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# Structural Irony in Weissenberg's A Shtetl

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I.M. Weissenberg's A Shtetl chronicles the decay of an anonymous town by portraying the failure of its inhabitants to introduce change and revitalize their stagnant way of life. The central manifestation of this failure is the attempt to establish a labor movement in the shtetl, a movement whose thwarted progress is viewed within the novella's subtly ironic structure. The organization of plot and detail undermines those values and aspirations which should guide the characters towards the renewal of their shtetl; instead, these supposed guides are set against one another and contribute to the violence and stasis which dominate the novella. Weissenberg presents a narrative in which individual aspiration is stifled by the prevailing monotony, events of timely significance are trapped within the timeless, empty context of the ritual and seasonal calendar, and characters and details are diminished through repetition, contrast, and opposition. This process of diminishment is perhaps the key to the structure's relation to thematic and ideological aspects of the work, for both the cyclical plot and the hierarchical arrangement of the story's components reinforce the monotony of the shtetl's decline, and the hopelessness of trying to rise above its static lifestyle.

Indeed, stasis appears as the prevailing condition in much

of the fiction devoted to the shtetl. From Aksenfeld, through Mendele, and into the twentieth century, the sustaining, meaningful qualities of religious myth and ritual are displaced by empty forms, and whatever riches may be derived from tradition are reduced to the most basic level of economic transaction. This perspective is evident within the first pages of A Shtetl, in which the men are grouped in the synagogue according to their professions, and Passover is anticipated solely on the basis of how it will effect business. The story as a whole deals with the community's transition from a spiritual to an economic ideology: Yekl's Utopian ideal is that the shtetl be united under the auspices of the Jewish Labor Bund rather than as a kehillat kodesh. But even this vision is defeated by the inability of the characters to see themselves as a collective being. The motivating drive for most of the shtetl dwellers is individual survival. In the wake of Sholom Asch's idealization of the shtetl as a collective hero, Weissenberg shows the absurdity of a community acting as if on one impulse. Insofar as the organization succeeds, it is not because it offers a vital alternative to the traditional ways of the shtetl, but because it can command allegiance without demanding sacrifice or understanding. The novella's structural achievement lies in the way it trivializes its human element in juxtaposition to the ineffectuality of the messianic labor "organization", the physical decay of the shtetl, and the indifference of the natural world. The sense of stasis is all the more overwhelming because, unlike in earlier Yiddish literature, the abundance of human activity here gives an illusion

* the editors omitted some

of progress.

The way in which Weissenberg conveys this world of static activity is threefold: first, through the cyclical nature of the narrative; secondly, through analogies drawn between the conflicting ways of shtetl life; thirdly, through the placement of descriptions and characters. A Shtetl consists of twelve sections (as indicated by breaks in the text),* but it can be more broadly divided into two cycles, each encompassing a distinct rise and fall in the fortune of the organization. The first of these begins with the raising of consciousness among the laborers of the shtetl, peaks with the establishment of the organization and its brief period of effectiveness, and declines into the rivalries and internal strife which lead to the arrest of Yekl, the disenchantment of Itchele, and the town's eruption into violence and murder. There follows a brief section describing Yom Kippur which, while not furthering the action, serves as both the major thematic statement of the story and as a transition between the two cycles. The second cycle, comprising two sections, is approximately one tenth the length of the first. Its brevity is the most striking example of the book's structural originality, for it merely echoes the events that preceed it. Itchele replaces Yekl as the leader of the organization and the strikes resume, continuing throughout the winter. There is the threat of violence, both from within the shtetl and from an anticipated pogrom, but nothing particularly terrible or wonderful happens until Yekl is released from prison, and even then the promise implicit in his return remains unfulfilled: he and his followers are arrested

after their first brief display of revolutionary zeal and the novella abruptly ends. Even the horror and bloodshed of the earlier cycle are unfulfilled in the latter: Pinchele's bullying of Reb Lazar, which led to the old man's death, has its variation here in the anti-climactic confrontation between the butcher Aaron and the prowling youths, while the riot which followed the murder of Chiam-Yosele's father-in-law reappears as the mere anticipation of violence. The story thus repeats itself, but in so doing it does not so much give the impression of continuity as of a winding down, of trivialization and decay. Even the frequent violence is engulfed by the monotony which is incorporated into the structure and narrative style.

As has already been noted, Weissenberg blurs the distinction between traditional and modern values; the progress of the oranization shows traces of the established order. For example, the opening scene in the synagogue and the descriptions of Passover which follow play upon that holiday's status as a celebration of freedom and of spring. We are given no information about the religious observance of Passover in the shtetl, but we do sense that Yekl and his fellow artisans are waging their own war against bondage, and that the time of the year is particularly appropriate for the founding of the organization with its potential for renewal and redemption. Yet, if this beginning suggests a movement towards the revitalization of the shtetl mythology, this goal is never achieved. Just as the meaning behind religious appearances is not revealed, so the ideology behind the labor movement is denied any significance. When Yekl tries to indoctrinate his friends

into the philosophy of the organization, their response is less than encouraging:

> Yekl scolded, and tried to restore order: there was a proclamation to be read! But no one was listening. They were enjoying the fun. Besides, they knew all about "Union" without being told. As Itchele said, "Union meant agreeing to what everyone agreed to." At last Yekl gave up (p.39).

Even Yekl succumbs to the general attitude, in which spectacle takes priority over content and the basic source of motivation is not altruism but the satisfaction of one's material well-being and self-esteem. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the rivalry between Yekl and the representative from the FPS: ideological purpose degenerates into a contest to prove who can produce the prettiest flag and cut the telegraph wires first (without being caught). Every sort of human endeavor, whether religious, professional, or revolutionary, is reduced to mere appearance, to doing one's "duty"(p.38).

A Shtetl's most powerful statement on the futility of instilling meaning into this world of decay comes in the transitional Yom-Kippur section(pp.69-71), especially in the description of the ritual slaughtering of the roosters, a passage which seems to encompass not only the traditional rite of atonement, but also expiation for the violence caused by the organization's collapse:

> That morning the roosters wakened not to crow but to lament, with bitter, mournful cries. "There is no judge and no judgement", their voices called as they were dragged from their roosts, roused from the sweetest of dreams , for the slaughterer in his broad-sleeved smock

> with the slaughter-knife in his teeth was passing from house to house. There was a flurry of feathers and a flapping of wings against the ground. Stifled cries were silenced, and a final gasp or flickering glance was crushed beneath an indifferent boot(p.70).

This passage, occurring after the disastrous completion of the first cycle, is a brilliant metaphor for the senselessness and oppression that by now dominate the novella. The Passover segment created an atmosphere of superficial hope; the corresponding Yom Kippur segment reflects the desolation resulting from that shattered hope. The cries of the roosters echo the human wails that accompanied the death of Chiam-Yosele's father-in-law; however, these animal noises convey more meaning than did the human deaths. Their claim is that there has been no meaning in anything that has come before, nor shall there be in the few remaining pages.

Up to this point I have tried to indicate the broadest structural devices in A Shtetl, i.e., the cyclical disintegration of the plot , and the juxtaposition of distinct but analogous worldviews. However, the book derives much of its richness from specific, seemingly insignificant details. By interspersing variations of a description throughout the narrative and by casting different characters in similar roles, Weissenberg not only conveys a sense of unity but also sets up a hierarchical scheme of the shtetl world. The individual characters are contained within the human society which in turn is contained within the physical shtetl, which is contained, or rather engulfed, within the natural environment. It is significant that the most human elements of the story occupy the lower levels of this hierarchy, while the

most static and inanimate are at the top: human activities command most of our attention in A Shtetl, yet behind them the omnipresent landscape cues us into their insignificance.

The most important pairing of human characters is that which links Yekl and Itchele as successive leaders of the organization; yet the two men are obviously and profoundly different. Yekl is the idealist, possessing some sense of doctrine and a vision of the transformation which the organization is supposed to cause. Although he has no disciples to whom he can communicate these things, they help him to function for a brief period as a leader. Itchele, on the other hand, is completely ignorant of doctrine, but he is more representative of the collective shtetl than Yekl. Whereas Yekl is constant and tenacious, Itchele is fickle and moody; whereas Yekl consciously strives to modernize the shtetl, Itchele assumes leadership almost unwittingly and with no specific program in mind. However, in both cases dedication to the organization is undermined by their sense of themselves as individuals. Yekl fails because the organization becomes for him a means of preserving his self-image as a revolutionary, while Itchele cannot be an effective leader because he sees the organization only as a projection of his personal, inarticulated discontent.

Yekl also passes moral judgement pp. 52, 55, 67

I have concentrated upon these two characters because together they serve to illustrate how Weissenberg uses the individual to undermine, rather than strengthen, the idea of a collective hero; the individual does not unite the human community, but emphasizes its fragmentation. The community in its turn dissolves and is

absorbed by its physical surroundings. The most immediate symbol of these surroundings is the shtetl itself, with its marketplace and synagogue, teashop and factories, and above all its windows which observe in detached silence the human activity on the streets below. Windows provide the central motif through which the shtetl is personified. They appear consistently throughout the descriptions of the town, reflecting the mood of a given moment. During holidays they "[sparkle] invitingly" (p.31), but following the outbreak of violence "shutters [are] closed at the very first sign of nightfall"(p.48). Yet, despite this personification, the shtetl does not share the human characters' delusion of permanence and growth; its disintegration is imminent, as ~~Yekl~~ Itchele observes in a moment of disenchantment:

> Looking around the marketplace at the peaceful little houses with their windows half open, he sensed something he had never sensed before: there, beyond the shtetl, lay such a vast multitude, and here everything was so small, so puny, held together by just a dab of spit.... It occurred to him that if the thousands out there [the Narodovtsi] suddenly decided to have a bit of fun [...] if each of them took from the houses of the Jews no more than a couple of rotting boards apiece and carried them off under his arm, nothing would remain of the shtetl but an empty plot of land(p.55).

Itchele's perception is echoed at the end, as the Bundists are led away by Tzarist police:

> A dreadful fear gripped the heart; what if the street should die, just so, behind its locked shutters, as they were passing through?(p.78)

The question is answered immediately afterwards, in the last line of the novella: what remains is "the wide gray world" whose

presence has been described at crucial points throughout the narrative. Perhaps the most striking of these descriptions is in the idyllic first section, in which the spring thaw floods the fenceposts "like herds of drowning sheep"(p.33). This simile foreshadows both the obliteration of the shtetl itself and the inability of its inhabitants to control their collective and individual destinies. Yet, Weissenberg constantly reminds us that the natural cycle continues, indifferent to the shifting human drama. When the first narrative cycle ends in a surge of violence that plunges the shtetl back into stasis and desolation, we are told that "the sun went on shining anyway. Everything was bathed in light"(p.59). Superficially this is a positive image, indicative of hope, but within the context of A Shtetl's structure it is a devastating denial of hope and a reaffirmation of the ultimate victory of stasis.

That final stasis, in which all pretence to vitality is swallowed up by the landscape, leaves us with the impression that, despite the novella's complexity, nothing has happened after all. Actually, a great deal has happened, over and over again, but to no lasting effect. The brilliance of the novel's structural irony lies in its allowing the reader to see what the characters cannot see--that they are destined to act within the deadly, monotonous cycle of the shtetl world until they share in its final dissolution.

An excellent, well-written analysis. I would appreciate a xerox copy for my files.

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