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Characterization and Pattern in "The Jewbird"

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Preface

"The Jewbird" (1963), a story by Bernard Malamud (1914-1986) covering less than ten pages, should rather be called a sketch. In fact, none of the major critics on Malamud's literature except Philip Hanson dwell on the story when they do comment on it. But it is nevertheless an impressive one for its positing a talking bird as its protagonist and for its cruel ending.

Concerning its theme, critics agree almost unanimously. According to Edward A. Abramson, Harry Cohen, who desires "to escape being Jewish and to assimilate completely," fails "the test of compassion and humanity" (134) and through the description of its process, Malamud appeals "the need for compassion in dealing with God's creatures" (133). Hanson says that Cohen reminds him of "early German Jews" who "remove practices and garb that identif[y] them as Jews" and desire to "be accepted by established Christian Americans" (361) and that such a tendency of his testifies "the loss of a capacity for charity," which Malamud finds "unpleasant" (365). Kathleen G. Ochshorn points out that Schwartz is "on a mission to humanize Cohen" (136) and concludes that the story deals with "the validity of one human's claim on another" as "a basic Malamud theme" (137). Robert Solotaroff, like Abramson and Hanson, notes that this story deals with the theme of "assimilation" as "the great theme of twentieth century Jewish- American fiction" (79) and says that Schwartz "tests the humanness of each member of the Cohen family" (78).

In the following, referring fully to the critics mentioned above, first of all, I would like to consider the characterization of Schwartz by comparing "The Jewbird" with "The Last Mohican" (1958), then to discuss Harry Cohen's behavior in relation to the priesthood of ancient Israel, and finally, to point out a pattern seen in the development of the plot mainly from the viewpoint of expression.

I. Schwartz in "The Jewbird" and Susskind in "The Last Mohican"

To delineate "The Jewbird" by comparing it with other stories written by Malamud has already been done by critics. Ochshorn identifies Schwartz with Pinye Salzman in "The

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Magic Barrel" (1954) and Solotaroff indicates that Schwartz is similar to Shimon Susskind in "The Last Mohican" as a "skinny-legged fugitive from anti-Semitism" (78). Sidney Richman regards Schwartz as "Half Bober and half Susskind" (126). This means that similar patterns of characterization or expression are repeated throughout Malamud's works.

For example, concerning Cohen's sick mother, Hanson regards her as "a woman of the same generation as Schwartz" (363) and Solotaroff as the symbol of "[Cohen's] vestigial tie to his Jewish past" (78). From these viewpoints, both of them estimate that the death of the mother triggers the murder of Schwartz by Cohen. Such views of theirs seem to me to be justifiable, especially Solotaroff's view is persuasive. By the way, as for me, the function of Cohen's mother in the story is, above all, to provide, through her own illness, Cohen as an assimilated Jew with the opportunity to struggle with the Jewishness incarnated as a Jewbird and thus to have his own peaceful lives thus far disturbed. As a matter of fact, this motif is applied to Nat Lime, a Jewish liquor-store owner in "Black is My Favorite Color" (1963) estimated to be written just after "The Jewbird." Lime regards himself as a cosmopolitan who does not attach himself to Jewishness, but his sick mother predicts that he will later face the problem of Jewish identity in a painful way by saying, "if you ever forget you are a Jew a goy will remind you" (336). Furthermore, the condition after the death of the mother is similar between Cohen's case and Lime's. That is, as far as Cohen is concerned, it is strongly suggested that he will be estranged from his wife and his child, which is indicated by his wife's utterance, "Anti-Semeets" (330) because this pronunciation is the same as Schwartz's. Besides, Richman says that Cohen "flings . . . fatherhood with it [the bird]" (126). In the case of Lime, too, he actually comes to be insulated from his housemaid Charity Quietness. Seen thus, the motif of the sick mother who foretells her son's confrontation with Jewishness and the conflict derived from it is repeated throughout the two stories written almost at the same time. If we see "The Jewbird" in a comparatively wider perspective, it becomes apparent that it not only absorbs images and motifs from an earlier story but also gives its own structure to a later one. In this sense, it plays a dynamic role among Malamud's stories and so, its position may be a unique one. Incidentally, the fact that mother foretells the emergence of the problem about Jewishness is connected to the matriarchate of Jewish society, that is, to the tradition that woman plays more important roles in the maintenance of the Jewish blood or in the Jewish education. This can be said to support the Jewishness of the two stories.

Now, concerning the description of Schwartz, like Solotaroff, I would like to pay my attention to its relationship to the portrayal of Shimon Susskind in "The Last Mohican." In other words, I try to define a part of "The Jewbird" by irradiation from "The Last Mohican." (Concerning "The Last Mohican," see my essay on it in *The Review of Kobe University of Mercantile Marine*, Part I, No. 48, 1999.)

First of all, the entrance of Schwartz is similar to that of Susskind. In the beginning of "The Last Mohican," Arthur Fidelman, presumably an assimilated Jew, is surrounded by the

scenery of Rome and feels rapture with satisfaction, when Susskind suddenly breaks his fancy and begs for a suit to protect himself from the cold weather of Rome. Also in "The Jewbird," the entrance of an intruder is portrayed at the beginning of the story. That is, when Cohen as an assimilated Jew is enjoying his dinner of "thick lamb chop" (322) and beer in his apartment, Schwartz unexpectedly flies into it through an open window, lands near the lamb chop, and begs for food to satisfy his hunger: "If you can't spare a lamb chop . . . I'll settle for a piece of herring with a crust of bread" (323). The characterization of both Susskind and Schwartz as Diaspora Jews is evident from their similar statements: Susskind: "I'm always running" (202); Schwartz: "I'm flying but I'm also running" (323). In addition to it, the plot which describes such a Diaspora Jew under hardship who begs a fellow Jew for necessity of life such as clothes or food is the one perfectly common to the two stories. The two Jews' alleged consciousness of the Jewish obligation of charity to a fellow Jew is guessed from the statement like Susskind's "Then you [Fidelman] are responsible [to Susskind]. Because you are a man. Because you are a Jew, aren't you?" (208)or Schwartz's "Where there's charity I'll go" (324). This is the core of the Jewish values both Susskind and Schwartz represent.

To such appeal to the Jewish idea of mutual aid, both Fidelman and Cohen respond indifferently (Fidelman: "I refuse the obligation" [208]; Cohen: "This ain't a restaurant" [323]). But in spite of that, it should be noted that the Jewish ethos represented by Susskind and Schwartz is described as tenacious. What emphasize and symbolize its tenaciousness are their thinned legs and motionlessness. For example, Susskind begs Fidelman for a suit "standing motionless" (203) for a long time despite his "slightly bowed, broomstick legs" (201). When he stresses the significance of Jewish mutual aid and is rejected by Fidelman, he is "[standing] there, oddly motionless" (208). On the other hand, Schwartz, in spite of his fatigue after a long travel, stands on "the top of the open kitchen door" (322) "on one skinny leg, then on the other" (324), talk with the Cohen family patiently, and finally succeeds in making Edie prepare for him marinated herring. Furthermore, Cohen comes to allow Schwartz to stay at his apartment for one night. Such an "incredible staying power" (Ochshorn 136) of theirs sometimes makes their "demands for charity . . . somewhat strident and demanding" (Hanson 362) to the extent that the other parties come to be possessed by somewhat ominous terror. In fact, Fidelman is scared by the possibility that he may be followed by Susskind endlessly and Cohen is troubled by the presence of Schwartz so much that he cannot but say, "Next thing you'll want to sleep in bed next to my wife" (327).

As seen thus, the characterization of Schwartz as incarnation of the Jewish ethos is strongly influenced by "The Last Mohican."

II. The Characterization of Cohen

Thus far, I have tried to define Schwartz's Jewishness by comparing the descriptions of him with those applied to Susskind. Now, I would like to consider Cohen's character and

behavior.

First of all, the surname of Cohen means in Hebrew "the descent from the priests of ancient Israel" (Rosten 192). In relation to this, Hanson says that in consideration of Cohen's "denial of his ties to Jewish tradition," his surname gives birth to "the irony of his failure to interpret and respond to Schwartz's plight in the traditional way" (264). It is true that the name of Cohen issues irony, but I think that whether he is really cut off from Jewish tradition or not should be considered in minute detail. In the following, I discuss Cohen's personality and behavior mainly from the viewpoint of the Old Testament.

The first obligation of the priesthood of ancient Israel (Cohen) is "to approach the Lord's table to serve him his food" (Werblowsky and Wigoder 544). This derives from *Leviticus* 21:6. That is, his role is to devote to God meat of sheep or goat in the tabernacle and he is permitted to eat it (*Leviticus* 22:11). From such a viewpoint, the lamb chop Cohen is gnawing at the dinner table can be thought to refer to his role as a priest serving his own apartment as the tabernacle. In this sense, I partially agree with Solotaroff's view that this lamb chop designates "Cohen's gross, obdurate sensibility" (78) because in a sense a priest of ancient Israel cannot but be obdurate as will be discussed later. Furthermore, according to *Leviticus* 22:3, anyone who "approach[es] the holy- gifts" in an "unclean" condition "shall be cut off from [God's] presence." If so, it is justifiable conduct as a priest that Cohen "[swats] at" Schwartz who lands near the lamb chop with his "frazzled" and "bedraggled" wings and "ruffled head" (322). Or afterward, he criticizes Schwartz's uncleanness by saying, "Why don't you wash yourself sometimes? Why must you always stink like a dead fish?" (326), which is understandable enough in consideration of Cohen's position as a priest. As seen thus, Cohen's behavior in the apartment overlaps that of a priest as his surname suggests.

The second obligation of the priesthood is the guard of the tabernacle itself, that is, "to prevent encroachment by unauthorized persons" (Werblowsky and Wigoder 544), which corresponds to *Numbers* 3:38: "any unqualified person who came near would be put to death." At the same time, *Leviticus* 21:23 prohibits anyone with "a defect in his body" from "profan[ing][God's] sanctuaries." From such viewpoints, Cohen's calling Schwartz "crosseyes" (325, 326)means that he is blaming him for the "defect in his body" that disqualifies him from entering the apartment and so, his efforts to drive him out can be said to aim for the protection of his own apartment as the tabernacle from such an "unqualified" being as Schwartz. These conducts of Cohen's are natural behaviors as a priest.

Thus a series of Cohen's behavior toward Schwartz reflect his efforts to protect his own sacred family from an unqualified stranger, which is emphasized by his surname evocative of the image of a priest of ancient Israel. In fact, Cohen's anger is directed to "Schwartz's applying 'Jew' to himself" (Hanson 360): "Poor bird, my ass. He's a foxy bastard. He thinks he's a Jew"; "A Jewbird, what a chutzpah" (325); "whoever heard of a Jewbird" (328). In other words, Cohen is suspecting that a stranger unqualified to enter the sacred place is

plotting to violate and possess it by disguising himself as a Jew. His indifference to Schwartz's begging, his worry about Schwartz's seduction to his wife, and his doubt if Schwartz is "dybbuk" (323) or "some kind of a goddamn devil" (327) reflect such sentiment of his. Cohen's doubt is amplified as a result of Schwartz's hesitation to identify himself definitely: "Who knows? . . . Does God tell us everything?" (324).

It is true that Cohen, who has an "up-to-date job" (Solotaroff 77-8) as a "frozen-foods salesman" (322) and talks in Americanized way, is to be categorized as an assimilated Jew. But at the same time, it is obvious that he is, at least to some degree, acquainted with the Jewish tradition, values, or ideas from the way he condemns Schwartz for his prayer with "[n]o hat, no phylacteries" or, as mentioned before, his worry about "a ghost or dybbuk" (323). And such familiarity with the Jewish way derives from his mother as "a vestigial tie to his Jewish past" (Solotaroff 78). Even Cohen's desire to have Maurie "in an Ivy League college" (326) reflects the traditional Jewish values which make it a crucial obligation for parents to give their child as much education as possible. In a word, as for Schwartz, Cohen is strongly doubting his identity; he is wondering if he is an authentic Jew worth giving charity in his own apartment, and in this sense, he has never "forgotten the tradition of charity in Jewish history" (Hanson 361). Actually, although his doubt about Schwartz's identity still remains, Cohen gives him "a bird feeder" (325) as a compromise.

Then what is ironic about Cohen's behavior? There is, first of all, a dramatic irony that Cohen cannot see Schwartz's Jewishness which is apparent to the reader. Cohen, who ought to have been equipped with discernment more than anyone else because of his calling as a priest, is really least capable of finding the truth. In fact, although the scene where Edie "bow[s] her head" and Maurie "rock[s] back and forth" in accordance with the "daven[ing]" (323) of Schwartz standing on high compares him to God and gives the apartment an image closest to that of the tabernacle, Cohen's suspicion toward him prevents such perception. He is insensitive to the orthodox Jewish ethos Schwartz issues. This kind of irony overlaps the one in "The Last Mohican" that although he is a Giotto scholar, Fidelman is far from understanding the essence of his art. Concerning what has caused Cohen's blindness, Solotaroff says to the effect that it is assimilation: "the degree to which a Jew is assimilated corresponds to the degree that he has been corrupted by contemporary American society" (79). It is partially true. But as noted before, Cohen cannot be regarded as entirely cut off from the Jewish tradition. Therefore Cohen's personality as a Jew is more complicated or ambiguous than is generally thought. Rather, I think that it is advisable for the reader to enjoy the tragi-comedy caused by an error than to be inquisitive about its cause.

The second irony is that although Cohen follows the Old Testament and puts Schwartz to death as an "unqualified person" in order to protect his own apartment as the tabernacle, it results in his wife's curse on him: "Anti-Semeets" (329). Even if it is based on an erroneous judgement, the murder of Schwartz by Cohen is a final attack on the opponent who continues

to trouble him by staining his apartment as the sanctuary ("the bird's smell threatens to overwhelm a central character" Hanson 363). It is nothing but an ironic end that such action as is taken to protect the tabernacle is understood as Anti-Semitism.

Seen thus, the interpretation of the story as a parable of the tabernacle and the priesthood makes Cohen's behavior and ironies about him easier to understand.

Incidentally, concerning the last scene where Edie and Maurie find the body of Schwartz, views differ. Ochshorn says that "there is some measure of hope" because Maurie "learned compassion from Schwartz" (138), but on the other hand, according to Solotaroff, the scene makes the reader feel that "the brutes still run things" (80). Such an ambiguous ending is typically Malamudian.

III. A Structural and Expressive Pattern in "The Jewbird"

In a sense, Cohen wages not only against Schwartz but also against Edie and Maurie who do not always follow his policy as a priest. Concerning his struggle with them, if we note the progress of the season and the image evoked by the word "a frozen-foods salesman" (322), a pattern emerges from it.

A synonym of the word "frozen" is "icy," which leads to the cold-bloodedness of Cohen who consistently tries to expel Schwartz as an "unqualified" stranger. About Cohen's job, Hanson points out that it connotes a kind of "sanitized" (362) condition as opposed to "bedraggled" and smelly Schwartz. If so, the "sanitized" condition, which does not allow any vestige of "germ" to exist, connects to Cohen's cold-bloodedness against the unclean like Schwartz, which links to cruelty of a priest who is permitted to kill a person in order to keep the tabernacle pure. As a matter of fact, such cold-bloodedness of Cohen comes to prevail in response to the change of the season from the warm to the cold, which forms a structural pattern of the story.

First of all, it is "on a hot August evening" (322) that Schwartz intrudes into Cohen's apartment, but then Cohen is forced to accept Maurie's request to let the bird stay for a while. Then in September, when Cohen suggests again that Schwartz should be expelled, this time Edie holds him.

However, as the season progresses, Cohen's cold-bloodedness against Schwartz comes to prevail. One day, he argues violently with Schwartz to the extent that he is "about to lunge for the bird's scrawny neck" (327) and since then, Schwartz becomes troubled with extraordinary nervousness. But what Edie can do for him this time is only to encourage him to compromise with her husband: "Maybe if you did some kind of the things my husband wants you, you would get along better with him"; " Like take a bath, for instance" (327). And it is in this scene that Cohen is first represented as "the frozen-foods salesman (began a quarrel with the bird)" (326) since the introduction of characters in the beginning of the story. Up to then, he is called solely "Cohen" or "he." It can be thought that through the mediation

of the word "frozen," a predominance of Cohen's cold-bloodedness in response to the frigidness of climate is displayed symbolically.

This tendency aggravates itself and one day after "late November" when "Schwartz [freezes] on the balcony in the fog and cold" (328), Cohen begins harassing him by keeping "a full grown cat" (328) in his apartment. Also in the scene, Cohen is represented as "The frozen-foods salesman (began his campaign against the bird)" (328), which emphasizes concisely his dominant cold-bloodedness. In fact, all Edie can do in answer to Schwartz's complaint of the cat is to confess her own powerlessness: "Be patient"; "I'm awfully sorry but Maurie likes the pussy and sleeps with it" (329).

It should be noted that the phrase "frozen-foods salesman" used twice occurs with the verb "began" because it is indicated through the combination that in response to the progress of the cold, a stage of Cohen's cold-bloodedness ends and the next more violent one begins.

As the final development of the campaign, some weeks later, Cohen at last kills Schwartz. In relation to this, Cohen in the scene just after the one of the murder is represented as "the salesman" (329). The deletion of "frozen-foods" means that his cold-bloodedness is exclusively directed to Schwartz and now that he is dead, it is no longer necessary. But at the same time, the word "salesman" cannot but evoke the omitted part "frozen-foods" and so, suggests that Cohen's anger toward Schwartz that motivated his cold-bloodedness still remains after the death of the opponent. Therefore it is proper that the word is used in combination with the sentence, "That's the end of that dirty bastard" (329). In reality, Cohen's cold-bloodedness is still predominant because both Edie and Maurie cannot even say "no" (329) when they learn Schwartz's death. Both of them can only mourn Schwartz in such unnoticed ways as "touch[ing] hankerchief to her eyes" or "rapidly [trying] the nine-times table" (329). They have to wait until "the spring when the winter's snow had melted" before they can assert themselves by uttering "Anti-Semeets" (330).

Conclusion

Thus far, concerning "The Jewbird," I have mainly tried to reveal Schwartz's identity and to regard Cohen's behavior not as "Semitic anti-Semitism" (Hanson 361) as generally considered. Furthermore, I have demonstrated a pattern embedded in the story in order to show the expressive device Malamud uses in the story. Expressive features in the works of Malamud should be inquired more carefully.

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Characterization and Pattern in "The Jewbird"

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In this small essay, "The Jewbird," a short story by Bernard Malamud, is discussed mainly from three aspects.

In chapter I, Schwartz's Jewish identity is considered by comparing it with that of Shimon Susskind in "The Last Mohican." As a result, it becomes apparent that characterization and description of Schwartz are influenced by those of Susskind, which emphasizes his Jewishness.

In chapter II, the characterization of Harry Cohen is discussed mainly in relation to the priesthood of ancient Israel described in the Old Testament. This leads to the view which regards his behavior not as "Semitic anti-Semitism" as many critics point out.

In chapter III, a structural pattern peculiar to the story is revealed. That is, Cohen's cold-bloodedness toward Schwartz comes to be predominant as the cold weather progresses. This process is mediated by the insertion of the phrase "frozen-foods salesman" evocative of Cohen's icy character and obduracy comparable to those of a priest.

Although "The Jewbird" is a small work covering less than ten pages, it is filled with many thematic and expressive elements worth paying attention to.

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