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The Use of Parallels in Character Motivation

A Small Hotel, by Robert Olen Butler, may be considered an elegant sequel to his 1995 short story “Jealous Husband Returns in Form of Parrot.” In the original short story, Butler explores a reincarnated parrot’s unrealistic fantasies, feelings of inadequacy and compulsive need to fill a spiritual void carrying over from one life to the next through a series of past-life parallels and current-life pairs. In A Small Hotel, Butler expands and exposes those same failings in a divorcing couple via a complex series of vignettes played out from each character’s point of view, randomly roaming through childhood, college, the recent past, and the present. Butler uses parallels between past and present events to clearly demonstrate the otherwise inexplicable motivation behind the actions and feelings of his principal characters.

Butler parallels the parrot’s observations from his current life with memories from his past life to establish how the fantasy version of his wife has gripped the bird’s heart and won’t let go. Seeing his wife for the first time in parrot form, he is astounded. He can’t believe “how beautiful she is.” She has “great brown eyes,” and they are “almost as dark as the center of mine” (Jealous 103). By relating his wife’s eyes with the beauty the bird sees in his own eye, Butler recreates the wife in the parrot’s own image so the bird can fantasize about her on his terms. As the wife’s face draws closer to his cage, the parrot contemplates her nose, and “its beauty is clear to [him] now. Her nose is a little too long, but it’s redeemed by the faint hook to it.” He relates the wife’s nose to the beauty the bird finds in all parrots and turns the wife into something the parrot wants and needs—a “pretty bird” like himself, the only thing he can ever mate with for life. Butler expands on the parrot’s fantasy. The bird’s wife isn’t merely pretty,

she also “seems to know about birds.” As she ruffles the feathers on the parrot’s neck, her touch makes his “tail flare.” He can feel the “stretch and rustle of [himself] back there.” Butler gives the impression that the bird is rather surprised by his reaction, as though this is the first time he has felt such a thing. Not even for a blue-front Amazon would the parrot’s tail flare. Only the touch of his wife gives him these feelings. Thinking back to his human life, it is “like those times when she would tell me she loved me,” when the fantasy was so real that he “believed her” (105). With the reawakening of the parrot’s feelings, wants and needs at the hands of his wife, Butler has established that the bird will never be able to resist her and that he will need her forever. The parrot’s connection to his wife is so deep that the parrot can only refer to her as “my” wife.

Butler creates a parallel between the bliss the wife makes the bird feel with the inadequacy she makes him feel, creating emotions in the bird that seesaw evermore wildly between the highs of crazy love and lows of insane jealousy. As the parrot in the pet store falls head over heels in love with his wife all over again, he attempts to respond to her “pretty bird” (104). But feelings of inadequacy are right around the corner as Butler introduces a boyfriend who is “big in the chest and thick with hair.” Seeing the boyfriend brings back the bird’s old feelings of inadequacy and he tries to physically disappear. Butler triggers a memory of the bird’s puny human body with its “bare chest” and a search through the sheets for extra-marital hairs that aren’t his. It is this new boyfriend who is “the kind of guy [he] always sensed her eyes moving to.” Even as the wife is admiring the parrot now, wanting him now, and choosing him now, Butler confronts the bird with what it felt like when his body was not enough and what it felt like to be looked through and talked through. Butler piles more *agita* on the parrot’s emotional seesaw after the bird flies into the window. Although the bird is in pain, it’s as if he’s flown to heaven because his wife “put her hands under [his] wings and lifted [him] and clutched [him] to her breast [. . .] and wept awhile” (106). Her tears warm the bird’s heart. Through this

vignette, Butler leaves the impression that the parrot's wife feels more love and affection toward him as a bird than as a man. Although the bird is "touched" by her attention to him by day, it is short-lived because "by the night she had another man." Butler shows that the bird is becoming increasingly unnerved by the never-ending parade of boyfriends that fan the flames of his burning inadequacy. After having felt important to her for almost a whole day, this setback makes him want to "fly against the bars of the cage."

Butler continues to build on the bird's feelings of inadequacy by paralleling the husband's unwillingness to speak with the parrot's inability to speak. He shows us that the man was not only puny in body, but was puny in spirit as well, being too frightened to take the risk of exposing his heart to his own wife as he "locked [himself] in the bathroom" (105). As the image of a grown man running to the bathroom settles, Butler suggests another image—one of a "damn fool" curled up and rocking on the toilet seat, "working on saying nothing, even if it meant locking [himself] up." But now as a bird, Butler evolves the man quite a bit. He is now a brave little parrot who is willing to confess his feelings of violation and why they grew into an unexpressed jealousy, explaining that he "sensed [other men] inside her and so they were inside [him]" (106). Butler completes the bird's evolution through the resigned realization that if he "had the words, these are the things [he] would say." In a similar parallel, Butler foreshadows the man's future from the perspective of the bird's past by using a memory of the man holding his wife "sweetly," all the while being aware of "this other creature inside [him] who knew a lot more about it" and who "couldn't quite put all the evidence together to speak" (105). And as a household pet who sees the evidence first-hand, Butler uses the image of the bird attacking his dangly toy to underscore the bird's painful wish to walk down the hall and catch her red-handed so "she couldn't deny it anymore." But then what? The question is left hanging, because neither the man nor the bird has anywhere to go from there.

Butler uses a parallel to reveal the deepest need that drove the man and is driving the parrot, which the bird mistakes as being his wife's deepest need that only he can fulfill. As the bird first recalls lovemaking with his wife as a man, Butler reveals the man's most fundamental need when simply states, "I was whole with her" (105). This is the motivation of the man's life—to be whole, something he could not do for himself. Now as a parrot, the bird's perspective is used as a device to confuse the physical empty space in his wife with the spiritual empty space inside himself. The parrot believes that if he can fill his wife's space, then the emptiness in his own spirit will somehow be filled. Through this parallel, Butler shows that the man believed the same. As the bird sadly acknowledges that he cannot be "part of all those other men who were part of her," Butler shows that the bird can never be whole (106).

Because the universe is curved (Watkins), Butler brings his previously-established parallels full circle to converge in a moment of clarity. As the parrot attempts to ignore his wife's lovemaking with the boyfriend he hates the most, Butler shifts the bird's attention from the man's feelings of inadequacy to "the scene of peace" on the other side of the window into which he had previously flown (107). Butler parallels the bird's old feelings of longing for his wife, with new feelings of longing for freedom and fulfillment as a bird. The parrot attempts to soothe himself by calling himself "Pretty bird," echoing his wife's words to him in the pet shop, and recalling those times as a human when his wife told the man that she loved him, and he believed her. Butler introduces the first large cracks in the parrot's imaginary love construct when his wife appears in the den naked. When the bird is confronted with his wife's "terrible nakedness," the man's deep-seated disgust for his own puny "bare chest" is reiterated and projected onto her. As the parrot wishes to pluck "the feathers from [his] chest, and give them to her," Butler exposes the bird's desperate need to resuscitate the fantasy created earlier in the pet store, causing the bird's world to crumble further. At first there is a sense of bewilderment as the parrot questions his destiny, wondering how he can be together with his wife if she is not "empty

in the place [he is] to fill.” A moment of clarity occurs as the bird realizes that he “was not enough” (108). The parrot’s world lies shattered around him and Butler delivers the final blow, a final feeling of hope paired with a final feeling of inadequacy resulting in a final moment of clarity. As the parrot pours his heart out using eight of his nine vocabulary words, Butler reintroduces the boyfriend. The wife “scrapes [the bird] off her hand onto the open cage door and she turns her naked back to [him] and embraces this man.” Butler uses the word “scrapes” to accentuate the carelessness of the wife, who treats the parrot like a blob of mud at the change of her whim. Clarity dawns on the bird as he realizes that the wife’s boyfriend is “what she wants. Not [him].” Butler completes the circle by pairing the bird’s first thought wherein he “never can quite say as much as [he knows]” (103) with this final moment of realization, understanding that he can “never say what is in [his] heart to her. Never” (108). Butler ends the past life/present life cycle with the bird choosing to “be free of all these feelings.” There will be no rebirth; he is choosing to let go of his wife. The brave little bird has evolved and chooses peace over fantasy, something he could never do as a man. Butler creates a painful series of events that can only conclude with the shattering of the parrot’s world, as he perpetually seeks spiritual completion through the eyes of his wife. While the parrot did indeed evolve to a place where he was able to be free of his obsessive needs, he was not able to find completion in himself, and so he is truly dead.

In his Salem Press review, William Nelles observes that the parrot “gains insight by considering the parallels between his two lives” (Nelles). An “interrogation of the limitations and uses of language” might also describe the parrot’s insurmountable challenge in communicating with his wife (Smith Rakoff). However, Joanna Smith Rakoff is in fact describing A Small Hotel, a novel written by Butler fifteen years later, which follows Michael Hays, a gifted and eloquent trial lawyer who is incapable of expressing the emotions that are

trapped inside his façade of perfect composure. Inasmuch as the parrot's story is a mélange of parallels between love, words, and expression, A Small Hotel is even more so.

Paralleling the parrot's story, Butler explores the cause and effects of Michael's refusal to express his emotions in words. The parrot's goal was to avoid angering his wife; Michael's goal was to avoid angering his father, who felt that in expressing affection "[w]ords spoil it. They spoil it completely" (A Small 62). By stifling the little boy's need to say "I love you," Butler shows how a small child's unquestioning worship of his father can neatly transform itself into an obvious fact that doesn't need to be spoken. Eventually, the boy grows into a man whose belief is that "Love means never having to say I love you" (116). Butler taps into the traditional early 20th century expression of love as being something that is not expressed, but shown by support, presence, and fidelity, as well as the 21st century's form of expression of love—just presents. He explores what happens when this attitude, having perpetuated itself throughout Michael's life, wreaks itself on his wife, Kelly. As with the Parrot's inability to say what he knows, Michael is also incapable of expressing the love he feels for his wife. Frustrated, he "would only feel the demand for words and gestures he could never adequately give" (76). In response to Michael's ineptitude for outward expression, Butler parallels Michael's childhood disappointment with Kelly's adult disappointment, as she "makes herself believe this will do for now" (43). Kelly is forced to extrapolate and trust that the stereotypical trappings of love that Michael provides are a direct expression of what her husband feels for her.

Kelly's story also parallels the parrot's story in that she desperately needs to know that her beloved loves her in kind. Butler never tells us why the parrot's wife cheated, but we know why Kelly cheated on Michael. It was because of words—the three little ones. Kelly might consider the parrot to be lucky in that his wife would tell him that she loved him. But, Kelly never once in over twenty years of the relationship heard those words from Michael. Nor did she hear from her father "the words she [wished] to hear—words she [had] not yet heard from her

father—not ever, ever, ever” (69). With such a setup, Butler has boxed Kelly into a situation similar to a man freezing in the Antarctic. Her soul is craving for the warmth of the simplest of things—three little words—and the need for them leaves her spiritually naked. As she undresses, she becomes aware that she is “as naked as she feels inside” (100). If Michael had been the parrot, he would surely have plucked his own feathers to protect her, but Kelly’s learned silence prevented him from knowing. In a cruel parallel that triggers the destruction of Kelly’s world, Butler traps her between a man who feels love but can’t express it and Drew, a stereotypic womanizer who says “I love you” with abandon but doesn’t feel it. Naturally, Kelly is seduced by the “the words she always thought would fix her” (110). Butler catches Kelly in the same trap as the parrot—the fantasy of a being fixed by someone, the fantasy of three words making her whole. But in the same way the parrot is not what the wife is looking for in life, Kelly is not what Drew is looking for in life. After Drew breaks up with Kelly, she concludes that words are “just signifiers. And the absence of words signifies too. She has never been loved. She has never been worthy of that” (110). Kelly’s fantasy of being made whole now lies in splinters. Butler has given the hearing of three little words the power to define the self-worth of a grown woman.

Yet as powerful as Butler makes the word “love” for the parrot and Kelly, he makes the word “pretty” equally powerful. Throughout history, the concept of love has folded into itself the concept of beauty found in the eyes of the beloved. The parrot found his wife to be pretty and worked and practiced to utter the word “pretty” as his gift to her. The parrot’s wife expressed affection to him by telling him that he was pretty. It was one of his greatest joys. But, Michael has never told Kelly that she was pretty; she has never known that joy. In the parrot’s story, the importance of the word “pretty” becomes pivotal when his world begins to shatter; he soothes himself by calling himself the most precious of his words, “pretty bird” (Jealous 107). Similarly, Butler makes the word “pretty” another bone of contention between husband and wife.

After her foolhardy affair, Kelly must appease her starving ego by knowing that her husband at least finds her to be pretty. Twice, Kelly asks Michael if he thought she was “pretty tonight,” hinting to him that there are things she needs. Twice, Michael brushes her off saying, “Of course” (A Small 117). Butler does not use “pretty” to show us a woman fishing for a complement; he is using it to indicate the preamble to a delicate conversation. To show how one seemingly innocuous word can shatter a twenty-year marriage, Butler lets the natural flow of this age-old conversation run its course. Michael’s inability to recognize that Kelly is in crisis sends her over the edge. She declares that she slept with another man. Kelly’s sudden confession is not designed to cleanse the soul; it is only meant to hurt. It is meant to force Michael to ask why she was so unhappy that she would do such a thing. Unfortunately for Kelly, however, the standard human response is to instead say, “Ouch.” The marriage is over. Like the parrot, Kelly’s entire world is shattered and she can see no future. Kelly has come to the small hotel to seek the same dream of peace that the parrot sought; she has come there to slip away with a bottle of sleeping pills.

Ironically, Michael’s sudden awareness of parallels is the device that Butler uses to save Kelly’s life. As Michael’s new girlfriend becomes aware of his inability to express words of love, she becomes the anti-Kelly. She berates him using Kelly’s words, telling him that “people need” to hear that they are loved (116). In contrast to the parrot’s story, Michael ponders this crucial parallel and evolves beyond the “ouch” of Kelly’s infidelity to confront his role in the underlying question of “why.”

Smith Rakoff concludes that in exploring the words “I love you,” Butler “demonstrates in the novel’s moving climax—when uttered truthfully, they don’t just express but enact the roiling and conflicting emotions that lie beneath them.” Could the lesson be learned in a harder way? Yes, but it would be the same lesson. While Butler appears to have written the same story over the course of fifteen years, Kelly’s fate is very different from the parrot’s. Butler, too, has

evolved; his perspective is different. Perhaps his own story has been worked out. He now sees the motivations behind the bad deeds of good people. He understands role of antagonist and protagonist cannot be assigned, because in life there is no such thing.

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