Mask of Love: Strategic Manipulation in Caroline Kepnes' You

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Abstract

The present paper uses the dramaturgical theory by Erving Goffman to discuss this strategic manipulation done by Joe Goldberg in the novel *You* by Caroline Kepnes. It shows how Joe creates and maintains an illusionary picture of love in the form of well-calculated performances in the company of others so that he can dominate every social situation and the virtual world of the Internet. And this persona goes in high contrast to his secret "back stage" self which is characterised by violence, obsession and psychopathic behaviour. The discussion demonstrates how the Impression management employed by Joe breeds a twisted reality not only to the victims in a particular narrative but also into a meta-narrative of manipulation because the reader is pulled into the same trap. By employing the theories of Goffman, the paper has underscored the harmful effect of influence, the psychological effects it has on the victims, and also the vulnerability which it creates due to curated online identities in the hyper-connected world.

Keywords: Impression Management, Manipulation, Persona, Front Stage, Back Stage

1. Introduction

You, is a psychological thriller by Caroline Kepnes that sees the dark side of Joe Goldberg through the theme of obsession and identity. The novel was hugely covered culture and this has been further complemented by its adaptation into a popular Netflix series. Its distinct first-person narration makes the reader a participant, Joe twisted logic and makes one reconsider the norms of the society and criticizes contemporary phenomenon such as social media and online exposure.

The protagonist Joe Goldberg who seems endearing but is terribly disturbed and has a knack of manipulation. His outer persona of a model boyfriend which is confident, smart, sensitive contradicts a pathological control freak and a violent tendency. Goldberg is always reinventing himself by creating new personas to avoid punishment and to continue his obsession and killing habit because he always wants to be considered a nice guy. This paper will present the case that *You* by Caroline Kepnes is an interesting case study of dramaturgical analysis as designed by Erving Goffman.

2. Theoretical Framework: Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Analysis

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory views social interactions as theatrical performances. Individuals are actors who perform for an audience, presenting a forced set of behaviours rather than their true self. The self is a dramatic effect emerging from social interaction, constantly remade through engagement with others. The environment influences the performance's nature and response.

Goffman distinguishes between the "front stage" and "back stage" for identity management. The front stage is the public arena where performance is visible, forced to meet social norms through impression management. The back stage is a private space where performers can relax, step out of character, and drop the act, revealing a more immoral self. Maintaining a strict two personalities is vital, as any back stage revelation can cause social confusion.

Impression management is a method in which one manages to create an impression towards others either consciously or unconsciously. It entails intentional behaviours and other nonverbal messages. People usually act in ways they've learned from society's rules. However, occasionally, the real side of them is revealed, and their antics were not entirely an act. These moments put things into perspective of the effort it takes to be the image we prescribe to the world.

The concepts of Goffman regarding performance are also relevant to social media that now serves as a new form of persona to the people. However, Internet users were selective of the content they post and use it wisely to portray themselves. The ability of filters, captions, and profiles provides them with the control over their persona. For someone like Joe Goldberg, online platforms also act as a tool for spying. This mix of self-presentation and hidden surveillance makes Goffman's concepts even more relevant in today's world.

3. Joe Goldberg's Front Stage: The Charismatic Lover

The primary front stage performance of Joe Goldberg is his role as the ideal boyfriend in order to exert power over his victims. He models himself to appear to be charming, intelligent, sensitive, and protective and exudes an image of quiet confidence and intelligence. At other times, he becomes the role of the poor bookseller, in the effort to be perceived as the real nice guy.

The use of his appearance and manners is a well-designed instrument of deception that Joe Goldberg employs. His occupations, such as bookseller or professor, provide an element of respectability and intelligence, which is usually balanced by soft, friendly garments such as cardigans. The warm tone, smooth diction, and the numerous literary allusions make him appear educated and intellectual. He performs acts of consideration, like listening attentively, making breakfast, helping with ambitions all as a part of a script that he has worked out to make himself look like an ideal partner. He believes that he is rescuing or fixing the women he targets in his mind as Prince Charming or saviour.

The social media is an important front stage that Joe Goldberg uses in his performance and information accumulation. He digs through the digital platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, to find out personal information about his targets, friends and universities, addresses, and daily routines. By using this information, he will be able to organize accidental meetings and integrate into their lives. This backstage study influences his personal front in allowing him to tweak his actions to appear as the ideal fit, where the boundary between genuine interest and manipulation is non-existent.

4. Joe Goldberg's Back Stage: The Obsessive Predator

The sharp contrast between the front stage version of Joe Goldberg and the back stage version rooted in obsession, violence, and psychopathic tendencies proves that the front stage is a mere projection of the self, and it does not reflect the reality. The dark activities are not revealed since they are against social disciplines. It includes constant stalking, breaking into private spaces, and imprisoning victims in a glass cage beneath the bookstore. He murders Benji, Beck's ex-boyfriend, by using his peanut allergy, and later tracks and kills Peach Salinger, discarding her body in the ocean. For Goldberg, anyone who stands in the way of his idealized relationships becomes an 'obstacle' to be removed. He justifies violence in his mind as 'saving' the women he targets.

Joe Goldberg's "back stage" is marked as a self-delusion. He does not consider himself as a villain but a flawed hero. He rationalizes his killing in the name of true love, killing to have the greater good and makes himself believe that moral standards do not apply to him. The novel is narrated on his inner monologues in which he rationalizes what he has done to himself and to the reader. Being an unreliable narrator, he warps reality to keep his own personal image intact, and thus he can never really feel in his own mind that there was any flaw in his character.

Joe Goldberg is extremely cautious of any gaps in character that might give away the reality of him. When Guinevere Beck uncovers his personal items, exposing his obsession, he shifts the blame onto her for violating his privacy. He deals with potential exposures by killing his victims or by gaslighting them into questioning their own sanity. The plexiglass cage is the only place where he allows victims to see his true self only when they are trapped, ensuring he maintains complete control over the moment of revelation.

5. The Audience's Experience: Manipulation and Distorted Reality

The manipulation by Joe Goldberg severely affects his victims who would find it hard to realize that they have been abused and hence powerless, anxious, and with broken trust. The most important thing in his tactics is gaslighting; he rejects the existence of abusive actions, distorts the reality, and leaves victims confused about their mental health. As an example, when he faces accusations by Beck of stolen goods, he accuses her of crossing his privacy. Joe methodically marginalizes victims through killing friends and ex-boyfriends and making them more dependent on him and manipulating their reality. His mental control makes Beck believe that his stalking behaviour is aimed to her own good, and the disclosure of disturbing facts brings her to a state of thinking dissonance.

The impression management that Joe embodies is a trap that feeds on the insecurities that the victims possess, particularly the low self-esteem. He plays down their feelings, belittles their emotions and diverts the focus to his needs, having chipped away their confidence little by little. Looking at the online personality of Beck, he creates a perfect idea of herself in his imagination and then builds himself into the perfect man to compliment it. This carefully crafted persona makes Beck see him at first as the supportive, intelligent, and loving partner she's been looking for, making the moment his true "back stage" emerges all the more devastating.

The second-person narration of the novel that uses the term You, makes the reader his immediate audience. This produces an awkward feeling of closeness, drawing the reader into his point of view and twisted logic. His inner monologues occasionally elicit pity or humanize his actions and make it briefly superior to keep with him or make him rather justified in his actions, a situation of fiction manipulation and real-life versions becoming indistinguishable. In this way, the narrative itself becomes a form of literary gaslighting, nudging the reader to accept Joe's distorted logic just as his victims do. The result is a sharp meta-commentary on manipulation and digital vulnerability, showing how easily curated online personas can mislead and control.

6. Summation

The dramaturgical perspective helps us better understand the multi-dimensional psychology of Joe Goldberg, in particular, the absence of distinguishing line between the good and evil in contemporary fiction. His charm shows how powerful a performance can be, even when it masks horrific actions. More than just a character study, *You* works as a social commentary on obsession, human behaviour, and the risks of living in a hyper-connected world. It exposes how digital footprints can be weaponized, transforming an ordinary online presence into a step-by-step guide for manipulation.

Future research could compare Joe Goldberg with other literary or cinematic manipulators through Goffman's framework, identifying shared patterns in their performative strategies. It would also be valuable to examine how unreliable narration shapes reader perception and influences ethical engagement with texts that challenge traditional morality. Additionally, empirical studies on how social media affects impression management and increases susceptibility to manipulation could draw useful parallels with *You*. This could offer important insights into the societal risks of our digitally connected age.

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