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MEYER WOLFSHEIM AND ROBERT COHN: A STUDY OF A JEWISH TYPE AND STEREOTYPE

For centuries the Jew has been an important literary figure, especially in the literature of the West. He has embodied a convenient mythology which has often proved indispensable to the writer of imaginative fiction. This mythology has taken many shapes: the Jew as villain, the Jew as degenerate, the Jew as wanderer, the Jew as parasite to mention but a few. In modern times, and especially since the devastating experience of World War II, the literary role of the Jew has increasingly become a dual one. On the one hand he maintains something of his ancient, mysterious, and somewhat impalatable flavor, while on the other he merges as an heroic figure, long-suffering and imbued with the wisdom of the ages. In fact, he has become freed of the ancient onus to the extent that it has been possible in this century for Jewish figures to appear to the serious reading public in a variety not previously possible. Consider Proust, Joyce, and Kafka, for example.

It is not at all surprising that such extensive use of Jewish characters in literature would result, on occasion, in their misuse. It is the purpose here to examine two such occasions: Meyer Wolfsheim in *The Great Gatsby*¹ and Robert Cohn in *The Sun Also Rises*,² to show that Meyer Wolfsheim can best be understood as a "villainous Jew" and Robert Cohn as a "shlemiel," and that as Jewish figures both are inauthentic and unrealistic failures. The terms "villainous Jew" and "shlemiel" are perhaps widely, but certainly not universally, understood. Thus, a short discussion of both will be given in order to avoid possible misunderstanding.

Although neither Wolfsheim nor Cohn is a protagonist each serves as an interesting example, for each plays an important role in the work in which he appears, and, perhaps more to the point, the Jewishness of each dominates his characterization despite the fact that such a characterization is not really demanded by the text in question. In each case the Jewishness appears to be superimposed upon the text, perhaps as a reflection of some private attitude held by the author (or perhaps the author's response to what he feels to be a *widespread* attitude among his reading public).

It is, in fact, well known that in the 1920's, some of the literary *avant garde* (among them Hemingway and Fitzgerald) revealed anti-Semitic attitudes, both in their essays and in their imaginative writing: here the Jew very often appeared as a representative of the modern bourgeoisie which these writers attacked without mercy. As an example of this, Fitzgerald in "Echoes of the Jazz Age" writes: ". . . by 1928 Paris had grown suffocating. With each new shipment of Americans spewed up by the boom the qualitz fell off, until toward the end there was something sinister about the crazy boat loads . . . I remember a fat Jewess, inlaid with diamonds, who sat behind us at the Russian Ballet and said as the curtain rose, 'Thad's luffly, dey ought to baint a picture of it' . . . it was evident that money and power were falling into the hands of people in comparison with whom the leader of a village Soviet would be a gold-mine of judgment and culture."³

Where Hemingway is concerned we cannot avoid considering the anti-Semitic comments that run through *The Sun Also Rises*. It is interesting to note that various remarks about Robert Cohn's Jewishness (appearing in the Modern Library edition on pp. 98, 104, 148, 168, 170, 184, 211, 214, 218) which the editors apparently considered to be anti-Semitic were deleted from the first Bantam edition of the book, without the knowledge of either the author or his regular publisher, Scribner's.⁴ Hemingway, upon having this brought to his attention denied the possibility: "If you think the book is anti-Semitic you must be out of your mind or at least not in full possession of your faculties." It would be incorrect and unfair to Hemingway to assert that the book is an anti-Semitic tract; certainly anti-Semitism

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is not its intention. However, here are characters in the novel who do express anti-Semitic feelings, and their remarks most certainly color our perception of Cohn, so that we see in him few redeeming qualities.

The situation of Meyer Wolfsheim is different, but with some of the same overtones. In *The Great Gatsby*, there is a scene in which Wolfsheim is the man that is said to have "fixed" the World Series in 1919. The fact "staggers" Nick, for it had never occurred to him that "one man could start to play with the faith of fifty million people with the singlemindedness of a burglar blowing up a safe" (p. 81). It is this luncheon scene which elicited the admiration of Edith Wharton in her congratulatory letter to Fitzgerald on the publication of his book. "The lunch with Hildesheim, [the name was changed to Wolfsheim in the subsequent edition of the book] and his every appearance afterward, make me auger still greater things." And in another part of the letter, ". . . meanwhile, it's enough to make this reader happy to have met your perfect Jew . . ."⁵

Of the several Jewish stereotypes in Western literature that of the "villainous Jew" seems to predominate. A Jewish type of great importance in Yiddish and Hebrew literature is that of the "shlemiel." Between these two there is an important distinction to be drawn, and it is advisedly that we have referred to one as a "stereotype" and to the other as a "type." The villainous Jew of literature is a synthesis of various elements drawn from many individual Jews; he is essentially a receptacle for a large number of evil characteristics that could, at one time or another, be attributed to individual Jews. The "villainous Jew" thus remains a lifeless, stereotyped outgrowth of the antipathy felt toward Jews by the world at large. The "shlemiel," on the other hand, is a genuine Jewish figure, dating back to Biblical times at least. His appearance in literature is rooted in conditions existing in the Jewish community. It can be observed that in the shlemiel's first appearance in literature most of his basic characteristics are already in evidence, that in contradistinction to the villainous Jew he did not emerge as a composite of characteristics pieced together so as to form a convenient stereo-

type, but rather he developed organically as a necessary response to a real environment.

Endowing a character with a Jewish name and referring to him as a Jew, a writer does not automatically create an authentic Jew, that is, a character who would have to be essentially different if he were not Jewish. Fitzgerald in Wolfsheim and Hemingway in Cohn have not done so. Curiously, the failure of Wolfsheim to be an authentic Jewish character must be explained on grounds that are not merely different from those given to explain Cohn's failure, but in fact, on diametrically opposed, even contradictory grounds. Wolfsheim fails because he fulfills the role of the villainous Jew too faithfully; Cohn because he does not fulfill the role of the shlemiel faithfully enough. In light of the discussion of the villainous Jew and the shlemiel given earlier this is not the paradox it might otherwise appear to be.

The myth of the Jew as villain as well as his description can be found in the Biblical story of Herod where much of that description is recalled in the character of Shylock, which by the Renaissance became an accepted caricature of the Jew.⁶

By the 19th century things could be predicted about the Jew, and it is here that we come very close to Wolfsheim. The stereotype of the Jew was that of a "fairly thoroughgoing materialist, a physical coward, an opportunist in money matters, a bit of a wizard in peddling his pharmaceutica; . . . secretive in his living habits, servile in his relations with Christians, whom he abominated. For physical signposts he had an outlandish nose, an unpleasant odor, and frequently a speech impediment also. He was a literalist and stickler in debate and a trained Talmudist in his logic . . . His conversation was attended by much frenzied gesticulating . . . He himself sat spider-like, in the center of an impressive commercial network. Other animal metaphors which described him were the hog, the dog, the rat, the vulture, the weasel, the fox, the toad, the serpent, and the wasp. As an ageless creature less sinned against than sinning, he hardly qualified for tragedy; on the other hand, his repulsive physiognomy, his eccentric habits, and his hostile motives conspired to suit him ideally for the purposes of the comic and the horrific."

In *The Great Gatsby*, we first meet Wolfsheim at his luncheon

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appointment with Jay Gatsby and Nick Carraway. Here we are told that Wolfsheim is a "flat-nosed Jew" (p. 77). The fact that he is Jewish seems to play no role either at this point or in the rest of the novel; this, together with the realization that we are not so repeatedly reminded of the religious affiliations of any of the other characters, makes Fitzgerald's description of Wolfsheim take on added significance. It is important to note, too, that Wolfsheim as yet has done nothing evil, but it is clear that his name, his "tiny eyes," his "large head," and "the two fine growths of hair which luxuriated in either nostril," serve to emphasize Wolfsheim's animalistic qualities and to arouse in the reader feelings of repulsion and abhorrence.

Wolfsheim's materialism is emphasized by his cuff-links that are made out of human molars:

"... I see you're looking at my cuff buttons."

I hadn't been looking at them, but I did now. They were composed of oddly familiar pieces of ivory.

"Finest specimens of human molars," he informed me (p.80).

The fact that the question as to whether these molars are his own or someone else's is never answered not only brings to mind the ethics of the usurer, but also hints at the combination of usury with the crimes of mutilation and cannibalism as was done in Shakespeare.

Several other aspects of the stereotype are fulfilled in this short scene. Wolfsheim speaks with an obvious speech impediment: "He went to Oggsford College in England. You know Oggsford College?" (p. 80) His deference in describing Gatsby as "the kind of man you'd like to take home and introduce to your mother and sister," is hardly strong enough to cover up the scorn he feels toward Gatsby: "I raised him up out of nothing, right out of the gutter" (p. 181). Consider how closely related this is to the stereotyped picture of the Jew's abomination for the Christian we cited above.

The animal-like characteristics of Wolfsheim are especially emphasized by Fitzgerald. His name, of course, is an obvious key, but note, too, that many other bestial traits such as eating

with "ferocious delicacy," for example, are given to Wolfsheim. Fitzgerald spends a great deal of time talking about Wolfsheim's nose although it is very subtly done. He "covers Gatsby with his expressive nose," like an animal smelling his prey. Before Wolfsheim speaks to him, Carraway says, "His nostrils turned to me in an interested way," again suggesting the image of the animal smelling his prey before the kill. When Wolfsheim leaves the luncheon meeting, "his tragic nose was trembling." Like an animal, then, Wolfsheim seems to use his nose in a way essential to his existence.

The next time we see Wolfsheim is after Gatsby's death, and Fitzgerald takes the opportunity to further the stereotype. We have an emphasis on the secrecy in Wolfsheim's living habits with the reference to his name "not being in the phone book" (p. 174). The mysteriousness of Wolfsheim's business is strongly focused upon, thus abetting the concept of Wolfsheim as wizard. The spider sitting in the center of his web is analogous to Wolfsheim at the center of his phantom-like business operation about which no one knows anything. One point is clear, however, the Swastika Holding Company is up to no good.

Our final picture of Wolfsheim occurs after Gatsby's death; Wolfsheim is describing Gatsby as a young man. Here the picture of the innocent Gatsby is sharply contrasted with the portrait of the Jew villain as Wolfsheim's knife is now poised for the purpose of extortion. At this point Wolfsheim also represents the cowardly Jew, covering his cowardice with Talmudic logic: "When a man gets killed I never like to get mixed up in it in any way. I keep out. Let us learn to show our friendship for a man when he is alive and not after he is dead" (p. 182).

Wolfsheim has a subordinate and yet very important role to play in the novel. Like the classical usurer, he is the power behind the scenes in Gatsby's life. We have his own statement in the closing passages of the novel that he not only "started" Gatsby, he "made him." There is no reason to doubt his word. A man who could play with the faith of fifty million people could surely make one yokel into a clean-limbed Romantic American whose refinement he could use in some mysterious way. However, despite his importance to the novel, Wolfsheim

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remains a caricature, a flatly-drawn figure who never takes on the three-dimensional qualities necessary in the portrayal of a real flesh-and-blood character. Wolfsheim does not succeed as a real Jew, for he does not succeed as a real man. In Wolfsheim's case the stereotype is carried so far that he is almost an allegorical figure, possessing no real humanity. Fitzgerald needed an evil manipulator; the villainous Jew served his purpose well.

The character of Robert Cohn, the Jew in *The Sun Also Rises*, is in the tradition of the classic Jewish type, the "shlemiel." But he fails as a Jewish character basically because he fails to be a genuine and consistently drawn "shlemiel." Not that Hemingway failed to give Cohn many of the classical attributes of the shlemiel. On the contrary, these attributes are present to such an extent that his derivation from the shlemiel is unmistakable.

The notion of the shlemiel is a rather complex one beginning with Talmudic commentaries.⁷ It is here that he is first considered a cuckold. Gradually, through medieval and renaissance literature, the shlemiel became the stock figure and object of humor in Jewish folk tales.

Perhaps the best description of the shlemiel comes from Ibn Ezra (1092-1167), the Hebrew-Spanish poet, who talks about himself in a series of personal epigrams: "If I should undertake to sell candles the sun would never set; if I should deal in shrouds, no one would ever die." Through these expressions we have a combination of a kind of ironic humor and bitterness, and also perhaps a notion of the absurd.

It is from these roots that shlemiel gradually became the stock figure and object of humor in Jewish folk tales. This clumsy, unfortunate, and ineffectual character appeared in a variety of forms, perhaps as an outright cuckold or a duped and henpecked husband, who was repeatedly defeated in sexual matters until "defeat had become his trademark." Co-existent with the humor that this figure elicits, there is a sense of the tragic about the shlemiel, for he is usually the cause of his own misfortune. He is not merely a victim of circumstance who has somehow missed the mark. He is at the same time guilty of some nebulous and tragic flaw and doomed to live under an unlucky star. These

flaws remain nebulous, perhaps for the reason that stories about the shlemiel were "almost never psychological; a person was a shlemiel by virtue of what he did, not by what he thought."

In viewing Cohn as a shlemiel, an obvious beginning can be made with his sexual life. The theme of Cohn as cuckold and as henpecked lover are fully developed in the novel. Other shlemiel attributes brought out are Cohn's passivity, his failure to articulate, and his inability to cope with his more articulate and more aggressive companions. In effect, they become Cohn the man, not one to be taken seriously, but rather one who must be scorned and ridiculed. His "pitiful" and "sad Jewish face," "forever suffering," plague the other characters. In other words, Cohn's Jewishness (which at one point in the novel is characterized by his pushing away a dish of cucumbers in favor of a plate of pickled herring) and its concomitant characteristics (real and imagined) are a source of irritation to Jake and the others. They see in him the archetypal Jew, the shlemiel, the misfit with "a big wreath of twisted garlic around his neck and on his chest," who, by asking the wrong questions and making the wrong comments, consistently violates the unwritten code of conduct adhered to by his companions.

This last point bears upon Cohn's final link with the traditional shlemiel. The shlemiel "became a point of reference for the community around him, . . . and as the 'fool,' he was free to criticize in a way that the others were not." Cohn too takes all of life with more than just "one grain of salt," and thus his presence serves as a satiric comment on the fundamental belief of his companions that their lives have a semblance of order, and a reminder of their colossal failure. It is only Cohn who would be able to say: "I can't stand it to think my life is going so fast and I'm not really living it" (p. 10). The fact that the others are condemned to live within the margins of the rules and with the sham of sophistication makes them unable to show any intensity of passion.

As a case in point, consider how Cohn unashamedly exhibits his love for Brett in spite of the fact that the code demands that one be cavalier about his love affairs. In contrast to Cohn's uninhibited crying, the code required that the show of love must

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exhibit itself as it does in Mike: "Isn't she a lovely piece? Don't you think so, Jake?" (p. 79) To the extent that Cohn stands outside this artificial code of conduct, he is superior in human terms to his successful persecutors. Thus, a genuine possibility in interpreting Cohn's personality is to see him as a social commentator, somewhat beyond the pale of the peculiar society in which he functioned, and somewhat superior to it.

On the other hand, in depicting Cohn as a shlemiel, Hemingway may have been attempting to characterize the lack of heroism of his generation. Basically the idea of using the shlemiel to serve this purpose is a workable one. For in an age which found itself unable to think in terms of the old-style hero, the figure of the shlemiel fits in well, blending, as we have already noted, disparate elements of the comic and the tragic. In a very real sense, then, he becomes a natural candidate to serve as a metaphor of the human experience in modern times.

In adopting (perhaps inadvertently) the tradition of the shlemiel for *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway had confronted himself with an unusual opportunity either to make meaningful social commentary or to develop insights concerning the condition of man. Unfortunately Hemingway did not make successful use of this opportunity, and his failure to do so is intimately bound up with his failure to capture in Cohn the shlemiel's real essence. For, in spite of Hemingway's ingenious portrayal, Cohn remains an inauthentic shlemiel.

The difficulty in the depiction of Cohn as a shlemiel arises from several different sources. The first and lesser of these is Cohn's family background and his social and economic position in life. A shlemiel simply does not emerge from a wealthy New York family; nor does he attend Princeton; and most especially he does not become a collegiate boxing champion. All of these things Cohn has done. The true shlemiel comes from a humble background and is singularly unsuccessful in all of his ventures in life, including, by the way, those in his childhood. Cohn's sudden confrontation with his Jewishness at age eighteen which then evoked feelings of inferiority leading to shlemiel-like behavior, is simply not an adequate explanation.

The really significant failing of Cohn as shlemiel is his lack of charm. Although this might seem at first to be a minor matter it in fact is one of great importance. For the true shlemiel has as a major redeeming quality a charm and "humaneness which makes him dangerously warm and lovable" at the same time that he is a social irritant who stands outside of the social structure and mores of the society in which he moves. A good part of the shlemiel's charm derives from his traditional ability to make humorous commentary on his own ineptitude, thus making ambivalent the attitude of society toward him. Cohn does not indulge in humorous commentary and, we feel, he would be totally unable to do so. For he lacks the lightness of touch, the "ironic posture to face a world he cannot beat or quit," the ability to laugh at himself that would make this possible.

This failing in Cohn's portrayal can be better appreciated through a brief comparison with a rather recent, but already classical, shlemiel, I. Bashevis Singer's, "Gimpel the Fool." Gimpel is a thoroughgoing shlemiel, a fool, who, in his own words has been labelled, "imbecile, donkey, flax-head, dope, glump, ninny, and fool,"⁸ by the people of the *shtetl*. However, in the final analysis his foolishness triumphs over the wisdom of the world. For he affirms life with an ironic positivism and a bitter humor, expressed in part through "symbolic shrugs and gestures," that reflect an acceptance of his absurd condition in this world and perhaps a confidence that things might be better in the "next world." This is a remarkable quality in a man who was at the very bottom of the social scale within a society that was itself under great external pressure and upon which "the heaviest weights of history descended."⁹ Herein lies his great charm and his saving grace. This is the source of his ultimate triumph.

In the case of Cohn the *shtetl* has been replaced by the society of his companions. Like Gimpel, Cohn is a fool who occupies the lowest position within this society. But Cohn fails to share in Gimpel's redeeming ironic humor. Gimpel's "symbolic shrugs and gestures" are unknown to him. The source of Gimpel's triumph is inaccessible to him and in the end he remains a miserable failure.

Disparate though they are, Wolfsheim and Cohn share, besides

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their religion, the distinction of being the most repulsive characters in the novels in which they appear. Since we have condemned both of them as inauthentic Jews it is important to emphasize that we do not intend to imply that a "real" Jew must be morally upright or likeable. We can elucidate this point by briefly diverting our attention from Fitzgerald and Hemingway.

Bloch is one of the most faithfully portrayed of the Jewish characters in Proust's *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*. As in Hemingway and Fitzgerald this Jew commands attention for two reasons: first, he gives to the novel a very definite social significance; secondly, he acts as a catalytic agent upon the other characters of the novel and upon its narrator. But the point of difference between Bloch and the Jews in Hemingway and Fitzgerald is that the Jewishness of Bloch is not given "any extra-social dimension" which might detract from his importance as a social being. In other words, Proust has seen Bloch "chiefly as a component of the society he depicts."¹⁰ Bloch offends us the moment he appears in the novel, just as do several other characters in the novel, but not because they belong to any national or racial group. In other words, the fact that Bloch is an abhorrent Jew is not more important than the fact that he is an abhorrent man, in the same way that Swann's positive character does not take on added significance because he is a Jew. Thus Proust's Jews are not left hanging in mid-air. Rather, Proust provides a milieu that saves them from becoming stereotypes.

This social milieu has not been provided by Hemingway and Fitzgerald for Cohn and Wolfsheim. If these Jews are to be an integral part of the society which is being depicted, we may legitimately question the necessity to label them so emphatically as Jews. Since their Jewishness is obviously not central to the novels in which they appear, we should question the emphasis placed upon it. It can be conjectured that for Hemingway and Fitzgerald the traits of meanness, corruption, and weakness are somehow closely bound-up with Jewishness. Partly for this reason, and partly because of the existing stereotypes, creating Cohn and Wolfsheim as Jews and emphasizing their Jewishness was a natural and convenient way for Hemingway and Fitzgerald

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to proceed. It was undoubtedly the way in which they felt they could most effectively achieve the character portraits they sought.

NOTES

1. Fitzgerald, F. Scott, *The Great Gatsby*, New York, Bantam Books, 1945.
2. Hemingway, Ernest, *The Sun Also Rises*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954.
3. Fitzgerald, F. Scott, *The Crack-Up*, edited by Edmund Wilson, New Directions Paperbook, New York, New Directions, 1956, pp. 20-21.
4. Scott, Arthur L., "In Defense of Robert Cohn," *College English*, XVIII (March, 1956), p. 310. These correspond to pp. 10, 96, 101, 143, 162, 164, 177, 184, 203, 206, respectively, of the Scribner edition.
5. Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up*, p. 309. The emphasis on the word "perfect" would seem to indicate that Fitzgerald was being complimented on his uncomplimentary portrayal of Wolfsheim.
6. Edgar Rosenberg has an extensive discussion of this in his book, *From Shylock To Svengali: Jewish Stereotypes in English Fiction*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960, pp. 21-38.
7. Pinsker, Sanford, "The Schlemiel in Yiddish and American Literature," *The Chicago Jewish Forum*, XXV (Winter, 1966-67), pp. 191-195. My discussion of the history of the shlemiel is based primarily on Pinsker's remarks. In his article, Pinsker deals only with Yiddish authors and American-Jewish authors.
8. Singer, Bashevis, "Gimpel the Fool," *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, edited by Irving Howe and Eliezar Greenberg, New York: Meridian Books, 1958, pp. 401-413.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
10. Hyde, John K., "Proust, His Jews and His Jewishness," *French Review*, II (Winter, 1966), pp. 837-848. Note also the article by Milton Hindus, "Proust's Ethics and the Jews" *The Chicago Jewish Forum*, XI (Fall, 1952), pp. 31-37.