The Magic Barrel Study Guide

The Magic Barrel by Bernard Malamud

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Bernard Malamud's short story, "The Magic Barrel," was first published in the *Partisan Review* in 1954, and reprinted in 1958 in Malamud's first volume of short fiction. This tale of a rabbinical student's misadventures with a marriage broker was quite well received in the 1950s, and Malamud's collection of short stories, *The Magic Barrel,* won the National Book Award for fiction in 1959.

As Malamud attained a reputation as a respected novelist in the 1960s and 1970s, his short stories were widely anthologized and attracted considerable attention from literary students and scholars. A writer in the Jewish-American tradition, Malamud wrote stories that explore issues and themes central to the Jewish community. A love story with a surprising outcome, "The Magic Barrel" traces a young man's struggle to come to terms with his identity and poses the religious question of how people—Jews and others—may come to love God. Is human love, the story asks, a necessary first step to loving God? Malamud's "The Magic Barrel" is a story remarkable for its economy, using just a few strokes to create compelling and complex characters.

Author Biography

Bernard Malamud was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1914 to Russian Jewish immigrants named Max and Bertha Malamud. He later described his parents as "gentle, honest, kindly people." Max, the manager of a small grocery store, was the model for Morris Bober, the grocer protagonist of Malamud's second novel, *The Assistant* (1957). Malamud went to high school in Brooklyn and attended the City College of New York, graduating in 1936. In 1942 he received a Master of Arts degree from Columbia University.

Malamud did not begin writing seriously until after World War II, when the horrors of the Holocaust became known to the international community. The revelation seems to have made Malamud more actively aware of his own Jewish identity. "I was concerned with what Jews stood for," he recalled, "with their getting down to the bare bones of things. I was concerned with . . . how Jews felt they had to live in order to go on living."

In 1945 Malamud married Ann de Chiara. To the Malamud family, traditional Jews, Bernard's marriage to a gentile woman seemed an unforgivable act. After the wedding Max Malamud went through the rituals of mourning for his son—an act reminiscent of Salzman's actions in "The Magic Barrel." Ann and Bernard moved to Oregon in 1949, after Bernard accepted a teaching position at Oregon State University. There, Malamud recalled, "I was allowed to teach freshman composition but not literature because I was nakedly without a Ph.D." It was at Oregon State that Malamud wrote "The Magic Barrel" in the basement of the university library.

In 1952 Malamud published his first novel, *The Natural*, a poignant treatment of the American hero as baseball player. His second novel, *The Assistant* (1957), is the heartbreaking account of an impoverished grocer and the Catholic drifter who comes to work for him. In 1961 Malamud and his family moved to Vermont, where he took a job teaching creative writing at Bennington College—a position in which he would continue for almost twenty- five years.

A highly respected teacher, Malamud was himself skeptical of creative writing courses: "In essence, one doesn't teach writing; he encourages talented people whom he may be able to do something for. I feel that writing courses are of limited value although they do induce some students to read fiction with care." Malamud won the Pulitzer prize in fiction for his 1966 novel, *The Fixer*, and the American Library Association's Notable Book citation for *Dubin's Lives* in 1979. Malamud continued actively to teach and write almost until his death in 1986.

Plot Summary

Part I

Leo Finkle has spent the last six years studying to become a rabbi at New York City's Yeshivah University. After hearing that he would have better job prospects if he were to get married, Leo decides to consult a matchmaker. Matchmakers, also called marriage brokers, were common in many European Jewish cultures, as well as in some Jewish immigrant communities in the United States. Leo's own parents were brought together by a marriage broker, and Leo is determined to find his bride through the same tradition. He contacts Pinye Salzman, a marriage broker who has advertised in *The Jewish Daily Forward*, New York's leading Yiddish newspaper. (Written in Hebrew characters and based on the vocabulary and syntax of medieval German, the Yiddish language was spoken by many European Jews and their American immigrant descendants.)

Salzman arrives at Finkle's apartment one day late in February and the two set about their task:

Leo had led Salzman to the only clear place in the room, a table near a window that overlooked the lamp-lit city. He seated himself at the matchmaker's side but facing him, attempting by an act of will to suppress the unpleasant tickle in his throat. Salzman eagerly unstrapped his portfolio and removed a loose rubber band from a thin packet of much-handled cards. As he flipped through them, a gesture and sound that physically hurt Leo, the student pretended not to see and gazed steadfastly out the window. Although it was still February, winter was on its last legs, signs of which he had for the first time in years begun to notice. He now observed the round white moon, moving high in the sky through a cloud menagerie, and watched with half-open mouth as it penetrated a huge den, and dropped out of her like an egg laying itself. Salzman, though pretending through eyeglasses he had just slipped on, to be engaged in scanning the writing on the cards, stole occasional glances at the young man's distinguished face, noting with pleasure the long, severe scholar's nose, brown eyes heavy with learning, sensitive yet ascetic lips, and a certain, almost hollow quality to the dark cheeks. He gazed around at the shelves of books and let out a soft, contented sigh.(Excerpt from "The Magic Barrel")

Salzman boasts to Finkle that he has so many clients that he has to keep their cards in a barrel at his office. He summarizes the attractions of three young women to Finkle, listing their age, appear ance, dowry, and the financial assets of their respective fathers. Finkle becomes embarrassed by the overtly commercial nature of the conversation and, wondering what role love might play in an arranged marriage, asks Salzman to leave.

Leo spends the next day restless and unsettled, wondering if he should try another matchmaker or if he should find a wife on his own. That evening Salzman returns to Leo's apartment, asking if the student has reconsidered any of the three women he described. Salzman particularly recommends one Lily Hirschorn, an unmarried

schoolteacher. Finkle pretends to be ambivalent about the idea, but is intrigued; Salzman leaves the apartment confident that Leo and Lily will meet.

Part II

The next Saturday Leo takes Lily for a walk. She turns out to be "not unpretty," is *au courant* (or up to date) on a variety of topics, and talks easily and intelligently. Leo has the uneasy feeling that Salzman is hiding somewhere nearby, watching them. He pictures the matchmaker as "clovenhoofed Pan" (in Greco-Roman mythology Pan is the god of nature, depicted as half man and half goat) sprinkling flower buds in their path to celebrate their union. Lily presses Leo for details about his calling as a rabbi, and Leo realizes that Salzman has represented him to Lily as a passionately religious man. In a moment of unguarded honesty, Leo confesses to Lily: "I think . . . I came to God not because I loved him, but because I did not." Lily is disappointed in his answer and the afternoon ends with the understanding that there will be no match.

Part III

Leo returns home in despair. The conversation with Lily has made him realize some disturbing things about himself, in particular that he lacks the ability to love. Leo's religious vocation seems meaningless because he has lived an empty life. How can he love God if he does not love man? He considers leaving the university, then decides to continue his studies, but to find a wife to love on his own terms. When Salzman arrives the next day, Leo criticizes the matchmaker for having misrepresented the situation to Lily, and tells him that he will no longer require his services. Salzman departs, but leaves an envelope containing photographs of other women for Leo to consider.

After a few weeks, Leo opens the envelope. Inside are six photographs of women who are "past their prime." Disappointed, he returns the photographs to the envelope; at the last moment, a seventh photograph falls out. Leo looks at it a moment, then lets out a cry of love. The face in the photograph is beautiful, melancholy, and carries "an impression, somehow, of evil." Leo falls desperately in love with the image in the picture. He finds Salzman and presses him for the woman's name. Salzman hesitates, claiming that the picture was included in the envelope by accident, then bursts out: "This is my baby, my Stella, she should burn in hell." Salzman's daughter Stella, it is implied, has committed some terrible act of disobedience against her father and Jewish tradition. As punishment, she has been disowned.

Part IV

Leo cannot stop thinking of Stella. Finally, he resolves to find her and to "convert her to goodness, himself to God." He encounters Salzman in a Broadway cafeteria and insists that Salzman set up a meeting. Salzman agrees, and Leo suspects that Salzman had planned for him to fall in love with Stella from the beginning.

Part V

Shortly after, Leo finally meets Stella on a spring night. She stands smoking beneath a street light and he runs to her with a bouquet of flowers. We are then told that: "Around the corner Salzman, leaning against a wall, chanted prayers for the dead." In Jewish tradition, a parent will say the *Kaddish,* or the prayer for the dead, for a living child only when that child has committed a sin of disobedience so grave as to cause a final separation from the parent.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

On a cold day in February, Leo Finkle, a 27-year-old rabbinical student at New York's Yeshivah University, is sitting in his small apartment regretting the fact that he decided to call in a matchmaker to help him find a wife. However, Finkle knows that he needs to find a wife if he wants to get an appointment as a rabbi after he graduates, so he patiently waits for Pinye Salzman to arrive and, hopefully, arrange a suitable match for him.

Pinye Salzman arrives and cuts a not displeasing figure with his dignified air and wizened looks. However, he is also missing teeth and he smells distinctly of fish, which he eats constantly, so he is not entirely pleasant either. However, more importantly, he carries a binder holding pictures of eligible Jewish women with him, and Finkle hopes that it holds a woman for him.

To explain himself, Finkle tells Salzman that he is a student too wrapped up in his studies to have a proper social life and, but for his parents in Cleveland, he is quite alone. Thus, with few female prospects in his life, he has called in a marriage broker, which Finkle considers a very honored position in the Jewish community, to make "practical the necessary without hindering the joy." (2) Salzman, of course, is quite pleased with the kind words that Finkle offers him, and Salzman opens his binder to offer pictures and descriptions of some women that are looking to marry.

Unfortunately, Finkle looks at the pictures, hears Salzman's descriptions and decides that none of these women is for him. One is too old, one is a widow, another's father is a stomach specialist and none of them really entices Finkle. Of course, Salzman argues and tells him that these are all fine women who would make him very happy, but Finkle disapproves of all of them and, in frustration, sends Salzman away.

The next day, Leo Finkle is pondering his decision not to see any of the women that Salzman offered and wonders whether he made the right choice. However, Salzman appears at his door that very same night and says that Lily Hirschorn, a 32-year-old woman that he mentioned the previous day, is actually only 29 and, therefore, not too old for Finkle. Of course, Finkle is immediately suspicious and suspects that Salzman is lying in order to make him meet the woman, but Finkle decides to pay her a visit anyway.

Leo Finkle and Lily Hirschorn's evening together is unfortuntely, a disaster. Not only is Lily at least 35 years old, but also she seems to have an idea that Finkle is some sort of eminently holy man who can see into the mind of God. Though Finkle is comfortable with her at first, Lily turns the conversation to Finkle's studies with a clear expectation that he will help her see into his understanding of divine truths. Obviously, Salzman built up Finkle as some sort of mystic or prophet, and Finkle cannot provide her with any of

the answers that she is looking for. In fact, when Lily asks Finkle why he learned to love God, Finkle hears himself say, "I came to God not because I loved Him, but because I did not." (12) This is not the answer Lily is looking for and the evening ends in disappointment for both of them.

The next day, Leo Finkle is furious at Salzman for lying to both him and Lily. However, the more Finkle thinks about it, the more he realizes that he is furious at himself. After all, he should be able to meet women on his own, but his complete inability to have a real social life and his total ineptitude with women has forced him to speak with a marriage broker in order to find a wife. However, the thing that really angers Finkle is the realization that he is studying to be a rabbi because he does not love God, which he only came to understand when he was speaking with Lily Hirschorn. Furthermore, Finkle has never loved anybody, except for his parents, and no one has ever loved him. Thus, he finds himself unloved, loveless and very, very lonely.

Over the next two weeks, Finkle neglects his studies and neglects to take care of his self as he begins to do some serious soul-searching. Though he considers dropping out of the Yeshivah, he does finally determine that he should continue his studies and finish school, as planned. However, he still needs to find a wife, but he is not going to use Salzman to do it for him.

The night that Finkle decides he does not needs Salzman, the matchmaker himself appears with a new batch of photographs. Of course, Salzman first asks about Lily, but Finkle accuses Salzman of lying to both him and Lily. Salzman apologizes profusely and offers explanations, but Finkle tells him that he is in search of love, not a convenient marriage partner. Of course, Salzman offers him an envelope of photos to look at, but Finkle wants nothing to do with it. However, before Finkle can give the photos back to him, Salzman rushes out the door.

The month turns to March and Finkle makes plans to have a real social life so that he can fall in love. However, it never materializes and Finkle realizes that he is simply not in a situation that allows him to go out and meet women. After all, he is a poor university student who studies diligently and he has neither the time nor the funds to spend on evenings out. Thus, as he comes to grips with his plight, he opens Salzman's envelope of pictures.

As Finkle looks through the pictures, he realizes that there is nobody in there who interests him. They are all tired old women who are past their prime, just like Lily Hirschorn, and Finkle, frustrated, puts the pictures back into the envelope. However, as Finkle puts the pictures back in, a small picture that he had not noticed falls out.

When Finkle sees the picture, he realizes that he has found the woman he is looking for. She is young, beautiful and alive in a way that he cannot describe. Though she looks familiar, Finkle knows that he would have remembered meeting such a woman and, therefore, they must have never met. However, he knows that he must meet this mystery woman and he immediately runs out to talk to Salzman.

When Finkle arrives at Salzman's home, his wife informs Finkle that her husband is out. However, Finkle leaves a message telling Salzman to come over. Then, surprisingly, Salzman is waiting at Finkle's door when he returns.

After Finkle provides Salzman with tea and a sardine sandwich, he shows Salzman the picture and says that he wants to meet that particular woman. However, Salzman is shocked and refuses, though he does not explain why at first. When Finkle presses Salzman to let him meet the woman that Salzman says that the picture is of his daughter Stella, and she is dead to him and she should rot in hell.

After Salzman leaves, Finkle is so shocked by the revelation that he hides in bed, trying to get Stella out of his mind. Unfortunately, he cannot. For days, he is tortured with longing for her, though he tries to beat his feelings down and forget the image of the woman he loves. However, instead of destroying his feelings, he decides that it is up to him to convert her to goodness and bring her back to God. Thus, when Finkle meets Salzman in a cafeteria in the Bronx, he convinces Salzman to arrange a meeting and let him try to help Stella.

Finally, the night arrives that Finkle is to finally meet Stella. They are to meet on a corner under a streetlight and Finkle brings a bouquet of flowers for her. Then, when Finkle sees her in person, he runs toward this shy, yet confident woman that he has loved since he saw her picture. However, just around the corner, Pinye Salzman chants prayers for the dead.

Analysis

The magic barrel of the title is the barrel where Salzman says he keeps the photos of his eligible women. It is magic because it somehow puts a picture of Stella into the envelope for Finkle to find. Though there is, in reality, probably no barrel at all, the hypothetical barrel is still somehow responsible. The name of Finkle is actually something of a pun. It is remarkably close to the word 'fickle', which describes Leo Finkle and his taste in women perfectly.

When Finkle sees the picture of Stella, he feels like he knows her, even though they have never met. This foreshadows the fact that Stella is Salzman's daughter. At the end of the story, Salzman is chanting prayers for the dead. However, it is not clear if he is chanting them for Stella or Finkle.

The fact that Stella is smoking a cigarette on the night that Finkle meets her indicates that she is a troublesome woman. After all, at the time this story was written, smoking was considered a very unladylike thing to do. As well, the fact that Finkle is meeting Stella on a street corner instead of at her own home shows that she may be a prostitute. Instead of meeting her, Finkle may actually be stopping by to meet her while she works.

This story is a symbolic journey for the man who does not know how to love. First, he attempts to buy love through a matchmaker, but he learns that it is not for sale. After that, he meets Lily Hirschorn out of desperation, but Finkle only learns that love does

not simply arrive because it is called for. Then he attempts to force his way toward love by a simple test of will, but he learns that it does not respond to force. In fact, when he gives up hope, love finally arrives and shows him the woman he has been looking for. This symbolizes the old saying, "Love arrives when you least expect it."

Characters

Leo Finkle

Leo Finkle has spent the last six years studying to become a rabbi at New York's Yeshivah University. Because he believes that he will have a better chance of getting employment with a congregation if he is married, Leo consults a professional matchmaker. Leo is a cold person; he comes to realize that "he did not love God so well as he might, because he had not loved man." When Finkle falls in love with Salzman's daughter, Stella, the rabbinical student must confront his own emotional failings.

Lily Hirschorn

Lily Hirschorn is introduced to Leo Finkle, the rabbinical student, by Pinye Salzman, the matchmaker. She is a schoolteacher, comes from a good family, converses on many topics, and Leo considers her "not unpretty." It soon becomes clear, however, that the match between them will not work.

Pinye Salzman

Leo consults Pinye Salzman, who is a professional matchmaker. Salzman is an elderly man who lives in great poverty. He is unkempt in appearance and smells of fish. While Salzman works to bring couples together, Leo has reason to believe that the matchmaker, or "commercial cupid," is occasionally dishonest about the age and financial status of his clients. Salzman seems greatly dismayed when Leo falls in love with Stella. Yet Leo begins to suspect that Pinye, whom he thinks of as a "trickster," had "planned it all to happen this way."

Stella Salzman

Stella Salzman is the daughter of Pinye Salzman, the matchmaker. Salzman has disowned his daughter, evidently because she has committed some grave act of disobedience. When Leo, who has fallen in love with Stella, asks her father where he might find her, the matchmaker replies: "She is a wild one—wild, without shame. This is not a bride for a rabbi." When he finally meets Stella she is smoking, leaning against a lamp post in the classic stance of the prostitute, but Leo believes he sees in her eyes "a desperate innocence."

Leo consults Pinye Salzman, who is a professional matchmaker. Salzman is an elderly man who lives in great poverty. He is unkempt in appearance and smells of fish. While Salzman works to bring couples together, Leo has reason to believe that the matchmaker, or "commercial cupid," is occasionally dishonest about the age and financial status of his clients. Salzman seems greatly dismayed when Leo falls in love

with Stella. Yet Leo begins to suspect that Pinye, whom he thinks of as a "trickster," had "planned it all to happen this way."

Themes

Identity

Malamud's Leo Finkle is a character trying to figure out who he really is. Having spent the last six years of his life deep in study for ordination as a rabbi, he is an isolated and passionless man, disconnected from human emotion. When Lily Hirschorn asks him how he came to discover his calling as a rabbi, Leo responds with embarrassment: "I am not a talented religious person. . . . I think . . . that I came to God, not because I loved him, but because I did not." In other words, Leo hopes that by becoming a rabbi he might learn to love himself and the people around him. Leo is in despair after his conversation with Lily because ". . . he saw himself for the first time as he truly was—unloved and loveless."

As he realizes the truth about himself, he becomes desperate to change. Leo determines to reform himself and renew his life. Leo continues to search for a bride, but without the matchmaker's help: ". . . he regained his composure and some idea of purpose in life: to go on as planned. Although he was imperfect, the ideal was not." The ideal, in this case, is love. Leo comes to believe that through love—the love he feels when he first sees the photograph of Stella Salzman—he may begin his life anew, and forge an identity based on something more positive. When at last he meets Stella he "pictured, in her, his own redemption." That redemption, the story's ending leads us to hope, will be Leo's discovery through Stella of an identity based on love.

God and Religion

Central to Malamud's "The Magic Barrel" is the idea that to love God, one must love man first. Finkle is uncomfortable with Lily's questions because they make him realize "the true nature of his relationship to God." He comes to realize "that he did not love God as well as he might, because he had not loved man." In spite of the zeal with which he has pursued his rabbinical studies, Leo's approach to God, as the narrative reveals, is one of cold, analytical formalism. Unable fully to love God's creatures, Leo Finkle cannot fully love God.

Once again, the agent of change in Leo's life seems to be Stella Salzman. The text strongly implies that by loving Stella, by believing in her, Leo will be able to come to God. Just before his meeting with Stella, Leo "concluded to convert her to goodness, him to God." To love Stella, it seems, will be Leo's true ordination, his true rite of passage to the love of God.

Style

Point of View

Point of view is a term that describes who tells a story, or through whose eyes we see the events of a narrative. The point of view in Malamud's "The Magic Barrel" is third person limited. In the third person limited point of view, the narrator is not a character in the story, but someone outside of it who refers to the characters as "he," "she," and "they." This outside narrator, however, is not omniscient, but is limited to the perceptions of one of the characters in the story. The narrator of the story views the events of the story through the eyes of Leo Finkle even though it is not Leo telling the story.

Symbolism

Symbolism is a literary device that uses an action, a person, a thing, or an image to stand for something else. In Malamud's "The Magic Barrel" the coming of spring plays an important symbolic role. The story begins in February, "when winter was on its last legs," and ends "one spring night" as Leo approaches Stella Salzman under a street lamp. The story's progression from winter to spring is an effective symbol for the emotional rebirth that Leo undergoes as he struggles to grow as a human being.

Idiom

Idiom may be defined as a specialized vocabulary used by a particular group, or a manner of expression peculiar to a given people. In other words, different groups of people speak in different ways. While the narrator and most of the characters in "The Magic Barrel" speak standard English, Pinye Salzman, the matchmaker, speaks Yiddish. Written in Hebrew characters and based on the grammar of medieval German, Yiddish was the common language of many European Jewish communities. A Russian Jew at the turn of the century (Malamud's father, for example) might read the Torah in Hebrew, speak to his gentile neighbors in Russian, and conduct the affairs of his business and household in Yiddish.

Since World War II, Yiddish has become less prevalent in Europe and in the immigrant Jewish communities of North America. In another generation, it may totally die out. Many of Malamud's characters, however, still use the idiom. When Salzman asks Leo, "A glass tea you got, rabbi?"; when he exclaims, "what can I say to somebody that he is not interested in school teachers?"; and when he laments, "This is my baby, my Stella, she should burn in hell," the reader hears an idiomatic version of English seasoned with the cadences of Yiddish speech.

Historical Context

Malamud's "The Magic Barrel" was first published by the *Partisan Review* in 1954 and reprinted as the title story in Malamud's first volume of short fiction in 1958. The period between those two dates was an eventful time in American history. In 1954 the United States Supreme Court unanimously rejected the concept of segregation in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education,* which found that the practice of maintaining separate classrooms or separate schools for black and white students was unconstitutional.

In the same year Senator Joseph McCarthy was censured by the Senate for having unjustly accused hundreds of Americans of being communists. In 1957 the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the first satellite to successfully orbit the earth, sparking concern that the Soviets would take control of space.

While the text of "The Magic Barrel" is almost entirely free of topical or historical references that might allow readers to place the events of the story at a particular date, one detail establishes Leo's encounter with Salzman as taking place roughly at the time of the story's publication in the mid-fifties. Finkle is about to complete his six-year course of study to become a rabbi at New York City's Yeshivah University. *Yeshivah,* in Hebrew, means a place of study. Yeshivah University is the oldest and most distinguished Jewish institution of higher learning in the United States. While its history goes back to 1886, the school was not named Yeshivah until 1945, when its charter was revised. At the end of the traditional six years of study to become a rabbi, then, Leo would probably be considering marriage sometime early in the 1950s.

By consulting a professional matchmaker to find a bride, Leo is acting more like his immigrant grandparents than an American Jew of the 1950s. In Yiddish, the secular language of many European and American Jewish communities, the word for "matchmaker" is *shadchen* (pronounced shod-hun). Before the seventeenth century, the *shadchen* was a highly respected person, responsible for the perpetuation of the Jewish people through arranged marriages. As European Jewish communities grew larger and as modern secular notions of romantic love became pervasive, professional matchmakers became less scrupulous in their dealings and were frequently the objects of satire and derision. Indeed a wealth of humor at the expense of the *shadchen* developed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; representative is the remark of the Yiddish writer Sholom Aleichem (1859-1916), who quipped that the shadchen was best defined as "a dealer in livestock."

Regardless, the *shadchen* tradition survived Jewish immigration to the United States. In his history of Jewish immigrant life on New York City's lower east side, *World of our Fathers,* Irving Howe describes the typical *shadchen* as similar to Malamud's Pinye Salzman: "Affecting an ecclesiastic bearing, the matchmaker wore a somber black suit with a half-frock effect, a silk *yarmulke* (skullcap), a full beard." The matchmaker, according to Howe, "customarily received 5 percent of the dowry in addition to a flat fee, neither one nor both enough to make him rich." Pinye Salzman is in many ways, then, a stereotypical figure who has stepped from the world of Jewish oral humor into the pages

of Malamud's story. Leo, in seeking the *shadchen's* help in the 1950s, reveals himself not only as a formal, but as a very old fashioned young man.

Critical Overview

When Malamud's "The Magic Barrel" first appeared in *Partisan Review* in 1954, it provided a colorful glimpse into the world of American Jews. Fours years later, after his second novel, *The Assistant,* had been enthusiastically received, Malamud reprinted "The Magic Barrel" as the title story in a collection of his short fiction. The collection sold well, and was praised by reviewers for its honesty, irony, and acute perception of the moral dilemmas of American Jews. It won the National Book Award for fiction in 1959.

Between the publication of the collection in 1958 and his death in 1986, Bernard Malamud became one of America's most respected writers of fiction, publishing six more novels and numerous collections of short fiction. Malamud's writing has been the subject of critical debate for three decades. Writing in 1966, Sidney Richman examines the emotional sterility of the protagonist Leo Finkle. According to Richman, ". . . Finkle knows the word but not the spirit; and he makes it clear that in a secret part of his heart he knows it."

Theodore C. Miller, in 1972, compares "The Magic Barrel" to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter,* pointing out that both stories explore "the love of the minister and the whore." Unlike Hawthorne's minister, Arthur Dimmesdale, however, Malamud's rabbinical student, Finkle, "comes to accept Stella for the reason that he accepts universal guilt." Miller also contends that Salzman has arranged the love affair between Leo and Stella because he wishes "to initiate Leo Finkle into the existential nature of love." When at the end of the story Salzman says *Kaddish,* the traditional Jewish prayer for the dead, he is "commemorating the death of the old Leo who was incapable of love. But he is also celebrating Leo's birth into a new life."

Both Richard Reynolds and Bates Hoffer offer interpretations of "The Magic Barrel" based on specific Jewish religious traditions. Reynolds's focus is on the role of *Kaddish,* maintaining that Salzman hopes that Leo will bring Stella, "the prodigal daughter," back to a moral life. In that case, reciting the *Kaddish* is particularly appropriate given the ancient prayer's emphasis on resurrection. Hoffer compares the five-part structure of the story to the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament, the sacred text of Judaism) and claims that Leo has broken a majority of the ten commandments.

Finally Carmen Cramer maintains that Leo's story is a journey of emotional maturity. Rather, "The Magic Barrel" chronicles the rabbinical student's "Americanization," his gradual assimilation into American culture. Cramer asserts that Finkle "possesses few of the typical American traits— decisiveness, emotionality, action-orientation—but he melts into the American pot by the end of Bernard Malamud's polished piece of writing. . . ."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5

Critical Essay #1

Goluboff has taught English at Lake Forest College in Lake Forest, Illinois. In the following essay, he places the story within the context of Jewish fiction of the 1950s and focuses on the theme of inter-generational relations.

Publishing "The Magic Barrel" in 1954, Bernard Malamud was at the beginning of his career, and near the beginning of a brief and remarkable period in the history of Jewish-American writing. For perhaps a decade, from the mid-1950s to the mid- 1960s, the American literary imagination seemed to have been captured by a series of books by and about Jews. In 1953 Saul Bellow published *The Adventures of Augie March,* a story of tragicomic misadventures set in Chicago's Jewish immigrant milieu. In 1957 Malamud brought out his second novel, *The Assistant,* the tale of an impoverished Brooklyn grocer who becomes a kind of Jewish everyman. 1959 saw the literary debut of Philip Roth, whose *Goodbye, Columbus* was the account of a doomed love affair between two Jewish young people divided by social class.

Goodbye Columbus won the prestigious National Book Award for fiction in 1960, as Bellow's *Augie March* had done in 1954, and as Malamud's collection of short stories, *The Magic Barrel,* had in 1959. Equally distinguished Jewish-American writers— such as Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller, and Chaim Potok—attracted attention on the literary scene during these years as well.

The novelists who made their reputations during this time didn't always have Jewish concerns as the focus of their fiction. Still, for a decade or so, Malamud's fiction seemed to be part of a movement of the American novel toward the lives and problems of Jews. Of course, Jewish-American fiction was not invented in the 1950s; novels by and about American Jews comprised a tradition of some significance and depth by the time Malamud began his career. In one important respect—in its theme of change and conflict between generations— Malamud's "The Magic Barrel" is solidly embedded in the tradition of Jewish-American fiction.

The first important Jewish-American novel was Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* of 1912. Born in Russian Poland, Antin immigrated to Boston as a child in 1894 and became a social worker in the immigrant neighborhoods of that city. *The Promised Land* is based on Antin's own immigrant experience, contrasting the poverty and persecution of Jewish life in Eastern Europe with the freedom and economic opportunity available to immigrants in the United States.

The vision of America is not so happy, however, in *The Rise of David Levinsky* by Abraham Cahan (1917). Cahan was a Russian immigrant who found success in America as an editor and journalist. (He edited the *The Jewish Daily Forward,* the Yiddish newspaper in which Leo Finkle reads Pinye Salzman's ad.) Like his creator, David Levinsky encounters an America where opportunity is purchased at great sacrifice. As David rises in New York's garment industry, his success costs him love and personal integrity. Most of all, David's success results in his betrayal of those Jewish

spiritual traditions that had sustained his ancestors in Russia. David ends the novel as a representative of an immigrant generation that has lost the integrity of its ancestors.

The theme of change and conflict among generations appears powerfully in Anzia Yezierska's 1925 novel *Bread Givers.* Yezierska's novel dramatizes the conflict between Sara Smolinsky, a lively young Jewish woman, and her dictatorial father, a Russian immigrant Rabbi. Rabbi Smolinsky has devoted his life to study of the Torah, and insists that his daughters work to support him as he continues his studies in America. Sara dreams of receiving a secular American education and becoming a teacher, but to do so she must defy the will of her father: "More and more I began to see that father, in his innocent craziness to hold up the Light of the Law to his children, was a tyrant more terrible than the Tsar from Russia." Sara eventually realizes her dream, becoming a teacher in the New York Public Schools, but only at the price of breaking off her relationship with her father. When the two reconcile at the end of the novel, it is because Sara has come to recognize that the drive and will that allowed her to finish her education came from her father.

As Leo Finkle and Pinye Salzman pursue each other through the pages of Malamud's "The Magic Barrel," the theme of generational conflict presents itself with rich ambivalence. It's as clear from his profession—an arranger of marriages in the way traditional to nineteenth-century European Jewish communities—as it is from his Yiddish-inflected speech that Pinye Salzman is the story's representative of an older generation of immigrant Jews. Leo Finkle, born in Cleveland and bearing a gentile given name, as clearly embodies a younger population— perhaps those second- or third-generation American Jews who came to maturity in the 1950s. What's less clear, however, is with which of the two generations the story encourages us to empathize. Who has moral authority in the story, old Salzman or young Finkle?

It is tempting to read the story as favoring youth, especially in light of the emotional transformation that Leo Finkle undergoes. Leo enters the story as a cold and passionless young man. He requires a bride not because he is in love, but because he is about to be ordained as a rabbi and believes that he will find a congregation more readily if he is married. Leo praises Salzman's profession with chilly formalism; the matchmaker, he says, makes "practical the necessary without hindering joy." After his date with Lily Hirschorn, Leo comes to recognize and deplore his own passionlessness. Prompted by the matchmaker, Lily had expected Finkle to be a man of great human and spiritual fervor. Leo disappoints her, of course, and sees "himself for the first time as he truly was— unloved and loveless."

In the aftermath of this revelation, Leo appears to change. He tells the matchmaker, "I now admit the necessity of premarital love. That is, I want to be in love with the one I marry." Salzman's reply to this declaration seems to identify the matchmaker with the older generation: "'Love?' said Salzman, astounded. After a moment he remarked, 'For us, our love is our life, not for the ladies. In the ghetto they—.'" (Finkle interrupts here with more about his new resolve to find love on his own.) In his fragmentary response Salzman seems to say that for the older generation—those who had lived in the Jewish ghettoes of Europe—romantic love was a frivolous luxury. Survival was what mattered

("our life"), not "the ladies." With that remark, Salzman appears to inhabit a past whose dangers are no longer real to any but himself.

Finkle's transformation is complete when he falls in love with the photograph of Salzman's daughter, Stella, left accidentally among pictures of the matchmaker's other clients. Loving this fallen woman, and loving her only on the basis of her photograph, is just the passionate leap of faith of which Leo has been previously incapable. His eyes now "weighted with wisdom," Leo has learned at last the redemptive nature of passion.

Old Salzman, however, is more inflexibly than ever rooted in tradition. He considers his daughter dead because of her mysterious sin, and even Finkle's newfound passion for her can't restore Stella to the living in her father's eyes. In the story's mysterious final section, Finkle rushes to Stella with a bouquet of flowers while: "Around the corner, Salzman, leaning against a wall, chanted prayers for the dead."

If we interpret Salzman's *Kaddish*—the traditional Jewish prayer for the dead—as being for his daughter, then as representative of the older generation Salzman is so committed to tradition that he sees only death where life had just begun. Consequently, Finkle's transformed character would suggest that, unlike their ancestors, the younger generation is open to passion, to change, and to new beginnings exempt from the influence of tradition.

One problem with this interpretation is that the story more than once suggests that Finkle's sudden passion for Stella might not have been an accident, that it might have been planned by the wily Salzman. Finkle suspects that the old man is capable of intrigue. As he walks with Lily Hirschorn, Finkle senses Salzman "to be somewhere around, hiding perhaps high in a tree along the street, flashing the lady signals with a pocket mirror. . . ." Just before the story's conclusion, when Salzman has finally agreed to let Finkle meet Stella, Leo is suddenly "afflicted by a tormenting suspicion that Salzman had planned it all to happen this way." If Leo's meeting with Stella is part of the matchmaker's plan, then we would have to attribute to him, and to the older generation he represents, a knowledge of human frailty and passion superior to that of the formalistic rabbinical student.

What, then, do we make of the Salzman's saying *Kaddish* at the story's conclusion? If his plan has been all along to educate Leo in the necessity of passion, then it would be inconsistent with that plan for Salzman to mourn just when he has succeeded in bringing the lovers together. Critic Theodore C. Miller has suggested a persuasive way out of this dilemma: ". . . if Salzman has planned the whole episode, then the matchmaker through his *Kaddish* is commemorating the death of the old Leo who was incapable of love. But he is also celebrating Leo's birth into a new life." Viewed in this way, the matchmaker's prayer of mourning celebrates the success of his plan for Leo and Stella, the *"Yiddishe kinder"* (Jewish children).

Because Malamud's "The Magic Barrel" is a work of art and not a sociological study of intergenerational relations, it must remain a matter of interpretation whether the story privileges the older or younger generation. Because its central interpretive question

involves this judgment between two generations, however, "The Magic Barrel" is a story solidly grounded in the tradition of Jewish-American fiction.

Source: Benjamin Goluboff, "Overview of 'The Magic Barrel,'" for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Richman provides a plot synopsis and an examination of the major themes of "The Magic Barrel."

The impact of "The Magic Barrel" is, inexplicable— certainly as inexplicable, and for much the same reasons, as *The Assistant*. The story of the love and maturation of a young rabbinical student, it conspires like the author's second novel in a boundary world which pulsates now with the bright energy of a fairy tale, now with something of the somber tones of a depression tract. Both qualities are immediately apparent in the opening: "Not long ago there lived in uptown New York, in a small, almost meager room, though crowded with books, Leo Finkle, a rabbinical student in the Yeshivah University."

The key to Leo Finkle's rebirth, however, lies not alone in the protagonist, a poor and lonely student hurrying after six years of study toward his June ordination. A Frankie Alpine in a black fedora, Leo unites myth and anti-myth in his own person. Passionately interested in Jewish law since childhood, Leo is nonetheless Godless. Bound in his deceit, he throbs through the torment that washes over Malamud's love-hungry and God-hungry young Jews. Like Fidelman on Giotto, Finkle knows the word but not the spirit; and he makes it clear in every gesture that in a secret part of his heart he knows it.

But Leo Finkle's heart is too secretive, and his salvation depends upon another who can test all there is of humanity in the student. The "other" does not arrive, however, until the last page; in her place there comes a marriage broker whom Leo has summoned when he learns that a wife will help him win a congregation. But from the moment Pinye Salzman materializes, the student is on the way. For, reeking of fish and business, the broker seems only another Susskind. Half criminal, half messenger of God, Salzman whips from his battered portfolio a select group of feminine portraits, for "is every girl good for a new rabbi?"

As Pinye exalts his merchandise, however, Leo persists in positing reservations; and they are not alone a matter of distrusting Salzman's grossness (indeed, he seems *too* gross to be believed). When Pinye plays his trump card: "Ruth K., Nineteen years, Honor student. Father offers thirteen thousand cash to the right bridegroom," Leo, sick of the whole business, gives himself away: "But don't you think this young girl believes in love?"

Dismissing Pinye, Leo slides into misery; but the misery is only the signal of breaking ice. Trying to analyze his reactions, he wonders if perhaps "he did not, in essence, care for the matchmaking institution?" From this thought, slightly heretical, he flees throughout the day; and it is only at nightfall, when he draws out his books, that he finds any peace. But Pinye, like a haggard ghost—and he grows more desperate-looking with each meeting— is soon at the door, his presence thrusting Leo out of his books and threadbare composure. Bearing the vitae of Lily Hirschorn, high-school teacher and linguist, young (twenty-nine instead of the thirtytwo of the night before), Pinye dispels

Leo's lack of interest with a mournful imprecation: "Yiddishe kinder, what can I say to somebody that he is not interested in high school teachers?"

Despite the retiring young scholar's hesitancy, a meeting is arranged; and one Saturday afternoon he strides along Riverside Drive with Lily Hirschorn, oldish but pretty, hanging to his arm. From the beginning, however, Leo senses the presence of Pinye, somewhere in the background, perhaps "flashing the lady signals with a pocket mirror; or perhaps a cloven-hoofed Pan, piping nuptial ditties."

But if Pinye is directing the proceedings, he is after more than a quick profit; for about the walk there is strong suggestion of ritual indoctrination, a testing by question and answer that suddenly exposes Leo. Lily, having been primed by Salzman into the belief that Leo Finkle is the true anointed of God (or is Lily another Iris?) addresses herself as if to a holy image: "How was it that you came to your calling?" When Leo, after some trepidation, replies, "I was always interested in the Law," Lily's questions soar: "When did you become enamored of God?" In mingled rage at Pinye and himself, Leo finds himself speaking with shattering honesty: "I am not a talented religious person. I think that I came to God not because I loved Him, but because I did not."

After the smoke-screen of hatred for Pinye dissipates, there is a long week of "unaccountable despair" in which Leo's beard grows ragged and his books meaningless. Feeding on his confession to Lily, which had revealed "to himself more than her—the true nature of his relationship to God," Leo bounds to further revelations. He realized that, "apart from his parents, he had never loved anyone." Then, with a quick jolt, the two ragged ends of his lovelessness fuse: "Or perhaps it went the other way, that he did not love God so well as he might, because he had not loved man."

Made desperate by the unexpected image of himself, Leo contemplates leaving Yeshivah. "He had lived without knowledge of himself, and never in the Five Books and all the Commentaries—mea culpa—had the truth been revealed to him." The knowledge sends Leo scurrying into near hysteria, a state disagreeable and pleasurable at the same time, and then into a long swoon, a kind of moral waystation from which he "drew the consolation that he was a Jew and that a Jew suffered." The revelation, needless to say, represents a turning; and when Salzman returns—at precisely this moment—he must listen to a new Leo: "I want to be in love with the one I marry. I find it necessary to establish the level of my need and fulfill it." Discharged, Salzman disappears "as if on the wings of the wind"; but he leaves behind a manila packet.

The pattern of pursuit which dominates the first half of "The Magic Barrel" parallels also the early sections of "The Last Mohican"; moreover, like Fidelman's in the Italian story, Leo Finkle's redemption involves the reversal of the pattern, the quest of the once despised. Coincident with the arrival of March and the turning toward spring, Finkle remains closeted in his room, gloomy over the frustrations of his hopes for a better life; and so, finally, he is drawn to open the manila packet which had all the while been gathering dust. Within he finds more photographs, but all seem versions of Lily Hirschorn. But, as the scholar puts them back, he discovers another snapshot, small and cheap, which without preliminaries evokes a shout of love. Staring back at him is a

composite of every heroine Malamud has yet written about, from Iris Lemon and Harriet Bird through Pauline Gilley and Helen Bober. In shreds of images, some mythic, some terrifyingly real, the face closes, like fate itself, over Leo's heart:

spring flowers, yet age—a sense of having been used to the bone, wasted; this came from the eyes, which were hauntingly familiar, yet absolutely strange. He had a vivid impression that he had met her before, but try as he might he could not place her although he could almost recall her name, as if he had read it in her own handwriting. . . . *something* about her moved him she leaped forth to his heart—had *lived,* or wanted to—more than just wanted, perhaps regretted how she had lived-had somehow deeply suffered. Her he desired he experienced fear of her and was aware that he had received an impression, somehow, of evil.

Dashing into the streets, Leo rushes off in pursuit of Pinye Salzman, only to discover from his wife (and "He could have sworn he had seen her, too, before but knew it was an illusion"), that the matchmaker was nowhere about, that he "lived in the air." "Go home," she suggests, "he will find you." When the student returns to his flat, Salzman, standing at the door, asks, "You found somebody you like?" Without hesitation, Finkle extends the snapshot. But for his eager love the student must submit to the final horror. With a groan, Pinye tells him "this is not a bride for a rabbi. She is a wild one—wild, without shame." When Finkle presses Salzman for a clearer answer, the old man dissolves in tears: "This is my baby, my Stella, she should burn in hell."

Under the covers of his bed, a makeshift chapel perilous, Leo, beating his breast, undergoes the climactic test. "Through days of torment he endlessly struggled not to love her; fearing success he escaped it. He then concluded to convert her to goodness, himself to God. The idea alternately nauseated and exalted him." Though brief, the ordeal finally draws Leo from bed with a long "pointed beard" and "eyes weighted with wisdom." A mixture now of lover and father, he meets Salzman again (and the marriage broker seems unaccountably young) and, despite Salzman's pleas to desist, a meeting is arranged.

The rendezvous, held on a spring night, is Malamud at his ambiguous best. With flowers in hand, Leo finds Stella standing in the age-old posture of the prostitute, under a lamp post smoking: "She waited uneasily and shyly. From afar he saw that her eyes—clearly her father's—were filled with desperate innocence. He pictured, in her, his own redemption. Violins and lit candles revolved in the sky. Leo ran forward with flowers outstretched."

This paragraph, however, is the penultimate one: as if the mixture of goddess and prostitute, the promise of hope through a future of willfully chosen agony, were not sufficiently confusing, Malamud allows the final paragraph to focus on Pinye, who, leaning upon a wall around the corner, "chanted prayers for the dead." It is impossible to tell for whom Pinye chants—for himself and his guilt (for even Leo had finally suspected "that Salzman had planned it all to happen this way"), for Finkle's past or Finkle's future, or for all these reasons. In some ways, the last alternative—that Salzman chants for everything—seems only proper; for if Leo has graduated into saint and rabbi, it is only

by succumbing to the terrors which the role prescribes. What better reason to chant when to win means to lose?

But such confusions, as demonstrated in *The Assistant,* are the only possible vehicles for Malamud's faith. If the ironies undercutting the story preserve it from a kind of mythic schmaltz, the myth preserves the story from the irony. The same strange tension is surely in the characters—in the infested goddesses, like Stella, who can only be redeemed by the hero as victim, and in those unstable ministers of God, now devils and now angels, the Pinye Salzmans and the Shimon Susskinds. In that inexplicable and indeterminate character, they signal, as Alfred Kazin has said, "the unforeseen possibilities of the human—when everything seems dead set against it." One finishes "The Magic Barrel" as one finishes *The Assistan*t—not with the exaltation of witnessing miracles, but with the more durable satisfaction of witnessing possibilities.

Source: Sidney Richman, "The Stories," in *Bernard Malamud and the Critics,* edited by Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field, New York University Press, 1979, pp. 305-31.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Hoffer identifies parallels between the first five books of the Old Testament and the structure of the story, arguing that Finkle is a "sinner" rather than a hero.

No synopsis is a substitute for ["The Magic Barrel"]. One is given here in case you have not read the story for some time.

Leo Finkle, a rabbinical student, hears that he may have a chance at a better position if he is married. He approaches Salzman, a poverty-ridden matchmaker who smells of fish, who wears old clothes, and whose suggested brides are not shall we say big winners. After rejecting the few suggested by Salzman, Leo finds a picture in the file of a different girl and immediately falls in "love." The picture is of Salzman's daughter and the story does not make clear whether the picture is there by mistake (as Salzman says) or by design (as Leo suspects). It is clear that Salzman has indeed disowned his daughter who has gone completely bad. Leo demands to meet her, no matter what her background and condition. As the story closes, Leo is rushing toward her with a bouquet while she is standing under a streetlight dressed in red and white. The last paragraph then reads:

Around the corner, Salzman, leaning against a wall, chanted prayers for the dead.

As common in Malamud's stories, the closing picture is ambiguous upon a superficial reading. Salzman is chanting for whom? His daughter? Leo? The current state of Judaism? Someone even suggested to me that Salzman is singing in happiness because he is a Jew who is about to get his daughter married!

One example of a previous interpretation of the story is given by Rovit [in *Bernard Malamud and the Critics,* 1970]:

The aesthetic form of the story—the precise evaluation of forces—is left to the reader. . . .In the best of his stories in The Magic Barrel, the same pattern of ultimate poetic resolution by metaphor is evident.

I assume that you will agree, after re-reading the quote, that Rovit does not provide an interpretation at all. In fact, he finds purposeful ambiguity, as evidenced by:

The dramatic action of the story attempts to lead the characters into a situation of conflict which is "resolved" by being fixed poetically in the final *ambiguity* of conflicting forces frozen and united in their very opposition. (Italics added)

In other words, the answer to the question "Who is he chanting for?" is "Who knows?" That answer is only sufficient if there is no evidence at all for an answer. That there is abundant evidence is made clear below.

Another example is from Rahv's Introduction to *A Malamud Reader:*

Of all Malamud's stories, surely the most masterful is " The Magic Barrel," perhaps the best story produced by an American writer in recent decades. . . .. . . Salzman contrives to leave one picture in Finkle's room by which his imagination is caught as in a trap. When tracked down, he swears that he had inadvertently left the fatal picture in Finkle's room. "She's not for you. She is a wild one, wild, without shame Like an animal, like a dog. For her to be poor was a sin. This is why to me she is dead now . . . This is my baby, my Stella, she should burn in hell." (Rahv then quotes the last two paragraphs of the story.)Thus the rabbinical student who, as he confesses, had come to God not because he loved Him but precisely because he did not, attempts to find in the girl from whose picture "he had received, somehow, an impression of evil" the redemption his *ambiguous* nature demands. (Italics added)

Rahv, then, sees the basic ambiguity in Finkle and does not worry about Salzman.

But worry we must. Where Rahv assumes Salzman "contrives" to leave Stella's picture, others feel that Salzman tells the truth when he swears it was an accident. Assumptions and feelings will convince no one who does not agree with us. Therefore we must look for evidence in the story for support of one view or another. Let us, then, turn to independent but mutually supporting arguments, based on the story itself, for a non-ambiguous interpretation. We should only accept ambiguity after exhausting all procedures and even then realize that someone else may find the key to clear up the ambiguity. . . .

We start by noting that Leo is a final year rabbinical student about to obtain a doctoral degree from Yeshiva, a highly prestigious university. As rabbi, as scholar deeply knowledgeable of the Pentateuch, the Law, he will be "master" and "teacher" of the Law to generations of Jewish children. We therefore begin our analysis of Leo by judging his thoughts, words and deeds in light of his vocation. Although we might go deeply into the Law— and the reader is encouraged to do so—in order to judge, here we will mainly use the "basic" part of the Law which most of us know, the Ten Commandments from Deuteronomy 5:6-21. (I use Monsignor Knox's translation for a variety of reasons. It is important to note that Catholics, Protestants and Jews often number the verses, and consequently the commandments, differently.) Surely we can expect a rabbi to support at least the fundamental parts of the law.

Deuteronomy 56 And thus he spoke: I am the Lord thy God, it was I who rescued thee from the land of Egypt, where thou7 didst dwell in slavery. Thou shalt not defy me by8 making other gods thy own. Thou shalt not carve thyself images, or fashion the likeness of anything in heaven above, or on earth, to bow down and9 worship it. I, thy God, the Lord Almighty, am jealous in my love; be my enemy, and thy children, to the third and fourth generation, shall make amends;10 love me, keep my commandments, and mercy shall be thine a thousand-fold. (Commandment 1)11 Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God lightly on thy lips; if a man uses that name lightly, he will not go unpunished. (2)12 Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as13 the Lord thy God has bidden thee. Six days for drudgery, for doing all the work thou hast to do;14 when the seventh day come, it is a sabbath, a day of rest, consecrated to the Lord thy God. That day, all work shall be at an end, for thee and for every son and daughter of thine,

thy servants and serving-women, thy ass, too, and thy ox, and all thy beasts, and the aliens that live within thy city walls. It must bring rest to thy men-servants and thy maid-servants,15 as to thyself. Remember that thou too wast a slave in Egypt; what constraining force the Lord used, what a display he made of his power, to rescue thee; and now he will have thee keep this day of rest. (3)16 Honour thy father and thy mother, as the Lord thy God has bidden thee; so shalt thou live long to enjoy the land which the Lord thy God means to give thee. (4)17 Thou shalt do no murder. (5)18 Thou shalt not commit adultery. (6)19 Thou shalt not steal. (7)20 Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour. (8)21 Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife. (9)Thou shalt not set thy heart upon thy neighbour's house or lands, his servants or handmaids, an ox or ass or anything that is his. (10)

The first three commandments pertain to God and the next seven to man. As we go through the story and compare Leo's behavior against the standards of the law, recall that the first three were summarized by Christ with the phrase from Deuteronomy 6:5, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with the love of thy whole heart, and thy whole soul, and thy whole strength," and the last seven from Leviticus 19:18, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thy self; thy Lord is his." Note, then, that love of God is the focus of all.

So now we look to Leo. Instead of observing the Sabbath, he goes out on a date with Lily. On the date he mentions the name of God in ordinary conversation. . . . And on the date he says he "came to God not because I loved Him, but because I did not." Poof! The first three commandments disappear, not broken but evaporated! We begin to suspect we are not here reading of a dedicated religious leader.

Before turning to the other commandments, let us pause and look closely at the definition of love in the Law and compare it with Leo's version. In commandment number one we find that love of God includes keeping the commandments: "If you love Me, keep My commandments." "Love," then, is a commitment of the will to behave in a certain manner. It might be helpful to use an example here. In the commandment against adultery, the word "adultery" itself refers to an "adulteration" of the love of God by an illicit love of someone or something. Thus fornication or sex outside marriage, and sex when married, are both adulterations of the Divine love. Human love is a reflection of Divine love and, therefore, true love is always within the limits of the Divine will expressed in the commandments and elsewhere. Yet when we turn to Leo's version of love, we find that he has decided to throw away the divine definition:

Love, I have said to myself, should be a by-product of living and worship rather than its own end. Yet for myself I find it necessary to establish the level of my need and fulfill it.

He changes "love" to "need" and seeks not God's will but his own: "my" need, he says. Recall here that Leo's great "love" for Stella all comes from a cheap picture. He has not yet met her or seen her in the story. "Who can love from a picture?" Salzman asks. "If you can love her, then you can love anybody." Then Leo confirms what we have suspected, that he has thoroughly confused "love" with sex, desires, needs and etc. "Just her I want," he murmurs. This bastion of Judaism has spent almost seven years in rabbinical preparation and still has the understanding of "love" of a sexstarved

sophomore. There is no evidence in the story of any commitment to his religion or his vocation, no evidence of any real practice of his faith or any real knowledge of it. We find that his study has not been rewarding. You can find, if you look, the several other places which indicate that Leo is not what you would call your model rabbi.

Let us go on to the other commandments. Numbers 6 and 9 deal with sex. There is evidence that Leo does not understand the morality of sex at all. When he goes out with Lily, he thinks he sees Salzman as a "cloven-hoofed Pan, piping nuptial ditties" throwing flowers in their way. Note the pagan image for marriage. When he first thinks of using a matchmaker, he looks out the window and

observed the round white moon, moving high in the sky through a cloud menagerie, and watched with half-open mouth as it penetrated a huge hen, and dropped out of her like an egg laying itself.

My judgement is that Leo is thinking primarily of the physical part of the marriage, to put it diplomatically. The last example here occurs when he discovers Stella's picture. You should re-read the whole paragraph, but in case you do not have a copy handy, here are some critical lines:

It was not, he affirmed, that she had an extraordinary beauty— no, though her face was attractive enough; it was that *something* about her moved him. Feature for feature, even some of the ladies of the photographs could do better; but she leaped forth to his heart — had lived, or wanted to— more than just wanted, perhaps regretted how she had lived— had somehow deeply suffered: it could be seen in the depths of those reluctant eyes, and from the way the light enclosed and shone from her, and within her, opening realms of possibility: this was her own. Her he desired. His head ached and eyes narrowed with the intensity of his gazing, then as if an obscure fog had blown up in the mind, he experienced fear of her and was aware that he had received an impression, somehow, of evil. He shuddered, saying softly, it is thus with us all.

"Her he desired." He senses she is "evil" and shudders with excitement. Here at the 3/4 point of the story, the climax, he makes his decision to possess the evil. His desire must be attained. That she is evil is clarified by Salzman as he and Leo talk:

"She is not for you. She is a wild one—wild, without shame. This is not a bride for a rabbi.""What do you mean wild?""Like an animal. Like a dog. For her to be poor was a sin. This is why to me she is dead now.""In God's name, what do you mean?""Her I can't introduce to you," Salzman cried."Why are you so excited?""Why, he asks," Salzman said, bursting into tears. "This is my baby, my Stella, she should burn in hell."

Ultimately, Leo chooses the wild animal, the dog, the disinherited Stella "dead" in sin. We can only conclude, following this line of reasoning, that eventually Leo consciously chooses evil and turns his back on God Whom he said he did not love anyhow. Leo is not, to put it mildly, thoroughly dedicated to the Law.

The other commandments are broken or ignored in less powerful ways. For example, Leo breaks the one against stealing when he refuses to give Salzman's picture of Stella

back. The commandment against greed, avarice and envy of other's goods may be involved in the reason why Leo approached the matchmaker in the first place. Quite simply he wanted to "win" a better congregation. By which might be meant a bigger or more affluent one. The commandment against lying is broken when Leo turns down the lame girl; he tells Salzman, "because I hate stomach specialists," the profession of her father. The one against honoring mother and father is ignored when he decides to avoid the matchmaking institution. [At one point] he couples that institution with the honoring of his father and his mother. Indeed the only Commandment he does not overtly break is the one against murder—and my judgment is that he does indeed "murder" his own soul by choosing evil.

With all this evidence that Leo is precisely the worst possible rabbi—we have not time to note the other rules and laws he breaks—we must conclude that Leo is not a positive picture of a modern rabbi. He may be a picture of some modern rabbi, but Malamud does not give us a *positive* picture. Leo may even be a picture of one type of rabbi graduating today, one pursuing a "thrust for life" (to use Rahv's phrase) which is actually a grasp of spiritual death. At the story's close, Salzman is around the corner chanting prayers for the dead, which refers to Leo and Stella and their offspring to the third and fourth generation and to that part of Judaism which has a Leo, a great "lion" of God, as its master and teacher. . . .

There is a richer and deeper analysis of "The Magic Barrel" which carries us across the sweep of Jewish history and takes us into the heart of the Pentateuch itself. For a few moments forget all you have read above and read this subsection independently.

In much great literature there is an underlying structure which borrows from religious and/or literary structure. James Joyce builds his *Portrait* on Dante's *Inferno,* Greene builds *End of the Affair* on John of the Cross' *Dark Night of the Soul,* Faulkner builds *The Sound and the Fury* on the New Testament through Revelations. Examples abound in any good survey of Western literature. To posit such a structure for "The Magic Barrel" is to suggest that some of the story's power derives from its allegorical structure.

The underlying structure begins to take shape when you see that the story is in five parts and that Leo has been studying the Pentateuch, the five parts of the Torah. Here is a brief version of each book . . . :

GENESIS: "In the beginning" the focal point is the fall of Adam which begins the redemption story.EXODUS: "The going out" has Moses as the central figure. The deliverance by means of crossing the Red Sea is referred to throughout the Bible. The wandering in the desert and the manna from heaven are major points.LEVITICUS: "The Levites" or Israelite priesthood discusses the ministry of the Levitical priesthood. This highly legalistic book demands perfect obedience and sets up the rites of the Day of Atonement in precise detail. Obedience will bring redemption.NUMBERS: "In the wilderness" the Israelites are given final preparation for their entrance into the Promised Land. Numbers stresses that disobedience receives its due reward, but repentance results in pardon and restoration.DEUTERONOMY: The "second law" describes the Israelites as they are about to enter the Promised Land. Moses will not be allowed to

enter because of a sin. Moses exhorts the people to follow the law and describes the results of a lack of obedience. The concluding part is an added section on the death of Moses.

Before starting the broad outlines of the parallels between the Pentateuch and "The Magic Barrel," recall the simple point that allegories as defined in *Linguistics in Literature* are parallel structures. The story is divided into five sections overtly, that is, by spaces on the page.

"In the beginning" of the story Leo has his sexual image fantasy about the moon while Salzman is there talking about women.

In part two, parallel to Exodus or "the going out", he literally "goes out" with Lily. We notice the mention of his walking cane even as Moses carried a staff. This section contains an image that is extremely hard to explain except by reference to Exodus. The winged loaves of bread that Leo sees at the end of the story make perfect sense if we accept a parallel to the "bread from heaven" or *manna* which occurs in Exodus. The manna came down from heaven as if frost or snow in Exodus and of course just after the loaves of bread fly high overhead it snows in part two. Note also that part two ends with Leo still "out."

In part three Leo spends much time thinking of the priest hood (Leviticus), his reasons for his decisions, and so on. Leo seeks redemption for self in the sense of establishing the level of his need. The redemptive picture given by Salzman is the choice of good or evil, that is, he tells Leo that Leo should not choose Stella, "she should burn in hell."

In part four, parallel to Numbers in which the methods and choices in the redemption story become clear, Salzman offers Leo yet one more chance to avoid evil. "Who can love from a picture? . . . if you can love her, then you can love anybody."

Finally, again only in the broadest terms, in part five Leo rushes towards his serf-defined "promised land," Stella. Parallel to the funeral prayer for Moses, who could not enter the Promised Land, the section which concludes Deuteronomy, we find the prayers for the dead concluding this part.

Now let us pause for a while and reflect. The analysis above accounts for a whole potful of seeming aberrations in the story, for several occurrences which cannot be explained in an internally consistent way by any other analysis: loaves of bread flying overhead; a matchmaker who "appears" out of thin air, who is "transparent," almost "vanishing"; the prayers for the dead when no one is dead and so on. If, however, we had only the above parallels few would bother searching for the more particular parts of the parallel structure. Here I will give one extended parallel and drop a few hints for parallels you can have fun finding for yourself.

Let's look for a moment at the choice which Leo faces, Lily or Stella, coupled with a central choice which the priest has in Leviticus. In making an offering to God, the priest must choose only a *clean* animal, never an unclean. He must be able to distinguish them. We note here that the girl proposed by Salzman is named "Lily," surely a symbolic

name for purity. The priest must also do something to the clean animal or the offering is not valid. That something is that it must be salted. Here we notice that Salzman (which means "salt- man") has disinherited his impure daughter. She is not only "unclean" but unsalted. Thus we find that the names of Lily and Salzman are perfectly suited to the parallel structure.

Let's go a little more deeply into Leviticus. Aaron's two sons mentioned in chapter 10 decide to honor the Lord more than their orders require by moving closer to the holiest place. They decided to do more; that is, they think they are choosing *good* when they decide to do it their own way. They are then consumed by fire from the Lord. Leo, too, wants to decide for himself and he decides Salzman's daughter is "good" despite all evidence to the contrary (100% of it). Now if I had written "The Magic Barrel" and had set up the parallel to this point, I would look for a girl's name which suggests purity or whiteness but which also suggests the fire which consumes her ("she should burn in hell") and will, by extension, consume Leo. In fact, "Stella" does the job to perfection since it means "star.". . .

There are several other parallels you could track down. Part two ought to have a body of water (i.e. "Red Sea"). It does. Leo ought to have other parallels to Moses. He does. There ought to be more examples of law and tradition breaking, since Leo is the great Law-Breaker rather than a Moses or Law- Giver. There are. Since Salzman appears and disappears on "wings of the wind" and has a relative who has fallen and burns in hell, it shouldn't be too difficult to relate them to the redemption story. (If you will permit me—if she indeed is *burning,* it is interesting to note that when Leo first sees her she is standing "by the lamp post, smoking."). . .

One last line of analysis must be given here to show clearly that what Leo thinks is a "redemption" process is precisely the opposite. We look at Leo at the end of each section and find how he had "entangled himself" to such an extent that he became suspicious of "Salzman's machinations." He acted "frenziedly" in his craving for Stella, was "afflicted" with a "tormenting suspicion" and finally had "prayers for the dead" prayed for him. Leo looked upon evil, decided it was good, and ran to greet it with flowers outthrust.

I do not see how anyone could find the story "ambiguous" with respect to Leo's decision.

The analysis presented above uses a great deal of direct textual evidence (such as breaking of various rules) to show that Leo is the opposite of a high-level rabbi and it uses direct textual evidence for parallels between the story and the Pentateuch, that which Leo studied for years and that which he would be expected to teach as a rabbi. In the latter interpretation, Leo becomes the great Law-Breaker as contrasted to the author and "hero" of the Pentateuch, the Law-Giver, Moses. Leo seeks not the Promised Land offered by God, but the promised land of his own desires, union with a prostitute whom he does not even know, save from a cheap picture. Leo breaks God's laws, the Mosaic law, the natural law, the standards appropriate to a rabbinical student and to a Jew in general; he breaks the traditions of his religion, his race, his ancestors, his parents; he

breaks the rules of common courtesy and kindness. He seeks that which makes him shudder, a picture of evil which he decides will become his good. From direct textual evidence, Leo is perhaps the greatest loser in the history of literature since *Lucifer's Fall*. . . .

You may disagree with the last sentence, but the point there was exaggerated for a particular reason. Over and over again the commentators on this story project Leo as a winner, as someone who has "matured" and seeks his redemption. Pinye Salzman is even seen as a "criminal." How can anyone hold the idea that Leo is somehow "maturing" by choosing a hooker? Here I would like to attempt an answer, not by quoting endlessly, but by commenting on the type of criticism involved. Let us therefore begin by presenting a case for Leo as the good guy.

As we read "The Magic Barrel" we note that Leo is suspicious that Pinye *arranged* for him to find Stella's picture and that the whole story was *staged*. Leo is presented pictures of older or crippled girls so that Stella will seem better. Stella is condemned so as to make her more attractive to Leo. Pinye is a poor, undignified representative of the old, repressive system that must be broken through for true maturation to take place. (Maturation, in this interpretation, consists of doing exactly what one wants to do.) Leo runs toward his redemption to the tune of violins.

What precisely is it that is the key to the two polar opposite—and hence ambiguous? —interpretations? Clearly it is the interpretation of the role of the matchmaker. Is Leo right in his suspicion that the whole affair was staged or is Pinye right in denying any duplicity? If you side with Leo, then everything Pinye says is suspect because after all *lying* is breaking a commandment. If you side with the matchmaker, then you see Leo as having a guilty conscience, one that turns Pinye into a Pan or a liar or a fraud. How do we resolve the issue? We look closely at the story for evidence that one is presented as a positive character and the other as negative. Only if the evidence is mixed can we accurately say the story is *"ambiguous."* A close analysis shows Leo to be the consummate loser. The only evidence for Pinye as wrong comes from Leo's thoughts. No, Leo as hero simply will not hold up if you use the evidence of the story itself.

OK, you ask, but aren't we back where we started? How can someone cling to the view that Leo is the good guy? The answer is rather harsh, but I think the harshness is fully justified. My judgment, after some years of studying the issue, is that those critics actually *believe* that breaking all the rules and sleeping with a prostitute is a maturational experience. . . . Those critics must actually *believe* that "adult" movies are indeed adult, rather than mere adolescent sex fantasies. I am convinced that they *believe* that breaking God's law, dropping religious beliefs, and doing anything your little ole heart desires are the marks of maturation. They aren't, in the abstract, but the issue raised by their misunderstanding is a serious one. Let us spend a few lines on it. Leo may represent the "mature" modern rabbi who abandons his entire background and perhaps he may in a more general sense represent the Jew who has nothing of Jewishness left except his race. Certainly that interpretation fits with other Malamud Jews, especially Henry Levin (of "The Lady of the Lake") who changes his name to Henry R. Freeman and heads for Europe to escape and denies his Jewishness to one

and all. But there is more to it than that, simply because Leo's story is more than abandoning his past values. Leo actually decides to treat what is shudderingly evil as a positive good through which to achieve redemption. The critics and commentators who find Leo a "model" for our youth must have absorbed the same reversal of values, which reversal after all so pervades American society. Leo, then, may also represent all of us who are faced with the profoundly spiritual question: which value system do I choose? We know Leo's choice and have clear and direct textual evidence that he chose wrong. The evidence from the story is clear, but we have come to the point in literary criticism where we may ignore the text, ignore the structure of the story, ignore anything that clashes with the interpretation we want to make. We have come to the point where the choosing of evil is considered a positive good—*just as Leo considered It*.

"The Magic Barrel" is a great short story. Its power is evident whether you seek a deeper level of meaning or not. It is anthologized widely and discussed by thousands of people every year. Analyses of it are still appearing. The point of this article is that Malamud has constructed his story of the student of the Pentateuch on the structural framework of the Pentateuch and that any interpretation which fails to take into account this integration of content and form is deficient. The conclusion of this analysis is that Malamud as master craftsman and Malamud as artist of vision has created for us a powerful short story which will stand the test of time as a classic of our century.

Source: Bates Hoffer, "The Magic in Malamud's Barrel," in *Linguistics in Literature,* Vol. 2, 1977, pp. 1-26.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, Reynolds investigates the meaning of the prayers for the dead that Salzman chants at the conclusion of "The Magic Barrel."

Published analyses of Bernard Malamud's "The Magic Barrel" praise the "richly ambiguous" conclusion. The consensus is that to reduce the story to specific meaning is to do the author an injustice. Perhaps, however, an interpretation may be sustained that points to a consistent moral thread.

Pinye Salzman is, as Professor Bellman suggests [in "Women, Children and Idiots First: The Transformation Psychology of Bernard Malamud," *Critique* (1965)], "almost supernatural." The title of the story supports that. What exactly is a magic barrel? Apparently Malamud did not have a specific analogue in mind, but the concept is quite clear; it is a barrel which produces surprises, usually inexhaustible quantities or unique qualities, or both. Plainly Salzman's briefcase is the magic barrel, providing first an endless number of possible brides for Leo Finkle, and then yielding, as if from a mysterious compartment, the special girl, Stella. There is thus an irreducible element of magic in the story; the narrative combines sheer fantasy with the idea that love and marriage are divinely supervised.

But Salzman also operates in the earthy sphere of gefilte fish, dingy tenements, and Broadway cafeterias. At this level, and at least in this one instance of Leo and Stella, Salzman is a superb manager, whose art is based on his understanding of Leo's character and situation. He gives Leo the chance to learn about himself by associating with people. The meeting with Lily Hirschorn brings Leo to the realization that "he had never loved anyone. . . . he did not love God so well as he might, because he had not loved man." The supposedly accidental appearance of Stella's picture from the magic briefcase leads to Leo's eager pursuit of her and to Salzman's evasions and assertions of his daughter's wild life. "If you can love her, then you can love anybody," Salzman tells Leo, apparently with scorn, but knowing this is exactly the challenge Leo wants. The image Salzman has presented of Stella contrasts sharply with Leo's own life. She has dared, sinned, suffered. She is the prodigal daughter. Leo has gone from a sheltered home in Cleveland to six years of intensive study in a small room. "Put me in touch with her . . . Perhaps I can be of service," Leo says to Salzman. He has learned that he will not reach God through books, that he needs to involve himself with mankind, and that he and Stella can assist each other.

Whether Stella is the fallen woman Salzman has suggested and Leo has visualized, is uncertain. She plays the part, standing by the lamp post smoking. But she waits for Leo "uneasily and shyly . . . her eyes . . . filled with desperate innocence." She is probably much less experienced than her father has indicated. That is of less importance than the revolution that Salzman has achieved in Leo's heart.

But what about the prayers for the dead, which Salzman is chanting at the end of the story? Does he do so because the meeting of Leo and Stella is a "disaster?" That hardly

agrees with Leo's own notion that Salzman has been managing Leo's prospective marriage for some time. Is it [as Earl Rovit asks in his "Bernard Malamud and the Jewish Literary Tradition," *Critique* 6, No. 2] simply the matchmaker's "final dignified behavior," his part in the concluding tableau? Is it [as Sidney Richman asks in his 1966 *Bernard Malamud*] "impossible to tell for whom Pinye chants?" To decide, we must consider the nature of the *Kadish,* the prayers for the dead. [According to Meyer Waxman in *A Handbook of Judaism,* 1947:]

[The *Kadish*] is not primarily a prayer for the dead. . . . It is not known definitely when the *Kadish* became the special prayers for mourners, and various reasons are advanced for this appropriation. The real reason seems to be that the Kingdom of God is so closely associated in the entire Talmudic and Rabbinic literature with the Messianic times when resurrection will take place, that a plea for its realization was considered indirectly a plea for the resurrection of the departed.

No one would appreciate this better than Leo Finkle, after six years' study about to be ordained. If, as one may well suppose from the story, Leo knows where Salzman is and what he is doing— reciting the *Kadish*—then the matchmaker is playing his part to the end: he has specifically told Leo that he considers Stella dead; Leo and love are to effect her resurrection. The understanding and art of Salzman have brought about a prospect of happiness.

Source: Richard Reynolds, "'The Magic Barrel': Pinye Salzman's Kadish," in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 10, No. 1, Winter, 1973, pp. 100-02.

Critical Essay #5

In the following excerpt, Miller discusses the role of love in "The Magic Barrel."

Although Bernard Malamud has colored his short story "The Magic Barrel" with the language and the manners of the Jewish ghetto, he also makes use of a cultural past that has a closer relationship to Nathaniel Hawthorne and Blaise Pascal than to Sholem Aleichem.

Malamud, of course, is using the same motif that Hawthorne mined in *The Scarlet Letter*—the love of the minister and the whore. Hawthorne's Dimmesdale, the man of God, was destroyed because he could not accept Hester and her emblem of sexual transgression. In Malamud's story too, Leo Finkle, the young rabbinical student, is at first repelled when he senses the sexual history of Stella, the matchmaker's daughter. Although he does not yet know specifically that she is a whore when he first sees her picture, his attraction is stifled, for "then as if an obscure fog had blown up in the mind he experienced fear of her and was aware that he had received an impression, somehow, of evil." But Finkle, unlike Dimmesdale, comes to accept Stella for the reason that he accepts universal guilt. When Malamud adds that "[Finkle] shuddered, saying softly, it is thus with us all," Finkle is well on his way to becoming a Dimmesdale redeemed.

But Malamud's minister is ultimately quite different from Hawthorne's. For Leo Finkle does not fall in love primarily for a reason—but rather he loves for no reason at all. Malamud—who echoes Pascal in several other stories too—is suggesting that "Le coeur a ses raisons, que la raison ne connait point"—one must love even if all the evidence denies the emotion. Like Pascal, Malamud proposes that love is existential.

And if Salzman is Malamud's spokesman in the story, then he only appears to be the comic stereotype of the Jewish marriage broker. Although he has decided that his own daughter should be the bride of the young rabbinical student, he does not really believe in the matchmaker's ethic that love is the product of reason. Salzman is the sage who would initiate Leo Finkle into the existential nature of love—but that is a peculiarly difficult task since Finkle is the eminently rational young man committed to the life of reason. The student wants to marry for the solid cause that it will prove beneficial to his professional status. He has even turned to the rabbinate, not for love of God, but because he is interested in the Talmudic law—rules of reason. Therefore, in order to work his ends, Salzman must engage in a ruse—he initially enters into Finkle's system of thought, offering him several young women who should prove highly attractive according to all the rules of logic. One has a father, a physician, ready to give a handsome dowry; another has a regular teaching license—the reasons derive from the middle-class Jewish ethic.

But Finkle's rational world fails him, for despite all the logical good inherent in these young ladies, he cannot fall in love with them. Instead, he becomes filled only with existential despair as he realizes the emptiness of his life—and of his religious calling.

Only after he has exploded Finkle's system can Salzman make sure that Finkle sees Stella's picture. But he must present her in a context so that it is absurd to marry her. And precisely because it is absurd, Finkle falls in love.

Several critics have accepted literally the description of Stella as a "carnal young lady" and a "girl of the streets." And indeed within the text, she evokes "a sense of having been used to the bone, wasted"; Finkle has that "impression of evil"; and Salzman, himself, describes his daughter as "a wild one—wild, without shame." But the accuracy of these characterizations is most ambiguous since they are all subject to double meanings. That Stella has been "used to the bone" may mean only that she has suffered. That she evokes "an impression . . . of evil" may be interpreted not in a sexual sense, but in Hawthorne's sense that all men bear human guilt. And Salzman's own statement may be part of his ruse to complete Finkle's initiation—and bring him to the marriage altar with his daughter. Just as Salzman only pretends to be a comic marriage broker who offers young women for rational cause, he must also pretend that his daughter is a whore, a girl whom there is no reason to marry. Near the end of the story Finkle himself recognizes that Salzman has perhaps planned this outcome from their first encounter.

When Finkle finally encounters Stella, her purity is suggested by the whiteness of her dress and furthermore by the explicit statement that Finkle sees a look of "desperate innocence" in her eyes.

But more important, her innocence clarifies the puzzling ending when the reader is told that Salzman is chanting a prayer for the dead. In the orthodox Jewish ritual, a parent may in extreme cases enact the ritual of mourning for a child who has broken a primary taboo. If Stella is really a trollop, her father, considering her and the rabbinical student to be a most unfit couple, is rejecting them both through his prayer. But if Salzman has planned the whole episode, then the matchmaker through his *kaddish* is commemorating the death of the old Leo who was incapable of love. But he is also celebrating Leo's birth into a new life. Salzman's remark to Leo about Stella "if you can love her then you can love anybody" is ironically not a statement disparaging his daughter as a social outcast. Rather Salzman is suggesting that if Leo can love Stella, he has unlocked his heart to mankind and God. He will have learned that the barrel in which Salzman keeps his pictures is then indeed a magic barrel, for love is a magic that cannot be explained by the normal laws of logic.

Source: Theodore C. Miller, "The Minister and the Whore: An Examination of Bernard Malamud's 'The Magic Barrel,'" in *Studies in the Humanities,* Vol. 3, 1972, pp. 43-4.

Topics for Further Study

When did Jewish people settle in large numbers in New York City? Describe the Jewish communities in New York City or in another large American city. In what way can "The Magic Barrel" be read as a story about the descendants of immigrants?

In chapter twenty of the Book of Exodus in the Bible, Moses sets forth the Ten Commandments to the Israelites. Do the characters in "The Magic Barrel" follow the Commandments? What does this say about them?

What does the story suggest about the relation between love and self-knowledge? What must Leo Finkle learn about himself before he is truly able to love?

Compare and Contrast

1950s: Decades of immigration from Eastern and Western Europe have led to a considerable Jewish population in the United States. Strong and vibrant Jewish communities thrive in many American cities. Yet discrimination against the Jewish people exists.

1990s: Through intermarriage and assimilation, many people in the Jewish community believe that Jewish culture is endangered. Unfortunately, discrimination still exists in the United States, but many groups fight misinformation and discrimination against Jews.

1950s: The Jewish matchmaker, also known as the "shadchen," performs a vital function within the community. Arranged marriage, although losing popularity among Jewish families, is still a viable option for young Jewish men and women of age.

1990s: Matchmaking is considered an antiquated tradition. It is mainly used in orthodox Jewish communities, as other networking opportunities allow Jewish men and women to meet and find possible marriage partners.

What Do I Read Next?

The Jews in America, a work by Arthur Hertzberg, is an accessible and entertaining history of Jewish people in the United States from colonial times to the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* is a powerful novel about a family of Russian immigrant Jews on New York's Lower East Side.

The Assistant is Bernard Malamud's second novel. Frank Alpine, a drifter and dreamer, works in the corner grocery of Morris Bober, an impoverished and hard working Jew. Through his friendship with Morris and his daughter Helen, Frank learns about Jewish culture and religion.

The Stories of Bernard Malamud, published in 1983 several years before the author's death, contains stories of great wit and frightening insight.

Further Study

Astro, Richard and Jackson Benson, eds. *The Fiction of Bernard Malamud,* Oregon State University Press, 1977.

Gives a comprehensive study of Malamud's short and long fiction.

Field, Leslie A. and Joyce W. Field, eds. *Bernard Malamud: A Collection of Critical Essays,* Prentice- Hall, 1974.

Explores various aspects of Malamud's work.

Meeter, Glenn. *Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth: A Critical Essay,* Eerdmans, 1968.

Examines the two writers in the context of Jewish fiction.

Pinsker, Sanford. "The Achievement of Bernard Malamud," in *Midwest Quarterly,* Vol. 10, July, 1969, pp. 379-89.

Provides an assessment of Malamud's career.

Richman, Sidney. *Bernard Malamud,* Twayne, 1966.

Gives a detailed survey of Malamud's life and works.

Bibliography

Antin, Mary. *The Promised Land*, first published 1912, reprinted, New York: Penguin, 1997.

Cahan, Abraham. *The Rise of David Levinsky,* first published 1917, reprinted, New York: Harper's, 1960.

Cramer, Carmen. "The Americanization of Leo Finkle," in *Cyahoga Review,* Vol. 1, No. 2, Fall, 1983, pp. 143-147.

Hoffer, Bates. "The Magic in Malamud's Barrel," in *Linguistics in Literature,* Vol. 2, No. 3, 1977, pp. 1-26.

Miller, Theodore C. "The Minister and the Whore: An Examination of Bernard Malamud's 'The Magic Barrel,'" in *Studies in the Humanities,* Vol. 3, 1972, pp. 43-4.

Reynolds, Richard. "'The Magic Barrel': Pinye Salzman's Kadish," in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 10, c. 1973, pp. 100-102.

Richman, Sidney. *Bernard Malamud,* Twayne, 1966.

Yezierska, Anzia. *Bread Givers,* first published 1925, reprinted, New York: Persea Books, 1975.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Short Stories for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

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:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535