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Discriminated Occasions and Discrete Conflicts in Agnon's *A Simple Story*

THE POWERFUL INFLUENCE OF AGNON'S Jewish mothers on their sons has long been observed by his critics. Yet the psychology of the mother herself—her motives, thoughts, words, and actions—has not been explored. *A Simple Story,* the novel that is Agnon's masterpiece of psychological realism,[1] offers an excellent opportunity to delve into the mother's mind. Unlike Jacob Rechnitz's mother in "Betrothed" and Yitzhak Kumer's in *Just Yesterday,* Hirshl's mother belongs to the fictive present of the novel. Rechnitz and Kumer's mothers, though they doubtless have a pervasive and devastating influence on their sons' lives, especially upon their later relationships with women, belong only to the suggestive biographical background of the work. However, Hirshl's mother Tsirl is not only an authoritative figure who is responsible for her son's character and predicament—a recurrent theme in Agnon's works—but she has a psychological depth of her own.

Although the protracted conflict between an assertive mother and a submissive son is the core of the novel, in this study I will concentrate on a more discrete conflict, the one between Tsirl and Blume, his mother and the woman he desires. By focusing on this underlying drama, I will try to expose both the psychology of the mother and Agnon's subtle technique for revealing it. It is this technique which makes *A Simple Story,* with its unpretentious title, Agnon's most intricate work. The novel, which deals with the well-worn theme of a young

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man disappointed in love, emerges upon closer reading as a stunningly original piece of work.

A Simple Story relates the story of Hirshl Hurvitz's unrequited love for Blume Nacht, his orphaned second cousin on his father's side. Unrequited love, another prominent theme in Agnon's fiction, is inextricably linked to the theme of the mother-son relationship; possessive and forceful mothers tend to make weak and passive sons, unsuccessful in fulfilling their erotic desires. Blume, who is to become the object of Hirshl's desires, travels to Szybusz to join the prosperous Hurvitz family—Boruch Meir, his wife Tsirl, and their only son Hirshl—in accordance with her dying mother's suggestion: "When I die, go to our cousin Boruch Meir. I'm sure he'll have pity and take you in" (3). But, alas, during Blume's first evening in the Hurvitz household, Tsirl, Boruch Meir's wife, is resentful of the intrusion of the newcomer; and Boruch Meir himself does not appear until breakfast on the following morning to welcome his cousin. At the outset, then, the gap between the promise of the influential cousin and his delayed appearance in the text hints at Boruch Meir's secondary role in his own household. Indeed, Blume's abiding sense of alienation in her relatives' home is directly attributable to the combination of Boruch Meir's self-effacement and Tsirl's domineering presence.

Nevertheless, Blume's arrival comes at an opportune time for the Hurvitzes and for Tsirl in particular. The latter, busy with the family business inherited from her father, needs a reliable person to run her house; that is, she needs a new maid. Thus, in a less than charitable gesture this wealthy cousin takes in Blume as a servant, an unsalaried one at that, on the grounds that the girl is a relative and not some "hired hand." Although Tsirl seems to be satisfied with the services rendered, she finds herself faced with the irritating fact of her son's growing love for the poor relation. Seeking to stave off the ill effects of such a situation Tsirl decides to marry her son off to Mina Ziemlich, the daughter of nearby wealthy farmers with whom the Hurvitzes have business connections. Having acquiesced in the marriage, Hirshl goes mad and he is taken by his parents to the sanatorium of one Dr. Langsam in Lemberg (Lvov). True to his name, Langsam—"slowly" in German—step by step and with sensitivity guides Hirshl to recovery and back to the bosom of his family.

Now we may return to the meeting at the breakfast table around which the whole Hurvitz family gathers and encounters Blume for the first time—a scene treated at length and in minute detail. Through this "discriminated occasion"[2] I intend to illustrate how dramatized scenes in Agnon come to assume large dimensions on both a symbolic and an allusive scale, and how seemingly inconsequential episodes, the most routine events, continue to resonate throughout the text. This use of

recurring elements, or motifs, is one of Agnon's strategies of indirection, which are, in turn, the essence of his art.[3]

On her first morning in the Hurvitz household Blume rises early. By the time the relatives are up and about breakfast is waiting for them. As a final touch, Blume has set out a tray of cakes she had brought with her from home after her mother's death. The Hurvitz family looks at the breakfast table in the scene that follows.

> Soon Boruch Meir appeared, rubbing his hands. He said good morning to Blume, lifted the tails of his jacket, and sat down at the table, where he poured himself some coffee and regarded his cousin and the cakes she had brought with approval. He was followed into the dining room by his son Hirshl, who declared:
>
> "Those cakes look awfully good!"
>
> He took one of them, ate it, and said, "These deserve a special blessing."
>
> "Who baked them?" asked Tsirl, breaking off a little piece and tasting it. "Did you?"
>
> "No," Blume said, looking at her. She too tasted a piece. "But I can bake just as good."
>
> "Thanks be to God," said Tsirl, her tone of voice changing, "that we aren't cake eaters and pastry nibblers here. Plain ordinary bread is good enough for us."
>
> Blume looked down at the table. The munching of cake did not stop.
>
> "Mama dear," said Hirshl, leaning toward his mother, "I have something to say to you."
>
> Tsirl looked at her son. "Then say it," she said.
>
> "It's a secret," said Hirshl with a smile.
>
> Tsirl bent an ear toward him.
>
> Hirshl put his mouth to it as though intending to whisper and said in a loud voice, "You must admit, Mother, that these cakes are delicious."
>
> Tsirl frowned. "All right," she said. (6)

The abundance of detail lavished on Blume's cakes elevates the conversation about them to something more than idle chitchat. Indeed, in the context of so mundane an episode this conversation functions as a portentous exchange in which are announced in embryonic form the interpersonal relationships that impel this novel: Tsirl's ambivalence toward Blume, the rivalry of these two women for Hirshl's affection, and the latent friction between Hirshl and his mother over Blume. The prepared and ready breakfast provides the unequivocal response to Tsirl's semi-hopeful, somewhat offensive remark to Blume the day before: "But I do hope that you were also taught a few things that a woman ought to know" (4)—Blume, that is, is to serve as a maid. Tsirl had been quick to drop the hint, and just as quickly Blume responded. As much as this tacit understanding, obviating the need for direct talk, may have pleased the lady of the house, she was greatly displeased by

the relish with which her husband, and especially her son, greeted Blume's cakes. Sensing that Blume might rise above the humble station she has in mind for her—a mere maid—Tsirl voices misgivings about the girl's talents, culinary and otherwise: "Plain ordinary bread is good enough for us."

Henceforth, the breakfast episode recurs as a haunting refrain in the novel. The essence of the problematic relationships uniting and dividing the principal figures is captured immediately in their placement around the table. The cake episode will resurface allusively over and over, in telling acts and vignettes and in Hirshl's dreams. Cake (plus puddings, pancakes, and other confections) and servant girls placed in everyday scenes will function as metonymic representations of Blume. Such scenes, far from being innocuous, are supercharged with portent; the memory of Blume and her cakes will cast a long shadow on them all, for Blume is conspicuous even in her absence.

A symmetrical structure is evident in the breakfast scene, an early symptom of the conflicts entangling the characters. Tsirl cuts a piece of cake, tastes it, and then speaks, after which Blume does exactly the same—the deliberate slow-motion ritual of two rivals testing each other's mettle in the first stages of a duel. (Such symmetry will also mark the last days of Blume's stay in the Hurvitz home. Before deciding to find her son a wife, Tsirl notices that Hirshl is quietly but desperately pining for Blume: "Tsirl saw what she saw." And when Blume, aware that Hirshl is about to be married off by his mother, decides to look for work elsewhere, the narrator comments: "Blume saw what she saw" [35, 45].)

The early scene is already fraught with ironic comments on the relationship and rivalry between the two women. Even as Tsirl makes her tactless remark, "Thanks be to God we aren't cake eaters and pastry nibblers," everyone continues munching on the cake. (In fact, the Hebrew text states literally that as Blume lowers her eyes in embarrassment, the sound of uninterrupted "chomping" grows progressively louder, or "explosive.") And the rest of Tsirl's comment, that "plain ordinary bread is good enough for us," is mocked as well, but later in the novel. As the narrator mentions the visits of Gedalia Ziemlich, Hirshl's prospective father in-law, he elaborates: "At one time this had been accompanied by a slice of fried bread; since Blume's arrival, however, the coffee was drunk with a piece of such cake as she had learned to bake from her mother" (42). Lastly, Tsirl's declaration of restrained eating habits is set in glaring contrast to the facts, for "what Tsirl liked best was a proper meal: a good roast, stew, or cut of rare beef" (26). How ironic, then, that such disingenuous words of domestic frugality are directed against a poor girl who nursed a sick mother from an early age and never knew a pampered day in her life.

Blume eventually leaves her cousins' home. But the taste of her homemade cakes lingers long after she is gone. A hint about them is dropped, for example, at a festive dinner given by the Ziemlichs in honor of their future in-laws. As dinner is served, Tsirl and Hirshl, mother and son, indulge in private ruminations about Blume and the first encounter with her. Everyone but Hirshl attacks the sumptuous meal with gusto. All the while a serving girl comes and goes with platters of food, until at last she brings in the dessert.

> The serving girl reappeared with a large cornmeal pudding in the shape of a derby hat, stuffed with plums and walnuts and sprinkled with sugar coins. Though everyone except Hirshl was bursting at the seams, the aroma proved irresistible. Even Hirshl took a large slice and ate it with gusto.
>
> "You must admit, Hirshl," said Tsirl, flashing him a smile, "that this pudding is delicious." Hirshl blushed. After priding himself on his self-restraint, here he was being a pig like the rest of them. Nor was that the worst of it. The worst of it was that his mother's words were the same as those he had spoken to her on the day of Blume's arrival in their house, when she had brought with her the most delicious home-baked cakes. (81)

The picture of the serving girl with her pudding could not but conjure up instantaneously, for both Tsirl and Hirshl, the vision of Blume. Thus, thoughts of Blume surface precisely when Tsirl's marriage plans for Hirshl—aimed at keeping Blume away—are proceeding apace. When the pudding is served, Hirshl, who had barely touched the rest of the meal, cannot resist the sweets and cuts himself a large slice. Tsirl's mordant remark operates on two levels. Taken at face value (by the other guests, who know nothing about the smoldering conflict over Blume), it is a mother's gentle mockery of her son's uncharacteristic burst of gluttony. But the remark has another meaning as well, one known only to Tsirl and Hirshl. For Tsirl, the occasion is an unmitigated triumph, as she makes Hirshl eat his own words, giving him measure for measure by repeating his comment from the breakfast table. She had never forgotten—or forgiven—the grudging confession her son had wrested from her about Blume's cakes. Here at last was her gratifying "revenge," the opportunity to put him in his place.

But Blume had conquered Hirshl's heart with her sweetness right from the beginning. Soon after her arrival at his family's house, he is found standing in the store, "staring into space. Whole days passed with his lips slightly parted and his tongue firmly tucked in his mouth, as if he had been given a candy to suck on and wished to retain the taste of it" (27). And the memory of her lingered in his mind long after she had gone, leading to an obsession that ended in madness.

After Hirshl suffered his breakdown, he underwent treatment in the Lemberg clinic of Dr. Langsam. There, midway in his treatment, as Hirshl hovers between a stubborn denial of the realities that had

pushed him into madness and a lucid acceptance of them, he dreams the images which encapsulate the story of his life, bringing to the fore a host of unresolved conflicts and resentments and uniting a number of motifs. The early breakfast scene is incorporated into this dream as well. The dream unfolds to the sound of a blind beggar's song, an eerie melody "without beginning or end."

> [The song] was still going on when a cloaked woman appeared, bent low before him, and sliced him a piece of cake. (193)

Hirshl's wish that the confrontation between his mother and Blume would somehow resolve itself, is expressed acutely in his dream image: his mother and his sweetheart, each of whom had once, in waking life, sliced a piece of cake for herself, become in the dream a single figure offering Hirshl a piece of cake (sweets, perhaps an infantile symbol of sexual pleasure). Yet his prayer goes unanswered. The dream's answer to that wish is that before the cloaked woman could give him the cake, "a man came along and threw a pocketful of coins at him—or rather, into his eyes, which were soon covered with two mountains of them," testimony to the blinding, overpowering effect of money, especially in Hirshl's bourgeois home. Hirshl's anguish in response goes unheeded: "Though Hirshl screamed and sobbed, carriage wheels kept drowning out his voice." And so in the dream as in life Hirshl's cry is rendered mute by materialistic values that Hirshl, the son of well-to-do parents, is expected to welcome in lieu of real love.

The novel delineates the agonizing details of Hirshl's obsessive preoccupation with Blume: he aches for her return, engages in imaginary conversations with her, sees her in the faces of strangers, compares her with his wife, loiters near her new home at the edge of town night after night, and finally goes mad with grief because of her. Even when he is on the road to recovery, she has an unmistakable presence in his dreams.

Less obvious is that Tsirl, too, remains preoccupied with thoughts of Blume long after she has gone, intimations of which are intercalated into the dinner scene at the Ziemlichs. If the hint there is rather broad, in other passages to be discussed below the allusions are far subtler.

In this regard it is a basic characteristic of Agnon's style that a first reading of a given piece cannot impart the cumulative effect of the complex of its allusions. Once the totality has been grasped, however, it often yields new insights into motives and events and may necessitate a radically different interpretation from the one originally entertained. Moreover, form often reflects content in Agnon's work. So artfully does he disguise the workings of psychological repression and concealment that his clues are often overlooked. But the clues are there

nevertheless. As demonstrated earlier, Agnon favors the technique of incremental repetition or slight variation of motifs consisting of minor details or random phrases. Once attuned to these echoes, one begins to discern the patterns. Hirshl's dream, a difficult nut to crack, is actually a repetition of a cluster of motifs that mean to lead the reader to the thoughts buried in the recesses of the protagonist's mind and, by extension, of the novel. Close examination of private ruminations, too, often provides entry into the protagonist's inner world. Since waking meditations, like dreams, censor feelings, they too must be painstakingly examined and interpreted if their secrets are to be unraveled.

Let us return now to Tsirl. Although thoughts of Blume are uppermost in her son's emotional world, in hers they are only faintly discerned, for she deftly hides this preoccupation from herself and from others. And Agnon's text, in imitation of Tsirl's psychological denial, cleverly conceals her thoughts about Blume from the reader as well. Yet these artful dissimulations, when brought to light, have considerable aesthetic impact.

Let me show this by focusing on the account of the train ride to Dr. Langsam after Hirshl has gone mad. This account, as opposed to the first discriminated occasion at the outset ("the breakfast episode") is narrated rather than dramatized. It is a commonplace that by dramatizing an author is exempt from speaking about his protagonists, from asserting his own truth, and so dramatization is often held to be in some way preferable. Agnon, however, even when he narrates an event rather than letting his protagonists play it out has his own ways of concealing as he reveals. The following narrated excerpt offers a surprising insight into Tsirl's psyche, demonstrating that Agnon's art of telling is by no means less cunning than his art of showing.

> And so two days after the onset of Hirshl's illness his parents set out with him for Lemberg, taking along a paid companion to watch over him.
>
> The companion proved unnecessary. Hirshl bothered no one and neither croaked nor crowed. He simply sat and said nothing the whole trip. God in heaven knew what he was thinking. Though his parents pointed out to him each station they pulled into, he didn't even trouble to look up. From time to time Tsirl offered him food from a basket. If his hand was closed, he did not open it to take it; if it was open, he did not close it to grasp it; and when she tried sticking it into his mouth, he simply refused to chew.
>
> As they entered Stanislaw, Tsirl redoubled her efforts. "Look, Hirshl, look, we're in Stanislaw," she said, hoping to get a response to the name of the town in which Mina had studied. Hirshl, however, showed no more interest in Stanislaw than he had in any other place he had passed through.
>
> Tsirl felt despondent. And thinking of the store just made it worse. Since the day she stopped nursing Hirshl she had hardly missed an hour's work in it, and, on the rare occasions when she had, she had left it in the

> hands of her husband and son. Now all three of them were away. It was not that she was worried about pilfering. Getzel was as good as gold and would keep an eye on Feyvel. Still, a store should not be left without an owner, to say nothing of a house. Had Blume still been the Hurvitzes' maid, Tsirl would not have been concerned. But how could she not be with Blume's replacement? Indeed, Tsirl thought of a great many people on the way to Lemberg, of whom Mina did not happen to be one. (175–76)

Hirshl's madness, unleashed in a storm of gibberish and hallucinatory actions, gives way to silence and apathy. But now his parents' attempts to coax a reaction from him lead nowhere. Finding Hirshl utterly unresponsive, the latest symptom of his derangement, the "despondent" Tsirl withdraws into herself as well. But curiously her heaviness of heart is not the result of her failure to spark any reaction in her son; and it does not reflect her concern for him. No, Tsirl's concerns are for the store, her work, the possibility of financial loss, and the unattended house. But the closing words of the passage merit special attention since they may stand this first impression of Tsirl's preoccupation on its head. These words can be more fully appreciated by their literal translation that follows: "Many were the thoughts on Tsirl's mind on the way to Lemberg, but few of them were about Mina." Tsirl's thoughts gravitate toward her possessions and property, according to a specific order of importance: the store ("her" store, as the Hebrew text states) first and then the house. In view of the crisis that has overtaken the family, Tsirl's overriding concern with *her* store and *the* house stands as a grave indictment of her. But a closer reading will prove that Tsirl only seemingly thinks about her possessions; her outer thoughts mean to conceal a deep link between her innermost world and her son's.

In Tsirl's thoughts the house is recalled only secondarily by virtue of its association with the store. That fact emerges with even greater clarity if one notices that five and a half sentences are devoted to the store and two and a half to the house. As for Tsirl's reflections on people, they are inserted into a materialistic context as well: Feyvel is liable to pilfer but Getzel is "good as gold," while Blume is remembered as an efficient maid. Thus Mina, who is neither employee nor household servant, does not figure in any of Tsirl's categories of associations, and Tsirl's thoughts about her are commensurately limited.

Among Tsirl's sundry thoughts, the final one highlighting Mina's relative unimportance is in stark contrast to the closing sentence in the preceding paragraph, where Tsirl mentions Stanislaw in the hope that her son will respond to the name of the town in which Mina studied. The disparity between these two sentences stresses a key aspect of Tsirl's personality: her heart and her mouth are not one. Tsirl may speak of Stanislaw in order to arouse thoughts of Mina, but her own thoughts about Mina are minimal. She may attempt to elicit interest in

Mina from her son but she cannot muster it in herself. Mother and son barely give Mina a passing thought. It should be noted at this juncture that Mina, at an advanced stage in her pregnancy, has in the meantime been left to cope alone with the shock of her husband's sudden derangement. Yet even at a time when Mina deserves some sympathy, Tsirl devotes nary a thought to her predicament. If thoughts about Mina are subliminal here, what could they be under normal circumstances?

Who then is really on Tsirl's mind? Blume. That Blume is ubiquitous in Hirshl's world is obvious—the entire novel hinges on his fixation. But that Blume should occupy a significant place in Tsirl's "saner" pragmatic world—that is something we learn only by scrutinizing the hints and innuendos.

Aside from its psychological value, the concluding sentence in the aforementioned section is of structural significance as well. In it Agnon resorts to another technique, the punch line, the *pointe*. The last statement, or rather understatement, about Mina immediately follows Tsirl's stray thoughts about Blume's efficiency and the unsupervised house. At first, this reminiscence of Blume strikes us as a link in a chain of associations about the store and the house. But the understatement at the end of the passage removes Blume from the predictable context and creates a tension of opposites. In other words, if Tsirl entertains few thoughts about Mina, most of her thoughts are therefore about Blume; Mina's status is downplayed, and Blume's centrality is enhanced. The reader is made to understand that the *pointe* about Mina has rendered Blume into the focus of Tsirl's thoughts.

There is more to come. As Tsirl's thoughts drift from recollections of Blume's competence to Mina (whose name seems out of place, having as its main purpose here to alert the reader), there is an intermediary phrase that begins with the words "many were the thoughts on Tsirl's mind" followed by the word "but." The caesura in the punch line calls out for a comparison between the two clauses of the sentence. Thus, if the reader had any doubts regarding the subject of Tsirl's "many thoughts" during the long ride to Lemberg, the *pointe* makes it abundantly clear that Blume is the object of these unspecified ruminations.

Tsirl's thoughts about Blume may well derive on the overt level from obvious associations with business and home. Indeed, Tsirl has always been considered by the critics as the embodiment of middle-class attitudes and mores and nothing more.[4] My analysis means to convey that there is more complexity even in a representational figure such as the forceful, self-assured, practical Tsirl. Her exposed thoughts may be a façade for other, inadmissible ones, in which case they explain the incongruity of Tsirl's preoccupation with property and possessions at

such a critical moment. Tsirl's disquiet—"had Blume still been the Hurvitzes' maid, Tsirl would not have been concerned. But how could she not be with Blume's replacement?"—takes on another meaning altogether. Tsirl is uneasy, not because of the house and its neglect but rather because she knows more about Blume's hold on Hirshl than she cares to admit even in the privacy of her own thoughts. By according Blume a subservient status Tsirl attempts to deny reality. The *pointe* about Mina, though, hints at Tsirl's deeper thoughts. The same woman who keeps her opinions to herself as she flatters her customers (140) avoids confronting her own innermost feelings. Just as Tsirl's resentment emerged involuntarily as her voice changed and as she frowned at the breakfast scene, so the reader can discern, in this case as well, that discomforting thoughts afflict her willy-nilly.

Were it not for the statement about Mina, Blume would have remained no more than one of the underlings surrounding Tsirl, for thoughts about the shop boy Getzel and Blume converge. But Blume is not merely a servant, and Getzel is more than a hired hand. Despite Blume's subservience, Tsirl involuntarily associates her with Mina, Hirshl's wife, and accords the girl a status beyond her will. The strategic insertion of Blume's name between those of Getzel and Mina—the employee and the lawful wife—attests to Blume's ambiguous status in the Hurvitz household. Tsirl had always treated Blume as an underling while pretending to care for her as a cousin, whereas Hirshl, who first loved Blume like a twin sister and then with sexual passion, never thought of her as a maid. Blume turned on her heels and left, but the conflict over her has festered.

Until now, Getzel has figured in Tsirl's thoughts as a glorified salesman. But the *pointe* about Mina, forcing the reader to backtrack and reassess the meaning of the passage, brings to light an unsuspected motive for the entwinement of Blume and Getzel in Tsirl's thoughts. Just like her son, Getzel too loves Blume: she is the object of his sweetest dreams (141). In that respect, the two young men are equals. And that both Hirshl and Getzel loiter in the vicinity of Blume's new home further reinforces the analogy. It is Hirshl's complex relationship with Getzel, his rival—a relationship of which his mother is aware—that triggers her train of thought. And indeed Hirshl's emotional involvement with Getzel is substantiated in the text. In Dr. Langsam's clinic, where Hirshl lets himself go, his true feelings toward Getzel are revealed.

> Hirshl pictured the long, narrow store with its scales and counters . . . and its customers being waited on by Getzel and Feyvel. He suddenly was overcome by a hatred for Getzel such as he had never felt for anyone before. Could it be that he envied him his activity in the store while he, the owners' son, did nothing all day but eat, drink, play chess, and listen to the tales of Dr. Langsam? (195)

The narrator's rhetorical question is a fine example of disingenuousness: Hirshl certainly has no desire to be in Getzel's shoes at the store. Why would he want to be? Indeed, his loathing of the family business and of his work there is stressed repeatedly in the novel. Moreover, the patient is quite apparently enjoying his convalescence and has little cause to complain. The cause of Hirshl's jealousy of Getzel is not the store but Blume Nacht, the object of Getzel's affections. Hirshl's long-repressed hostility toward Getzel, a function of his love for Blume, emerges in full force for the first time. Only at this late stage are Getzel and Blume interwoven in Tsirl's mind just as they are in Hirshl's, and appearances to the contrary, mother and son are of a piece. Given this complicated network of relationships, it is small wonder that thoughts of Mina are eclipsed.

One more example will illustrate the extent to which Blume dominates Tsirl's inner world. This section, too, culminates with a *pointe* that stands the passage on its head, a short episode, or expanded punch line, that I will call an "episodic *pointe*." It follows the celebration of Hirshl's engagement to Mina, chapters nine and ten, and crowns chapter ten.

After the party, at one o'clock in the morning, the Hurvitzes return home but cannot open the door because the maid has locked it from the inside and left the key in the hole. This symbolic event, coming on the heels of Hirshl's engagement, casts the prenuptial celebration in an ironic light: Tsirl cannot force Mina onto Hirshl; another woman already occupies his heart and has locked it from the inside. Metaphorically the two keys, the one inside and the other uninsertable, represent Blume and Mina. Blume's presence also pervades the scene in the persona of the new maid, who is her replacement and has locked the door from within.[5]

Unable to open the door, Tsirl screams at the maid in a wild outburst out of all proportion to the innocent mistake. In fact, it is something else, not the new maid's incompetence that sets her off. Tsirl does not vent her anger until the word "maid," a metonymic reminder of Blume, is verbalized.

> "I imagine," said Boruch Meir, "that the girl must have locked up without realizing that we weren't home."
>
> "What girl?" asked Tsirl.
>
> "*The new maid.*"
>
> Tsirl knocked on the door and shouted angrily, "Open up there!" (66–67, emphasis added)

When the maid asks Tsirl to wait "just a minute" while she puts on a dress, Tsirl becomes even angrier.

> Tsirl pounded on the door in a rage. "Just listen to her! A dress she wants to put on! You might think this is a formal visit."

Later, when the maid goes back to sleep and begins to snore, Tsirl fumes: "A minute ago, she wanted to try on all her dresses, and now she's in a deep sleep" (68).

The maid's dress, the object of Tsirl's displaced fury (by way of exaggeration, "a dress" multiplies into "all her dresses"), recalls an earlier bone of contention between Blume and Tsirl; a previous conflict now erupts in full force.

In that earlier episode the narrator's and Tsirl's voices joined to submerge the signs of conflict: "Just as she [Tsirl] was considerate toward everyone, so she was with Blume. If, for instance, she came across an old dress that did not fit her, or a shoe that had seen better days, she was sure to give it to her cousin." But Blume behaved as a free agent and discarded what she could not use: "As long as it was usable, Blume would use it, and only when it wasn't usable at all was it discarded." Tsirl, offended by Blume's "ingratitude," remarked: "I myself save everything. Not like our Blume, who throws out whatever she doesn't care for." And the narrator went on "to explain": "Though a person might have thought that Tsirl was finding fault, anyone knowing her would have realized she was simply stating a fact" (9). At the time, Tsirl's abiding resentment was attenuated by certain deceptive terms of endearment ("our Blume"). In that instance, the text appropriately reflected Tsirl's self-restraint and her ability to dissemble. Form and content united to convey the idea that what could have sounded like criticism was "simply" an innocuous statement of fact. The episode of the key—with the maid who slips into something decent before opening the door—is a retrospective commentary on the other episode about Blume and her dresses. It exposes Tsirl's true feelings: the poor girl she was "good enough" to take in (46) had uppity ways and did as she pleased with the dresses her mistress gave her out of "compassion." Thus, the new maid belatedly unleashes the fury that Tsirl had contained when she noticed Blume's independence.

The scene of the key—with the new maid as a stand-in for Blume and at the receiving end of Tsirl's wrath—ends with the explicit mention of Blume. It would seem that Tsirl's bottled-up anger needs an outlet and erupts at the word "Blume." But even then, Tsirl catches herself and couches her reference to Blume in casual terms that belie the core of Tsirl's resentment. Hearing the new maid snore, Tsirl says to her husband: "Blume never snored like that. Just look at me, I'm yawning my head off and still it stays wide awake. . . . I must sleep" (68). With studied indifference, Tsirl draws a trivial distinction between Blume and the new maid while camouflaging the deeper cause of her anger. Unwittingly Tsirl betrays herself, for this mention of Blume

drives home Blume's centrality once again. Interestingly, as soon as Blume is called to mind, Tsirl complains that in spite of her exhaustion she is wide awake, that is, she cannot sleep because her mind is on Blume. It is here that the affinity emerges between Tsirl's ruminations during the ride to Lemberg and the scene at the door: in each case there is no escaping Blume.

The scene at the door, suffused with Blume's invisible presence, is a mini-epilogue to the engagement party and a commentary on it. The episodic *pointe* forces us to re-conjure the scene of the engagement and some of its more disturbing moments. During the engagement, Tsirl keeps looking at Mina, "for whom she felt a special affection for having agreed to become her daughter-in-law, thus saving Hirshl from the clutches of Blume." While Tsirl beams at her daughter-in-law, Hirshl is thinking: "How will I ever talk to or look at Blume again?" Meanwhile the party grows "gayer and gayer" (63). For Tsirl, Mina is undoubtedly a means to an end, an instrument to keep Blume away from Hirshl. Tsirl's affection for Mina is not unconditional, which may explain why she barely gives her a passing thought during the ride to Lemberg: Hirshl's madness, the occasion for Tsirl's ruminations, proves that Mina has failed to keep her part of the bargain. Consequently, she is the odd person out as Tsirl recalls the services of competent employees like Blume and Getzel; unlike these assistants, Mina did not deliver the goods, since she failed to eclipse Blume in Hirshl's mind. When during his engagement Hirshl, wishing he were elsewhere, wonders if he could ever face Blume again (and the question is irrelevant because Blume left the house months ago), his thoughts are a counterpoint to Tsirl's plan of distancing Hirshl from Blume. The scene at the door, which metaphorically underscores Blume's hold on Tsirl and Hirshl, intensifies dissonant notes already sounded at the engagement celebration. The oblique reference to Blume as one who doesn't snore reaches a crescendo of understatement that proves, beyond all doubt, that Blume haunts Tsirl's internal world.

At the engagement party Tsirl suspects that Hirshl is still distracted by thoughts of Blume, but she hopes to get his mind off her once and for all during the festive dinner. As Tsirl settles into the carriage that will take her to the Ziemlichs, she turns toward the house and screams out to the maid: "You there! Lock up and don't forget to take the key out. Did you hear me?" (72). Tsirl does not relish the idea of finding once again an "unwanted" key in the door when she returns home. The maid assures Tsirl she has taken the warning to heart by nodding her head. "Then, uncertain whether it had been seen, she stepped outside and said, 'Don't you worry, ma'am, I won't leave that key in for a second'" (72). That assurance given, Tsirl's mind is at ease, and stretching her legs out comfortably in the carriage, she is set to

enjoy the ride. The irony is that as she leaves the new maid she is not freed from thoughts of Blume, even for a brief reprieve at the festive dinner in the Ziemlich home. For another maid, the Ziemlichs' serving girl, comes and goes bearing not only sweet and spicy delicacies but also the bittersweet memory of Blume Nacht.

In naming the inaccessible heroine of *A Simple Story* Blume Nacht, Agnon played on both the Yiddish and Hebrew meanings of her name. *Nakhtblum*, "night flower" in Yiddish, does not let her love bloom (69) because she is aware of Tsirl's opposition and Hirshl's passivity. And in Hebrew, the root *b-l-m* means to restrain or curb.[6] By chapter eight of the novel, Blume has already left the Hurvitz home and moved in with Akaviah and Tirtza Mazal and their child. Hence, early in the work (which contains 37 chapters) she disappears almost entirely from Hirshl and Tsirl's view and for the remainder exerts her powerful influence from afar. The tale that began with Blume's journey to the bustling town of Szybusz ends with Blume's retreat to a remote corner at the edge of town, where she becomes a recluse. Agnon, concentrating on the mother who tries to lessen her son's sexual desire, removes Blume from the center of town—and from the center of the novel—to its periphery. Yet despite the fact that Blume's presence becomes implied rather than explicit, she symbolizes a universe that is distant but not forgotten. The son as well as his anaphrodisiac mother continue to be obsessed by her.

If Tsirl's store—with its buying and selling and constant flow of noisy customers—represents the tempo of life in Szybusz by day, Blume embodies the silent mysteries of the night. It is after the light has waned and the tumult of the day has subsided that Hirshl's silent scream—the torment of a soul aching with desire and paralyzed by the fear of erotic surrender—pierces the night.

In *A Simple Story* the constant tension between the overt and the concealed, the familiar and the unknown, is conveyed in the conflict pitting Tsirl against the object of Hirshl's inhibited but visceral desire, Blume. This conflict is demonstrated in the first discriminated scene of the novel, which then remains as an important point of reference and urges the reader to look for it everywhere. Blume, the flower of the night, with all that she represents and with her spiritual rather than physical presence, is not only the source of an attraction that is at once irresistible and terrifying; she is also the source for creative inspiration. In the closing words of the novel, the narrator comments that "Hirshl and Mina's story is over, but Blume's is not" (230).[7] Blume's story continues because Agnon's sentimental and romantic investment in her can "fill another book" and "much ink would be spilled and many quills

broken before we would be done" (230). For Agnon the artist, as for Agnon's protagonist, despite the rasping intrusion of the mother, Blume is an unending story, like the blind beggar's song in the dream that has neither beginning nor end.

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NOTES

1. S. Y. Agnon, *A Simple Story,* translated by Hillel Halkin (New York, 1985). The Hebrew original, *Sippur pashut* was published in Tel-Aviv in 1935.

2. Henry James in *The Art of the Novel,* ed. R. P. Blackmur (New York, 1962), p. 323, describes a "discriminated occasion" or "scene" as "copious, comprehensive and accordingly never short, but with its office as definite as that of the hammer on the gong of the clock, the office of expressing *all that is in* the hour." Cf. Meir Sternberg, "What is Exposition? An Essay in Temporal Delimitation," in *The Theory of the Novel,* ed. John Halperin (New York and London, 1974), pp. 25–70, but especially pp. 49–59.

3. Gershon Shaked in *Omanut hasippur shel Agnon* [The Narrative Art of S. Y. Agnon] (Tel Aviv, 1976), pp. 197–227, considers the "eating" as the central motif of the novel. The term "motif" as used in Shaked's essay, as well as in mine, designates a recurrent and migratory thematic unit, very often reducible to smaller units. Indeed, Shaked's large motif—the "eating"—is reduced in my account of the breakfast meal.

4. See A. J. Band in *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley, 1968), p. 247.

5. I will not deal here with the obvious Freudian connotations of lock and key, nor with the significance of this theme for Agnon. It is dealt with at length in Yael Feldman, "Between Key and Lock" [Hebrew], *Hasifrut* 32 (1983). For my purposes it is sufficient to note that in *A Simple Story* "door," "window," "lock," and "wall" serve as obstacles separating Hirshl from the object of his love. Hirshl, on his way to the unattainable Blume, stops to weep "on the handles" of her new house's "lock." *On the Handles of the Lock* is the title of the volume which contains Agnon's love stories.

6. There is also a pun in the name Mina Ziemlich. Mina sounds like old German Minne = love; Ziemlich = moderate(ly).

7. Many critics have commented on these closing words. See for example Esther Fuchs, *Omanut hahitamemut: 'al ha'ironia shel Shay Agnon* [Cunning Innocence: On S. Y. Agnon's Irony] (Tel Aviv, 1985), p. 96 and Hillel Halkin "Afterword" to his translation of *A Simple Story* (246).