

Leo Finkle: The Embodiment of Spiritual Rebirth in “The Magic Barrel”

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Abstract

Leo Finkle, the protagonist in Jewish American author Bernard Malamud’s famous short story “The Magic Barrel”, is a representative embodiment of universal spiritual rebirth, especial for the Jewish people who have suffered a lot in their specific history and culture. In his writing, Astro (1977) once remarks, “Malamud often uses a prison motif to evoke any place or circumstance which restricts man’s freedom of development”. The severity of his characters’ suffering is a necessity — only great affliction can bring out their hidden spiritual force and their understanding of their own capacity for dignity and compassion. Leo Finkle, realizing his own dignity and his responsibility to others, comes out of his isolated zone and steps out to achieve his own spiritual rebirth. Based on psychoanalysis, this paper attempts to address inward struggles of Leo Finkle, an epitome of all humankind, and explore how he achieves his spiritual rebirth when he is confronted with conflicting reality, through which, we can also have a profound understanding of Malamud’s humanist care not only for Jewish people, but also for all human beings, that is to say, his concern about universal humanities such as mercy, redemption, spiritual rebirth so on and so forth. In this way, we may pay more attention to Jewish people and other marginalized social groups in today’s society.

Key words: Spiritual rebirth; Psychoanalysis; Inward struggles; Humanist care; Marginalized social groups

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INTRODUCTION

Regarded as one of the best known Jewish American authors of the 20th century, Bernard Malamud is well-known for his short-story writings, which exclusively focus on the life of Jewish characters. Although his concern is mainly about special social groups, he endeavors to seek for universal truth of human spirits. As he says of himself, “If you don’t respect man, you cannot respect my work. I’m in defense of the human” (Solotaroff, 1989, p. 146). As one of Bernard Malamud’s representative works, “The Magic Barrel” is acclaimed as Malamud’s “super story”, collected in *The Magic Barrel*, a collection of his short stories of the same title. The narrative revolves around Leo Finkle, a rabbinical student who is in need of a wife for the sake of his career development. Based on Freudian psychoanalysis, this essay intends to conduct an analysis of the incorporeal suffering and its roots of Leo Finkle, an embodiment of spiritual rebirth, in his course of seeking for love and self-identity.

In this story, Leo Finkle, a rabbinical student who has studied in a Yeshivah University for six years, is advised by an acquaintance that he is supposed to find himself a wife for the development of his career if he wants to be ordained in the near future. However, his consecutive years of studies alone have incapacitated him from social interaction with women, leading him to be trapped in isolation and alienation. Therefore, he turns to a marriage broker Pinye Salzman to help him improve his prospect of marriage. After several introductions of the targeted women of Salzman’s clients, Leo feels none of them fits. Ultimately, he is deeply impressed by a picture left by Salzman on purpose, on which a girl is full of youth and beauty, whose eyes are endowed with sense of reluctance, fear, and evil, something utterly irreplaceable by others. Owing to that, Leo is caught in a spiritual dilemma — either persisting in his choice or giving up moving forward. In the end, he makes up his mind to execute self-

examinations and redeem the girl from vice. He returns to real life, recognizing that he can only find out the truth about God by way of living in reality. His self-recognition of his identity facilitates his spiritual growth and rebirth, during which Leo's inner conflicts have been well reflected.

Malamud's works reflect his universal understanding of human sufferings, and to some extent, he applies Jewish people's sufferings to represent the sufferings of all mankind. He once claims that all people are Jews and confusion and pain of those Jewish people who are lost in life and isolated in spirits indicate common people's true circumstances. Therefore, his works are endowed with certain attributes of moral allusion, that is to say, when the protagonist is in the course of his pursuit of a new life, he must go through overwhelming hardships and endeavors. His works present a general picture of people's struggles for their own life, which differs him from his contemporary writers and also echoes his own hope and faith in life, all of which gain comprehensive representation in the process of Leo Finkle's spiritual rebirth.

1. FREUDIAN THEORY

According to Freudian psychoanalysis (1923), guided by the pleasure principle, id means the part of people's mind which is completely unconscious but has hidden needs and desires, in which all decisions are based on the immediate gratification of pleasure; ego is the part of people's mind with which people think and take action; and superego refers to the part of people's mind that tells people whether what they are doing is morally right or wrong. As a consequence, corresponding to the pleasure principle, the reality principle occurs because of societal needs and the operation of the superego, during which, Freud believes that a person's moral development and conscience appear for the first time. The conflicts between Leo's id and external realities force him to repress his id, while his ego is inclined to seek for the right woman and spiritual truth, and his superego purifies and sublimates his soul, which makes for his spiritual transformation.

2. AWARENESS OF SELF-IDENTITY THROUGH SUPPRESSION OF ID

As for Leo, the imperative to find himself a wife plays an important role in his career development. Besides, his six-year study has totally deprived him of his capability to socialize with women normally. There is no denying the fact that he feels eager and full of expectations to look for an appropriate wife and a promising career for his future life, which is a sufficient reflection of his id under the influence of the pleasure principle. He thinks the marriage broker "made practical the necessary without

hindering joy" (Malamud, 2004, p. 447), and he expresses his expectation of love implicitly when he speaks of his parents' marriage — "at least a successful one in the sense of their everlasting devotion to each other" (Malamud, 2004, p. 447). Therefore, though he lives in poverty and loneliness, he still embraces a hope to find a perfect and romantic love.

In order to achieve his desire for love, he turns to Salzman for help, whose view of marriage is disposed to be traditional and realistic. Id has complete representation in Leo's view of love — he values people's true self and sense of perfection, that is to say, from his perspective, human qualities come first, while family backgrounds and social status rate second, which however, count first in Salzman's mind. Differences of those two kinds of values severely hurt and blow Leo's id, from which he mentally suffers a lot and feels a great sense of pessimism and disappointment. Take the first woman client Sophie P. as an example, who is a 24-year-old widow with higher education and rich life. Leo is really insulted in his pride and self-respect by Salzman because he can hardly accept a woman who is a widow — "Marrying a widow has never entered my mind" (Malamud, 2004, p. 448). The second is a 32-year-old high school teacher Lily H. with rich life experiences, strong language capabilities and an intelligent mind. However, her age is too old for Leo, which is completely unacceptable for Leo. The third one is a 19-year-old Honor student with an affluent family but also is a cripple because of a car accident. All those imperfections are exaggerated in Leo's mind in terms of his sense of perfectionism and romance. The three women Salzman introduces are a widow, a spinster and a cripple respectively, due to which Leo is lost in agony and spiritual confusion. His id can not be achieved perfectly and outside forces put great pressure on his spirits. He begins to reflect himself deeply and readjust his id properly to cater for his need of his ego. This meeting with Salzman in a sense evokes him to wake from his long-time isolation and to step out to real world for the first time. His self-identity is shaken and he begins to open his heart and look tentatively into the outside world.

3. RECONSTRUCTION OF SELF-IDENTITY THROUGH INTERVENTION OF SUPEREGO

Salzman tries hard to help Leo find his love and eloquently manage to persuade Leo to engender interest to Lily, the so-called school teacher whose age is reduced from 32 to 29 deceptively. As a matter of fact, the first meeting with Salzman has already put Leo into setback and driven him to face up with reality. He gradually realizes that he can not leave realities behind in order for the actualization of his pursuit of perfect love and happiness. Therefore, he agrees to meet with Lily who is several years his senior.

It is an obvious evidence that after the repression of his id, his ego begins to conduct his actions and lead him to reality. However, with the intervention of his ego, he still suffers a lot because of the continuous conflicts between id and outside reality. During the meeting, conflicts between Leo and Lily and conflicts between Leo and himself are still latent. Considering Leo as a loyal man to God because he is a rabbinical student, Lily tentatively asks him, “did you become enamored of God”(Malamud, 2004, p. 455)? This is the question which really immerses him in deep and substantial contemplation of his faith, God, realities, and human weaknesses on himself. This is the turning point of his spiritual life to some extent. He knows himself too well that he recognizes he is “unloved and loveless”(Malamud, 2004, p. 456). Therefore, he answers Lily honestly in a strained manner, “that I came to God not because I love Him, but because I did not”(Malamud, 2004, p. 455). For him, nothing is more painful than to confess his inadequate love for God. This meeting with Lily really causes him to plunge into a spiritual wasteland, through which he suffers a lot but also gains solid mental growth by way of self-contemplation and self-examination with the help of his superego.

4. RECONSOLIDATION OF SELF-IDENTITY THROUGH RECONCILIATION OF ID, EGO AND SUPEREGO

It is not easy to achieve the balance between id, ego and superego, especially for a man like Leo who is utterly altered by social reality to change from isolation to interaction, from self-ignorance to self-examination and from romanticism to realism. His new experiences in life make for his painful sufferings both in physical and spiritual level. “The week that followed was the worst of his life. He did not eat and lost weight”(Malamud, 2004, p. 456). After those meetings with women who live in real life, he becomes oversensitive and irritable. What’s worse, he comes down to the wrong conclusion of his sufferings that “he was a Jew and that a Jew suffered”(Malamud, 2004, p. 457). Therefore, he is still spiritually astray and desperate to find a way out. Though his affliction with heartburn and anxiety for his quest of a bride is still underway, he is confident that with his self-recognition his way ahead will be more smooth than in the past.

He is extremely impressed by the picture left by Salzman on purpose, on which a girl is full of youth and beauty, whose eyes are endowed with sense of reluctance, fear, and evil, something reminding him of his present mental torture. He knows she is the one he has been looking for the instant he sees her picture. Therefore, he immediately seeks for Salzman’s help, who informs that the girl was a decadent prostitute — “She is not for you. She is a wild one — wild, without shame. This is not a bride for rabbi”(Malamud, 2004, p. 462). In the end, he

is once again put into the most conflicting inner struggle between his superego and his id. It seems that he is totally trapped in a painful abyss because of this soulless girl who has lost purity and spirituality.

To move forward firmly regardless of secular bias or to escape in fear and live in alienation, that is a question. He thinks life thoroughly and “could not sleep her out of his mind”(Malamud, 2004, p. 462), and he is unable to come to a final decision until he encounters with Salzman in a cafeteria. With the guidance of his superego, the two finally meets. After his prior real experiences in life, he becomes more insightful and inclusive because he realizes Stella’s sin originates from her poverty and he sees through her eyes reluctance and “open realms of possibility”(Malamud, 2004, p. 459). He understands that the girl is forced by life to do something she is unwilling to do and is desperate for change and improvement. Therefore, he makes a choice which is morally right and gains forceful evidence for his choice when he sees “she wore white with red shoes, which fitted his expectations”(Malamud, 2004, p. 463) because red is the color of brazen sexuality while white symbolizes chastity. He “ran forward with flowers outthrust”(Malamud, 2004, p. 463), and determines to love and save her from her vulnerable and painful past, through which he can achieve his self-redemption, self-identity, and spiritual rebirth because he accomplishes essential change from the one who is “unloved and loveless”(Malamud, 2004, p. 456) to the one who realizes the truth of real life. Thanks to his superego, he gains great incentive to step forward unswervingly with celebration and reward from God — “Violins and lit candles revolved in the sky”(Malamud, 2004, p. 463). Therefore, not only the girl but also he himself achieves spiritual rebirth from the past.

5. ACHIEVEMENT OF SPIRITUAL REBIRTH THROUGH FOUR FORCES

All in all, there are three main motivators who help Leo to achieve his spiritual rebirth in the reconciliation of his id, ego, and superego — Lily, Salzman, and Stella. Lily is the inspirator who stimulates his self-examination of life and himself. It is her question about his relationship with God brings on his epiphany that apart from his parents, he has never loved anyone and because of his lovelessness to human makes it impossible for him to love God; Salzman is the propeller who pushes forward the transference of his spiritual rebirth. Salzman goes all out on his creating opportunity of meeting for his daughter and Leo in order for his daughter’s spiritual rebirth and happiness. Without his sophistication and schema, there is no possibility for Leo and his daughter’s spiritual rebirth; and as for Stella, she is the originator and companion of Leo’s spiritual rebirth. It is because of her that Leo can actualize his change of spiritual rebirth and embody the truth of God’s

word — "Love me, love my people". What's more, there is no denying the fact that Leo himself exerts a decisive influence upon his own spiritual rebirth. Under no circumstances can his self-examination, his readjustment and resilience of his inner self, and his humanities can be underestimated. When Leo meets Stella, the real spring comes, and their love will burgeon in the season of renewal. Both of them gain self-redemption and spiritual rebirth, which echoes Malamud's universal motif in writing — to affirm the human spirit.

CONCLUSION

Revolving around the experiences of Leo Finkle's pursuit of an appropriate wife, this short story begets new interpretation through psychoanalysis. Leo turns from an loser to a success in his pursuit of a new life by virtue of his sacrificial spirits. His first date makes him realize he has never loved anyone and has never been loved and his personal life is totally blank. This awareness haunts him more than the fact that he can not find a wife. However, his self-examination and epiphany are his new beginnings in life, which facilitate his spiritual growth and new understanding of love — love for love's sake. Although he knows neither of Stella's age, nor of her background, he loves her at first sight. He insists upon changing Stella spiritually and helping her achieve redemption even if he is told that she is dissolute. His life becomes meaningful because Stella changes for his love and spiritual salvation. Therefore, in this short story, the integration of modern

life and Jewish traditions, religious beliefs and secular life, and tragic elements and comic elements are all conducive to the construction of a moral allusion by way of the representation of Leo Finkle's spiritual rebirth, through which Malamud's humanist care can be exemplified to the utmost and it serves as a reminder for people to pay more attention for the marginalized, not only for the Jews, but also for any less-privileged social groups. As Jeffery says(1985), "almost all of Malamud's fiction is fable. In such fiction, all talk tends to become philosophical and all action symbolic". In this sense, Malamud's works are universally meaningful.

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