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## AGNON PAPER

One of the most intriguing aspects of Agnon's A Simple Story is the title itself. Certainly on the surface, it is a fitting title for this seemingly straightforward account of bourgeois shtetl life and its struggles. But does the title actually refer to the narrative itself, or to some meta-narrative that overhangs the events that unfold? What simple story are we really reading in Agnon's novel?

In the first two-thirds of the book, the narrative itself is as straightforward as it is disturbing. There isn't a single character in this work who isn't irksome in some way. The novel constantly teases us. We expect to find a classic novel that explores the tensions between passionate love and bourgeois banality, and yet we are left frustrated. It would seem as if there was something almost unspoken that is working against the love-conquers-all motif--some kind of counter-narrative, a simple story, that either attracts or repulses the different characters. ✓

Certainly by the end of the book, we must conclude that Agnon is mocking our expectations of romantic love. But he also leaves us with an ironic replacement for this expectation of love, and this replacement--the message of the simple story--is the promise of redemption for Hirshl and his family.

As the story unfolds, it is the omniscient narrator himself who is the most irksome presence in the novel. He introduces us to Blume and the Hurvitzes, and seems almost an accomplice to the crime of Blume's servitude. Never once does he directly reflect

on the injustice of her treatment. Never once does he directly denounce the bourgeois excesses of the Hurvitz lifestyle. True, he will tell us of Blume's loneliness perhaps, but we are left longing for someone to step in and decry the world of the Hurvitz family. Instead, we are left with a narrator who justifies the bourgeois world:

. . .Nor, since [Blume] was family, was there any need to pay her a wage. "After all," said Tsirl to her husband, "she is one of us, isn't she? He who rewards us will reward her too." It might have seemed that Blume was being taken advantage of; yet anyone considering the matter closely would have concluded that Tsirl was right. After all, was it conceivable that, when Blume's time came to marry, Tsirl would beg a dowry for her form some local charity? . . .

It would almost seem as if the narrator was as bourgeois as his characters, participating the bourgeois-induced haze that blinds them to everything except class-distinctions and social norms. He is Jewish, very Jewish, sprinkling his speech with "God in heaven"s and the like, and yet he presents us with Tsirl and Baruch Meyer, whose greatest joy in life is counting their earnings at the end of each day, and it is up to us alone to judge them. And yet this same narrator ultimately takes us on a journey through Hirshl's madness, and to his finding peace and redemption. It is the narrator who leaves us with a sense that there may yet be something more to believe in than bourgeois norms. The narrator, like all the characters in this book, is paradoxical. He is deeply Jewish, and yet he is cut off from the values of the tradition. While his speech is in the idioms of

Torah, he has somehow strayed from the belief that to lose Torah is to lose everything. To the contrary, in supporting--and sometimes downright justifying--the Hurvitz's bourgeoisie, the narrator presents a world where the marketplace and social convention are the true purveyors of meaning, not Torah and the tradition.

Agnon's artistry is in his presentation of this all-pervasive paradox in 1906 shtetl life. Not only is the narrator fraught with paradox, but all the characters are as well. Hirshl, Baruch Meyer, and Gedalia are seemingly pious men. There are numerous references to their davening, and their attendance at synagogue. We read how Hirshl davens slower than his father, taking the time for greater kavanah. We see how Baruch Meyer longs to be with his community davening Slichot as he rides on a train to pick up his son. We see the deep piety of Gedalia, who knew that a

sukkah was no place for idle talk. His prayer book open before him, he sat praying that God would make the world His tabernacle as His people had made the sukkah theirs. (p. 55)

Yet all three men betray their piety even as they live a tradition-infused lifestyle. Hirshl had left the Beit Midrash at a young age, foiling his parents' admirable hopes that he might become a rabbi. In his adulthood, he preferred to spend his evenings reading the newspaper at the Zionist club than studying at the Beit Midrash. And both Boruch Meyer and Gedalia ultimately succumb to bourgeois values rather than Torah values.

Boruch Meyer is all too eager to please everyone, most of all his wife Tsirl, who stands as the strongest figurehead of the bourgeois shtetl, whose sole purpose at the store is to size up customers for their monetary worth. And while she too lives with the traditions of Jewish life, she almost openly disdains them. True, she had hoped that her son would become a rabbi. But her reason for this hope was to break a rabbi's curse of insanity that was put on her grandfather. Pious motives do not occur to her. As for Gedalia, we wonder if his piety is more motivated in response to his constant fear of impending financial ruin than for any other reason. Gedalia, furthermore, is married to Bertha, another paragon of glutinous bourgeoisie, and together, they see to it to raise their daughter caring more for clothes and niceties than for anything else.

Nice!

Indeed, by the end of the first two-thirds of the book, Agnon has artfully used the medium of paradox to create a world of stifled spirituality and stifled passion. And the character of Tsirl lies at the heart--both physically and metaphorically--of this stifling mechanism at work in the shtetl. She is physically at the heart of the store that dominates the marketplace that lies at the center of the shtetl's values. She is the heart that withholds love both in the community and for her family. She has her husband and son wrapped around her finger, and her greatest goal is social respectability. The unseemly memory of an insane grandfather and uncle motivate her to achieve her goal, and to stamp out the insanity from her

family. Paradoxically, it is her very efforts at controlling her world and her son that ultimately drive him to insanity.

Thus, Hirshl is the tragic victim of his mother's paradoxical struggle. He is the living battle ground where bourgeois values clash with the ill-defined "something more" that is missing in their lives and in their shtetl. The character of Blume serves as the personification of everything that Hirshl cannot attain because of his plight. It is fitting the Agnon chose the medium of the classic *roman* for telling this story. The paradigm of unrequited love provides a perfect medium for the all-pervasive sense of spiritual exile even within the shtetl. good

The narrator describes Blume almost exclusively in reverential tones. As with all the characters, she is described with omniscience, but never is there a probing beneath the surface, beneath her own self-conception in a way that can lay bare her inner motivations. One is almost reminded of the biblical narrative that describes only the actions of the patriarchs, and only rarely does it hint at their inner drives. While in our work, we are given considerably more information about Blume's thoughts and feelings, she is still enigmatic to us, perhaps almost as much as she is to Hirshl. She is personally ascetic and hardworking. She accepts full responsibility for her actions and her fate without complaint. She is admirable in that she is unmoved by the bourgeois world of her shtetl, but it is difficult to determine if she can be moved by anything at all. She is inherently mysterious and Other. In

her stoicism, she is a mystery to her father, a man of deep sensitivity and devotion to learning and the tradition. And she is equally a mystery, an Other, to Hirshl a product of bourgeois Jewish life.

She does not struggle with either end of the paradox, and as such she is the energizing force of the story, a force of great attraction to Hirshl who longs to escape the paradox. This is the great irony of the love-story format of this novel. Even from its inception, the love between Hirshl and Blume is subverted in that it leads us to question whether the love was ever real in the first place. There is certainly attraction between the two, and Hirshl's swooning crush on her cannot be in any doubt. Her enigmatic inaccessibility is the basis for Hirshl's attraction. Hirshl's passionate devotion to Blume, however, is really fired when Tsirl officially forbids their association. It becomes a maddening passion for Hirshl after years of total separation and a life of confinement in the store with his mother and at home with his shallow and bourgeois wife.

Blume Nacht is the only character in the novel who truly does live up to her namesake: she is the flower that blossoms in the night, a source of great beauty that cannot be seen because it is shrouded in darkness. She becomes a kind of mythic goddess of otherness, living out on the periphery of town, away from the marketplace, on Synagogue street where only one wall of the old synagogue still stands. She is more archetype of otherness than an intimately cherished woman.



Can we call Hirshl's love for Blume-as-goddess a real love story? Is romantic love even possible? These are the ironic questions that arise out of this love-story novel. It would seem that the real story beneath the story--the simple story--arises with Hirshl's journey to and out of madness. Hirshl's love for Blume ultimately is his expression of his profound resentment of his mother, a woman whom he cannot contradict in any way. When she puts an end to his encounters with Blume and marries him off to a woman more fitting of his family station, he becomes a seething and brooding man, questioning his world and his place in his world. His refusal to eat meat and his fascination for the angry goose serving bowl at one family glutinous meal bespeaks his growing alienation.

His own fascination for his family madness is his first act of lashing out at his mother and what she represents. Hirshl wonders, as we do, if the madness of his forbears was in fact insanity, or perhaps a well planned escape from their stifling existence. The uncle who engaged in academic learning and then went off into the forest to live on berries may indeed have simply felt the same alienation that Hirshl was now experiencing. And so madness itself becomes more and more attractive for Hirshl as the only way to achieve the very otherness, the escape from the paradox, that Blume represents.

In and of themselves, paradoxes can be maddening, and it is of little surprise the Hirshl himself goes mad. Madness was Hirshl's destiny both as the repressed bourgeois son of Tsirl,

and as the inheritor of a generations-old rabbinic curse. Madness is also Hirshl's salvation as well. Unable to escape from the clutches of his world in any other way, madness provides him with a way out of his mother's clutches and into the care of Dr. Langsam.

Dr. Langsam is the ultimate savior not only of Hirshl in this story, but his wisdom provides a potential solution to the paradoxical world of Hirshl's shtetl as well. Dr. Langsam is somehow magically able to see through Hirshl's madness. He asks no questions, and administers no drugs. His sole therapy is to talk to Hirshl, and to provide him with a story, over and over. He tells him the story of his village. It is the story of the shtetl during a simpler time, some forty years previous, where people lived simple, down to earth lives and cherished the tradition and learning Torah. The salvational story that Dr. Langsam tells Hirshl over and over is the Simple Story. It is a story free of the contradictions and paradox of Hirshl's shtetl.

Clearly, Dr. Langsam represents Agnon himself, who also fondly recalled his youth in a small town in Russia. Perhaps more accurately, the relationship of Dr. Langsam to Hirshl best describes Agnon himself, a man who left his traditional youth for a secular life and then returned to a pious life. Agnon himself may have known alienation and a romantic attraction to otherness not unlike Hirshl, and then found his way back to a lifestyle of simple piety.

Dr. Langsam's Simple Story provided the missing piece, the



"something more" that was missing in Hirshl's life and world. Hirshl was living in an observant Jewish world, but it was a world devoid of any real meaning. The synagogues, the davening, the sukkot were all there, but in the turbulent changes of the early twentieth century, their meaning was rapidly getting lost. And so Dr. Langsam put an end to the madness by providing the "myth" of the simple, pious shtetl life (to use a Gillman reference) that had been forgotten by Hirshl's family and community. The bottom had fallen out on Hirshl's world because  
✓ his world had no foundation. Dr. Langsam, in telling the story, provided a foundation of meaning that enabled Hirshl to return to sanity, and to find meaning in his life.

Thus, Hirshl returns home with the ability to <sup>g</sup>know take his own place in his world. He is no longer chained to his mother; his is now the provider of meaning for his own life. And thus, he is able to find love and passion in his marriage to Mina, and ultimate meaning in his children, particularly in his newborn at the end of the novel, a child who has so many names that the one he was given at birth was forgotten. This child symbolizes Hirshl's ultimate freedom and the redemptive hope for the future. His son would not be chained to his name, his rigid role to either live out or react against. His son would know that life is about meaning, the meaning that comes from simple piety and devotion to family and the simple things that matter in life.

Was this novel a love story? It was a love story turned on its head. We end the story with Hirshl as a man who has indeed

found love in his life, but not the mere romantic love that we would expect to find in this novel genre. He has found a truer kind of love: he found the love that comes when life is lived for meaning, for Jewish meaning; his love was the greater love for a child whose life is a promise of a life lived free of maddening paradoxes, and full of simple truth.

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You wrestle with the novel's paradoxes with great skill and intelligence.

For Agnon to prod and irritate the reader out of his or her state of complacency has its merits--provided there is some point to it. But is there a point? Your introduction boldly points out that Agnon's novel seems to irritate for irritation's sake. Does this irksome and frustrating teasing make for great literature? And is the promise of redemption, which you consider the message of the simple story, overly didactic and potentially tiresome as Agnon works it out? Your conclusion hints at this.

You make a strong case for the fact that most of the older characters (including the untrustworthy narrator) use their Judaism like an oldtime Hollywood set which is faithful only in its outward surfaces. In the end, you imply they inhabit a neither-fish-nor-fowl world, which you aptly describe as one of "stifled spirituality and stifled passion." But the coming brave new world seems somehow bearable for this older generation (especially for Tzirl). Their emotional foundations are grounded after all in the solid, intergrated older world which shaped them and remains in their memories. Hirshl however born into Tzirl's world seems to have no grounding and only a watered-down usable past. No small wonder the impact of Blume's entry into his fragile world cuts him loose from whatever moorings he has. With apologies to Milton, Agnon's story seems to be one of Closure Lost and Closure Regained. This seems to be what you are saying regarding the "something more" which has gone missing in Hirshl's life.

It's exactly right on your part to assess the real story of the novel as arising from Hirshl's journey into and out of madness. He has lost his hold on his world, shaky as it was. Dr. Langsam gives him back another world, a simple, mythic pious shtetl life reintegrated on Hirshl's own terms, or so Langsam allows him to believe it has been.

While it violates the halacha of literary criticism to cite Agnon's person saga in connection with Hirshl's ordeal, the elucidation you provide by doing so is worth it. But is it sufficient to say that Hirshl found his way back "to a lifestyle of simple piety?" There are those who, in order to keep on living, must simply exchange one set of illusions for another. Could that be what Hirshl did?

It may be that Agnon has slyly cast Blume, not as a potential lover, but as the "structural villain" of the novel which like any villain of a classic comedy must be pushed out of the action at the end in order for there to be happily-ever-after closure. If it is a given that Hirshl's inner world is fundamentally precarious, then Blume's otherness is just not usable. After genuine personal suffering, what Dr. Langsam may have helped Hirshl achieve is inner homeostasis rather than a renewed life of love "lived for meaning, for Jewish meaning" as you state.