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Malamud's "The First Seven Years" and the indirect achievement policy

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Abstract

The implied or indirect thematic basis of Bernard Malamud's "The First Seven Years" (1950) revolves around how the characters credit individual happiness as their social status rises in their acquisition of material and monetary achievement in the industrial and technological developments. Such an individuality reflects itself especially as the shoemaker father, the main character, in the short story decides to arrange a marriage for his daughter, Miriam, to a schoolboy, Max. Father's decision making gives him great pleasure, yet, the tale concludes differently: not Max but Sobel becomes much more interested in his daughter. This implies that direct circumstances and direct themes in the short story reflect indirect messages and implies the occurrence of ironic themes, i.e., what is implied stands for some other meanings in the context.

Keywords: Direct Themes, Indirect Messages, Bernard Malamud, Moral Wealth, Material Accumulation, Success Ethic

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1. Ethical Values Versus Material Possessions in “The First Seven Years”

Writing in post-World War II period, Bernard Malamud, American novelist and short story writer of the twentieth century, implicitly reflects the influence of historical and cultural changes on individuals within American society in his famous short story, “The First Seven Years” (1950). This article highlights a transformation in the consideration of success ethic within Jewish ethnic group as they immigrated into several regions of the United States. It explores how materialist world influences ethical and moral values in public life so that most of the characters in this short story evaluate it as a retrospection for the continuity of morality in their lives. That is, the main thematic fabric for Malamud is to evaluate moral and ethical concerns of the Jewish immigrants and their social lives in New York City.

2. Malamud’s Success Ethic

Malamud expresses in an interview that he writes about what he knows about Jews, indicating that he notes of his own experiences. He exposes that he is concerned with Jewish dramatic history of immigrants as well as their ethicality (Leviant 1991: 50). To illustrate, in an interview with Daniel Stern, Malamud underlines the significance of morality in his fictional works and stresses the difficulty of protecting it in different environments (Stern 1991: 60-61). He signifies that what he is disturbed of is the “population misery, famine, politics of desperation, the proliferation of the atom bomb” (Stern 1991: 67). He emphasizes that morality in social life is destructed in these great matters. Some critics support the argument of this article considering Malamud “as a moralist and an insistent one” and interpret that most of the characters earn their lives in misery by pursuing hard effort and become “victims of others” (Shechner 1987: 71). This indicates that some of the individuals lose their lives because of the others’ misusing them in various working and social conditions. He manifests the difficulties of the achievement policy for a social rise in their circumstances. Malamud pinpoints a change in the historical context of his target short story. He emphasizes a change in the meaning of achievement ethic and indirectly reflects a change in the evaluations of success in different phases. Whereas the meaning of achievement substantially was regarded in moral terms before the Industrial Revolution, it was credited in material accumulation basis onwards with the rising of the business world and technological developments. As Henry Bamford Parkes notes, monetary accumulation became the most significant subject matter in the age of industrialism.:

With the transformation of the pioneer into the businessman, money became the principal symbol of success and the main object of ambition. . . . The business classes sought to prove their strength by the conquest of money, as their ancestors had done by the conquest of the wilderness and judged each other in monetary terms. (260)

It is just the post World War II, after which the individuals quest for the accumulation of possessions in economic terms. The main characters in “The First Seven Years” are evaluated in assessing this monetary wealth. In a literary approach, the rise in social position means, changes throughout the social basis of different historical periods. Bernard Malamud focuses on common people, Jewish immigrants living in New York City in this story. The main character, Feld, is a Jewish shoemaker who searches for a proper husband for her daughter Miriam to acquire a better life when compared with the difficulty of their present living circumstances. He requires her “to marry an educated man and live a better life” (Malamud 1983: 14). However, education is in terms of accumulation of wealth: It is not moral but material prosperity. He thinks of Max, a college student, to be the most suitable person, whom his daughter is ever interested in. This implies that the story is also about sons or daughters looking for relief in marriage to have a better future (Sio-Castineira 1998: 9). This underlines that the story again revolves around the acquisition of a better living standard. Here, most of the main characters reflect this policy in every phase of their lives. Feld discovers that his assistant, Sobel, a Polish Jewish refugee, also becomes in love with Miriam who responds his affections. Malamud describes him as a “stocky man, poorly dressed, with a bald head that had once been blond, a severely pain face, and sort blue eyes prone to tears over the sad books he read, a young man but old” (Malamud 1983: 17). Such a bad introduction manifests Feld’s disgust from moral achievement regardless of material accumulation. On the other hand, developing his knowledge of financial matters, Max studies to be an accountant, being much more interested in material possessions and qualifies to be

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