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DOUBTFUL CONVERSION TO FAITH

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Abstract: *The following paper examines employment of humor in a short story Conversion of the Jews by Philip Roth and Angel Levine by Bernard Malamud to portray characters' perception of faith and doubt. The concept of faith and doubt is connected with the process of assimilation of Jews in America in the aftermath of the Holocaust. The process of assimilation, delineation from traditions and the search for new identity are typical themes of Jewish American writers of that period.Both stories demonstrate that the issue of faith and doubt is extended beyond Jewish American experience and can be perceived as a universal human dilemma. Such assertion is demonstrated in a comparative analysis of major characters in both stories.*

Keywords: *assimilation, faith, identity, doubt, Jewish American.*

The following paper examines the use of humor in a short story The Conversion of the Jews (1959) by Philip Roth and Angel Levine (1958) by Bernard Malamud to portray characters' dilemma between faith and doubt. Both writers belong to the generation of Jewish American writers of the 20th century. The choice of the theme needs to be comprehended within the historical context of American Jews of the time both stories were published. American Jews were undergoing a process of assimilation in a new country since their first wave of immigration to America at the end of the 19th century. The evidence of such process and constant dilemma of what identity to choose is prevalent in the texts of the first two generations of Jewish American writers. Jewish longing for being truly assimilated into American society is predominant theme in writings of Anzia Yezierska, Abrahan Cahan, Mary Antin and many others. However, with the publication of a collection of short stories The Magic Barrel (1958) by Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth's Goodbye Columbus (1959), one can observe certain resolution that Jewish label is no longer necessary and both writers emphasize the universality of immigrant experience above their own ethnicity. Strengthening or losing faith is related to the aftermath of the Holocaust and is connected with the process of assimilation of Jews in America. The process of assimilation, delineation from traditions or one's roots as well as the search for new identity are typical themes of the Jewish American writers of that period. However, the selected short stories do not only encompass similar themes, historical context, literary genre of a short story or the use of humor, but they both demonstrate that the issue of faith and doubt extends beyond the borders of America and can be perceived as a universal human dilemma. Such assertion can be demonstrated in the analysis of the major characters.

Conversion of the Jews is a story from the collection of short stories Goodbye Columbus which earned critical success

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for Philip Roth yet sparked certain controversy among representatives of Jewish community. The title of the story indicates the controversy of the major theme as well as it foreshadows the resolution of the story. The story deals with a character of a Jewish teenage boy Ozzie Friedman who falls into a serious theological argument with Rabi Binder as well as his own mother about the origin of Jesus Christ and the possibility of God being able to do anything. However, both adults fail to give Ozzie satisfactory explanation and instead they discipline him but also accidentally punish him by hitting. Ozzie's rage at the injustice of the adults who should serve as the representatives of morality culminates to such an extent that he wants to run away but symbolically ends up on a roof of the synagogue. From the top of the roof he makes the whole crowd kneel down and makes them say that they all believe in Jesus Christ. Despite the seriousness and the sensitivity of the theme which is portrayed here, by employing humor, particularly satire, Roth succeeds to criticize formalism and hypocrisy of a religious practice. The first evidence of the satire is used in the language of the opening dialogue between Ozzie and his friend Itzie Lieberman who are theologizing the subject. The very instance of humor lies in the fact that two teenage boys who are in Jewish school would focus on the discussion of a subject of such a profound nature. Satire of this humorous yet serious interaction is emphasized by the use of the language which in Ozzie's case is attempting to be rather formal almost academic. When he paraphrases Rabi Binder's argument for the explanation of the conception of Jesus, he uses the word “intercourse” while Itzie votes for informal or rather vulgar expression “get laid”. The innocence, curiosity as well as the informality of the conversation between the two boys delineates the central schism between the two religions, however by the employment of humor Roth succeeds achieving the light-hearted tone of a two thousand year old theological argument.

The second evidence of Roth's criticism of the formality of religion and his use of satire is represented in Ozzie's conversation with Rabi Binder on the subject of Jews being the Chosen people: “The first time he had wanted to know how Rabbi Binder could call the Jews 'The Chosen People' if the Declaration of Independence claimed all men to be created equal”(460). This is a significant point in a story which depicts the process of assimilation of Jews in America and their central dilemma of identity. Even though, Ozzie is probably not aware of the historical significance of the Declaration of Independence, his observation is innocent yet logical and in some ways it represents the central vocalization of the beginning of a new identity of American Jews as many of them felt that God had absented himself during the Holocaust.

The whole outcome of Ozzie's search for the truth is reflecting the confusion with the process of assimilation. By posing difficult questions to the authorities of the community and being brave enough to defend his stand he is showing the mirror to his own community and to the very core of his own religion. The concept of doubt is essential in the character of Ozzie since by attacking the formal aspect of his religious practice he is able to transform into a true believer. Even though, the initial resolution of the story seems to lie in a conversion of the Jews into Christians it is clearly not the point Ozzie is trying to make. By being unjustly punished by the Rabi as well as his mother for thinking differently, his aim is to demonstrate that everybody has a right to their own belief no matter how contradictory or different it may be.

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The character of Manischevitz in Malamud's story Angel Levine is in many ways similar yet different to Ozzie. The story was first published in the collection of thirteen stories titled The Magic Barrel (1958). Manischewitz is a fifty-one year old tailor who one day loses everything. His establishment burns down, his son dies in a war and his daughter runs away from home. What is more, his health starts failing and his wife becomes seriously ill. Despite all these misfortunes, he remains faithful to God and considers his fate to be God's test of his faith. It is obvious that Malamud based the character of Manischewitz on the biblical story of Job. The story of Job represents central pillar of Jewish identity. Jewish thinkers, in their theological ruminations in a post-Holocaust world, have returned with renewed interest to the biblical book of Job (Mathewson 19). As Roth uses the central theological argument between Judaism and Christianity, Malamud also leans on Jewish theological platform to express the continual dilemma between the faith and doubt. Suffering afflictions and not losing one's faith in God is the basic concept of both religions. Even though, Manischewitz is leading a dialogue or rather a monologue with God about the purpose of his suffering, he remains stoic about his situation. The rising action in Malamud's story occurs when Manischewitz finds a black man in his living room. The intruder introduces himself as Alexander Levine and claims that he is an angel. Even though Manishewitz is able to believe that a black man could be a Jew since such origin is indicated in his surname and he is able to say Hebrew prayer, the tailor remains rather skeptical about Levine being an angel as well. This is the central analogy between Roth's and Malamud's story, since both writers emphasize the limitations of one's faith. Roth portrays the character of Ozzie as somebody who has no limits in his faith however he is able to achieve such state only through doubt. In Manischewitz's case, even though his faith is strong, it is not limitless. The encounter of Manischewitz with a black man who claims to be an angel is portrayed humorously since the tailor confuses Levine with a welfare worker: “Recovering from his fright, Manischevitz gueassed he had left the door open and was being visited by a case worker from the Welfare Department – some came at night-for he had recently applied for relief “(49). Nevertheless, when the next day after his encounter with a mystical angel his health starts to improve and then worsens again, he becomes eager to show some doubts about his certainty that Levine might be an angel after all. The doubt about his initial judgment of Levine inspires him to start looking for him in Harlem. He finds Levine in a shabby bar drinking, smoking and dancing with a robust black woman Bella. The comic portrayal of an angel who is the opposite of a traditional image of a white, all pure, heavenly creature has a very profound effect on the perception of faith which is again analogical with Roth's story.

Goffman asserts that black angel is an anomaly in Eurocentric religious construction (Goofman, 69). The relationship between the character of Manischewitz and Levine represents the relationship between doubt and faith. Levine needs Manischewitz to acknowledge him as an angel since his return to earth is only temporary: “Under certain circumstances we lose privileges and prerogatives upon returning to earth, no matter for what purpose, or endeavoring to assist whosever” (50). If Levine wants to regain his angelic position he needs a human being to believe that he is an angel. On the other hand Manischewitz needs Levine to perform a miracle and help him recover. This is an ironic reversal of historical Jewish and Black roles. As Goofman furthermore asserts Manischevitz's initial refusal to believe that a black Jews can be a true angel of God can be interpreted as a general refusal of belief, an initial failing of God's test. Alternatively it can be contextualized

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within modern America as an early fable about the consequences of rejecting American diversity (Goofman, 69).

The application of humor in Malamud's story is also eminent in the use of the language. Similar to Roth's shift from formal language into informal in the dialogue between Ozzie and Itzie, Levine's discourse also changes dramatically: "It was given me to understand that both your wife and you require assistance of a salubrious nature?" (51) to " Speak yo' piece, son" ...[...]..."Speak, Ah is a private pusson." (57). Such shift from formality to informality in both stories indicates authors' purpose to address the issues with their basic names. Such indication may be related to the over academic discourse of faith and doubt nonetheless using informal language or in Levine's case Harlem vernacular makes both issues of faith and doubt closer to ordinary people.

When Manischewitz finally acknowledges Levine to be an angel: "I think you are an angel from God" (57) he is able to witness a miracle of Levine taking off and flying away: 'He heard an odd noise, as though of a whirring of wings, and when he strained for a wider view, could have sworn he saw a dark figure borne aloft on a pair of magnificent black wings (58). Malamud's resolution of the story is open-ended. The question is whether Manischevitz's final belief in the angel is his real or imagined faith. Paradoxically, by including elements of fantasy Malamud makes the appearance of the black angel more plausible. Manischewitz's doubt whether an angel could be black and Jewish at the same time is similar to Ozzie's perception of the origin of Jesus. While Manischewitz doubts a concept of a black Jewish angel, Ozzie is capable of persuading the whole community to acknowledge the immaculate conception of Jesus. Perception of faith for both characters is to certain extent dependent on different ages of both protagonists. While Ozzie is a young boy whose mind is not burdened by the tradition and therefore he is more prone to think liberally, the character of Manischewitz is a mature experienced man who is not easily fooled and needs to be persuaded by more arguments.

However the most significant resolution of both stories lies in the concept of doubt and faith and their inevitability to be intertwined for asserting one's belief. Both Roth and Malamud present characters whose faith is limited by historical and formal representations. Identity of both characters undergoes assimilation which is representative theme for American Jews in the 20th century. If it is asserted that American Jews were losing their faith and their Jewish identity, Malamud and Roth confirm the opposite. Character of Ozzie and Manischewitz prove that American Jews by being exposed to new aspects of humanity in America of the 20th century underwent true conversion by expanding their faith beyond the borders of their religion and thus Jewish American experience can be considered universal one.

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