

THE STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF “TAKE PITY”: A SHORT STORY BY BERNARD MALAMUD

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at analyzing the structure of Bernard Malamud's short story *Take Pity*. Structure plays an essential part in a literary work which juxtaposes the plot and other elements of the story, to make the narration comprehensible for the readers and also to clutch the meaning which the writer wants to convey. The short story *Take Pity* published in November 1957 in America. This analysis reveals the writer's intention of fabricating the story through its premise, theme, backstory, conflict, context and setting. This analysis is supposed to aid the readers in getting better understanding through its elements.

Keywords: structure, premise, plot, theme, backstory, conflict, context, setting.

INTRODUCTION

Any written material like poem, book, that has the purpose of telling a story or entertaining, as in a fictional novel, comes under the term literary text. It offers aesthetic pleasure as well as political messages or beliefs. Some text lies in the category of informational text such as science and history books. Literature is an umbrella term which covers all the literary works like poetry, novels, drama, short stories, prose; anything written, in fact with an apparently artistic purpose, rather than merely to communicate information or anything written and examined as if it had an artistic purpose. Not all writings constitute literature. Literature refers to the historical development of writings in prose or poetry which provides entertainment, enlightenment, or instruction to the reader as well as the development of the literary techniques used in the communication of these pieces.

Klarer (1999) regarded a brief narrative prose as a short story. Short stories are that genre of literature which encourages the new writers to produce their own work as well with maximum chances of acclamation. Some of the American writers are considered as the best short story writers. Short stories are usually designed to entertain the readers. The problem propounded in this study is the structural analysis of Bernard Malamud's short story written under the title *Take Pity* and was published in America in November 1957. It directs at how the structure supports the author to convey his message to the readers.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Nature of Short Story

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines the short story as a story with a fully developed theme but shorter than a novel. It is easy to categorize the small prose fiction as short story but it is difficult to define exactly at what point a short story turns into a Novella or Novel. Certain features emerge as characteristic of the form: concentration on few characters, often one single character; lack of complicated plot and leisurely description; swift denouement; economical, dense writing, usually organized so as to focus on the exposition of a single incident or character. Most of these qualities are simple consequences of the one defining

factor of the short story: that it should be short. Shaw (1983) elucidated it as the short story is an independent yet hybrid genre, which connects with other art forms at various points and keep eluding definition except as an interplay of tensions and antithesis.

The short story emerged as a form in its own right in the nineteenth century, though many earlier forms, such as the Fable, Lai, Fabliau and folktale are clearly its precursors. The American writer, Edgar Allan Poe is often designated as the originator of the modern short story. Poe (1842) points out that Hawthorne defined 'the prose tale' as a narrative that can be read at one sitting in less than two hours and which, he said, was concentrated on 'a certain unique or single effect'. Writers like Malamud expanded literature through their short stories after the Second World War.

Parts of Short Story

Short stories are the most popular form of literary text. A short story comprises the basic elements namely theme and premise, backstory or exposition, the spine of the story (plot, characters, climax), conflict or crisis, context and setting (time period).

The Premise is a statement or an idea that forms the basis for a reasonable line of argument. It plays the role of a container that holds the essence of the story's real structure. The premise provides basis for the story in a single statement. James N. Frey (2012) explained it as premise is what happens to the characters as a result of the actions of a story. It is the frame or roadmap which leads to the story.

The Theme refers to the key points presented by the author in the form of abstract subject of the work. Theme holds the central idea or ideas which may or may not be explicit or obvious. A text may contain multiple themes. The writer conveys his message or purpose of writing through theme.

The Spine of the story is the backbone of a literary work. It is considered the central feature and the main support in the structure of a short story. The spine of the story is interwoven with the plot, characters and climax of the story. These are interdependent terms and the most crucial parts of a story.

The Plot is the plan or outline of the short story with a beginning, a middle and an end. It is formally named as a narrative. It reveals the string of events in the story. As Aristotle (1895) explained that the plot follows the web of causation in the form of exposition, rising action, falling action and denouement. These are considered the elements of a plot.

The characters are the invented persons in a narrative work which are given specific qualities by the writer. They make their appearance through dialogues, action and description. The description of the character helps the reader to visualize accurately. The characters with changing moods are called round characters while the flat characters are those who do not alter their attitude in the duration of the story.

The story climax refers to a collision between two opponent forces. The critics regard climax as the explicit encounter which firmly decides about the successor. The climax in the story leads to a point of realization, a stage of extreme tension caused by characters or situation. It is the point which arise the reader's interest leading to the conclusion. It is also known as the story culmination.

The Conflict is the point of issue or problem in a story. It helps in providing pace to the story. The internal or external conflicts are of four kinds: man versus self, man versus society, man versus circumstances and man versus man.

The Setting includes the set of surroundings, environment, the place, circumstances, time period, time of the year or the day as well as the temperature, weather conditions, social conditions of the characters, mannerism, customs, speech patterns, dialects and scenery, etc. in which the action of the story takes place. Grey (1994) adds that the setting must be suffused with story adequately. The setting generates a context which helps the characters to act and develop.

Backstory is defined in The Oxford Concise Dictionary as the history, past or background created for the characters that influence the present or future. It helps the readers to know where the characters are coming from. It helps in making clear to the reader that why the characters are acting the way they act. Just to create depth in the story the writer gives glimpses of history. It reveals what has already happened before commencing the story. It is also known as exposition.

Criticism of the Short Story

A short story is analyzed through the terms known as literary appreciation, interpretation and literary criticism. Literary appreciation is used to explain the worth of a literary piece of work. It evaluates whether the work holds some appealing quality for the reader or not. It helps in capturing reader's interest. Literary interpretation refers to delve deep into a literary piece and bring out to consideration not only the superficial or literal aspects but also ponder over the underlying concepts. It also takes account of author's suggestive meanings. Literary criticism incorporates observation, appraisal, clarification and elucidation. It critically observes the literary work. A certain theoretical framework is used in criticism to get valid and logical inferences.

The structural analysis is done through the literary elements. The literary elements include plot, theme, conflict, setting, character, climax, premise etc.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

I am applying the above mentioned theory of structural analysis and also observe with close reading, to analyze the short story, "Take Pity" and collect the results about the following basic elements:

- The title
- The theme and premise
- The spine of the story
- The backstory or exposition
- The conflict
- The context and setting

And some other literary devices like irony symbolism, imagery and flashbacks.

INTRODUCTION OF THE AUTHOR

Bernard Malamud (1914-86) is a US writer whose novels and short stories are chronicles of immigration of unwieldy hordes of Jews. He is among the most famous American Jewish

writers. He is a celebrated writer. Malamud's stories usually deal with the ill-fated poor men, leading a life of misery. His characters encounter social and financial malaise in hostile circumstances. Bernard Malamud's parents were immigrant Jews. His family was not well-off. His father had a grocery store. He wrote 'Take pity' in autobiographical manner.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Title

The title of the story possibly alludes to double interpretations. Firstly, it can be interpreted as Rosen's compassion or sympathy which he showed for poverty-stricken Eva and her family. Rosen wanted to give them a plush life. Take pity is synonymous to relent. So the title of the story can also be explained as how Eva abandoned her obstinacy, severely harsh attitude and relented at the end.

The Theme and Premise

"Take Pity" appeared in Malamud's first collection of short stories *The Magic Barrel, and Other Stories*, most of which anchored in the tales of long-suffering Jews. The themes Malamud propagates in this story are life of destitution and privation, compassion, sufferings, loss, untiring efforts, self-esteem, social and cultural setup against the economic conditions and frailties of human nature. Another theme which makes its appearance throughout the story is selfless service for the impoverished people.

The premise is the storyline. In this story the premise includes observable differences in thoughts of a polish refugee widow, Eva who with her two daughters in America, strives hard to make both ends meet and a benevolent coffee salesman, Rosen who avails all means to comfort her.

The Spine of the Story

The Plot Summary

The story *Take Pity* surrounds a poor refugee family comprising husband Axel, wife Eva and their two little daughters and also Rosen, a coffee salesman and friend of Axel. He supported Axel through thick and thin. After the death of Axel, Rosen feels compassion for the bereaved family. He wanted to do something for the suffering family, desperately. But the widow of Axel was not accepting any aid given out of sympathy, although her family was enduring a life of privation.

Eva was a feisty woman. She slogged her guts out for the survival of her family. She decided to run her late husband's shop. This shop was the only asset she had. She set her husband's left over shop by investing insurance money of one thousand dollars. Eva's family was facing a deluge of miseries. She had no inkling of where her life was going to lead her. She worked really hard but all her efforts in vain and she could not succeed in getting out some profit. Rosen offered her some loan but she denied. He wanted to help her due to his forbearing nature. Eva was waffling over where to go. Poverty was a malady for her family which was leading to starvation. Rosen suggested her to decamp her house for the creditors. She denied to abscond the shop and her house. Rosen took it as idiocy on the part of Eva. He also offered her a house. Eva disdained his offer of help. Rosen offered her for marriage of convenience. She was not taking it with the gravity it deserved. He argued plausibly. All of Rosen's efforts proved pointless. Rosen prepared a will in which he gave all his money and assets to Eva and

her daughters. Rosen felt crestfallen and attempted suicide. The story ends at a Delphic point. It is full of obscurities. At the end, Eva appeared imploring before Rosen for his help. But Rosen got furious and he berated Eva. Rosen muttered expletives under his breath and snubbed her.

The Characters

Main Characters

The main characters in the story include Eva and Rosen. Both the characters possess demarcating traits of nature. Both these characters are round as there occur changes in their disposition in story. Eva represents women's desire to approve their abilities. She shows stubborn attitude towards life without using her faculty of reason. She suffers due to her choice of action.

Rosen represents selfless and considerate sentiments towards suffering humanity. He tries to help a friend's family by using all available resources. But his efforts prove futile.

Minor Characters

The minor characters in this story are Davidov, a census taker who came to find out the reason of Rosen's attempt to commit suicide. There are Eva's daughters Fega and Surale who are five and three years old, Axel Kalish, a Polish refugee nearly forty and Eva's husband. He worked a lot as a grocer in America but suddenly died of heart attack. Other than Davidov none of them make physical appearance in the story. They are being introduced by the narrator.

The Climax

The climactic point occurs in the story after Rosen's attempt of suicide, when Eva comes to Rosen to know if his offer is still available. But Rosen out of fury rebukes her. Rosen's reaction appears completely unexpected. At this point the story reaches its culmination and takes a turning point.

The backstory or exposition

The backstory in this story makes its appearance through discussion between the characters and a very short description of past. In *Take Pity* the backstory is inserted in the first half or near the middle of the story, though it doesn't seem to overpower the whole story. The backstory is extremely grim. The gruesome past haunted their present. Its aftershocks mislead their lives. Eva gives glimpses of the brutalities of Hitler's vicious nature.

The conflict

All types of conflicts are being infused by Malamud in this story. Firstly the main characters undergo internal as well as external conflicts due to adverse society and circumstances. Both hold opposing disposition. The main conflict occurred in their manner of thought. They are facing social and economic problems simultaneously. The main conflicting point lies in Eva's obstinacy and Rosen's compassion. And their cultures also stand poles apart.

The context and setting

The economic situations and cultural bearings are crucial in the setting of a short story to move on. The setting or context helps in understanding the characters. The story is composed in 1930s, with a tensed environment in America. The setting is being revealed through narrator. The narrator gives detailed description of Eva's dingy shop and Rosen's gloomy house in the course of the story.

The Findings

- Malamud has used dull and drab images throughout the story. He gives the description of Rosen's house with dark imagery.
- It is ironic that Rosen feels pity for the widow and her daughters but at the same time he becomes too frustrated that he wished to break her head.
- The rotten store is symbolic of Eva's decaying life.
- The twilight in the closing passage refers to the end of the story.
- In the beginning the census taker shows no interest in writing the story told by Rosen. It appears that he has written not a single word but later on he fills up a whole book comprising Eva and Rosen's tale. He collected all their episodes in an indifferent manner. Moreover he wrote it in an unintelligible language which shows that he has not considered it important.
- There are numerous instances of mocking utterances. Davidove and Rosen's conversation is ironic and ridiculous as well. The entire story is woven with satire pertaining to social criticism.
- The story remains cliffhanging till the end.
- This story has an omniscient narrator who is one of the main characters.
- The economic gloom and misery permeates the story.
- It is a surreal story, told in flashbacks.

CONCLUSION

This analysis entails all the details about the skeleton of *Take Pity*. I have tried to delve deep into the story through its structuring pattern. The presentation of story through flashbacks gives it a flow. The structural elements help in understanding the writers' intension behind the story.

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