From the Fool to the Sage: An Analysis on the Narrative Methods in *Gimpel the Fool*

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In one of his short stories *Gimpel the Fool*, I. B. Singer renders a fool, Gimpel, who ultimately transforms himself into a sage. The narrative structure of the story contributes a lot to the characterization and the molding of the theme. This paper attempts to expound how Gimpel’s transformation, through the major conflicts in the story, is accomplished by analyzing the narrative methods used, i.e. interior monologue, direct speech as opposed to indirect speech.

**Keywords**: *Gimpel the Fool*, fool, sage, narrative methods

**Introduction**

Isaac Bashevis Singer, an American Jewish writer and Noble Prize laureate, creates numerous Jewish characters in his short stories, among which, *Gimpel the Fool* depicts an anti-hero, Gimpel, who transforms himself from a fool to a sage amid the lies- and viciousness-filled world.

“Fool” is a frequently dealt-with subject in literature. What distinguishes *Gimpel the Fool* from others lies in not only the character himself, but also the unique narrative methods which help to mold the figure and reveal the theme.

*Gimpel the Fool*, the title itself suggests it is a story of a “schlemiel”. At the beginning of the story, the narrator enumerates seven synonyms of “fool” used by others to address Gimpel. “There are two basic types of characters in American Jewish novels, registering both the richness of Jewish cultural sustenance and the conceptual frame of Jewish existence: schlemiel and victim” (Qiao, 2007, p. 185). Gimpel “elevates credulity to a conscious even sophisticated—tactic for survival” (Friedman, 1988, p. 189), and “By virtue of the holy simplicity that led him to apprehend God’s truth beyond Frampol’s lies, Gimpel the fool truly becomes Gimpel the sage” (Friedman, 1988, p. 192).

**The First-Person Perspective and Interior Monologue**

The conflict in the story lies between Gimpel and those deceiving him in the town.

The story is narrated in the first person in that it is able to reveal the inner thoughts of the hero thus arousing the empathy from the part of readers in experiencing all that Gimpel goes through, and simultaneously, its being limited to the first person allows for the account of others’ behavior only, thus psychologically alienates readers from the town people depicted. As a result, the environment in which Gimple lives is strengthened with all the indifference, estrangement, unfriendliness, and even wickedness.
With no chance to resist, Gimpel suffers deception and dispels the ridicule in his unique way. The first-person narrative conveys every effort Gimpel has made to survive in the vicious environment which signifies the trial and tribulation of the Jewish throughout history, against which, Gimpel’s determination to survive also implies the vitality Jewish people possess through the days of diaspora.

Gimpel never admits himself to be a fool, which is shown in the beginning of the story. “I am Gimpel the fool. I don’t think myself a fool. On the contrary. But that’s what folks call me” (Singer, 2011, p. 3).

When becoming the laughing stock of the folks in the town, the marginalized Gimpel is not able to fight against all the lies and fooling but to dispel the viciousness by unique means that help him to come to terms with the world, which is conveyed in interior monologues in the story as follows.

When others lie to him that his parents have stood up from the grave, Gimpel reacts:

To tell the truth, I knew very well that nothing of the sort had happened, but, all the same, as folks were talking, I threw on my wool vest and went out. Maybe something had happened. What did I stand to lose by looking? (Singer, 2011, p. 4)

Before Gimpel’s wedding, he is tricked into believing that his fiancé Elka is a virgin. It is not until the day when the marriage contract is being drawn up that Gimpel gets to know Elka is both a widow and divorced woman. This is what Gimpel responds: “It was a black moment for me. But what was I to do, run away from under the marriage canopy?” (Singer, 2011, p. 5).

Seventeen weeks after the wedding, Elka gives birth to a boy, apparently an illegitimate child whose father is unidentified. Despite this, Gimpel accepts the child. In the constant abuse out of hysteria and threat of divorce from Elka, Gimpel contemplates: “Another man in my place would have taken French leave and disappeared but I’m the type that bears it and says nothing. What’s one to do? Shoulders are from God, and burdens too” (Singer, 2011, p. 8).

When Gimpel reveals Elka’s adultery to the rabbi, the rabbi advises him to get a divorce. However, Gimpel changes his mind by lying to the rabbi so as to save Elka. Not long after that, Elka gives birth to a girl, upon which the whole town goes wild. Gimpel reacts: “However, I resolved that I would always believe what I was told what’s the good of not believing? Today it’s your wife you don’t believe; tomorrow it’s God Himself you won’t take stock in” (Singer, 2011, p. 9).

It’s evident that in all the above four monologues, Gimpel goes through two stages in his introspection. First, he realizes he is fooled and wronged; second, he manages to dispel all of this with rhetorical questions showing the dilemma he is in, and the inability of an outcast of the environment.

It is worth noticing that in the last monologue, Gimpel mentions “wife” and “God”, which are in fact the faith that Gimpel holds fast to in surviving: family and religion.

Gimpel shows incredible tolerance to Elka despite her constant abuse, curse, and even her adultery that Gimpel has meant to report. Gimpel forgives every sin his wife commits and protects her and even her illegitimate child. The seemingly ridiculous marriage is a disgrace to Gimpel, thus making him a laughing stock of the whole town; nevertheless Gimpel never ceases to give his unyielding love and support to family. “The survival of Jewish people largely depends on the bond to tradition. In families, fathers enjoy supremacy” (Qiao, 2008, p. 268). In Gimpel’s conception, the role of either father or husband is of crucial importance. Being an alienated fool, he is forced to accept a wife imposed by others in a ridiculously mischievous manner. Once he is married, he values his role of a husband and later a father so much that he tries all his means to fulfill the duty, which are both out of obligation and enjoyment against all odds. Quite contrary to his usual tolerance, Gimpel
bears a surprisingly aversion to the illegitimate child carried by Elka before the marriage. It is not only because of the disloyalty from the part of Elka but also the Gimpel’s firm conviction in marriage, to which those don’t belong are worth despising. The irreplaceable marriage and family impel Gimpel to sustain his life through pain and torture, a Jewish convention dramatized by Singer in the story.

To Gimpel, religion is his spiritual support. Every time he is in bewilderment, he turns to the rabbi for help. Upon Elka’s death, the evil in him is evoked, and he is determined to revenge the town’s people. It is Elka’s spirit in Gimpel’s dream that helps to change his mind: “‘You fool!’ she said. ‘You fool! Because I was false is everything false too? I never deceived anyone but myself. I’m praying for it all, Gimpel. They spare you nothing here.’” (Singer, 2011, p. 13).

Elka, in the form of God’s messenger, delivers that good and evil will be rewarded. Gimpel saves himself by terminating his plan for revenge. He sets out on his wandering with his prayer shawl and his cherished memory of Elka. “When the time comes I will go joyfully. Whatever may be there, it will be real, without complication, without ridicule, without deception. God be praised; there even Gimpel cannot be deceived” (Singer, 2011, p. 14).

With reverence to God and emotional attachment to Elka, Gimpel wanders in the world as a pilgrim, transforming from a fool into a sage. In a certain sense, fool is a mask under which Gimpel is able to survive against all the exclusion and alienation, and a shelter in which all the ridicule and deception are dispelled. Meanwhile, in his inner self, the cherishment of the convention of family and conviction in God constitute his spiritual world, in which his puzzles are resolved by God, his forgiveness of Elka’s disloyalty is rendered, his own wickedness is deterred by God through the messenger Elka. In the last moment of his life, he waits for his beloved wife in peace.

**Direct Speech vs. Indirect Speech**

Gimpel’s transformation from a fool to a sage is both conveyed by his introspection: interior monologue and external inspection: dialogue.

The dialogues between characters are in the form of either direct speech or indirect speech. With quotation marks in direct speech, “it gives an indispensable sound effect” (Shen & Wang, 2010, p. 157).

For instance, there is a talk between Gimpel and Elka when the former finds out that the latter gives birth to a boy seventeen weeks after the wedding.

“Gimpel,” said she, “why are you silent? Has your ship gone and sunk?”
“What shall I say?” I answered. “A fine thing you’ve done to me! If my mother had known of it she’d have died a second time.”
She said, “Are you crazy, or what?”
“How can you make such a fool,” I said, “of one who should be the lord and master?”
“What’s the matter with you?” she said. “What have you taken it into your head to imagine?”
I saw that I must speak bluntly and openly. “Do you think this is the way to use an orphan?” I said. “You have borne a bastard.”
She answered, “Drive this foolishness out of your head. The child is yours.”
“How can he be mine?” I argued. “He was born seventeen weeks after the wedding.”
She told me then that he was premature. I said, “Isn’t he a little too premature?” she said, she had had a grandmother who carried just as short a time and she resembled this grandmother of hers as one drop of water does another. She swore to it with such oaths that you would have believed a peasant at the fair if he had used them. To tell the plain truth, I didn’t believe her. (Singer, 2011, pp. 6-7)
The above dialogue begins with direct speech and ends up in indirect speech with Elka’s arrogant and domineering tone gradually being overshadowed by the truth revealed by Gimpel. There is an evident decrease in the credibility of Elka’s defense. “Novelists are good at maneuvering the power of the dialogue by means of direct or indirect speech. The indirect speech in the third person narrative besides the past tense exerts alienation and distance the reader from the protagonist” (Shen & Wang, 2010, p. 157). In the quoted dialogue, Gimpel’s words are all in direct speech, whose credibility is out of question, arousing sympathy from the reader. In the confrontation, Elka becomes the fool and Gimpel, the wiser.

Gimpel reports Elka’s adultery to the rabbi, who immediately decides to send Elka away as punishment. Gimpel has the first talk about it with the rabbi.

I said to the rabbi, “What shall I do?”
“You must divorce her at once,” said he.
“And what if she refuses?” I asked.
He said, “You must serve the divorce. That’s all you’ll have to do.”
I said, “Well, all right, Rabbi. Let me think about it.”
“There’s nothing to think about,” said he. “You mustn’t remain under the same roof with her.”
“And if I want to see the child?” I asked.
“Let her go, the harlot,” said he, “and her brood of bastards with her.” (Singer, 2011, p. 9)

In the above dialogue, the direct speech denotes the rabbi is loud and clear in his resoluteness and scorn on Elka against Gimpel’s indecisiveness. After one sleepless night, Gimpel makes up his mind to forgive Elka, and the following is the account of the communication between him and the rabbi:

In the morning I went to the rabbi and told him that I had made a mistake. The rabbi wrote on his quill, and he said that if that were so he would have to reconsider the whole case. Until he had finished I wasn’t to go near my wife, but I might send her bread and money by messenger. (Singer, 2011, p. 9)

The above conversation is recorded in indirect speech in that Gimpel has to lie to the Rabbi to shield Elka from punishment, which distances the character from the reader, producing the tone of falsehood and thus strengthening the quality of forbearing that a sage instead of a fool is able to possess.

Conclusion

In the town of Frampol, Gimpel is treated by people with ridicule and deception. In his life full of vicious lies and hostility, Gimpel is not able to resist, not to mention retaliation. Despite all the mental states that he has been through: struggle, torture, and the urge to report Elka’s disloyalty, Gimpel compromises himself with the wicked world in his own way, a seemingly foolish but in fact a wise and philosophical way. The way saves Elka in her final plea for forgiveness before death and enables Gimpel to seek solace from God constantly, thus confronting the vicious world and transforming himself from a fool into a sage, which is all conveyed adequately by Singer’s narrative methods.

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