A Silver Dish Study Guide

A Silver Dish by Saul Bellow

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". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

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". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Saul Bellow's story "A Silver Dish" illustrates the skill of one of the greatest American authors of the twentieth century. The story spans a period from the middle of the Great Depression to the mid-1980s, showing the changes that time renders in both society and in one man's life. The main character, Woody Selbst, is one of Bellow's finest creations. A lonesome, successful businessman, Woody reminisces about the circumstances under which his father, a con man and thief, caused him to lose his scholarship to a seminary school, an act that redirected his entire life.

Bellow, the 1976 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, fills this long tale with acutely observed details and characters who are so unusual that they feel like they could only come from real life. Woven throughout the story are meditations about religion, death, and responsibility that one expects in Bellow's fiction. Long for a short story, "A Silver Dish" holds as much insight, humor, and wisdom as one may hope to find in a novel.

This story was first published in the *New Yorker* in 1978 and was subsequently published in Bellow's 1984 collection *Him with His Foot in His Mouth*, which as of 2006 is in print.

Author Biography

Saul Bellow is considered one of the greatest writers America has ever produced, having won every major writing award available, including the Nobel Prize for Literature. He was born on June 10, 1915, in Lachine, Quebec, Canada. His parents, who had recently emigrated from Russia, moved the family to Chicago in 1924. After high school, Bellow attended the University of Chicago for two years then graduated with honors from Northwestern University in 1937, taking degrees in sociology and anthropology. He went on to do some post-graduate work at the University of Wisconsin, but soon returned to Chicago, which is the city that he has been most closely associated with throughout his long lifetime.

For most of Bellow's life, he was a teacher. His first position was at Pestalozzi-Froebel Teachers College in Chicago, from 1938 to 1942. During World War II, he served with the Merchant Marines. With money from a Guggenheim fellowship, he traveled in Europe after the war. After a stint as an editor at *Encyclopedia Britannica*'s "Great Books" program from 1943—1946, he took positions at University of Minnesota (1946—1949; 1954—1959), and then the University of Chicago, where he became the Grunier Distinguished Professor in the university's acclaimed Committee on Social Thought, in 1962. Bellow's affiliation with the committee lasted for more than three decades, until 1993. He then went to Boston University and became a professor of English, a position that he held until his death in 2005.

Bellow was productive and his writings won high critical acclaim. After the publication of his first novel, *Dangling Man*, in 1944, he produced ten novels and a few collections of plays, short stories, and novellas. His essays are also widely regarded, particularly "The Old System," a report on Israel's Seven-Day War that he wrote in 1967 for *Newsweek*. In addition, he was a frequent magazine contributor and an editor of dozens of volumes of fiction. His works are celebrated around the world: a partial list of his awards includes the National Book Award (Bellow is the only person to win it three times, for *The Adventures of Augie March* in 1953, *Herzog* in 1964, and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* in 1970); the National Institute of Arts and Letters Award; the French Croix de Chevalier des Arts et Lettres; and, of course, the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976. He was also a controversial figure: in 1970 he was booed off the stage at a reading in San Francisco by protestors who objected to his conservative views, and, after the publication of *To Jerusalem and Back*, about a trip to the Holy Land in 1976, critics characterized him as an opponent of Israel. Saul Bellow died at eighty-nine on April 5, 2005, at Brookline, Massachusetts. He had had five wives, three sons, and with his fifth wife, one daughter, born when he was eighty-four.

Plot Summary

Saul Bellow begins "A Silver Dish" by focusing on Woody Selbst, the protagonist, at age sixty. He is a successful businessman, the owner of a tile distribution company, living alone in an apartment on the top floor of his company warehouse. It is Sunday morning, and the bells are ringing in churches all around the South Chicago neighborhood where he lives. Woody reflects on the death of his father, Morris "Pop" Selbst, earlier in the week. He thinks of other people in his life: his mother, whose conversion to Catholicism hastened her husband's abandonment; his two weak-willed sisters, who are in their fifties and still living with their mother; his wife, from whom he has been separated for fifteen years, and Helen, his mistress; and Halina, the woman for whom his father left the family when Woody was fourteen and with whom his father lived for over forty years. He has a particular time of the week allotted for each of them. Sunday has always been his day to spend with Pop.

The church bells and thoughts of his father lead Woody to recall an incident that happened during the Great Depression, when Woody was seventeen. He was attending a seminary, with his tuition paid for by a rich patron, Mrs. Skoglund, a friend of his aunt and uncle. They all took an interest in him because he was Jewish and had converted to Christianity. One day, his father came to him and said that Halina had stolen money from her husband so that he, Morris, could pay a bookie and that he had to put the money back or the husband would beat Halina and possibly kill her. He wanted Woody to take him to Mrs. Skoglund's house, so that he could ask the wealthy woman for a loan. Woody knew that Mrs. Skoglund did not approve of Selbst and that there was a danger that she might quit paying his tuition if she thought that his father had too much influence on him, but out of loyalty to his father he agreed.

They traveled by trolley car from the south side of Chicago to the affluent suburb of Evanston, north of the city, during a blinding blizzard. At the Skoglund mansion, Woody talked their way in the door past the suspicious housekeeper, Hjordis, who opposed the idea of showing them any kindness at all. Mrs. Skoglund came to meet them and took them into a parlor where Woody introduced his father and then stepped back, quietly allowing Pop to make his case. Morris explained that he was a hard-working man who had gotten himself into financial trouble, making the case that he would be able to help children if she would just give him a break.

When Mrs. Skoglund and Hjordis left the room to pray to God about the best course of action, Pop went to a cabinet, pried open its lock with his penknife, and, to Woody's dismay, removed a silver dish. He explained that it was just in case Mrs. Skoglund did not give him the fifty dollars he needed; he would put it back if the money did appear. Woody tried to take the dish from his father, which resulted in their rolling on the floor, wrestling with each other. They broke their hold and stood up just before Mrs. Skoglund returned.

Having prayed about it, she decided to give Morris a check for the money. Woody accompanied her to her office as she wrote it and gave it to him, asking him to pray with

her for his father's soul. Once they left the house, Woody asked Pop if he had returned the silver dish to its proper place, and he said that of course he had. Because of the snow, they spent the night at the Evanston YMCA, and in the morning Pop went straight to Mrs. Skoglund's bank and cashed the check.

A few days later, the dish was discovered missing. Woody denied knowing anything about it but was forced to leave the seminary. When he confronted his father about it, Pop gave him the ticket from the pawn shop when he had hocked it and invited him to redeem it.

In his apartment, Woody now remembers his father's final days. In particular, he remembers being in the hospital room when Pop tried to pull the intravenous needles out of his arms. To stop him, Woody had taken off his shoes and climbed into the bed beside him, holding his arms, denying him what he wanted for once. Prevented from removing the tubes with his hand, Pop had just shut his metabolism down, letting the heat seep out of his body until he was dead.

Characters

Halina Bujak

Halina Bujak is a Catholic woman who has worked in Morris Selbst's dry cleaning shop. When Woody is fourteen, Morris leaves his family to live with Halina, and Morris and Halina live as husband and wife for over forty years, although Halina remains married to someone else. Of all members of his extended family whom Woody sends to Disney World, Halina enjoys it most, particularly the Hall of Presidents.

Mitosh Bujak

The son of Halina, Morris Selbst's longtime companion, Mitosh is only mentioned once in the story. He plays the organ at the Stadium for basketball and hockey games.

Helen

Helen is the mistress of Woody Selbst, his "wife de facto." In his tight schedule, Woody schedules Friday nights for being with Helen.

Hjordis

Mrs. Skoglund's housekeeper, Hjordis, is a tough, suspicious old maid, unwilling to accept the good in anyone, reluctant to allow Morris Selbst into the house, even in terrible weather. When leaving the Skoglund house, Woody requests that Hjordis phone the local YMCA, where her cousin works, to get a room for Morris and himself: she does so, but reluctantly, feeling that she is being taken advantage of by people she does not like.

Aunt Rebecca Kovner

Woody's aunt, Rebecca Kovner, is the sister of his mother. She is married to the Reverend Doctor Kovner, and together they work to convert people to Christianity, including Woody, his mother, and his sisters. When he is at the seminary, Woody works under Aunt Rebecca at a soup kitchen shelter for the poor, and he pilfers food he does not need, just for spite.

Reverend Doctor Kovner

The brother-in-law of Woody's mother, Reverend Doctor Kovner is actively involved in converting people to Christianity. He despises Morris Selbst, and the feeling is mutual.

Morris accuses Kovner of converting Jewish women by making them fall in love with him.

Mother

Woody's mother, who is never mentioned by name, is converted to Christianity by her sister, Aunt Rebecca Kovner, and her sister's husband. She is a self-important woman whose stern piousness drives her husband, Morris, to leave her. During the next fifty years, up to the time of this story, she lives with her two daughters. Woody accuses his mother of spoiling her daughters, making them fat and crazy, and being out of touch with the real world.

Pop

See Morris Selbst

Joanna Selbst

Woody's sister, Joanna Selbst, is depressed and mentally unstable.

Morris Selbst

Living on the streets of Liverpool, England, from the age of twelve, Morris Selbst comes to the United States at age sixteen, sneaking into the country by jumping a ship in Brooklyn; he never establishes an official identity in the country. He spends his life pursuing illegal and semi-legal means of support. In his forties, he leaves his wife and three children to live with one of his employees, Halina, with whom he remains for more than forty years until his death. Morris, or "Pop," as Woody often refers to him, is a gambler, cheat, and thief, who feels entirely justified in being the way he is. When he comes to Woody and asks for his help on the behalf of his mistress, Halina, Woody suspects that his plea is bogus, as it in fact turns out to be. When Pop takes the silver dish, he promises to put it back if Mrs. Skoglund gives him the money he asks for; when she gives him the money, he steals the dish anyway and then lectures Woody about how religious people are really taking advantage of him and deserve what they get.

Paula Selbst

Woody's sister, Paula Selbst, is cheerful but mentally unstable.

Woody Selbst

This story focuses on the life of Woody Selbst, who is now a sixty-year-old tile contractor in Chicago. Woody is the center of his extended family and the means of support for many people around him. He lives alone but has a girlfriend, Helen, whom he sees every Friday night. Every Friday he also shops for groceries for his wife, from whom he has been separated for fifteen years. He goes on Saturdays to visit his mother and his two sisters, who are in their fifties and still live at home with their mother. He has supplemented the income of his father, who has recently died, and his father's mistress, Halina.

Woody lives alone in an apartment atop his company's warehouse. He travels internationally by himself once a year. He is generally law-abiding and dependable, but he also has a criminal streak: in the previous year, for instance, he smuggles hashish in from Kampala, just for the excitement of doing so (the hashish is used to stuff the Thanksgiving turkey). He does not like to keep entirely within the limits of the law, considering it a matter of self-respect to do otherwise.

When he is in his teens during the Great Depression, Woody, by birth a Jew, converts to Catholicism and attends a seminary, which is paid for by a benefactress, Mrs. Skoglund. He takes his father to Mrs. Skoglund's house one day, and his father steals a silver dish from a curio cabinet; as a result of this theft, Woody is forced to leave school and go to work.

Mrs. Aase Skoglund

An old widow who has cooked for the wealthy Skoglund family and married their son, Aase Skoglund uses the money that she inherits to promote Christian charitable projects, such as paying Woody Selbst's tuition at a seminary. She is deeply religious, praying to God when she has a decision to make. She is charitable enough to give money to Morris Selbst, a man of whom she disapproves. She accepts no excuses when she finds out that Woody and his father have stolen from her.

Themes

Familial Love

Woody Selbst loves his father much like an indulgent father might love his irresponsible, yet self-serving son. Woody loses the opportunity to have his education paid for because of the selfish actions of his father. Because he loves his father, he gives him his savings when the old man wants to hire a taxi and leave the family. Because he loves his father, he takes him to the house of his patron, Mrs. Skoglund. Having gone that far against his better judgment, Woody distances himself from his father after the older man steals the silver dish. The brief wrestling bout on the living room floor is caused by the son trying to keep the father from misbehaving. Acting out of love rather than anger, Woody tries to restrict his father, just as later he climbs into the dying man's bed to prevent him from disconnecting his tubes.

The narrative states explicitly that Morris Selbst loved his son, too, listing him second only to Halina, his mistress, in the older man's life. Though Morris tries to take advantage of Woody, in his own mind, Morris wants to spare Woody the indignities of having to associate with people who only pretend to care for him.

Snobs and Snobbery

Pop Selbst justifies his behavior by characterizing the people who have converted Woody and his mother to Christianity□Mrs. Skoglund, the Reverend Doctor Kovland, and Aunt Rebecca Kovland□as snobs, who look down upon him because of his humble background and, perhaps, because of anti-Semitic feelings. Whether he is right, or is just using their disapproving attitude to excuse his own criminal behavior, it is nonetheless clear that Woody agrees with him. Woody characterizes his mother as waiting, like a queen, for her husband to return to her, even forty years after he left the family, but refusing their daughters to have anything to do with him: "The Empress of India speaking," Bellow writes, to show Woody's disdain for his mother's pretentious ways.

As a grown man, Woody still battles snobbery. His opponents are not religious, though: in the late twentieth century, religion is not the powerful force it once was. Woody smuggles hashish in from foreign lands and grows marijuana in the field in the back of his warehouse, not because he feels the need for such things, but in effect to snub authority. Though he is a respected and responsible member of his community, he retains the attitude that his father had, challenging, with his very respectability, the people who might look down on him.

Humility

Though the story does not show how he was able to do so, it is quite clear about the fact that Woody has been able to derive some moral advantage from what might have been a crippling humiliation. His father's actions at the house of Mrs. Skoglund resulted in his losing his scholarship and being thrown out of school. Such a traumatic event might have driven him to follow Pop into a life of crime, but, instead of becoming irresponsible, Woody grows up to be a man with a weighty conscience. He does not abandon his family, the way his father once did, but he works to support them all. An example of this is the way he shops every week for his wife, even though they have not lived together for fifteen years. Even more notable is the fact that Woody pays for vacations to Disney World for all members of his extended family (though he cannot, of course, send his mother and his father's mistress, his own wife and his mistress together). Though Woody engages in some petty crimes as a matter of self-esteem, his life is generally focused on his responsibility toward others. He does not allow himself to feel that he deserves better.

Aging

Since most of this story takes place in retrospect when Woody Selbst is a young man, it may be difficult for readers to bear in mind that he is sixty years old, well past the prime of life. Throughout the story he is overshadowed by his father. As a young man, his struggle to establish an independent identity fails, as his father ruins his chance to become a scholar and is responsible for his being thrown out of school. According to Morris Selbst, seminary did not offer Woody a true calling anyway. In adulthood, Woody has taken financial responsibilities of his family for years, but upon his father's death he awakens to a new awareness of the limits of life. Noting, at his father's hospital, the general decrepitude of his mother and his father's mistress, he muses, "everybody had lived by the body, but the body was giving out."

Solitude

Although, in his adult life, Woody is involved in the lives of people as diverse as his ex-wife, his grown sisters, his father's mistress and his own mistress, he still is alone, spending Sunday morning, the time that he has devoted to his father, alone in his apartment, listening to the mournful sounds of church bells. The root of this solitude can be plainly seen in his youth, when he was divided between his two parents when they separated. While it was easy for his sisters to sympathize with their mother, Woody only partially followed his mother's path: he converted to Christianity, but also rebelled, stealing bacon from Aunt Rebecca Kovner as a way of asserting his independence. Still, he grew up with too much conscience to follow directly in his father's larcenous footsteps. In keeping himself free of the restraints that any particular lifestyle would impose, he has also detached, to such a great extent that Helen, the woman whom he thinks of as being like a wife to him, is mentioned just once in the story and forgotten.

Style

Anti-hero

Bellow makes the character of Morris Selbst enough of a likeable rouge that readers can easily see why his son would be willing to forgive his crimes and try to help him improve. Morris may be considered a hero of the work because he is a sympathetic main character: certainly, he is something of a hero to his son, Woody. But he has many personal qualities that are less than heroic in the traditional sense. He is vain, petty, dishonest, greedy, and crude, to name just a few of his unattractive characteristics. Because he subverts the standard expectations of a hero, Morris functions as an anti-hero, making readers question their own expectations of what a hero is and does.

Foil

Traditional fiction often provides a protagonist with a foil, a character who is the opposite of the main character and whose traits contrast with the protagonist at every turn. The foil underscores the protagonist by striking a sharp contrast to him. In other words, the contrast between the two makes both more clear as it underscores the protagonist's nature.

Woody is a foil for Morris. Woody cares for his extended family, while Morris abandons his for a new life with his mistress. Woody accepts financial support to go to seminary, but he hesitates at the thought of his father borrowing money from his benefactor. When the two visit the Skoglund mansion their contrasting personalities are dramatized by their fight, which includes their wrestling with each other on the floor. This contrast played out this way makes each personality clearer to readers.

Denouement

The French word *denouement* means "unraveling." In literature, it generally refers to the part of a story that follows the climax, when the tense situations are settled and loose ends are wrapped up. The main part of "A Silver Dish" revolves around the object of the title. The story's climax may be seen as the fight that takes place between Woody and Morris, to keep him from stealing the dish; or it might be Woody's dismissal from the seminary and his steadfast decision not to blame his father; or maybe the old man's confession, later, that he took the dish, and his explanation that it was probably good for Woody that he did. Regardless of what one interprets as the story's climax, the last scene, in which Woody climbs into his father's hospital bed and holds him until he dies, is certainly the story's denouement. It is not integral to the main action of the story, but it is appropriate to the story because it dramatizes the love Woody feels for his father and the opposition he poses to his father's wishes. This final image conveys the son's love and the son's desire to prevent his father from a certain action.

Historical Context

The Great Depression

At the center of this story is Bellow's description of the night when Woody and his father, who are both poor, travel from the south side of Chicago to the affluent suburb of Evanston to the north. The contrast between the two worlds is made clear to readers, as the contrast between the rich and the poor was very clear during the Great Depression.

Like most large social phenomena, the Depression was the result of many events occurring simultaneously, such as the destruction of Europe during World War I finally taking effect and poor financial planning by the United States, which, after the war ended in 1918, failed to anticipate its rise to global financial dominance. America was a rich country throughout the 1920s, but some of that wealth was only on paper: the wealth that showed in bankbooks and stock transactions was not backed up by enough production of tangible goods. An important event that heralded the Depression was the New York Stock Market crash on October 29, 1929. Stock prices tumbled, causing other stockholders to sell their holdings at discount prices to cover their losses. People lost their savings when banks were forced out of business by large depositors pulling out. From 1929 to 1933, the U.S. gross national product fell by nearly half, from $103 billion to $55 billion. Unemployment, which usually stays under 5 percent, reached 30 percent at the height of the Depression in 1933, which is when Franklin D. Roosevelt became president and initiated new economic policies. Roosevelt's New Deal consisted of a variety of plans that gave work to many people.

Globalization in the 1980s

In this story, Bellow describes his protagonist, Woody Selbst, as a world traveler, experiencing exotic lands such as Kampala, the White Nile, and Japan, and important cities such as Istanbul, Jerusalem, and Delphi. While such international travel was of course possible then, it was by no means as common as it is in the early 2000s.

Several factors made world travel more attainable for the common person in the last two decades of the twentieth century. For one thing, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which had been in existence since the end of World War II, became more involved in regulating commerce between countries. Previously, the IMF had been charged with tending to the interactions between a few developed countries, but in 1982 it was shaken from its slumber by an international debt crisis. With a strong regulatory body directing financial traffic between countries, international involvement increased.

Also, communications improved after the 1980s. The fax machine, which allowed a copy of a document to be transferred across phone wires, had its origins in a device that was copyrighted in 1862, but it did not become a practical tool for business offices until the late 1980s. Just as the fax machine was revolutionizing international information

sharing, the Internet boom transformed business throughout the 1990s: within a matter of years, companies that had relied on verbal communications or couriers could exchange information accurately and immediately.

As businesses spread their scope throughout the world, so did individuals. The Internet and cable television brought a steady flow of information about other cultures, removing some of the fear and mystery of other lands. Tourism became a streamlined industry, so that agents in different countries could offer amenities that they knew their foreign customers wanted. Airlines became increasingly efficient at moving passengers, bringing fares down to levels that could be reached by middle-class Americans. Since the 1980s, international travel has become much more practical and desirable for millions of vacationers who once could only dream of going abroad.

Critical Overview

By the time "A Silver Dish" was published in Saul Bellow's 1984 collection *Him with His Foot in His Mouth*, Bellow's reputation as one of the great American authors was already established. He had won most of the major awards available to writers, including the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1984. Still, even with a devout following of fans and scholars waiting for each new work, this collection was greeted with particular enthusiasm. Bellow's reputation was built by the novels that he published after the 1940s, but few readers had ever encountered his short fiction. With his reputation established, Bellow expanded the scope of his novels, inserting longer and longer passages of philosophical musings within the stories. As Sanford Pinsker explained it in his review of *Him with His Foot in His Mouth* for *Studies in Short Fiction*, "Saul Bellow's last novel, *The Dean's December*, confirmed what fans and critics alike had long suspected□namely, that the delicate balance between texture and talkiness was tilting, unhappily, toward the latter." Bellow's characters "had too much of the non-fictional essay pressing on their chests." Pinsker was pleased to report that the short story form focused Bellow's skills onto story-telling: "the sheer discipline that the short story requires has served Bellow well at this time, this place in his distinguished career."

The collection was received positively all around. D. Keith Mano started his review in the *National Review* by calling the book "a spirit-wrestler." Writing in a style that reflects Bellow's own, Mano notes, "In five stories Bellow, our best manuscript illuminator, has thrown off more stylistic improvisation and bright elegance, more body English, than ten normal-good penmen could." Janet Wiehe echoed his sentiments in the *Library Journal*, concluding as follows: "An impressive collection: Bellow's lush, intellectual fiction vigorously confronts ideas and connects individual experience to a broad scheme of life and art and thought." By the end of the decade, the book was still influential, remembered by *Time* magazines as one of the best books of the 1980s.

By the early 2000s, critical attention that focused intensely on Bellows two decades before had dimmed. Before his death in 2005, he published short fiction so infrequently that readers look back on this collection as a particularly cherished event. "A Silver Dish." the one of his most frequently anthologized stories, is included in Bellow's 2002 *Collected Stories*. It is also included in *Best Short Stories of the Century*, edited by John Updike.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of literature and creative writing at College of Lake County and Oakton Community College in Des Plaines, Illinois. In this essay, Kelly examines Bellow's use of symbolism.

In a 1959 essay published in the *New York Times* called "The Search for Symbols, a Writer Warns, Misses All the Fun and Facts of the Story," Saul Bellow takes literary critics to task for reading too deeply, asserting that close scrutiny can in fact be a threat to fiction. He presents a hypothetical situation: a professor, asked why, in *The Iliad*, Achilles drags the body of Hector around the perimeter of Troy, answers that it is because doing so fits a pattern of circles, from shields to chariot wheels, that run throughout the story. To support his thesis the imaginary professor points to the fact that Plato, who was himself an ancient Greek but had no other relation to the author of *The Iliad*, favored geometric patterns, particularly the circle. Bellow submits to readers that the real answer is the simple one: Achilles circled the walls of Troy with Hector's carcass because he was angry. He says that the deep readers, who spin off symbolic importance from every little object mentioned in a work, are those who prefer meaning to feeling. Bellow's point is well taken: the search for symbolism certainly does distract a reader from nakedly experiencing a work of fiction. Still, the nature of literature is that, unlike life, the objects and events one encounters are certain to have some meaning greater than themselves, so it is more than a little disingenuous to blame the readers who want to explore possible meanings.

By the time he published the story "A Silver Dish," almost a quarter of a century later, Bellow seemed to have warmed to the idea of the responsible use of symbolism. How much of this is because he developed a more secure artist's hand over the year and how much is attributable to the fact that the short story form itself calls out for the compression that symbolism can allow is hard to say. The fact remains that "A Silver Dish" requires readers to have an appreciation of the symbolic if they are going to make meaning from it.

To start with, the title is symbolic. Titles are *always* symbolic, if we take "symbolism" to mean using one idea to represent another. A title is expected to mean much more than it says. In this particular case, three words are used to carry the same approximate meaning as thirty pages of text.

A well-formed title is transparent, at least until the other options of what it could have been are considered. "A Silver Dish" could have been called "The Bells" or "A Theft" or "A Death in the Family," but any one of these would steer the story's reader into a different direction. Something as simple as the use of "a" instead of "the," for instance, raises the tone of the story from the particular to the mythical. Describing the dish as "silver" in the story is just good, concrete, descriptive writing, but mentioning it in the title tells readers that there is something special about its being silver: as it turns out, the item in question is silver plated, a counterfeit, a sham. And the fact that the title is no more specific about the item than calling it a "dish" shows that Bellow is intentionally

being general, when he could have referred to it properly as a plate, platter, or tray, just as easily as he identifies the cabinet it is stolen from as an "étagère." These choices are used to signify something to the reader. Where writers disagree with critics is in determining just how much this signifying can be considered symbolism.

There are certain elements in "A Silver Dish" that are clearly symbolic, even though Bellow seemed to think that he could mute their symbolism by making the story's protagonist, Woody Selbst, aware of them. The first and most obvious of these is the buffalo calf that Woody has seen dragged underwater in Uganda. Watching the parent buffalos in their bafflement about the disappearance of their child taught Woody something about mourning. How do readers know this? For one thing, the event makes no sense being in the story if its significance is not felt; for another, Bellow introduces this episode as an "experience that was especially relevant to mourning." Similarly, the bells that chime around Woody's apartment on a Sunday morning certainly have sensual impact□thinking of church bells ringing will put readers into the state of mind that Woody is in that first Sunday without his father□but they also symbolize the larger concept of organized religion, which Bellow acknowledges when he uses the line, "he had some connection with bells and churches" to take readers into Woody's past, when he was studying for the seminary.

There are, it should be said, many things in the story that point readers toward a larger significance but do not reach a level of dual meaning that would make one categorize them as symbols. Woody's one-time job pulling a rickshaw at the 1933 World's Fair is mentioned several times, and so it might seem that there is an implied connection between his life and the Chinese character that he plays for cash: this job does show him to be the hard worker that he proves to be later in life, but that is just consistent characterization, not symbolism. Riverview Park is described in more detail than most things along the streetcar route□Bellow mentions the Bobs, the Chute, and the Tilt-a-Whirl□but nothing else in the story implies that this amusement park is supposed to represent life (although if that *were* Bellow's point then his comment about "the fun machinery put together by mechanics and electricians" would make more sense). The blizzard that Woody and his father travel through might be considered symbolic of the freezing of their relationship that is to come, but the story works well enough without giving it any extra significance. Just considering the blinding snowstorm as the sort of extreme weather that writers often use for setting, to make a story all that more gripping, explains it without over explaining it. It would be easy to make too much of minute details like these and blow their significance out of proportion. This is just the sort of thing that Bellow's 1959 essay warned against.

On the other hand, there are aspects to "A Silver Dish" that are so striking that it would be off the mark to make too little of their symbolic significance. Woody and his father wrestling on the floor of Mrs. Skoglund's front room is one. Physical competition between a father and son almost always implies the Freudian concept of the Oedipal complex, in which the son tries to overcome the father, taking his sexual power from him and winning his sexual identity. Freudian interpretation is the one area that most often makes readers and writers feel that critics are going too far in the search for symbols, stretching the given facts to fit a predetermined meaning, and it was at its height when

Bellow's essay was published. Still, when Bellow has a father and son grappling for what is stuffed down the front of the older man's underwear, it is difficult to avoid seeing how well the Freudian interpretation fits.

One other act in "A Silver Dish," which echoes the wrestling bout in the way that it brings the two main characters together physically again, comes when Woody takes off his shoes and crawls into the bed of his dying father to hold the old man's arms. This action is clearly meant to indicate more than just the effort to keep the father from pulling out his intravenous tubes. It shows a comfort and intimacy that the father and son never shared when the old man was vibrant; it shows Woody climbing closer to death, wrestling it to save his father's life; it shows Woody, now sixty years old, coming to recognize his own approaching mortality. There are many interpretations that work, but the one thing that cannot be said about such a striking, prominent gesture is that it is meant to stand only for itself.

From one perspective, everything in a work of fiction must mean something beyond itself: it would be quite naïve to ask readers to please not question why the author chose to include one element or another in story. On the other hand, it is easy to see what Bellow was getting at when he criticized those readers who take a work to be a package full of symbols, rather than an organic entity unto itself. A reader who insists on torturing the slimmest connections out of each object and gesture and calling it a symbol will miss out on the fun of reading. But symbols exist, and they always will, even when the author is not aware that they occur; it is a fact that writers just have to live with.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "A Silver Dish," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

Bellow was interviewed by Matteo Bellinelli on the video *Saul Bellow* (1994), released by Films for the Humanities & Sciences.

An audio interview, *On Art, Literature, and American Life*, is available from Encyclopedia Americana/CBS News Audio Resource Library.

A four-cassette video collection produced by Boston University, called *Conversations with Saul Bellow: Novelist, Author of Short Stories and Plays*, was released in 1987.

Topics for Further Study

Woody is divided between the religions of his father and mother, who are, respectively, Jewish and Christian. Explain the central event of "A Silver Dish" to a rabbi or minister and record the advice that they would give to a young person who witnesses a parent committing a crime.

Many YMCAs, including the one in Evanston, Illinois, that is mentioned in the story, have rooms to rent. Contact one near you and find out their policies: who rents their rooms, how much they charge, and what reservation policies are followed.

Woody and his father have a bond that Morris does not have with his daughters, nor Woody with his mother. Research Sigmund Freud's theory of the "Oedipal Complex," and explain its possible relevance to the relationship between Woody and each of his parents.

The music of the 1930s was generally about hope for a better future. Listen to the lyrics of a few songs from the Depression and describe which character would approve of it more, "Pop" Selbst or Mrs. Skoglund. Explain your reasons.

Bellow explains that Woody is responsible for his sisters, who live with their mother. What social services could they apply for after their mother's death, so that they would be able to live independently?

Compare and Contrast

1930s: An immigrant like Morris Selbst, who comes into the country by jumping off a ship before it docks, can live his entire lifetime without his presence documented by the government.

Today: Government records are cross-referenced by computer. It would be virtually impossible for a man to own a business without several government agencies knowing of his existence.

1930s: The World's Fair in Chicago, dubbed the "Century of Progress," draws attendance of more than 22 million people.

Today: The ease of international travel and the knowledge of the world via the Internet make world fairs unnecessary. The last world's fair of note, Expo '98 in Lisbon, Portugal, drew 11 million people.

1930s: Gambling means placing bets with a bookmaker with underground connections.

Today: Most states have casinos, lottery, and legalized horse betting. Financing bets is more often done with a credit card than with a bookie.

1930s: A car is a luxury: there is one car for every three people in the United States. In cities, the main mode of transportation is the streetcar.

Today: There is an average of one car for every person over the age of sixteen. Urban areas try to discourage car ownership and to encourage the use of public transportation to cut down on traffic congestion and pollution.

1930s: Banks are going out of business, so people like Bujak in the story keep their cash hidden in their homes.

Today: Cash is becoming obsolete: businesses encourage transactions with credit or debit cards.

What Do I Read Next?

Bellow's essay "In the Days of Mr. Roosevelt," originally written for *Esquire* magazine, is his non-fiction account of what life was like in Chicago during the Great Depression. It is reprinted in *It All Adds Up: From the Dim Past to the Uncertain Future*, a collection of his essays published by the same year as this story.

Bellow wrote the afterward for an edition of *Con Man* (1942), an autobiography of legendary Chicago swindler J. R. "The Yellow Kid" Weil.

Philip Roth, one of the great American novelists, wrote an appreciation of Bellow's long career in "Rereading Saul Bellow," published in Roth's collection *Shop Talk: A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work* (2001).

Unlike most literary biographies, Harriet Wasserman's memoir of Bellow, *Handsome Is* (1997), is steeped with personal and intimate observations about its subject and his life. Wasserman was Bellow's friend and agent, and her book brings readers close to his life.

Further Study

Atlas, James, *Bellow: A Biography*, Random House, 2000.

This is a major literary biography, ten years in the making, by an important analyst of the literary scene.

Glaysher, Frederick, "A Poet Looks at Saul Bellow's Soul," in *Saul Bellow and the Struggle at the Center*, edited by Eugene Houlahan, AMS Press, 1996, pp. 43—55.

Since the split between spiritual traditions of Christianity and Judaism is so much a part of the life of this story's protagonist, readers may enjoy Glaysher's examination of matters usually deemed too spiritual for literary criticism.

Kiernan, Robert F., *Saul Bellow*, Continuum Publishing, 1989.

Kiernan is one of the few critics to devote several pages to this specific short story.

Porter, Gilbert, *Whence the Power? The Artistry and Humanity of Saul Bellow*, University of Missouri Press, 1974.

When this book was published, Bellow had already been an important figure in American literature for two decades. Porter analyzes the early novels and ends with a summary chapter about "Bellow's Vision."

Bibliography

Bellow, Saul, "The Search for Symbols, a Writer Warns, Misses All the Fun and Fact of the Story," in the *New York Times*, February 15, 1959.

Mano, D. Keith, "In Suspense," in *National Review*, Vol. 36, Issue 15, August 10, 1984, p. 48.

Pinsker, Sanford, Review of *Him with His Foot in His Mouth*, in *Studies on Short Fiction*, Vol. 21, Issue 4, Fall 1984, pp. 404—05.

Wiehe, Janet, Review of *Him with His Foot in His Mouth*, in *Library Review*, Vol. 106, Issue 11, June 15, 1984, p. 1251.