

Identity Crisis and Construction in *The Magic Barrel*

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Based on a detailed analysis of the text of the short story—*The Magic Barrel*, this article aims to explore the identity crisis and construction of the Jewish nation. Using Leo's moral choices and dilemmas as clues, it showcases the development of Leo's spiritual world, explores the protagonist's love pursuit and sacrifice spirit, and includes discussions on the Jewish classic themes of suffering and redemption, which is hoped to provide a new perspective for the study of this short story.

Keywords: identity crisis, identity construction, *The Magic Barrel*, Bernard Malamud

Introduction

The Magic Barrel is a short story about Jewish themes written by the famous American Jewish writer Bernard Malamud. The story unfolds around the protagonist Leo Finkle's search for a spouse, showcasing the complex inner world of Jewish characters and their special emotional attachment to their cultural identity. In this short story, Malamud describes Leo's change in emotional journey from confusion of the first blind date to the spiritual renewal after breaking free from social rules to pursue true love, reflecting the author's profound exploration of identity themes.

The Embodiment of Leo's Identity Crisis

Erik Erikson was one of the earliest scholars to introduce the concept of identity into social psychology. Erikson proposed the progressive theory of identity, shifting the psychological process of self-identity from Freud's identity to the process of self-development. In a series of works, he extensively pointed out the developmental process of the self throughout life and proposed the concept of "identity". Erikson's concept of identity refers to an individual's reflection on themselves and who they are. He emphasizes the interaction between the self and society in the process of identity recognition, and sees the development of self-identity as a developmental process about the meaning of life.

Identity crisis is defined as the profound unease and distress of an individual towards his self-identity and social role during his life development process. In *The Magic Barrel*, we clearly perceive the changing process of Leo's psychological perception of self-identity and his attitude towards life sufferings in different stages.

The loss of emotions and the lack of social life leave Leo Finkle confused about his marriage during the search for a spouse. Two difficulties, the failure of blind date with Lily and the unknown about the upcoming new social identity as rabbi, subsequently lead him to doubt his own identity and fill his heart with anxiety and uncertainty. The contraction between ideals and reality has led Leo into a dilemma of self-doubt. The weakening

of his sense of belonging causes his mental detachment from the collective society. His identity crisis is clearly reflected in his self-doubt, loss of emotional ability, and failure to socialize.

Two Conflicts in Leo's Identity Crisis

Ideal Loyalty to God and Reality

As a student who has achieved academic success and is about to become a rabbi, Leo lives a lonely hermit life for six years, studying Jewish law every day, and holding onto his illusory faith in God. He faces a lonely life without social interaction and friends. During this stage, the spiritual orphan is comforted by his faith in God. Leo simply believes that his mastery of Jewish law is the solid foundation of his rabbi position. After day-after-day of learning the teachings of the law, he naturally defines himself as an ideal and perfect convert to God. His daily life is filled with God's teachings and he himself is presenting to the outside world, such as Lily and Salzman, the image of a faithful convert to God. And Lily and Salzman also openly accept Leo's identity as an expectant rabbi. But when Lily finally disrupts the subtle balance on the surface and attempts to explore deeper reasons for Leo's faith, it also disrupts Leo's idealized cognition of his own identity. Lily asks him a series of questions about religion and God, and under Lily's unsatisfactory offense, Leo instinctively refutes the answer "I am not a talented religious person, I think, that I came to God not because I love him, but because I did not". Such an answer plunges Leo into pain and deep reflection during the week after their meeting. His persistence in Jewish doctrine is not enough to prove his unflinching faith in God, and the shaking of a firm expectant rabbinic faith and the failure of socialization make him question his ethnic cultural complex. When he begins to contemplate his faith in God, he realizes that he also lacks a complete and profound understanding of life and the ability to love. The conflict between his idealized self and his actual self ultimately leads him to question his identity and his professional value. Leo's self-awareness is completely chaotic, and he even develops somatic symptoms of depression.

Social Rules of Marriage and the Pursuit of True Love

The identity recognition relationship between individuals and collective in identity politics is shaped through relevant social organizations. From a larger perspective, these organizational forms include race, class, religious beliefs, gender, culture, and from a smaller perspective, can include sexual orientation, information interests, historical background, musical or literary interests, medical conditions, professions, or even habits. In terms of Leo's social identity, the society demands him a marriage that contributes to the development of his social identity and helps to gain collective recognition of Leo's new identity, usually the congregation's recognition. The social collective generally believes that a rabbi's spouse should have a matching social status and good social reputation, and his marriage is more about the establishment of a beneficial relationship. A good spouse can help the rabbi win respect in the congregation and also help with his preaching work. Therefore, as mentioned by the matchmaker, for a student who is about to become a rabbi, his wife's family, dowry, profession, and the financial commitment of her father, as well as the social status and occupation of her family members, are far more important than appearance and age. From Leo's personal perspective, during Leo's six years of pursuing his studies, he is absent from normal social activities and therefore lacks social experience with young women. His understanding of love derives entirely from his parents' marriage, and he has never personally experienced the taste of affection. As a young boy lacking in love experience, he hopes to meet an attractive girl. He emphasizes more the personal charm of his spouse and the pursuit of pure love.

He chose his own matchmaker to introduce him to a partner, but on the first night after meeting the matchmaker, he begins to question his own decision. He does not want marriage to be seen as a transaction, and eventually realizes that he is pursuing true love rather than a spouse with superior conditions. At the same time, Leo sees through the matchmaker's tricks. The women he has introduced to be married were all those who are trained by society to look homogenized. Balzman introduces Leo these women's perfect conditions, but is unwilling to mention their shortcomings. Women's are asked to hide their true selves to cater to society's pursuit of perfection. They have economic conditions but no attractive personalities to support themselves. In this situation, the youthful and unadorned beauty Stella fascinates Leo very much. Her existence supports Leo's understanding of love and becomes a concrete manifestation of his pursuit of love. However, Stella's social reputation and status have been criticized by the collective, and her pursuit of true love has become an obstacle for Leo to gain identity recognition from the social collective. The contraction between his pursuit of admirable girl and collective's recognition leaves him the mental predicament.

The Method of Identity Construction

From identity crisis to identity construction, this is the process of Leo's repeated painful reflections and spiritual torment. In Leo's life, this process has become the concretization of the classic Jewish theme—suffering and redemption. After a week of painful reflection, Leo attributes the spiritual torment he has suffered to the obligation of the Jewish race. When he establishes an identity relationship with the world and others, and gradually determines his individual role in Jewish culture, he also re-recognizes the essential setting of himself as a Jewish person to obtain a new life through suffering. The new self-identity makes him committed to the pursuit of new life goals, and the hardships he must go through before arriving in a new life are through his pains in love to save Stella and realize his own value. Stella's existence inspires Leo to transcend social traditions and norms, paying more attention to his inner emotional needs. The meeting to Stella is a salvation for him from the marriage and identity dilemma, but her identity is another suffering to Leo Finkle. Facing this woman who is both wild and shameless, yet full of hope for a new life and eager for redemption, Leo willingly sacrifices himself in love, in an attempt to learn the ability to love from Stella, regain faith in God, and embark on a new life with her.

Suffering and redemption often appear in Malamud works. This deeply reflects the cultural complex of this Jewish writer. To him, suffering can play an important role in redemption as well as provoke people to a vision for the future and it becomes necessary for our human beings to achieve self-sublimation. In his short story *The Magic Barrel*, this function has been fully confirmed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Leo's pursuit of spiritual independence shows us the Jewish nation's adherence to suffering and redemption. When social rules serve as a means of discipline that puts Leo in a crisis of identity, self-sacrifice and the pursuit of love help Leo break free from shackles and achieve recognition and construction of identity. As a short story written by an American Jewish writer, *The Magic Barrel* provides a detailed interpretation of Jewish culture and promotes the development of Jewish literature.

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