Salvation in *The Magic Barrel*

Jian Xiong

Hohai University, Nanjing, China
Email: xiongjianjane@163.com

Abstract

Salvation and rebirth are classical themes in Jewish fictions. *The Magic Barrel* depicts the life of different characters, showing their transformation from suffering to salvation. Researching the salvation can help readers to understand this novel better. So through analyzing three characters’ transformations, this article researches the salvation in *The Magic Barrel*, and reveals that kindness and love are the origins of salvation.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords


1. Introduction

Bernard Malamud is a Jewish writer who is adept at depicting the suffering life of Jewish [1]. *The Magic Barrel* is one of his most prominent short fictions which won the National Book Award for fiction. *The Magic Barrel* is about a young student who experienced a series of the cross of twists and turns and finally gained the salvation. The novel shows us that the suffering is not terrible, it’s something that everyone should experience. Only when we use the kindness and love to deal with it, can we get the salvation and rebirth.

2. Salvation of Leo Finkle

Leo Finkle is the protagonist of this novel. He is a rabbinical student in the Yeshivah University and he is a knowledgeable person with a kind and lovely heart. It can show in others’ comments and his ordinary behavior. He is a smart person who read many books. The matchmaker Salzman “gazed around at shelves upon shelves of books and let out a soft, contented sigh.” [2]. And when he first feel
sad about these things, he could get peace from the books. So he could tell him-
self “he drew the consolation that he was a Jew and that a Jew suffered” [2] and
wasn’t defeated by the suffering.

He is kindness and polite. When Salzman asked for a tea, even he is not so
happy for Salzman’s appearance, he “rose and brewed the tea. He served it with a
chunk of lemon and two cubes of lump sugar, delighting Salzman.” [2]. He is
polite and he had self control which “had kept him this long in her presence.”
[2]. Even in the worst of his life, he could “waylaid her on the stairs and apolo-
gized abjectly” [2] for his impolite. He is honest to himself and others. He re-
fused Salzman to call him “rabbi” [2] and tell Lily he is not “a talented religious
person” [2]. He could see his shortage and face it correctly.

But he is also a normal person who lost in the big city which causes his su-
ffering and helps him to achieve the salvation. When he first met the matchmak-
er, he “pretended not to see and gazed steadfastly out the window” [2]. The
window is an image in the novel which represents isolation to the world and
confusion to him. The view out of the windows is “signs of which he had for the
first time in years begun to notice.” [2]. He is like the people out of the window,
having a hasty life without knowing what he wants.

The conversation is the beginning of his suffering, because he found that he
didn’t love people expect for his family, so he didn’t have the ability to love the
god [3]. This is a ruin to his world view. The novel describes it as “It seemed to
Leo that his whole life stood starkly revealed and he saw himself for the first time
as he truly was—unloved and loveless.” [2].

The meeting to Stella is a salvation for him from the marriage dilemma and
autognosis, but her identity is another suffering to Leo Finkle. He experienced a
progress that “Although he soon fell asleep he could not sleep her out of his
mind. He woke, beating his breast.” [2].

The kindness and love helped him to solve the problems and get the salvation.
He found he could marry the girl, gave her a salvation from the darkness and
“convert her to goodness, himself to God” [2]. When he decided to help the girl,
he got the salvation indeed.

3. Salvation of Stella

Stella is a character who only appeared in the ending of the novel. But according
to the plot before, we can know her experience. She had a tough experience. So
her father said her “Like an animal. Like a dog. For her to be poor was a sin. This
is why to me she is dead now.” [2]. But from the sentence we can find that her
experience stems from poor. Her suffering is not because of her mistakes. She
was just a female who need to get the salvation and hope to be reborn. And the
author also describes her character in the feeling Leo to her. “He saw that her
eyes—clearly her father’s—were filled with desperate innocence.” [2].

From the Judaism, Stella suffered because she had the original sin, but the
suffering can help her to salvation and rebirth. Even she experienced something
terrible, she had the innocence heart and that is why she attracted Leo. This can
be seen in her dress when she waited for Leo. “She wore white with red shoes,
which fitted his expectations.” [2]. The white dress represented her innocence.
But to the protagonist, he thought “although in a troubled moment he had im-
agined the dress red, and only the shoes white.” [2]. He thought she needed to
get the salvation because she was suffering but kept innocence. And the inno-
cence and good virtues are the reason of salvation that she married Leo in the
novel.

4. Salvation of Salzman

Comparing with other people, Salzman had a more complicated personality. On
the one hand, he is like the fish he ate which is slippery and crafty. He was good
at conjecturing the thought of people, and seizing the moment. He can choose
the best time to Leo’s home and avoid the period that Leo is annoyed to him.
And when he first came to Leo’s home, he can know Leo from the circumstance
he lived. He is very calculating. When Leo met the girl, he felt that “score anoth-
er for Salzman, whom he uneasily sensed to be somewhere around, hiding per-
haps high in a tree along the street, flashing the lady signals with a pocket mir-
ror; or perhaps a cloven-hoofed Pan, piping nuptial ditties as he danced his in-
visible way before them, strewing wild buds on the walk and purple grapes in
their path, symbolizing fruit of a union, though there was of course still none.”
[2]. And when Leo found that the girl he loved was the daughter of Salzman, he
“afflicted by a tormenting suspicion that Salzman had planned it all to happen
this way.” [2]. This is cunning of a Jew. It seems like a trap that all steps inclu-
ding the introduction and the photo left in the package.

But on another hand, he is compellent. When Leo first saw him, Leo thought
“although he was missing a few teeth, his presence was not displeasing, because
of an amiable manner curiously contrasted with mournful eyes” [2]. And he was
responsible for her daughter, though he rumored his daughter when Leo wanted
to know who she is, but it is a blame that a father had. He loved his daughter so
he was toilsome. In this angle, his cunning is not wrong, and he is also suffering
from the experience his daughter had.

This complicated character makes him controversial. But when we saw what the
author describes him and his daughter, we can learn, that he was a person that is
kindness. And in some researchers’ studying, he is the guider of the protagonist.

In the end of the novel, he also got the salvation. “Around the corner, Sal-
zman, leaning against a wall, chanted prayers for the dead.” [2]. The dead is not
only the former Leo and Stella, but also containing himself. It is a goodbye to the
former life and the suffering they experienced.

5. Conclusions

Although the three characters have achieved self-redemption, their ways of re-
demption are different. The suffering that Leo Finkle experienced was gradually
developed by him as he began to know himself. His character, while causing his suffering, also helped him achieve self-salvation. The suffering that Stella experienced was due to the original sin. Her character kept her innocent in her suffering and made her unable to escape this dilemma. She is a character of powerless waiting for others to redeem. Salzman’s redemption method is the most complicated. He plays the character of a wise man in the novel [4]. His insight is acute and he is aware of Leo Finkle’s mind, and Leo Finkle’s self-awakening is largely attributed to him. By understanding Leo Finkle’s emotional transformation in exploring the self, he introduced Stella to Leo Finkle at the right time, which led to the salvation of Leo Finkle and Stella. From another perspective, his own living condition in the novel is not good, and he is also experiencing the suffering of the Jews. By helping men and women to achieve salvation, he can solve his daughter’s difficulties, get rewards, and realize his spiritual and practical salvation.

The novel tells us that the protagonist realized the salvation of lots of people because of his kindness and honest. He is brave to face the situation and finds the best way to save himself and others. Salvation and rebirth are the everlasting themes in Jewish novels [5]. And author expresses it by the little story. Suffering is normal, and it is a growth progress. What you need to do is to face the suffering and treat it as an original way and keep the kindness and love, and the salvation will come to you and people around you.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References


