

A silver dish by saul bellow essay

[Family](#), [Father](#)



1. Describe the characteristics of the post-war literature?

Post-war period is not the golden period of English Literature. However, it was the period when Jewish-American writers emerge. In the mid-twentieth century, Jewish-American writers came up with their stories with Jewish themes. As many Jews were deeply affected by the war, the Holocaust, and the depression that makes the Jewish writers to include several concerns such as experience of immigrant Jews, tenseness between Jewish tradition and secular society, assimilation, alienation, and anti-Semitism. While analyzing the writings of post-war Jewish writers, the stories help to explore how they react and reflect to the post-war and its effects. As a Jewish-American writer, Saul Bellow writes his “A Silver Dish” with one of the Jewish theme “depression” that explores the Great Depression in the mid-twentieth century. As post-war literature concentrates more on social and aesthetic problems rather than the political issues, Saul Bellow describes the depression and changes in society and individual’s life. By presenting the life of his story’s protagonist Woody Selbst, Saul Bellow explores the speculations about responsibility, religion, and death. Bellow effectively reflects the post-war Jewish themes through a Jewish character, who had converted to Christianity.

2. Which Historical eras take place in the story?

The story has taken place in two historical eras that are Woody’s childhood days and manhood days (sixty-year old man). The Great Depression prevails in society during post-war in the mid of the twentieth century. During this time, people, especially Jews, had to live during the Great Depression, economic strife, food and clothing lines, utter destitution, and people

desperately searching for a way out of their poverty. In 1970s, Woody as a sixty-year-old man recalls his early days and his family members. The desperation of the characters' helplessness and violence shown during these historical eras shows the bleakness and the depravity of man that permeates both stages of man that are explored in the story. This plays into the nihilism inherent to Woody's character: " We know now what goes daily through the whole of the human community, like a global death-peristalsis." (Bellow, pg).

3. What is the most significant similarity between Woody and his father?

Beside several differences between Woody and his father, they have significant similarities. Both of them are good at heart, but Morris uses his chance to live in the Great Depression during the period. However, Woody never leaves his way to live. Perhaps the most similar attitude of Woody and Morris is their rebellious nature. Whether they have the same character or not, they have similarities in their living that both left their wives and lives with mistress. Perhaps the most significant similarity between Woody and Morris is their rebellious nature. Morris is shown having a predilection toward gambling, but tries to leave it with an unconventional sense of morality that allows him to justify his actions. " He didn't look like a wrongdoer, a bad guy; he looked like a good guy. But he liked taking chances" (Bellow, pg). Their attitude toward women remains same, as he learnt a lot from his father, especially about women. Woody and his father are risk takers: Morris, like Woody, " also relished risk or defiance" (Bellow, pg), which is shown through the various attempts at thievery and embezzlement of money Morris goes through. At the same time, Woody thumbs his nose at the religious figures

around him in the seminary, especially when he gives his sermons - he thinks about other things, and even when his emotions leave him, he knows he has to keep going with the sermon. He also steals food from the mission house for its own sake; he likes being reckless just like Morris does. This is an incredible piece of evidence of Morris's influence on Woody's life: " Morris wanted no relation to theory, and yet he was always pointing Woody toward a position—a jolly, hearty, natural, likable, unprincipled position" (Bellow, pg). Morris teaches Woody to be a thief and to do whatever it takes to survive during the Great Depression, which causes conflict within Woody and his desire to be a good person. The major difference between these two characters is the religion: Morris did not accept conversion that makes him to leave his wife who has converted into Christianity; however, Woody accepted Christianity and did all the ceremonies in the Church.

4. What is the importance of religion in the story?

Obviously, " A Silver Dish" presents the various aspects of religion, as the story deals with the life of the Jews and converted Christians. Saul Bellow explores the different kinds of approaches to religion through his well developed characters who possess different attitudes and approaches toward religion. Religion becomes the backdrop for the moral battle that takes place between Woody and Morris. Woody takes on the characteristics of his cynical, secularist father (despite his Jewish background and practices), and the devout, fundamentalist Christianity of his ex-wife and sisters. Everyone has a different religion in Woody's family. Morris's hatred of the women's Christian fundamentalism is clear in his verbal disdain for them, explaining his parenting style: " Unless I take a hand, you won't even understand what

life is. Because they don't know - those silly Christers" (Bellow, pg). Despite Morris's influence, Woody is still somewhat pious, or at least anchored by a sense of morality. He has a naively positive view of the world according to God: " God's idea was that this world should be a love-world, that it should eventually recover and be entirely a world of love" (Bellow, pg). This perspective on religion is constantly challenged due to Morris's cynicism, and his eventual ousting from the seminary due to his Morris's actions cements his inability to choose a faith. Because of his desire to do and be good, and his yearning to be close to his father and learn the ways of life, Woody becomes a contradictory and complex character.

5. Why is it called " A Silver Dish" and not " The Silver Dish"?

The reason the story is called " A Silver Dish," instead of " The Silver Dish," is to illustrate the irony of such a small thing having such an impact on a person's life. The silver dish is but one of many in Mrs. Skoglund's collection, emphasizing how minor a thing it was compared to the significance it has for both Woody and his dad's lives. Morris seems to believe it is unimportant, at least enough that the Skoglunds would not notice it until it was gone; his inability to treat the object with respect is hinted at by the implicit downgrading of the importance hidden in the story's title. Since it is just a ' silver dish,' he has no compunction about stealing it for his own benefit; this displays just how amoral Morris was during this time (and possibly beyond). If the story were to be called ' The Silver Dish,' it would place too much conscious importance of the object, which Morris himself did not place on it; it is the fact that he underestimates just how much it would change his life (and his relationship with his son) that makes it important.

6. Find Symbols and explain?

Many different symbols in “A Silver Dish” help to serve the story’s themes of family, religion, and maturity. The Church bell is used as a symbol that symbolizes the events that strike in the mind of Woody to recall his past and family. They are all referenced at once, illustrating the push and pull of the different religious influences that were plaguing Woody throughout his childhood. Added into the mix is the image of innocence being lost in a treacherous, dog-eat-dog world; on safari once, Woody sees a young buffalo calf being eaten by crocodiles: “the parent buffaloes couldn’t figure it out” (Bellow, pg). Woody tries to salvage this lack of care by assuming human feelings onto the dumb expressions of the buffalo parents: “He chose to assume that there was pain in this, he read brute grief into it” (Bellow, pg). Their fight for silver dish symbolizes their fight for morality that keeps them apart. Here, the silver dish takes the role of a symbol.

Another important symbol is breasts, and their connection to sexuality, as Woody grows up and becomes more of a sexual creature; he becomes more conscious of breasts. At first, it is Morris, who gives him this idea; when Aunt Rebecca has a breast removed due to cancer, he says it is because she did not have enough sexual activity: “if titties were not fondled and kissed, they got cancer in protest” (Bellow, pg). Later, Mrs. Skoglund’s large breasts, becoming temporarily mesmerized by them, entrance Woody. Through symbols, Saul Bellow clearly depicts the state of mind and characters’ attitude toward a particular subject, whether it may be religion or morality.

7. What is the significance about Woody and his father’s fight?

The fight that Woody and his father have over the silver dish shows Woody’s

unwillingness to actually fully go down the road that his father goes down. Therefore, he resists stealing the silver dish. Their fight for silver dish is for silver, but for morality. This is the point of no return for Woody, as he recognizes he feels a sense of remorse that Morris lacks; Morris has no compunction about stealing, but “ was then overcome with many bad feelings of a sort he knew the old man never suffered” (Bellow). Up to this point, Woody had taken risks and thumbed his nose at authority along with his father, but here is where he realized he had to resist Morris’s selfish wishes. Furthermore, during the fight, Morris finally defeats him with several punches to the face, something that irrevocably damages their relationship. What adds insult to injury is that Woody’s efforts are in vain; “ of course,” Morris still steals the dish anyway, which leads him to be kicked out of the seminary. From then on, that is something that Woody will never forget, and will find it difficult to forgive in the future. The chief significance of Woody and Morris’ fight is the fundamental schism in ethics and morality that comes to a boiling point because of this decision. Woody proves that he lacks the ability to convince his father to do anything, even if it is in his own best interest. Furthermore, he realizes that Morris only truly cares about himself, souring their relationship in a lasting way.

8. Discuss the importance of the ending of the story?

The story’s ending, in which Morris comforts his dying father, finally sees the tables turned in their relationship, and an attempt to reconcile his acrimonious feelings towards him. Woody takes on the fatherly role by soothing and comforting Morris as he cries out in pain, crawling into bed with him. This is the moment where Woody finally commits to loving his father, no

matter what he has done in the past. It is also a much-needed counterpoint to the childhood fight over the silver dish; this time, Woody is able to easily control his father, who is now weak in his old age. He seemed so different from the tyrant who made his life hell during his childhood that he looked at his father in an entirely new way.

Holding him as he slipped into death, Woody discovered that he was the powerful one in the relationship, something he had not felt before. At the same time, even in death, Morris was able to act on his own will: “ You could never pin down that self-willed man. When he was ready to make his move, he made it—always on his own terms” (Bellow, pg). Morris chose to die in that moment, in Woody’s arms, as if to allow his son the peace and equilibrium that he needed. The ending allows the relationship between Woody and Father to come full circle; Woody is showing pride in his father’s ability to avoid anyone telling him what to do.

Works Cited

Bellow, Saul. *A Silver Dish*. New York: Albondocani, 1979. Print.