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A Hegelian Analysis of the Master-Slave Dialectic: Power, Dependence, and Recognition in Bernard Malamud's *The First Seven Years*

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Abstract

This study offers a philosophical reinterpretation of Bernard Malamud's short story "The First Seven Years" (1950) through the lens of G. W. F. Hegel's dialectic of lordship and bondage as developed in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Where the dominant critical tradition has read the story as social realism, moral fable, or an expression of Jewish ethical endurance, this paper argues that the relationship between Feld, the immigrant shoemaker, and Sobel, his refugee assistant, dramatizes a sustained dialectic of power, dependence, and recognition. Employing a qualitative methodology grounded in close textual analysis, the study demonstrates that Feld's apparent mastery—rooted in ownership, control of wages, and command over time—is structurally unstable because it depends upon the very labor it subordinates. Sobel, by contrast, achieves a durable self-consciousness through formative work, patience, and the eventual demand for recognition, which crystallizes around the question of marriage to Feld's daughter, Miriam. The analysis shows that the narrative enacts the characteristic Hegelian reversal: the master's recognition proves "unessential," while the bondsman's labor becomes the true ground of identity and agency. The study concludes that "The First Seven Years" is best understood not merely as a realist or moral tale but as a philosophical meditation on the relational and unstable nature of authority. In doing so, it extends Malamud criticism beyond ethical humanism and affirms the continuing usefulness of Hegelian thought for the interpretation of postwar American short fiction.

Keywords: Hegelian Dialectic; Master-Slave Dialectic; Recognition; Labor and Power; Dependence; Bernard Malamud; Identity Formation

1. Introduction

Literature has long served as a privileged arena for the examination of power. Because the literary text stages human relationships in concrete and particular form, it renders visible the structures of dominance, dependence, and desire that ordinarily remain concealed beneath the surface of everyday life. Narrative does not merely reflect existing hierarchies; it interrogates them, showing how authority is constructed, sustained, and, frequently, undone. As Terry Eagleton observes, criticism has always been bound up with questions of ideology and social relation, for the literary work encodes the very tensions of the world that produces it (Eagleton,

Among the philosophical accounts of power and selfhood, few have proven as durable or as generative as the dialectic of lordship and bondage advanced by G. W. F. Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). In the section commonly known as the master-slave dialectic, Hegel argues that self-consciousness is not a solitary achievement but an intersubjective one: the self becomes actual only insofar as it is recognized by another self-consciousness (Hegel 111). Two such consciousnesses, each seeking acknowledgment, enter a struggle from which one emerges as master and the other as servant. Yet the apparent triumph of the master conceals a fatal instability. The master, ceasing to labor, comes to depend upon the servant both for material sustenance and for the recognition that alone could confirm his mastery; the servant, meanwhile, through disciplined and formative labor, gradually attains a self-consciousness more secure than that of his lord (Hegel 115–119). Authority, in Hegel's account, contains within itself the seeds of its own reversal.

Bernard Malamud, one of the most significant American writers of the postwar period, is an author whose fiction repeatedly stages such asymmetries of power among ordinary people. Born in Brooklyn in 1914 to Jewish immigrants who kept a small grocery, Malamud drew upon the world of struggling shopkeepers, laborers, and refugees to explore the moral weight of work, suffering, and responsibility (Helterman 3–6). His first collection, *The Magic Barrel* (1958), which received the National Book Award, opens with "The First Seven Years," a story first published in *Partisan Review* in 1950. The narrative concerns Feld, an aging Polish-Jewish shoemaker; Sobel, the refugee assistant who has labored in his shop for five years; and Miriam, Feld's nineteen-year-old daughter, whom Feld hopes to see married to a promising college student named Max. Beneath its quiet domestic surface, the story enacts a subtle drama of employer and employee, father and daughter, labor and reward—a drama peculiarly hospitable to a Hegelian reading.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Critical attention to Malamud has been shaped overwhelmingly by three interpretive tendencies: an emphasis on social realism, a concern with Jewish ethical tradition, and a focus on moral endurance and redemptive suffering (Richman 27–31; Alter, *Defenses* 116). While these approaches have yielded valuable insight, they tend to treat the relations of power within "The First Seven Years" as incidental to its moral meaning rather than as its organizing structure. Consequently, the philosophical architecture of the Feld-Sobel relationship—its dynamics of ownership, dependence, deferred recognition, and reversal—remains under-theorized. No sustained study has read the story through Hegel's dialectic of lordship and bondage, despite the story's pronounced concern with labor, waiting, and acknowledgment. This paper addresses that gap by demonstrating that the narrative does not merely

depict a moral awakening but stages a complete dialectical movement in which authority, grounded in the subordination of labor, is progressively destabilized by its dependence upon that labor.

1.2 Research Objectives

The study pursues two principal objectives:

- To interpret "The First Seven Years" through Hegel's master-slave dialectic, with particular attention to power, labor, and dependence.
- To examine how recognition, dramatized through the question of marriage, reshapes the distribution of authority among Feld, Sobel, and Miriam.

1.3 Research Questions

- How does the Hegelian master-slave dialectic operate within "The First Seven Years"?
- In what ways do labor and recognition transform relations of authority over the course of the narrative?

1.4 Significance and Delimitation

The significance of the study is threefold. First, it introduces a rigorous philosophical framework to a body of criticism dominated by ethical and realist readings, opening a new interpretive horizon for Malamud's fiction. Second, it demonstrates how an abstract philosophical concept can illuminate the ordinary social relations depicted in short fiction, bridging philosophy and literary study. Third, it contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship by showing that the concerns of postwar American fiction—labor, dignity, and recognition—resonate with the central problems of German idealist thought. The study is deliberately delimited to a single text, "The First Seven Years," and a single theoretical framework, Hegel's dialectic of lordship and bondage. It does not undertake psychoanalytic, Marxist, or sociological readings, though it acknowledges their relevance, in order to preserve the coherence of a single sustained argument.

1.5 Organization of the Study

The paper proceeds in six sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 reviews the existing scholarship on Malamud and identifies the research gap. Section 3 elaborates the theoretical framework, offering an exposition of Hegel's master-slave dialectic and its key concepts. Section 4 describes the qualitative methodology and the practice of close reading employed here. Section 5, the core of the study, presents a thematic analysis of the story, tracing the construction and eventual reversal of authority. Section 6 concludes by summarizing the findings, restating the study's contribution, and proposing directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

This section surveys the critical reception of Bernard Malamud in order to situate the present study and to establish the gap it seeks to fill. The review moves from general accounts of Malamud's fiction to scholarship on labor and authority in "The First Seven Years," before identifying the limitations of prior criticism and the opening they leave for a Hegelian interpretation.

2.1 Critical Studies on Malamud

Malamud has traditionally been read as a writer of moral realism whose characters endure poverty, disappointment, and ethical trial within recognizably ordinary settings. Sidney Richman's early monograph established a durable framework, presenting Malamud's protagonists as figures who must choose between competing values under conditions of suffering, and who become fully human only

through that choice (Richman 28–32). Subsequent critics have elaborated this ethical emphasis. Jeffrey Helterman reads the fiction as a sustained meditation on moral responsibility, in which suffering is neither meaningless nor merely endured but transformed into the occasion for self-knowledge (Helterman 40–44). A second and closely related strand locates Malamud within the Jewish ethical tradition. For these critics, his characters embody values of patience, endurance, and accountability that derive less from religious doctrine than from a cultural inheritance of moral seriousness (Alter, A third body of criticism reads Malamud as a distinctively postwar American writer, responding to the economic precariousness and social dislocation of the mid-century decades. In this account, the shop, the tenement, and the immigrant's uncertain foothold in America become the settings in which questions of mobility, class, and belonging are worked out, and the recurrence of confined, "prisonlike" stores has been read as an image of both economic entrapment and moral testing (Abramson 22–26).

2.2 Labor, Ethics, and Authority in the Story

Labor occupies a central place in Malamud's imaginative world, and critics have long noted that work in his fiction is a moral as well as an economic activity. Characters define themselves through diligence, perseverance, and the endurance of hardship, so that labor becomes a mode of self-definition rather than mere subsistence (Solotaroff 19–23). At the same time, Malamud's treatment of work is markedly ambivalent: labor confers dignity and meaning, yet it also confirms structures of dependence and frequently goes unrewarded. This doubleness—work as both ennobling and exploitative—has been widely observed but rarely theorized, and it is precisely this tension that a Hegelian reading is equipped to explain.

Discussions of "The First Seven Years" commonly identify Feld as a figure of authority who controls the material and emotional resources of the narrative. As the owner of the shop, Feld regulates access to work, wages, and the future security they represent, and he extends this control from the economic sphere into the personal, seeking to determine his daughter's marriage (Richman 30). Sobel, by contrast, is generally read as a figure of endurance and quiet devotion. His years of underpaid labor and his silence are interpreted as signs of moral strength rather than weakness, and his eventual outburst is understood as the disclosure of a long-concealed love (Solotaroff 21–24). Marriage, most critics agree, functions in the story as the decisive site of recognition: Feld's initial refusal to countenance Sobel as a suitable husband sustains the hierarchy between them, while his final relenting marks a moral transformation.

2.3 Limitations of Existing Criticism and the Research Gap

Despite its considerable insight, the existing criticism exhibits three related limitations. First, its preoccupation with moral realism tends to subordinate the analysis of power to the analysis of virtue. Second, the criticism lacks a sustained philosophical vocabulary for describing how power is constituted and reversed; concepts such as recognition, dependence, and formative labor are invoked descriptively rather than analytically. Third, no study has read the story's relations of authority as a coherent dialectical process in which the master's power is undermined by the very labor it exploits. This study addresses that gap by applying Hegel's dialectic of lordship and bondage to "The First Seven Years," recasting endurance and dependence not as static moral qualities but as moments in a dynamic process through which identity is formed and authority transferred.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Self-Consciousness and the Necessity of Recognition

Hegel's philosophy rests upon the conviction that the self is not a fixed, self-enclosed substance but a process that unfolds through conflict, labor, and social interaction. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel maintains that self-consciousness cannot achieve certainty of itself in isolation; it becomes actual only when it is acknowledged by another self-consciousness. In his famous formulation, self-consciousness "exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged" (Hegel 111). Recognition, or *Anerkennung*, is therefore not an optional supplement to identity but its constitutive condition. The self is inherently relational: to be a self at all is to require the acknowledgment of another. This insight places human relationships at the very center of philosophical inquiry and renders Hegel's framework uniquely applicable to the analysis of narrative, where selves are defined precisely through their encounters with others (Williams 46–50).

Crucially, recognition is rarely symmetrical or freely given. It is typically distorted by inequality, and where acknowledgment is withheld or deferred, conflict ensues. Hegel understands this struggle for recognition as a driving force of individual development and social history (Taylor 148–153). The demand to be acknowledged, and the refusal of that acknowledgment, supply a conceptual grammar for reading relationships marked by authority and subordination—relationships of the kind that structure Malamud's story.

3.2 The Dialectic of Lordship and Bondage

The master-slave dialectic emerges when two self-consciousnesses, each seeking recognition, confront one another in a struggle for prestige. Because each stakes its life to prove that it is not bound to mere existence, the encounter takes the form of a life-and-death struggle. One party, gripped by the fear of death, chooses life over the assertion of freedom and submits; the other, willing to risk everything, prevails. The victor becomes the lord, or master; the vanquished becomes the bondsman, or servant (Hegel 113–115). At first the relationship appears wholly asymmetrical: the master enjoys independence and the fruits of the servant's labor, while the servant appears merely dependent and unessential.

This initial appearance, however, is deceptive, and the dialectic's power lies in exposing its instability. The decisive factor is labor. The master, ceasing to work, relates to the world only through consumption; he enjoys objects that the servant has prepared, and his enjoyment is fleeting and dependent. The servant, by contrast, labors upon the material world, and in shaping objects he simultaneously shapes himself. Work, for Hegel, is "desire held in check"—a disciplined activity through which the servant acquires skill, patience, and self-possession (Hegel 118). In the enduring object he has formed, the servant beholds an image of his own consciousness and thereby attains "a mind of his own" (Hegel 119). Alexandre Kojève, whose influential reading foregrounds the anthropological dimension of the dialectic, emphasizes that it is the laboring servant, not the idle master, who becomes the agent of transformation and history, precisely because work negates and reshapes the given world (Kojève 24–29).

From this reversal follows the central paradox of mastery: the master's independence is in truth dependence. He requires the servant both for his material existence and for the recognition that would confirm his status. Yet because he regards the servant as unessential, the recognition he receives is worthless—acknowledgment from a consciousness he does not himself acknowledge as an equal. Kojève describes this as the master's "existential impasse": he has risked his life for a recognition that cannot

satisfy him (Kojève 46). Hegel concludes that "the truth of the independent consciousness is accordingly the servile consciousness of the bondsman" (Hegel 117). Mastery reveals its essence to be the reverse of what it takes itself to be, and the servant, through the discipline of labor and the transformative experience of fear, moves toward a self-consciousness more genuine than that of his lord.

3.3 Recognition, Labor, and Identity

Three interlocking concepts thus structure the framework of this study. The first is recognition, the intersubjective acknowledgment without which self-consciousness cannot be complete. The second is labor, understood not as mere toil but as a formative activity—*Bildung*—through which the working subject cultivates discipline and comes to self-awareness. The third is dependence, which discloses the hidden fragility of authority: the master survives only through the labor he subordinates. Robert R. Williams has shown that, across Hegel's corpus, recognition ultimately points beyond domination toward mutuality, so that the deepest movement of the dialectic is not the mere inversion of hierarchy but the possibility of reciprocal acknowledgment (Williams 68–72). This trajectory—from struggle, through reversal, toward the demand for mutual recognition—will prove especially illuminating for the resolution of Malamud's narrative.

3.4 Applicability to Literature and to the Story

The application of Hegelian philosophy to literary interpretation is well established. Critics have long employed the master-slave dialectic to analyze relationships of inequality in fiction and drama, using it to expose how authority is constructed and how it depends upon that which it dominates (Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 152–155; Tyson 68–71). Short fiction is a particularly congenial site for such analysis. The compression of the form concentrates power relations within a confined space and a small cast of characters, so that dialectical tensions emerge with unusual clarity; an entire philosophical struggle may be enacted within a single shop or family (Barry 184–187). "The First Seven Years" offers precisely such a concentrated arena. Feld, as owner and employer, occupies the position of the master; Sobel, the laboring refugee, occupies the position of the bondsman; and Miriam becomes the site upon which the struggle for recognition is contested. The sections that follow apply the framework to these figures in turn, tracing the movement from apparent mastery to dialectical reversal.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research design appropriate to the interpretive aims of literary analysis. Because the object of inquiry is meaning—specifically the construction of power, labor, and recognition within a narrative—rather than measurable or quantifiable data, a qualitative approach grounded in interpretation is the suitable method (Creswell 42–45). The design privileges close engagement with language, characterization, and thematic development over hypothesis testing, and it seeks to produce a coherent and well-supported reading rather than a generalizable empirical claim.

4.2 Textual Analysis as Primary Method

The principal method of the study is close textual analysis. This technique involves the sustained examination of the text's language, dialogue, imagery, and structure in order to identify patterns of ownership, subordination, formative labor, and deferred recognition (Barry 184–186). Passages are selected for their bearing on the dialectic of authority and interpreted in light of Hegelian concepts, with each analytical claim anchored in specific textual evidence. Interpretation thus proceeds through the

continuous interplay of theory and text, so that the philosophical framework draws out a structure already latent within the narrative.

4.3 Sources

The primary source is Bernard Malamud's "The First Seven Years," as collected in *The Magic Barrel* (1958). The relationships among Feld, Sobel, and Miriam are examined in detail as the narrative core of the analysis. Secondary sources fall into two categories. The first comprises philosophical works—principally Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and its major commentators, including Kojève, Taylor, Pinkard, and Williams—which supply the theoretical apparatus. The second comprises critical studies of Malamud and of literary methodology, which situate the reading within existing scholarship and justify its interpretive procedures. Together these sources enable a reading that is both theoretically grounded and critically contextualized.

4.4 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

The study observes standard scholarly ethics. All primary and secondary sources are documented in MLA style, and all quotations and interpretations derived from other scholars are duly attributed. As the research is confined to published literary and philosophical texts, it involves no human subjects. Care has been taken to represent both Malamud's narrative and Hegel's philosophy accurately. The study's limitations follow from its design: its findings pertain to a single text interpreted through a single theoretical lens, and they are not intended to be generalizable beyond the work under examination. These constraints, however, permit a focused and detailed account of power, labor, and recognition in the chosen story (Tyson 72–73).

5. Analysis and Discussion

This section presents a sustained reading of "The First Seven Years" through the Hegelian dialectic of lordship and bondage. It proceeds thematically, examining Feld's position as master, Sobel's position as laboring subject, the role of labor in forming self-consciousness, the function of marriage as the site of recognition, and the dialectical reversal through which authority is transferred. Throughout, the analysis maintains that power in the story is relational and unstable.

5.1 Feld as the Master Figure

Feld enters the narrative as the unmistakable figure of authority, and his mastery is grounded in economic ownership. He is the proprietor of the shoe-repair shop, the possessor of the means by which livelihood is secured, and it is this ownership that positions him above his assistant. In Hegelian terms, Feld's dominance derives not from labor but from command over the conditions under which labor is performed. He determines who works, for what wage, and for how long (Hegel 113). The shop is at once his kingdom and the instrument of his authority.

Feld's power is exercised most tellingly through his command of time and reward. Sobel has labored in the shop for five years, and Feld has grown accustomed to receiving that labor as though it were simply his due. He offers neither generous wages nor the prospect of advancement, and when the question of the future arises he responds with deferral rather than acknowledgment. This strategy of postponement is characteristic of the master's exercise of power: by controlling when, and whether, recognition will be granted, Feld keeps his assistant in a condition of suspended expectation. Authority here operates not through overt coercion but through the quiet manipulation of hope, and it is sustained precisely by the refusal to bring matters to resolution.

The narrative carefully constructs the illusion of Feld's self-sufficiency. He understands himself as the independent center of the enterprise—the source of value upon which the dependent Sobel relies. This self-image corresponds exactly to the false independence Hegel attributes to the master, who takes himself to be autonomous while in fact subsisting upon the labor of another (Hegel 116). Feld imagines dependence to run in a single direction, from servant to master, and it is this misapprehension that the story will progressively dismantle.

For beneath the appearance of independence, Feld's existence is thoroughly bound to Sobel's work. It is Sobel who performs the arduous, skilled labor upon which the shop depends, sitting day after day at the bench, cutting and hammering the leather that Feld, aging and ailing, can no longer manage alone. Feld does not sustain the enterprise; he presides over it while another sustains it. When Sobel abruptly departs after overhearing Feld's plan to match Miriam with Max, the fragility of the arrangement is immediately exposed. Feld hires a replacement he cannot trust and finds the shop faltering. "Without his temperamental assistant he was a lost man": the phrase discloses that the master cannot survive without the servant (Malamud 9).

Feld, in sum, embodies the Hegelian master in his initial phase. His authority, founded upon ownership and the control of labor, time, and recognition, appears secure, yet it harbors from the outset the contradiction that will undo it. His mastery is a performance sustained by the labor of the one he subordinates, and the story's subsequent movement consists precisely in the gradual revelation of this hidden dependence (Hegel 117).

5.2 Sobel as the Laboring Subject

If Feld occupies the position of the master, Sobel occupies that of the bondsman, the subordinate whose identity is defined through labor rather than command. He does not own the shop, set its terms, or determine his own future; his standing is that of the one who serves. Yet from the beginning the narrative invests his subordination with a moral gravity that unsettles any simple hierarchy. Sobel is a refugee who escaped the Nazis, a survivor whose very presence in the shop bears the trace of an encounter with annihilation. In Hegelian terms, he is the consciousness that has known "the fear of death, the absolute master," and it is precisely this experience that, in Hegel's account, shakes the servant to the foundations and opens the path to a deeper self-consciousness (Hegel 117). Sobel's subordination is thus never mere passivity; it is the ground upon which a formative transformation will occur.

Patience and silence are Sobel's characteristic modes. He labors under conditions of meager reward without complaint, accepting low wages and asking for nothing. His silence is not the sign of a diminished self but a discipline, a holding in reserve of what cannot yet be spoken. He stands at the bench, absorbed in his work, while Feld directs and defers; and in this contrast the narrative reproduces the Hegelian configuration in which the bondsman's consciousness is enlarged not through speech but through labor (Hegel 118). What appears as submission is, on closer inspection, the outward form of an inner accumulation.

For labor is the medium through which Sobel's selfhood is formed. His work is relentless and skilled: for five years he has sat at the bench, "cutting and hammering away," bearing the physical burden of the shop with a constancy that Feld neither matches nor fully perceives (Malamud 5). Through this repetitive and disciplined activity Sobel acquires not only mastery of his trade but mastery of himself—the patience, endurance, and self-possession that Hegel identifies as the fruits of formative labor. His

identity is grounded in what he does and makes, and this grounding proves firmer than Feld's, which rests merely upon what he owns.

The revelation that transfigures the meaning of Sobel's labor is that he has worked all these years not for wages but for love. He has remained in the shop, enduring underpayment and silence, in order to be near Miriam and to wait for her to come of age. "Why do you think I worked so long for you?" he demands of Feld; the years of sacrifice were offered not for money but for the hope of recognition and union (Malamud 12). This disclosure recasts his endurance as purposive rather than merely dutiful: his labor has been directed toward a future acknowledgment, and it is this orientation toward recognition that raises his work from subsistence to moral and existential significance. In the Hegelian schema, Sobel is the laboring subject who, through work and waiting, attains a self-consciousness that will finally compel the master to acknowledge him.

5.3 Labor and the Formation of Self-Consciousness

At the heart of the Hegelian dialectic lies the claim that labor is the crucible of self-consciousness. Through work the subordinate consciousness transforms the external world and, in doing so, transforms itself, converting raw desire into disciplined activity and acquiring an inner strength that liberates it from mere dependence (Hegel 118–119). "The First Seven Years" dramatizes this formative process with quiet exactness. Sobel's years at the bench are not merely years of service but years of self-making: in the steady rhythm of cutting and hammering, he cultivates the patience and constancy that constitute his moral character.

The story renders this formation partly through the image of Sobel's reading. He is not only a maker of shoes but a reader of books, one who devours the volumes he lends to Miriam and fills their margins with impassioned commentary. His labor is therefore doubly formative: he shapes leather and he shapes his own mind, and he becomes an educator whose annotations awaken Miriam's intellectual sensibility. This convergence of manual and intellectual labor exemplifies the Hegelian conception of *Bildung*, the formative cultivation through which the working subject rises to genuine self-awareness.

The paradox that Hegel identifies—that the servant grows freer within even as he remains bound without—is precisely Sobel's condition. Materially, he remains dependent upon Feld, subject to his wages and his authority. Inwardly, however, he has attained a self-possession that Feld lacks, for he has learned, through years of disciplined waiting, to hold his desire in check and to direct it toward a purpose. When at last he refuses to continue in silence, declaring that he has waited long enough, the declaration issues from a consciousness that labor has made whole (Malamud 12). The formative work is complete when it produces a subject capable of demanding recognition rather than merely enduring its absence (Hegel 119).

5.4 Recognition, Marriage, and Power

If labor forms the self, recognition confirms it, and in "The First Seven Years" recognition is contested through the question of marriage. In Hegelian terms, selfhood is completed only when it is acknowledged by another, and the withholding of acknowledgment is therefore an exercise of power (Hegel 111). Feld understands this instinctively. By reserving the right to determine whom Miriam shall marry, he retains control not only over his daughter's future but over Sobel's standing as a full human being. Marriage becomes the currency of recognition, and Feld the one who controls its distribution.

Feld's preference for Max, the college student, and his refusal to imagine Sobel as a suitable husband, express the logic of mastery. Sobel is, in Feld's estimation, too old, too poor, and too homely—an assistant, not a son-in-law—and this judgment reduces him to his function, denying him recognition as a subject with desires and worth of his own. In refusing to acknowledge Sobel's humanity beyond his utility, Feld treats him precisely as the "unessential consciousness" that Hegel attributes to the servant in the eyes of the master (Hegel 116). The denial of marriage is thus the denial of recognition, and it is the mechanism by which Feld sustains the hierarchy between them.

Miriam occupies a complex position within this economy of recognition. She is not merely the passive object of exchange between the two men but the site upon which their struggle is joined. She rejects Max, discerning in him a materialist "without a soul," and her preference registers a scale of value opposed to her father's—one that esteems inwardness over prospects. Her judgment aligns her with Sobel, the reader and laborer, and deprives Feld of the compliance upon which his authority depends (Malamud 11).

The pivotal moment arrives when Sobel ceases to wait and demands recognition outright. Confronted in his rooming house, he abandons the silence of years and gives voice to his love and his grievance, insisting that his long labor has earned him a claim that can no longer be deferred (Malamud 12). This is recognition seized rather than granted, and it enacts the Hegelian principle that authentic acknowledgment cannot be extorted by the master but must be reciprocally established between subjects. In demanding to be seen, Sobel asserts himself as an essential consciousness, and in that assertion the structure of mastery begins to give way (Williams 70).

5.5 Reversal of Power and Dialectical Resolution

The reversal that the dialectic predicts unfolds gradually but decisively. As the narrative advances, Feld's authority is revealed to rest upon a dependence he can no longer disavow. Sobel's departure has already demonstrated that the shop cannot function without him; now his refusal to return for any wage exposes the emptiness of Feld's power. "I will raise your wages," Feld offers, still speaking the language of the employer, only to be met with the retort that scatters that language entirely: "Who cares about wages!" (Malamud 12). The master's instruments—money, employment, the control of reward—have lost their purchase, for what Sobel seeks is not payment but recognition, and recognition cannot be purchased. Here the deepest logic of the dialectic becomes visible. The master depends upon the servant not only for material sustenance but for the acknowledgment that alone could validate his mastery; yet that acknowledgment, coerced from a subordinate, is worthless (Hegel 116–117). Feld's belated offer of higher wages is an attempt to reassert control, and its failure marks the collapse of his position. Sobel speaks from the strength that labor and suffering have forged, and his voice carries a moral authority that Feld's ownership cannot match. The one who served has become the essential consciousness; the one who commanded has become the dependent.

Yet the story's resolution does not simply invert the hierarchy; it gestures, in a distinctly Hegelian manner, toward mutual recognition. Confronted with the depth of Sobel's devotion and the reality of Miriam's feeling, Feld undergoes a transformation. His initial outrage yields to acknowledgment, and he grants what he had so long withheld—though not without exacting a final term. Sobel must wait two more years, until Miriam turns twenty-one, so that his service will amount to seven years in all. The condition is at once a last assertion of paternal authority and a genuine act of recognition, for in imposing

it Feld accepts Sobel as a suitor and thus as a subject worthy of his daughter. The following morning, Feld finds Sobel returned to the bench, "pounding leather for his love," and walks home "with a stronger stride" (Malamud 13).

This ending admits of a double reading, and the dialectic accommodates both. The reimposition of a term of service appears to restore the hierarchy; yet, more profoundly, the resolution transforms the meaning of that service. Sobel now labors not as an exploited assistant but as an acknowledged suitor whose work is the willing expression of love and whose recognition is assured. The labor is the same; its significance is wholly altered. In Hegelian terms, the narrative moves beyond the sterile inversion of master and servant toward the reconciliation in which each acknowledges the other (Williams 71–72). The biblical resonance of the title, which recalls Jacob's seven years of labor for Rachel, deepens this sense of a covenant of love sealed through work.

5.6 Discussion in Relation to Existing Criticism

The Hegelian reading advanced here both extends and revises the established criticism. Prior interpretations have rightly emphasized the moral dimension of the story—Sobel's endurance, Feld's awakening, and the redemptive value of suffering (Richman 30; Solotaroff 22). Yet by framing these elements primarily as questions of virtue, such readings tend to romanticize submission and to treat power as incidental to the story's ethical meaning. The dialectical approach reconceives endurance not as passive goodness but as formative labor, and it reconceives Feld's transformation not merely as a moral epiphany but as the necessary outcome of a structural dependence that the narrative has traced from the outset. Sobel's declaration that he has waited long enough is, on this reading, not only a moral protest but a philosophical assertion of selfhood—the moment at which formative labor issues in the demand for recognition (Malamud 12).

The reading thus clarifies what the ethical criticism observes but does not explain: the mechanism by which authority passes from Feld to Sobel. Where realist interpretations note Feld's dependence upon his assistant, the Hegelian framework identifies that dependence as the hidden truth of mastery and shows why it must surface (Hegel 117). Where the ethical criticism praises Sobel's patience, the dialectical account explains how that patience, sustained through years of labor, constitutes a self capable of compelling acknowledgment. Far from displacing the moral reading, the philosophical analysis grounds it, revealing that the story's ethical drama is inseparable from its structure of power.

5.7 Summary of the Analysis

The analysis has shown that power in "The First Seven Years" is organized through labor, dependence, and deferred recognition, and that it follows the trajectory Hegel describes. Feld's mastery is destabilized by its reliance upon the labor it subordinates; Sobel's endurance proves a formative discipline through which he attains self-consciousness; and marriage functions as the contested site of recognition. The reversal comes when Sobel's demand for acknowledgment renders Feld's instruments of control powerless, and the resolution moves toward a reconciliation in which service is transformed into covenant (Hegel 119; Williams 72).

6. Conclusion

This study set out to interpret Bernard Malamud's "The First Seven Years" through Hegel's dialectic of lordship and bondage, and to show how labor and recognition reshape relations of authority within the narrative. The analysis has established several findings. First, Feld's authority, though grounded in

economic ownership and the control of time and reward, is structurally unstable, for it depends upon the labor of the assistant it subordinates. Second, Sobel's years of underpaid and silent labor are not the marks of mere submission but the medium of a formative self-consciousness, through which he acquires the patience, discipline, and moral strength that finally enable him to demand recognition. Third, recognition, dramatized through the contested question of marriage to Miriam, is the decisive currency of power in the story, and Feld's control over it is the mechanism by which he sustains his mastery. Fourth, the narrative enacts the characteristic Hegelian reversal, as Feld's dependence surfaces, his instruments of control fail, and authority passes to the laboring subject—culminating in a resolution that gestures beyond inversion toward mutual acknowledgment.

The master-slave dialectic thus operates in the story with remarkable completeness. Feld begins as the apparent lord and ends as the dependent party; Sobel begins as the subordinate servant and ends as the essential consciousness whose labor has forged both his identity and his claim. Labor proves to be the true ground of selfhood, and recognition the pivot upon which authority turns.

The contribution of this study to Malamud scholarship is to demonstrate that his fiction rewards philosophical as well as ethical interpretation. By reading "The First Seven Years" through Hegel, the study moves beyond the prevailing emphasis on realism and moral endurance to reveal the dialectical structure underlying the story's moral meaning. More broadly, it affirms the continuing usefulness of Hegelian philosophy for the interpretation of postwar American short fiction, showing that the concerns of that literature—labor, dignity, dependence, and the desire for recognition—are precisely the concerns of the dialectic.

Several avenues for future research follow from this study. The master-slave dialectic might be applied to other stories in *The Magic Barrel* and to Malamud's novels, particularly *The Assistant*, whose central relationship between shopkeeper and helper invites a comparable analysis. Comparative studies might set Malamud alongside other postwar American writers to examine how labor and authority are represented across the period. The Hegelian framework might also be combined with Marxist or recognition-theoretical approaches to develop a fuller account of power in literary texts. In each of these directions, the dialectic of lordship and bondage offers a supple and revealing instrument for the interpretation of fiction.

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