

[研究ノート]

A Study on Bernard Malamud's "The Mourners"

—Groping for Identity and Life as a Jew—

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Abstract

When investigating the contents of Bernard Malamud's short story, "The Mourners", one must first of all clarify to whom the word "mourners" from the title refers. As the word "mourners" is plural, it follows that there are two or more mourners being referenced here. While interpretations about who is the mourner in this work may differ depending upon the reader, I hold that the tenant of the apartment, Kessler, and the owner, Gruber, are the mourners mentioned. Given this premise, inquiry as to why these two had to become mourners leads into an investigation into the essence of this work. This article will discuss the reasons why Kessler and Gruber became "the mourners".

キーワード：Jewish-American／identity／ethnicity／Holocaust mentality

I Introduction

After the Second World War, the middle class became dominant in American society and Jews were largely accepted by that society. During this time, Jewish writers faced problems such as how to maintain their identity as a Jew while assimilating themselves into America. By making use of the method of realism, Jewish writers boosted their personal problems to such a universal problem as how to live in the time of absurdity.

Writing about the American scene as they saw it, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth attained the leading roles as Jewish novelists and short-story writers.ⁱ

Bernard Malamud is the writer who illustrated most the experience of ordeals and immigration of the Jews and the morality of Judaism. The success story *The Assistant* (1957) tells about an Italian man who broke into a grocery store owned by a Jewish man who ran the shop to make an honest and meager living. The

Italian man was converted to Judaism ultimately. Malamud was also very good at writing short stories. In the year after he published *The Assistant*, he published a collection of short stories entitled *The Magic Barrel* (1958) and was awarded the National Book Award.

It is often said that because of its strong thought-provoking ending or its ambiguity, Malamud's story "The Mourners"—which first appeared in *Discovery* in January 1955ⁱⁱ and was included in *The Magic Barrel*—can be interpreted in various ways by the readers. It is not clear just who "the mourners" are and what or who is being mourned. In this paper, I will analyze these questions as I follow the story.

II A Study on "The Mourners"

Kessler was a skillful egg candler, and should have been able to find a good job that paid well. However, he was stubborn by nature. Wholesalers were reluctant to deal with him. So, he had to rely on his old-age pension and lived in an inexpensive and tiny room on the top floor of an apartment located on the East Side of New York. He had a wife and three children but did not get along with them, so he had left them behind 30 years before and had not seen them again. This is very

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representative of the Jewish experience in America.

There are two problems here. How do the Jews keep their identity as a Jew in a new land, America, after they immigrated from Europe and how do they assimilate themselves into America (Americanization)? During the Jew's childhood, when groping toward assimilation into American society, the father was not a good model but the mother played a very important role. The mother worked hard to help the father who could not make a living and they sent the child to school. In such a situation, many Jewish fathers abandoned their families and disappeared and the mothers raised the children by themselves. Probably Kessler was such a father.

Kessler was living in his apartment for 10 years but seldom mixed with other residents. In the apartment an Italian family and a German couple were also living but Kessler never greeted them. In this story, Ignace, the janitor plays an important role. The name, "Ignace", is Polish Christian, but from a different point of view, the name makes us remember the fear of the holocaust. There is no doubt that Ignace's merciless and mean character reminds us of the holocaust.

Ignace played a card game called pinochle with Kessler but since Ignace always lost, finally he stopped visiting Kessler. Ignace blamed his failure on the circumstances. He told his wife that Kessler's room was full of offensive odors and that he felt like vomiting. He also said that to other residents. Therefore, others thought that Kessler was a dirty old man and started to avoid him. Kessler knew this but he despised and ignored them.

One day, Ignace and Kessler finally started arguing about how to throw away the garbage. Due to daily pent up feelings, the argument led to abusive language. Kessler slammed the door hard in front of Ignace. As a result, Ignace again started speaking ill of Kessler to his wife, and the owner, Gruber, told Ignace to tell Kessler to move out of the apartment. Since the war, none of the residents in the apartment had a written contract for the rent. Moreover, after throwing Kessler out he also thought that he would be able to raise the rents.

Ignace went to Kessler's room to give him the message from Gruber saying that he would have two weeks before he had to leave the apartment. The door opened slowly and Ignace was expecting to see Kessler fearful but on the contrary, Ignace was surprised to see Kessler's weird look. That was because Kessler looked like "a corpse adjusting his coffin lid." (p.151)ⁱⁱⁱ His face looked like that of a corpse but had a clear voice. Kessler rebuked Ignace for his merciless deed until Ignace drew back. Ignace also shouted with all his strength.

Even when Gruber gave Kessler the final notification and the official notification from the court was sent, he never agreed to leave. Finally, an executor visited Kessler. When Ignace had unlocked the door with a master key, they went into the room. Ignace quickly went down the stairs to hide in the basement. The two men took the furniture out and put them outside even though Kessler resisted desperately. When that was done, they threw Kessler out. Kessler shouted and struggled, asking for help from the neighbors, but they just stood in front of the doors watching him.

Kessler sat outside in the rain silently. When people passed by him they tried to avoid the pile of furniture. When the Italian lady came back from shopping, she felt piteous to see Kessler. Her two sons carried him up to the 5th floor. Another resident in the apartment, Hoffman, forced the door open so that Kessler could enter his room again. Ignace told Gruber about this. He was surprised and hurried to the apartment by car. When Gruber arrived at the apartment, he went to Kessler's room and entered the room with a master key. Gruber shouted at him, saying "What do you think you are doing here?" (p.154) Kessler just sat there quietly. Then Kessler finally started talking with tears in his eyes.

"What did I do to you?" he bitterly wept. "Who throws out of his house a man that he lived there ten years and pays every month on time his rent? What did I do, tell me? Who hurts a man without a reason? Are you Hitler or a Jew?" He was

hitting his chest with his fist. (p.154)

When seeing the sentence, "Are you Hitler or a Jew?" I first interpreted it as a sign of "Holocaust mentality". Michiko Kakutani explains Malamud and the Holocaust as follows ;

It was the advent of World War II and the Holocaust, he [Malamud] says, that first made him sure that he had something to say as a writer. Until then he had not given much thought as to what it meant to be Jewish, but the horror of war — as well as the fact that he had married a gentile woman, Ann de Chiara — made him question his own identity as a Jew and compelled him to start reading about Jewish history and tradition.^{iv}

First- and second- generation survivors are not yet free from the nightmare of the experience under the Nazis. They still have a strong fear against government and are filled with doubt and faithlessness. They live with anxiety. I interpreted it to mean that Kessler was one of those people. But Kessler did not only ask, "Are you Hitler?" he also asked, "Are you a Jew?" That means Gruber was a Jew like Kessler rather than anti-Jewish like Hitler. Even though they were the same Jewish-American, some kept their identity as a Jew (often as eager Judaists) and persistently kept the way they lived as a Jew in America. On the other hand, some chose to live as an American, not as a Jew, and tried to assimilate themselves into America, not being aware of being a Jew.

Based on the hypothesis that Kessler was the former type of Jew and Gruber was the latter type, if the words "Are you Hitler or a Jew?" are interpreted, Kessler was trying to make Gruber remember his identity as a Jew, saying "How come you can do such a thing? You are as cruel as Hitler. Aren't you a Jew like me? Why can a Jew do such a thing to a Jew?" Thus, Kessler was trying to make Gruber feel compatriot. In other words, Kessler was trying to have Gruber think over what he was doing.

Gruber could not find any words for Kessler who

was very persistent like this. After thinking it over one night, he decided to go to the police. On the way, he dropped in at the candy store, and there he decided to talk to Kessler one more time. Gruber thought he could recommend Kessler to enter the public home for the aged. He started explaining it to Kessler but Kessler had no ears for that. While Gruber was talking, Kessler was thinking about what had come to mind when sitting on the chair in the rain and sleet. He deeply realized how miserable his life was when he remembered that he had abandoned his wife and three children and had never tried to find them. Kessler sat on the floor — a traditional Jewish act for mourning — and thought about what he had done in the past. He moaned painfully and scratched himself with his finger nails. This was because Kessler regretted his faults in the past, and was suffering from a guilty conscience. So, he was probably mourning "dead humanity" in himself.

Gruber, listening to Kessler's prayer, felt ashamed of what he had done to Kessler. Gruber took Kessler's bed sheet and wrapped himself with it and prostrated himself on the floor.

When after a while, he gazed around the room, it was clean, drenched in daylight and fragrant. Gruber then suffered unbearable remorse for the way he had treated the old man. With a cry of shame he pulled the sheet off Kessler's bed and, wrapping it around himself, sank to the floor and became a mourner. (p.156)

In this way, Gruber also became a "mourner". The white bed sheet that Gruber wrapped himself in reminds us of the clothes Jews wore at Passover. Gruber did that because he remembered the Jewish tradition.

Sydney Richman refers to this scene as follows.

...Although Kessler is mourning for himself, for his past misdeeds and for his abandoned wife and children, Gruber, "sweating brutally," decides that Kessler is mourning for *him*. In a gesture that

plunges him out of the role of landlord and back into Jewish history, Gruber wraps himself in a sheet and drops to the floor as a fellow mourner. While spectacular and even haunting, the epiphany of “The Mourners” is simply too abrupt and too meaningful to be supported by the two-dimensional characters and the unrelieved weight of horror. It is, finally, only the conclusion which remains in the mind, a sudden frozen tableau.^v

III Conclusion

As I read the story like this, the old and plaintive apartment Kessler lives in represents Kessler’s lonely and isolated life. Also, in that apartment Italians and Germans as well as Jews (some assimilated themselves into America and some did not) live. The apartment itself seems a miniature of America. In that apartment Kessler was trying hard to grope for his identity as a Jew but at the same time he lost the humanity which he regretted and mourned deeply. In addition, he was able to make Gruber, who also has Jewish blood in his vein, result in his self-recognition.

In this story, like other stories of Malamud’s, one of his favorite patterns is used, where a hero makes one choice after sufferings. His stories often feature Jews. His main interest is toward humanity and ethics that Jews have accumulated based upon the history, especially religion rather than tracing and presenting characteristics using Jewish people. In “The Mourners”, having two different kinds of Jews — a Jewish-like Jew (Kessler) and a Jew who deeply assimilated himself into America (Gruber), Malamud successfully presented the way Jews lived and the difficulty of keeping their identity. He also showed the reality of their Americanization as well as presenting Jewish-like humanity and the ethics with the word “mourner”, which easily reminds us of the religious base.

NOTES

ⁱ Karp, Abraham J. (1985) *Haven and Home : A History of the Jews in America*, Schocken Books, p.325.

ⁱⁱ *Discovery*, 5 (January, 1955), pp.37-95.

ⁱⁱⁱ All these references in this form are to *Bernard Malamud The Complete Stories* (ed. Robert Gioux), The Noonday Press, 1998.

^{iv} Kakutani, Michiko.(1980)“Malamud Still Seeks Balance and Solitude” in *Conversations with Bernard Malamud* (ed. Lasher, Lawrence), University Press of Mississippi, 1991, p.94.

^v Richman, Sydney. “The Stories” in *Bernard Malamud* (ed. Bloom, Harold),Chelsea House Publishers, Philadelphia, 1986, p.77.

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