

## **The Jewish Literary Tradition in Bernard Malamud's the Assistant**

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### **Abstract**

*Malamud's characters are judged on the basis of their ability to learn "what it means to be human" from their suffering. This universal conception of suffering piety creates a Jewish identity that is more symbolic than actual. If there has to be a hallmark of American-Jewish literature, a defining quality that may be relied on, it is perhaps the Jewish-American writer's wish to insist on both arrogance and tolerance, and on self-belief and tragic doubt on the core of his or her work. There is a fundamental tension between self-assertion and self-denial in American-Jewish literature. For this paper, I am taking Bernard Malamud's novel The Assistant and discussing the Jewish Literary tradition, their ethnicity in respect to the characters of this novel.*

**Key Words:** Identity, Tolerance, Self-assertion, Marginalization, Historicity, Ethnicity.

"All men are Jews, though few of them know it." (Cappel 38)

This comment has widely been interpreted as Malamud's thesis, which underscores the universality of his suffering heroes. Malamud says in *The Assistant*, "the world suffers" (TA 5) and it is the responsibility of his good and ethical characters to empathize with this suffering. Consequently, Malamud's characters are judged on the basis of their ability to learn "what it means to be human" from their suffering. This universal conception of suffering piety creates a Jewish identity that is more symbolic than actual. Malamud's symbolic system of Judaism is generally effective in gaining a reader's empathy when he writes novels and stories not set in a particular historic framework, as is the case with his allegorical short stories and his fables or when he resorts to supernatural and fantastic elements in his work.

Ilan Stavans claims that "what makes a book Jewish is neither its author nor its subject matter but its reader" (Stavans xii). To make this point clear he cites the case of Kafka in whose work the word 'Jew' never appears and who desired no readership, Jewish or otherwise but is otherwise acclaimed by many critics as most quintessentially Jewish of writers Jewish of writers. Further Ilan Stavans has eluded Norman Mailer and Gertrude Stein from *The Oxford of Jewish Short Stories* on the grounds that they are not openly engaged in their Jewishness but has included Kafka with an indirect explanation to this: "Modern Jewish literature... is less about content than a sensibility expressed through language" (Stavans xii).

If there has to be a hallmark of American-Jewish literature, a defining quality that may be relied on, it is perhaps the Jewish-American writer's wish to insist on both arrogance and tolerance, and on self-belief and tragic doubt on the core of his or her work. There is a fundamental tension between self-assertion and self-denial in American-Jewish literature. On the one hand, Jewish writers wish to escape the narrow concerns of their own community and resent the label of Jewish writer as an imposition that marginalizes and trivializes their work; on the other hand, they jealously guard their Jewishness, in the face the skepticism of the Gentile literary establishment, as a literary asset, giving them access to a sensibility not available to other writers. Irving Howe sums up the paradox in his autobiography *A Margin of Hope*:

We wanted to shake off fears and constraints of the world which we had been born, but when up against the impenetrable walls of gentile politeness we would aggressively proclaim our 'difference', as if to raise Jewishness to a higher cosmopolitan power. (Howe 137)

Removing one's roots from the Old world and replanting them in native soil is to become a writer. Yet for the, writing in a language which is and yet isn't their own, becoming a writer is as liable to highlight their Jewishness as it is to efface it. In fact, for a Jew to write in the language of his or her host nation is both an act of assimilation and self-sublimation -sanctioning the discourse of the adopted land by entering into it and of colonization and self-assertion- appropriating the language and implicitly, enriching it. For any writer, the publishing of his or her work is an act of self-exposure, an event that makes the author vulnerable, but for Jews in particular, the decision to give public voice to their 'self' has historically been fraught with political implications and internal conflict. However the sheer number of post-war autobiographies or family biographies by the Jewish writers which have, as explicit or implicit agendas, the desire to explain the meaning of their Jewishness, cannot be accounted for solely in terms of the immigrant experience. Sartre identifies 'an almost continuously reflective attitude' as a common feature of Jewish intellectuals who wish to escape from their Jewishness, but this modern reflectiveness seems, on the contrary, to be the result of an impulse to return to, or recover, a sense of Jewishness. Moreover this impulse is in fact a keynote in much of post-war American -Jewish fiction. The protagonists of many post-war Jewish novels and short stories are characterized, above all, by their insatiable desire to acknowledge, advertise and explain their Jewishness.

Becoming an artist is likely to be frowned upon by both camps. If the artist's Jewishness is merely incidental to his work, he is an assimilationist, denying his heritage; if his Jewishness is the subject of his art, he is taken to be representing the community at large and, consequently-invariably- to be misinterpreting that community. The Jewish writer is therefore doubly on trial: as a writer before his fellow Jews and as Jew before the outside world. Although Malamud's characterizations are most natural and well defined in the portrayal of the Jews, the ethnic group which largely dominates his fiction, yet there is no specific trait by which his Jewish characters may be defined particularly regarding the nature of their Jewishness. Most of his Jews are Jews simply as a matter of course, without any definitory characteristics thus there are moral and honest Jews (Morris Bober, *The Assistant*); corrupt and greedy Jews (Karp or Sobeloff, *The Assistant*); ritual and orthodox Jews (Manishevitz, "Angel Levine"), (Schwartz, "The Jew Bird"); liberal Jews (Yakov Bok, *The Fixer*), (Harry Lesser, *The Tenants*). There are Jews who are typically Jewish in manners or in speech, like the Bober couple in *The Assistant*.

Jewishness through the process of assimilation while others remain displaced old country Jews in the New World. And among the European Jews, there is also a great variety largely imposed by nationality (or the lack of it) since some come from Germany, others from Italy, many from Eastern Europe and Russia. Confronted with a variety of types within the Jewish characterizations one is easily led to a belief that Malamud never attempted to define Jewishness apart from this variety and that he has no central idea as to what being a Jew essentially implies. But this is not more than three pages, through the co-protagonist of his famous novel *The Assistant*, Morris Bober. It is a brief but significant definition for it is a key to understanding Malamud's vision of his own faith.

The definition of Jewishness is to be found in the central pages of *The Assistant*, voiced by Morris Bober as the living embodiment of his essential Jewishness and later recapped, towards the end of the novel by the rabbi's eulogy at the funeral of Morris Bober. The following passage where Morris Bober is in conversation with his assistant Frank Alpine brings about Malamud's of Jewishness:

After a half hour Frank, squirming restlessly in his chair, remarked, "Say, Morris, suppose somebody asked you what do the Jews believe in, what would you tell them?"

The grocer stopped peeling, unable at once to reply.

What I like to know what is a Jew anyway?

Because he was ashamed of his meager education Morris was never comfortable with such questions, yet he felt he must answer.

My father used to say to be a Jew all you need is a good heart.

What do you say?

The important thing is the Torah. This is the Law- a Jew must believe in the Law.

"Let me ask you this," Frank went on. "Do you consider yourself a real Jew?"

Morris was startled, "What do you mean if I am a real Jew?"

Don't get sore about this, Frank said, "but I can give you an argument that you aren't. First thing, you don't go to the synagogue- nor that I have ever seen. You don't keep your kitchen kosher and you don't eat kosher. You don't ever wear one of those little black hats like this tailor I knew in South Chicago. He prayed three times a day. I even hear the Mrs. Say you kept the store open on Jewish holidays, it makes no difference if she yells her head off.

"Sometimes," Morris answered, flushing, "to have to eat, you must keep open on holiday. On Yom Kippur I don't keep open. But I don't worry about kosher, which is to me old fashioned. What I worry is to follow the Jewish Law."

But all those things are the law, aren't they? And don't the Law say you can't eat any pig, but I have seen you taste ham.

This is not important to me if I taste pig or I don't. To some Jews is this important but not to me. Nobody will tell me that I am not Jewish because I put in my mouth once in a while, when my tongue is dry, a piece ham. But they will tell me, and I will believe them, if I forget the Law. This means to do what is right, to be honest, to be good. This means to other people. Our life is hard enough. Why should we hurt somebody else? For everybody should be the best, not only for you or me. We ain't animals. This is why we need the Law. This is what a Jew believes.

"I think other religions have those ideas too," Frank said. "But tell me why it that the Jews suffer so damn much, Morris is? It seems to me that they like to suffer, don't they?"

Do you like to suffer? They suffer because they are Jews.

That's what I mean; they suffer more than they have to.

If you live, you suffer. Some people suffer more, but not because they want to. But I think if a Jew doesn't suffer for the Law, he will suffer for nothing.

"What do you suffer for, Morris?" Frank said.

"I suffer for you," Morris said calmly.

Frank laid his knife down on the table. His mouth ached, "What do you mean?"

I mean you suffer for me. The clerk let it go at that.

"If a Jew forgets the Law," Morris ended, "he is not a good man." (TA 112-13)

Malamud's concept of Jewishness as voiced through and represented by Morris Bober is once again summarized in the rabbi's eulogy at Morris' funeral. Though Morris does not go to the synagogue, keeps the store open on Jewish holidays and ignores some other things yet the rabbi calls him 'a true Jew' for he lived in the 'Jewish experience' and possessed a 'Jewish heart'. In the very words of the rabbi:

When a Jew dies, who asks if he is a Jew? He is a Jew, we don't ask. There are many ways to be a Jew. So if somebody comes to me and says, "Rabbi, shall we call such a man Jewish who lived and worked among the gentiles and sold them pig, meat, trayfe, that we don't eat it, and not once in twenty years comes inside a synagogue, is such a man Jew, rabbi?" To him I will say, "Yes, Morris Bober was to me a true Jew because he lived in the Jewish experience, which he remembered, and with the Jewish heart. May be not in our formal tradition- for this I don't excuse him- but he was true to the spirit of our life- to want for others that which he also wants for himself. He followed the Law which God gave to Moses on Sinai and told him to bring to the people... (TA 203)

Two basic interrelated ideas emerge from this passage, whose fragments have been so often quoted by the critics; the simplification of Jewishness to a bare universal ethics and the idea of suffering as requisite for the participation in this ethics. This vision of Jewishness has been widely commented by the critics with total consent and excessive reiteration since the publication of *The Assistant* in 1957. Of the various definitions of Malamud's vision of Jewishness the most appropriate one is given by Iska Alter:

Morris' Jewish Law is synonymous with Malamud's secular moral code. The Jew himself is not used in the religious or ethnic sense: he is a symbol of modern man, a symbol of hopefulness, humility and self-identity in the face of suffering and isolation. Becoming a Jew always refers to a secular, personal inner struggle; and the best Jews are those who become moral men while continuing to suffer because the nature of their moral code demands self-abnegation. If a Malamud hero denies his Jewishness, his humanity, he is lost. (Field 262)

The opinion of others critics coincides with Iska Alter's: for Kathleen Ochshorn "(Morris') own description of Jewishness is so generalized as to be more a definition of humanism." And Edward Abramson, who devotes the first section of the chapter on *The Assistant* (in *Bernard Malamud Revisited*) to "The Nature of Jewishness", comments "(Malamud's) approach to Jewishness is not a parochial one, in that he casts it as a type of secular humanism, a moral code that all good people try to follow." (Abramson 25)

Malamud's vision of Jewishness, voiced through Morris, is totally different from dogmatic vision of Judaism. This becomes clear by Morris' interpretation of the Torah or Jewish Law. In this regard Abramson observes ...although Morris may define the Jewish law as the Torah, the basic principles that he chooses to live by are universal. Most of the laws of Torah are universal, but there are many which Morris chooses to ignore, that are particularly directed to the children of Israel. By thus removing any stress on the particular in order to highlight the universal, Morris eliminates the specialness of the Jewish people in world history... (Abramson 25)

Although this vision of the law is already interpreted as transdenominational by Frank Alpine himself for he says, "I think other religions have those ideas too" (TA 113). And it is as close to Christianity as it is to Judaism. Robert Ducharme accurately points this out

Though Morris is a Jew (as indeed Christ was), his actions and his words embody what has come to be known as the Christian or love-ethic. When Frank asks Morris what it means to be a Jew, the grocer answers in words that would also be an apt response to the question of what it means to be a Christian. (Ducharme 15)

But it would be wrong to interpret Morris Bober's (and consequently Malamud's) notion of suffering in Christian terms instead of Jewish. Rather there is a merging of two concepts. Malamud's emphasis on the value of suffering for Jews is usually linked to historical realities of anti-Semitism. Even though the Jewish world of *The Assistant* is far removed from the cruder historical realities of Europe, the holding up of Morris Bober is justified in anti-Semitic terms: "A Jew is a Jew, what difference does it make?" (TA 66)

This vision of suffering is often conveyed in Christian terms and at the same time linked with Jewish experience gives impetus to the central idea of Jewishness or the Jewish Law as being synonymous with Malamud's secular moral code in the very words of Iska Alter. This blending of the Christian and Jewish lore is characteristic of Malamud for even in "The Lat Mohican" Fidelman's understanding of Susskind's painful Jewish reality comes through the vision of a fresco (wall painting) based on Christian theme. Field and Field rightly remark that "For Malamud, religion's function is to convey the essentials of the 'good hearts'; he has little sympathy either for the ghetto-minded Jew or parochial Christian" (Field 127).

Consequently, Malamud's disapproval of orthodox or restrictive forms of Judaism is reflected in some of his other works also. In *The Assistant* Morris Bober's Jewishness is in sharp contrast with the attitudes of other characters. This contrast is visible in two ways: first, in the materialism of the New World as against the ethics of the Old World. Secondly, between Morris Bober's capacity to value Alpine purely in terms of humanity and other Jewish characters' propensity to judge him in terms of ethnic difference (as a gentile or a 'goy') for other Jewish characters hold a restrictive vision of Jewishness.

Towards the close of *The Assistant* Frank Alpine is converted to Judaism and the novel ends with the lines "One day in April Frank went to the hospital and had himself circumcised. For a couple of days he dragged himself around with a pain between his legs. The pain enraged and inspired him. After Passover he became a Jew" (TA 222)

These closing lines have been widely debated among critics and have received differing opinions from them. They constitute the climax of the gradually evolution of Alpine towards Morris which eventually ends with Morris' replacement in the store by his assistant both at literal and symbolic levels. Frank's conversion strengthens the idea of Morris' Jewishness as strictly ethical and thus universal and transdenominational, "Frank's conversion to Jewish religion has a symbolic significance far beyond the social act of joining a Church, for by it Frank has confirmed his investiture (starting) with a set of moral attitudes" (Ducharme 17-18)

In the paragraph preceding this conversion to Jewishness, in a daydream Frank Alpine envisions his identification with St. Francis as he (Frank/ St. Francis) offers Helen a wooden rose as a token of his love.

Thus the Christian theme is once again mingled with the Jewish one confirming the idea that Malamud takes from Jewishness merely its moral essence, choosing the universal over the particular and thus arriving at the bare vision of the two faiths, so that Jewishness can be defined through Christianity as much as Christianity could be defined through Jewishness, as Edward Abramson points out that, "By formally becoming a Jew at the end of the novel, Frank illustrates Malamud's point that paradoxically a character may become more Christ like as he becomes more Jewish. Jewish or Christian, it is the heart that counts" (Abramson 30).

All the characters of Bernard Malamud are united by the one thing which they have in common, their suffering, Charles Alva Hoyt has written that the "suffering of the Jew is to Bernard Malamud the stuff and substance of his art" (Hoyt 65). Certainly, as Hoyt points out, all the main characters, Jew and gentile bear an amazing amount of pain and encounter many difficulties, for Malamud has made his Jewish hero a symbol. He does not write about one man; he is not writing about one Morris Bober or one Yakov Bok- he is writing about mankind. The Jew is one with mankind because mankind, in general, suffers; then, in the same sense, anyone who suffers is a Jew. Perhaps the most obvious reason for the suffering which the Jewish hero endures is the fact that Malamud has given the hero, despite his Jewishness, a universal character. In other words, the hero is, within one body, a composite of all men who have lived and who are now living. Malamud portrays his hero, not as a superman or god, but as a human being with all the pains, weaknesses, frailties, incompetency, and failures which have plagued men of all races and creeds throughout the ages. It is not surprising, then, to find that the Jewish hero suffers from backaches, respiratory diseases, a damaged and weak heart, swollen feet, or any other pain which has found its way into the annals of medical history, both physical and mental. The most distressing thing about the aches and pains of the hero is the intensity and quantity. Morris Bober suffers from shortness of breath, catarrh, severe headaches, backaches, exhaustion, and pneumonia.

In *The Assistant*, one views Morris through the eyes of Julius Karp, one of the few successful people in Malamud's fiction. Karp thinks

So he (Morris) had been hit on the head in a holdup, was the fault Karp's? He (Karp) had taken care- why hadn't Morris, the shlimozel? "Why, when he had warned him there were two holdupniks, across the street, hadn't he gone first to lock his door, then telephone the police? Why- because he was inept, unfortunate. (TA 149) Malamud continues with this idea and reveals the conclusion of Morris' inability, "And because he was (inept) his troubles grew like bananas in bunches" (TA 149). Morris creates many of his own problems, problems such as another head injury, keeping an assistant whom he cannot afford, keeping a "goy" around a Jewish daughter, and pneumonia.

It is this way of life, this acceptance of duty to mankind, which is a major cause of the hero's misery. When the hero puts duty above his own comfort and well-being, he is certain to encounter pain seems so little that it appears insignificant to all but the hero, who is as fully aware of one small hurt as he is of the largest. Morris Bober takes food out of his own family's mouths each time he gives a little bread, butter, and vinegar to the "drunk woman" whose money "he never hoped to see". In spite of the hardship which this one small act will bring, Morris cannot ignore that part of him which says that such a deed is good and necessary.

The term 'Moral' means relating to the principles of 'right' and 'wrong'. Malamud's hero experiences a severe and trying pain within his "inner world". The suffering of the Jewish hero in his "outer world" is both impressive and offensive to the reader. The suffering is almost too much to be true; yet, it is true. Still, no matter how a more severe and more trying pain. This pain is that which the hero experiences within the realm of himself, within his "inner world". It is here in the psychological and spiritual self of the hero that he is tortured by a struggle between his two natures- the human being and the moral being or the conscience. He is also tortured by the knowledge which he possesses or by the awesome nature of the reality of the self and of life. Then the pain which is brought by conscience and enlightenment is increased by dreams.

Malamud's hero is a special man with a definite concept of right and wrong. Frank Alpine, in *The Assistant*, comes to see this truth in the midst of his suffering and he thinks "that all the while he was acting like he wasn't, he was really a man of stern morality" (TA 176). The hero possesses a very active conscience, one which brings him much torment.

Perhaps the conflict which the hero, such as Frank Alpine, must endure is best explained by Dr. Werner Wolff "Since man's conscience is the center of his self, abandonment of his conscience means loss of this center. Man becomes homeless, unsure, unsafe; he fears being persecuted by his own self; he is a fugitive from himself" (Wolff 278).

Using this analysis of the role of conscience, one may apply the same principle of self-persecution to the active life of the hero, instead of only the dreams. Often the hero tries to abandon his conscience in an attempt to satisfy some selfish or physical desire, for he cannot achieve his goal with one part of him continually saying "no". In reality, the hero is attempting to do the impossible in rejecting the mainstay of his personality. It would be simple enough if he could physically separate himself from his conscience, but this he cannot do. He, therefore, ignores his conscience for a time, but he soon finds that he must suffer both from guilt of abandoning his conscience and from increased punishment when the conscience regains its former position of supremacy. In other words, the hero suffers from pain which he inflicts upon himself. This pain is a rabid self-hatred and the alienation of the hero's conscience and the hero's conscious being.

Helen Bober, actually a minor character in *The Assistant*, has tried to deny her conscience by giving, almost without thought and without love, her virginity to Nat Pearl. Yet, she is "surprised by torments of conscience". She promises herself that she will never give herself wholly until she gives it in true love, but she soon forgets her promise and once again commits fornication with Nat Pearl. Her conscience becomes very active and "afterward she fought self-hatred". She cannot overcome her self-hatred and is a slave to it throughout the novel. Later, when Helen is sure of her new love for Frank, she goes to tell Frank, and the reader infers, to give herself to him. Then because of circumstances Frank takes her- takes what Helen would have given. Despite the fact she would have given her body to Frank afterwards Helen cries out in hatred, "Dog-uncircumcised dog". She hates Frank and she hates herself. Because of her bitterness, she brings to her life a deep and lasting pain which increases the hurt which she must already bear.

The entire course of Frank's life is determined by what he calls his sense of "morality," and the pain which he suffers is the pain of not being one with the center of his personality. Frank, as if under the control of some power other than his own, is forced back to the store and the grocer whom he helped rob. For months he is plagued by remembrance of his part in the robbery; he spends harrowing hours trying to come up with a defense for him because he knows that he, for his own sake, must tell Morris what he has done. Finally he tells Morris, very plainly, that he was one of the men. And, for a few moments, he "experienced a moment of extraordinary relief- a tree full of birds broke into song; but the song was silenced when Morris, his eyes heavy, said, "This I already know, you don't tell me nothing new" (TA 198). Frank argues that he did not hurt Morris and that he has paid back all the money, but neither Morris nor Frank can forget this act of malice against a fellowman. Thus, Frank is condemned to a life of penance in an effort to purge his soul of the guilt for his actions.

This misery connected with this one instance of Frank's betrayal of his fellowman and his sense of moral goodness is compounded by Frank's treatment of Helen in the park. Malamud's words best explain the suffering which Frank has brought to himself

He lay in bed with the blankets pulled over his head, trying to smother his thoughts but they escaped and stank. The more he smothered them the more they stank. He smelled garbage in the bed and couldn't move out of it. He couldn't because he was it- the stink in his own broken nose...

Oh my God, why did I do it? Why did I ever do it? Why did I do it?

His thoughts were killing him. He couldn't stand them. He sat on the edge of the twisted bed, his thoughtful head ready to burst in his hands. He wanted to run. Part of him was already in flight, but he didn't know where...

Frank got up on the run but he had run everywhere. There was no place left to escape to. The room shrank. The bed was flying up at him. He felt trapped- sick, wanted to cry but couldn't. (TA 174)

The conflict between the actions of Frank-his robbery of Morris' store and the rape of Helen- and the standards of his austere conscience bring about his destruction, both mental and physical. Concerning such a condition Werner Wolff has written, "The feeling of guilt and of persecution may become intolerable. Suicide may be the only way to escape from the self, from the threat of the deserted conscience" (Wolff 278). And suicide seems to be the only avenue of action which is open to Frank; he plans his death.

But Frank saves himself from death and grasps at a straw- he realizes the problem and thinks that he can, perhaps, deal with it more effectively in the future, even if he cannot solve the problem and remove the suffering which accompanies it.

Even Morris Bober suffers from pangs of Conscience. Morris thinks his poverty, and then he compares his life to that of Louis Karp. The difference is, indeed, painful. Morris has, for years, “escaped resenting the man’s good luck, but lately he had caught himself wishing on him some small misfortune” (TA 22). Later, then, when Karp’s store is demolished by fire and when Karp experiences a mild heart attack, Morris begins to suffer for what he has thought. And the suffering is great, “With a frozen hand the grocer clawed at a live pain in his breast. He felt an overwhelming hatred of himself. He had wished it on Karp- just this. His anguish was terrible” (TA 219).

In *The Assistant*, Morris Bober is forced to come face to face with the life of poverty which he has given Ida; he is forced to see that it is he who has taken from Helen her college education. He is forced to accept the fact that the man he has befriended has robbed him twice and has brought hurt to Helen. He is forced to admit that he must sell the store before it buries him. But all of these admissions do nothing but bring to Morris Bober’s heart a feeling of uselessness and dejection; he feels that there are “so many changes to make and get used to” (TA 224). Later Malamud writes of Morris

He thought of his life with sadness. For his family he had not provided the poor man’s disgrace. Ida was asleep at his side. He wanted to awaken her and apologize. He thought of Helen. It would be terrible if she became an old maid. He moaned a little, thinking of Frank. His mood was of regret. I gave away my life for nothing. It was the thunderous truth (TA 226). The truth is too much; to Morris it has brought the pain of self-hatred, and it finally brings the pain of death. Frank Alpine also suffers the pains of knowledge. He is hurt by the knowledge that he has brought to Helen disgust for her and for him. It is his own human weakness, his inability to be patient and disciplined, that has brought him to the sorrow in which he must live, and “he cursed himself for having conceived this mess...” (TA 237). Frank is overcome with a feeling of hopelessness and a hurt much like that of Morris when he is confronted with the truth of his life.

In *The Assistant* Frank Alpine steals and removes money, food stuffs and other eatables from the store of his master, employer and well wisher, Morris Bober. When he came his condition was miserable. Morris treats him well and gives him something to eat. But later he is changed. He dedicated himself to the service of Morris Bober, Ida Bober and their daughter Helen, when they become victims of abject poverty. It is apparent that Frank resorted to thievery forced by his penury otherwise he is a man of high moral aptitude. Helen Bober dressed up ostentatiously and Frank is charmed by her beauty. He longs to abuse and rape her. But later in the story Frank’s longing for Helen transcends the fleshliness of man-woman relationship. He repents over his past sins. Remorse corrodes his heart. He knew how much he stole from the store. He looks bleary, face pale, nostrils inflamed and voiced husky. He is now determined to return every cent that he had removed from the cash box. He opens a savings account in a bank for this purpose. He decides to confess everything before Morris Bober but he has no courage to look him in the face. Frank’s moral aptitude can be gauged by the fact that he works as a bread-earner for twelve hours a day, when the latter is in bed. The end of the novel reveals Frank as a man of high morals. He assumes the responsibilities of Morris after his death. Helen also shows signs of moral upliftment. She returns Frank’s gift and wants to “see him dressed well, his hair cut shorter, speaking fluent English and growing in value to himself and others” (TA 96). Frank Alpine learns the lessons of patience, fortitude, suffering and sacrifice from Morris Bober. Morris Bober though worked very hard but somehow was unlucky. “The harder he worked the less he seemed to have”. Still he never loses faith in humanity and goodness. “He gave everything away that he owned, every cent, all his clothes off his back. He enjoyed being poor. He said poverty was a queen and he loved her like a beautiful woman” (TA 31).

Although Malamud did not confront the holocaust experience directly, his fiction is clearly haunted by the Holocaust. The tragedy enters his fictional universe through diverse allusions, symbols, imprisoning imagery, metaphor etc. The Jewish suffering as the metaphor for human suffering is the essence of Malamud’s fiction. When asked whether he was a Jewish writer, Malamud replied

I’m an American, I’m a Jew, and I write for all men ... I write about Jews when I write about Jews, because they set my imagination going. I know something about their history, the quality of their experience and belief, and of their literature, though not as much as I would like.



Like many writers, I'm influenced especially by the Bible, both testaments. I respond in particular to the East European immigrants of my father's and my mother's generation: many of them were Jews of the pale as described by the Classic Yiddish writers. And of course I've been deeply moved by the Jews of the concentration camps, and the refugees wandering from nowhere to nowhere (Lasher 39-68).

The Assistant's evocations are far more subtle than *The Fixer's*, consisting of conditions and events that resonate with the Holocaust's. Morris Bober, a poor grocery store owner takes on as an assistant Frank Alpine, who had robbed Morris' store. During the course of their relationship, Frank is humanized and sensitized to Judaism. After Morris' death, Frank takes his place in the store and converts to Judaism. Michael Brown has detailed the novel's Holocaust allegory, observing that a German, Italian and a Pole catalyze the failure of Morris' business: that is the Axis powers and fellow victims combine to destroy the Jew. In addition Morris' neighborhood contains but three Jewish families, one of which is destroyed in a fire. Thus one-third of the neighborhood's Jewish population is burned, just as the Nazis incinerated one-third of the global Jewish population. Morris' life is filled with poverty, disease and hopelessness. Like the victims in the camps, he is in his own horrific world from which there is no escape. Finally, Morris contracts pneumonia from shoveling snow, and like Oskar Gassner, dies, as many of the six million Jews.

The critical tendency to categorize twentieth-century American authors by ethnically oriented labels has done Bernard Malamud a great injustice. He is traditionally grouped along with other writers of Jewish origin such as Saul Bellow, Philip Roth and others, under the general label "Jewish American writers". Malamud was fully justified in protesting against the restrictiveness of the term. Although in terms of biography Malamud can be regarded as a Jewish American, to view Malamud's fiction as the work of a Jewish American writer is indeed a mistake, and not just because the Jewish American element should not be present in his fiction- indeed it is- but simply because it only describes a partial aspect of his work, and consequently fails to encompass and explain a large part of his fiction. A label of this kind points to the preconception that the author in question tends to focus on characters and themes specifically distinguished by a particular combination of intrinsically Jewish and American traits.

The hero of the recent American novel has typically found himself in a hostile world. He is an individual who is pitted against strong cruelty, indifference, oppression, and absurdity. Most often the hero falls victim to these forces and never rises again. Although Bernard Malamud is a contemporary novelist and a short-story writer, he has not chosen to underscore the horrifying gloom and absurdity that many of other writers since 1945 have emphasized. The hero in Malamud's fiction does, it is true, suffer endlessly; also, many times the suffering seems to be in vain. A more careful examination of the hero in Malamud's world of pain will demonstrate, however, that this author does not let his hero's suffering go unrewarded and unacknowledged. Suffering, to Malamud's hero, is not a worthless encumbrance; the hero is not left to drown in his own tears.

At first glance, Malamud's fiction seems to suggest irrationality; there appears to be no justification for many actions and for much suffering. Most of the characters in Malamud's fiction do not understand why they suffer; they do not even suffer in the hope that they will gain something from bearing their pain. The results of the suffering in fact, come to the hero because he has endured the discomforts and injustices of life.

When the Malamud's hero has suffered all that there is to suffer, when there is no new affliction for him to bear, the results of the suffering are obvious- he is, in many ways, a new man. At this point, the main character becomes the perfect model of Malamud's conception of the Jewish hero. First, one is conscious that the Jewish hero is a more understanding man after he has endured his own personal sorrow; he looks at the world and life with a new sight. Next, the hero becomes, through his private pain, a man of compassion. He is a man who loves all people and who knows life and mankind so well that he can empathize with the entire human race. Lastly, the Jew in Malamud's fiction becomes a hero in the traditional sense; he develops into a man of great spiritual strength and abilities, he becomes truly heroic because he, like Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), has battled the forces of nature and has emerged from the battle. The hero is not destroyed, for he has conducted himself well and has endured with honor.

The effect of suffering which, in most cases, is most startling to the reader is the climax of the hero's gradual awakening to the realities of existence.



In this process of awakening, the hero actually undergoes catharsis. He realizes that the soul is the element to be purged because it is with the soul that the hero truly sees the world. He perceives the intricacies of human nature and sees the sorrows and pains of others.

Sometimes the Malamud hero seems to be drenched in his individuality. Frank Alpine is intoxicated with himself; he wants only to satisfy his desire for love and, later, his desire for forgiveness. The self, however, does not command the hero's concern throughout the entirety of Malamud's fiction. In *The Assistant*, Morris is already more concerned with the welfare of others than he is with his personal well-being. The turning away from the self to humanity is a slow process which often continues to the very conclusion of the novel or short story. At the end of *The Assistant*, Frank Alpine is deeply involved with the lives of people other than Ida and Helen Bober. He makes tea for Breitbart and sympathizes with the bulb salesman who also suffers.

The hero eventually understands that all men suffer as he suffers and that the pain in the world demands some kind of action from the individual. Without the belief that all men have similar needs, desires, and troubles, the hero cannot be a man of compassion, for the first step toward compassion is the awareness of man's true state, of man's life of pain. Although Malamud's hero is a Jew, the hero transcends the religious and minority group limits and is actually a representative of man, who suffers throughout his lifetime and throughout history. Compassion, however, is much more than mere knowledge of man's pains and sorrows. It is not enough that Yakov Bok knows that other Russians suffer; or that Arthur Fidelman knows that Shimon Susskind is a pitiful, deprived man. Compassion implies and demands from the hero empathy and some action.

In examining the spiritual or intangible world of Malamud's characters, one may go so far as to say that perhaps the Morris Bobers of the world are greater men in their own way than many of the ancient heroes. In fact, the modern world in which the Malamud characters exist is an unfeeling world, a world of indifference even to the best of men and the best of actions, why should a man worry about principles and good deeds in this kind of world? It would be easier to sit by and avoid much of the sorrow which a wall of indifference can keep out of man's life; yet, the Malamud hero does not sit by unmoved; he involves himself in the life of those who need help.

American Holocaust fiction demonstrates the constant change in the human condition and the perspective wrought in the Holocaust crucible. Although all the survivors suffer Holocaust trauma, some engage in a regenerative process that takes a form of rebuilding Judaism and the Jewish community in America and Israel. Central to the concerns of religious survivors is the preservation and transmission of the Jewish past unlike the immigrants of Jewish-American fiction set in pre-Holocaust period, the post-Holocaust immigrants do not seek assimilation and acculturation, but continue instead to grapple with the European past and often labor to preserve their Jewish particularity, history and tradition.

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