

# On Leo Finckle in *The Magic Barrel* From the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism

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This paper conducts an analysis of the protagonist, Leo Finckle, in *The Magic Barrel* from the perspective of ethical literary criticism. It explores Leo's character traits, his ethical dilemmas and choices, and the moral and ethical implications within the context of the story. The study examines how Leo's search for a wife and his encounters with various characters in the magic barrel setting reveal his inner struggles and the complex ethical landscape he navigates. It also analyzes the role of social and cultural factors in shaping Leo's ethical perspectives and behaviors. Through this analysis, a deeper understanding of the text is achieved, highlighting the significance of ethical considerations in literature and the rich portrayal of the human condition presented through Leo Finckle's experiences in *The Magic Barrel*.

**Keywords:** Leo Finckle, *The Magic Barrel*, ethical literary criticism

## Introduction

The work depicts the old Jewish man, Shazman, who tries to find a husband for his maybe beloved daughter, showing his seemingly cunning but kind-hearted nature. In 1959, Malamud won the U.S. National Book Award for the collection of short stories, *The Magic Barrel*. Malamud observes the life of the lower class people with a keen eye and writes about the perseverance and tenacity of the Jewish character. Many foreign scholars have paid attention to the thematic analysis of *The Magic Barrel*, such as love, marriage, redemption, etc., and have also conducted a lot of research on the Jewish cultural traditions and religious beliefs shown in the novel. Domestic scholars have analyzed *The Magic Barrel* from the perspective of Bildungsroman, and they have also paid much attention to the cultural identity of Jewish immigrants in the novel, while some have put *The Magic Barrel* together with other works for comparative studies, analyzing their similarities and differences in theme, style, or cultural connotation. In terms of translation studies, many scholars have studied the Chinese translation of *The Magic Barrel* to explore the understanding and communication of the original text during the translation process, as well as the impact of translation on the dissemination and reception of the work in China. In view of this, this paper tries to analyze the protagonist Finckle from the perspective of literary ethics to find out the profound connotations embedded in the work.

Literary ethics criticism, advocated by Nie Zhenzhao (2004), is a method of criticism that incorporates

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**\*Fund:** USST Construction Project of English-Taught Courses for International Students in 2024; USST Teaching Achievement Award (Postgraduate) Cultivation Project in 2024; Key Course Construction Project in Universities of Shanghai in 2024.

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ethical factors into the study of literature, but it is not a simple addition of literature and ethics. As a method of literary study, literary ethical criticism “emphasizes the social responsibility of literature and its criticism, stresses the teaching function of literature, and takes this as the basis of criticism” (Nie, 2013, p. 135).

Literary ethical criticism sees literature as a product of ethics from its origin, and believes that literature is an expression of social ethics at a particular stage of history, that literature is essentially an art about ethics, and that the value of literature is embodied through its didactic function. In the process of ethical choice, human ethical consciousness begins to emerge, and the concepts of good and evil gradually take shape. Ethical choice is realized through teaching, but teaching is obtained through literature. The history of human civilization shows that only literature can achieve the purpose of teaching, rewarding and disciplining through a series of moral examples and role models, thus helping people to complete the process of ethical choice of choosing the good and abandoning the evil and becoming a moral person. (Nie, 2013, p. 248)

### **Leo Finckle in *The Magic Barrel* From the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism**

Leo Finckle is a young Jewish rabbi student who exhibits complex personalities while searching for a life partner. From an ethical perspective, Leo is influenced by traditional ethical concepts and demonstrates a steadfast commitment to religious beliefs and family expectations; on the other hand, he is also facing inner struggles and confusion under the impact of modern society. Leo gradually realized his ethical dilemma in his interactions with others and worked hard to seek solutions. His image reflects the ethical challenges faced by individuals in the conflicts between tradition and modernity, and between individuals and society, as well as their exploration of self-worth and the meaning of life. Here are some more detailed analyses.

#### **Ethical Identity**

Literary ethics criticism focuses on analyzing the ethical identity of characters, because ethical identity is an important factor in literary works. In society, people often play different roles and have multiple identities, and ethical identity refers to the combination of people’s identities and the ethical environment, which is not only a simple sign or symbol, but also carries the responsibilities, obligations, and constraints stipulated by the ethical laws at that time (Nie, 2013, pp. 36-37).

**A restricted Jew.** As one of the representative writers of American Jewish literature, Bernard Malamud is committed to expressing his Jewishness and his original Jewish thematic ideas in his works. In *The Magic Barrel*, Malamud presents the difficult life faced by American Jewish immigrants and their descendants and the spiritual crisis brought about by the influence of mainstream American culture (Fan, 2016, pp. 201-203). The author reveals the cultural identity choices faced by Jewish immigrants to the United States by depicting the various influences on Finckle, as a young Jew, when faced with the decision to marry. In doing so, Malamud expresses his concern about the neglect and forgetfulness of the cultural identity of the younger generation of Jewish immigrants and calls for a return to Jewishness among Jewish immigrants.

**A scholar soon-to-be a rabbi.** Leo Finckle is a Jewish college student who decides to fulfil his parents’ expectations by finding a marriage partner through a matchmaker. In his interactions with Salzman, he comes to realize his true expectations of love and marriage. Leo is a young Jewish student who has a more traditional view of love and marriage. He believes that marriage should be based on love and mutual respect, not just to fulfil societal expectations or financial gain. He hopes to find a mate with whom he can appreciate and support each other to build a happy family together. However, Leo’s views on love and marriage are subject to some challenges and tests. In his interactions with Salzman, the matchmaker, he gradually realizes that his expectations of love and marriage may be at odds with reality. He begins to realize that love is not just about romance and passion,

but also needs to take into account various factors in real life.

**Ethical predicament.** In literary ethical criticism, the ethical environment is regarded as the historical conditions for the emergence and development of literature, and Nie Zhenzhao stresses that “literary ethical criticism requires that literary criticism must go back to the historical scene, that is, to criticize literature in a specific ethical environment” (Nie, 2013, pp. 50-51), so as to avoid subjective evaluations as well as understanding bias due to the difference of times. Therefore, it is of great significance to analyze the ethical environment in which literary works take place.

**Confusion of the identity of rabbi.** Finckle, a graduating theology student, is standing at a crossroads in his life. His choice of profession places a heavy ethical responsibility on him, while his personal emotional needs continue to well up within him, creating a strong conflict. In traditional theological concepts, clergy should maintain spiritual purity and transcendence, keeping a distance from worldly emotions. However, Fink, as a young man of flesh and blood, inevitably longs for love and the warmth of family. This contradiction between professional and personal desires puts him in a deep ethical dilemma.

**Isolation from social life.** Due to the long time in school, Fink seldom interacts with the outside world and is unfamiliar with the outside life. Therefore, when he is about to graduate and enter the society to face the major events of his life, he is easily influenced by the opinions of others, and on the one hand, he has to follow the views of his parents and the matchmaker’s rhetoric, and on the other hand, he also wants to follow his own heart to choose the woman of his own choice. At the same time, Fink’s ethical dilemma is also reflected in the fact that he is bound by religious teachings and moral codes. His inner entanglement reflects the suppression of personal emotions by religious ethics in the society at that time. For example, when he comes into contact with his blind date, he always unconsciously measures the other person by religious standards, fearing that his emotional impulses will go against the sacred teachings. This inner struggle makes him hesitant to take a crucial step in front of love.

### **Ethical Choice**

From the perspective of moral choice, Fink shows complex psychological changes when confronted with a series of blind dates introduced to him by Leo Finckel. At first, he has certain expectations of this kind of matchmaking and hopes to find true love through this route. However, as the matchmaking process advances, he gradually finds himself in a moral dilemma in which the material and the spiritual, the realistic and the ideal are in conflict with each other. He develops a contradictory emotion in his heart when he faces women who are outstanding in appearance but lacking in spiritual connotation. On the one hand, he is attracted by the beauty of the other woman; on the other hand, he knows that this attraction based on appearance alone is not in line with his deep-seated pursuit of true love. This wavering moral choice fully demonstrates Fink’s inner struggle and confusion.

Fink’s inner world is full of anxiety and insecurity. He is afraid that his choice will lead to moral degradation, and at the same time, he is worried about missing out on the love that truly suits him. This anxiety stems from his inability to balance his reverence for religious ethics with his desire for personal happiness. For example, when he meets a blind date who is well off but has a flamboyant personality, he will go over and over in his mind whether or not he should ignore the other person’s character flaws for the sake of material security. This inner struggle reflects Fink’s difficulty in the face of moral choices.

### Conclusion

However, we cannot just see Fink as a passive victim. When faced with an ethical dilemma, he also struggles to find a way out, trying to find a balance between the constraints of religion and his personal emotional needs. He constantly reflects on his actions and thoughts, trying to find the right direction in the maze of ethics. This spirit of self-reflection reflects Fink's initiative to take on moral responsibility as an individual with a conscience.

In addition, Fink's experience also reflects the ethical landscape of the society at that time. At that time, the power of religion was still strong and had a profound influence on people's lives and thoughts. However, as society developed and changed, people's pursuit of personal emotions and happiness became stronger and stronger (Jian, 2018, pp. 1-4). Fink is precisely a character in such a period of social transition, and his struggles and confusion are not only personal, but also epitomize the challenges faced by society as a whole in the process of changing ethical concepts.

Analyzing Fink from the point of view of literary ethics, we can see that his character has profound practical significance. His story reminds us that in the face of ethical dilemmas, we need to face our hearts bravely and hold fast to the moral bottom line while actively seeking harmony between personal happiness and social ethics. For example, in today's society, in the process of pursuing career success, people also often face ethical problems in terms of family responsibilities and interpersonal relationships. We can learn from Fink's experience and learn to weigh various interests and values and make choices that are in line with our own conscience.

Fink's story is not only an individual's emotional journey, but also a profound reflection on morality, responsibility, and human nature, which provides useful insights for us to understand and solve ethical dilemmas in real life.

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