

**IDENTITY AND RACE WITHIN INTRA- AND INTERRACIAL
RELATIONSHIPS IN BERNARD MALAMUD'S SELECTED
SHORT STORIES**

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INTRODUCTION

One of the world's oldest religions is Judaism which is also one of the most ubiquitous religions on Earth. Jews were present in the Thirteen Colonies, also known as the Thirteen British Colonies, and therefore in the United States of America since the mid-seventeenth century, but only in small numbers.¹ Large-scale Jewish immigration started in the second half of the nineteenth century after the antisemitic laws started to spread across Europe.

However, the immigration of Jews into the United States transformed the racially divided society – the white and the Black – into a more complex one. Jews, given their common historical memory, vocabulary, religion and cultural patterns, defined themselves as a separate group and the society of the United States also viewed them as a separate ethnicity from whites and blacks. From the time of the large-scale migrations – both internal and external – in the nineteenth century, growing anti-Semitism also caused a shift in the Jews' mentality about their place in the society, beginning to view themselves as white.²

This phenomenon was even more enhanced by the Second World War, when Jews had to maintain their whiteness while also trying to maintain their unique culture and traditions. The American Jews sometimes feared to be treated similarly to the Afro-Americans; however, as they were also a minority, Jews could highly empathize with them, which put a strain on the two ethnicity's relationship.

Concerning the first-generation and the second-generation American Jews, it can be acknowledged that there were different ways of adapting into American society. For example, some Jews were assimilated into the society by pressure from the outside events, some Jews were acculturated, and some chose apostasy. Defining the meaning of these words may be able to give a fuller picture of what it is like to be part of a separate culture while trying to blend into another. Cultural assimilation is a process in which a minority group – in this case, Jewish Americans – try to resemble the majority group's values and behaviours. Although there are many types of assimilation, in multicultural communities the cultural integration is the phenomenon which can be observed most of the time, when the society's majority sets up a set of rules and social norms and the minority follows it while trying to retain their original culture.

¹ Atkin, Maurice; et al. (2007). "United States of America". In Berenbaum, Michael; Skolnik, Fred (eds.). *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Vol. 20 (2nd ed.). Detroit: Macmillan Reference. 305.

² Waxman, C. I. (2006). Race, Ethnicity, and Religion in American Jewish Identity [Review of *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*, by E. L. Goldstein]. *Jewish Political Studies Review*, 18(3/4), 151–155.

Acculturation is a process of cultural, psychological, and social changes that stems from the balancing of two cultures while adapting to the dominant culture of the given society. Individuals adjust to their new cultural environment while holding onto their own cultural values and traditions.³ A good example of this is when Jewish Americans celebrate Valentine's Day while also celebrating Tu B'Av, which is the Jewish version of Valentine's Day.

Apostasy, on the other hand does not try to merge cultures together or try to find the middle path of belonging into a society; it is the abandonment of a religion. We can observe this behaviour in one of Bernard Malamud's short stories, "The Jewbird", where second-generation Jewish Americans try to completely assimilate into the American society by becoming apostates.

While it is relatively easy for Jewish-Americans to blend into the American society, the African American minority cannot do so easily, which again, may be responsible for the strain on the two minorities' relationship. Even though some literary works state that Black-Jewish relations is a textual construction and try to undermine and problematize the realness of Black-Jewish relations (which is going to be discussed later on), more and more works are concentrating on the realness of this relationship between the two ethnicities.⁴ It is a cultural and historical phenomenon which is worthy of further inspection, especially because Jewish Americans can relate to the African American minority in a way as no one else can.

Bernard Malamud was one of the Jewish American writers in the twentieth century who concentrated on first- and second-generation Jewish Americans' relations, Black-Jewish relations, and the relationships between Jewish Americans and other minorities. This paper is going to examine the first- and second-generation Jewish mentality, the question of identity, and the Black-Jewish interracial relationships in the United States through Bernard Malamud's short stories.

³ Jacob, L. M. (2020). Acculturation. Salem Press Encyclopedia.

⁴ Rubinstein, R. (2002). Review: Textualizing Black-Jewish Relations: Karen Brodtkin. How Jews Became White Folks And What That Says About Race In America. And Emily Budick. Blacks And Jews In Literary Conversation. And Adam Newton. Facing Black And Jew: Literature As Public Space In Twentieth-Century America. And Ethan Goffman. Imagining Each Other: Blacks And Jews In Contemporary American Literature. *Prooftexts*, 22(3), 392–402.

1. THE JEWISH AMERICANS AND THE JEWISH MENTALITY AND IDENTITY IN THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY; FIRST- AND SECOND-GENERATION JEWISH AMERICANS RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH MALAMUD'S SELECTED SHORT STORIES

For an attempt at understanding the Jewish American mentality, the historical background of the minority and the United States is indispensable. Between 1870 and 1920, nearly three million Jews arrived in the United States as immigrants,⁵ mainly due to the rapid economic growth and the strengthening of antisemitism in Europe. The Gilded Age's industrialisation between 1870 and 1900 demanded an increasing level of unskilled labour force, which drew many immigrants, and therefore, Jews into America's largest cities, especially New York.

After the Gilded Age came the Progressive Era, which spanned from the 1890s to 1920s. The main objectives of this era were addressing the problems of immigration, industrialisation, and corruption. Civil rights issues also emerged, which concerned African Americans and other non-white minorities, because racial integration was viewed by the majority of Progressives as a challenge to be overcome rather than a desirable outcome.⁶

After the First World War, and the events in Russia in 1917, the United States enacted the Immigration Act of 1918, so that undesirable aliens, particularly anarchists, communists, labour organizers, and similar activists, could be arrested and deported by the government.⁷ The vast majority of those arrested were Italians, Eastern Europeans, and Jews.⁸

However, the United States still provided protection from the ever-growing antisemitism in Europe, till the Immigration Act of 1924, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act. The Immigration Act of 1924 restricted the number of immigrants who could enter the United States through a national origins' quota, which provided immigration visas to 2% of the total number of each nationality in the United States.

⁵ Diner, H. (2012). The Encounter between Jews and America in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 11(1), 3–25.

⁶ Durrheim, Kevin; Dixon, John (2005). *Racial Encounter: The Social Psychology of Contact and Desegregation*. Routledge. pp. 134–135.

⁷ Avrich, Paul (1991). *Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 130–136.

⁸ Smith, Page (1985). *America enters the world: A people's history of the Progressive Era and World War I*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

By the early twentieth century, American Jewish journalists, rabbis, and others had joined a growing attack on American race relations. They admonished the United States about the omnipresence of racism and urged the country to live up to its liberal and inclusive creed.

The strong connection between African Americans and Jewish Americans was articulated by their actions at that time; Jews made up half of the white people who created the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (1909); They also helped to fund and form the National Urban League (1911), and the Jewish press, both in English and Yiddish viewed African Americans as their partners in misfortune.⁹

By the early twentieth century, however, Jewish Americans not only fought for civil rights, but also for their own religious rights. Jewish Americans fought against the Christian majority which would want to declare the United States as a Christian nation. This new assertiveness affected Jewish communities throughout the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, as American Jews aspired to redefine Judaism and the nature of Jewish life. Judaism was viewed as a changeable concept that the Jews could shape to match their beliefs, tastes, and sensibilities. In terms of vitally important aspects such as language, governance, and institutional structure, American Jews developed religious practices and institutions that worked for them as Americans.¹⁰

Between the 1910s and 30s, a new Jewish American generation was brought up by their immigrant parents. The Jewish minority sought education, not wanting to be condemned to labour as lower-class workers like their ancestors. More and more Jewish Americans started to take on white-collar jobs and live amongst the American middle-class. However, this brought another threat to Jewish identity; getting a higher education resulted in a higher chance of assimilation. Public schools also sought to Americanize children by promoting American values and traditions.

Bernard Malamud's short story, "The Jewbird" also supports the threats of this generational gap between first generation Jewish immigrants and second-generation Jewish Americans. "The Jewbird" is set in post-World War II, Brooklyn. The main character is Schwartz, who is a crow that is able to communicate. One day, he flies into a flat, which is occupied by a family: Mr. Harry Cohen, a salesman, the father, Mrs. Edie Cohen, the mother, and their son, Maurie

⁹ Diner, H. (2012). The Encounter between Jews and America in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 11(1), 3–25.

¹⁰ Diner, H. (2012). The Encounter between Jews and America in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 11(1), 3–25.

(Morris). Mr. Cohen is wary of the bird and wants him out of their home, but Edie and Maurie are able to convince him to let the bird stay for a little while, because Schwartz was running away from the “Anti-Semites”.

Time flies, months go by, and Mr. Cohen is getting more and more enraged day by day at the bird, even though Schwartz helps his son, Maurie with schoolwork, and keeps the child company, just like a traditional Jewish father would do. The father starts to antagonize the old bird, spoils his food, does not let him sleep, and even brings a cat home to get Schwartz to leave, but he has nowhere else to go, so he just puts up with the tormenting by his host. One day, Mr. Cohen cannot take it anymore and throws Schwartz down from the balcony, who dies from the impact in the cold streets of Brooklyn.

Mr. Cohen and his family symbolise the second-generation Jewish Americans, while the bird, Schwartz symbolises the Jewish immigrants who did not wish to assimilate into the society, but wished to keep their own traditions and religion. Mr. Cohen does not wish to be different from the average American citizen, he lived the life of an apostate, and he demanded that his family should do the same, while Schwartz is everything they were desperately attempting to forget. When Mr. Cohen throws Schwartz out of the window and condemns him to death, it is like he is attempting to murder every ounce of Jewishness that he has in himself. It is one of the most symbolic moments of the short story.

Schwartz’s character is itself a symbol: a symbol of the past, of tradition, of culture. His physical form as crow might represent adaptability, just like how Jews were able to adapt to many difficult situations throughout their history. The language he speaks apart from English, that is, Yiddish, is the language used by the Jewish in Central and Eastern Europe before the Holocaust. This also symbolises the gap between the first and the second-generation immigrants in the Jewish community.

““But aren’t you a crow?”

“Me? I’m a Jewbird.”

Cohen laughed heartily. “What do you mean by that?”

The bird began dovening. He prayed without Book or tallith, but with passion. Edie bowed her head though not Cohen. And Maurie rocked back and forth with the prayer, looking up with one wide-open eye.

When the prayer was done Cohen remarked, “No hat, no phylacteries?”

“I’m an old radical.””¹¹

Here, one can clearly observe how the Cohen family behaves: the father does not bow his head to the prayer, while the mother does. The child is in wonder – he is not familiar with this kind of behaviour. While Schwartz is recounting the most fundamental piece of the Jewish religion, Mr. Cohen completely dismisses the idea of paying respect to the religion he must have been brought up in, because he is not a Jew anymore, he is an American citizen.

This kind of behaviour is common in people who have assimilated into the society and have given up their own traditions just to fit into the majority. This kind of behaviour also puts strains on relationships, because the assimilated person usually does not want to have any type of connections with the group, they have parted ways with. According to American psychologist Gordon W. Allport, this behaviour is connected to belonging into a group. In his work, *The Nature of Prejudice*, Allport also states that prejudice can encourage assimilation, as the individual may lose himself in the dominant group by the process of losing his customs, speech, and possessions, thus making him indistinguishable from the majority, and this process of identification with the dominant – in this case, the average, white, American citizen – group inflicts self-hatred in the “victims” of assimilation.¹²

Deborah Dash Moore, American Jewish historian also supports this idea in her article, “At Home in America?: Revisiting the Second Generation”. However, she also states that acculturation can happen without assimilation, and that the second-generation Jewish Americans were able to accomplish that.¹³ One can clearly observe that this is not what happened to Mr. Cohen in “The Jewbird”. Gordon W. Allport also discusses a topic which can be related to the behaviour of Mr. Cohen. Allport states that the aggression against one’s own social group roots in blaming a sub-group of one’s own group for which the whole group suffers.¹⁴

At the end of Malamud’s short story, when Maurie finds Schwartz’s dead body in the spring with his mother, Mrs. Edie Cohen, the child asks about the person who could have murdered the bird. His mother’s only answer is, “Anti-Semets.”¹⁵, which is the last line of “The Jewbird”. This is the moment when Mr. Cohen transforms from an annoyed man who threw a bird out of

¹¹ Malamud, B. (1997). *The Complete Stories*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 347.

¹² Allport, W. G. (1954). *The Nature of Prejudice*. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company. 150-151.

¹³ Moore, D. D. (2006). At Home in America?: Revisiting the Second Generation. *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 25(2/3), 163.

¹⁴ Allport, W. G. (1954). *The Nature of Prejudice*. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company. 151-153.

¹⁵ Malamud, B. (1997). *The Complete Stories*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 354.

his window into an aggressor against his own social group, or one could state that he transformed into an enemy. The fact that Edie chooses to use this Yiddish wording for ‘antisemites’ renders this fact even more accentuated.

This kind of hostility against first generation Jewish immigrants is not unheard of in Malamud’s works; Malamud himself belonged to a family of Jewish immigrants, and he was brought up in the United States as a second-generation Jewish American. It is no wonder that he was able to understand all of these socio-cultural shifts in their own social group, mostly because he could have experienced these feelings first-hand.

In another short story of Malamud, “The Lady of the Lake”, the reader can find Mr. Cohen’s more reserved and kinder alter ego, Henry Levin, who goes by the name of Henry Freeman. He is the main character of the short story, from New York – like many Jewish characters of Malamud’s – who seeks to find the love of his life by travelling aboard.

First, Levin travels to Europe and decides to stay in Italy. He changes his name to Henry R. Freeman just to symbolise the change in his life and identity. In Italy, he meets a woman, Isabella, whom he will come to love, but he lies about his identity. When they first meet, Levin tells her that he is not a Jew. The last time when they see each other, Isabella asks about his origin once again, and Levin still denies being a Jew. After this, Isabella uncovers her chest and shows Levin the tattooed number on it, demonstrating that she is a Holocaust survivor, and Isabella cannot marry a man who is not Jewish. After this, Isabella disappears, and Levin is left in a garden, embracing a statue instead of her.¹⁶

“When she revealed her breasts—he could have wept at their beauty (now recalling a former invitation to gaze at them, but he had arrived too late on the raft)—to his horror he discerned tattooed on the soft and tender flesh a bluish line of distorted numbers.

“Buchenwald,” Isabella said, “when I was a little girl. The Fascists sent us there. The Nazis did it.” Freeman groaned, incensed at the cruelty, stunned by the desecration.

“I can’t marry you. We are Jews. My past is meaningful to me. I treasure what I suffered for.”¹⁷

Levin is someone who could pass as Mr. Cohen’s alter ego in another universe – less aggressive, less cold, but still someone who denies his own past and traditions in order to fit into the

¹⁶ Malamud, B. (1997). *The Complete Stories*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 238-258

¹⁷ Malamud, B. (1997). *The Complete Stories*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 256.

standard role of an American citizen, even when he is not in the United States anymore. Only, this denial of Jewish identity cost Levin the love of his life. Levin abandons his own history, his own name, his own identity in order to free himself from the weight of being a Jewish person and wants nothing to do with his heritage, while Isabella treasures her past and heritage, declaring that she had not suffered because she was a Jew but suffered for it.

This reveals a different kind of connotation to the readers: suffering does not come from being Jewish, however, in order to remain one, the individual has to suffer.¹⁸ Just like how Schwartz suffered and eventually died in order to preserve his Jewishness, Isabella also had to endure painful events to continue to be Jewish.

Another short story by Bernard Malamud, “Armistice” can further prove this connection of Jewish identity with inherited suffering. Morris Lieberman is an immigrant in the United States who came from Russia. The short story takes place during the Second World War. Morris is a grocer who lives with his young son, Leonard, while his wife is no longer present. “Armistice” begins in medias res, throwing the reader into a memory of Morris’, when he was still just a boy. Morris witnessed a pogrom against the Jews in Russia:¹⁹

“[He saw] ... a burly Russian peasant seize a wagon wheel that was lying against the side of a blacksmith’s shop, swing it around, and hurl it at a fleeing Jewish sexton. The wheel caught the Jew in the back, crushing his spine. In speechless terror, he lay on the ground before his burning house, waiting to die.”²⁰

With this, the opening lines of the short story shock the reader and the grim atmosphere is preserved throughout the whole work. After this opening, the reader is transported into the present, thirty years later, as Morris listens to the radio reports about the war. He religiously listens to these reports whenever he is able to, on the condition of not letting his own son listen to them. Morris is worried about the war, worried about the chances of Germany winning, and even more worried about his fellow sufferers. He is sometimes accompanied by a man, Gus, who is a German American immigrant, and he is the meat man who supplies his shop with meat. Gus makes him agitated because Gus clearly cares about the German forces, and he would prefer Germany to be successful in winning the war. The German American tirelessly mocks

¹⁸ Joseph Kessler, S. (2017). Bernard Malamud in Italy: Moral Courage and the Choice of Being Jewish in “The Lady of the Lake.” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-), 36(1), 55.

¹⁹ Marovitz, S. E. (2010). Malamud’s Early Stories: In and Out of Time, 1940-1960, with Humor, History, and Hawthorne. *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-), 29, 116.

²⁰ Malamud, B. (1997). *The Complete Stories*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 13.

Morris for listening to the radio and suffering from the inability to somehow aid his fellow Jews.

Eventually, when France surrenders to Germany, Morris becomes devastated, and he is sure that Gus will have comments about his obsession with listening to the news, mocking him again. When Gus arrives with the meat which he provides to the shop, Leonard starts to calculate the bill, just to make sure Gus' selling price is correct. As predicted, Gus gloats about the German victory over France, and an argument breaks out between Gus and Morris. Gus also cheated on the bills, which is revealed during the argument, he reveals a trait which could be easily deciphered if one paid enough attention: Gus is an antisemite.

“Morris was still angry. “If you’re not a Nazi,” he said to Gus, “why are you so glad the French lost?”

“Who’s glad?” asked Gus. Suddenly he felt proud and he said, “They deserved to lose, the way they starved the German people. Why the hell do you want them to win?”

“Pa,” said Leonard again.

“I want them to win because they are fighting for democracy.”

“Like hell,” said Gus. “You want them to win because they’re protecting the Jews—like that lousy Léon Blum.”

“You Nazi, you,” Morris shouted angrily, coming from behind the table. “You Nazi! You don’t deserve to live in America!””²¹

After the argument, in fear of losing a customer, Gus leaves the store, and the short story ends with Gus driving away while imagining himself as one of the German soldiers who are currently occupying France.

The title and the names in the short story are suggestive – the title could refer to the Armistice of 22 June 1940 itself²², which was a formal agreement, a truce between Germany and France after the Germans basically occupied an enormous territory in France. According to Marovitz, it could also refer to the “unspoken truce between Morris and Gus” (Marovitz, 2010, p.117), who detest each other, however, they need to work together. The names can be viewed in a similar way. Lieberman, which is Morris’ last name, has Yiddish and German origins, and it

²¹ Malamud, B. (1997). *The Complete Stories*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 17.

²² Marovitz, S. E. (2010). *Malamud’s Early Stories: In and Out of Time, 1940-1960, with Humor, History, and Hawthorne*. *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-), 29, 116.

means “dear, beloved”, that can symbolise the love his son holds for him. Gus’ last name is Wager, which has the same German and Yiddish origins, and it means “wagon driver”, and that can symbolise his cruel daydream about how he has driven a massive tank as a German soldier.

The universal suffering that derives from being a Jewish person is portrayed in all three of these short stories, and the complete refusal of bearing this burden can also be seen in all of them by looking at either some of the side characters or the main characters, such as Cohen, Leonard, or Levin. They are second-, and at times first generation Jewish characters who do not wish to burden themselves by nursing Jewish traditions, culture, or history.

2. INTERRACIAL RELATIONSHIPS AMONGST JEWISH-AMERICANS AND AFRICAN AMERICANS THROUGH SOME OF BERNARD MALAMUD'S SHORT STORIES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

To try and look at the bigger picture regarding the relationship between Jewish-Americans and African Americans, it is needed to take a look at the history between these two ethnicities. According to Philip S. Foner, Jews were, along with African Americans, viewed as second-class citizens before a twentieth century.²³ They felt some kind of a companionship with each other, based on their status in the American society and the shared cultural memory of slavery.²⁴

Furthermore, during the mid-20th century, when several African American movements started to assemble, many of them turned to the Bible for guidance. The African Americans drew strength from the Holy Book, not only because of their religion, but because of the biblical stories of how God was able to free his people from slavery. This was another cause to feel the companionship between the two ethnicities.

African Americans were the only ones in the United States that could understand what it was like to flee from racism – Jim Crow laws, the Ku-Klux-Klan –, and Jews also understood them because they fled from the antisemitic Europe. During the Tulsa Massacre in 1921 for example, many Yiddish newspapers, such as the *Der Morgn Zhurnal* (*The Jewish Morning Journal* in English), referred to this horrific event as 'Black pogroms'.^{25, 26} After these events, the kinship between the two ethnicities got even stronger.

Many African Americans and Jews shared neighbourhoods with each other, but slowly, these neighbourhoods became emptier. The Jewish Americans were torn between feeling this kind of kinship with the oppressed African American minority, while they wished to be a part of the white American society. Jewish Americans yearned to have a more adequate social standing by educating – and in this way –, assimilating their families into the American society.²⁷

²³ Foner, P. S. (1975). Black-Jewish Relations in the Opening Years of the Twentieth Century. *Phylon* (1960-), 36(4), 360.

²⁴ Jewish Women's Archive. "Tensions in Black-Jewish Relations." (Viewed on November 17, 2022) <https://jwa.org/teach/livingthelegacy/tensions-in-black-jewish-relations>.

²⁵ Goren, Arthur A. "The Jewish Press," 215–17;

²⁶ Diner, "Drawn Together by Self-Interest: Jewish Representation of Race and Race Relations in the Early Twentieth Century," 29–31.

²⁷ Goldstein, E. L. (2006). *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*. Princeton University Press. 147-157.

After the Second World War, when African Americans fought against segregation, many Jewish Americans withdrew from these movements, mostly due to the reasons stated above – they feared that their white peers would not be pleased with that kind of behaviour. Many of the Jewish Americans, due to their education and their ability to “pass as white”, experienced more class mobility, and they could buy properties or open businesses in mostly Black areas. In this way, Jews played into their pre-set roles that fuelled the Nazi Germany and antisemitism, because from this point, Jewish Americans and African Americans were no longer equals in views of social standing – the Jewish Americans became the employers, and the Black Americans the employees.

Throughout the 1980s, Black-Jewish relations strained even more due to the growing racial tensions in the United States. Many African American and Jewish American politicians used antisemitic and racist rhetoric in their speeches.

Bernard Malamud was one of the Jewish writers who desired to explore this strained relationship between the Jewish Americans and the African Americans in his works, such as “Angel Levine”, “Black is My Favorite Color”. The common points of these works are the variety of different ethnicities in their characters (Afro-Americans and Jewish Americans, sometimes even Jewish Afro-Americans), and the different conflicts that connect these ethnicities.

“Angel Levine” presents the relationship between the two main characters, Manishevitz, a Jewish American, and Alexander Levine, a Jewish Afro-American who claims to be an angel. The most important factor about this short story besides the religious aspects which are going to be discussed, is the representation of interracial affairs. These interracial affairs are represented in the characters’ behaviours, dialogues, and thoughts.

The short story begins to unfold with the description of Manishevitz’s life. Manishevitz, who worked as a tailor, lost everything overnight when his establishment burned to the ground, lost his son in the war, his daughter disappeared with a man, and his wife, Fanny, was taken ill. Manishevitz, during these probing times, remained stoic, simply out of disbelief. He was a religious man and could not believe that God could be so unjust. However, at one point his emotions become unbearable, and he starts talking to God:

“When his burden had grown too crushingly heavy to be borne he prayed in his chair with shut hollow eyes: “My dear God, sweetheart, did I deserve that this should happen to me?” Then recognizing the worthlessness of it, he set aside the complaint and prayed

humbly for assistance: “Give Fanny back her health, and to me for myself that I shouldn’t feel pain in every step. Help now or tomorrow is too late.” And Manishevitz wept.”²⁸

Just like in “The Jewbird,” “The Lady of the Lake”, and “Armistice”, the universal suffering of being Jewish is also shown again when Manishevitz asks what he did to deserve the unfortunate events of his life, however, the emphasis falls on turning to God even in the most probing times.

After his outburst, Manishevitz turns back into his stoic self and reads a Jewish newspaper. Later, he realizes that someone is in their apartment, and finds Alexander Levine in the living room. Manishevitz and Levine have a conversation about who Alexander really is, and Manishevitz learns that Levine is not only a Jewish Afro-American, but also a “bona fide angel of God”²⁹. The man of the house is in an obvious disbelief, so he asks questions regarding Levine’s angelic state, and he also asks for a proof. Levine discloses that he cannot prove his angelic nature due to being on a probation.

“He asked a last question. “So if God sends to me an angel, why a black? Why not a white that there are so many of them?”

“It was my turn to go next,” Levine explained.

Manishevitz could not be persuaded. “I think you are a faker.”

Levine slowly rose. His eyes indicated disappointment and worry. “Mr. Manishevitz,” he said tonelessly, “if you should desire me to be of assistance to you any time in the near future, or possibly before, I can be found”—he glanced at his fingernails—“in Harlem.””³⁰

It is important to know, just like the whole city of New York, which was the centre of multiculturalism – and still is –, Harlem was the centre of the African American movements for equality and civil rights in the 1920s and 1930s in New York. Malamud consciously chose this place in order to represent the African American culture in his short story, also due to the fact that Levine is an Afro-American character, and Harlem was not only a cultural centre, but it also gave home to many African American neighbourhoods.

²⁸ Malamud, B. (1997). *The Complete Stories*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 172.

²⁹ Malamud, B. (1997). *The Complete Stories*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 174.

³⁰ Malamud, B. (1997). *The Complete Stories*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 175.

Manishevitz did not believe in an Afro-American Jewish angel, and his pains – and his wife’s pains – lessened for a while. He was grateful for being alright again after a long while, yet his pains returned, so he decides to go to Harlem in order to find Alexander Levine. When Manishevitz does find him, he is in a bar, getting swarmed by dancers and engages in inappropriate behaviour, so Manishevitz becomes mortified by it and leaves. When he returns home, Fanny is in an even worse shape, Manishevitz becomes desperate. He searches for Levine again, finds the address of the bar again, however, he realizes that the bar where Levine has taken part in illicit activities now changed into a synagogue.

As he enters the synagogue, four African Americans are discussing the immateriality of the souls of every being.

““But has dis spirit got some kind of a shade or color?” asked bubble eyes, deadpan.

“Man, of course not. A spirit is a spirit.”

“Then how come we is colored?” he said with a triumphant glare.

“Ain’t got nothing to do wid dat.”

“I still like to know.”

“God put the spirit in all things,” answered the boy. “He put it in the green leaves and the yellow flowers. He put it with the gold in the fishes and the blue in the sky. That’s how come it came to us.””³¹

Malamud must have intended to simulate the African American characters’ dialogues heavily influenced with dialect. Also, this conversation about colours – “*Then how come we is colored?*” (Malamud, 1997, p.179) – is meant to show equality, a sense of companionship, signalling that what is on the outside does not matter, *skin colour does not matter*. “Angel Levine” was written in 1955, which was the time of fighting for civil rights for the African Americans. For example, in 1954, the U. S. Supreme Court ruled racial segregation in educational establishments unconstitutional, which was a major victory for the civil rights movement.³² In this scene, it can also be seen how Manishevitz found the representation of his own religion in Harlem among Afro-Americans. Manishevitz from this point started to

³¹ Malamud, B. (1997). The Complete Stories. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 179-180.

³² Schauer, F. (1997). Generality and Equality. Law and Philosophy, 16(3), 280.

sympathize with the Afro-Americans, and this was one of the factors which led him to believe in Angel Levine.

He asked for the angel, Levine, and got redirected to Bella's, the bar across the street. Here, Manishevitz tells Levine that he believes that he is a Jew, although he realises that acknowledging Levine's Jewishness is not going to be enough, and his inner debate overbears his thoughts:

“Manishevitz was recalling scenes of his youth as a wheel in his mind whirled: believe, do not, yes, no, yes, no. The pointer pointed to yes, to between yes and no, to no, no it was yes. He sighed. It moved but one still had to make a choice.

“I think you are an angel from God.” He said it in a broken voice, thinking, If you said it, it was said. If you believed it, you must say it. If you believed, you believed.”³³

He admits believing in Levine, and from that point, Levine breaks down from the humiliation that preluded this conversation – that Manishevitz did not believe in him mainly because of his skin colour and the absurdity of the situation. Manishevitz embraces Levine's multiple identities with his single sentence about believing in him.

The short story concludes with Levine's departure and Manishevitz's arrival to his home. He finds Fanny up and about, no signs of her illness anymore. ““A wonderful thing, Fanny,” Manishevitz said. “Believe me, there are Jews everywhere.”” (Malamud, 1997, p.182) This sentence strongly resonates with what Malamud once said in an interview: “All men are Jews except they don't know it.” (Field, 1975, 11.), meaning that every member of the society bears some burdens, and everyone is equal in some sense. This sentence could refer to not only Levine and the four Afro-American Jews in the synagogue of Harlem, but to Jewishness itself³⁴, or the identity of being Jewish. “... Jews are everywhere” (Malamud, 1997, p.182) may refer to “All men are Jews” (Field, 1975, 11.).

It can be concluded that Malamud looks at Jewishness at a universal level, because to him, being a Jew is the same as being a human. According to J. P. Steed, the short story even at the beginning was about mirroring the “normal” Jewish stereotype with the “unnatural” one³⁵, when at the beginning of the story, Manishevitz is reading a Jewish newspaper, and finds

³³ Malamud, B. (1997). *The Complete Stories*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 181.

³⁴ Steed, J. P. (1999). *THE SPIRIT IN ALL THINGS: THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN MALAMUD'S “ANGEL LEVINE.”* *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-), 18, 12.

³⁵ Steed, J. P. (1999). *THE SPIRIT IN ALL THINGS: THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN MALAMUD'S “ANGEL LEVINE.”* *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-), 18, 12.

Levine holding a Jewish newspaper also in his hands. They are mirrors of each other, in their feelings of uncertainty – because just like Manishevitz, Levine also lost his ‘everything’, his wings –, in their faith, and also, in their skin colour. Manishevitz is upset about Levine not being a white angel, so he is, just like anyone in the 1950s is preoccupied with “race” and does not take Levine’s similarities into account, only focuses on their differences.

If this theory of J. P. Steed is accepted, then it can also be concluded that Manishevitz, when he is searching for Levine, is in truth searching for himself. This symbol is also suggested by the short story:

“After a short while he discovered, to his surprise, that he was actively scanning the news, searching for an item of great interest to him. Exactly what he thought he would read he couldn’t say—until he realized, with some astonishment, that he was expecting to discover something about himself.”³⁶

The fact that Levine appears in Manishevitz’s living room after he is expecting to discover something about himself is further proves Steed’s theory.

The losses Manishevitz experienced made him lose his real self too. When he is entering the tailor’s shop in Harlem, or when he enters the synagogue, he is brought back to the past, and finds pieces of himself. This search for identity – for the Jewish identity – can be related to how first and second-generation Jewish Americans are struggling to find their own identity as well.

Therefore, it can be concluded that through this short story, Malamud wished to express his views on equality, stating that everyone is a Jew in their own right, carrying burdens and all being the children of God, and that the Jewish Americans are struggling to maintain and find their Jewish identity.

“Angel Levine” presented an optimistic perspective on the problem of Black-Jewish relations. Malamud also intended to express the distrust between Jewish Americans and Afro-Americans and concluded at the end of the story that mutual understanding and trust is vital for both of the groups.

However, “Black is My Favorite Color” does not support these ideas and introduces a more pessimistic – or even realistic – point of view regarding the relations between the Jewish-Americans and the African Americans. The short story was published almost a decade after the

³⁶ Malamud, B. (1997). *The Complete Stories*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 173.

publication of “Angel Levine”, in 1963, and it tries to explore the possibilities of an interracial relationship (or even friendship) between these two ethnic groups.

“Black is My Favorite Color” begins in medias res, tossing the reader into a bathroom in Harlem, New York, where an African American woman is eating her breakfast. This bathroom belongs to Nat Lime, who is a middle-aged man, and his favourite colour is black – even if it cannot be deciphered from his previous experiences. Nat is a bachelor, owns a liquor store in Harlem with two African American clerks. During his life, Nat has always tried to connect with Afro-Americans, from his childhood to his adulthood, but he never could.

Charity Quietness, the woman in the bathroom is his cleaning woman, who comes once a week to clean Nat’s rooms where he lives with his sick mother. Charity’s actions (eating her breakfast in the bathroom while Nat is eating at the dining table) reminds Nat of his previous experiences with other African Americans. Charity’s behaviour is also a reminder of the division between the two ethnicities.

However, through the opening lines of the short story, the similarities between the two ethnicities is highlighted in the following passage:

“Charity Quietness sits in the toilet eating her two hard-boiled eggs while I’m having my ham sandwich and coffee in the kitchen. That’s how it goes, only don’t get the idea of ghettos. If there’s a ghetto I’m the one that’s in it.”³⁷

According to Simonová, with the use of the word “ghetto”, the two groups come together: The ghettos, which are often used to describe the African American and Latino neighbourhoods in America, and the ghettos, where the Jews were forced into during the second World War, and this word in itself is an introduction for the reader to the racially divided society of America.³⁸

Charity’s actions reminded Nat of his relationship with Buster Wilson, who was the first African American Nat tried to connect with via friendship because Nat was new in the neighbourhood, but Buster wanted none of that. Nat persistently tried to win him over, but it did not work. Nat also tried to bribe him by taking Buster several times to the movies with him, although in the end, the relationship failed, they did not become friends, and Nat concluded that it was because he was the only one trying to maintain it.

³⁷ Malamud, B. (1997). *The Complete Stories*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 355.

³⁸ Bc. Simonová, Anna. (2016). *Bernard Malamud’s Selected Fiction in the Context of Black-Jewish Literary Relations*. 91.

“One day when I wasn’t expecting it he hit me in the teeth. I felt like crying but not because of the pain. I spit blood and said, “What did you hit me for? What did I do to you?”

“Because you a Jew bastard. Take your Jew movies and your Jew candy and shove them up your Jew ass.”

And he ran away.

I thought to myself how was I to know he didn’t like the movies. When I was a man I thought, You can’t force it”³⁹

In this scene, Nat is defined as Jew for the first time, not even by himself but by Buster. Nat himself never said that he is a Jew, because he does not view himself as a Jewish person, and his mother also reminded him of something similar:

“I sat shiva for a week and remembered how she sold paper bags on her pushcart. I remembered her life and what she tried to teach me. Nathan, she said, if you ever forget you are a Jew a goy will remind you.”⁴⁰

Goy is a Yiddish word for a non-Jewish person, or, in other cases (for instance, in Biblical Hebrew) means nation. Nat’s mother suggests that Nat’s Jewishness will always be seen from the outside, even if he is part of the white majority, he does not belong into that group, because he is going to remain a Jew until he dies.

“What I’m saying is, personally for me there’s only one human color and that’s the color of blood. I like a black person if not because he’s black, then because I’m white. It comes to the same thing. If I wasn’t white my first choice would be black. I’m satisfied to be white because I have no other choice.”⁴¹

Nat identifies himself as a white, not as a Jew, unlike the typical Jewish characters of Malamud. This increases the distance between Nat and the Afro-American characters even more, because while Black-Jewish relationships are strained, they are still better than the African American’s relationships with the white majority during this time (the 1950s). In order to blend into the mainstream white society of America, Nat had to downplay his own Jewishness, which resulted in losing his own identity. A good example for this is when Nat highlights that he is eating a

³⁹ Malamud, B. (1997). *The Complete Stories*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 358.

⁴⁰ Malamud, B. (1997). *The Complete Stories*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 360.

⁴¹ Malamud, B. (1997). *The Complete Stories*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 355-356.

ham sandwich⁴² at the beginning of the short story, signing that he does not follow the religious rules of Judaism.

For these reasons, it may be suggested that because of the loss of his own identity, Nat wishes to associate himself with other minorities, such as African Americans, in order to regain some parts of himself, or that Nat may associate himself with the white majority in order to gain superiority above any minority, and this also may be the cause of his obsession with the African American minority. Nat also says that “If I wasn’t white my first choice would be black.” (Malamud, 1997. 356.), which further proves his obsession with Afro-Americans, even if he does not even see it in himself.

The question of double identity⁴³ is also represented here, just like in “The Jewbird” and “Angel Levine”, because Nat is a white person, while he is also a Jew, because he cannot completely break away from the Jewish identity (he is using Yiddish words, and the outside world perceives him as a Jewish person). In “The Jewbird”, Schwartz is a Jew while he is a bird, and in “Angel Levine” Levine is Black and Jew while being an angel at the same time.

Years later, Nat also met Ms. Ornita Harris, an African American widow who was only in her thirties. She visited his liquor store regularly. One night, even though the reader does not exactly get to know how, Nat and Ornita agreed to go on a date. They met in another part of New York (outside of Harlem), which was some kind of a “social limbo”⁴⁴ for them, given the fact that New York is a city rich in diversity, and many different ethnicities live together there. Nat describes this experience with sadness:

“We went in like strangers and we came out like strangers.”⁴⁵

When Nat and Ornita’s relationship progresses to the level of having sexual intercourse, Nat describes her undressing in a manner that reveals his fascination with colours and his superiority towards the fact that Ornita is Black:

“Under her purple dress she wore a black slip, and when she took that off she had white underwear. When she took off the white underwear she was black again.”⁴⁶

⁴² Malamud, B. (1997). *The Complete Stories*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 355.

⁴³ Bc. Simonová, Anna. (2016). *Bernard Malamud’s Selected Fiction in the Context of Black-Jewish Literary Relations*. 46.

⁴⁴ Christ, H., & Legutke, M. (1996). *Fremde Texte Verstehen: Festschrift Für Lothar Bredella Zum 60. Geburtstag*. Narr Verlag. 227.

⁴⁵ Malamud, B. (1997). *The Complete Stories*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 359.

⁴⁶ Malamud, B. (1997). *The Complete Stories*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 360.

According to H. Christ, this game of colours, Nat's mysterious description, the stages of purple, black, white, black and back to white only makes sense when it is read from the viewpoint of a racist: At one time, this was a praise for African Americans from white racists, when they said they were white inside (because their skeleton is white), meaning that in spite of belonging to a biologically inferior race, they managed to have some human traits. (Christ, H. 230.)

Nat also claims that whatever was in Ornita's mind, a white man like him cannot possibly know. Ornita and Nat try to maintain this relationship only to realise that the social environment of Harlem cannot accept an intermarriage between two different ethnic groups (the Jews and the Blacks), and to get married will be simply impossible for them:

““What you doin with this white son of a bitch?” he said to Ornita.

“I'm minding my own business,” she answered him, “and I wish you would too.”

“Boys,” I said, “we're all brothers. I'm a reliable merchant in the neighborhood. This young lady is my dear friend. We don't want any trouble. Please let us pass.”

“You talk like a Jew landlord,” said the green hat. “Fifty a week for a single room.”⁴⁷

This is another sign of Nat's double identity, because first he is recognised as a white man by the outside world, then he is identified as a Jewish person. After this, his relationship with Ornita comes to an end because she leaves New York.

After Nat has thought about his failed relationship attempts with African Americans, the readers are transported back to the present time where Charity is still in the bathroom, eating her breakfast and Nat is in the dining room, eating his own. The short story concludes with Nat's angry shouts at Charity: ““Charity Quietness—you hear me?—come out of that goddamn toilet!”” (Malamud, 1997. p. 364.) His failed relationships anger Nat to the point of shouting, making him demand the presence of the closest African American person, which further proves his obsession with the minority, and his wishes to be part of the “superior” group, the white majority, according to his perceptions.

⁴⁷ Malamud, B. (1997). *The Complete Stories*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 362.

3. CONCLUSION

This paper attempted to examine the first and second-generation Jewish American mentality, the question of their identity, and the Black-Jewish interracial relationships through several of Bernard Malamud's short stories: "The Jewbird", "Armistice", "The Lady Of The Lake", "Angel Levine", and "Black is My Favorite Color".

It can be concluded that Bernard Malamud tried to form his Jewish characters "universal" characters, which is proven by Malamud himself in an interview: "All men are Jews except they don't know it." (Field, 1975, p. 11), while his characters still tried to remain Jewish. Their struggles came from not only their own identity, but from the outside world's perceptions about them. These Jewish characters struggle with their own identities because while they would or would not like to remain Jews, they also slowly assimilate into the mainstream society, causing them to question themselves.

The first- and second-generation Jewish American relationships in "The Jewbird", "The Lady of the Lake" and "Armistice" show that assimilation, and with it, the loss of identity is a struggle for the Jewish communities of America. These struggles are not only on a psychological and individual level but they also affect the whole community and the lives of the different individuals in the community.

The universal suffering that derivates from being a Jewish person is portrayed in all three of these short stories, and the complete refusal of bearing this burden can also be seen in all of them by looking at either some of the side characters or the main characters, such as Cohen, Leonard, or Levin, the second-, and at times first-generation Jewish characters who do not wish to burden themselves by nursing Jewish traditions, culture, or history.

Bernard Malamud illustrated the strained relationships between the Jewish Americans and the African Americans in many of his works, however, this paper only examined two of them: "Angel Levine" and "Black is My Favorite Color". The reason for these choices is that one of them ("Angel Levine") provides an optimistic outlook on the Black-Jewish relations, while "Black is My Favorite Color" is more realistic and pessimistic in these matters. Both examine this strained relationship with the help of the relationships between the different characters, and while "Angel Levine" has many fable-like elements, it is still able to make the reader recognise that the two minorities should rely on each other rather than pull apart.

The problematics of racism can also be found in these two short stories, however, while “Angel Levine” promotes equality and a sense of companionship between the two ethnicities, in “Black is My Favorite Color” the readers get to experience Nat’s obsession and positive prejudice against African Americans, while he is trying to suppress them under his false sense of white superiority.

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