The First Seven Years Study Guide

The First Seven Years by Bernard Malamud

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Introduction

Written in 1950, "The First Seven Years" was published in Bernard Malamud's first collection of short stories, *The Magic Barrel,* in 1958. The story is about Feld, a Jewish shoemaker who seeks a suitable husband for his daughter Miriam. But she is not interested in his choice of Max, a college student. Feld soon discovers that his assistant, Sobel, a Polish Jewish refugee, is in love with Miriam, and that she returns his affections. Miriam sees spiritual qualities in Sobel, but Feld is dismayed because he wants her to do better for herself. Feld is faced with a moral choice: will he allow Sobel to wed Miriam? Can he put his daughter's feelings above what he thinks is appropriate for her? Can he learn to see in Sobel what Miriam sees in him? In the climax of the story, Feld tells Sobel that if he works for two more years, making seven in all, he can ask Miriam for her hand in marriage. Hence the title of the story, which is an allusion to the Biblical story of how Jacob labored in the service of Laban for seven years to win the hand of Rachel, whom he loved.

"The First Seven Years" is one of many stories Malamud wrote about Jewish immigrants living in New York. As such, it is a representative work of one of the most distinguished American writers of the second half of the twentieth century. Although Malamud often wrote about Jews, he is usually regarded not as a "Jewish" writer but as one who explored, through the Jewish experience, universal human hopes, struggles, conflicts, and dilemmas.

Author Biography

Bernard Malamud was born on April 26, 1914, in Brooklyn, New York, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants Bertha (Fidelman) and Max Malamud. His father kept a small grocery store where he worked seven days a week to keep the business afloat.

Malamud always wanted to be a writer and began writing stories when he was eight or nine. In 1932 he enrolled at City College of New York, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in 1936. From 1936 to 1938 he attended Columbia University and was awarded a Masters degree in literature in 1942.

Malamud worked as a clerk in the Bureau of the Census in Washington, D.C. From 1940 to 1949, he taught evening classes in high schools, mostly to immigrants in Brooklyn. During this period, he continued to write in his spare time. His first published stories appeared in 1943.

Malamud married Anne de Chiara, who was of Italian descent, in 1945. They had a son, Paul, born in 1947 and a daughter, Janna, born in 1952.

In 1949 Malamud accepted a position at Oregon State College, in Corvallis, Oregon, where he taught English composition. He continued to write and in 1950 his stories appeared in *Harper's Bazaar, Partisan Review,* and *Commentary.* His first novel, *The Natural,* was published in 1952.

In 1956 Malamud lived in Rome and traveled in Europe. In the following year his novel, *The Assistant,* which drew on his observations of his father's life as a struggling grocer, was published. *The Magic Barrel,* which included the story "The First Seven Years," followed in 1958 and in that year, Malamud was awarded the Rosenthal Award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the Daroff Memorial Award. In 1959, *The Magic Barrel* received the National Book Award, and from 1959 to 1961 Malamud was a Ford Fellow of the humanities and arts program.

Malamud left Oregon State College, where he had risen to the rank of associate professor, in 1961, and joined the faculty at Bennington College in Vermont. In the same year, his third novel, *A New Life,* was published, followed in 1963 by *Idiots First,* a collection of short stories. In 1966 Malamud published what is often considered his best novel *The Fixer,* which was awarded the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize.

Malamud's next book was *Pictures of Fidelman: An Exhibition* (1969), followed by *The Tenants* (1971), and *Rembrandt's Hat* (1973). In 1976 he was awarded the Jewish Heritage Award of the B'nai B'rith and in 1983, he received the Gold Medal for fiction from the Academic Institute.

Malamud's final two works before his death in New York City on March 18, 1986, were *Dubin's Lives* (1979) and *God's Grace* (1982). *The People and Uncollected Stories* (1989) was published posthumously.

Plot Summary

Feld the shoemaker and his assistant Sobel are working at their benches on a snowy February day. Feld thinks about Max, a young man he admires for his dedication to pursuing his education. He contrasts Max's determination with the lack of interest his daughter Miriam shows in education.

At that moment Max brings in a pair of shoes for repair. Feld takes him aside, out of Sobel's hearing, and asks whether Max would like to meet Miriam. After Max sees a picture of Miriam and asks a few questions about her, he agrees to get in touch with her. Feld gives him Miriam's telephone number. Feld decides to repair the shoes at a reduced price although he does not tell Max of his generosity. Later that day, Sobel pounds so hard on the last (the wooden mold of the human foot on which shoes are built or repaired) that he breaks it. He then grabs his coat and rushes outside, quitting his job.

Sobel's departure leaves Feld in an unfortunate situation. He cannot run the business entirely by himself. He remembers how, five years earlier, he had had a heart attack and would have had to sell the business had it not been for Sobel, a Polish refugee, who appeared and begged him for work. Feld took him on and Sobel soon learned how to run the business. Feld trusted him. Sobel, although uneducated, spent his spare time reading, and was in the habit of lending his books to Miriam. Although he earned little, he showed no desire to secure a better-paying job.

One week later, Feld seeks out Sobel in his rooming house, but the landlady tells him Sobel is not at home. Feld does not believe her. He decides to hire a new assistant, and although the new man is not as proficient as Sobel, Feld is satisfied. He also learns that, on Friday, Max is to have his first date with Miriam.

When Miriam returns from her date, Feld meets her in the kitchen. Miriam reports that she and Max went for a walk, but she is noncommittal about whether she likes him. Feld, though disappointed, is consoled by the fact that Miriam has accepted a second date with Max, eight days later. On that occasion, Feld waits up for Miriam to return. But Miriam confesses she was bored by Max's company, and does not plan to see him again.

Max does not call again, and he starts to take a different route to school, avoiding Feld's house. Then one afternoon he returns for his shoes and the transaction is completed without Miriam's name being mentioned.

That night, Feld discovers that his new assistant has been stealing from him, and the shock gives him a mild heart attack. He stays in bed for three weeks, and on his first day back at work he realizes he has no option but to seek out Sobel again. He visits Sobel in his one small room, which has several stacks of books in it. Feld asks him when he will return to work and Sobel says never. Feld offers him higher wages, but Sobel does not care about money. Then Feld says he had always treated Sobel as if he

were his own son, but Sobel seizes on the remark and asks Feld why, then, did he seek out boys for Miriam to go out with instead of him?

In the ensuing discussion, it transpires that the only reason Sobel worked for Feld for five years was because he was in love with Miriam. Feld had half-guessed this was the case but had not acknowledged it to himself. Sobel says that Miriam knows how he feels about her although he has never told her directly. Feld is angry and tells Sobel that he will never marry his daughter. Sobel also becomes angry but then breaks down in tears. Feld feels pity for him. He does not want Miriam to have the life of a shoemaker's wife; he had dreamed of a better life for her. But then Feld has a change of heart. He says that if Sobel waits two more years he can then talk to Miriam about marriage.

When Feld returns to work the next morning, he finds Sobel already at his bench, working hard.

Summary

The protagonist in "The First Seven Years" is a shoemaker named Feld who wants his daughter to have a better life than his. In the introduction of the story, Feld is angry with his assistant, Sobel, because he makes too much noise as he works. Feld looks at Sobel angrily but the assistant doesn't notice because he is bent over his work. Feld looks out the window at the falling February snow. He remembers the Polish village where he grew up and his life now. He also thinks about a college boy named Max, whom Feld saw trudging through the snow that morning. Feld respects the sacrifices Max has made, going to school through all kinds of weather to get his education. Sometimes Feld wishes he had a son instead of a daughter. His daughter, Miriam, has little concern for education. Although she spends a great deal of time reading, she didn't want to continue her schooling, and wanted to work instead. Feld begged her to go to school but she said she wanted to be independent. Feld's assistant, Sobel, is well read in the classics. He lends books to Miriam and advises her on her readings.

Max enters the shoemaker's shop with shoes that need repair. He is embarrassed as he tries to explain what he wants done with the old shoes. Feld listens to the young man eagerly but cannot concentrate on what the young man is saying because he is thinking about getting Max to ask Miriam on a date. He knows that Miriam would probably be angry with him for meddling but feels it is his duty to introduce them. Miriam works in an office and only meets loud-mouthed salesmen or illiterate shipping clerks. Feld thinks that maybe Max could awaken Miriam's interest in going to college, so that she can marry an educated man and have a better life. After Max describes what he wants done with his shoes, Feld asks to speak with him in the hall. The men are silent for a moment and Sobel stops working. After Sobel begins working again, Max asks Feld what he wants to tell him.

Feld looks at Max, noticing that he is tall, overly thin, with sharp cut features and a beak-like nose. He is wearing a loose, long overcoat, a soggy brown hat, and battered shoes. Feld tells Max that he has observed him since he was in high school. He tells Max that he has a nineteen-year-old daughter whom he thinks Max might be interested in meeting. Max asks to see a picture of her. Feld shows him a photo and Max says she's all right, agreeing to meet her. Feld gives Max his phone number and tells him to call Miriam after work. Max asks for the price of the shoes, Feld quotes him a low price. When Max leaves, Feld hears Sobel pounding on his last piece of work furiously until it breaks. Sobel grabs his hat and coat and rushes out of the shop.

Feld is worried. He will be lost without Sobel's help because he has a heart condition that could cause him to collapse him if he exerts himself. He hired Sobel five years ago after having a heart attack. Sobel was a Polish refugee who appeared near the shop and begged for work. He was poorly dressed and stocky, with a bald head. Sobel is thirty years old, with a plain face and soft blue eyes. He knew nothing about shoemaking but agreed to work for little pay if Feld would teach him the trade. In six weeks, Sobel was as good as Feld and he ran the business expertly. Feld trusts Sobel, leaving him to guard the shop and money alone. Sobel lives in a rooming house and

does not ask for much, only books, which he then lends to Miriam, along with his thick notes of written commentary. Feld pays him more than he asks for and tells him he could earn better wages somewhere else, or even open a place of his own but Sobel has no interest in leaving. Feld imagines that Sobel remains at the shop because, as a refugee, he is afraid of the world.

After Sobel breaks the shoe he was working on, and runs out of the shop, Feld decides to make him wait for a week before going to find him. When Feld finally goes to Sobel's rooming house, the landlady says he isn't home, but Feld thinks this is a lie. Because he needs the help, Feld hires a new assistant, a quiet man with an irritating rasp. He doesn't trust the new assistant, though, so he has to spend more time in the shop than he did when Sobel worked for him. He keeps his spirits high, though, by thinking of Max and Miriam. Max has called Miriam, and they are meeting on Friday. On Friday evening, Feld doesn't feel well so he stays in bed when Max comes to see his daughter. Miriam brings Max to the bedroom door before they leave. Max greets Feld and his wife with ease. Miriam looks fresh and pretty even though she has worked all day. Miriam comes home from her date at 11:30. Feld goes into the kitchen where his daughter sits, reading. She tells him that she and Max went for a walk. She says the date was all right but she can't tell, yet, how the relationship will progress, although Max asked her out again for the following Saturday. She asks her father about Sobel. Feld says Sobel got another job. Miriam says nothing more and goes back to reading.

During the week, Feld asks Miriam to tell him more about Max. Max is taking a business course to become an accountant. Feld is a little disappointed that Max isn't studying to become a doctor or lawyer, but after he asks around and discovers that accountant is a well-respected job, he is happy. When Saturday arrives, the shop is busy so Feld is not able to be at home when Max comes to call on Miriam. After work, Feld falls asleep reading the newspaper. He wakes up when Miriam comes home. Miriam looks tired and Feld is afraid to ask her anything about the evening. When he does ask, Miriam tells him her date was boring. She says that Max is a materialist. Feld doesn't understand what this means. Miriam says Max has no soul. He only cares about material possessions. Feld asks if she will see Max again and she replies that he didn't ask her for another date, but if he does she will refuse. Feld secretly hopes that she will change her mind. He hopes that Max will phone but he does not. Max now takes a different route to school so that he doesn't pass by the shop. Feld is deeply hurt.

One afternoon, Max walks into the shop to get his shoes. He is excited when they are handed to him because the shoes are better than new. He pays Feld and leaves without any mention of Miriam. That night, Feld finds out that his new assistant has been stealing from him and has a mild heart attack. Feld stays in bed for three weeks. When Miriam suggests that he go ask Sobel to return to the shop, Feld doesn't want to, but knows he has no other choice. He makes his way to Sobel's rooming house and knocks on the door. Sobel answers and lets him in. His room is empty except for a narrow cot and stacks of books. Feld thinks Sobel is odd; he is unable to understand why an uneducated man wants to read so much. When he asks Sobel this, Sobel says that he reads "to know." Feld asks, "To know what?" Sobel doesn't answer, which makes Feld believe that he reads so much simply because he is odd.

When Feld asks Sobel to come back to work, Sobel says, "Never," asking why he should come back. Feld offers to raise his wages but Sobel doesn't care about the wages. Feld says he has treated Sobel like a son. Sobel disagrees because Feld asked a strange boy on the street to date his daughter without even considering him. Sobel explains that Miriam is the reason that he worked for Feld for the past five years. He tells Feld that Miriam knows him and knows he loves her. Feld is shocked, and feels angry and deceived. He yells at Sobel, telling him that Miriam would never marry and old and ugly man like him. Sobel is enraged. His eyes fill up with tears, and he turns to the window, his back to Feld, and clenches his fists.

As Fled watches Sobel, his anger subsides. He pities him, and is aware of Sobel's history, escaping Hitler's prison camps in Poland. Feld thinks it is strange that this refugee has come to America and has fallen in love with a girl half his age. Aware of Sobel's desperation, Fled says that he didn't mean to say he was ugly. He says that what he called ugly was not Sobel himself but the life he pictured for Miriam if she were to marry him. He wants his daughter to have a better life. He doesn't want her to be the wife of a shoemaker. All the dreams that Feld had for his daughter are now dead.

Sobel stands by the window, reading. Fled notices that he looks young when he is reading. Fled tells Sobel his daughter is only nineteen, too young to be married. He tells Sobel to wait for two years before asking her to marry him. Sobel doesn't answer and Feld leaves. Once he is outside in the snow, he walks with a stronger stride. The next morning, Feld arrives at work to open the shop but Sobel is already inside, sitting at the last, pounding leather for love.

Analysis

"The First Seven Years" is the first story in Bernard Malamud's collection entitled *The Magic Barrel*. It tells the story of an aging shoemaker who left Poland to start a new life for his family in America. More than anything, Feld, the shoemaker, wants a better life for his daughter, Miriam, than the kind of life he and his wife have had. He pleaded with his daughter to go to college and worked long hours at the shop to save money for her education, eventually causing him to have a heart attack. Miriam isn't interested in fulfilling her father's for her life. She is an avid reader but would rather work than go to college because she wants to be independent. As a last resort, Feld tries to set his daughter up with a college boy. By setting his daughter up with Max, he hopes to give Miriam the opportunity of having a better future.

Miriam agrees to go out with Max, but by their second date, she is repulsed by his materialistic focus. Max's shallowness is foreshadowed early in the story. When Feld approaches the boy about dating his daughter, the first thing Max asks is if he can see a photograph of Miriam. This is an early sign that physical appearances are of primary importance to Max. This theme is continued in the story when Max goes back to Feld's shop to pick up the shoes he has had repaired and can barely contain his delight at seeing that his shoes look better than new.

Five years ago, after Feld had a heart attack, he hired an assistant named Sobel. Sobel is a Polish refugee who escaped Nazi prison camps and fled to America. Although Feld respects and trusts Sobel, he is annoyed with the man's hard edges. This is evident in the introduction to the story when Feld becomes irritated because Sobel works too loudly. Sobel has worked with Feld for low wages because he is in love with Miriam. Sobel and Miriam share reading as a common interest. Sobel lends the girl his books and gives her his notes on the books he reads. Feld cannot understand Sobel's interest in reading. He finds this hobby odd because Sobel is not an educated man. Sobel's character is highly symbolic in the story. Feld's frustration with the worker comes from the fact that he reminds Feld of himself. Both are Polish immigrants who are destined to spend their futures as shoemakers. Feld is angry when he finds out his assistant is in love with his daughter. Their marriage would inevitably dissipate the hopes he has for her. If Miriam marries Sobel, she will struggle as her mother did, as a shoemaker's wife.

Malamud's story addresses a universal theme. The story expresses the common hope of parents to see their children have an easier life than theirs. In the end of this tale, Feld accepts his daughter's destiny with Sobel, asking only that the assistant to wait two years, until she is twenty-one, before asking for her hand in marriage. The author states that when Feld leaves Sobel's rooming house at the end of the story he walks with a stronger stride. This symbolizes that he has not only accepted the possibility of his daughter marrying Sobel, but also that he has developed confidence in the match. It also represents that he trusts that she can make her own decisions now. Feld has done what all parents must eventually do; he let his child have true independence by allowing her to make her own decisions about her future.

Characters

Feld

Feld is a Polish Jewish immigrant shoemaker. He has lived in America for many years although he spent his youth in a village in Poland. He has labored hard to establish his business and has had some modest success—he can afford to send his daughter to college, for example. However, his years of hard work and the worry of maintaining a business have damaged his health. Five years earlier, he suffered a heart attack; another mild attack keeps him confined to bed for three weeks. Although occasionally Feld wishes he had had a son rather than a daughter, he is a loving father who is deeply concerned for the welfare of his daughter, Miriam. He wants her to have a better life than he has been able to give to her mother. He unsuccessfully tries to persuade Miriam to go to college and then tries to set up a romance between her and Max. Feld is sensitive enough to be apprehensive lest Miriam should think he is meddling in her affairs, but he fails to perceive where Miriam's affections truly lie.

Miriam Feld

Miriam is Feld's nineteen-year-old daughter, a "large-framed girl with a well-shaped body, and . . . a fine open face and soft hair." Miriam is intelligent and reads many books, especially those that Sobel passes on to her. But Miriam has no desire to go to college, preferring to get an office job and be independent. She is quite capable of standing up to her father, and does not confide in him very readily. In her choice of romantic partner, she is also extremely independent, rejecting her father's choice. She is not afraid of expressing her own opinions.

Max

Max is a college student studying to become a certified public accountant. The son of a peddler, he is tall and thin, with a beak-like nose. At Feld's instigation, Max takes Miriam out twice, but she finds him a bore because he is interested only in practical, material things. In a telling moment, Max shows more excitement when he collects his newly repaired shoes ("Max's Adam's apple went up once he saw them, and his eyes had little lights in them") than he does when he first sees a photograph of Miriam.

Sobel

Sobel is Feld's assistant in the shoemaking store. He is a Polish Jewish refugee and has worked for Feld for five years. Although he knew nothing of shoemaking when he started, he quickly learned the business and could soon repair a shoe as well as Feld. Sobel is also efficient and trustworthy, and Feld allows him to manage the business. Sobel has no worldly ambitions and is content to work for low wages because he is in

love with Feld's daughter Miriam. In his physical appearance, Sobel is not impressive; he is a bald, stocky, plain-faced man who looks older than his thirty-five years. But he has an active and questioning mind. Although he is not educated in the conventional sense, he reads the classics voraciously. Sobel is also an emotional man, quickly given to anger or tears, and he sometimes acts impulsively, as when he quits his job after learning that Feld has arranged a date for Miriam with Max.

Themes

The Material v. the Spiritual

Although Feld wishes the best for his daughter and wants her to find a husband who can provide her with a better life, he takes account only of material values. He thinks of himself as a practical man, which is why he favors Max as a husband for Miriam. Max is studying to be an accountant, developing knowledge of financial matters. But that is all he is interested in. He has no depth. Miriam is soon aware of this, and tells her father that Max has "no soul."

In contrast, Miriam, who seems to care little for material things, loves Sobel, who is the opposite of Max. Sobel spends much of his time reading because he wants to better himself by means of a less tangible kind of knowledge than would be taught in accountancy classes: he reads because he wants to understand the human condition. Although he owns almost nothing in material terms, his soul is rich because he nourishes it with intellectual thought. In that sense, he has a spiritual dimension that Max lacks and Feld does not understand or value. When Feld looks at Sobel, all he sees is an odd, unattractive, prematurely old shoemaker who is a totally unsuitable match for his beloved daughter.

But in the climax of the story, Feld is forced to reexamine his values and make a choice. Although he feels heavy-hearted about Miriam's material future, he manages to feel compassion for Sobel. Rather than condemning him, Feld has the courage to accept the genuineness of the bond Sobel shares with Miriam, even though he cannot understand it because it is outside his value system. In allowing a more generous aspect of himself to emerge, Feld tacitly accepts that there is more to life than the narrow materialism he has previously espoused. As a result of this episode, which he neither asked for nor welcomed, he acquires a broader perspective on life.

The American Dream

The American Dream is the belief that anyone, no matter what their background, can move up the social ladder to wealth and success if they work hard enough and show sufficient grit and persistence. The Dream has often been embraced most enthusiastically by immigrants. Although Feld, an immigrant with a precarious yet reasonably prosperous business, knows that his own station in life is not likely to improve, he cherishes the idea of the American Dream for his daughter. He envisions upward mobility for her through marriage. In Feld's eyes, Max is the embodiment of the Dream. As the son of a peddler, Max's origins are humble, but ever since high school he has made sacrifices in pursuit of his education, and he is ambitious. When he finishes his studies and becomes a certified public accountant, he will be a highly respected member of mainstream American society, with much higher status than an immigrant shoemaker.

The irony is that Miriam, too, strives for the American Dream—but her vision of the Dream differs from that of her father. She has no interest in social respectability or wealth; however, in one respect at least she is more "Americanized" than Feld because she strongly believes in charting her own course in life and is not afraid to be unconventional. This spirit of individualism has always been endemic to American society. But Miriam's independent streak means that she has a different set of expectations than does her father in regard to marriage. He remains part of a culture that is more patriarchal in family matters. As a consequence, he believes he has the authority to ask Sobel to wait two more years before approaching Miriam. Although Miriam does not say so explicitly, she gives the impression that she prefers to run her own affairs and would chafe at such a fatherly restriction.

Style

Point of View

The story is told by a limited third person narrator from the point of view of Feld. No direct insight is given into the minds of Max, Miriam, or Sobel. They are revealed only by their words, their actions, and through Feld's perceptions. Telling the story from Feld's point of view means that he becomes a sympathetic figure; the reader understands his thoughts and feelings. But there is also irony in the method. Part of the effectiveness of the storytelling technique lies in the fact that there is so much that Feld does not notice, but which is plainly apparent to the reader. Feld cannot see that Max is unsuited to be a husband to Miriam, which is obvious to the reader from the casual way that Max first agrees to see her. Nor can Feld allow himself to acknowledge that Sobel and Miriam are secretly in love, even though that too is plain to the reader through numerous hints: the fact that Miriam reads Sobel's long commentaries on the books he studies "as if the word of God were inscribed on them," and that she inquires about Sobel after he quits his job. This lack of insight leads Feld to the mistaken belief that the reason Sobel does not seek a better job is because his bad experiences as a refugee have made him afraid of the world. The irony here is that it is not Sobel who is afraid, but Feld, who fears to recognize the true relationship between Sobel and Miriam.

Language

Malamud helps to create the atmosphere of an immigrant's experience by using constructions that suggest the speaker has not mastered English in a standard way. Some scholars argue that the syntax of the language used by Feld and sometimes also by the narrator resembles Yiddish, the vernacular language of European Jews, which developed in the ninth or tenth century out of a fusion of Hebrew, Aramaic, and German, and includes elements of Romance and Slavic languages. However, there is no general agreement on this point. Whether reminiscent of Yiddish syntax or not, it is clear that in the following sentence, spoken by Feld to Max, the word order is not what would be used by a native American English speaker: "I watched you in the morning go to the subway to school, and I said always to myself, this is a fine boy that he wants so much an education." Again, when Feld asks Miriam, "What means this word?" (he is referring to her use of the word "materialist"), the word order is not standard American English.

The use of language in a nonstandard way serves to reinforce the characterization of Feld as an immigrant not quite at home in the dominant culture. It also provides another reason for his interest in Max as a match for his daughter. Although Max says little, he seems to speak in a more standard form of English. Feld therefore has little difficulty in believing that Max will become a respected member of the mainstream culture, a status to which Feld aspires on behalf of his daughter.

Historical Context

Polish Jews and the Holocaust

"The First Seven Years" is set in New York City in 1949 when the world was still coming to terms with the horrors of the Holocaust. The Holocaust refers to the killing of six million Jews in death camps by the Nazis during World War II.

Two characters in the story are Polish Jewish immigrants. Feld remembers his life as a youth in a Polish Jewish village, or *shtetl,* and he appears to have lived in America for some years. He may have arrived at the end or shortly after the first wave of Polish immigration to the United States in 1914.

The next wave of Polish immigration came in the 1940s, as a result of World War II. The second character, Sobel, arrived as a refugee in about 1944. Feld believes Sobel must have experienced terrible things at the hands of the Nazis, escaping "Hitler's incinerators" only "by the skin of his teeth." Feld has good reason to suspect this. Not only did Poles suffer greatly following the German invasion of their country in September 1939—which began World War II—but Polish Jews suffered even more. The Nazis regarded Jews as sub-human and forced them into overcrowded urban ghettos where living conditions were appalling. The worst was the Warsaw ghetto, in which half a million Jews struggled to survive, ravaged by hunger and disease.

From the ghettos, the Germans deported the Jews to concentration camps where they were killed. Some of the most notorious death camps were built in Poland, including Treblinka, which was a few miles from Warsaw, and Auschwitz, where millions were murdered, including Jews from many other European countries.

A total of three million Polish Jews died in the war; only fifty to seventy thousand survived. Seen in this terrible light, Sobel was one of the lucky ones.

Malamud commented that he was deeply affected by World War II and the Holocaust, which forced him to think carefully about what he wanted to say as a writer. In a 1958 interview quoted in Solotaroff's *Bernard Malamud: A Study of the Short Fiction,* he said, "The suffering of the Jews is a distinct thing for me. I for one believe that not enough has been made of the tragedy of the destruction of 6,000,000 Jews." In the same interview, which coincided with the publication of "The First Seven Years," Malamud said, "the purpose of the writer . . . is to keep civilization from destroying itself," a remark that clearly refers to the horrors of Nazism, as well as totalitarianism in other countries such as the Soviet Union.

Malamud and Jewish American Literature

When "The First Seven Years" was published in *The Magic Barrel* in 1958, following closely on Malamud's *The Assistant* (1957), it confirmed that Malamud was one of a

number of Jewish writers who, from the end of World War II to the 1950s, were making their mark on the American literary landscape. Saul Bellow, for example, published his novella *Seize the Day* in 1956 and *Henderson the Rain King* in 1959. Another Jewish writer, Philip Roth, published his collection of short stories *Goodbye, Columbus* in 1959. Along with Malamud, these two writers were often linked together as Jewish Americans who made much use of their ethnicity as the subject of their fiction. A fourth Jewish writer to emerge during this period was Isaac Bashevis Singer, whose works of fiction are written in Yiddish. Like the two characters in "The First Seven Years," Singer was a Polish Jewish immigrant to America. His novel *The Family Moskat* (1950) recreated the vanished world of Polish-Jewish society between the two world wars.

Jewish Immigrants in the United States

Although the 1950s was a period of economic prosperity in America—World War II had ended the Depression and American cities, unlike their European counterparts, had escaped the devastation of the war—Malamud chose not to reflect this increasingly affluent, consumer society in his work. Instead, he harked back to an earlier period when Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe had only recently arrived and were learning how to gain a footing in America. Malamud once remarked that he responded with particularly deep feelings to the Eastern European immigrants of his parents' generation. His parents were Russian Jews who settled in New York City sometime between 1905 and 1910. They were part of a wave of Jewish immigration to New York that lasted from about 1880 to 1920. Many settled in the Lower East Side, which for many years could provide them with only slum conditions. Although there were jobs, working and living conditions were poor, with overcrowding and disease common. However, thousands of Jews quickly bettered themselves through education and study, activities that have always been valued in Jewish culture. (This belief finds an echo in "The First Seven Years," in Feld's concern that his daughter Miriam should have a college education.)

Malamud, however, grew up in Brooklyn, not in a predominantly Jewish area, and "The First Seven Years" does not reflect the specific material conditions for New York Jews in 1950 or in any earlier generation. On the contrary, Malamud's Jewish characters are often generic figures, with their roots as much in the genre of the folk tale as in contemporary social conditions.

Critical Overview

With its Jewish immigrant characters living in dingy surroundings and burdened by the weight of life's cares, "The First Seven Years" is a representative Malamud story. It has been highly regarded ever since its publication in Malamud's collection of stories, *The Magic Barrel* (1958). For example, William Peden commented in the *New York Times,* "[Malamud] possesses a gift for characterization that is often breathtaking. His lonely shoemakers, despondent graduate students and sickness ridden shopkeepers are brilliantly individualized."

The story has stood the test of time. It seems to have been among Malamud's own favorites, since he included it in his selection of twenty-five stories for *The Stories of Bernard Malamud* (1983). This volume was favorably reviewed by Robert Alter in the *New York Times,* who selected "The First Seven Years" as one of five Malamud stories "which . . . will be read as long as anyone continues to care about American fiction written in the 20th century."

In 1997, the story received further attention when an edition of Malamud's complete stories was published. Richard Bernstein, in the *New York Times,* commented,

The earliest stories in the collection [which include "The First Seven Years"], written when Malamud was in his late 20's and early 30's, take figures from the immigrant Jewish petty bourgeoisie and place them into struggles worthy of the Greeks.

Literary critics, too, have found plenty to discuss about the story. Edward A. Abramson, in *Bernard Malamud Revisited,* grouped it with eight other Malamud stories that are set in "prisonlike stores of various kinds." Although these stories "lack complexity . . . their very carefully crafted simplicity . . . heightens the effectiveness of the epiphany that so frequently occurs in Malamud's tales."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English. In this essay, he considers the character development of Feld in Malamud's story "The First Seven Years. "

Although "The First Seven Years" is one of a number of stories by Malamud that feature Jewish characters who live in New York City, there are few details that locate the story in a specific place. These details help to give the story the plain and timeless quality of the folk tale or Biblical narrative. It is indeed loosely inspired by the Genesis story of Jacob's love for Rebecca and his willingness to serve Laban for seven years to win her hand.

The absence of a clearly defined or complex external setting—the reader is told only that it is February and it is snowing—also conveys the fact that "The First Seven Years" is essentially an internal drama. It shows characters who are caught up in the swirl of powerful emotions that are universal in their application. The details of time and place are not so important.

The internal drama centers primarily on Feld, the character who is presented with the greatest personal challenge. He must learn to grow and change, to see things he had formerly not seen and to value things he had formerly not valued. This is not an easy task for an elderly man whose formative years lie in the distant past, in a *shtetl* in Poland where, according to him, he wasted his youth. Feld is continually anxious that his daughter Miriam should not waste hers. But there lies the irony of the story. There is such a contrast in Feld between what he thinks he is doing—protecting the interests of his daughter, acting with vision and foresight, keeping the long-term future in mind—and what he actually does, which is to try to arrange a completely unsuitable match and to fail to recognize the destined couple who are together under his own roof.

Early in the story, there is a telling passage when Feld looks out of the window "at the nearsighted haze of falling February snow." The personification (the attribution of human traits to inanimate objects) in "nearsighted" obviously does not mean that the snow itself is nearsighted but that the falling snow makes it hard for a person to see very far. The term makes a perfect metaphor for Feld himself, and, coming as it does in the first paragraph of the story, it foreshadows what is Feld's dominant characteristic: he is not far-sighted. As the narrator explains at the beginning, Feld is a practical man, but this practicality operates between very narrow limits. This deficiency is glimpsed in the direct way he speaks to Max when he is about to try to interest the young man romantically in his daughter: "I am a businessman," Feld says, which might be thought of as an unpromising beginning for a man entering into such a venture. Many of Malamud's characters in his other stories and novels are imprisoned in one way or another, and Feld is no exception. He is the prisoner of his limited notions of life that cannot, whatever the worthiness of his aims, accommodate any goal other than practicality, material success, and social respectability.

This means that Feld cannot even begin to understand a man like Sobel. Although Feld acknowledges that Sobel is trustworthy, capable, and efficient (practical virtues that he can appreciate), Feld is puzzled as to why Sobel is content to work for such low wages and has no worldly ambition. The reason Sobel continues to work for Feld, of course, is his love for Miriam, but Feld, with his myopic (a narrow view) vision, does not allow himself to perceive this. As for Sobel's habit of immersing himself in books, Feld sees no virtue in it and feels that Sobel is simply "queer." When he asks Sobel why he reads so much, Sobel replies that he reads to know although he offers no further explanation in response to Feld's question, to know what? The question is one that Feld cannot help but ask. For the practical man, activities of this kind must have a clearly defined purpose. Max, the student of accounting whom Feld so admires, no doubt also reads books, but his reading is confined to textbooks. Mastering them will allow him to climb the ladder toward social and financial success. On the other hand, no one will ever pay Sobel a penny for poring over the classics and scribbling annotations in the margins. Nor would Sobel expect anyone to do so. But the act of reading and commenting on his reading nourishes Sobel's spirit; it fulfills an inner yearning to understand the world and the human place in it. Sobel can no more ignore this impulse to know than he can ignore the need to eat. It bestows on him a nobility that Miriam sees clearly, and this is what draws her to him, for she too has an urge to know, although she has no desire to fulfil this urge by means of a conventional college education.

Feld, however, is in this respect blind. He can understand nothing of Sobel's motivation. He and Sobel are like creatures from different planets, each in his own orbit, neither ever coming close to touching the other. And in a way, Feld and Sobel are representative human types. After all, what can the engineer find to say to the poet, or the businessman to the philosopher, or the scientist to the artist? Each lives in a separate world, one outer, one inner. And Feld's unspoken assumption—what use are the classics if they do not lead to a secure job and material prospects?—is an argument used everywhere by those who espouse a utilitarian concept of education, as opposed to the traditional humanist belief that the purpose of education is the development of the whole person.

It is this huge gulf separating Feld from Sobel that makes the climax of the story so moving because when the emotional pressure builds up on Feld he manages to reach beyond himself in a way he has never done before. In a moment of self-transcendence, he bridges the gulf that divides him from Sobel. The moment comes in three distinct steps. The context is Feld's confrontation with Sobel during which he discovers that Sobel has found a way of letting Miriam know his feelings for her. Feld vows that Miriam "will never marry a man so old and ugly like you." Sobel breaks down and stands at the window sobbing.

But then, in the first of the three steps, Feld suddenly feels compassion for Sobel, "bald and old with his miseries," and he understands the anguish Sobel must have experienced in his years of silent love for Miriam. This moment of empathy for another man's situation in life takes Feld out of himself and allows him to withdraw half of the insult he had uttered only moments before: "Ugly I didn't mean." Perhaps this happens in part because Feld senses how much Sobel loves Miriam. He can empathize with

Sobel because he too loves her, his own daughter: the object of their love is the same. It is this bond he shares with Sobel—a bond not previously, consciously acknowledged—that begins to melt his heart.

This event is followed by a few moments of silence in the room. Feld feels sorrow for his daughter, knowing that she will never have the life he envisioned for her. But he also experiences something more than sorrow. The quietness in the room is the prelude to an epiphany. Feld looks across the room and sees Sobel standing by the window reading, "And it was curious that when he read he looked young." Introduced quietly, without fanfare, and with no trace of sentimentality, this is the moment to which the whole story has been leading: at long last, the old shoemaker sees his thirty-five-year-old assistant, who had always in his eyes looked old, in a fresh light. In this moment, Feld sees Sobel as Miriam must see him. The act of reading, and the thinking and intellectual speculation that go with it, is the activity that lends nobility to this rough-hewn, otherwise unappealing man. When Sobel reads, the beauty of the soul, which is ageless and untouched by time, shines out of him. And when Feld, in a moment of grace, sees this, he is freed from the prison of his selfishness and his belief that only practical, material things have value. In that moment, he is able to make a generous gesture, no matter the cost to himself, that previously had been beyond his reach. Now he can walk the street with a "stronger stride," knowing that he has bowed to that which is beyond understanding: the mysterious nature of love and the unknowable pathways by which it travels from one heart to another.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "The First Seven Years," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Sanderson holds a Master of Fine Arts degree in fiction writing and is an independent writer. In this essay, she points out that Bernard Malamud's short story not only includes references to the story of Jacob, Rachel, and Laban, but also incorporates the experiences of American immigrants in the early twentieth century.

As the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants who came to the United States early in the twentieth century, Bernard Malamud understood the obligation he carried as a second-generation American to do better in life than his parents had done. Malamud's parents ran a grocery store and worked there seven days a week with the hope that their son would not have to keep such a grueling schedule. Unsurprisingly, Malamud's stories are filled with immigrant shopkeepers who have high hopes for their children's futures.

Malamud also wove the stories and styles of the "old country" into his work. Numerous critics have noted the cadence of Yiddish folk tales and proverbs throughout Malamud's writing, as well as his primarily Jewish characters. In fact, David J. Zucker in *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought* argues that the style of many of Malamud's stories parallels the short, concise explications of biblical stories written by rabbis up until about the thirteenth century and called *midrashim.* According to Zucker, these *midrashim* were "brief, but enlightening . . . limited in scope and content, and sought to convey a message about the human condition," a perfect description of Malamud's short stories. "Malamud often created a kind of *midrash* in his writing. He utilized figures from the Jewish past and recast them, reclothed them in modern dress," observes Zucker.

So, like any great storyteller, Malamud combines the old with the new. Not only does he use ancient techniques to relay a story (and, as often as not, that story is as ancient as they come), but he shows himself to be a son of the New World, as well. In one of his early short stories, "The First Seven Years," Malamud tells a traditional story but with a decidedly American twist. This is not only a story with roots in the Old Testament, as most critics agree, but also a new story of America and the promise that hundreds of thousands of immigrants in the first half of the twentieth century saw for themselves and their heirs.

In "The First Seven Years," Malamud writes of a shoemaker named Feld, originally from Poland but now living in New York City, prosperous enough that he can afford to hire an assistant who helps him at the shop. Sobel, the assistant, a recent refugee from Poland, "expertly ran the business for the thoroughly relieved shoemaker" and was eventually as good at making shoes as was Feld.

Feld wants only the best for his daughter, Miriam, and so desires a match with Max, a neighborhood boy who is studying to be an accountant. But unbeknownst to Feld, Sobel has been in love with Miriam since he started working in the shop, and Miriam loves Sobel, too. Feld knows that Sobel and Miriam regularly get together to discuss books, but the possibility that the two are a couple has not entered his mind. To Feld, Sobel is

just a balding man in his mid-thirties, a man like those Feld left behind many years ago in his own Polish village. He is blind to Sobel's potential in the New World because in the Old World Sobel would have had none.

As many critics have noted, parts of the story bear a close resemblance to the story of Jacob, Rachel, and Laban in the Bible's book of Genesis. And, as Zucker has pointed out, Malamud has created a *midrash* of the biblical story with "The Last Seven Years." When Feld discovers that Sobel has remained working at his shop only for the chance to marry Miriam, he is at first incredulous. "So what has my daughter got to do with a shoemaker thirty-five years old who works for me?" asks Feld. When Sobel explains how he feels about Miriam, and that he has withstood poor wages, waiting for the time when he can marry her, Feld is even more astounded and cries, "She will never marry a man so old and ugly like you."

In the biblical story, Jacob leaves his father's land and comes upon Rachel, and knows immediately that he loves her. He is willing to do just about anything to marry her, but Laban, Rachel's father, has other plans, telling Jacob that he must work for him for seven years before Rachel will be allowed to be his wife. In the same way, Feld tells Sobel that Miriam is not ready to marry yet and that Sobel must wait for another two years before asking her— making his *love* apprenticeship, as it were, a total of seven years, including the five he has already spent. Like Jacob, whose seven years "seemed but a few days, because of the greatness of his love," Sobel is happy at the end of the story, hard at work early the morning after this conversation, "pounding his leather for love."

It is obvious where the Old Testament story comes into play in this one. But overlaid on this foundation is a new story—the story of a destitute immigrant building up his own life and, in the process, helping to build a nation. Sobel is a man running from Poland, as his homeland has become a dangerous place. With World War II and the Holocaust close on his heels, Sobel must leave and find a place where he can begin again. He appears on the shoemaker's doorstep, almost as a miracle, after Feld has suffered a heart attack and is worried about finding someone trustworthy to take over the running of his shoemaking shop. "But just at the moment of his darkest despair, this Polish refugee, Sobel, had appeared one night out of the street and begged for work."

However, Sobel does not simply accept the job and consider his life made and settled. And this is the difference between the Old World and the New. In New York, even a man of thirty-five still has opportunities to better himself. In five years, despite his being almost invisible to Feld, Sobel grows from a haggard immigrant in desperate need of work to a man who will soon be living part of the American dream—because in two years, at the end of his seven-year apprenticeship, he will be married to the boss's daughter and will, no doubt, inherit the business. Along the way, Sobel has become self-educated—as witnessed by his obsession with books and reading—and self-confident enough to walk out on Feld when he encourages the accountancy student to date his daughter.

Feld believes that his assistant is "afraid of the world" because of his terrible experiences as a refugee and that he has no ambition. But such thoughts are based on Feld's ideas about life in his homeland and are not accurate perceptions about Sobel. Sobel actually is more a man of the New World than is Feld. When Feld comes to Sobel's modest apartment to ask him to come back to the shop, he notices with some surprise that the assistant's "shirt and trousers were clean, and his stubby fingers, away from the shoemakers bench, were strangely pallid." Sobel's self-image is grounded in his view of his future, not in his present circumstances. Feld does not understand this view.

Sobel's character is the beginning of an American lineage, a line of immigrants who bettered themselves and thereby contributed to the country's growth, and this patriarchal status he shares with Jacob. Jacob is also referred to as Israel, and his twelve sons are the progenitors of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, who became a nation.

In Genesis, God grants the promised land to Abraham's descendents (among which Jacob and his twelve sons count themselves). America, too, has often been referred to as the promised land. Sobel has come to this particular promised land and found not only love but also a chance at a new life. It is critical, in fact, that Sobel fall in love with a young girl such as Miriam for, like Jacob, his job is to be "fruitful and multiply," ensuring that his descendents go out into the promised land. And indeed, the title's seven years of waiting for Miriam are the first seven years of Sobel's life in the Promised Land, as well.

But why is Feld so unhappy for his daughter? On the surface, it is because he sees her union with Sobel as boding a repetition of his own life. He doesn't understand the opportunities that exist for Sobel, and therefore he believes that he has failed in one of his primary jobs as a patriarch in the New World—to see that his children go on to bigger and better things than he has had. However, it is important to note that his frustration with Miriam does not start with whom she will marry; it is clear in the story's first paragraph when he complains that she is not the son he wished for, and also that she will not take advantage of his prosperity and attend college. Malamud does not elaborate on this—this is, after all, a *midrash,* a concise, focused story. But maybe this is Feld's first taste of one of the bittersweet experiences of America; that the same energy that makes it possible for one's child to be the first in the family to attend college can also make that child feel independent enough to reject that prize. When Feld asks Miriam why she is not interested in Max, she responds, "Because he is nothing more than a materialist. . . . He has no soul." What the father wants for the daughter is not what the daughter wants for herself.

With "The First Seven Years" Malamud has written a story as burnished by the promise of a new land as it is steeped in tradition. The similar experiences of people separated by thousands of years but still seeking a better place are merged in his tale, told as only the son of immigrants could tell it. What appears to be a simple love story is actually a densely layered story of generations and history and potential.

Source: Susan Sanderson, Critical Essay on "The First Seven Years," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Richman presents an overview of "The First Seven Years," calling it an illustration of Malamud's Jewish tales.

The initial tale in the collection, "The First Seven Years," might illustrate them all; for the opposition and final integration of Feld, the shoemaker, and Sobel, his assistant, is pure Malamud. The aged Feld is the real center of the story by virtue of the special moral demands imposed upon him. Like most of the protagonists in the stories, Feld must choose between alternate values; and the choice, made in terror and suffering, distinguishes finally the shoemaker from the *mensch.*

Like Morris Bober, Feld is in part the victim of his own goodness. Spinning daydreams out of the February snow, and agonizing over memories of his youth in a Polish *shtetl,* the shoemaker has sworn to create for his daughter Miriam a better life than he has known. But the dream, with true Malamud irony, redounds not to Feld's glory but feeds the guilt which tortures his relationship to Sobel, a spectral young-old refugee who five years before had saved Feld from ruin by becoming his assistant. Aware without full consciousness that Sobel labored only for love of Miriam, Feld arranges a date for his daughter with a young accounting student who is the harbinger of a better life. For this action, Feld immediately loses his infuriated assistant and, for his guilt, his own sense of well-being.

A single date convinces Miriam, who had already been won by Sobel, that the budding accountant is an inveterate materialist; and when a new assistant proves a thief, Feld in despair takes to his bed with a damaged heart. Later, driven by a complex of needs, the old man pushes himself to Sobel's cluttered rooming-house and the kind of confrontation which is Malamud's special province: a meeting in which the denied self begins, in pity, to leak past one's guard and for a decisive moment pours forth in a sanctified stream. Listening to Sobel's tearful declaration of his love, Feld shuttles from exasperation to a compassion that proves his undoing:

Watching him, the shoemaker's anger diminished. His teeth were on edge with pity for the man, and his eyes grew moist. How strange and sad that a refugee, a grown man, bald and old with his miseries, who had by the skin of his teeth escaped Hitler's incinerators, should fall in love, when he had got to America, with a girl less than half his age. Day after day, for five years he had sat at his bench, cutting and hammering away, waiting for the girl to become a woman, unable to ease his heart with speech, knowing no protest but desperate.

Though Feld feels a gripping sorrow for his daughter's future, he submits to the relationship and the return of the assistant. But Feld exacts from the now young-looking Sobel the promise that he wait two years before the marriage (and so invokes the mythic cycle of fertility). That is all of the story; but for Feld there is an instant of real though muted triumph, a gesture which, despite the winter night and the continuous poverty for himself and his daughter, stamps the story with a spectral promise of

salvation through love. His success is no more perhaps than the ability to walk the whitened street "with a stronger stride," or to hear, without anxiety, the consecrated labor of his assistant, who, himself now the father and provider, sits at his work desk "pounding leather for his love."

Despite the brevity of the form, Malamud's ability to evoke a sense of full experience with an odd verbal twist, as in the last line, or to intimate the Biblical parallels of the story, seems to raise behind the actual story a canvas far larger than the described one. But what sustains "The First Seven Years" most effectively is what sustains *The Assistant,* an alteration of techniques which continually shifts the character into a strange borderland world which becomes the emblem of the author's belief in the possibility of a leap beyond determinism. The intensity of Feld' s emotion, the fragments of myth, the grotesque beauty of Sobel, and most particularly Malamud's own beautifully clumsy and compassionate voice charge the story not only with the suggestion of human mysteries but human miracles. Here, for example, is the description of Max, the poor accounting student: "He was tall and grotesquely thin, with sharply cut features, particularly a beak-like nose. He was wearing a loose, long slushy overcoat that hung down to his ankles, looking like a rug draped over his bony shoulders, and a soggy, old brown hat, as battered as the shoes he had brought in."

That Max might pluck a magic flute from the folds of his monstrous coat seems only the result of the faith of the teller himself: that weirdly ironic, poetic voice which reminds the reader—by an occasional clumsiness, a halting rhythm, or the folk tale form itself—that what he is relating is more than just art. What finally makes the miracle most believable, however, is that it does not occur. Malamud' s tongue is "forked"; for, though it rings at times with the visionary simplicity of a child, it is nonetheless thick with the sour disaffection of a cynic which enforces upon the whole, despite the clear drift toward sentimentality, a drama of pained possibility.

Techniques so delicately balanced, however, can easily become uncoupled and spill over either into outright fantasy or the grotesque. While it is true that Malamud rarely loses control of his Jewish tales, he does occasionally slip. Stories like "The Mourners" or "Angel Levine" illustrate this tendency.

Source: Sidney Richman, "The Stories," in *Bernard Malamud and the Critics,* edited by Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field, New York University Press, 1970, pp. 305-06, 309-11.

Adaptations

Malamud' s novel *The Natural* (1952) was adapted to the screen in a 1984 Hollywood movie directed by Barry Levinson, with an all-star cast including Robert Redford, Robert Duvall, Glenn Close, and Kim Basinger.

Topics for Further Study

In "The First Seven Years," Miriam appears to be more modern and Americanized than her father (she insists on her independence and takes no notice of his advice). What problems might second-generation immigrants, whether Jewish or otherwise, face in terms of the conflict between the culture their parents identify with and the culture that they, the children, were born and raised in? Might a second-generation immigrant be more likely to have difficulty forming a secure sense of personal identity?

If Feld's choice of a husband for Miriam is practical, her own choice is more romantic. What are the best criteria for forming intimate relationships leading to marriage? Do the practical and the romantic always have to be at odds? Why do some people seem to make a habit of choosing relationships with "unsuitable" partners?

Write a short story based on the two dates that Max and Miriam had, and write it from the point of view of Max. We know that Miriam was bored, but how did Max experience their meetings? What did they talk about? How did Max behave? Did he think the dates were successful? Was he aware that he was boring Miriam? Create the tone of their interactions with plenty of dialogue.

Research the experience of Polish Jewish immigrants in America. Why did they come to America? Have they faced discrimination in the past? How did they overcome it? Has the experience of non-Jewish Polish immigrants been different from that of Jewish Poles?

Compare and Contrast

1950: Televisions, refrigerators, and other consumer gadgets begin to appear on the market. For many people, these items and others like them are considered luxuries.

Today: The luxury items of the 1950s are considered essentials, and consumers now rush to buy sophisticated personal computers, cell phones, and satellite TV dishes.

1950: In the wake of World War II and the dawn of the nuclear age, the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union dominates global politics.

Today: Immediate threats to world peace come not from nuclear confrontation between superpowers but from terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, including chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons.

1950: A woman's social and financial status is often determined by whom she marries, since women do not usually work outside the home. A woman's job is to raise her children.

Today: More women than ever before hold full-time jobs and have successful careers with high incomes. Young children are often put into day-care centers while both parents work.

What Do I Read Next?

Malamud's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Fixer* (1957), is set in anti-Semitic, pre-Revolu-tionary Tsarist Russia. The persecuted protagonist, Yakov Bok, is imprisoned for a murder he did not commit, but through his ordeal, experiences moral growth.

Malamud's *The Complete Stories* (1997) contains all fifty-five short stories that Malamud wrote over a period of forty-five years, arranged in order of composition.

Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology (2000), edited by Jules Chametzky, John Felstiner, Hilene Flanzbaum, and Kathryn Hellerstein, is a collection of Jewish-American writing from colonial times to the present. It features 145 writers and covers all genres, including fiction, poetry, drama, essays, journals, autobiography, and song lyrics.

Hasia R. Diner's *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (2000) is a history of the Jewish community in New York City's Lower East Side (the setting for many of Malamud's stories).

Further Study

Field, Leslie A., and Joyce W. Field, eds., *Bernard Malamud: A Collection of Critical Essays,* Prentice-Hall, 1975.

This collection includes essays on all aspects of Malamud's work and an interview with the author. The editors' brief introduction is an illuminating overview of his main themes.

—, *Bernard Malamud and the Critics,* New York University Press, 1970.

This volume contains twenty-one articles about all aspects of Malamud's work from the 1950s and 1960s. Particularly interesting is Earl H. Rovit's examination of the Jewish literary tradition and Malamud's place in it.

Lasher, Lawrence, *Conversations with Bernard Malamud,* University Press of Mississippi, 1991.

This is a collection of twenty-seven interviews with Malamud from various sources, ranging from 1958 to 1986.

Sio-Casteneira, Begona, *The Short Stories of Bernard Malamud: In Search of Jewish Post-Immigrant Identity,* Peter Lang Publishing, 1998.

Sio-Casteneira analyzes ten short stories taken from the twenty-five that were included in *The Stories of Bernard Malamud,* published in 1983.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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