

# Bernard Malamud's 'The Magic Barrel' Critical Thinking

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Analysing the short story

Analysing the short story

The Magic Barrel is a collection of thirteen short stories, written by Bernard Malamud which was published in 1958. One of the short stories from the collection was titled the same as the book- 'The Magic Barrel'. It is quite an interesting account of a young rabbinical student seeking a marriage-broker for suitable match and their experiences henceforth. With an amusing as well as mischievous tone, it does leave the reader skeptical at times. This essay presents an analysis of the very story through the following points:

- The Storyline
- The Interpretation of Story
- The Use of Language
- The Intrinsic Worth

## **The Storyline**

The short story 'The Magic Barrel' revolves around two main characters- the protagonist Leo Finkle who is a rabbinical student in Yeshivah University and a poor yet smart marriage-broker named Pinye Salzman. Finkle is told by an acquaintance that it would be convenient to win a congregation if he gets married. The protagonist has devoted his entire life so far, which is twenty-seven years, to books, study and earnest efforts towards a stronger career and future. As a result, his social life as well as experience of interacting with young women was almost non-existent. So, a bride for marriage was something he could not arrange for so hastily. So, he seeks a marriage broker, the old and impoverished Pinye Salzman. He chose a matchmaker to help him as his own

parents were married through the same process- a marriage broker's business! When Salzman, the man who smelled poignantly of fish met him in person, it was confusion and embarrassment more than excitement which imbued Finkle. Salzman showed him the cards of six girls- each with certain great qualities but one which turned off Finkle. Salzman tried his witty talk to convince Finkle for going for one of these ladies. After a meeting with one of the girls, he gets even angrier on the issue and clearly says, "I am no longer interested in an arranged marriage. To be frank, I now admit the necessity of premarital love. That is, I want to be in love with the one I marry". Finally, Salzman walks away after leaving an envelope of cards on Finkle's table in hope that he would see the girl's in future. Very surprisingly, one of the pictures of the girls which makes him desperate with its moving face turns out to be Salzman's daughter's. Salzman earnestly refused this match, telling that his daughter is a spoilt one. But, Leo Finkle convinces him. And as he meets the girl, he finds a glimpse of his own redemption in her desperate innocence underneath the spoilt image.

## **The Interpretation of Story**

There are several points in the story where the reader feels sceptical.

Several reviewers and readers of the story feel that it was Salzman in a clandestine role who plotted to set up the story between Leon Finkle and his sloppy daughter, Stella. The intentions and planning of Salzman becomes even clearer if one reads the story twice. He always seems to look at Finkle with hungry eyes. He addresses him as 'rabbi' to win his respect. He constantly shows that he is trying his

best to find a suitable match for Leo Finkle. But in disguise, he always brings a negative characteristic of the girls to limelight so that Finkle gets turned off. He makes Finkle meet Lily H and get disappointed. Finkle ends up deciding that he wants a love marriage, not an arranged one. And then, when the iron is hot, he knowingly hits it hard by leaving the picture of his beautiful daughter Stella in the envelope. All the other pictures were not surprising to Finkle but as plotted, Stella's face and expression catches his attention. But to prove himself totally innocent here, he strongly emphasises on Stella being unfit for Finkle. The more he refused, the deeper the desire for her develops in Finkle's heart. And finally, he makes them meet. It all seems perfectly under a plan to seek the attention of Leo Finkle, making him reconsider his ideas and then, hitting on the right chord. Salzman managed to find a good bridegroom for her spoiled daughter.

There are certain points which are left unanswered by the writer. Why did Lily H. Seemed undesirable to Leo (Malamud's Subject Matter, p 183)? She was beautiful, intelligent and honest. Her expectations should not have turned off or offended Leo but encouraged him to try for more. If a woman expects nothing great from her man, then it is clear that she has accepted his mediocrity. Also, it's pretty not clear why the ending of story shows Salzman chanting prayers for the dead?(David Robertson, p 78) It was a moment to be happy- his daughter was going to meet such a wonderful boy.

## **The Use of Language**

Except at places, the use of language is excellent. The phrases are not confusing, in fact there is a clarity in tone and tenor. The dialogues between

Salzman and Finkle have been written with such appeal that it makes a way to the reader's mind. Although Salzman has a hidden plot in mind as he talks to Finkle but whatever he says seems really ponderous. For example:

Salzman- "A widow don't mean spoiled, rabbi. She lived with her husband maybe four months. He was a sick boy she made a mistake to marry him."

Finkle- "Marrying a widow has never entered my mind." Salzman- "This is because you have no experience. A widow, especially if she is young and healthy like this girl, is a wonderful person to marry. She will be thankful to you the rest of her life. Believe me, if I was looking now for a bride, I would marry a widow."

### **The little conversations between them is worth noticing.**

At places the language has been used bit uncouthly. E. g. Phrases like "with half open mouth" as the moon "penetrates" a hen-like cloud before dropping out like an egg, "The student is at last "aroused" by fantasies of Lily H. and walks "erectly" to meet her." (Gary Sloan's Malamud's unmagic barrel) The comparison of moon through clouds with hen and eggs seemed foolish and vague, irrelevant in fact.

### **The Intrinsic Worth**

There were reasons why the collection of stories received the US national Award for fiction in 1959 (National Book Awards-1959). It makes for wonderful read. Except a few loopholes that a reader or reviewer can find in terms of phrases or reasoning at places, 'The Magic Barrel' is made for an interesting read. Every reader or reviewer has his/her own say. The plot of Salzman to trap Finkle is quite evident from several phrases, demeanour and

behaviour of Salzman. And that what's make it so interesting! A poor match maker so brilliantly plays a plot which helps a young man fall for love marriage. And as a matter of perfect coincidence, the young man finds a woman who seems complementary to his nature. They both balance each other and are expected to drive each other to redemption through love. As told earlier as well, it's the dialogues between Salzman and Finkle, along with their uncomfortable yet a strong liaison between them which makes the essence of the story. How a confused wannabe rabbi realises what he wants and seeks an unusual girl for life in the process of finding a bride for winning a congregation- it is fascinating. The final dialogue between Salzman and Finkle is noteworthy.

"Salzman," he said, "love has at last come to my heart."- Enchanted by the expression of Stella in the snapshot, Finkle gets desperate to meet her. Then Salzman contradicts what he does i. e. convincing people to marry a suitable match through portfolios and pictures- "Who can love from a picture?" mocked the marriage broker. The desperate Finkle insists- "It is not impossible." But Salzman retorts- "If you can love her, then you can love anybody. Let me show you some new clients that they just sent me their photographs. One is a little doll."

Finally Finkle convinces Salzman with a statement that the father of a spoilt daughter cannot ignore- "Put me in touch with her, Salzman," Leo said humbly. "Perhaps I can be of service."

## Conclusion

Like David Robertson, one may take time to analyse how the use of fish and fishy smells dominates the story, indicating the sex-related aspects of Finkle's mind and Salzman's favourite food. But way more appealing than that is to notice how Salzman values women for their virtues. Though he does so to get a client and expand business, it does not matter. He believes that widows are not spoiled, age does not matter but qualities do. His words to convince Finkle in the first half of story shows that though men avoid widows, aged women and physically challenged women for marriage, they are not virtue-less and deserve a good life partner. "The Magic Barrel" is worth reading and analysing.

## References

- David Robertson. 'Fish and the book of Tobits' in Malamud's Magic Barrel.' Vol 28. 2009. Retrieved on 28 Feb 2013
- Gary Sloan. "The Magic Barrel: Malamud's unmagic barrel". Source: Studies in Short Fiction. 32. 1 (Winter 1995): p51. Retrieved on 28 Feb 2013
- National Book Awards – 1959". National Book Foundation. Retrieved from Web on 28 Feb 2013 <http://www.nationalbook.org/nba1959.html>
- Sandor Goodhart. Malamud's Subject Matter: Reading 'The Magic Barrel' as Story, Collection, Philosophical Reflection, and Redemption. Purdue University. Retrieved on 28 Feb 2013