



Research Paper

## Contemporary Jewish Cultural Dilemma: The Exploration of the Narrative Space of Nathan Englander's *The Gilgul of Park Avenue*

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**ABSTRACT:** Charles Morton Luger is a financial analyst in Nathan Englander's *The Gilgul of Park Avenue*, a short story collected in *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges: Stories*. An epiphany comes that he realizes that he has a Jewish soul inside, and then he begins to pursue a Jewish lifestyle which is questioned and resisted by both his wife and his psychologist. But he not only accepts that he is the reincarnation of a Jewish soul, but he also excitedly announces his Jewish identity to the secular world and hopes that the secular world will still accept him as who he is. This article intends to discuss the cultural dilemma of contemporary Jews from three narrative spaces, geographic space, social space and psychological space, respectively, where the protagonist lives.

**KEYWORDS:** Secular, Jewish, Soul, Reincarnation, Narrative Space

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Nathan Englander, whom Philip Roth calls a brilliant genius, is an important member of the third generation of American Jewish writers. Since 1999, his five short stories have been collected into American Short Story of the Year, including *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges* (1998), *The Gilgul of Park Avenue* (2000), *How We Avenged the Blums* (2006), *Free Fruit for Young Widows* (2011), *What We Talk About When We Talked About Anne Frank* (2012). These short stories are rooted in the Jewish tradition and contain many Hebrew and Yiddish words that have not been translated into English and Jewish customs that have not been explained, which is closely related to Nathan's own life experience, born in a Jewish family in the United States, grows up in an orthodox Jewish community in New York, studies in Israel, gives up Judaism and returned to the United States, but still keeps to the Jewish tradition.

No matter what American Jewish writers "write or how they write, the endpoint of their works is always to publicize a Jewish ethical relationship" (Qiao, 2009). Charles, the protagonist of *The Gilgul of Park Avenue*, answers the question of how difficult it is to be a Jew in contemporary American society, that is, the problem of identity construction when the Jewish tradition collides with the mainstream American culture.

### II. FIRST NARRATIVE SPACE: CHARLES' PHYSICAL SPACE

The story takes place in the back seat of a taxi, and it's the first physical narrative space where Charles Morton Luger experiences his Jewish soul for the first time. In this space, Charles, who would not normally converse with a stranger, is "obligated" (*Gilgul*, 168) to share his feelings with the driver as a woman eager to share her feelings after giving birth in the elevator. It is also the first space where the protagonist takes the initiative to declare his Jewish identity without fear of other's eyes and hopes to be accepted by others. Benjamin Schreier believes a novel's main dramatic conflict is the lack of language and paradigms for the characters to express their Jewish identity forcefully. In *The Gilgul of Park Avenue*, however, Charles is excited and eager to declare his identity as a Jew, "Jewish," Charles says. "Jewish, here in the back" (*Gilgul*, 169). In need of positive confirmation, what Charles gets in response from the driver is "No problem here. Meter ticks the same for all creeds" (*Gilgul*, 169). Disappointed with the answer, he thought it at least "benign" (*Gilgul*, 169). Looking out of the window, he is searching for a wink, a confirmation that the world knows what he already knows. In the first narrative space, Nathan shows how Charles, the protagonist, wants his Jewish identity to be known. With the encouragement of minority culture in the multicultural background of the United States in the 1980s, the minority would not be discriminated against, but show their charm because of their difference, just

like having a heritage and “having their own stories to tell” (Xue, 13). To some extent, it reflects the desire of the third-generation American Jewish writers to make their Jewish identity public and accept them as who they are, after the second-generation Jewish writers tried to keep their Jewish identity hidden. As the taxi arrives, we arrive at the second physical space, Charles' home, while greeting his doorman and handing the driver 50 dollars, Charles' affluence and generosity is shown to the readers, in this space, ordinary people, represented by the driver, only care about whether they get paid, and race seems not an issue to be considered.

Charles' home comes as the second physical narrative space, where his wife Sue “had redone the foyer and the living room and dining room all in chintz fabric, an overwhelming amount of flora and fauna patterns” (Gilgul, 170). An ordinary family may only own a living room and a dining room, while the home of Charles owns a foyer. Also, from the decoration point of view, if the interior space is not large enough, with such a complicated and overwhelming amount of flora and fauna patterns, the space of the room will appear very limited. However, the room demonstrates “a vast slippery-looking expanse” (Gilgul, 170), which corresponds with the narration setting that Charles lives in abundance. In the kitchen, Sue is reading the maid's note of the method of heating creamed chicken, while Charles, who is already Jewish then, is puzzled by the fact that he does not know if a creamed chicken can be accepted Kosher. Home is an important place to keep and pass on Jewish tradition and culture, among which, keeping the Jewish food tradition is an extremely important and inevitable part of practicing Jewish doctrine. If one wants to keep tradition and culture beliefs complete, home is the physical space where one must tell the eating habits one possesses. Not ready to tell Sue, Charles eats the food provided by his wife as a Marrano—the Jews who were forced to convert from Judaism in order not to be persecuted by anti-Semites—while at the same time a Jew in his heart. Encouraged by the rabbi, Charles confesses to his wife that he is Jewish, and she thinks he is joking or insane, which is to say that even in the most basic physical space, his Jewish identity is not accepted, as demonstrated by his wife's rejection of his new identity. Out of respect for her husband, Sue prepares “nonconfrontational” (Gilgul, 185) food, still, she finds it hard to accept her husband's sudden conversion to a Jew, she is not a very religious Christian, thinking her husband's conversion is just an outlet for his midlife crisis, an outlet that is the same as becoming a vegetarian, becoming a Liberal Democrat, or having an affair, except that being a Jew is more extreme.

Chronologically speaking, the third narrative space is Royal Hills, Nathan's fictional Jewish community in New York, which can be found in other short stories of his. Charles is here to find Rabbi Zalman. Royal Hills Mystical Jewish Reclamation Center (R-HMJRC) has a Gothic looking, and the entry hall is marble, the overall appearance marks the center a luxury place which impresses Charles, and he feels that “There is money in the God business” (Gilgul, 173). This is the place where Charles turns to the rabbi, who is entirely not surprised by his reincarnated soul. R-HMJRC represents a space where Charles' Jewishness is fully accepted and unquestioned.

The Fourth physical narrative space is Charles' office, where he learns the code of Jewish law from Rabbi Zalman. When asked about the rabbi, Charles lies and says Zalman is just a metal broker. By denying the identity of a rabbi, Charles shows the reader that Jewish identity is not acceptable or recognized in the working environment, or maybe it's Charles who is not ready to publicize his belief. In terms of the degree of acceptance of Charles' transformation, the fourth narrative space also does not accept his change, thus the attitude of the fourth narrative space can be juxtaposed with it of the second.

### **III. SECOND NARRATIVE SPACE: CHARLES' COMMUNITY SPACE**

Community is of great significance to the construction of character identity, Homogeneous community accepts homogeneous attributes and individuals, while rejects heterogeneous ones. Therefore, groups with the same identity attribute will establish a homogeneous community environment, and the relationship between groups and community environment is interactive. Therefore, the culture with groups as the carrier will interact with the community space. Moya and Markus believe that physical appearance and social behavior divide people into groups, thus this will lead to fair access of inequality. So, after Charles told the taxi driver that he was Jewish, the driver's first reaction was “Meter ticks the same for all creeds” (Gilgul, 169). This indicates that although cultural diversity encourages the appreciation of racial heterogeneity, there is still a phenomenon of injustice or prejudice, which results in the driver's attitude to reassure the passenger. The indifferent attitude of the driver also reflects the general attitude that ordinary people hold, showing that people willingly ignore elements different from themselves under the multi-culture. Compared with the unenlightened social environment different from the traditional one, contemporary society is more acceptable to heterogeneous elements.

Charles gets out of the taxi and goes home. The first thing he does is to run to his wife and share with her the fact that he suddenly feels his reincarnated soul, yet he still dares not. “He inhaled the scent of perfume and the faint odor of cigarettes laced underneath” (Gilgul, 170), which illustrates a modern society that women are allowed to smoke, or that women have the same right to smoke as men. Sue has a career, an art director, her life is more glamorous compared with Charles. In such a modern society, women can work like men and can be

respected for their professionalism. And when Sue says curse word “damn”, the impression of modern society where women can speak curse words like men while not to be judged is reinforced. Men and women share equal status, Charles admires and respects Sue, therefore the social environment lays the foundation of the dinner “meeting”.

Because of the sudden reincarnation, Charles does not know of Jewish culture and taboos, and there is the situation where Jews don't know what to do to be Jewish because of the absence of Jewish tradition. In search of a rabbi who could help him, Charles opens the yellow pages-public service number-to find a rabbi's phone number. Charles is so grateful for the city life of New York, because you can find anything, any information in the yellow pages. In this modern city, it's easy to find everything, things, places, and help. Charles finds it modern to get help after dialing the number, first, he selects the service he needs through the automatic phone tone option, and then it transfers accordingly. In this case, Charles finds Rabbi Zalman he can turn to.

Charles comes to R-HMJRC. The luxurious building of the Jewish center makes Charles feel that God also has a money career, which echoed the taxi driver's only care for income and neglect of racial issues previously, indicating that in today's materialistic economy, this is a society where the money is supreme. Where Rabbi Zalman works is a “new space. much bigger” (Gilgul,175). A phone sets to ring indicates how busy Zalman can get. Paintings on the wall shows the rabbi's taste in art, and also through the eyes of Charles, we see the rabbi “was sporting a pair of heavy wool socks and suede sandals” (Gilgul,175), which suggest the delicate and exquisite life Rabbi Zalman leads. In fact, it is the same pursuit of the material life of ordinary people. So, from this point, there is no difference between Jewish rabbis and ordinary people.

Amezuzah nailed to the doorpost is to tell the neighbors the presence of a Jewish family, Charles gets the mezuzah from a Jewish family, for they no longer use it, and “their daughter is dating a black man” (Gilgul,197). Just like the Fraiman gives up their belief, Rabbi Zalman turns a rabbi from a hippie, and Charles finds his Jewish soul in the back seat of a taxi, religion can be opened or closed easily as a switch. However, the practice of a Jewish soul, how to behave like a Jew, and how to keep up Jewish tradition and doctrine take learning and training. For instance, the Fraiman family is Jewish, what they celebrate is Hanukkah according to Jewish law, however, they invite Charles to see their Christmas tree, which is one of the symbols of celebrating Christmas, a festive for gentiles. Also, Fraiman's daughter is dating a black man, which goes against traditional Jewish values. For Fraiman, it is easy to turn off his religion. To believe or not to believe is just a question of making a choice, yet to keep up and pass on the Jewish religion and tradition is a process that needs to be practiced. Similarly, in such a social environment, religious issues are not taken seriously and the cost of believing or giving up the faith is very low. For Sue, she is a less strict Christian herself, and wants Charles to find a less demanding God. Perhaps for Sue, who represents the people in everyday life, religious activity is more like a tool to get access to social activities, allowing them to socialize with others on Sundays or even helpful at work.

#### **IV. THIRD NARRATIVE SPACE: CHARLES' PSYCHOLOGICAL SPACE**

As a cool-headed financial analyst, Charles doesn't allow himself to be the victim of extreme emotion, but after he learns his Jewish reincarnation identity, he's excited to announce the news to the world. With the change of physical space, he tells the taxi driver surprisingly, proudly, and later wants to share his enthusiasm with his wife. Unlike the traditional family, where women are trapped in the family chores and kitchen, Sue has a career that Charles supports, admires and respects.

From secular to Judaism, Charles encounters the problem of lacking the knowledge of Jewish customs and laws. Facing the creamed chicken, he doesn't know if the dish is kosher. This is a reflection on wanting to be Jewish without knowing how to be one. Not ready to tell his wife, he wants to consult his psychologist or a rabbi, which is to say, in the first stage of his transformation, psychologist functions the same as a rabbi, also he wonders his sudden transformation is a spiritual problem.

In order to find Rabbi Zalman, Charles comes to R-HMJRC, where “the only thing familiar” is “his unfamiliar self” (Gilgul, 173). The reason Rabbi wants to know if Charles' mother is Jewish, is because the mother as a metaphor here, actually represents the second-generation Jews who hide their true identity. And the feature of the second generation is they discard their Jewish way of living, their doctrine, and tradition, and by doing all of these, hide their Jewish identity. However, according to the study of Julius Lester, no matter what's the reason to depart from Judaism in the first place, after the third, the fourth or more generations, the displaced soul will be reborn in this bloodline, the soul is so eager to return to its people, and will eventually return to the Jewish religion, its people and its own culture. Rabbi Zalman, a former Hippie, finds his Jewish soul all of a sudden just like Charles, so Charles' transformation doesn't surprise him. People's religion in Nathan Englander's *The Gilgul of Park Avenue* is like a switch which can be turned on or off easily, no difficulties at all, in this way, Zalman and Charles are the same. Knowing that the soul is Jewish is one thing, learning Jewish laws and doctrines and how to behave like a Jew is another thing that Charles has to work on. So, the first thing Charles needs to do is to tell his wife, for “Kosher can wait. Tefillin can wait. But there is one thing the tender

soul can't bear- the sacrifice of Jewish pride" (Gilgul, 180). Sue is threatened, and Charles wants to prove he is still the same man who loves his wife dearly and hopes to be accepted by his wife, even after he finds his faith.

## V. COLLISION OF THREE NARRATIVE SPACES

The story reaches a climax when the three narrative Spaces come together, Charles' psychologist, who represents the social space the protagonist lives in, calls Sue, the representative of the family space, and asks for a meeting for the three of them to talk about the issue of Charles' sudden transformation. And Charles asks Rabbi Zalman, who represents his psychological space, to come to the dinner for spiritual support. Charles feels sorry for Sue, for Sue not only needs to deal with family chores but has her own career, while Charles couldn't understand himself. At the dinner table, the rabbi is clearly absorbed in the food, and he only stops once to say the psychologist is a Jewish name. For Charles, he looks, acts the same, "no different than before. Different rituals, maybe. Different foods. But the same man. Only that I feel peaceful, fulfilled" (Gilgul, 206). Sue threatens to leave in order to let Charles give up his sudden transformation, while during the course of their quarrel, the spokesman of the social and psychological space couldn't stay but retreat. Nathan once in an interview revealed that all his conversations in his fiction are Jewish, if we take this into account and reconsider the role of Charles, his wife Sue, rabbi, and psychologist, and the identity they each represents, we will find, the untransformed Charles can represent the second generation Jews, according to Marcus Lee Hansen, the second generation tends to depart from Judaism and emerge into the big social environment. After the protagonist feels the reincarnation, he wants to declare his Jewish identity to the whole world, and hopes to be accepted as always, as before, even he now has faith, which is the features of the third-generation Jews. The psychologist's name is Birnbaum, and is pointed out by rabbi, this is a Jewish name, which indicates his identity as a second-generation Jew, who abandons Torah, in pursuit of Freud on behalf of psychological science. Sue shares the same position as the psychologist, they are Jew deserter in this way. Rabbi Zalman represents the Jews in transition from the second generation to the third. The secular world doesn't want to know Charles' world, and therefore doesn't want to accept the changed Charles. In the words of Rabbi Zalman, "There is no hope for the pious" (Gilgul, 211). It's ironic, for the words should not come from a rabbi, a rabbi may say that "the pious are saved". However, we see the dilemma facing by the contemporary third-generation Jews that when individual wants to acknowledge their true identity regardless the consequences, still, they don't want get judgement for their Jewish identity, for their belief. And they can't get enough understanding, support, even tolerance. The "quarrel" at dinner is not simply the quarrel between the Jewish and the non-Jewish group, but also the quarrel between the second and the third-generation Jews, the third requires understanding from the second generation. Hansen comments, "what the son wants to forget, the grandson wants to remember". In describing the return of third-generation American Jewish literature and the Jewish awakening, what is different from Eli, the Fanatic by Phillip Roth, is the ending of Eli is ambiguous, Eli may end up abandoning his epiphany because the threat posed by the society around him, the doctor sedates him and he is unconscious. In this sense, Eli's Jewishness can be suppressed in external ways. While Charles in *The Gilgul of Park Avenue* comes clean his identity and makes a full commitment and is accepting the consequences. The Frankness of Charles represents the attitude of the third-generation Jews.

As the review of the collected short stories by an American writer Colum McCann, this is a book that challenges tradition in a way that will upset some but will endure forever. In Englander's hand, storytelling became a transformative activity.

## VI. CONCLUSION

By discussing the three-dimensional narrative space in Nathan Englander's, *The Gilgul of Park Avenue*, we can see the story develops simultaneously from three dimensions, the Jewish community space is not just a landmark, or a physical space, but also a cultural and psychological space. The narrative space is well structured. Also, we can see Nathan Englander, as a third-generation American Jewish writer, how he sees his identity and position, and is willing to share his identity openly. And his positive response to the traditional faith practice and behavior reveals under the circumstances of lacking Jewish tradition and faith, the dilemma of how to rebuild one's own Jewish identity.

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