

**Rumena Bužarovska\***

Ss. Cyril and Methodius University

Blaže Koneski Faculty of Philology, English Department

Skopje, Macedonia

## **WHY IS A TALKING BIRD FUNNY? ASPECTS OF HUMOR IN “THE JEW BIRD” BY BERNARD MALAMUD**

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the humor in Bernard Malamud’s story “The Jewbird”. Humor is analyzed through two aspects: the universal and the socio-cultural. The universal refers to the mechanisms that render something comic regardless of their socio-cultural setting, i.e the culture from which they originate. Two existing theories of humor are used to describe this: the incongruity theory and the superiority theory. The socio-cultural aspect is a description of the elements of humor whose creation and perception depend on the local culture from which they originate. Finally, the paper reviews the significance of the elements that create an appropriate atmosphere for the comic.

**Key words:** Jewbird, Bernard Malamud, humor, comic, incongruity, superiority, society, culture

A frequently anthologized short story, Bernard Malamud’s “The Jewbird” is also among his best known works. One of the leading voices in Jewish-American literature of the late 20th century, Bernard Malamud (1914-1986) was born and raised in Brooklyn, in a family of first generation Russian Jewish immigrants. As a result of his upbringing, his prose

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\* E-mail address for correspondence: rumena.buzarovska@gmail.com

thematically focuses on the urban life of this community. Similarly, “The Jewbird” revolves around Malamud’s familiar themes. Set in post-World War II Brooklyn, a skinny cross-eyed crow with unkempt feathers flies into the kitchen of the Cohen family while they are having supper. The bird, named Schwartz, perches on the kitchen door and talks like a human, explaining that it is a Jewbird who is on the run from other birds of prey persecuting him. Harry Cohen, a frozen food salesman, is immediately suspicious of the bird and its Jewishness, and so treats him with hostility, while his wife Edie and his son Morris (Maurie), show the bird compassion and charity and are willing to take him in and feed him. At the insistence of Laurie and Edie, the bird stays with the family despite Mr. Cohen’s objections. As time gradually passes Mr. Cohen begins to harass the bird in order to kick him out, believing him to be a “pest” and “free loader”, even though the bird helps Laurie with his homework and has a very small appetite. Eventually Mr. Cohen and Schwartz have a fight and Mr. Cohen kills the bird, throwing him out through the window.

This short story is rich with metaphors, symbols, parodies and other figures of speech that point to the various levels of meaning in the text. For example, the short story can be analyzed through the metaphor of the tenant, which is also the subject of Malamud’s 1971 novel *The Tenants*. In fact, this short story treats the idea that for centuries Jews were “tenants” in foreign lands, not having their own country where metaphorically they could be their own “landlords”. As “tenants”, they were always dependent on someone’s mercy or whim; and just like the crow Schwartz, they lived in fear of being evicted or killed for no apparent reason, or, or for reasons such as Mr. Cohen’s: he says the bird is an “A-number-one trouble-maker” (Malamud 1981: 918). The allegorical element of the bird speaking with the language of first generation immigrants also points to another level of the text – the hatred of assimilated Jews towards non-assimilated Jews, or the intolerance of second generation assimilated immigrants towards their parents. Hence the significance of the beginning and ending of the story: the story opens with the arrival of the bird and the mention of the illness of Cohen’s mother, and ends with her death and Cohen’s murder of Schwartz. Malamud suggests that the hatred that Cohen feels towards the bird is a type of Semitic anti-Semitism. Eileen Watts explains this self-hatred: “Living for so long by others’ standards of behavior, dress, and especially language has contributed to the self-hatred that many assimilated American Jews project onto unassimilated Jews” (Watts 1996: 158). Similarly, the hostile

and inhospitable manner in which Cohen treats the bird also symbolizes the harsh welcome the Jews received in America.

In addition to the socio-cultural complexity of the story that is crucial for the understanding of the symbolic meaning of the text, there is another complex phenomenon present in the short story – the element of humor. Even though the short story can be labeled as “comic” due to the continuous presence of humor generally associated with positive feelings, the story also has elements of tragedy – hence it can be categorized in the domain of the tragicomic.

The humor in “The Jewbird” will be analyzed through two aspects: the universal and the socio-cultural. Here the universal level of humor refers to the mechanisms that render something comic regardless of their socio-cultural setting, i.e. the culture from which they originate. Two existing theories of humor are used to describe this: the incongruity theory and the superiority theory. The incongruity theory refers to the cognitive mechanism functioning behind the comic notion – an unexpected cognitive shift, or a combination of two incongruous ideas – or to quote Keith-Spiegel, “Humor arising from disjointed, ill-suited pairings of ideas or situations or presentations of ideas or situations that are divergent from habitual customs form the basis of incongruity theories” (Keith-Spiegel 1972: 7). Although the beginnings of this theory are seen as far back in history as Cicero, it is considered to be developed by the philosophers Kant and Schopenhauer in the 18th and 19th century, and later embraced in its full or modified form by many contemporary theorists of humor such as George Santayana and Michael Clark. The superiority theory of humor, on the other hand, is known as a social theory of humor (Attardo 1993: 47), but in this text it will be referred to as a theory that also explains humor on a universal level. This theory is social in nature because its essence lies in the aggression or superiority expressed from one person to another, where usually the person who suffers the aggression is the butt of the joke, while the person imposing his or her superiority is the creator of the humor. Where self-deprecating humor is concerned, the person creating the humor is also its subject, but feels superior to “follies of themselves past” (Hobbes 1987: 19). Among the first to explain humor as functioning through this mechanism were Plato and Aristotle, though one of its major proponents is the philosopher Thomas Hobbes in the 17th century and Charles Gruner in the 20th century. Many theorists of humor combine both of these aspects – incongruity and superiority – to explain the essence of

the comic; such are Henri Bergson, Arthur Koestler and John Morreall, to name a few. This paper also combines these two theories to explain the universal level of humor in the analyzed short story.

The second aspect through which humor will be analyzed – the socio-cultural aspect – is merely a description of the elements of humor whose creation and perception depend on the local culture from which they originate.

Finally, the paper explores the significance of the elements that create an appropriate atmosphere for the comic.

The main incongruity that gives “The Jewbird” its comic character is the mixing of reality and fantasy as expressed through the talking bird. This creature is simultaneously both man and bird – something that is not deemed strange by the environment that communicates with it. This humorous mechanism has been defined by several theorists of humor. According to Henri Bergson, one of the three main characteristics of humor is its human dimension (Bergson 1911: 10). Hence, the comic effect is realized when animals, plants or things behave or look like human beings. However, the man-animal incongruity is not the only element that causes the comic effect. Arthur Koestler, who defined the “Man-Animal” relationship as a separate form of humor, claims that “this double-existence is comic, but only so long as the confrontation has the effect of slightly degrading exposure of one or the other” (Koestler 1964: 67) – which clearly points to the aggressive nature of this phenomenon and the way in which incongruity and superiority work together to cause the comic effect. In “The Jewbird”, the man-animal mechanism is of key importance to the comic nature of the text. For example, had the bird Schwartz been a banished old Jewish man – abused and killed by a member of his own ethnic and religious group, the short story would have been unequivocally tragic.

If we consider incongruity to be the major cognitive mechanism that creates humor in the text, the element of aggression or superiority where a certain trait, individual or group is the object of humor can be seen as the content-based mechanism that also contributes to the generation of the comic effect, as noted by Koestler. In “The Jewbird”, the object of the comic (“the butt of the joke”) is double. This duality corresponds to the two comic characters in the short story – Schwartz and Harry Cohen, who are in conflict with one another. On the one hand, it seems that Schwartz, the banished bird trying to find refuge from the anti-Semitic birds of prey is the object of humor because of his constant passive-aggressive complaining,

his attempt to make others pity him, while at the same time imposing himself on his hosts and getting everything he wants:

At Cohen's insistence Schwartz lived out on the balcony in a new wooden birdhouse Edie had bought him.

"With many thanks," said Schwartz, "though I would rather have a human roof over my head. You know how it is at my age. I like the warm, the windows, the smell of cooking. I would also be glad to see once in a while the *Jewish Morning Journal* and have now and then a schnapps because it helps my breathing, thanks God. But whatever you give me, you won't hear complaints."

(Malamud 1981: 915)

We see a similar example when the cruel Mr. Cohen suggests that Schwartz eat the dry corn from the bird feeder:

"Not for my digestion," he later explained to Edie. "Cramps. Herring is better even if it makes you thirsty. At least rainwater don't cost anything." He laughed sadly in breathy caws.

(Malamud 1981: 915)

These examples indicate that Schwartz is the object of humor because he insists to be treated like a man, although in reality he is a bird who puts on a false show of humility and gratitude. As Schwartz symbolizes first generation Jewish immigrants to America, this ethnic group seems to be the object of amiable ridicule.

Cohen, on the other hand, a representative of second-generation assimilated Jews, is the most ridiculed character in the text. Hence, the criticism conveyed through humor is in fact criticism of this particular ethnic community. It is no coincidence that Cohen is a frozen food salesman: frozen food, according to Watts, represents his "icy humanity" and "cold compassion" (Watts 1998: 159). At the same time, this profession points to the assimilation of Cohen into the urban environment and his rejection of Jewish tradition. There is further symbolism in Cohen's profession: the only thing the skinny, smelly, disheveled Schwartz demands of Cohen is that he shares with him the same food he provides for his family. Not only does Cohen refuse to share this insignificant amount of food with the bird, but he also humiliates him by feeding him cheap bird food and herring. Cohen is verbally vulgar and constantly offending Schwartz –the

underlying reason for his abusive behavior being that the bird presented himself as a Jew:

“What have you got against the poor bird?”

“Poor bird, my ass. He’s a foxy bastard. He thinks he’s a Jew.”

“What difference does it make what he thinks?”

“A Jewbird, what a chutzpah. One false move and he’s out on his drumsticks.”

(Malamud 1981: 914-915)

Even though Schwartz earns the food and roof over his head by voluntarily overlooking Maurie’s studying and violin practicing, resulting in a significant improvement in Maurie’s low grades, Cohen’s vanity and pride prevent him from realizing that his son’s success is somehow related to the bird.

Towards the end of the story, after Cohen terrorizes Schwartz for months, hoping that he will leave on his own (he buys a cat for his son, pops paper bags while Schwartz is sleeping, mixes his food with watery cat food), Schwartz and Cohen finally have a fight and Cohen kills Schwartz. The manner in which the murder takes place is deeply symbolic: during the fight with the bird, Cohen takes Schwartz by his legs and whirls him several times above his head. This episode is in fact a parody of the Jewish custom Kapparot performed on the day before Yom Kippur. During this ritual, a chicken or rooster are taken and waved over the head while reciting a prayer. After that the bird is slaughtered and given to the poor, in hope of redemption from one’s sins. The irony is that Cohen, a man who has lost touch with his Jewish tradition and is oblivious of his ill deeds, does not seek nor receive redemption from his sins.

In Cohen’s case, the element of aggression or ridicule in fact refers to Jewish anti-Semites, who, in their selfish attempt to preserve their newly acquired identity, yield to hatred, selfishness and aggression. On the other hand, this criticism can refer to all anti-Semites, as well as more generally to the negative human characteristics of selfishness, pride and hatred.

In fact, Malamud frequently uses vanity and stupidity as objects of ridicule, especially where the characters of Cohen and his son Morris are concerned. When Morris’s grades in school improve and he starts getting C’s due to his work with Schwartz, Cohen’s vanity and pride are ridiculed when he openly reveals his plans to send Morris to an Ivy League college. Even Morris’s good-natured stupidity is kindly ridiculed when he doesn’t

understand why Schwartz is hiding in a paper bag and believes that he's making himself a nest – an absurd idea because the bird does not behave like a bird at all, and is in fact hiding out of fear.

Bearing the above-mentioned in mind, we can conclude that the universal level of humor is expressed through the cognitive mechanism of incongruity on the one hand, and the existence of superiority or aggression on the other hand. Due to the fact that the object of humor or ridicule is a particular ethnic group, the type of humor in the short story can also be labeled as ethnic humor.

The socio-cultural setting of "The Jewbird" is quite complex and rich, conditioning the understanding of the humorous elements by the reader. In fact, the comic character of the short story is dependent on its context: a family of second generation assimilated Jewish immigrants in Brooklyn, New York. If the reader is unaware of the specifics in the relationships in this ethnic community, they cannot grasp the essence of the humor or the object of ridicule in certain situations. When the reader, for example, is unaware that the name Cohen is a typically Jewish name, as well as that Kingston was a popular vacation spot for Jewish families in the 1950s, they will find it difficult to establish the wider context of the short story and its humor. The typically Jewish food on Cohen's table is another element that points to the identity of the short story's protagonists. The language the crow speaks – English riddled with errors and Yiddish words – symbolizes the language of first generation Jewish immigrants to America. If the reader fails to comprehend the meaning behind the lexical and syntactic idiosyncrasies of the crow's speech, the humorous incongruity may remain unnoticed and unappreciated. One such comic example heavy with socio-cultural meaning is the following:

"But aren't you a crow?"

"Me? I'm a Jewbird."

Cohen laughed heartily. "What do you mean by that?"

The bird began dovening. He prayed without Book or tallith, but with passion. Edie bowed her head though not Cohen. And Maurie rocked back and forth with the prayer, looking up with one wide-open eye.

When the prayer was done Cohen remarked, "No hat, no phylacteries?"

"I'm an old radical."

(Malamud 1981: 913)

This dialogue occurs when Cohen and Schwartz meet, emphasizing the suspicion and disrespect that Cohen feels towards the crow. The humor arises not just from the fact that the bird talks like a human being; it also observes Orthodox Jewish religious rituals and has a clever response to Cohen's subtle attack towards his lack of the religious kit needed for praying: "I'm an old radical". What is also interesting to note is that the parody of the Kapparot custom at the end of the story where Cohen kills Schwartz does not contain elements of humor, although parodies are generally considered to be comic. This supports the scholar Weisstein's thesis that parodies are not necessarily funny – "It would be wrong to maintain, however, that such discrepancies are invariably humorous, although it is naturally hard to determine a parodist's true intention." (Weisstein 1966: 803). In the case of the parody of Kapparot in "The Jewbird", the critical imitation of the custom points to the tragic sinfulness of the performer of the ritual, who, ironically, does not seek atonement. The positive emotions that humor generally evokes are not present in this very serious parodic segment that is key to the understanding of the entire short story.

Humor is present in the very last line of the short story; the humor is linguistic, and thus, culturally conditioned. At the very opening of the story Schwartz explains that he is on the run from "anti-Semeets" – an incorrect pronunciation of the word "anti-Semites" which would be typical for the first generation Jewish immigrants with a lesser command of English. Although the family corrects the crow in his pronunciation, when Maurie finds the lifeless and disfigured body of the bird and asks who could've done such a thing, Edie's answer is the tragicomic echoing of Schwartz's explanation: "Anti-Semeets". This short utterance holds several layers of meaning: Edie's acceptance of her parents' identity, as well as her subconscious confession that her husband is an anti-Semite himself.

Apart from the universal and socio-cultural levels of humor present within the text, Malamud adds elements to the short story that provide an appropriate setting for the comic. For example, if the incongruity of a crow talking and behaving like a human being was accompanied by an atmosphere of dark mysteriousness, the reader would most probably feel fear instead of the pleasant emotions associated with humor. In the studies of humor, this thesis was tested by Mary K. Rothbart, who argues that these incongruities can result in several reactions, the most extreme of which are fear and laughter due to pleasure – the latter of which is "experienced in a safe or playful setting" (Rothbart 1976: 38) Malamud is quite aware of the



danger of incongruity so he lightens up the potentially serious atmosphere with many dialogues, short sentences, profanity in Mr. Cohen's direct speech and the use of Yiddish words by the crow. The crow's speech renders a playful imitation of the syntax of first generation Jewish immigrants: "I would also be glad to see once in a while the *Jewish Morning Journal* and have now and then a schnapps because it helps my breathing, thanks God". (Malamud 1981: 915) Malamud's general choice of words also contributes to the comic value of the short story. For example, at the very beginning of the story, when Schwartz makes a bizarre and unexpected appearance in Cohen's kitchen, Malamud describes him as "black-type longbeaked bird—its ruffled head and small dull eyes, crossed a little, making it look like a dissipated crow" (Malamud 1981: 913). It is the incongruity in the description itself, i.e. the unexpected and unconventional choice of words that adds to the comic effect. Additionally, the bird is not only comic because of its appearance: undoubtedly the reader will draw a parallel between Malamud's crow and Poe's raven (Hanson 1993: 363). The comic here lies in the ironic shift from the tragic, serious and noble in Poe, to the low and mundane of Malamud: his crow is a ruffle-feathered, rheumatic thing with a chronic cough which lands on the kitchen door instead of a bust of Pallas.

Another of Malamud's characteristics of style is the use of clever responses in the crow's speech. Such is the case with the dialogue between Edie and Schwartz, when she tells him he has to be patient so that the cat gets used to him and stops attacking him. Schwartz has a witty response for this foolish advice: "When he stops trying we will both be in Paradise" (Malamud 1981: 918). This phrase, on some level resembling a joke, is comic because of its implied value.

To conclude, the humor in Malamud's "The Jewbird" is marked with a strong socio-cultural note, whereas its universal aspects are expressed through situations and language typical of a particular ethnic community. The playful and witty language that Malamud employs in combination with short sentences and frequent dialogues contribute to the creation of a light atmosphere that allows the leading incongruity of the story – the bird that behaves like a human – to be perceived as comic. The incongruities in Malamud's story are further related to subjects that call forth the ridicule of negative human characteristics such as pride, vanity, stupidity and hatred.

Nevertheless, perhaps the most impressive feature of "The Jewbird" is the subtle balance between the tragic and the comic. Even though the

short story is fundamentally tragic, emphasizing the senselessness of hatred and selfishness which in turn lead to torture and murder of the innocent, “The Jewbird” also raises essential questions about ethnic and religious identity and its influence on the moral aspects of the individual. The comic manner in which these serious issues are approached is not coincidental: it seems that Malamud was well aware of the power of the comic to yield an entirely different viewpoint on suffering – one that is devoid of needless sentimentality – thus subtly enabling the reader to independently comprehend the absurdity of hatred.

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**Румена Бужаровска**

ЗАШТО ЈЕ ЈЕВРЕЈ-ПТИЦА СМЕШНА?  
АСПЕКТИ ХУМОРИСТИЧНОСТИ У „ЈЕВРЕЈ-ПТИЦИ“  
БЕРНАРДА МАЛАМУДА

**Сажетак**

Тема овог есеја је хумор Бернарда Маламуда (Bernard Malamud) у причи „Јевреј-птица“ (“Jewbird”). Хумор се посматра из двоструке перспективе: хумор у општем смислу речи и хумор са социо-културног аспекта. Универзални аспект хумора односи се на постојање елемената у тексту које сматрамо смешним без обзира на могуће социо-културне импликације, односно културу из које дело потиче. Тумачење дела у оквиру овог рада засновано је на две постојеће теорије хумора: теорији инконгруентности и теорији супериорности. Социо-културни аспект подразумева опис елемената хумора чије уметничко обликовање и разумевање зависе од познавања локалне културе. Коначно, у овом есеју се говори о значају елемената који доприносе стварању повољне атмосфере за комичне ефекте.

**Кључне речи:** Јевреј-птица, Берnard Маламуд, хумор, комика, незграпност, супериорност, друштво, култура