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The Folk and the Psychological Monologue

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By choosing to transmit their stories through a single character's monologue, both Sholom Aleichem and Jonah Rosenfeld heighten the reader's sense that the tale and its structure result from the 'lived' experience of the protagonist, leaving behind all claims to some allegedly objective realm. The formal limiting of perspective which results from using the monologue form can intensify the connection between the protagonist and his or her audience or it can distance them from one another. The monologue which brings the two together, drawing upon their shared world view and speaking to the realities of their lives, such as Sholom Aleichem's "Hodel", functions as a "folk monologue." The folk monologue stands in contrast with the "psychological monologue", such as Jonah Rosenfeld's "Competitors". The psychological monologue alienates the audience from the speaker by concentrating on the thought processes of the protagonist, conveying the idiosyncratic world of the individual to the extent that that which is familiar to the reader becomes unfamiliar. The folk monologue partakes in the communal consciousness while the psychological monologue stands in opposition to it.

In exemplary folk monologue style, "Hodel" begins with the protagonist, Tevye, addressing the author as though he were inside the framework of the story. "You look, Mr. Sholom Aleichem, as though you

were surprised that you hadn't seen me for such a long time" (p. 168). Tevye (or perhaps we should say Sholom Aleichem by way of Tevye) thereby creates the fiction of himself as author. As the first person narrator, Tevye limits his tale to the realm of his own experiences. Everything he describes he either sees or feels or thinks or understands. There is no one beyond Tevye who can tell the reader the "real" situation, so we must rely on Tevye alone. However, the interplay between Sholom Aleichem the author and Tevye the character, and between Tevye the narrator and Sholom Aleichem the audience, does not allow the reader to have a simple relationship to an authoritative source. Ultimately, we cannot distinguish a single author of the story, because the person whom we would ordinarily call the author (Sholom Aleichem) disclaims this role when he inserts himself as a recipient of the story. One might wish to claim that this is merely a literary device, a tool which does not actually cause confusion about who is truly in charge, but doing so diminishes the brilliance of the device. By making himself a character, Sholom Aleichem acknowledges the role of the characters, of the community, in writing its own story. It comes not from some external observer, but from someone who truly understands the world of the story because it is the world in which he lives. Tevye is not merely a character but he is also an

embodiment, and in that sense Sholom Aleichem is merely a mouthpiece.

We must ask: to what extent does the story stand independent of the reality of the community? Surely the tale has a coherence which results from it being a believable account of the experiences of a single individual as told by that individual. However, the experiences are a product of "current" times, which Tevye refers to as "these days" (p. 169). The word 'current' along with its quotation marks serve an important function here. They acknowledge that even when the story does not speak of a time which we experience - and probably no one experienced it exactly the way Tevye portrays it - in order to read the story we must become Tevye's contemporaries. When Tevye says "well, you know what these match makers are," we find that we do know what he means (p. 174). We are observers who are being introduced to that world, as well as the community who shares the traditions and the hardships.

Even though the story creates an aura of tradition, we do not find a static world. Rather, the thread which holds the story together is the unstoppable influence of change on the community. Tevye begins by speaking of "the troubles and heartaches he has endured" (p. 168). The pain comes from living with the changes as best he can, mediating between the traditional and the new. In "Hodel" the new consists of socialist

revolutionary ideas. Even before Tevye has introduced the reader to the young revolutionary he speaks of "Workers' children. Tailors' and cobblers', so help me God! (p. 169)" Taken together, these phrases capture the tension of the modern/traditional times. For Tevye, the age of the worker must exist without taking away from the realm of God. Since it functions as a folk monologue, "Hodel" takes this world of the comfortingly traditional and the frighteningly new and finds a way for the folk to experience it together with the narrator.

The psychological monologue does not create such a constructive framework out of impending chaos. Rather, through exploring the acute solitude of the individual in relation to the surrounding world, the psychological monologue exposes its audience to the terrifying.

"Competitors" begins with Maier's presentation of his possessions. He lists the furniture in his house, including "a couple of bowlegged stools, and a table with a limp," as being deformed (p. 386). From this first line the reader knows that everything in the unnamed narrator's world is off balance and horrible, but there is no way to escape from him and receive a clear vision. Unlike in the case of the Sholom Aleichem's folk monologue, where the reader trusts the narrator, Jonah Rosenfeld's psychological monologue leads the reader - almost immediately - to wish for an

alternative. When he claims "my old lady sets to pinching me and gouges chunks out of my hide" (p. 387), the description seems inconceivable, and yet we cannot say that it is not so, because the events only happen in so far as they are experienced by the individual.

The psychological monologue does not presume that any reader will understand the world of the monologue, and by inverting reality it intentionally makes it difficult for the reader to do so. Maier's analysis of his relationship to his daughter functions in such a way. After Maier has been beaten by his wife to the point when he runs out of the house, he returns and looks in the window, watching his daughter help get the children ready for bed. Rather than being pleased that he need not work so hard, he thinks "damn her, she's competing with me! I can tell she's glad to be rid of me, and that she's sidling up to Mama to show that they can get along perfectly well without me" (p. 387). This thought seems so strange that the reader has no way of processing it. Is Maier speaking lightheartedly? Is the daughter possibly competing with him? Only by continuing to read can the reader understand the deadly earnest contest in which Maier is engaged, but we still do not know with certainty whether it is all a product of his imagination. And ultimately it is only that which is in his mind which counts, since neither he nor the reader can get beyond it.

The psychological monologue keeps bringing us back to the frustration caused by the limited perspective. It does not allow us to come together as a community, to feel expressed by a narrator. Rather, it forces us to objectify the narrator and view ourselves as cut off from him. The scene where Maier rapes his wife illustrates this.

Thank God, I'll be all right for a while. It was my only way out: my wife must have another baby. Then I would have nothing to fear from my rival... But now I'm in clover - who's afraid of her? With my wife pregnant they won't be getting rid of me so fast. I saw to that. But it was far from easy - she kept pushing me away, and this time she didn't pretend she was asleep. "You beggar, you! Another litter?" she would say, doubling up so I couldn't get to her. I had my work cut out for me, but I made it. It has given me a tremendous satisfaction; I need no longer cower before my wife. I feel a sense of triumph when she stands before me with her pointed belly. I've shown her who wears the pants (p. 391).

He sees the rape as an act of self-defense. Only by having another baby in the house can he secure his own position. And so it is by making himself necessary as a nurse that he proves to his wife that he "wears the pants." He knows that they cannot afford to feed another baby, but the baby does not matter here at all. The baby is merely a playing card. In his mind the human has sunk to the material level. The operative logic is unique to his mind.

The events in the monologue are externalizations of the narrator's internal process. Maier's world becomes increasingly horrific until he

finally leaves his family to go "out into the black world" (p. 396). This going out, however, is the first positive action which he has taken. The entire story has spun downwards into the depths of darkness, with Maier trapped inside. By leaving, by embracing the dark and the horrible which exist outside, Maier has confronted his largest fear, that he will have to leave his home which - in spite of being deforming and dementing - was secure. In the end he must confront himself alone.

The experience of struggling alone stands in contrast to striving as a community. Through the use of a monologue, however, an author can choose to create an atmosphere of either one. The psychological monologue, which plunges into the individual and ultimately solitary experience of the human being, captures the unique perspective of a single person with his or her illogical logic and peculiar distortions. The reader cannot take part fully and, therefore, is led to confront himself or herself as a solitary being. The folk monologue functions oppositely. By expressing the shared experiences of the community, the narrator treats the reader as an insider in his or her world. Where the psychological monologue heightens the reader's awareness of the fragile balance which human beings must maintain in order to survive, the folk monologue adds a layer of cushioning to the fragile construction by bringing the many

experiences together into a life-affirming tale.