

# The Theme of Human Freedom in Malamud's "Talking Horse"

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In the short stories of Bernard Malamud, the theme of human freedom certainly exists.<sup>1</sup> Even though this theme doesn't seem explicit in many stories, it is almost always implied, in varying degrees of depth, in each protagonist's struggle to be free from the metaphoric prison, which Malamud employs to express various kinds of limitations which prevent the protagonist's human possibilities.<sup>2</sup> And there are certain types of Malamudian prison, such as "the prison of self" (Richman 111) as in "A Summer's Reading" (1956) and many other stories which, in many cases, have lonesome protagonists who can't or refuse to communicate with others, what could be called the prison of fate as in "Idiots First" (1961), or the prison of economic system as in "The Loan" (1952).

Unlike in the other stories, Malamud addresses the issue of human freedom directly and comprehensively in "Talking Horse" (1972). And Abramowitz's imprisonment is not only "the weirdest of the many imprisonments in Malamud's fiction" (Solotaroff 131) but it is a symbolic complex of the prisons which have appeared in his previous stories, so that the free centaur which Abramowitz transforms into at the end of the story is a symbol of human freedom. To understand the human freedom symbolized in the centaur clearly, we must begin by examining the typical Malamudian prisons which compose Abramowitz's prison.

One of the typical Malamudian prisons is the prison of self, self-incarceration which has resulted primarily from the ignorance of one's own nature and deep-seated needs. Since this is a kind of self-deception, prisoners in the prison of self have to go through painful recognition and acceptance of their true identity to be free, as Leo Finkle in "The Magic Barrel" (1954) or Kessler and Gruber in "The Mourners" (1955). Though Abramowitz is not so self-deceptive as the above mentioned characters initially are in their respective stories, he also has to find out who he really is to be free from his imprisonment.

"Talking Horse" opens with Abramowitz asking himself, "Am I a man in a horse or a horse that talks like a man?" (338) and not until he comes to the conclusion that "he knows more than a horse should, even a talking horse, so therefore, given all the built-up evidence, he is positively not a horse" (343) he dares to take action to free himself from his deaf-mute master, Goldberg.

In order to understand the plural nature of Abramowitz imprisonment, we must turn to Goldberg's role, since he represents the imprisoning force of each Malamudian prison Abramowitz is locked in. Sío-Castiñeria presents an allegorical interpretation of "Talking Horse" in terms of Freudian psychoanalytic theory:

In the story, the animal part of Abramowitz represents the *id*. . . . The animal's capacity to talk corresponds to the *ego*. . . . Goldberg represents the *superego*, a defender of pride, social hyper-correctness and purified conscience, and the impulse toward perfection. (132)

Though my interpretation is not Freudian, her interpretation of Goldberg as the *superego* suggests that he represents the self-imprisoning force within Abramowitz. This is especially true of the scene where Goldberg rebuts Abramowitz's dreams of "other lives he might live" in Abramowitz's sleep (340 - 41).

Goldberg also has some divine aspects. Beth and Paul Burch point out that "Goldberg embodies aspects of both Greek and Judaic systems of mythology," because Goldberg and Poseidon, the Greek god of the sea, has common features, such as the trident, the power to create vibrations, the arbitrary, omnipotent nature, and the link with the horse, and also because, like God, Goldberg plays the role of creator, possesses the secrets of the universe and manipulative ability, and does not communicate in an ordinary fashion. (Burch 176 - 78).

Though the link between Poseidon and Goldberg seems more systematically intended by the author, it

is the link between God and Goldberg that suggests Abramowitz's imprisonment has the aspect of the prison of fate. After the above mentioned question of Abramowitz, he compares himself with Jonah self-mockingly:

If the first, then Jonah had it better in the whale more room all around; also he knew who he was and how he had got there. About myself I have to make guesses. Anyway, after three days and nights the big fish stopped at Nineveh and Jonah took his valise and got off. But not Abramowitz, still on board, or at hand, after years; he's no prophet. (329)

Despite all the difference between Abramowitz and Jonah, the relationship of Abramowitz to Goldberg turns out to be that of Jonah to God. In the world full of freaks, Abramowitz plays the role as a prophet telling the unintelligible words of Goldberg to the audience, and he is the only one who knows the nature of Abramowitz's fate and has the power to release him from it.

This aspect of Abramowitz's imprisonment that implies the link between Abramowitz and the Biblical characters like Jonah or Job who suffer badly from their fates further links Abramowitz to other Malamudian characters, such as Manishevitz in "Angel Levine" (1955) and, especially, Mendel in "Idiots First," who are also confined in their own prison of fate. And it is evident that what Salzberg has called "Malamud's quarrel with God" is behind this prison of fate:

In such early stories as "Take Pity" (1958) and "Idiots First" (1963), one discovers a Malamudian anger directed at divine indifference in the face of human suffering. Indeed, subsequent works such as "Talking Horse" (1972) and, more recently, *God's Grace*, bring to the surface what seems to have been a private conflict implied in his earlier stories Malamud's quarrel with God. (2)

The "divine indifference" suggested by Salzberg is best expressed in the same words in both "Idiots First" and "Talking Horse." In the final struggle with Ginzburg, Mendel, who tries desperately to send his idiot son, Isaac, to his brother before his own death, says, "Whichever business you in, where is your pity?" In response, Ginzburg, the Angel of Death, says, "This ain't my commodity. The law is the law" (44). Likewise Goldberg talks in Abramowitz's sleep: "The law is the law, you can't change the order" (341). Although Goldberg as God is "so flawed that he exists only through human capitulation" (Solotaroff 131), he certainly represents the tyrannical God in Malamud's

stories who burdens humans with their fates.

Divine as he is, Goldberg also has traits in common with other petty human characters in Malamud's stories whose economic concerns block their human possibilities as well as those of others. Like Feld in "The First Seven Years" (1950), who can see Sobel only in terms of economic values and cannot allow his daughter Miriam to marry him initially, or Bessie in "The Loan" (1952), who, because of poverty, refuses the loan which Kobotsky begs for to buy a grave stone for his wife, Goldberg rejects Abramowitz's plea for freedom because of his economic concerns:

If it makes you feel any better, I will admit to you I can't live without you, and I won't let you live without me. I have my living to make and you are my talking horse I use in my act to earn my living, plus so I can take care of your needs. (342 - 43)

Like Feld's and Bessie's, Goldberg's economic concerns are self-imprisoning, since they prevent him from understanding Abramowitz's predicament and blind him to his moral obligation to Abramowitz. And Goldberg's economic concerns, in turn, build up the bars of the prison of economic system around Abramowitz.

As we have seen so far, Abramowitz's imprisonment in the body of a horse is not only physical confinement. It is also a mixture of various types of Malamudian prisons<sup>3</sup> that prevent his protagonists from fulfill their own human possibilities. Therefore, Abramowitz's fight for freedom and his original form after he decides that he is a man in a body of a horse assumes a symbolic meaning of every man's fight for freedom from the limitations that the Malamudian prisons suggest, and the free centaur which Abramowitz finally transforms into through the struggle with Goldberg is a symbol of human freedom.

Critics have offered various interpretations on the centaur,<sup>4</sup> but the intricacies and ambivalences of the human freedom symbolized in the centaur have yet to be examined. At the end of the story, Abramowitz is free from the prison of self, since he knows who he is. He is also free from the prison of fate and the prison of economic system, since Goldberg has disappeared. But he is still half-tied to the body of a horse.

The image of the centaur suggests that there is no such thing as absolute freedom: just when we have released ourselves from one prison, we find ourselves trapped in another. In this respect, Solotaroff's comment on the centaur is sound:

What seems to be the culminating joke in what is perhaps the wittiest of all of Malamud's stories is the suggestion that if only Goldberg had not run away when he did, the human who was suffering the weirdest of the many imprisonments in Malamud's fiction might have pulled himself all the way out and avoided the new organization of man and horse.

Beneath this joke lies the pervasive human comedy: something will always come up; our liberations will always be partial; wholeness, perfect unity will always recede before the grasp of creatures whose existence is, in Santayana's words, lyric in essence, tragic in fate, and comic in existence. (131 - 32)

The centaur suggests that the human freedom is a matter of degree: we can only become freer than we initially are.

What is unique to the freedom that Abramowitz has gained is that it is equivalent to loneliness. Compared to the other stories in which the protagonists manage to become free from their prisons, what is characteristic in "Talking Horse" is that there is absolutely no communion with others by which many Malamudian characters can break through the walls of their prisons and which is best expressed in Morris Bober's words, "I suffer for you" (*The Assistant* 125). Whatever type of the prison they are confined in, the key to freedom in other stories is generally the same: painful recognition and acceptance of one's true identity, if necessary, and communion with others.<sup>5</sup> But Abramowitz has achieved his freedom from Goldberg without any help from others.

This loneliness, or singleness, of the centaur implies the difficulty of achieving this level of freedom. But, more importantly, it counterpoints the seeming freedom of people in general, who are represented in the audience of Abramowitz's act. They are anonymous masses in the story but represent people in general, since they are the only ones that see Abramowitz in a realistic mode in this fantasy of a dysfunctional God and a talking horse. The other characters, such as the circus master, the woman in an old riding-school, and the conductor, don't seem surprised to hear Abramowitz talking, but the audience does:

In the sideshow days people used to stand . . . laughing beyond belief at Abramowitz talking. He remembers one man staring into his mouth see who's hiding there. Homunculus? Others suggested it was a ventriloquist's act even though the horse told them Goldberg was a deaf-mute. (336)

Only the audience responds to Abramowitz just like

we would respond to a talking horse.

Though the audience appears to be free physically, they are also imprisoned mentally in the same sense that Goldberg is, as Abramowitz says, "somebody who all he does is repeat his fate" (343). They have the freedom to choose where to go and what to see, but what they have chosen is the same old act which they have already seen before, and they are totally controlled by Goldberg. And what is worse, they don't seem to notice it. That is why none of them help Abramowitz get out of his prison, even though they are moved to tears by his performance for freedom.

The theme of human freedom in "Talking Horse" is both optimistic and pessimistic. Optimism lies in Abramowitz's liberation from Goldberg, and thence he is a typical Malamudian character, like Leo Finkle in "The Magic Barrel" and Mendel in "Idiots First," who "fears his fate, is caught up in it, yet manages to outrun it" (Shenker 34), while unlike those characters, he is totally alone in his struggles is pessimistic. But, as "the tie between Abramowitz and Abram" (Burch 179) implies, Abramowitz's singleness is that of a beginning.<sup>6</sup> Malamud suggests in the image of the centaur that human beings as a whole make themselves freer little by little. This is not pessimism, but Malamud's move "from optimism about man to a new and serious understanding of how growth and achievement take place" (Salzberg "Interview," 127).

Note

<sup>1</sup> For example, in his review of *The Magic Barrel*, Norman Podhoretz has written that Malamud's work "seems a kind of miracle, an act of spiritual autonomy perfect enough to persuade us that the possibility of freedom from the determinings of history and sociology still exists" (590). And Jeffrey Helterman has written that the themes of Malamud short stories collected in *The Stories of Bernard Malamud* are "freedom, commitment, responsibility, and the bonds of love and hate that link man to man" (129). Joel Salzberg has also stated that freedom is one of "Malamud's thematic preoccupations" (2).

<sup>2</sup> In an interview with Leslie and Joyce Field, Malamud said that the prison motif is "a metaphor for the dilemma of all men throughout history. Necessity is the primary prison, though the bars are not visible to all. Then there are the man-made prisons of social injustice, apathy, ignorance. There

are others, tight or loose, visible or invisible, according to one's predilection or vulnerability" (12).

<sup>3</sup> Abramowitz's imprisonment suggests still another imprisoning force that appears in other Malamud's stories. It is "the imprisonment of a character in past limitations" (Abramson 138). In musing over the nature of his fate, Abramowitz says to himself, "It might be because of something I said, or thought, or did, or didn't do in my life" (329). Like Tommy Castelli's imprisonment in the candy store in "The Prison," it is implied that Abramowitz's is due to his past failure.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Beth and Paul Burch concludes that "Perhaps through the fusion of the myths, he indicates the futility of man's relationship with God; the prospect of man's fulfilling the covenant is a ludicrous one, especially since he lives in a dark world where the mores of the centaur prevail" (179). In contrast, Kathleen Ochshorn states that "Abramowitz' metamorphosis to centaur is a step up for him: he is more human with his intense eyes and pince-nez. He has not become more brutal. If the new world he enters is 'a dark wood,' it represents the constant danger of further oppression and slavery, Abramowitz' unknown future, not a darkness in the centaur's nature" (246). See also Sío-Castiñeria 135; Helterman 137; Abramson 135.

<sup>5</sup> In "The Magic Barre," for example, Leo Finkle has managed to release himself from his prison of self with the realization of his true identity, someone who comes to God not because he loves Him but because he does not (134), and the love, a typical form of communion, for another lonely, suffering human being, Stella.

<sup>6</sup> " 'Abraham,' meaning 'father of a multitude,' is the name give to Abram after he accepts the covenant. Additional simiarities[sic] between Abramowitz and Abraham exist. Abraham questions God (Gen. 18 : 23 - 24) as Abramowitz persistently queries Goldberg, and Abraham laughs at God (Gen. 17 : 17) as Abramowitz snickers at Goldberg during performances, which to Abramowitz's mode of thinking are sacrificial acts. But Abraham represents . . . a beginning, the seed of a great nation, whereas Abramowitz is always searching for his beginnings . . ." (Burch 179). But he doesn't have to search for his beginnings any longer when he becomes the centaur.

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