

Symbols in *The Magic Barrel*

FU He-yuan

Wuhan Institute of Technology, Wuhan 430205, China

The article takes the famous modern American Jewish writer Bernard Malamud's novel *The Magic Barrel* as the object of study, and uses symbolism to interpret it, analyzing it one by one in terms of the magic barrel, the colors, the seasons and the windows, respectively, so as to reveal the process of getting rid of the childishness within the novel's male protagonist, Leo Finkel, who is maturing, as well as the novel's Jewish theme of searching for the soul of the self.

Keywords: symbol, magic barrel, window

Introduction

Bernard Malamud was an outstanding Jewish writer who rose to prominence after World War II, winning the 1959 National Book Award for his collection of short stories, "*The Magic Barrel*, which catapulted Malamud to become one of America's finest Jewish writers" (Yang, 2014). Scholars at home and abroad have focused more on the exploration of Jewish themes and the author's Jewishness in the texts, the analysis of the characters in the stories, and the study of Malamud's unique narrative techniques and the narrative effects they produce. It is true that "suffering and redemption" is an important motif in Jewish teachings and a classic theme in Malamud's literature, and it has always been used as an important perspective in the interpretation of his works. While the typical fate formula of "suffering and redemption" in *The Magic Barrel* is well known to readers, the symbolic imagery in the novel is crucial in the transformation of the protagonist's fate. Discussing symbolic meanings in a limited space helps us to gain a deeper understanding of this work. Symbol, in general terms, can mean anything that denotes something else, and thus we can say that all words are symbols. In literature, the symbolism is "the writing technique of using symbols. A symbol is something that conveys two kinds of meaning; it is simply itself, and it stands for something other than itself. In other words, a symbol is both literal and figurative" (Li & Li, 1998, p. 204). Symbolism draws on the external characteristics of a concrete object to convey a richer meaning. The advantage of symbolism is that it can make abstract things concrete and figurative, and it can also make complex concepts simple and unitary. The artistic mood it creates can expand the reader's imagination and make people have associations, thus enriching the expressive effect of the work. Our job is to try to capture the symbolism of the imagery in the work.

Symbolism of Magic Barrel

When we first read this novel, many of us can't help but be intrigued by the title, *The Magic Barrel*. What does a magic barrel look like? What is it used for? Why did the author use such a title? Does it have any special meaning?

After the main character Leo has emotional expectations, the "Magic Barrel" happens to appear and becomes the premise from which all the stories and emotions in the novel are created and changed. By reading the article, we can easily find out that Salzman is the owner of this MAGIC BARREL. He tells Leo Finkle, the hero of the story: "You wouldn't believe me how much cards I got in my office," Salzman replied. "The drawers are already filled to the top, so I keep them now in a barrel, but is every girl good for a new rabbi" (Malamud, 2011, p. 12)? The "barrel" is the one Salzman refers to as the barrel in which the suitor's personal details and photographs are stored. However, it is later revealed that "But there was no sign of Salzman or his magic barrel, probably also a figment of the imagination" (Malamud, 2011, p. 17). It turns out that there is no such thing as a magic barrel, so why is it the title of a novel if it is just an imaginary object? More importantly, what is its magic? Here we have to focus on the character of Salzman. We can say in a way that Salzman, the professional matchmaker, is the master of this magic barrel. He is like a magician and under his arrangement Leo's life changes as if by magic. From the very beginning of his contact with Leo, Salzman sees this well-endowed young man as a perfect candidate for his son-in-law. The first few dates are just a brilliant prelude to a successful marriage arrangement for his daughter Stella. Even Stella's fall from grace seems to be directed by Salzman. Before he met Salzman, Leo lived like a lonely hermit, completely cut off from the outside world. With no friends and his only daily activity being the study of Jewish law, he had become a man completely devoid of social experience and detached from reality, even from the natural scenery outside his window. But Leo's life takes a wonderfully dramatic turn when he finds Salzman based on a newspaper advertisement and asks him to find him a marriage partner. After being set up by Salzman on a date with Lily, a high school teacher, Leo suddenly realizes his true relationship with God as a clergyman. He doesn't even have a thorough understanding of God, of the Jewish teachings that he will preach for the rest of his life, even to the point of saying "I came to God not because I loved him, but because I didn't" (Malamud, 2011, p. 18). For the first time in his life he realized the fact that "he had not loved anyone" except his own parents... This honesty undoubtedly contributed to Leo's "epiphany". In James Joyce's book *Stephen the Hero*, "epiphany" is defined as "a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of words or gestures, or in a memorable phase of thought itself" (Qian, 1987, p. 195). After his "epiphany", he began to meditate seriously on three philosophical questions. The first was his relationship with God, reflecting that he had never loved anyone but his parents and that he was a person who did not love or be loved. So he realized that he was such an indifferent person that he could not love God devoutly. Secondly, there is the question of his own identity. After a thorough introspection, he found the reason for this mental torture and the way to regain his peace of mind, which was to define himself as a Jew, who "is born to suffer". The last question concerned his attitude to marriage, and he was convinced that if he had love, the bride would come in love. Therefore, he refuses to accept marriage by introduction and wants to marry the one he truly loves. At this stage, it can be seen that Leo's conception of marriage has shifted from the unrealistic and fanciful to the prudent and reflective and rational. Leo is not interested in the young

widows, high school teachers, and rich girls that Salzman is trying so hard to introduce to him. One day, by chance, Leo sees a picture of Salzman's daughter Stella and is so taken with her that he decides she is the one he has been looking for. The girl, whom Leo has never met, is described by her father as "she is a wild one-wild, without shame" "she should burn in hell" (Malamud, 2011, p. 18). And all this happened as if by magic.

Thus, it is not the barrel who has the magic but the protagonist Leo. Salzman goes to great lengths to make Leo, the future rabbi, fall in love with his daughter. Under Salzman's careful orchestration, Leo realizes that he is such an indifferent person. After a thorough introspection, he finds the reason for this mental torture and the way to regain his former peace of mind, which is that he defines himself as a Jew, and Jews are "born to suffer." The last question concerned his attitude to marriage, and his conviction that "if he has love, the bride will come to him in love." He regained his ability to love again by connecting with others. After days of mental torture "he finally decided to persuade her (Stella) to turn to God and himself" (Malamud, 2011, p. 18). Malamud often depicts the magic of love in his works, allowing it to save lost souls. In this short story, he uses the same magic of love, but symbolized by the magic barrel, which enables Leo to be reborn himself by saving Stella. "It is only through love, trust, and compassion that the differences of colour, language, and behaviour between peoples can be transcended. This transcendence is the sense of redemption among peoples that Malamud is trying to convey" (Qin, 1986, p. 221). Spiritual salvation is what this novel highlights and what *The Magic Barrel* represents symbolically.

Dark, Red and White: Symbolism of Colours

The night appears twice in the article. The first time is when Salzman came to Leo's house at the beginning, "the matchmaker appeared one night" (Malamud, 2011, p. 13), but usually, if it is not an invitation to a party, it is usually during the daytime to go to someone's house, and the author's use of "appear" instead of "came" makes the real purpose of Salzman's visit very intriguing. The second time, the marriage broker, "a skeleton with haunted eyes, returned that very night" (Malamud, 2011, p. 15). The darkness of the night is characterized by secrecy and ambiguity. Malamud arranges for him to visit Leo's house at night, so we can infer that the first is an attempt to hide the fact that Salzman's real purpose is to seek a quality husband for his daughter. Secondly it also serves to set up Salzman's cunning characterization at the same time.

The most famous symbol of colour in this novel lies in the last paragraph: "Stella stood by the lamp, smoking. She wore white with red shoes" (Malamud, 2011, p. 19). The colour red in western culture often focuses on the negative meanings of violence and gore, obscenity and debauchery, for example, "red light district" refers to the place of the moon, while the colour white in western culture focuses on the positive meanings of innocence and beauty. White in western culture is more focused on the positive meaning of innocence and beauty. "Her eyes: clearly, her father's, were filled with desperate innocence" (Malamud, 2011, p. 19). However, in that moment of panic, in Leo's imagination, Stella's dress was red and only her shoes were white. Why is the Stella in Leo's eyes a little different from the Stella in reality? We can see some clues from the novel's description of Leo's reaction when he sees Stella's photo. He thinks that "she leaped forth to his heart—had lived, or wanted to—more than just wanted, perhaps regretted how she had lived—had somehow deeply suffered". When he looking at her photos, "he experienced fear of her and was aware that he had

received an impression, somehow, of evil” (Malamud, 2011, p. 16). We know from the story that later Salzman had hinted to Leo about what was going on in Stella’s life. “For us, our love is our life, not for the ladies. In the ghetto they—” (Malamud, 2011, p. 17). That means that those ladies sometimes had to do unsavoury things in order to make a living. Since Stella also lived in the shanty town, she was part of those ladies and naturally had to do some of the same things. From this, it seems that Leo is well aware of Stella’s actual condition. That may be why Leo saw Stella standing under the streetlight “in a troubled moment he had imagined the dress red, and only the shoes white” (Malamud, 2011, p. 20). So from this perspective we can say that in Leo’s eyes, the colour red is Stella’s side as a prostitute, and most of Stella is bad and only a small part is good. She is the lost sheep waiting to be redeemed by himself. However, as he stares at the photo, he also sees in the face “opening realms of possibility”, the possibility of rescuing her from her pain, the possibility of transforming her. Stella’s face is not beautifully packaged or heavily made up, but is the real “face” that Stella shows in the photographs. “It gave him the impression of youth—spring flowers” (Malamud, 2011, p. 18). Stella’s face exhibits a variety of opposing qualities that keep pulling Leo’s heart in opposite directions. “as if an obscure fog had blown up in the mind” (Malamud, 2011, p. 18). It also gave him a deeper desire for the girl in front of him. Stella and Leo met with different intentions, but it is certain that love has developed between them. So the colour Red also represents passion and love. Stella wears a white dress and red shoes, symbolizing that she is mostly good, with only a few minor blemishes. And that’s exactly what Leo was expecting, so he ran up to him, the flowers in his hand held out forwards, and it was a bunch of violets and roses. The sound of the violins and the candles represent the gospel and the wishes of God for these two people, while Salzman prays silently for the “dead” Leo and Stella, who at this moment are reborn through a true and sincere conversion.

The Symbolism of Seasons

Reading the text carefully, it is not difficult to find that as the story slowly advances, the seasons also change, that is, the transition from the lifeless winter to the vibrant spring, which symbolizes the transformation of Leo’s salvation from suffering, and also symbolizes the salvation of other characters in the novel from suffering. When Leo first meets Salzman in the winter, he does not have a mature idea about his wife or his chosen profession, but follows family tradition and goes with the flow. After meeting his first date, Lily, and feeling disappointed and cheated in his search for a wife, Leo’s state of mind is as sad as this winter. In the first half of the novel, the character’s situation and state of being are as lonely and desolate as winter, and Leo’s conversation with his first date, Lily, makes him re-examine his relationship with God, and the springtime clothes she wears show that Leo’s inner world has begun to sprout his own new thoughts. “The springtime that occurs at this time of year is a symbol of the protagonist’s beginning to awaken and start down the path of self-redemption” (Zhang & Zhou, 2020). Afterwards, he falls in love with the matchmaker’s daughter by mistake. Although he knows that she is a degenerate, after deep introspection, he decides to redeem this lost soul, and in this way he not only redeems her degenerate, but also finds the true way of believing in God, and ultimately completes his self-redemption.

The Symbolism of Window

Imagery reveals the inner emotional state of the characters. In *The Magic Barrel*, the author uses a variety of symbols to highlight Leo's transformation from a complete lack of love for God and others to a determination to redeem others as well as himself. Apart from the imagery of magic barrel and the colour of the clothes, the author also arranges the right material condition for Leo's spiritual awakening: an open window. The window cuts through the space, causing a break in the originally continuous and unified space, creating an image of divergent or incoherent meanings in and out of the window; through the window, the person who was in the room before, and the one who stepped out of his comfort zone through the window after that, had very different perceptions of love, God, and the self in terms of spiritual awareness. As mentioned earlier, Leo is a future rabbi who has always put all his thoughts on his studies, who has almost no need to socialize and never pays attention to everything around him. During his first conversation with Salzman, he felt so uncomfortable that he pretended not to see Salzman's activities while staring deathly out the window. "the student pretended not to see and gazed steadfastly out the window" (Malamud, 2011, p. 14). Through that window, for the first time in years, he noticed how brightly lit the outside world was and how bustling the city was. It was through this window that the change of seasons was also re-perceived by Leo. The round bright moon and the varied clouds are visual imagery, which look to him like a hen laying an egg. All these images allow the reader to construct a picture of peace and harmony in his mind, while the open window connects him to the boundless sky and the open world, and becomes a symbol of his breaking through the shackles of his own world to embrace social life. One morning Leo lazily climbed over those steps, went into his room, looked out the window again, and saw the city outside the window, the people on the street running around busily trying to make a living for themselves. And that's when he turned around and realized that his room was so small, so he couldn't help but get angry. This was because he was beginning to want to broaden his social sphere, to become one with everyone's life instead of studying God all day without purpose. All the moral qualities that Leo could think of, such as duty, sympathy, and patience, were aroused in him by the sight of Stella's picture, and he resolved to save the girl, however wicked she might have been before. It is precisely at this time, too, that Leo overhears Stella's photo and his path to self-redemption opens. "Thus, the window can also be seen as a boundary between Leo's personal world and the wider outside world" (Li, 2006). And when he decides to cross this boundary, to pay attention to and participate in the world outside the window, he is sure to find the true meaning of life.

Conclusion

Malamud graphically and vividly depicts the emotional and psychological struggles and changes that Leo endures in his search for a wife. The process of searching for a mate is painful, but it does complete the most important step from suffering to salvation. In the process, he reacquaints himself with what kind of wife he wants, and chooses to grow up with the fallen one, realizing his own salvation in the process of redeeming the fallen girl. "*The Magic Barrel* demonstrates the indomitable pursuit of a better life despite the repeated failures of the Jews in the face of social oppression" (Kong & Liang, 2023). It is a Jewish allegory with a coming-of-age theme, and the various types of symbolic imagery that appear along Leo's path of growth and

rebirth clearly reveal his process of change, providing a perspective for interpreting this excellent short story. Of course, there is much more to the novel that awaits our exploration.

References

Malamud, B. (2011). *The Magic Barrel*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

孔艺霖, 梁艳. (2023). 《马拉默德的普世之爱 ——《魔桶》主题解析》. 载《英语广场》, 2023年8月, 第75页.

李游海. (2006). 《《魔桶》中的象征意义》. 载《企业家天地(理论版)》, 2006年9月, 第150页.

李翠亭, 李正栓. (1998). 《美国文学学习指南》. 北京: 清华大学出版社.

钱满素. (1987). 《美国当代小说家论》. 北京: 中国社会科学出版社.

秦小孟. (1986). 《当代美国文学概述及作品选读: 中册》. 上海: 上海译文出版社.

杨仁敬. (2014). 《简明美国文学史》. 上海: 复旦大学出版社.

张金梅, 周丹. (2020). 《《魔桶》的结构主义解读》. 载《文学评论》, 2020年48期, 第7页.