

# The Bus' Tour      The Life's Tour:

## Interpretation of *The Bus* from Narrative Perspective

### VOYAGE EN BUS, VOYAGE DE LA VIE:

#### Interprétation du *Bus* dans la perspective narrative

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**Abstract:** One chief concern of critics on Singer is whether he is a modernist. The wealth of subject matter and narrative invention in his fictions are often mentioned. These two factors are decisive to understand Singer's works' modernism. Here I chose a short story *The Bus* for example to analyze how the focalization helps to enrich the themes in it.

**Key words:** modernism, focalizer, focalized

**Résumé:** La modernité de l'oeuvre de Isaac Bashevis Singer est bien contestée dans le milieu critique. Les critiques parlent souvent du thème varié et de la narration créative de Singer, qui constituent la clé pour comprendre la modernité de son oeuvre. Prenant sa nouvelle *Le bus de voyage* comme exemple, l'article présent tente d'explorer le rôle de la focalisation dans l'approfondissement du thème.

**Mots-Clés:** modernité, focalisateur, focalisé

## INTRODUCTION

Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904-1991) is the most famous Yiddish writer of the twentieth century, who had won a lot of awards and honor such as Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978; and Gold Medal for Fiction from American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1989. In his lifetime, he wrote nearly 200 stories which win him the fame of a prolific writer and master storyteller. However, as commonly acknowledged, Singer's greatness as a storyteller and stylist appears most evident in his short stories and novellas.

Although most critics thought Singer's works were overwhelming favorable for appreciation, they are still discussing about many issues about this great writer. One of their chief concerns is whether Singer is a modernist writer. Some hold the view that Singer is much of a realistic writer. They found Singer was influenced by the tradition of the 19th-century European masters such as Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Dickens, and Flaubert. He always wrote in a historically realistic manner, and he adopted many of the stylistic features of the nineteenth-century fiction. Others like Richard Burgin consider Singer embraces a "sly modernism".

Because "what he wants us to understand about his characters is their attempts to comprehend the structure and modus operandi of a universe that resists understanding." (1991: 114-115) We can interpret in the way that Singer's concern with the "Jewish questions" as well as the human conditions; the most fascinating aspects to him are the non-rational. For my part, I admit Singer's writing bears many traditional features while we can also see modern elements.

What are the elements? Lars Gyllensten in the presentation Noble Prize address stressed the wealth of subject matter and narrative invention in his fictions. These two factors he mentioned are decisive to understand Singer's works' modernism. Here I chose a short story *The Bus* for example to analyze how the focalization helps to enrich the themes in it.

## FOCALIZATION

I would hazard to guess that no narratologist has ever ignored the issue of focalization, no matter which term he/she uses. Because it is a preliminary problem in narrative discourse and it has proven its usefulness. Let's first have an overall look at the different modes by

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different narratologists. Genette has a tripartite classification: (a) nonfocalization (i.e. omniscience); (b) internal focalization; and (c) external focalization (1980: 189-194). Rimmon-Kenan emphasizes that the movement of focalization includes not just a shift of vision but also a shift in emotive, psychological, and ideological perspective. (1983: 70-85). Bal's definition tells us we have both focalizers (narrating-I and experiencing-I) and objects of focalization (focalized) and he also discusses their relationship. (1997: 142-161)

Shen Dan and other narratologists point out that focalization functions both in story and discourse level. It can signify the character and narrator's vision in the story. Studying the reason why the mode of focalization is adopted can help us to understand the theme of the story as well as character's personalities and psychologies. (1998: 186-206) The next part is devoted to an investigation of focalization of the short story *The Bus*, so as to shed lights on its theme and narrative strategy.

### FOCALIZATION OF THE BUS

As we all known traditional and classic literary works are always narrated by an omniscient narrator who knows everything about the situation and events recounted. The third-person external focalization is the typical example for this kind of writing. The narrator gets a God's-eye view which enables him/her to acquire knowledge of all fields, to know the past and future, even to look into the character's heart, telling us what the character is thinking. But the narrator's manipulation can be easily seen by the skeptical readers who will lose interests in the story and chose not to be fooled any more. Many modern writers also find this kind of narration can't meet their needs. Henry James, the pioneer of writing techniques, advocated and experimented the constricting of the eye-witness point of view. Then other modern writers continued discussing and experimenting on this.

Singer didn't follow these modern writers and never claimed himself as modern writer. Throughout his career, he served his self-proclaimed masters, Chekhov and Maupassant. According to my limited reading, his three family chronicles *The Family Moskat*, *The Manor*, *The Estate* are in style of primary realism. However, many of his short stories which many critics calls open stories are the combination of mysticism and rationality, traditionalism and modernism, realism and symbolism. In the story *The Bus*, Singer abandons the traditional omniscient narrator and uses the first person narrator with the shifts of focalization so as to make the story vivid and attractive.

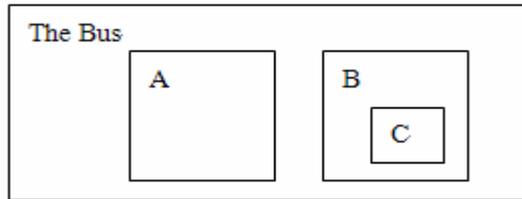
In the short story, "I" is a Yiddish writer who takes a particular tour to Geneva. He and other tourists take the bus to their destinations and they are required to exchange seats each day so as to sit up with different

persons. The bus turns out to contain a whole Grand Hotel full of strange people who "I" makes several conversations with generate a lot of plot in a few pages. The text of *The Bus* has a length of less than twenty pages and the story has the time span of no more than 12 days. However, it has more than 5 focalizers and much more focalizations. Although focalizer and focalization are changing frequently, the story steps forward smoothly and arouse readers' interests all the time. That actually conforms to Singer's three rules of a good fiction: suspenseful plot; a sense of urgency; the writer had to feel that only he could tell this story in this way. We can further explore how these are achieved.

*The Bus* is chiefly conveyed through the first-person retrospective narrator. Indeed the choice of narrator "I" is significant. Owing to the double identity, "I" seems to be a reliable narrator telling a true story calmly by his observation. Rimmon-Kenan takes Dicken's *Great Expectation* for example to show that first person retrospective narrative can have two kinds of focalizers (1983:74): narrator-focalizer ---- the narrator looks back on his previous experience; character-focalizer ---- "I" often immerse himself and the reader in his past. Evaluating their functions, we regard former one as narrating self while the latter as experiencing self. It is acknowledged that the story is always rendered of the narrating self rather than of the experiencing self in the first person retrospective narrative, that is to say narrator-character often acts as dominant perspective in it. But *The Bus* deviates the norm, the narrator "I" functions as character-focalizer much more than narrator-focalizer. When the omniscient narrator slide to eye witness character-narrator, credibility of the story and the intimacy between narrator and reader are reinforced thus readers' curiosity are elicited. "I" has finished the tour but neither tells the story in an omniscient way nor gives much comment on the characters. In many occasions we are experiencing with "I", we follow "I" to meet persons and know them one by one and listen to their stories, making our own judgments by the information given. In this way, *The Bus* follows the theory of modern fiction which prefers suggestiveness by using first person narration or limited reader's view or multiple points of view. This limitation accords with the modernist vision that truth does not exist objectively but is the product of a personal interaction with reality. Insofar we may be clear about why and how Singer uses the first person focalizer, while it is worth noting that shifts of focalizer are also unique in the short story. Then we can look at why and how Singer adopts this technique.

If we readers are careful enough, we will find that *The Bus* mainly consists of two different clues which I think can be regarded as two stories respectively that are hard to define which the sub one is. Nevertheless we have overlapped parts of the two stories, for the clearness and convenience, I name them story A (characters involved are I, Mr. And Mrs. Weyerhofer) and story B (characters involved are I Mark and Mrs.

Metalon). Story A focuses on the dying marriage of Mrs. Weyerhofer, Holocaust Polish Jew, and his Swiss husband's. Story B is a story of mine. Mark, the child of a Jewish father who died and widowed Armenian mother, is trying to arrange a match between his mother and I. But I know I have no spiritual ties with the pampered boy and the rich widow so I incline to escape more and more and finally free myself from them. Matrix stories as story A and B are, the diagram follows:



Since The first degree story which is told by the narrator "I" has already been analyzed, let's turn to Story A which is focalized chiefly by two characters Mr. and Mrs. Weyerhofer who are criticizing each other. At the very beginning of the story, when Mrs. Weyerhofer first acts as a focalizer, she describes his husband as a man who hates her, "doesn't like Jews", "has a million prejudices", and she is "ready to give him a divorce but he's too stingy to pay alimony (P. 543)". She gives us the impression that her husband is a terrible, mean and maybe anti—Semitism person who reminds us of Nazi's prejudice and persecution. In the next part, Mr. Weyehofer's husband, the Swiss Protestant Doctor, sits next to the narrator "I" and explains his troubled marriage. It is proved that he really doesn't like Mrs. Weyerhofer, he calls her "that woman" or "the woman" and says his wife "makes enemies wherever she goes, but her worst enemy is her own mouth (P. 547)". What's more, he says "the woman has a buying mania (P. 547)". He even plunges into intimate talk about her one grand trait "she could attract a man, sexually (P. 548)". Her sexual energy is not the amazing body but the mind which "has a powerful imagination". But then her wife denies this and abuses him of "sexually impotent" and "homosexual (P. 548)".

Singer leaves spaces for us, yet gives us some hints which are observed by narrator "I" who is the internal focalizer of story A. It seems as if Singer has endowed him with the extraordinarily keen observation. If we don't have the narrator "I", we would hardly judge whether the dialogues are true or not, we would finally treat them as a mere quarrel of the couple about their troubled marriage, we readers will lose the curiosity and the theme will be blurry. But in the story, "I" later shows us that Mrs. Weyerhofer is a self-centered, aggressive, humiliating woman who irritates all other passengers for delay the schedule. She comes back with bundles and packages late every time ignoring others' feelings. She insults her husband and slanders others. She takes all the others as her enemies, accusing them of anti-Semitism. At last "I" even couldn't help speaking out "Madam, your own conduct does more harm to Jews than all the anti-Semites" (P. 558). Should I say the

"narrator", or just "Singer" criticizes Mrs. Weyerhofer? Not exactly, she symbolizes a kind of Polish Jews, or Eastern European Jews to a large extent, which Singer vividly depicts. They are the Holocaust survivors who suffered from discrimination, persecution and pogroms, so they still are haunted by their immediate past. Like Mrs. Weyerhofer, manias and superstitions, fanatical hopes and dreams, the figments of terror, the lure of lust or power, the nightmares of anguish are obvious features of them. Why are they like this? Even in today, it is unimaginable that after the war that Nazi Germany and its satellites had killed 6 million Jewish men, women and children, reducing European Jewry from a prewar 9.5 million by almost two thirds. (1983: 83) They, the survivors, witness the massive killing and persecuting, lose their family members, relatives and intimate friends. What's terrible is that they may lose their belief in religion which is the spiritual homeland of Jews. Singer, an honest son of Jews, although sympathizes his people, he can't accept their deeds and moral failures. He criticizes the Jews who take the sufferings and disasters as an endless political and moral capital. for there is a small step between persecutee and persecutor.

In addition to this, Singer thinks the tragedy of the people is caused by the loss of faith. The first look of Mrs. Weyerhofer indicates she is wearing a cross, but it has nothing to do with religion. She has converted to the Christianity but was not devout. She betrays God in neither religion now. She represents herself as an atheist, but doesn't change her behaviors. The surface problem is the religion but the deeper one is the moral declination. She believes nothing and nobody in the world, so she lives in the past and illusion while in the contrast her husband's assimilate Jewish culture and religion. Therefore we get an ironic scene of Mr. Weyerhofer who breaks up with his wife raises his hand to the sky like a pious Jew swearing a vow. But all the women show their sympathy for him, taking him as "a saint to put up with such a horror". This is quite symbolic and this protagonist of Singer's represents the innocent outsiders who are trying to know Jews and live with Jews like saints but finally redeems himself from the reality.

As the above analysis demonstrates, Story A has prominent shifts of focalizers which give us the panorama of the story and let us rethink about the relationship between the couple, the Jews' psychologies in moderm times after Hitler's extermination, the belief in God, and conditions of the whole humanity. Unlike Story A which is focalized by Mr. Weyerhofer and Mrs. Weyerhofer, Story B is an outstanding story which the narrator "I" is in the center of the story. "I" narrates his own story to us instead of looking into the inharmonious couple's story. In story A, "I" can listen to the dialogues calmly and behave just like a recorder that record things exactly as they are yet in Story B "I" involves more, thinking and trying to figure out what's happening.

Story B starts with the boy Mark, coming up to me

and asking about whether I am an America, after that he immediately tells me his plan to become an America and demands me for an affidavit. The boy is just at the age of fourteen who on his father's side is a Jew, however, "he has already decided everything for himself (P. 545)". He inherited Jewish people's merits ---- intelligent, hard working and discipline. When Mrs. Metalon removes the lens to Mark, we can know "Mark is a genius, but like all geniuses he has his moods. He was a prodigy. At five he could do logarithms. He read Bible in French and remembered all the names (P. 555)". Nevertheless "I" think he is terrible because he does unto me what he want me to do. He stubbornly matches his mother and me for his American Dream which is rosy and promising. Due to the comparatively open and democratic policy toward immigrants, about 2 million Jews arrived America from 1881 to 1914 and makes the American Jewish community became the largest ever existed. During the World War II American Jewry became the undisputed leader of world Jewry, after the war Jewish participation intensified in American scientific, scholarly, literary, artistic, theatrical and musical activities. (1983: 85-89) Thus far we know why America is a Dream to many Jews. Mark is a symbol of them who regard America as a democratic and sincere country with opportunities for everyone.

The narrator is the target of Mark to be his future father partially because of his American identity, but Jewish American's life is not as satisfactory as others think. "I" has already touched upon the double identity and conflicting value of American Jews. The following example clearly shows this.

*The boys name was Mark. The waiter hadn't yet managed to serve all the tables, and while we waited I told the mother and son that I was a Jew, that I wrote in Yiddish, and that I came from Poland. I always do this as soon as possible to avoid misunderstandings later. If the person I am talking is snob, he knows I'm not trying to represent myself as something I'm not. (P. 544)*

The tense of the later two sentences changes from past tense to present tense. That suggests the character-focalizer (experiencing self) gives up to the narrator-focalizer. He is an American citizen now but he cares about others' opinions and tells others he is a Polish Jew as well, because he is under the burden of the unclear identity. Who is he? The puzzlement in identity crisis leads to other problems. I take that tour to forget the American woman whom I love but broke up with. "We loved each other but we couldn't stay together. This past year we argued constantly (P. 555)". He wants to forget the woman, the love and the identity problem through the tour, but that's in vain and he drops in another trap. That's reflects Singer's philosophical concern that world is mysterious with some unknown power. At last, through Mrs. Weyerhofer's mouth, we know we can't forget anything.

The last I want to mention is the psychology of "I" as focalizations which rarely appears in Story A. At the very beginning, I guess "what would a rich widow, an Armenian living in Turkey, want with a Yiddish writer? What kind of future could she see in this? (P. 549)" then new suspense comes as I wonder "Is she so weak. Or is there some scheme behind this? (P. 550)" after I see Mark treat his mother as if she was his daughter. At last, Mrs. Metalon also wants me to go with them and she gives out vague hints of making something into reality. "I had scored one of these victories I could never explain except by the fact that in the duel of love the victim is sometimes as eager to surrender as the attacker is to conquer (P. 560)" Finally I chooses to escape. These psychological descriptions are not given statements but questions and philosophical thoughts. Each of these sentences can have a number of possibilities, sometimes our minds echoes the protagonist and usually we'll have our own interpretation different from him.

Though the analysis above, if we pick all the important focalizers and focalized out we can gain a table as following:

Characters parts	I	Mrs. W	MR. W	Mark	Mr. Metalon
Part 1	Story A B Internal focalizer	Story A Focalizer	Story A Focalized		
Part 2	Story A Internal focalizer	Story A Focalized ↓ Focalizer <i>Focalizer</i>	Story A Focalizer ↓ Focalized		<i>Focalized</i>
Part 3	Story B Internal focalizer	<i>Focalizer</i>			<i>Focalized</i>
Part 4	Story B Internal focalizer	<i>Focalizer</i>		Story B Focalized	<i>Focalized</i> Story B Focalizer
Part 5	Story A Internal focalizer	Story A Focalizer <i>Focalizer</i>	Story A Focalized		<i>Focalized</i>
Part 6	Story B A Internal focalizer				

We may see the differences of focalizations in

Story A and B. Form the italicized words which means

the overlapped focalization, we can see Mr. Weyerhofer keeps on talking about Mrs. Metalon. This is another evident to show Mr. Weyerhofer inclines to slander others, especially the rich widowed woman.

According to the time sequence, we can find the story structure like this:

Part 1    Part 2    Part 3    Part 4    Part 5    Part 6

Story A B → Story A → Story B → Story B → Story A → story B A

We can easily see that though the story is written in a chronological order, it has potential structure. In the first part, I meet Mrs. Weyerhofer initially, Mark and his mother later. Coincidentally, I free myself from Mark and his mother and meet Mrs. Weyerhofer again surprisingly in the last Part. Part two is Dr. Weyerhofer's talk of his wife while in part five the main body is Mrs. Weyerhofer's talk. Part 3 and part 4 are also corresponding parts; they are all about Story B that Mark and his mother's contacts with me.

Why the story should be in a circular structure rather than the linear structure. Firstly, circular structure reminds us of the sense of world which is round. The world is a balanced and equilibrium world which is mysteriously powerful. And things in the circle can also end at where they start. At the story's end I meet Mrs. Weyerhofer again. She who we consider as nervous wreck says luminously "Unlike the driver of our ill-starred bus", where the story began, and "the forces that drive us mad have all the time in the world (P. 563)".

These punch lines reflect Singer's mysticism thought that there existing some unknown and mysterious spell in the world. The Bus is also full of symbolic meaning, it is not only a tour bus but small world in which you encounter persons and leave persons, you decide things and lose things, you want to escape but you can never escape. The bus tour is always a life's tour for us, for all the human beings. We live in a world which is full of violence's, disasters, misconducts, curses and abuses; we hate these while we are in it. We can never forget things and free from them. But hope always exists while we still unknown what it may be. Singer points out: "While the poet entertains he continues to search for eternal truths, for the essence of being. In his own fashion he tries to solve the riddle of time and change, to find an answer to suffering, to reveal love in the very abyss of cruelty and injustice. Strange as these words may sound I often play with the idea that when all the social theories collapse and wars and revolutions leave humanity in utter gloom, the poet - whom Plato banned from his Republic - may rise up to save us all."

## CONCLUSION

My own inflection about Singer's narrative methods prove that he is not merely a realist as many critics say, I would call him both a realist and a modernist because of his combination of realism and mysticism, of traditionalism and modern themes and techniques.

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