

A thorough analysis of 'Bontsha the silent' short story by Isaac Leib Peretz (1906)

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Abstract

The story of Bontsha the silent is a story written by I. L. Peretz, a Jewish writer. Bontsha is silent all his lifetime under various disasters and after passing away, he enters heaven in which the authorities hold a court for him and finally is accorded the highest honors of heaven, while he still keeps silent and admits only some bread and butter. Bontsha seems to represent an oppressed group who keeps a perpetual silence under the governing society's cruelty and even given an opportunity would not be able to take advantage of it. A defending angle defends Bontsha's privileged rights in heaven which represents a group of people who justify every possible phenomenon in society for their own benefit such as a dominant government or a dogmatic church. A prosecutor in trial session protests against the sentence manifests a limited number of people in any society tending to cry the truth and the reality which is neither welcomed by the dominant group nor given liberty or opportunity to declare their demands. This paper tends to analyze this story profoundly from different angles and evaluates symbols, ironies, fantasy, characterization, viewpoints, conflicts, emotions, plot and theme applied in the story.

Keywords: Bontsha the silent, I.L.Peretz, story analysis, Jewish stories.

Introduction

This story is known as a Yiddish folklore by many Americans. It is one of the most read and translated stories throughout the world¹. The most outstanding characters in the story are three: Bontsha, defending angle and prosecutor. Each of these characters in reality manifests a certain group of people in a conflicted society.

Bontsha who was born in a Jewish family represents a group of people who either take a silence policy deliberately or are obliged to keep silent. They might prefer to keep silent for some reasons such as their internal feebleness or because they are being oppressed by another dominant group usually tending to take advantage of the oppressed one while the latter has to endure their cruelty and malice and prefers not to protest against them. Ignorance might be another cause for their silence, i.e, they perceive the status quo as their legitimate right and a predetermined fate. And, the dominant group abuses this attitude and imposes its thoughts on them and the continuum goes on.

The second group in the story manifested by the defending angle represents a group of people who justify every possible phenomenon in the society to their own benefit. In the story, the defending angle seems to be a representative of a dominant government or a dogmatic church taking advantage of laymen by keeping them ignorant and injudicious. They do this so tactfully that average people are content with the state and never protest against it. The defending angle apparently defends Bontsha and displays his silence as a great virtue lest nobody perceives his real intention. Bontsha, as a typical oppressed man is rejoiced and excited with the way they accuse him and sentence a verdict of his not being guilty.

The last group in the story whose representative is the prosecutor, in fact manifests a limited number of people in any society tending to cry the truth and the reality. Yet, unfortunately neither are they welcomed by the dominant group nor do they find liberty or opportunity to declare their demands and if they do so, they are immediately suppressed by the others specially those employed by the dominant group, the defending group. Thus, they also prefer to be mute and keep the policy of superficial silence.

Symbols used in the story

The most outstanding symbolic usage in this story is the silence of Bontsha, since it has been repeated frequently during the story and also its emphatic application depicts a meaning beyond its superficial meaning. Although the writer signifies his silence humorously as if it is a real virtue, his real purpose is to amplify the ignorance and sometimes stupidity of human beings in the world. Yet, the writer justifies his silence in a way that his certain situation in life was impulsive to his silence, as poverty, his mother's death in his adolescence, having a step-mother etc.

Fantasy

Another important element in the story is fantasy. In the real world, human beings have on tangible information about the other world and their perception of that world is only taken from religious beliefs and Divine prophets. Nevertheless, in this story, the writer using the element of fantasy depicts a court and a trial execution in which the judge and angles are authorities of execution and the accused man is Bontsha, a man who does not have a lot to be accused, silence is his sole crime.

Ironies in the story

The defending angle in fact is defending himself and his own group to justify or account for that dominant group's conduct. Yet, apparently, he is defending the oppressed group while readers are conscious of this fact, what can be called a dramatic irony. Bontsha was aware of the fact that silence is not a virtue per se, i.e., he didn't expect to be given a red carpet treatment in heaven, yet he also didn't expect to be received so extremely, another dramatic irony in the story.

At the end of the story, everyone expects Bontsha to request a precious property, since at this time he possesses every possible property in heaven and could ask for everything he was deprived of in his lifespan. Yet, ridiculously, he requested for mere bread and butter! The reader could consider this situationally ironic.

During the defense of the angle, he elaborated on a man whose life was revived by Bontsha and calls Bontsha a philanthropist and consequently, that man ought to compensate for this favor. Since Bontsha didn't deserve such an attribute and defending angle was also aware of this fact, this is considered a verbal irony.

After Bontsha's trivial request for bread and butter, even those who were the creator or defender of silence on the earth became exceedingly ashamed. In other words, the impact of silence was so great and incredible that even the dominant group were affected by the silence. Since they are not expected to feel ashamed, the phenomenon is an irony of situation.

Another ironical point (situational) is when defending angle depicts Bontsha's name as befitting as a frock coat worn by a rich man, the prosecutor angle and the reader do not expect a fair lawyer to compare a man's name to a frock coat- since a frock coat and a ragged simple one are the same for virtuous people and such sort of properties are not considered a criteria for virtue or piety. Nevertheless, in the story silence is considered a virtue, this might be considered another situational irony.

The next situational irony laid in the story is that God who is supposed to be the manifestation of justice and equality, plays no specific role in the process of accusation. He appears to have taken an impartial side and angles are the ultimate judges.

And finally, all of the mentioned ironies implicitly or explicitly advocate the central irony, i.e., silence. The most dramatic irony is that even in that world silence is considered a virtue while one's wisdom never confirms silence as a virtue to the extent of stupidity. The mentioned point is simultaneously a situational irony too, since silence could not be considered a criterion for judgment but they used it as a virtue and exonerated him from sin or wrong deeds.

Characterization

The writer uses indirect presentation in the creation of most characters in the story, like defending angle, prosecutor and judge, but direct presentation of Bontsha's character. Whatever silence means for Bontsha, he has been silent all his life, this is what the author attempts to emphasize from the commence of the story, though via defending angle's language. The characters in the story are consistent in their behaviour, and sufficiently plausible in their treatment and speech. The characteristic features of all characters are depicted in such a way that one can simply correspond their behavior to the people of the real world. All of the characters are relatively of a flat type, since each has been characterized in one particular trait. Bontsha: silence, defending angle: defence and prosecutor: objection. The few characters of the story are static ones, since none of them undergoes a perpetual change in his or her character.

Point of view in the story

In this story, the writer has applied omniscient point of view. He, as the author owns all knowledge about what's going up in the heaven but not what has happened on the earth to the main character, i.e., the amount of omniscience of the author is limited, since most part of the story is told by a main character, the defending angle. Of course, cautiously speaking, the point of view he applies in this part is nearer to the limited omniscient. Yet, the writer remains as the story-teller until the end of the story.

The general situation of the story, especially the scene of the court and Bontsha's accusation, trial in the other world all were impulsive to choose a narrative point of view. Therefore, the author has chosen this point of view.

Conflicts in the story

The most conspicuous conflict in the story is the emotional conflict between the defending angle and the prosecutor, it can also be applied as being a moral conflict, since the moral criteria the defending angle were following is a vast ocean contradictory with what the prosecutor believed in. For this reason, they never came to an agreement and kept a remote mental distance from each other.

A minor emotional conflict also occurs between the two important saints and the defending angles, when the writer states that their voices were touched with envy.

Another conflict seen through the whole story is Bontsha's antagonism, his conflict against himself; as a matter of fact he knew he didn't deserve so much reception in heaven and that was the reason for his antagonism. Another conflict related to Bontsha is his conflict against environment and society fate; the conflict he was carrying in all his lifetime, he couldn't endure the fate considered for him by heaven.

Emotions applied in the story

In this story the writer exploits the element of emotion in such a way that the impression he means to occur is obtained easily and deeply. Although using exaggeration to represent Bontsha's silence, he never does it for the sake of provoking sentimentality in readers, i.e., emotions like sympathy or empathy. A critic analytical writer might discriminate between creating emotion and putting it as his purpose of writing; i.e., emotion is however the by-product of this story not its end-product.

Humor is also applied indirectly in the story, as mentioned in the analysis of the story, the author seems to deride the whole situation of the court and trial and the matter of justice. He seems extremely unsatisfied with the system of religious principles or the dominant government in which silence is considered a great virtue and in order to reveal his great dissatisfaction and frustration with the whole situation, he depicts a court in which silence is ridiculously highlighted as a virtue and a silent man obtains the greatest rank in Heaven. However, applying the element of humor by the writer is fulfilled implicitly, indirectly and smartly.

Plot of the story

Bontsha the silent is a man whose main characteristic feature, as his name indicates, is silence—a sorrowful silence. He has imprisoned himself in a chain of silence in both worlds. He is a real misery, every catastrophe and wretchedness one can imagine is assembled in this man. Poverty is the main reason resulting in all sorts of problems; being entirely ignored and disregarded by people in his birth, youth, marriage and death, living unknown in a melancholy leading a life full of affliction, falling into jail for beggary and poverty desiring for a penny to earn a living,.. and simultaneously keeping a perpetual silence in all his life. 'Unlike biblical Job, however, Bontsha lacks the dreams, aspirations, and passion to attain a better life ²' He is ignored and abused by all classes of the society even his own class and everyone used him to their own benefit. This is a general portrait of his disastrous life.

Now, he passes away and leaves this world to the hereafter. There, a series of extraordinary events happen which commence by Bontsha's death. At the very moment he dies, all the angles of different ranks are informed of the event as is 'his reception is excitedly anticipated ³, everyone cries out the news and passes to the others. Hearing the piece of news, all are thrilled and prepare themselves to meet him even God and Abraham (who is called our father). He is saluted as a king and a majestic throne and crown are brought to him and in one word, he is incredibly received in that world. During

all these events, he is still silent and does not believe in his eyes, even dares not to open his eyes to behold something.

There, a heavenly trial ought to be set up for everyone and Bontsha is no exception even though as a formality. The court starts and an angle commences Bontsha's occasions of silence in his first life. He visualizes all his deeds and justifies all of them as a virtue. Among them, for instance, the defending angle mentions his silence when his mother died and he was put under a cruel step-mother's dominance or when he was put into jail and kept silence without complaining or even when he was thrown off by his own child, he never complained. While defending angle is uttering a long list of Bontsha's silences in various occasions, once in a while the prosecutor angle objects and asks for facts not details; he protests against the unending realistic details that the defender points out to prove his innocence and calls some of them irrelevant, immaterial or sometimes he scoffs the defender's pieces of evidence and questions them ridiculously. The defender angle's reaction during all of these objections is the same; giving more examples of Bontsha's life to support and prove his verdict and also to exonerate Bontsha.

However, when the prosecutor perceives the fact that his statements are of no particular significance, he kept a convenient silence and didn't protest anymore. At the beginning of the trial, Bontsha is silent and can never believe that the court had been set up for him, he doesn't believe his ears when he hears his own name, he is thrilled with fear, excitement and doubt. Ultimately, he overcomes his fears and opens up his eyes to see his surrounding and when he realizes that the trial has passed the sentence and has given verdict to his innocence, a permission to enter heaven and use it, he rejoices. 'Although not noted for his holiness, fame, or righteousness, the silent Bontsha is accorded the highest honors to the consternation of some saintly residents'⁴.

At the end of the story, Bontsha is asked to request whatever he wishes since heaven's gifts are all at his disposal. As Ronald Pies (2010) states: "What supernal pleasure or reward does he request, after all his earthly suffering?"⁵ Yet, Bontsha astonishingly smiles and requests for only a piece of bread and butter "Well, then, what I would like, Your Excellency, is to have, every morning for breakfast, a hot roll with fresh butter." A prevailing silence is cast all over heaven, even the creators and defenders of silence feel greatly ashamed of watching this poor man grown in silence. The prosecutor is the only permanent protestor who laughs, a bitter laugh to see all these events.

The theme of the story

Some societies might be categorized into two main groups; one group who is usually the dominant one may be religious authorities or governing class and tend to keep laymen in depression, subjugate them and suggest their own attitudes to them. However, another group who compromise the majority of people is usually the oppressed one who is under total control of the ruling group. But, occasionally the governing class might tend to keep in ignorance, i.e., they justify for their actions in such a way that people take their behavior as if the government protects them; for instance, they suggest people that their catastrophes and disasters are rewarded in the other world or what they suffer from is their predetermined fate and in this way, they content common people with their so-called fate.

Consequently, they admit every sort of cruelty as their fate leading to keeping a permanent silence and remaining weaker and weaker.

But, the harsh reality is that even heaven can not compensate for the oppression they have suffered; since they have been accustomed to weakness and extreme humility and in no situation, they can take their own legitimate rights.

Conclusion

Pinsker (1971) compares Bontsha the silent by Peretz with Isaac Bashevis Singers' famous work "Gimpel the fool" and mentions that for many American readers, the story of Bontsha is a heavy dose of Yiddish sentimentalism, the sort of unadulterated play to the emotions that makes for a parochial, second rate product. (p. 58)

Pinsker considers Bontsha an everyman and states that he thus crystallized the experiences and aspirations of a people who saw themselves reflected, all too clearly in the mirror of his life. In Pinsker's eyes, For Bontsha's silence, his extreme passivity is less a cause for sentimental celebration than it is a call to action. Yet, some relate the story of court and heaven to the emancipation of the spirit in the next world.

They believe that slavery is not just a legal status; it is also a state of mind and Bontsha attained emancipation after his lifelong slavery. Yet, they state that God desires humility- but the true humility of Abraham and Moses, great men willing to argue against Him- not the passive meekness of a Bontsha.⁴

Hartley Mark (2013) also believes that the writer himself along with Bontsha might have been anticipative to obtain heaven after all their suffering on the earth. The author has written the story in 1906, the end of Czars' dominance and the beginning of Bolsheviks' dominance. In Czars' period, religion is considered a powerful lever to justify poverty, disasters and all sorts of affliction which people suffer. On the other hand, Bolsheviks believe in no religion, yet are not anti-religion and generally take a neutral attitude towards religion. The author lives in the society which undergoes these dramatic changes, in a period which religious groups take advantage of people's credulity and account for everything as a fate and suggest people what they suffer is justice and the will of God, hence people are kept in poverty and a wretched situation. The author seems to recapitulate the society's status quo in this story in the best possible way.

Another hypothesis is that the period is also the beginning of Communism and as we know, in communism school of thought, economy is the foundation of everything and materialism prevails all over the communist society. The writer seems to believe that common people take no advantage of this world nor the other world and the main reason for this is their poverty, ignorance and weakness. Thus, it is estimated that the writer criticizes the period leading to Communism.

The powerful dictators seem to even replace the position of God in that world, i.e. the whole scene of heaven and court might mean that the dominant group even would not consider God as a supreme being and take His position by falsifying his exalted principles.

When people are kept oppressed they get accustomed to this situation and even in a nondiscriminatory society having no particular classification and ranks (here, heaven), they can't request their rights and are satisfied with a little (as Bontsha is content with a little bread and cheese).

Footnotes

- 1- The Mendele Review: Yiddish Literature and Language, (A Companion to _MENDELE_)
Available at: <http://yiddish.haifa.ac.il/tmr/tmr03/tmr03013.txt>
- 2- <http://www.enotes.com/topics/bontsha-silent>
- 3- <http://www.enotes.com/topics/bontsha-silent/themes>
- 4- Ibid
- 5- The paragraph adapted from *Ein Eyah* vol. I, p. 44
Available at: <http://ravkooktorah.org/BO59.htm>

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