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Atsuhisa Shimazu¹

Introduction

"Still Life" (1962) by Bernard Malamud (1914-1986) is regarded as one of his "Italian stories" (Richman 113). It can be considered as the second chapter of his novel *Pictures of Fidelman: An Exhibition* (1969), but as Robert Solotaroff says of all the stories in the novel that they "belong to different fictional worlds" (91), it can be appreciated fully as an independent story. In the story, Arthur Fidelman, a former painter and an art student, comes to Rome and shares a studio with a female painter Annamaria Oliovino, is trifled with by the desire to paint once again and by his lust for her ("the meshing of [his] aesthetic and erotic lives" Solotaroff 91), and finally, finds out about a serious crime committed by her and punishes her in the way best suited for the nature of the crime.

In spite of the fact that Malamud is admired for his impressive short stories, about this one, there are differing views and critics like Sidney Richman severely regard this as "a sad-absurd sexual travesty" (Richman 113). In this essay, from the viewpoint of the expressive feature of the story, the relationship between Fidelman and Annamaria is surveyed through the consideration of the uses of the numbers "two" and "three." After that, the meaning of the title "Still Life" is examined and finally, the view of art put into the story is discussed in relation to that in "The Last Mohican" (1958), the first chapter of *Pictures of Fidelman: An Exhibition*.

I. The Relationship of the Number "Two" with Annamaria and Fidelman

The foundation of the plot of the story is Annamaria's murder of her child fathered by her uncle Augusto Ottogali. Her awareness of this crime is reflected in "a small black religious cross" hidden in her abstractions and the cross is explained as "her first two brush strokes" (284). In this sense, the number "two" is a synonym for cross and symbolizes abnormal physical desire and the crime derived from it. As Lawrence Royce Chott regards the cross as "'a cover-up' for her religious feeling or concerns" (59), the purpose of her painting is to dilute her awareness of her crime.

Throughout the story, the number "two" is given to many facts about Annamaria: she came to Rome from Naples "two years ago" (285); she has "two full meals a day" (289); she takes a siesta "[at] two every afternoon" (293); she paints her nude "in two stages" (288). In the first case, the number "two" is given to Rome as the place where her crime brought about by her

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abnormal sexual desire was committed; in the second and third ones, by associating the number “two” with her eating and sleeping, it is suggested that these actions are not only physiological phenomena but also hints of her unusual sexuality; in the fourth one, the combination of being the nude with the number “two” strongly hints at her sex-oriented tendencies as well as describes her manner of painting

The place most closely associated with her crime is the Tiber. The first scene of the river is through the windows of the studio: “Below the cold sunlit windows stood two frozen umbrella pines and beyond, in the near distance, sparkled the icy Tiber” (283). Also in the scene where Fidelman invites her to lunch, umbrella pines appear: “She . . . after darting an uneasy glance out of the window at the tops of the motionless umbrella pines, abruptly assented” (285). The number “two” is given to the trees when they are coupled with the Tiber and not when they have no relationship to it. In this way, the relationship between the Tiber and her crime derived from her physical desire is stressed. In the scene where she is blown by the wind from the Tiber, she “from time to time furtively [crosses] herself” (285). This shows the relationship between the river and her crime symbolized by the word cross (“two”). Her mind that rejects the river is described as follows: “she hated to cross any of the bridges of the Tiber” (288). The river and the action of walking over it form the image of cross and her unwillingness to finish the image reveals the connection between the Tiber and the crime symbolized by the cross (“two”).

As for Annamaria’s close boyfriends, they also carry the number “two.” Augusto her uncle comes to see her twice a week (“Monday and Friday afternoons”) and Giancarlo Balducci is “a cross-eyed illustrator” (286). Furthermore, “Fidelman never [sees] again” (286) any other visitors except the two men. Thus the closeness between Annamaria and them is emphasized. Metaphorically speaking, they are all residents of the world ruled by the number “two.” As a matter of fact, Augusto is the partner of Annamaria’s incest and Giancarlo hosts an indecent party and so, they share with her the sexual distortion symbolized by the number “two.”

This is true of Fidelman. Kept “warm by his hidden love for the pittrice” (283), Fidelman as “a true Malamudian fool in love” (Friedenthal 199) is wearing “two pairs of tennis socks” (284) while working on his picture. The number “two” in this scene responds to his physical desire possessing him even in his creative activity. In order to win Annamaria’s favor, Fidelman serves her in her everyday life. The typical example of this is his carrying “her two bags of garbage” (284) downstairs. This phrase including the number “two” symbolizes their minds stained by lust. In the scene where Fidelman is permitted to sleep with her, Annamaria, enjoying the sex, is suddenly notified by the caretaker to take down the garbage and hands her “two bags” (292). The number “two” in this scene has the same connotation. Even though Fidelman fails in the sex act and makes Annamaria angry, he often dreams “of ultimate victory” and wanders “from one cold two-bit movie to another” wearing “two woolen scarves around his neck” (293). His limitless desire to conquer her is reflected in the number “two” never leaving him.

The same can be said of Fidelman’s artistic activity. When Annamaria corrects his picture,

his attention goes not to his work but to "her intimate smell of sweating flowers" (288). It is not too much to say that he keeps standing in front of his easel to attract her attention. Concerning Fidelman's art, Edward A. Abramson regards this as the "way of attempting to get her into bed" (82) and Chott as "a means to draw closer to Annamaria" (60). Thus his perverted condition as an artist in which art serves his lust can be seen in his trying "two lyrical abstract expressionistic pieces" on the assumption that "it might please her" (288). The number "two" in the scene corresponds to his sexual impulse inherent in his art. This number is also related to the scene above mentioned where Fidelman sleeps with her. The picture he paints as a means of "more intimate possession of a woman" (290) is a portrait of two persons ("Virgin with Child"). This picture causes her to sleep with Fidelman. About this, it should be noted that this picture of two people is hung above her bed "replacing a gaunt self-portrait" (291), a picture of one person. This means that the picture of two people fits more to what is to be performed in Annamaria's bedroom. That is, this picture of two persons shows symbolically that it derives from sexual desire and is a means to satisfy it. Incidentally in this scene, Annamaria wears "yellow silk robe" (292). In this story, except in one case (Annamaria's "yellowed letters" 283), the yellow image is used in direct relationships to filth: "a yellowish façade stained brown along the edges" (282); "the yellowed, sedimented pot (for urine)" (284); Fidelman's left shoe "smeared with mustard" (294). In this fashion, Annamaria's "yellow silk robe" can be thought to describe her stained soul.

In the vulgar party held at Balducci's apartment, Fidelman is forced to be a nude model. The reason for his acceptance of the role is that he is "proud of his muscles" and that maybe if she sketches "him nude it might arouse her interest for a tussle later" (295). His depravity to the extent that he uses art for his sexual purpose, that is, his self "strongly sexual without being particularly moral" (Solotaroff 93), corresponds to "Two easels" (295) standing in front of him as a nude model.

Whether it is Fidelman's, Annamaria's, Augusto's, or Balducci's, the description of abnormal sexual desire never fails to be accompanied by the number "two." In this way, both Fidelman and Annamaria have the same inclination. The most obvious evidence of this is that they have two names. In the story, Fidelman is called "Fidelman" or "the art student"; Annamaria is called "Annamaria" or "the pittrice." But love based on what is symbolized by the number "two" never bears fruit in any way.

II. The Meaning of the Number "Three"

The number used in opposition to "two" in the story is "three." Concretely speaking, the spirit devoted purely to art and the morality of such a spirit in opposition to abnormal sexual desire are represented by the number "three."

The description of the windows of the studio in the beginning of the story should be noted: "the inspiring sight of an easel lit in unwavering light from the three large windows setting the former art student on fire once more to paint (282). In it, "windows" function as a medium for

leading Fidelman's spirit to art. When windows play such a role, the number "three" emerges. If not, the number is not given to windows. For example, in the citation above that describes the Tiber beyond the "two frozen umbrella pines," the windows are depicted merely as "the cold sunlit windows" (283) and the number "three" that is associated with art-oriented spirit does not appear. The citation flatly shows the incompatibility of the numbers "two" and "three," that is, the incompatibility of physical desire and art. Also in the scene where Annamaria paints her own nude and then locks herself in her private room with Augusto while discontented Fidelman is sitting in the studio, windows are depicted as follows: "Fidelman sat . . . before the glittering blue-skied windows, slowly turning to ice to faint strains of Bach" (289). Contrary to the quotation above that describes Fidelman set on fire to paint, when the windows are connected to Fidelman who has lost the enthusiasm for art and suffers from unsatisfied desire, the number "three" does not occur to them.

Therefore in the studio, which originally should be filled with the spirit of pure artistry represented by the number "three," it is impossible for Annamaria or Fidelman stained by what is symbolized by the number "two" to produce works that move people deeply. That is why Annamaria's pictures are expounded as "fake" (295) by a sculptor and Fidelman's painting is "going poorly" (286). By the way, one night, Fidelman, who is treated coldly by Annamaria and cannot work because of this, dreams that he has "three eyes" (289). This image overlaps with "the three large windows" (282) representing artistry, but the ironic situation of Fidelman's is that he can get what is symbolized by "three" only in his dream. In relation to this, to the sculptor's question, "Have you looked at her work?" he answers, "With one eye" (295). This phrase also emphasizes ironically Fidelman's condition that he has not acquired the quality equivalent to the number "three." Among Annamaria's pictures, the one that is related to the number "three" is a still life of "a loaf of bread with two garlic bulbs" (283), but that is still under creation and not perfected. Or she has three boxes filled with things. But one of them is full of "small sea shells" (283). A seashell is, in a way, a corpse of a shellfish and so, symbolizes death or the lack of substance. So the boxes seem to form "three," but in fact, they make "two." Likewise, in a scene, she uses the pigment made of three elements ("coffee grounds," "crushed mirror," and "ground-up sea shells" 287). Here, too, seashells appear, but what is more, this powder is called "the dust" (287). Like a seashell, the image of dust leads to death. That is, in the scene, it is suggested that as far as Annamaria is concerned, what is represented by the number "three" does not function. Also about her eating, the statement that Annamaria insists on "three hearty meals a day" is followed by the comment, "Twice he had seen her throw up her supper" (293). In the scene, the impression evoked by "three" is wiped out by "Twice." In every case above mentioned, Annamaria's condition far from artistry is hinted at by showing that the number "three" does not get attached to her. A similar suggestion can be found in another scene. Annamaria, having shuddered in the cold wind from the Tiber, asks Fidelman to "touch his testicles three times to undo or dispel who knows what witchcraft" (285), which he does. What

is emphasized here is not Fidelman given the number "three" but the opposition between what is symbolized by the number and the "witchcraft, that is, art and abnormal desire.

The only person blessed by the number "three" from the beginning is Clelia Montemaggio, "a female on the third floor" (289). She is a music teacher who will teach Fidelman what it means "being an artist" and so, has "credit for the renewal of his inspiration" (Chott 71). Not only in number but in appearance, Clelia is totally different from Annamaria. While Annamaria is "thin" and "gaunt" (282), Clelia has "plump bottom" (289). In contrast to Annamaria in "black woolen sweater," "black velveteen culottes," and "black socks" (282), there is "a bowl of white carnations" (297) on Clelia's piano. Fidelman is to restore his own self as an artist by being influenced by her and to acquire a moral principle strict enough to punish Annamaria.

The first time Fidelman hears Bach played by Clelia and enters her room is just after he has disposed of the garbage, the symbol of his mind stained by sexual desire, which clearly shows the incompatibility of lust and her room glorified by the number "three." Her room is none other than the incarnation of "La spirito" (289) of art. There are two cases of Fidelman's ignoring Clelia's invitation to her room filled with the spirit represented by the number "three." In the first case, just after rejecting her call, "Come een . . . I weel play for you" (290), Fidelman finishes a picture of "Virgin with Child" associated with the number "two," which causes him the ultimate disappointment. In the second case, after Fidelman's rejection of her Bach ("Come in and enjoy the warmth and a little Bach" 293), the plot of the story soon moves to the scene of the party held at Balducci's. There, as mentioned above, Fidelman's physical desire symbolized by "Two easels" (295) is revealed. Anyway, as a result of his rejection of "three" and his addiction to "two," Fidelman misses the opportunity to get out of his degraded condition both as an artist and man. On the other hand, the conversation between Fidelman and Clelia in the second case occurs when he carries "the garbage" (293) past her room. In the scene, the number "two" that stresses his lust is not given to the word "garbage." This hints at the possibility that at this point, in spite of being trapped in the desire to Annamaria, Fidelman is somewhat experiencing a new influence when he sees Clelia or her room.

III. From "Two" to "Three"

It is when Fidelman enters Clelia's room the next time that a decisive change happens to him. Here he is moved by the spirit of Bach, possessed by the impulse to paint the white carnations on the piano, and then thinks of creating his own self-portrait. The image of a white flower repeated three times in the description of her room ("a bowl of white carnations," "white petal," "a white flower" 297) emphasizes the pure art-oriented spirit symbolized by the number "three" that has nothing to do with Annamaria dressed in black and comparable to "sweating flowers" (288).

What ensues is quite different from the development in the previous two cases: "The art student hastened to a costume shop and settled on a cassock and fuzzy black soup-bowl biretta, envisaging another Rembrandt: 'Portrait of the Artist as Priest'" (297). Thus far, Fidelman had

two names of “Fidelman” and “the art student,” which shows his condition trapped in lust like Annamaria’s. Now he acquires the third self as priest, which reveals that he has overcome the extraordinary sexual desire that interrupted his creative activity and has got the true spirit as an artist. He comes to obtain three selves while Annamaria’s names are still “Annamaria” and “pittrice.” None other than Fidelman, who has overcome the lust, awakened to true artistry, and acquired three selves, is suitable as the residence of the studio with “three large windows” (282) which should be filled with the spirit symbolized by the number “three.” That is why Annamaria “rush[es] into her room” when she sees Fidelman abandoning himself to painting and “stealthily re-enter[s] the studio” (297) in spite of the fact that she is a “pittrice.” The difference of position in the world of art between Fidelman who has been relieved of what was symbolized by the number “two” and Annamaria who is still trapped in the number is manifested.

Furthermore Fidelman succeeds in attaining full growth in all his three selves. Fidelman as artist finishes the self-portrait as “an amazing likeness” (297) in a moment. Fidelman as art student compares his self-portrait as priest to that of Rembrandt. In fact, Rembrandt has left us a self-portrait that portrays himself as priest, so what Fidelman says is true from the viewpoint of art history. As Leonard William Rogoff says that Fidelman “makes art history personal” (225), he achieves self-realization as an art student. As for Fidelman as priest, his self-portrait as priest succeeds in drawing out the confession of her past crime and voluntary demand of punishment from Annamaria, which a real priest could not do. The scene where Fidelman as restored artist passes Annamaria “handing the garbage to the portinaia” (297) is noteworthy. The absence of “two” in the scene foreshadows her contrition that will occur later.

As Abramson quotes Sandy Cohen’s idea that “none should be the means to an end” and this “is what Fidelman must learn” (83), Fidelman procures the spirit that loves and devotes itself to art for art’s sake and discards the disposition that wants to use art for something else like physical desire or the flight from crime. The work produced by the artist equipped with such a spirit represented by the number “three” takes on a moral authority that is able to punish the crime embodied by “two.” By refusing the number “three,” Fidelman ends up drowning himself deeply in the world of sexual desire. But through the acceptance of the number “three,” he comes to punish Annamaria by nailing her “to her cross” (298), that is, by locking her in the world of sinful lust forever. In addition to Clelia’s recital of Bach that transforms Fidelman, this scene emphasizes the moral authority of art. Regarding the final scene of the story, the opinions of critics differ. Solotaroff sees in it “the beginnings of the sexual opportunist” (93) and Robert Ducharme remarks that “the moral curve of Fidelman’s progress . . . is downward” (136). Both are negative views. On the other hand, Kathleen G. Ochshorn sees in the scene “a sexual penance” (180) and Rogoff finds “some cleansing drops of pure lust” (225). Martin L. Friedenthal regards the scene as “more a punishment than an act of joy for either one” (201-202). These are the views that stress the aspect of atonement. I agree with Friedenthal. The figure of Fidelman who rejects Annamaria’s hope to cleanse herself of her crime by being embraced by

Fidelman dressed as priest is that of a severe judge. He makes it clear that her sin is unworthy of the purgation by a priest. Herbert Leibowitz points out the lack of "the ebullient spirituality of the flesh" (38) in the final scene, which is understandable if the aspect of punishment is considered. Ochshorn's interpretation of the scene as "the end rather than the beginning of their relationship" (181) is valid in consideration of Fidelman's awakening to the morality of art.

Lastly the meaning of the title "Still Life" is discussed. Still lives referred to in the story are only Annamaria's "a loaf of bread with two garlic bulbs" (283) and "bunches of bananas" (287). Rather her way of painting should be noted: "she alternated still lives with huge lyric abstractions" (284). Abstractions are "based on the theme of a hidden cross" (287) and so, identical with the number "two" symbolizing the crime derived from lust. Therefore as the verb "alternated" shows, still lives refer to what is incompatible with abstractions, that is, what is represented by the number "three." The condition of Annamaria's that prevents her from perfecting still lives hints at her fate. According to Iska Alter, a still life has two aspects, that is, "the promise of survival" and "death in life" (130). It can be said that the former is true of Fidelman and the latter of Annamaria.

Conclusion

In "The Last Mohican," the first chapter of *Pictures of Fidelman: An Exhibition*, Fidelman pursues Susskind who has stolen the manuscript of his thesis on Giotto, happens to enter a Jewish cemetery, and feels a sense of unity with the history of Jewish people. Through such an experience, he gets to the true understanding of Giotto. In "Still Life," Fidelman stops seeing art as a means for his selfish satisfaction, starts to respect art for art's sake, and then, creates a picture bearing a strong moral authority which causes a confession of crime and a punishment for it. As Rogoff observes, "Art and life are seamless, not until Fidelman has in some sense 'perfected' his life can he complete his art" (221), the view of art that rigorous morality is required of people engaged in art can be seen in the two stories. In addition, in both stories, there is a guide for Fidelman's growth. In "The Last Mohican," it is Susskind and in "Still Life," it is Clelia. There are many critics who see father-son relationships in the works of Bernard Malamud. Among other examples of this are Morris Bober and Frank Alpine in *The Assistant* (1957), Pinye Salzman and Leo Finkle in "The Magic Barrel" (1958), Investigator Bibikov and Yakov Bok in *The Fixer* (1966). In "Still Life," Clelia plays the role of the father and so, viewed in the light of the motif of mental growth guided by a fatherly figure, this story can be said to be equipped with a typical Malamudian feature.

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