

Study on the Symbolism in *The Magic Barrel*

CAO Shiyu

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

As an American Jewish writer, Bernard Malamud expresses his thoughts on life and universal concern for humanity through literary creation. The symbolic techniques in his short story *The Magic Barrel* are worth paying attention to. This article analyzes this short story from three aspects: the narrative function of symbolism, the specific manifestation of symbolism in the text, and the aesthetic value of symbolism, in order to understand its profound connotations.

Keywords: *The Magic Barrel*, Bernard Malamud, symbolism

Introduction

Bernard Malamud is an important American Jewish writer. His works mainly depict small Jewish figures who pursue a new life or moral regeneration, or seek development and breakthroughs in the common survival dilemma of humanity. He is apt to present that “the schlemiel struggles against forces within himself or in the world at large, serving as his symbolic Jew” (Kosofsky, 1991, p. 27).

The Magic Barrel is a work with a typical Malamud style. The story is about that a young Jewish man who is about to become a rabbi finds a matchmaker to help him secure a wife, so that it will be easier to win himself a congregation. The ending is also unexpected. In this short story, symbolism is also a major feature. This article attempts to analyze this short story from the narrative function of symbolism, the specific manifestation of symbolism, and the narrative limitations of symbolism.

The Narrative Function of Symbolism

The magic barrel is not only the title of the story, but also a thread that runs through it, mentioned multiple times in the short story. As a symbol, it drives the development of the plot and also promotes the growth of the protagonist.

After the protagonist Leo had emotional expectations, the first appearance of the magic barrel happened at the right time, becoming a prerequisite for all stories and emotions in the novel to generate and change. At this time, the magic barrel carries the primitive and barbaric energy products of natural life, which is a part of the human nature of ordinary people that has not been redeemed, filled with secular, comparative, and value judgments. Salzman believes that when you want to find a wife, you should consider “family, dowry, and what kind of promises” (Malamud, 2003, p. 172). And Leo hopes that his partner will match his economic interests. But when he went on a date with Lily and recognized his true self and his relationship with God, he realized that “Love should be a by-product of living and worship rather than its own end” (Malamud, 2003, p. 181). At this time, Leo realized that he did not pay attention to objective standards like social status of the girl. He has achieved spiritual sublimation. Leo understood his true inner needs and embarked on the path of self-redemption. At this

point, the description of the magic barrel appeared for the second time in the short story. When Leo went to the Salzman's house to search for more information about the girl in the photo, he found that the magic barrel did not exist at all. At this time, the magic barrel represents spiritual sublimation. When Leo found out that Stella was not a good girl, he still wanted to meet her and save her. Leo gained the ability to love through the arrangement of the magic barrel, allowing himself and Stella to have a new life.

From this, it can be seen that the magic barrel, as a symbol of love, not only drives the development of the entire plot, but also reflects the theme of the entire short story, that is suffering and redemption.

The Symbolism in *The Magic Barrel*

In the Jewish literature, the uses of the symbolism are countless. According to Sheldon Norman Grebstein, "symbols and emblems recur everywhere in Malamud's fiction..." (1937, p. 199). Symbolism has the specific manifestation in the text, such as the magic barrel, color, fish, and window.

The Magic Barrel

The magic barrel is not only the title of the short story, but also an image in the story. It appears in the text several times. Salzman told Leo that he kept cards in a barrel. But when Leo visited Salzman's house, there is no sign of magic barrel. It is not a real image. Salzman likes a magician. He uses the barrel to match people and make Leo's life deeply changed. Before encountering Salzman, Leo lived a poor and peaceful life, without the nourishment of love, and passions could not be talked about. During his six years of study in university, he ignored the outside world and focused solely on reading books. However, since Leo found Salzman from the advertisement in the newspaper and asked him to find a wife for him, his life had undergone a wonderful and dramatic change since then. After being arranged by Salzman to date high school teacher Lily, Leo suddenly realized the true relationship between himself and God. He did not even have a thorough understanding of God and the Jewish teachings that he would preach for life. He even said that "I came to God not because I love him, but because I did not" (Malamud, 2003, p. 179). The barrel serves as a clue throughout the story, symbolizing the magic of love that allows Leo to gain his own rebirth by saving Stella.

Color

What Stella wore in the short story is highly symbolic. The white color symbolizes purity while the red color symbolizes sin. In Leo's imagination, Stella wore red with white shoes. This means that in his heart, most part of Stella is bad, and the rest is good. This is because that Salzman hinted to Leo about Stella's life. Salzman said that "For us, our love is our life, not for the ladies. In the ghetto they—" (Malamud, 2003, p. 181). Those women sometimes have to do some shameful things in order to make a living. Since Stella also lives in the ghetto, she is also a part of those ladies, so naturally she has to do some similar things. From this, it can be seen that Leo is well aware of Stella's actual situation. It is the reason why Leo mistakes Stella's dress color and shoes color. Leo regards himself as the salvation of Stella. When he saw a photo of Stella for the first time, Stella "leaped forth to his heart—had lived, or wanted to—more than just wanted, perhaps regretted how she had lived—had somehow deeply suffered" (Malamud, 2003, p. 183). As Leo stared at the photo, he felt some evil dimension of her. However, as he stared at the photo, he also saw the "opening realms of possibility" (Malamud, 2003, p. 183). Leo saw the possibility of rescuing her from pain, the possibility of making her refreshed. Stella was wearing white clothes and red shoes, symbolizing that she was mostly good, with only a few small flaws. And that was exactly what Leo had hoped for. So, he ran forward, holding flowers that stretched out in his hand, a bouquet of

violets and rose buds, a symbol of love. Leo saw Stella as his redemption and he also wanted to save Stella. The couple can get a new life and say goodbye to their old selves.

Fish

The word “fish” appears many times in the story with the emerge of Salzman. He, as a marriage broker, “smelled frankly of fish”, ate fish and even his house has an odor of fish. The word “fish” appears so frequently, so it may contain special meanings. In Western culture, fish symbolizes rebirth. From the short story, it can see that Salzman worked hard and calculated to marry his daughter into a good son-in-law. For the inexperienced Leo, Salzman was like a slippery and elusive fish in the water. In *The Golden Bough*, Fraser tells many folk stories about storing souls outside, among which fish is a carrier (2001, p. 249). Humans can survive and die with the life and death of the fish. When Leo met Salzman for the first time, it is the beginning of Leo’s spiritual rebirth. Leo lacked a social life and devoted all the efforts to his study at first. But after he contacted with the matchmaker, he began to realize his true relationship with God and realized his own predicament of “no one loving him, and he doesn’t love anyone else” (Malamud, 2003, p. 179). Salzman said that if Leo can love Stella, then he can love anybody. So, at last, Leo gained the ability of love. From choosing to serve God just to find a profession, finding a wife just to better serve that profession, to bravely choosing Stella as his wife and saving her, Leo Finkle has been spiritually reborn. This may be why at the end of the short story, Salzman prayed for the dead. The dead signifies that in the past Leo and Stella has died and the couple will accept a new future.

Window

According to J. E. Cirlot, “Window is symbolic of consciousness” (2001, p. 373). In *The Magic Barrel*, window symbolizes Leo’s state of mind. Before encountering Salzman, Leo lived an almost isolated life. When he first met Salzman directly, he was so bashful that he pretended not to see Salzman’s activities and stared out the window. Through that window, he noticed the traces of seasonal changes that he did not notice during the several years. He made the decision to live a more positive life and find his true love on his own, but it is in vain. When he saw the city from the window, Leo found that people were busy running for their lives. Leo’s heart was tightly closed to the outside world until he met the marriage broker. And, he did not notice the scenery outside the window. But when he made the decision to take his acquaintance’s suggestion and marry a wife in order to become a better rabbi, he started to care about the outside world and even had leisure time to see the people walking on the streets, who, in a sense, were symbols of social life. This window can also be seen as the boundary between Leo’s personal world and the vast external world. When he decides to cross this boundary, care about and take part in the world outside, he finds the true meaning of life.

The Aesthetic Value of Symbolism

Symbolism conveys a rich content. The story involves numerous images, such as the magic barrel, fish, and colors. *The Magic Barrel*, through its symbolic writing style, evokes a sense of the growth journey of a Jewish rabbinical student. But, this short story not only tells about Leo’s growth, but also has a broader space of meaning beyond the story. As an American Jewish writer, Malamud delves deeply into the lives of Jews, contemplates the suffering of Jews and humanity, and hopes to find ways to soothe wounds and heal them in artistic creation. In addition, readers can experience many implied meanings through symbolic means, with a certain degree of implicit beauty. Although the work tells the story of the Jewish people, they are a microcosm of the entire human race. They have Jewish names and language mixed with Yiddish, indicating their Jewish identity. Apart from

these, these characters experience stories that anyone can experience. It can be said that Malamud's works have universal value.

Conclusion

The short story *The Magic Barrel* adopts symbolic techniques to describe Leo's growth and also reflects the theme of "suffering and redemption". Even in today's relatively peaceful life, one should always maintain a high level of vigilance. If people want to continue to survive, they must learn from history, endure suffering, redeem themselves, redeem others, and gain the ability to love and be loved. The whole story has profound connotations and aesthetic values.

References

- Cirlot, J. E. (2001). *A dictionary of symbols*. New York: Routledge.
- Frazer, J. G. (2001). *The golden bough: A study in magic and religion*. Stansted: Wordsworth Editions Ltd.
- Grebstein, S. N. (1937). *Bernard Malamud and the Jewish movement in contemporary American Jewish literature*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Jin, W. N. (2013). *Selected readings of American literature*. Shanghai: Fudan University Press.
- Kosofsky, R. N. (1991). *Bernard Malamud: A descriptive bibliography*. Westport: Greenwood Press.