UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL AUTONOMA DE MEXICO

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras

THE ROLE OF SUFFERING AND LEARNING IN A NUMBER OF BERNARD MALAMUD'S WORKS

Tesis que presenta
Susan Lynn Jacobs Obloczynski de Zenker
Para obtener el título de
Maestro en Lengua y Literatura Inglesa

México, D.F. 1981

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The theme of suffering is evident in most of Bernard Malamud's works; as Charles Alva Hoyt has pointed out:

> The suffering of the Jews is to Bernard Malamud the stuff and substance of his art....
> Suffering is Malamud's theme, and upon it he works a thousand variations.[1]

It is clear that Malamud depicts many kinds of suffering and that his settings and conflicts work together to bring his characters into potential learning situations.

However, because the relation between suffering and learning has not been, in my opinion, adequately explained in the numerous critical studies written on Malamud, in this thesis I intend to discuss further the role of suffering and learning in thirteen of Malamud's works.

I have chosen to begin with his novel The Natural, a key work in my discussion because it was one of the author's first works to treat the relation between suffering and learning. In it Iris Lemon, one of the characters, provides us with a direct explanation that suffering "makes men better," "teaches them to want the right things," and "brings them toward happiness." Because this character's explanation may

at first seem to be Malamud's own, various critics have used it as evidence of the glorification of suffering that Malamud supposedly portrays in this novel as well as in many of his later works.

However, in my opinion, there is a discrepancy between Iris Lemon's explanation of the relation between suffering and learning and Malamud's own view as revealed in The Natural as well as in his other works. Therefore, in addition to The Natural, I have chosen to discuss twelve other works in which the author repeatedly contradicts his own character's proposal of the meaning of suffering and indeed seems to consider it absurd. [2]

Thus, The Natural (1952) poses the question of whether or not man can learn through suffering. In regards to the other works I have chosen, "Angel Levine" (1955) and "Idiots First" (1961) are the only two which suggest that man can "better himself" through suffering, though only in a fantasy world. The works written prior to The Natural -- "The Cost of Living" (1950), "The First Seven Years" (1950), "The Bill" (1951), and "The Loan" (1952) -- are works in which the characters are placed in certain economic prisons; in these works it is implied that the only "learning" that can occur is disillusion. The works written after The Natural -- "The Magic Barrel" (1954), "A Summer's Reading" (1956), and The Assistant (1957) -- suggest that the life man leads after suffering

and learning is imperfect; while in "The Mourners" (1955), "The Last Mohican" (1958), and "The Lady of the Lake" (1958), the learning occurs too late. Finally, The Fixer, containing Malamud's most detailed study of excruciating suffering, attests to the futility of such suffering and of whatever lessons may be learned from it.

I intend to include a discussion of such elements as characterization, narrative technique, tone, and resolution whenever such elements help to reveal the relation between suffering and learning, as well as the nature of the author's consequent artistic achievement.

In this way, I intend to show that instead of glorifying the "sufferer," Bernard Malamud uses him, in The Natural as well as in many of his other works, to show the multiple prisons that surround and limit man and to characterize disillusion and defeat as part of man's daily routine.

A List of the Works to be Discussed

The Natural (1952)

"Angel Levine" (1955)

"Idiots First" (1961)

"The Cost of Living" (1950)

"The First Seven Years" (1950)

"The Bill" (1951)

"The Loan" (1952)

"The Magic Barrel" (1954)

"A Summer's Reading" (1956)

The Assistant (1957)

"The Mourners" (1955)

"The Last Mohican" (1958)

"The Lady of the Lake" (1958)

The Fixer (1966)

Notes for Introduction and Statement of Purpose

1

In "Bernard Malamud and the New Romanticism," reprinted as "The New Romanticism" in Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field's collection of essays entitled Bernard Malamud and the Critics, (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 171. (All subsequent page references to this article will be made to Field and Field's reprinting.)

2

I have chosen those works which deal with various "lessons about life," excluding those works in which the lessons are to be learned by artists or intellectuals. It is my belief that in general "academic" novels and works dealing with the role of the artist or the intellectual pose questions limited to these very specific areas and therefore deserve to be handled separately.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ABSURDITY OF SUFFERING SEEN IN MALAMUD'S FIRST NOVEL THE NATURAL

"Introductory Note for Chapter One"

The Natural (1952) is one of Malamud's early works in which the characters themselves directly discuss the role of suffering. The passage which several critics have cited as the key to suffering in Malamud's works [1] is the one in which Iris Lemon tries to explain to the protagonist, Roy Hobbs, the reason for his professional failures. Since I will continually refer to this passage throughout my thesis, I include it as this point for early consideration:

> "What beats me," Roy said with a trembling voice, "is why did it always have to happen to me? What did I do to deserve it?"
> "Being stopped before you started?"
> He nodded.
> "Perhaps it was because you were a good person?"
> "How's that?"
> "Experience makes good people better."
> She was staring at the lake.
> "How does it do that?"
> "Through their suffering."
> "I had enough of that," he said in disgust.
> "We have two lives, Roy, the life we learn with and the life we live with after that. Suffering is what brings us toward happiness....It teaches us to want the right things." [2]

1.1 "Background Concerning Critical Approaches to The Natural: The Need for a Closer Look at the Characterization and Conflict of the Protagonist"

In The Natural Malamud departs from his previous fictional worlds of Jewish and immigrant ghettoes [3] to combine instead the contemporary world of baseball and the mythical world of the Quest for the Holy Grail. Many critics, therefore, have gone to great lengths in their discussions of Malamud's use of baseball in combination with Arthurian myth, as well as in their tracing of his allusions to further sources such as Homer, Jung, and Eliot. As Frederick W. Turner, III has said:

> ...almost every critic who has troubled himself with The Natural has dutifully and sometimes painstakingly pointed out the various mythic parallels. [4]

For example, Earl R. Wasserman has explained how Malamud's choice of the myth of baseball captures the American spirit and some of its heroic rituals; [5] in addition he has explained how baseball player Roy Hobbs' quest to be the "greatest" is a quest to "gain access to the 'sources of Life,'" and thus embodies the "archetypal fertility myth." [6] Wasserman correlates the characters' identities and roles in the novel with their counterparts in the Grail-vegetation myth: Roy and Sir Perceval, Wonderboy and Excalibur, Iris and the Lady of the Lake, Pop Fisher and the Fisher king, Memo and Morgan Le Fay,

Gus the Supreme Bookie and Merlin the Magician, Otto Zip and the traditional Arthurian dwarf, and so on. The following is an example of the kind of correlations made; here Wasserman compares Roy's bat, Wonderboy, to Excalibur:

> a miraculous bat...with an energy of its own. Derived from nature's life and shaped by Roy for the game in which he is determined to be the hero, it flashes in the sun, blinds his opponents with its golden splendor, and crashes the ball with thunder and lightning. It is, in other words, the modern Excalibur and Arthurian lance, which Weston and others have identified as talismans of male potency and reproductive energy. The phallic instrument is the raw vitality and fertility he has drawn from the universal "sources of Life." After Roy's fruitfull night with Memo, Bump says to him, "I hear you had a swell time, wonderboy," and during Roy's slump Wonderboy "sags like a baloney." [7]

Similar detailed correlations have been made by Eigner, [8] Mellard, [9] Hoyt, [10] and Richman, [11] to name only a few. Yet their analyses of mythic allusions fail to capture the essence of the novel and of its implications about suffering and learning; as Turner has appropriately said:

> ...the mythic parallels themselves seem to lead nowhere, and it has seemed almost as if the use of myth was an end

> in itself as indeed the critics themselves have made it: to assert the presence of myth in a literary work is not necessarily to explain why it is there, and this has unhappily been too often the case with recent criticism....Podhoretz and Marcus Klein can tell us what myths are being used where, but they fail to tell us to what effect, [fail to go] straight to the heart of this novel, and perhaps in some measure to the heart of Malamud's fiction. [12]

In my opinion, such critics may have failed to capture the "heart" of the work because their lists of mythic correlations alone cannot help us to transpose Roy's personal story of suffering to the universal level. While the novel's "mythic trappings" [13] have apparently disuaded many critics from considering The Natural a realistic novel with well-defined characters and from interpreting Roy's struggle as an individual's struggle against himself, [14] I feel that Malamud has characterized Roy as an individual with a tormenting inner conflict. His characterization works first on a personal level; because it allows us to identify with Roy as an individual, it then allows us to draw some universal conclusions about suffering and learning, the universality of which Malamud enhances by means of his mythic references. As Ronald Z. Sheppard has said, Malamud develops "the hidden strengths of ordinary and often awkward people" [15] by depicting the questing knight in each one of us and by taking us

from the particular to the general.

It is clear the Malamud uses the game of baseball to represent the game of life and to make the obvious point of the value of good sportsmanship: that "it isn't if you win or lose, it's how you play the 'game' that counts." Yet, if we were to conclude simply that in the end Roy is "the failed hero" [16] because he "did not dearly love the fans" (p. 134),[17] we would be accepting, in Samuel Irving Bellman's words, "easy answers to profound questions," for we would be oversimplifying the complex conflict Malamud has developed. While Sidney Richman concludes his discussion of The Natural by assuring us that it is "deficient in conveying...a sense of tangible reality...and that it never quite becomes a deeply felt experience," [19] I believe that a psychologically real anguish becomes evident once we realize how Malamud's narrative technique works. It is worthwhile taking a moment to discuss this technique because it functions in much the same way in nearly all of Malamud's stories and novels.

1.2 "An Overview of Malamud's Narrative Technique"

In general, Malamud uses a third-person selective omniscient point of view [20] to move back and forth almost indistinguishably between narrator and character even within the same sentence, a technique which, as critic Sheldon Norman Grebstein has pointed out, has been used to advantage by "many resourceful writers:" [21]

> By refraining from editorial intrusions and maintaining the focus on a single character or a few characters, the writer can shift into interior monologue or take a stance which allows him to perceive as through the character's eyes without any obvious break in the narrative seam or detection by the reader. [22]

Though Malamud's use of the third-person omniscient viewpoint may not seem to be all that different from that of other writers, I find it necessary to point out the obvious characteristics of this technique since they have been ignored in published critical studies on Malamud up to now (with the exception of Grebstein's article "Bernard Malamud and the Jewish Movement"). In addition, as his narrative technique provides us with a key to the interpretation of the role of suffering and learning in his works in general, it is worthwhile taking

a moment to define the three styles Grebstein has found within Malamud's narration. By defining these three different styles -- "standard belletristic," "dialect," and "fused" -- Grebstein is also distinguishing what he calls the separate "voices" of the narrator (who may or may not be the author) and of the protagonist and other characters. [23]

The "voice" of the selective omniscient narrator is conveyed in a style which Grebstein calls the "'straight' or standard belletristic style," that is, the familiar direct objective mode used to give the "facts and figures" of the story line. This is a "style composed of the same linguistic materials used by other modern writers with a syntax familiar to all speakers of American English, and a diction drawn from the common vocabulary of standard informal usage" [24] combined with an "occasional sonorous and formal literary phrase never heard in the speech of ordinary men." [25]

Malamud then contrasts this more "formal," "literary" air of the narrator with the distinctive thoughts and perceptions of his characters by using what Grebstein calls a "dialect style." Passages of description which focus on a Jewish character, for example, "deliberately evoke the sound of Yiddish," [26] though there is no actual dialogue; in the case of The Natural, passages focusing on the various characters' perceptions evoke their speech patterns, "breezy and

slangy -- accurate to a world of baseball players." [27]

There are times when the character's "voice" is easily distinguished from that of the narrator. Since Grebstein has given illustrations of the difference between these "voices" within specific Malamudian works, I will, for the moment, point out examples only from The Natural.

On the one hand, a mere vocabulary item may indicate a change of focus from narrator to character, from objective mode to interiorization. Such a change is evident, for instance, in the following description of Roy's first glance at the manager, Pop Fisher:

> The man set his things on the floor and sat down on the concrete step, facing Pop. He beheld an old geezer of sixty-five with watery blue eyes, a thin red neck and a bitter mouth, who looked like a lost banana in the overgrown baseball suit he wore, especially his skinny legs in loose blue-and-white stockings (p. 36).

(In this first line, Malamud uses the familiar omniscient narrator as he describes the character's actions. Yet in the second line, as in many other cases, he then uses a term typical of the character's choice of words, here, "geezer," to imitate Roy's own thoughts in this characteristic "slangy" style. The rest of Pop's physical description would seem factual enough were it not for the comparison of the manager to a "lost banana," which also suggests Roy's own perceptions.)

On the other hand, a more complex sentence construction may indicate the change of focus from narrator to protagonist; as Grebstein has noted:

> ...constant interruptions and interjections of modifying or qualifying phrases and clauses impart a faintly alien air of brooding introspection and of constant self-examination.[28]

The complex construction in the following example imitates Roy's jumpy thoughts during his trip east:

> from the flaring sky out of the window it looked around half-past five, but he couldn't be sure because somewhere near they left Mountain Time and lost--no, picked up--yes, it was lost an hour, what Sam called the twenty-three hour day (p. 18).

The narrator's "literary" tone is heard at the beginning of the line with the use of the adjective "flaring." However, with the verb "it looked around," the narrator's omniscience turns to (or into) Roy's subjectivity. The doubt expressed in the use of "he couldn't be sure" and the hesitation seen in the line "no, picked up--yes, it was lost" both suggest Roy's introspection.

Yet more often than not, Malamud uses what Grebstein

calls his "mixed or fused style," combining the "belletristic" and the "dialect" styles and making it difficult to distinguish the character from the narrator.[29] That is, Roy's "voice," for example, is intricately "fused" with that of the narrator in sentences like the following line describing Roy's jealousy of rival player Bump Bailey: "Roy everlastingly fried Bump Bailey in the deep fat of his abomination" (p. 61). The narrator's "literary voice" heard in "everlastingly" and "abomination" is interwoven within the same sentence with the country boy's perception and colloquial usage -- "fried Bump in the deep fat."

It is difficult to pinpoint what makes Malamud's use of the third-person omniscient distinctively his own. Pinsker has attempted to do so when he writes that Malamud's "style" is actually a "syncretism," a blending of several "different or opposing principles...borrowed from a variety of sources, yet...assimilated and transformed...into something peculiarly his own." [30] We can trace, for example, certain Malamudian elements to such "diverse sources as Henry James, Dostoevski, the Bible, Nathaniel Hawthorne," as Pinsker has written. We can also note

> the surrealistic/hallucinatory humor of a James Joyce touched by the darker humor of the dramatists of the Theater of the Absurd...the seminal influence of Sholom Aleichem and to a lesser degree that of other Yiddish writers out of the shtetl... I. B. Singer's mysticism... [31] and readily recognizable mythic elements. [32]

Likewise, Richman attempts to pinpoint the reason for Malamud's singularity when he notes Malamud's "fusion of realism and symbolism," [33] a fusion which Grebstein also refers to when he calls Malamud a "symbolic realist." [34] Yet all of these borrowed elements appear surprisingly new in Malamud's works due to the author's unique recombination of them.

Certainly Malamud, like Bellow and Roth, creates special effects with his fusion of viewpoints or "voices;" such a "fused style," unifying the narrator's and character's perceptions, gathers force, as Grebstein has noted,

> ...from the juxtaposition or combination of lyrical, eloquent, soaring phrases (the belletristic) and homely idiom and vulgate (the dialect). The belletristic exalts the vulgate, infusing it with dignity and seriousness; the vulgate pulls down the belletristic from its literary eminence and makes it speak for ordinary men and coarse experience. The juxtaposition of the two also makes possible that remarkable bitter comedy we observe in Malamud, Bellow, and Roth. [35]

In Malamud's case, this juxtaposition of "voices" and an occasional tone of mockery create a distance between narrator and character, a distance which Grebstein has already noted in several Malamudian works. Referring to A New Life, for example, he says that the empty moralizing and "sappy" [36] statements in

it can be attributed to the narcissistic protagonist Sy Levin but not necessarily to Malamud who, in fact, "refrains from editorial intrusions." [37] In the same manner, there is a distance between narrator (and/or author) and the main character of The Natural, [38] a fact which is of vital importance to my final interpretation of the meaning of suffering and of the apparent "defeat" of the protagonist in The Natural.

I have taken time to discuss what might seem to some readers to be obvious characteristics of Malamud's technique because I feel that those critics who have misrepresented the work by taking Iris' explanation of suffering and learning to be Malamud's own have failed to separate Roy's perceptions of his predicament from those of the narrator and have failed to distinguish between Iris' view of suffering and the author's own as revealed in his works. A closer analysis of the conflict in the text will show that the empty moralizing about suffering is narrated in the dialect style of Iris or in the colloquial "voice" of Roy and thus represents the characters' own views of the world, which are not necessarily their creator's.

1.3 "Roy's Inner Conflict from Beginning to End"

Needless to say, it is difficult to distinguish the two "voices," and a separation of narrator and protagonist is not always possible or feasible.[39] What is evident is the fact that the author continually attempts to simulate the characters' thoughts. Although Roy's thoughts are not given word for word, the third-person narrator continually does "perceive as through the character's eyes" [40] when he uses idioms and syntax which reflect Roy's "dialect style."

Following these thoughts and perceptions throughout the novel, we note that much of the suffering in The Natural entails Roy's inner struggle between two different sets of values, those of the country and those of the city, values which Roy himself contrasts and opposes within his own mind. In the "Pre-game" section, Roy characterizes each of these worlds and their respective values. The first image we have of him is a self-image -- Roy as the country boy:

> Having no timepiece he appraised the night and decided it was moving toward dawn. As he was looking, there flowed along this bone-white farmhouse with sagging skeletal porch, alone in untold miles of moonlight, and before it this white-faced, long-boned boy whipped with train-whistle yowl a glowing ball to someone hidden under a dark oak, who shot it back without thought, and the kid once more wound and returned. Roy shut his eyes to

> the sight because if it wasn't real it was a way he sometimes had of observing himself....(pp. 7-8)

First, from this self-image we infer that one of the basic values he attributes to his country up-bringing is his innocence. Although at this moment in "Pre-game" he is already traveling eastward, he sees himself as the "white-faced" young "kid" playing catch. Second, his proximity to Nature has given him a natural wisdom, a kind of "sixth sense" with which he can tell what time it is, making the man-made "timepiece" obsolete. While a city-bred man might dread the dark and isolation of the night, Roy feels at home as he casually plays ball in the dark. Likewise, his country life has given him a natural ability as a ball-player: even in the dark he is a perfect catcher, a "natural" who needs only "moonlight" to guide him to wind up and pitch, to whip the ball "with a train-whistle yowl" to "someone <u>hidden</u> under a dark oak." Moreover, the comparison of Roy to Scout Simpson's dream players enhances our initial view of Roy's ability and parallels Roy's vision of himself as "pastoral" [41] player:

> ...[Sam] crossed over to an old, dry barn and sat against the haypile in front, to drown his sorrows with a swig. On the verge of dozing he heard these shouts and opened his eyes, shielding them from the hot sun, and as he lived, a game of ball was being played in a pasture by twelve blond-

> bearded players, six on each side, and even from where Sam sat he could tell they were terrific the way they smacked the pill -- one blow banging it so far out the fielder had to run a mile before he could jump high and snag it smack in his bare hand. Sam's mouth popped open, he got up whoozy and watched, finding it hard to believe his eyes, as the teams changed sides and the first hitter that batted the ball did so for a far-reaching distance before it was caught, and the same with the second, a wicked clout, but then the third came up, the one who had made the bare-handed catch, and he really laid on and powered the pellet a thundering crack so that even the one who ran for it, his beard parted in the wind, before long looked like a pygmy chasing it and quit running, seeing the thing was a speck on the horizon. ...[When the twelve giants vanished in a dozen directions, Sam] woke with a sob in his throat but swallowed before he could sound it, for by then Roy had come to mind and he mumbled, "Got someone just as good," so that for once waking was better than dreaming (pp. 13-14).

Third, it is clear that Roy attributes security and satisfaction to the "woodland" -- "the only place he had been truly intimate with...the privacy so complete his inmost self had no shame of anything he thought" there (p. 18). Even in the novel's second section, "Batter Up," Roy's moments of satisfaction are expressed in terms taken from his country background; in the following passage, for example, Roy's anguish and ambitions are quietened by a return to the country, first in his fantasies and then among the wall-papered fruits of his

hotel room:

> Finally, as the sight of him through the long long years of suffering faded away, he quieted down. The noise of the train eased off as it came to a stop, and Roy found himself set down in a field somewhere in the country, where he had a long and satisfying love affair with this girl he had seen in the picture tonight.
>
> He thought of her till he had fallen all but deep asleep, when a door seemed to open in the mind and this naked red headed lovely slid out of a momentary flash of light, and the room was dark again. He thought he was still dreaming of the picture but the funny part of it was when she got into bed with him he almost cried out in pain as her icy hands and feet, in immediate embrace, slashed his hot body, but there among the apples, grapes, and melons, he found what he wanted and had it (pp. 50-51).

In contrast, the values of the city are antagonistic to the values Roy assigns to the country. Even before he arrives in Chicago, Roy has the pre-conceived notion that this city, "a shadow-infested, street-lamped jungle" (p. 31), represents, first, the loss of innocence and the root of all evil:

> He had once seen some stereopticon pictures of Chicago and it was a boxed-up ant heap of stone and crumbling wood buildings in a many-miled spreading checkerboard of streets without

> much open space to speak of except the railroads, stockyards, and the shore of a windy lake. In the Loop, the offices went up high and the streets were jampacked with people, and he wondered how so many of them could live together in any one place. Suppose there was a fire or something and they all ran out of their houses to see--how could they help but trample all over themselves? And Sam had warned him against strangers [and Sam's words now become Roy's own] because there were so many bums, sharpers, and gangsters around, people you were dirt to, who didn't know you and didn't want to, and for a dime they would slit your throat and leave you dying in the streets (pp. 31-32).

Second, the city represents the nullification of his natural wisdom. The transitional trainride east presents Roy with his first city world predicaments (like ordering, tipping, and locating the men's room), and his incompetence in such situations proves to him that he is already a blundering outsider:

> When the waiter handed Roy the pad, he absently printed his name and date of birth but the waiter imperceptibly nudged him (hey, hayseed) and indicated it was for ordering. He pointed on the menu with his yellow pencil (this is the buck breakfast) but the blushing ballplayer, squinting through the blur, could only think he was sitting on the lone four-bit piece he had in his back pocket. He tried to squelch the impulse but something forced him to look up at her [Harriet] as he attempted to pour water into his ice-filled (this'll kill the fever)

> glass, spilling some on the table
> (whose diapers you wetting, boy?),
> then all thumbs and butterfingers,
> the pitcher thumped the pitcher down,
> fished the fifty cents out of his
> pants, and after scratching out the
> vital statistics on the pad, plunked
> the coin down on the table.
>
> "That's for you," he told the
> (what did I do to deserve this?)
> waiter, and though the silver-eyed
> mermaid was about to speak, he did
> not stay to listen but beat it fast
> out of the accursed car (p. 13).

Such trifles on the train proved to Roy that he would be helpless without his guide, the scout:

> ...he certainly hated to be left a-
> lone in a place like Chicago. With-
> out Sam he'd feel shaky-kneed and un-
> able to say or do simple things like
> ask for directions or know where to
> go once you had dropped a nickel in-
> to the subway (pp. 9-10).

Indeed, Sam's death later does leave Roy without a guide in the city's spiritual wilderness.

Third, the unknown world of the city represents the loss of his security and satisfaction:

> ..,he thought of here and now and
> for the thousandth time wondered
> why they had come so far and for
> what. Did Sam really know what he
> was doing? Sometimes Roy had his
> doubts. Sometimes he wanted to

> turn around and go back home, where he could at least predict what tomorrow would be like (p. 18).

As early as the time of the trainride east, Roy has already lost his former inner peace. Although he boasts that his goal is to "break every record in the book" (p. 26), at the same time he questions the validity of his aspirations to fame -- "he wondered why they had come so far and for what" (p. 18). This pattern of the approach-avoidance conflict is repeated throughout the novel, and a great deal of Roy's suffering, his guilt and indecisiveness, is caused by the fact that his city-bred ambitions run contrary to his country nature.

The major events of the story line reflect this psychological suffering, beginning with Roy's encounter with Harriet Bird. Roy's conflict concerning the city is reflected in his changing attitude towards Harriet. Roy desires the city-girl as soon as he meets her, yet when she proves to be uninterested, Roy questions his desires, nostalgically dreaming of his country "woodland," of

> ...the only place he had been truly intimate with in his wanderings, a green world shot through with weird light and strange bird cries, muffled in silence that made the privacy so complete his inmost self had no shame of anything he thought there, and it eased the body-shaking beat of his ambitions. Then he thought of here and now and for the thousandth time wondered why they had come so far and for what (p. 18).

A little later Roy is encouraged by his triumph over his rival player, Walter the Whammer, which seems to have helped his relationship with Harriet:

> ...he could see...that Harriet Bird (certainly a snappy goddess) had her gaze fastened on him.
>
> They sat, after dinner, in Eddie's dimmed and empty Pullman, Roy floating through drifts of clouds on his triumph as Harriet went on about the recent tourney,...,(p. 25)

Yet following this moment of apparent triumph, Roy is uneasy and feels that Harriet has somehow turned the scenery into something menacing:

> ...Harriet went on about the recent tourney, she put it, and the unreal forest outside swung forward like a gate shutting. The odd way she saw things interested him, yet he was aware of the tormented trees fronting the snaky lake they were passing, trees bent and clawing, plucked white by icy blasts from the black water, their bony branches twisting in many a broken direction (pp. 25-26).

While he grins at the thought of his triumph over the Whammer, the direct "pronouncement" of his selfish ambitions unsteadies him:

> He grinned, carried away by the memory of how he had done it, the hero, who with three pitched balls had nailed the best the American League had to offer. What didn't that say about the future? He felt himself falling into sentiment in his thoughts and tried to steady himself but couldn't before he had come forth with a pronouncement: "You have to have the right stuff to play good ball and I have it. I bet some day I'll break every record in the book for throwing and hitting" (p. 26).

Because he is still indecisive about his decision to come east, Roy comes to see Harriet's questioning on that subject as a "test:"

> ..."What will you hope to accomplish, Roy?"
>
> He had already told her but after a minute remarked, "Sometimes when I walk down the street I bet people will say there goes Roy Hobbs, the best there ever was in the game."
>
> She gazed at him with touched and troubled eyes. "Is that all?"
>
> He tried to penetrate her question. Twice he had answered it and still she was unsatisfied. He couldn't be sure what she expected him to say. "Is that all?" he repeated. "What more is there?"
>
> "Don't you know?" she said kindly.
>
> Then he had an idea. "You mean the bucks? I'll get them too."
>
> She slowly shook her head. "Isn't there something over and above earthly things--some more glorious meaning to one's life and activities?"
>
> "In baseball?"

> "Yes."
> He racked his brain--
> "Maybe I've not made myself clear, but surely you can see...that yourself alone--alone in the sense that we are all terribly alone no matter what people say--I mean by that perhaps if you understood that our values must derive from--..."
> Her eyes were sad. He felt a curious tenderness for her a little as if she might be his mother (That bird,) and tried very hard to come up with the answer she wanted--something you said about LIFE.
> "I think I know what you mean," he said. "You mean the fun and satisfaction you get out of playing the best way that you know how?"
> She did not respond to that.
> Roy worried out some other things he might have said but had no confidence to put them into words. He felt curiously deflated and a little lost, as if he had just flunked a test. The worst of it was he still didn't know what she'd been driving at (pp. 27-28).

The country boy is, in his own words, "deflated and a little lost" when he faces his own bad sportsmanship and inability to produce the "right answers" to the really "big questions." Although he momentarily calms this insecurity by dismissing Harriet's "test" as "nutty questions...that did not count" (p. 28), he is later forced to remember the "flunking" of her "test" when, during their hotel rendezvous, he again admits that his ambitions are selfish. For this he receives no less than a silver bullet in the "gut:"

> As he shut the door she reached into the hat box which lay open next to a vase of white roses on the table and fitted the black feathered hat on her head. A thick veil fell to her breasts. In her hand she held a squat, shining pistol.
>
> He was greatly confused and thought she was kidding but a grating lump formed in his throat and his blood shed ice. He cried out in a gruff voice, "What's wrong here?"
>
> She said sweetly, "Roy, will you be the best there ever was in the game?"
>
> "That's right."
>
> She pulled the trigger (thrum of bull fiddle). The bullet cut a silver line across the water. He sought with his bare hands to catch it, but it eluded him and, to his horror, bounced into his gut. A twisted dagger of smoke drifted up from the gun barrel. Fallen on one knee he groped for the bullet, sickened as it moved, and fell over as the forest flew upward, and she, making muted noises of triumph and despair, danced on her toes around the stricken hero (p. 33).

However, we are given two opinions concerning the silver bullet incident. The objective narrator makes it clear that Roy's "Pre-game" dream is brought to an abrupt end only because Roy becomes the victim of circumstances beyond his control, the victim of a crazy woman, of a "Bird"-brain dressed in melodramatic black, of an eccentric who has made herself the half-naked judge and executioner of top athletes. Some fifteen pages are devoted to the complicated story of how Harriet, by an absurd quirk of fate, chose the unknown country boy as her target, instead of the American League champion she had

planned on.

In contrast, for Roy, the entire encounter with Harriet is symbolic. In Roy's mind, her silver bullet is the punishment he receives for having admitted to the unworthy ambitions of wanting to "break every record in the book" (p. 26) and of wanting to do "something very big" (p. 27); this is the punishment which he is to refer to as "obscene" (p. 190), a punishment which is followed by fifteen years of what he feels to be a living contrition:

> miserable years after that, when everything, everything he tried somehow went to pot as if that was its destiny in the first place....(p. 96)

The second section of the novel, "Batter Up," is the continuation of the clash of values seen in "Pre-game." Although Roy indeed returns to become part of the city-world, he remains the product of a different value system. Burdened by a country-bred conscience which continues to make him question the validity of his vow to "hang on" to the baseball and its world forever (p. 8), Roy never finds the security and satisfaction he had felt in the country. A guilty conscience continues to make him feel that his ambition, like that of his rival player, Bump Bailey, is negative and self-destructive:

> "As for you, Bump Bailey, high and mighty though you are, some day you'll pay for your sassifras. Remember that lightning cuts down the tallest trees too," [Pop said].
> ...It took the Knights a while to grow bones and crawl out after Bump. But when everybody had gone, including the coaches and Dizzy, Roy remained behind. His face was flaming hot, his clothes soaked in sweat and shame, as if the old man's accusations had been leveled at his head (p. 44).

Indecisiveness spoils Roy's joy from the very first day he returns to professional ball, making him again nostalgic for the "woodland:"

> As he put his things away, Roy found himself looking around every so often to make sure he was here. He was, all right, yet in all his imagining of how it would be when he finally hit the majors, he had not expected to feel so down in the dumps. It was different than he had thought it would be. So different he almost felt like walking out, jumping back on a train, and going wherever people went when they were running out on something. Maybe for a long rest in one of those towns he had lived in as a kid. Like the place where he had that shaggy mut that used to scamper through the woods, drawing him after it to the deepest, stillest part, till the silence was so pure you could crack it if you threw a rock. Roy remained lost in the silence till the dog's yapping woke him, though as he came out of it, it was not barking he heard but the sound of voices through the trainer's half-open door (p. 40).

Like an elevator caught between two floors, Roy is caught between two worlds. For this reason he continually sees himself traveling on that transitional, eastbound train, even after he has arrived:

> ...he appeared calmer than he felt, for although he was sitting here on this step he was still in motion. He was traveling (on the train that never stopped). His self, his mind, raced on and he felt he hadn't stopped going wherever he was going because he hadn't yet arrived. Where hadn't he arrived? Here (p. 36).

In "Batter Up," Roy indeed attains one brief moment of glory -- the cover-splitting hit which brought three-day rains to the Wasteland-like field and a brief few games afterwards, a period which the narrator describes jubilantly, using country terms:

> The long rain had turned the grass green and Roy romped in it like a happy calf in its pasture (p. 66).

During this period Red Blow reaffirms our faith in the country boy's ability by calling Roy "a natural" (p. 67). Wonderboy, Roy's bat, brought from the country to the city, seems momentarily to link the two incompatible worlds, and Roy's promise and potential not only encourage the entire team but bring tranquil weather to the former urban hell:

> Even the weather was better, more temperate after the insulting early heat, with just enough rain to keep the grass a bright green.... (p. 73)

However, while Roy's insecurity is again momentarily calmed, other characters begin to act as his conscience. His coach derides him for being "a bad-ball hitter," an over reacher (p. 67); his teammates insist that Roy is playing only "for himself" (p. 72); the woman he desires, Memo Paris, insists that she is "a dead man's girl" (p. 75); columnist Max Mercy haunts Roy with questions about his past, a past which signifies his failure to provide the "right answers:"

> [Max Mercy's] appearance gave Roy a shooting pain in the pit of the stomach....Ashamed to be recognized, to have his past revealed like an egg spattered on the floor, Roy turned away (p. 42).

And manager Pop Fisher insinuates that Roy's ambitions have brought unexpected repercussions:

> "One thing I hafta tell you not to do, son," Pop said to Roy in the hotel lobby one rainy morning not long after Bump's funeral, "and that is to blame yourself about what happened to Bump. He had a tough break but it wasn't your fault."
> "What do you mean my fault?"
> Pop looked up. "All I mean to say was he did it himself."

> "Never thought anything but."
> "Some have said maybe it wouldn't happen if you didn't join the team, and maybe so, but I believe such things are outside of yours and my control and I wouldn't want you to worry that you had caused it in any way."
> "I won't because I didn't" (p. 70).

As a result, however, Roy's conscience again awakens, ruining his joy:

> Roy felt uneasy. Had he arranged Bump's run into the wall? No. Had he wished the guy would drop dead? Only once, after the night with Memo. But he had never consciously hoped he would crack up against the wall. That was none of his doing and he told Pop to tell it to Memo....
> Though Roy denied wishing Bump's fate on him or having been in any way involved in it, he continued to be unwillingly concerned with him even after his death. He was conscious that he was filling Bump's shoes....(p. 70)

The guilt Roy feels at the thought of Bump's death casts its powerful shadow over the rest of Roy's career, and Bump's ghost haunts Roy during his slump:

> For the first time in years he felt afraid to enter his room....Twisting the key in the lock, he pushed open the door. In the far corner of the room, something moved. His blood changed to falling snow.
> Bracing himself to fight without

> strength he snapped on the light. A white shadow flew into the bathroom. Rushing in, he kicked the door open. An ancient hoary face stared at him. "Bump!" He groaned and shuddered. An age passed,...His own face gazed back at him from the bathroom mirror, his past, his youth, the fleeting years (p. 112).

And in the final game, which Roy self-reproachingly "throws," putting his own end to his fame, Roy believes that Bump has avenged himself: "Bump Bailey's form glowed red on the wall" (p. 187).

When we trace Roy's clash of values, we also note that, as Roy becomes more and more caught up in materialistic urban America, he reaches a point at which he is more troubled by unsatisfied ambition than by conscience:

> ...his accomplishments were not entirely satisfying to him. He was gnawed by a nagging impatience--so much more to do, so much of the world to win for himself. He felt he had nothing of value yet to show for what he was accomplishing, and in his dreams he still sped over endless miles of monotonous rail toward something he desperately wanted. Memo, he sighed (p. 72).

Roy begins to succumb to the city world's temptations when he chooses to pursue "evil" Memo, the black-gowned, "flaming" red-

head (p. 69) who, according to Pop, would snarl Roy up in her troubles in a way that would weaken his strength (p. 101), when he makes his main objective the "cash" he needed to win her (p. 75). Yet the value judgements we find in the novel are Roy's alone, and not the author's. When he approaches Judge Goodwill Banner for a raise, he believes he is facing an "evil" man for an "evil" objective. Thus, it is Roy himself who makes special note of the traditional symbols of evil in the tower: "Roy noted the shellacked half of stuffed shark," 'the slippery stairs," the Judge's "black fedora" and "grizzled eyebrows," the "black fog of smoke" that rose from his "black" cigar, and the "slanting" of the floor (pp. 75-79). Ambitious Roy, who has come for the tool he needs to enter Memo's "dark" world, is unmoved by the Judge's mocking cliches about the evil of money: "'I don't love it, Judge. I have not been near enough to it to build up any affection to speak of'" (p. 79). The end of Roy's interview with Goodwill Banner is the point at which the "light" goes out for him; it is then the corrupt Judge who begins to cast his shadow on Roy's descent into darkness:

> "The interview is ended," snapped the Judge. He scratched up a match and with it led Roy to the stairs. He stood on the landing, his oily shadow dripping down the steps as Roy descended.
> "Mr Hobbs."
> Roy stopped.
> "Resist all evil--"

> The match sputtered and went out. Roy went the rest of the way down in the pitch black (p. 81).

The overt expression of his materialistic goal, the round figure of "forty-five thousand" (p. 75), places Roy "in the dark" like the Judge: at a nightclub called Pot of Fire, he finds himself accompanied by "masked devils with tin pitchforks" (p. 83), by "lurking," "dirty-eyed" Max Mercy (p. 81), by the one-eyed, one track-minded Supreme Bookie Gus Sands. Yet Roy's conflict continues, and the country boy resists aligning himself for the moment with the "evil" in these men:

> Roy disliked [Gus] right off. There was something wormy about him. He belonged in the dark with the Judge. Let them both haunt themselves there...Roy didn't like the way he threw out the bucks (p. 85).

His resistence, however, may be only "sour grapes," for Memo's intimacy with Gus

> sickened Roy because it didn't make sense....What did this glassy-eyed bookie, a good fifty years if not more, mean to a lively girl like Memo, a girl who was, after all, just out of mourning for a young fellow like Bump? (p. 85)

Annoyed by Gus's insinuation that Roy "owed" him something and that he might someday have to do him a "favor" (p. 89), Roy suddenly becomes a magician, who, out of nowhere, materializes the money to pay off the debt. He thus seems to bury the evil man, whose glass eye, after the act of magic, "gleamed like a lamp in a graveyard" (p. 90).

Nevertheless, the Pot of Fire incident, during which Roy declares his uncurbed ambition of "[wanting]to win in front of Memo" (p. 88), marks what Roy believes to be his initiation into the corrupt world of Gus and the Judge, an initiation which is followed shortly afterwards by Roy's public confession of his selfish goals:

> "...I will do my best--the best I am able--to be the greatest there ever was in the game.
>
> "I thank you." He finished with a gulp that echoed like an electric hiccup through the loudspeakers and sat down, not quite happy with himself despite the celebration, because when called on to speak he had meant to begin with a joke, then thank them for their favor and say what a good team the Knights were and how he enjoyed working for Pop Fisher, but it had come out this other way. On the other hand, so what the hell if they knew what was on his mind? (pp. 90-91).

Despite the fact that Roy refers to the day he makes this speech as "the happiest day of my life" (p. 92), his acquisi-

tion of material possessions belonging to the corrupt city world depresses him and again makes him nostalgic for his former simplicity and security:

> Sometimes he wished he had no ambitions--often wondered where they had come from in his life, because he remembered how satisfied he had been as a youngster, and that with the little he had had--a dog, a stick, an aloneness he loved (which did not bleed him like his later loneliness), and he wished he could have lived longer in his boyhood (p. 93).

Even when a satisfying relationship with Memo seems to be forthcoming, even when he encounters a romantic "full moon swimming in lemon juice" at her side (p. 92), his uneasiness is reflected in Nature, for the moon is "at intervals eclipsed by rain clouds that gathered in dark blots and shuttered the yellow light off the fields and treetops" (p. 92); riding with Memo takes him not to the life-giving ocean as he had anticipated but only to "polluted" water (p. 94), and although "Roy was all for getting into the car to find another place" (p. 94), it is too late, for he realizes that he has already lost his innocence and peace of mind. Thus, Roy has a vision of Memo running over a boy coming out of the woods with his dog, a mental image of himself as a child destroyed by her;[42] "it did not appear there ever was any kid in those woods, except in his mind" (p. 103). The soothing "aloneness" of Roy's past is now

replaced by "an uneasy fear they were being followed" (p. 111), by a fear of "cops" (p. 117), and of a sinister "black sedan" (p. 111).

Thus, Roy's public confession of his ambitions is again "punished:"

> Some of the fans agreed it was Roy's fault, for jinxing himself and the team on his Day by promising the impossible out of his big mouth.... "You'll get yours," they howled in chorus.
>
> He had, a vile powerlessness seized him" (p. 110).

It is Roy's conscience which causes him to go into a hitting slump totally uneffected by changes of tactics, new stances, amulets, or fortunetellers. At this point, Roy, now the self-declared "over-anxious" (p. 105) "bad-ball hitter" (p. 107), has not only lost his innocence, but his natural ability as well. Again Roy feels that this loss of natural ability is the punishment for his ambition, and thus he already anticipates his public death:

> He shut the hall door and flopped into bed. In the dark he was lost in an overwhelming weakness....I am finished, he muttered. The pages of the record book fell apart and fluttered away in the wind. He slept and woke, finished. All night long he waited for the bloody silver bullet (p. 112).

During his slump, another woman comes to test Roy -- Iris Lemon -- and seems to provide the "glorious" answers Harriet Bird had been looking for. Like the voice of his conscience, Iris points out the fact that the guiding light of his life should have been sacrifice for others:

> "...I hate to see a hero fail. There are so few of them....
> "Without heroes we're all plain people and don't know how far we can go....It's their function to be the best and for the rest of us to understand what they represent and guide ourselves accordingly....You've got to give them your best....I mean as a man, too....I don't think you can do anything for anyone without giving up something of your own (p. 123).

Iris seems to hold a promise of redemption for Roy when she "stands up for him" (p. 117), an act of confidence which in her words "'happened naturally'" (p. 123), thus helping him to save a "wounded boy in a hospital" (p. 113) -- himself, ending his slump and making him once again into "a natural not seen in a dog's age" (p. 135). Roy believes Iris could be good for him and equates her with the satisfied feeling he had felt as a boy:

> In her wide eyes he saw something which caused him to believe she knew what life was like (p. 120).
> ...For a second he thought he had found what he was looking for. More clearly than ever he remembered her

> pretty face and the brown eyes you could look into and see yourself as something more satisfying than you were.... (p. 150)

After Roy meets Iris, he finds that Memo, at times, tires him:

> ...there was something about her, like all the food he had lately been eating, that left him, after the having of it, unsatisfied, sometimes even with a greater hunger than before (p. 132).

However, despite Roy's apparent preference for Iris, conflict in him continues, as he compares and contrasts the two women who offer him two roads to satisfaction. While in his fantasies, he sees himself as happily married "at home," the identity of his wife remains a mystery:

> Iris' sad head topped Memo's dancing body, with Memo's vice versa upon the shimmying rest of Iris, a confused fusion that dizzied him (p. 154).

The longing he had earlier experienced as an endless traveling by train returns in the form of unsatiable hungers -- for food, for winning, for making the "right" decision. He then punishes himself by overeating the night before an important Pennant game; the resulting pain, like the earlier silver bullet,

"socked him yowling in the shattered gut" (p. 153). In the maternity hospital, where he is taken to "[moan] along with the ladies in labor" (p. 153), Roy might have undergone a spiritual rebirth. Instead, the untimely revelation of his failing health again hits Roy like another silver bullet:

> ...this giant hand holding a club had broken through the clouds and with a single blow crused his skull (p. 155). ...That frightened feeling: bust before beginning. On the merry-go-round again about his failure to complete his mission in the game.... A man who had been walking in bright sunshine limped away into a mist (p. 157).

Pressed by time and ambition and feeling suddenly "lost in the woods" (p. 166), Roy agrees to sign his spiritual life away to the Judge, fully aware of the "dark in the room" (p. 160) and of the naseated feeling the "rat-eyed vulture's" proposition provoked in him (p. 162); as Richman has said: "like many of Malamud's heroes, Roy is the image of the unintegrated man, the hero who acts incorrectly despite his awareness." [43]

Yet even following this final decision, Malamud does not allow Roy's conflict to be resolved; Roy again suffers anguish when his final decision proves to be indecisive. Throughout the play-off game, Roy vacilates:

> What have I done, he thought, and why did I do it? And he thought of

> all the wrong things he had done in his life and tried to undo them but who could? (p. 179)

There is a ray of hope in the final inning when Nature turns benevolent and allows the sun to come out as Roy comes to bat. Yet one of his "foul" balls hits Iris on the head, and Wonderboy, like himself, breaks in two. In the end, after having chosen the values of the city over those of the country, Roy leaps at another "bad ball" and "strikes out" in the game of life, losing to a young farmer-of-a pitcher who, unlike Roy, dreamt of only "fields of golden wheat gleaming in the sun" (p. 186). Dissatisfied with his alliance with the corrupt city world, Roy buries Wonderboy though he secretly wishes it could take him back to his country "woodland" (and all it signifies) by taking root and becoming a tree (p. 188). Feeling "polluted" (p. 187) and "grimy" (p. 190), in his words, Roy is unable to enjoy the pay-off money he had thought he desired. Still the country boy at heart, Roy laments his choice of values, laments that he never did learn anything from his past as he confronts his own bloodied image in a fifteen-year old photograph.

1.4 "Iris Lemon's View of Suffering vs. Roy Hobbs' 'First' and 'Second Lives'"

Roy's regret -- that he would have to suffer again ("He thought, I never did learn anything out of my past life, now I have to suffer again," p. 190) -- inevitably brings us back to the earlier explanation Iris gives of suffering:

> "Experience makes good people better,...
> "Through their suffering....
> "We have two lives, Roy, the life we learn with and the life we live with after that. Suffering is what brings us toward happiness....
> "It teaches us to want the right things" (p. 126).

This same passage has been repeatedly cited by critics who use it to point out Malamud's supposed message. For example, Goldman cites this passage and states:

> [Iris] believes that experience, suffering, can save us if (a persistent Malamud theme) we will save ourselves. She answers Roy's self-pity out of her own self-knowledge [hereafter quoting from The Natural]. [44]

Hoyt cites the same passage and explains that this "answer" from The Natural is reworked by Malamud in The Assistant, Pictures of Fidelman, and A New Life. [45] Richman believes that Malamud treats

Iris seriously, that he puts her forth as "the exemplar of human potential," that her life after suffering stands in contrast to "Roy's own blasted history," and that her advice to him represents "the way of salvation." [46] Even in the more recent article by Grebstein (1973), the critic attributes Roy's failure to the fact that he "never learns to live by the wise Iris' dictum, "'Experience makes good people better...Suffering...teaches us to want the right things.'" [47]

Contrary to critical opinion, I believe that while Malamud provides us with one possible explanation of suffering -- that of Iris, he himself does not take the same position.

First, Malamud treats Roy's romantic rendezvous with Iris, the moment when she explains suffering to him, with a mocking tone. [48] Because Roy and Iris drive off into "the lilac dusk" (p. 121), the subsequent scene of midnight, moon-lit skinny-dipping may at first seem to be unique among Malamudian works. Yet the author has embellished it with comic relief. The "golden-armed," "golden-headed" mermaid (p. 151) Roy first sees in Iris turns out to be "hefty" (p. 120) and "big-footed" (p. 122). She romantically dreams of "a home, children, and him coming home every night to supper" (p. 128) while Roy's mind is unromantically "crammed with old memories flitting back and forth like ghostly sardines" (p. 128). Although her lap is "lilac-scented" (p. 124), Roy spoils her fragrant moment by lighting up a Groucho Marx-like cigar that "stank up the night"

(p. 124). Furthermore, the revelation that she is a grandmother, which she anticlimatically imparts to him while love-making, "spoiled the appetizing part of her...changed her in his mind from Iris more to lemon" (p. 131), and equated her with Pop's description of a bad ball: "Pop then muttered something about this bad ball hitter he knew who had reached for a lemon and cracked his spine" (p. 67).

Second, there is doubt as to whether Malamud really meant Iris to be "exemplary" [49] to Roy and to us readers. Iris claims to have come to a reconciliation with the past; unlike Roy, she is in her own words "no longer afraid to remember her past suffering (p. 119) and, in her own opinon, had been able to build, out of her life of suffering, another life which had brought her happiness: "'I made a mistake long ago and had a hard time afterwards. Anyway, the child meant everything to me and made me happy'" (p. 129). While this reconciliation with the past is, in theory, praiseworthy, [50] her "second life" is in truth not very different from her "first." Although she claims to have learned from her past mistakes, we see that she impetuously gives herself to Roy in the way she had to the father of her first daughter, bringing forth yet another illegitimate child: "'Darling,' whispered Iris, 'win for our boy.... I am pregnant'" (p. 180). Realizing that she has repeated the same mistake, she can only hope that this second passion will have a different outcome:

> How like the one who jumped me in the

> park that night [Roy] looks, she thought, and to drive the thought away pressed his head deeper into her breasts, thinking, this will be different. Oh, Roy, be my love and protect me. But by then the ambulance had come so they took her away (p. 181).

Third, the real test of Iris' philosophy comes when we try to apply it to the one detailed life of suffering Malamud has conveyed in the novel -- Roy's. We find that Roy's life story is indeed divided into a "first life," "Pre-game," and a "second life," "Batter Up." However, instead of feeling that he has learned something from his "first life," Roy feels that his "long, long years of suffering" (p. 50) have given him only a sense of the absurdity of it all:

> He undressed, thinking of Pop's flop that changed his whole life, and got into bed.
>
> In the dark the bed was in motion, going round in wide, sweeping circles. He didn't like the feeling so he lay deathly still and let everything go by--the trees, mountains, states. Then he felt he was headed into a place where he did not want to go and tried to think of ways to stop the bed. But he couldn't and it went on, a roaring locomotive now, screaming into the night, so that he was tensed and sweating and groaned aloud why did it have to be me? what did I do to deserve it? seeing himself again walking down the long, lonely corridor, carrying the bassoon case, the knock, the crazy Harriet (less and more than human) with the shiny pistol, and him cut down in the very flower of his youth, lying in a red pool of his own

> blood.
> No, he cried, oh no, and lashed
> at his pillow, as he had a thousand
> times before (p. 50).

In this passage from "Batter Up," frustration, regret, and anger are the results of Roy's suffering. His "first life's" experience does not seem to have made him any "better." That is, the mistakes of "Pre-game" are repeated throughout "Batter Up;" his initial desire in "Pre-game" to be "the best there ever was in the game" (p. 27) is later repeated at his press conference in "Batter Up" in much the same terms: "'I will do my best--the best I am able--to be the greatest there ever was in the game" (p. 90). Likewise, we are not deceived by Iris' idea that "suffering brings us toward happiness;" the initial dissatisfaction Roy feels at having flunked "the test of LIFE" is greater in the middle of the novel ("his mind was crammed with old memories, flitting back and forth like ghostly sardines, and there wasn't a one of them that roused his pride or gave him any comfort," p. 128) and still greater at the end ("Going down the tower stairs he fought his overwhelming self-hatred. In each stinking wave of it he remembered some disgusting happening of his life," p. 190).

Therefore, although Roy's suffering has indeed been divided into two parts by the author, these two parts do not correspond to the "life he learns with" and the "life he lives with after that." Roy himself feels that his life resembles a

circle more than anything else:

> Often, for no accountable reason, he hated the pill, which represented more of himself than he was willing to give away for nothing to whoever found it one dull day in a dirty lot. Sometimes as he watched the ball soar, it seemed to him all circles, and he was mystified at his devotion to hacking at it, for he had never really liked the sight of a circle. They got you nowhere but back to the place you were to begin with (p. 134).

Yet even the metaphor of the circle does not exactly describe Roy's life; rather, it more closely resembles a lineal progression which, in order to move forward, must at times trace several circular-like patterns over this line, retrogressing several steps in order to gain one step forward. That is, throughout the novel Roy's life seems to trace a circle that "got him nowhere" because he is continually unable to differentiate between the failure he encounters at the hand of fate (Harriet) and the frustration his own indecisiveness brings. Yet a close look at Roy's choice of words shows that, at the end of the novel, Roy does take a step forward. Despite his own bitter cry, "I never did learn anything out of my past life, now I have to suffer again" (p. 190), Roy's perception of his failure changes. His early lament, "what did I do to deserve it?" (first seen on page 50 and repeated to Iris on page 126) becomes, at the end of the novel, "why did I do it?" (p. 179).

This change suggests that Roy has acquired a vague notion of how his own acts and decisions have brought him insecurity and dissatisfaction and how they have shaped his "destiny."

Nevertheless, at the end of the novel, Roy still does not know what he wants. He has only a vague idea of what he does not want, which is implied in his value judgements of the terrible threesome, Gus, Memo, and the Judge, when he calls them "slug," "whore," and "worm":

> Gus got up quickly when he saw Roy. "Nice going', slugger," he said softly. Smiling, he advanced with his arm extended. "That was some fine show you put on today."
>
> Roy slugged the slug and he went down in open-mouthed wonder. His head hit the floor and the glass eye dropped out and rolled into a mousehole.
>
> Memo was furious. "Don't touch him, you big bastard. He's worth a million of your kind."
>
> Roy said, "You act all right, Memo, but only like a whore."
>
> ...Roy took the envelope out of his pocket. He slapped the Judge's wig and eyeshade off and showered the thousand dollar bills on his wormy head (p. 189).

To say that suffering has taught Roy "to want the right things is to oversimplify the conclusion of the work, which leaves us with a view of Roy feeling that he has failed to learn; whether or not suffering has taught him anything he can put into practice in his "next life" remains outside of the scope of the novel.

Still in all, Richman's comment that The Natural concludes "on a note of total loss" [51] is also inadequate, for it is a "total loss" only in Roy's eyes:

> Going down the tower stairs he fought his overwhelming self-hatred. In each stinking wave of it he remembered some disgusting happening of his life.
>
> He thought, I never did learn anything out of my past life, now I have to suffer again (p. 190).

The choice of words, "stinking wave" and "disgusting happening," are clearly Roy's own, and therefore represent Roy's condemnation of himself, though not necessarily Malamud's. When Roy laments, "I never did learn anything out of my past life, now I have to suffer again" (p. 190), it is implied that he has unfortunately taken Iris' empty words seriously. [52] While his final "bitter tears" most likely result from frustrated ambition than from a vision of his "lower self," [53] I disagree with Richman that "the animal part of Roy's nature is so clearly predominant." [54] Richman exaggerates when he says that Roy's decision to "throw" the game testifies to "[Malamud's] belief that the forces of anti-life are at least as clear and powerful as the elusive humanity which resists them." [55] The personal ambition of a country boy who never had anything to speak of is not the same as the forces of anti-life which Malamud portrays in other works such as "The Death of Me," [56] "The German Refugee," [57] and "The Jewbird." [58]

1.5 "A Final Thought on The Natural -- Roy the Hero vs. Roy the Man"

I have devoted most of my discussion of the novel to a tracing of Roy's conflict because I feel that ultimately a view of Roy as a convincing character with a rich inner world can influence our interpretation of his final failure and of the author's implications.

If we see Roy as a mythic hero, as the White Knight who, because he "self-destructively...chases the wrong women and the wrong ideals," loses sight of the "true grail," [59] then we are bound to see the book's final image of Roy as that of the "failed hero." [60] Yet if we see Roy in the way I have suggested -- as an individual who is a victim of unfortunate circumstances and a victim of himself -- and if we identify with the frustration of his suffering, [61] then we see Roy's final decision as less damning and more human. Roy's "tragic flaw" [62] -- his desire to win -- may not be very different from our own ambitions. [63] To desire wealth, recognition, and physical love may seem "natural" to most of us, but paradoxically, a hero-worshipping public and Roy's own conscience will not allow him, because of his unique position as hero, to express such desires.

Thus, Roy is a "drab, down-and-out little nobody" [64] of a country boy, whose limitations of character -- his inability

to decide, his inability to act -- doom him, [65] even before he begins to play professional ball, and prevent his "mission in the game" from ever being that of "liberating the community." 66 Roy suffers and fails so that the author can present a certain psychological reality: the dilemma of the man who is torn between two worlds, who is "divided against himself."

Notes for Chapter One

[1] Direct quotes from these critical articles will be given later in my discussion.

[2] Bernard Malamud. The Natural. (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1971). pp. 125-126. (All subsequent page references will be made to this edition and will be included in parenthesis in my text.)

[3] The works Malamud wrote prior to The Natural -- "The Cost of Living" (1950), "The First Seven Years" (1950), "The Prison" (1950), "The Death of Me" (1950), "The Bill" (1951), and "The Loan" (1952) -- deal in one way or another with Jews or other immigrants in poor American ghettoes. As his subsequent works almost always deal with Jews, The Natural, when thought of in retrospect, often surprises some critics, such as Sidney Richman, who has exclaimed:

> The Natural is one of the most baffling novels of the 1950's, and it is doubly so when one attempts to see it as the work of a descendent of the "great realistic masters of Yiddish literature" [quoting Alfred Kazin]....Nowhere is there a Jew or a mention of one.

In Bernard Malamud (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1966), p. 28. Richman quotes Kazin from Commentaries, Boston, 1962, p. 204.

[4] In "Myth Inside and Out: Malamud's The Natural," reprinted as "Myth Inside and Out: The Natural" in Field and Field's Bernard Malamud and the Critics, op. cit., p. 112 and p. 119, Frederick W. Turner, III cites for example Norman Podhoretz's "Achilles in Left Field" (Commentary, March, 1953, pp. 321-326) and Marcus Klein's After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1962, pp. 247-293). All subsequent page references to Turner's article will be made to Field and Field's reprinting.)

[5] Wasserman has listed the facts and events from real baseball history which Malamud has drawn on, citing for example, Babe

Ruth's "monumental bellyache." While his explanation of Malamud's allusions leads him to explain that Malamud's baseball story, which derives from real events, is "a distillation of American life: its opportunities for heroism, the elevating or dispiriting influence of the hero on his community, the moral obligations thrust on him by this fact, and the corruption available to him," his conclusion is, in my opinion, a generalization which does not necessarily follow from the few examples he cites (in "The Natural: Malamud's World Ceres," reprinted as "The Natural: World Ceres" in Field and Field's Bernard Malamud and the Critics, op. cit., pp. 46-47. All subsequent page references to this article will be made to Field and Field's reprinting.)

6 Ibid., p. 48.

7 Ibid.

8 In "Malamud's Use of the Quest Romance," reprinted as "The Loathly Ladies" in Field and Field's Bernard Malamud and the Critics, op. cit., pp. 85-107, Edwin M. Eigner further elaborates on the hero's infantilism by referring to both Arthurian legend and Jungian archetypes to show Roy's rejection of Iris as an archetypal rejection of the mythic "gentle and helpful" mother (p. 89) and to show his pursuit of Memo as the pursuit of the retrogressive mother or "wicked temptress" (p. 80), both of which prevent Roy from taking on the mature father role. (All subsequent page references to Eigner's article will be made to Field and Field's reprinting.)

9 Similarly, critic James M. Mellard has discussed the novel's "seasonal rhythm," bird and animal imagery, and Malamud's "simple characters" and "idealization of benevolent nature" in terms of their mythic counterparts in the convention of the pastoral form in Malamud's Novels: Four Versions of Pastoral," reprinted as "Four Versions of Pastoral" in Field and Field's Bernard Malamud and the Critics, op. cit., pp. 67-81. (All subsequent page references to Mellard's article will be made to Field and Field's reprinting.)

10
Hoyt has analyzed Roy's actions in terms of the "myth of sacrifice" and has discussed Malamud's message as the establishment of the "schlemiel's divine origin," op. cit., pp. 183-184.

11
The story of Roy Hobbs' sudden rise to fame, his disappearance, and his final remorse has been equated by Richman to "the mythic formula of Initiation, Separation, and Return," op. cit., p. 30. Richman attributes Roy's failure as the hero to his failure to "slay the lower self," p. 31, that is, his failure to sacrifice his own ambitions for the good of the "community," p. 41. He points out Roy's initial birth from the train tunnel into the light, his encounters with temptresses and false mothers, the younger hero's replacement of the older hero Whammer, Roy's inability to slay the infantile "practical joker," the "gorilla type" within himself, his false grail pursuits, his inability to accept the fatherly role (pp. 30-37), his failure as hero when he decides not to marry Iris Lemon, a form of the ancient hag whom the knight must marry in order to attain his goal" (p. 38), and his failure to "resist the ego which divides man from his community" (p. 41).

12
Turner, op. cit., pp. 112-113.

13
William Freedman in "From Bernard Malamud, with Discipline and with Love (The Assistant and The Natural)," reprinted in Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field's Bernard Malamud: A Collection of Essays (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975), p. 160. (All subsequent page references to this article will be made to Field and Field's reprinting.)
In addition, other critics have attacked Malamud for his manipulation of myth in this novel. For example. Richman has called it "an exercise in mythic madness," op. cit., p. 28. Sam Bluefarb has said that it is "obvious" and "more superimposed than fully integrated," in "The Syncretism of Bernard Malamud," an original essay written for Field and Field's Bernard Malamud, op. cit., p. 77. And Eigner quotes Jonathan Baumbach as saying, "Malamud's use of mythic theme and subject matter... is...'somewhat gratuitous, a semi-private literary joke between author and academic reader,' merely 'a witty idea,'" in Bernard Malamud and the Critics, op. cit., p. 85. (The original source is Baumbach's "The Economy of Love," Kenyon Review, XXV, 1963, p. 448.)

14
A few critics have briefly mentioned the possibility of

seeing Roy first as a realistically developed character before seeing him as an allegorical player or archetype. Theodore Solotaroff has briefly stated that The Natural deals with Roy's "self-confrontation," though he leaves his statement as a generality without evidence from the text, in "Bernard Malamud's Fiction: The Old Life and The New," reprinted as "The Old Life and the New" in Field and Field's Bernard Malamud and the Critics, op. cit., p. 240. (All subsequent page references to this article will be made to Field and Field's reprinting.)

Ben Siegel has also pointed out that

> ...if the characters consistently are more metaphor than flesh, they never lose completely their human connections.

Yet Siegel does not trace this "human connection " in the text (in his article "Victims in Motion: Bernard Malamud's Sad and Bitter Clowns," reprinted as "Victims in Motion: The Sad and Bitter Clowns" in Field and Field's Bernard Malamud and the Critics, op. cit., p. 125. (All subsequent page references to this article will be made to Field and Field's reprinting.)

And Richman has pointed out the fact that the novel treats the protagonist's inability to deal with his past and thereby to escape its limitations, op. cit., p. 30, though he too leaves his remark without supporting evidence.

15
Ronald Z. Sheppard in "About Bernard Malamud," Washington Post (October 13, 1963), p. 5.

16
"Failed hero" is a term used by Joyce and Leslie Field to describe Roy. In their introduction to Bernard Malamud, op. cit., p. 2, they compare Roy and the protagonist of The Assistant, Frank Alpine. They believe that Frank undergoes a change, "that is, a giving up of the selfish concerns of youth for an involvement in the problems of mankind, an acceptance of life's responsibilities." They continue to say that "...for Roy Hobbs, the failed hero of The Natural, the change in his physical surroundings does not include this necessary interior growth, and thus he is a failure."

17
Following through with the metaphor of the game of life in the game of baseball, we note that "fans" corresponds to mankind. Most of the myth critics trace Roy's failure to his lack of love for the "fans." For example, Wasserman explains:

> In Roy the baseball champion, Arthurian knight, and Homeric hero have betrayed their fellows because of selfish infantilism of spirit (op. cit., p. 59).

On page 62, he continues to say that Roy's mistake is

> not learning from Iris' life that one gains his self by giving it to others and that one is immortal in the life-energy he gives.

He also refers to mankind as "the community," on page 49.

Likewise, William Freedman has written:

> The Natural is a mythic tale of pride, impulse, guilt, self-destruction, and the failure of self-control. Roy Hobbs is a congenital bad-ball hitter, a Knight who chases the wrong women and the wrong ideals....He wants too much and he wants it for himself....What Roy has not yet learned is that love and dedication to the needs of the larger group -- the family, the team, mankind -- are the true grail, not the triple devils of fame, wealth, and beauty he self-destructively pursues (op. cit., pp. 158-159).

18

Bellman has given emphasis to the fact that Malamud's works are often more complicated than they at first seem to be. In his article "Women, Children, and Idiots First: The Transformation Psychology of Bernard Malamud," reprinted as "Women, Children, and Idiots First: Transformation Psychology" in Field and Field's Bernard Malamud and the Critics, op. cit., pp. 12-13, he states:

> At first reading, Malamud's stories generally leave the reader little to wonder about.... However , Malamud has a tendency to seed his tales and novels with all sorts of suggestive passages that prey on the mind and cause the reader to reread and rethink Malamud's experiments in misery....Malamud, for all the apparent simplicity of his plots, for all the obviousness of his subject matter, is actually a very complicated

> writer, complicated enough it seems to have snared his reviewers into falling for easy answers to profound questions or meeting the Malamudian ambiguity of meaning by merely describing it in oblique or fragmentary terms.

(All subsequent page references to this article will be made to Field and Field's reprinting.)

19
Richman, op. cit., p. 49.

20
Two works in which Malamud experimented with the first-person are "Black is My Favorite Color" and "The German Refugee," both of which appear in his collection Idiots First.

21
Sheldon Norman Grebstein in "Bernard Malamud and the Jewish Movement," reprinted in Field and Field's Bernard Malamud, op. cit., p. 34. (All subsequent page references to this article will be made to Field and Field's reprinting).
This is the only critical article I know of which gives a detailed account of Malamud's technique.

22
Ibid.

23
There are sections in which the story is told by focusing on the minor characters' perceptions -- Pop Fisher, Red Blow, and Memo -- but for the most part Roy's thoughts dominate.

24
Grebstein, op. cit., p. 37.

25
Ibid.

26
Ibid., p. 37.

27
Ibid., p. 41.

28
Ibid., p. 39.

29 Ibid., p. 38.

30 Pinsker, op. cit., p. 72.

31 Ibid., pp. 72-73.

32 Ibid., pp. 77-78.

33 Richman, op. cit., p. 73.

34 Grebstein, op. cit., p. 35.

35 Ibid., pp. 38-39.

36 "'The good you did for one you did for all; it wasn't a bad way to live.'" (This quote from A New Life appears in Grebstein's article on page 35.)

37 This distance is also seen in The Assistant, although in The Fixer Malamud and Bok seem to express themselves in the same way, according to Grebstein, Ibid., p. 42.

38 Ibid., p. 34.

39 Grebstein emphasizes the difficulty of separating the two "voices" when he admits that one of the lines he is analyzing in A New Life -- "'Proof: leafy trees stippling green of earth on sky. Flowers casting bright color everywhere. Vast fires in cosmic space'" -- "can be either the narrator's or the character's," Ibid., p. 35.

40 Ibid., p. 34.

41

James M. Mellard discusses this point in his article "Malamud's Novels: Four Versions of Pastoral," reprinted as "Four Versions of Pastoral" in Field and Field's Bernard Malamud and the Critics, op. cit., pp. 67-81. (All subsequent page references to this article will be made to Field and Field's reprinting.)

42

Also noted by Tony Tanner in City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970 (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1971), p. 325.

43

Richman, op. cit., p. 35.

44

In several articles critics have stated that Malamud's message is equivalent to Iris' idea that suffering teaches. Their comments will be given in their proper context in the next four footnotes.

First, in "Bernard Malamud's Comic Vision and the Theme of Identity," reprinted as "Comic Vision and the Theme of Identity" in Field and Field's Bernard Malamud and the Critics, op. cit., pp. 163-165, Mark Goldman says:

> ...Roy must learn from his experience in order to break through the circle... of his failures. Ironically, he must learn to choose the real before he can become the mythic hero he embodies. Yet he continues to suffer because he does not learn, choosing, as he admits, the women who repeatedly "burn" him....Unlike Roy[Iris] has created life, reality, out of her experience....Roy still does not see what is clear to Iris: his denial of self, the repeated failure of an unreal quest for false values. She believes that experience, suffering, can save us if (a persistent Malamud theme) we will save ourselves. She answers Roy's self-pity out of her own self-knowledge (quoting from The Natural):
>
> "Experience makes good people better."
> She was staring at the lake.
> "How does it do that?"

> "Through their suffering."
> "I had enough of that," he said in disgust.
> "We have two lives, Roy, the life we learn with and the life we live with after that."

Goldman continues:

> And she concludes about suffering, striking home to the unseeing Roy. "It teaches us to want the right things."
> Malamud's fiction suggests certain moral equations. Knowledge of self equals knowledge of the world; to want the right things is to make real choices.

(All subsequent page references to Goldman's article will be made to Field and Field's reprinting.)

45

Hoyt has said that the theme of suffering proposed by Iris is reworked in other Malamudian works:

> Like many other artists, Malamud begins with the naked statement and spends later years clothing it. Suffering here [concluding his discussion of The Natural] is as blindingly apparent as the winter sun on a snowy field. The answer, too, falls as swiftly and completely over the scene as a storm front [quoting from The Natural]:
>
> "What beats me," he said with a trembling voice, "is why did it always have to happen to me? What did I do to deserve it?"
> "Being stopped before you started?"
> He nodded.
> "Perhaps it was because you were a good person?"
> "How's that?"
> "Experience makes good people better."
> She was staring at the lake.
> "How does it do that?"
> "Through their suffering."

Hoyt continues:

> The later works, though vastly more sophisticated, more careful, as the author comes to realize the enormousness of the problem, are essentially reworkings of The Natural. Frank Alpine as the tarnished man of good will, Fidelman the silly saint, Sam Levin the schlemiel who gets up after his tenth beating: all these are more intelligible, more comprehensible reincarnations of Roy Hobbs, who is even at the end of his book a little larger than real life (op. cit., pp. 183-184).

46

Richman's comment appears in this context:

> ...the fragrance-distilling lady, who will live on with much humanizing in Malamud's other novels....It is Iris who introduces to the novel the richest of all Malamud's subjects: the uses and abuses of love which animate and direct all his novels and almost all his stories....Iris functions as the exemplar of human potential, the living actuality that one can win through from suffering to a larger and more meaningful life....But if Iris' life represents a commentary to Roy's own blasted history, and its transmutation into a larger and more human status, she is also the mysterious healer who can salvage the hero through a crucial test. Indeed, she is the mirror of indoctrination and the way of salvation; and her analysis of the hero-as-hero is significant in this regard...."Without heroes we're all plain people and don't know how far we can go....I don't think you can do anything for anyone without giving up something of your own" (op. cit., pp. 37-38).

Richman continues to say that

> Iris invokes for the ballplayer...the ancient theme of redemption through suffering -- a theme which reappears in all of Malamud's later work: "'We

> have two lives, Roy, the life we learn with and the life we live with after that. Suffering is what brings us toward happiness'" (p. 38).

47

Grebstein states that

> in each of [Malamud's] major characters altruism and materialism combine as motives for self-sacrifice. In Malamud's first hero, Roy Hobbs of The Natural, materialism overpowers altruism. He has impulses for good but keeps making the wrong choices for the wrong reasons: baseball for glory rather than the joy of the game, a girl for sex not love, winning for prizes and payoffs. He never learns to live by the wise Iris' dictum, "'Experience makes good people better....Suffering is what brings us towards happiness'" (op. cit., p. 22).

He continues to say that Roy is

> Malamud's only hero [taking into account Malamud's novels as well as the stories from The Magic Barrel and Idiots First] who submits neither to love nor to idealism, and whose sufferings are consequently futile (p. 22).

48

In his article "Bernard Malamud's Mythic Proletarians," reprinted as "Mythic Proletarians" in Field and Field's Bernard Malamud and the Critics, op. cit., p. 189, Max F. Schulz notes that one of the problems a reader of Malamud faces is the interpretation of the author's tone: "Where one may easily go astray is in evaluating the ambiguity of tone which characterizes the fate of the protagonist [giving as examples Roy Hobbs, Frank Alpine of The Assistant, Sy Levin of A New Life, and Yakov Bok of The Fixer] and the outcome of the action." (All subsequent page references will be made to Field and Field's reprinting.)

49

As I have already noted, Richman does believe that she is "exemplary " op. cit., p. 37.

50
Richman has said that Iris' role in the novel is to show Roy the proper attitude one should have toward one's past:

> Though uneven in size, the events of the first part of The Natural clearly parallell the events of the second; and, taken together, they recapitulate the mythic formula of Initiation, Separation, and Return. But most importantly, the repetition serves to dramatize the author's belief that the way to redemption lies in part in the hero's reaction to his own past and his ability to understand it, thereby escaping its inherent limitations" (Ibid., p. 30).

51
Ibid., p. 40.

52
In my opinion, Iris' philosophy on suffering -- "'Experience makes good people better....Suffering is what brings us toward happiness....It teaches us to want the right things'" -- resemble the Judge's cliches about goodness and evil: "'The love of money is the root of all evil,'" "'He that maketh haste to be rich shall not be innocent,'" "'Put a knife to thy throat if thou be a man given to appetite'" (pp. 79-80) and "'Be it ever so humble there's no place like home'" (p. 76).

53
Richman, op. cit., p. 31.

54
Ibid., p. 40.

55
Ibid., p. 41.

56
In "The Death of Me, the senseless, bitter hatred of two assistants to a tailor, Emilio the Italian and Josip the Pole (two men who were, in the tailor's opinion, "as people, much alike," p. 58), comes to a violent end when one morning, as they argue over trifles, their animal instincts take hold of them:

> One Monday morning Josip opened the table drawer to get at his garlic salami and found it had been roughly

> broken in two. With his pointed knife raised, he rushed at the tailor [Emilio], who, at that very moment, because someone had battered his black hat, was coming at him with his burning iron. He caught the presser along the calf of the arm and opened a smelly purple wound, just as Josip stuck him in the groin, and the knife hung there for a minute.... They locked themselves together and choked necks (p. 66).

This graphic outburst of violence has terrible repercussions, for it causes the death of Marcus the tailor, who had naively tried to reform the quarrelers throughout the story, and who had innocently believed that man's differences were "trivial things they all forgot, no matter how momentarily fierce:"

> Marcus rushed in again, shouting, "No, no, please, please," flailing his withered arms, nauseated, enervated (all he could hear in the uproar was the thundering clock), and his heart, like a fragile pitcher, toppled from the shelf and bump bumped down the stairs, cracking at the bottom, the shards flying everywhere.
>
> Although the old Jew's eyes were glazed as he crumpled, the assassins could plainly read in them, What did I tell you? You see? (p. 66).

Unfortunately, the tailor had been right in predicting that their terrible hatred would be the "death of him." The tailor's assistant and the presser, who are Italian and Pole, come to represent all men who are in disagreement, nations as well as individuals. Mankind, like the two men in Marcus' dream, is "teetering on a ledge." One agressor is as guilty as the other, and "[slipping] in slime," each "[pulls] the other down with him" (p. 62) till they both sink to their self-made deaths. As if he were the last man to believe in his fellows, Marcus dies of a "broken heart" when he realizes how lowly (in this story at least) human nature can be. (Page references are made to the Pocket Book, Simon and Schuster, 1975 edition of Idiots First.)

57

"The German Refugee" deals with the terrible anguish of an alienated German intellectual who suffers remorse for having

abandoned his German wife and other obligations in Germany in order to emigrate to America during the Nazi holocaust. Even with the dedicated help of a young English teacher, Oskar Gassner is unable to write the speech he must write for the institute that had sponsored his trip to New York, a speech dealing with the German poets and Walt Whitman's feeling for "brudermensch:"

> "And I know the spirit of God is the
> brother of my own,
> And that all the men ever born are also
> my brothers, and the women my sisters
> and lovers,
> And that the keison of creation is love"
> (p. 189).

Every time he sat down to write the speech, Gassner was reminded of the fact that Whitman's philosophy was not only absent from "German earth" (p. 187), but also from his own life:

> "I have lozt faith. I do not -- not
> longer possezz my former value of my-
> self. In my life there has been too
> much illusion....
> "Confidence I have not. For this
> and alzo whatever elze I have lozt I
> thank the Nazis" (p. 185).

Metaphorically speaking, the Nazis mark the lowest point of mankind, and Gassner identifies with them. This identification is explained by Richman:

> The general failure of humanity -- the
> shadow of genocide and hate as a gen-
> eralized death wish -- is bound up
> and particularized in Oskar Gassner's
> guilt for his actions toward his wife.
> Yearning for death, the refugee finds
> himself in dreams identifying with
> the Nazis and the forces of anti-life
> generally (op. cit., p. 136).

In the end Gassner's suicide is overwhemingly depressing because it emphasizes the futility of his life and the futility of the genuine loving concern of his teacher and companion -- Martin Goldberg, who desperately fought to save him. (Page references are to the 1975 Pocket Book edition of Idiots First.)

58

In "The Jewbird." Harry Cohen's brutal killing of the helpful though pesty jewbird Schwartz demonstrates that the

forces of anti-life are the real rulers of the world. When the jewbird's requests for charity become too parasitic for Cohen, he attacks the bird with a broom stick, invading the sanctity of its home. The bird's loud cawing and wildly beating wings show the strength with which Cohen seizes it. After whirling the bird round and round, punching it, and tugging at its legs "with all his might" (p. 104), he flings it with a furious heave from the "top-floor apartment" (p. 95) and listens with secret delight for the sound of Schwartz's sure death below. Like the tailor's assistants in "The Death of Me," Cohen had no justiable reason for feeling such hatred. Cohen's cruelty is outrageously inhuman because it is directed at a helpless bird and testifies to the fact that the average man's capacity for love has been reduced to a minimum. Unlike other Malamudian characters called on to extend a helping hand to a fellow (Fidelman in "The Last Mohican," Gruber the landlord in "The Mourners," and the rabbi in "Idiots First," for example), Cohen shows no search into self, no trace of awakening. The need for commitment to others to lessen the world's suffering and to make men more "human" never even occurs to him. Through Harry Cohen, Malamud makes one of his most depressing commentaries on the cruel reality of human nature. (Page references are also to the 1975 Pocket Book edition of Idiots First.)

59

Freedman, op. cit., pp. 158 and 159. He has said that the "true grail" is "love and dedication to the needs of the larger group -- the family, the team, mankind," p. 159.

60

In "The Syncretism of Bernard Malamud," op. cit., p. 77, Bluefarb has criticized Malamud's use of myth for being "obvious" and "more superimposed than fully integrated."

Malamud himself admitted that his work was the product of a young writer:

> "Baseball players were the 'heroes' of my American childhood. I wrote The Natural as a tale of a mythological hero because, between childhood and the beginning of a writing career, I'd been to college. I became interested in myth and tried to use it, among other things, to symbolize and explicate an ethical dilemma of American life."

(Malamud is quoted by Field and Field in their introduction to Bernard Malamud, op. cit., p. 9.)

However, I would like to point out the fact that I have tried to emphasize the inner conflict depicted in this novel because it is, in my opinion, a strength of the work, in spite of the weaknesses found in his use of myth and in spite of the stated intentions of the author himself.

61

Malamud also "fused" the two "voices" in order to create a closeness on the part of the narrator and the character. For example, the narrator's choice of words indicates that he, too, feels joy at the time of Roy's professional peak ("The long rain had turned the grass green and Roy romped in it like a happy calf in its pasture," p. 66) . Likewise, he feels Roy's disillusion with the city world ("the shadow-infested, street-lamped jungle," p. 31). Such a closeness allows us readers to know and accept Roy and to feel sympathy for him.

62

"Tragic flaw" is a term used by Ben Siegel in his discussion of Roy (found in "Victims in Motion: Bernard Malamud's Sad and Bitter Clowns," reprinted as "Victims in Motion: The Sad and Bitter Clowns," in Field and Field's Bernard Malamud and the Critics, op. cit., p. 125:

> And if the characters consistently are more metaphor than flesh and blood, they never lose completely their human connections. In any event, Roy Hobbs serves as archetype for all of Malamud's small heroes, who -- like their larger Greek and Shakespearean counterparts -- fall victim to a tragic flaw aggravated by misfortune.

(All subsequent page references to this article will be made to Field and Field's reprinting.)

63

In Malamud's story "A Summer's Reading," protagonist George Stoyonovich allows all his neighbors to go on thinking that he has been reading extensively to improve himself, and thus, through George, Malamud again suggests that man's need for attention and admiration, for respect and success, is a very human need.

64

Bellman characterizes the protagonist of many of Malamud's works as a dull and dreary common man:

> The central figure is a drab, down-and-out little nobody who invites our instant pity (and sometimes contempt) because of his hard luck -- Sobel the shoemaker's helper ["The First Seven Years"], Fidelman the expatriate art student ["The Last Mohican"], Morris Bober the unsuccessful grocer [The Assistant], Seymour Levin the novice college instructor [A New Life], Marcus the weak-hearted tailor ["The Death of Me"], Etta the Roman widow who is twice betrayed ["Life is Better than Death"]. Always, it seems, the central character is poverty-stricken -- no money in hand and the wolf at the door. If money is not the problem, it will be a matter of another kind of poverty: judgement, perhaps, or resiliencey, or even just plain luck (op. cit., p. 12).

The term "drab, down-and-out little nobody" applies to Roy when we consider his background and limitations, though of course it does not when we consider the position of hero which he finds himself in.

65

Frank Alpine of The Assistant observes "how quick some people's lives went to pot when they couldn't make up their minds what to do when they had to do it," Bernard Malamud, The Assistant (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), p. 108 (original published 1957). (All subsequent page references to this novel will be made to this 1970 edition and will be included in my text in parenthesis.)

66

There are other non-learners in The Natural. In addition to the manager Pop Fisher, Roy plays with a whole team of born losers, moves in a world in which almost every one feels his life has been a waste. Regret over past losses, anguish over ambitions not realized reign, as if losing were the "natural state of things," at least in this particular fictional world Malamud is depicting.

CHAPTER TWO

THE GLORIFICATION OF SUFFERING IN TWO OF MALAMUD'S FAIRY TALES: "ANGEL LEVINE" AND "IDIOTS FIRST"

"Introductory Note for Chapter Two"

"Angel Levine" (1955) and "Idiots First" (1961) are two Malamudian works which do reflect Iris' idea that "suffering makes men better" and "brings them toward happiness." Though they are different from most of Malamud's works dealing with suffering, both of these short stories depict an enduring sufferer who is allowed to triumph "miraculously." In order to convey this type of resolution, Malamud turns to fantasy.

2.1 "On 'Angel Levine'"

Like many of Malamud's works dealing with suffering, "Angel Levine" begins with a detailed description of the protagonist's past and present woes, a description which seems to prepare us readers, in much the way that the "Pre-game"section of The Natural does, for entry into a world of predetermined failure:

> Manischevitz, a tailor, in his fifty-first year suffered many reverses and indignities. Previously a man of comfortable means, he overnight lost all he had, when his establishment caught fire and, after a metal container of cleaning fluid exploded, burned to the ground. Although Manischevitz was insured against fire, damage suits by two customers who had been hurt in the flames deprived him of every penny he had collected. At almost the same time, his son, of much promise, was killed in the war, and his daughter, without so much as a word of warning, married a lout and disappeared with him as off the face of the earth. Thereafter, Manischevitz was victimized by excruciating backaches and found himself unable to work even as a presser--the only kind of work available to him--for more than an hour or two daily, because beyond that the pain from standing became maddening. His Fanny, a good wife and mother, who had taken in washing and sewing, began before his eyes to waste away. Suffering shortness of breath, she at last became seriously ill and took to her bed. The doctor, a former customer of Manischevitz, who out of pity treated them, at first had difficulty diagnosing her ailment but later put it down as hardening of the arteries at an advanced stage. He

> took Manischevitz aside, prescribed complete rest for her, and in whispers gave him to know there was little hope.
>
> Throughout his trials Manischevitz had remained somewhat stoic, almost unbelieving that all this had descended upon his head, as if it were happening, let us say, to an acquaintance or some distant relative; it was in sheer quantity of woe incomprehensible. [1]

In this introduction, it is clear that the author goes to great lengths to establish the fact that Manischevitz, suffering disaster after disaster, has always been a pitiful victim of circumstances. In reaction to these cruel coincidences, to his "crushingly heavy" burden (p. 48), Manischevitz, lamenting and weeping but "recognizing the worthlessness of it" all (p. 48), whispers a half-hearted prayer.

The story which began with the hard reality of the tailor's seemingly hopeless fate suddenly becomes a fairy tale, a re-enactment of the tale of Alladin's lamp set in Jewish and Black New York. To Manischevitz's astonishment, a black Jew named Levine appears before him and claims to be an angel who can grant him any wish if only Manischevitz believe in him. The tailor at first disbelieves and asks for proof: "'Where are your wings?...If you are a Jew, say the blessing for bread'" (p. 50). His next encounter with the "angel," now "fallen," gives Manischevitz still more reason to disbelieve, for he finds Levine dancing most unangelically in a bar with "a big-breasted Negress in a purple evening gown" (p. 53). However, the tailor

listens to the voice of his conscience and later returns to the bar to say that he believed a half-drunken Negro to be a messenger of God:

> Believe, do not, yes, no, yes, no. The pointer pointed to yes, to between yes and no, to no, no it was yes. He sighed. It moved but one had still to make a choice (p. 57).

The description of Manischevitz's act of faith as the choice of a number on a roulette wheel is Malamud's criticism of what modern man's "faith" has become. Yet the tailor's declaration of faith in Levine still has, in the story at least, tremendous repercussions. The "fallen angel," revived by "man's" belief in him, returns to the "straight and narrow path" and regains the right to heaven. He then proceeds to perform a miracle -- Fanny's cure -- before taking off from the rooftop.

The story ends with still another affirmation, with Manischevitz's Eureka-like cry, his "triumphant insight," [2] the moral to Levine's miracle: "'A wonderful thing, Fanny....Believe me, there are Jews everywhere'" (p. 58). This last ambiguous line has met with mixed reactions. Critic Cynthia Ozyck has tried to lessen Manischevitz's affirmation of his faith in "Jews" by explaining away any religious, moral, or philosophical meaning Malamud might have intended to convey:

> To [Manischevitz]--and to Malamud at the end of the fifties--that Black and Jew are one is no miracle.... [3] Jews have always known hard times, and are naturally sympathetic to others who are having, or once had, hard times....Naturally there are Jews everywhere, and some of them are black. [4]

According to her, the tailor's affirmation represents only a certain historical truth, now "dated, obsolete." [5] However, although Malamud himself has denied that his fiction in general represents his efforts to capture the "spirit of a specific religion," [6] he once made a comment which is echoed in his last line of "Angel Levine": "'Every man is a Jew though he may not know it.'" [7] He added that he expected his statement to be taken metaphorically:

> "I handle the Jew as a symbol of the tragic experience of man existentially. I try to see the Jew as universal man. Every man is a Jew though he may not know it. The Jewish drama is a ...symbol of the fight for existence in the highest possible terms. Jewish history is God's gift of drama...." To call every man a Jew is a way of "indicating how history, sooner or later, treats all men." [8]

In an attempt to relate Malamud's remarks to his "gallery of Jewish characters -- Bober, Bok, Levin, Fidelman, and Lesser," Field and Field have commented that

> [Malamud's] definition (metaphorically speaking) of Jewishness includes such universal human virtues as moral obligation to one's fellow man and the community; acceptance of responsibility; being involved in the suffering of others; and learning from one's suffering. [9]

When we apply Field and Field's comments to Manischevitz's last line, we note that the tailor's exclamation that there are "Jews everywhere" expresses a sudden recognition that there are "committed," "responsible" men everywhere, as suggested by both the tailor and Levine at the end of the story.

Likewise, it expresses the belief that there are "sufferers everywhere," and in this sense "Angel Levine" is a re-enactment of the story of Job, as critic Sam Bluefarb has pointed out. [10] Like Job, Manischevitz suffers legions of disasters; like Job, he "is a religious man who finds his faith on trial;" [11] like Job, he questions and complains:

> Day by day, hour by hour, minute after minute, he lived in pain, pain his only memory, questioning the necessity of it, inveighing against it, also, though with affection, against God. Why <u>so much</u>, Gottenyu? If He wanted to teach His servant a lesson for some reason, some cause--the nature of His nature--to teach him, say, for reasons of his weakness, his pride, perhaps during his years of prosperity, his frequent neglect of God--to give him a little lesson, why then any of the the tragedies that had happened to him, any <u>one</u> would

> have sufficed to chasten him. But all together--the loss of both his children, his means of livelihood, Fanny's health and his--that was too much to ask one frail-boned man to endure. Who, after all, was Manischevitz that he had been given so much to suffer? A tailor. Certainly not a man of talent. Upon him suffering was largely wasted. It went nowhere, into nothing: into more suffering (pp. 51-52).

And like Job, he has a supernatural visitation that brings him back to his faith. On the mythic level, Manischevitz, representing Mankind, is at first the disbeliever who looks for "wings" or golden crowns; through the centuries it has been difficult for the average man, like this tailor, to "keep the faith." Yet, as Bluefarb says, Manischevitz suggests that it is not impossible when he becomes the man of faith, when he believes, despite the fact that there is no evidence to substantiate belief:

> Manischevitz is a man reborn. Faith has finally triumphed over suffering and doubt to bring Manischevitz the redemption that comes of that affirmation. [12]

From the story's resolution, we might say that his potential to believe (and to triumph because one believes) is hidden in all men: there are, according to the tailor, "believers everywhere."

Furthermore, Malamud's "fairy tale" suggests that, al-

though it may be difficult to believe, believing is essential. When believing in man (like "giving credit" in some of Malamud's other works) [13] is a two-way proposition, together men seem to work miracles, as suggested by Manischevitz's effect on Levine and, in turn, by Levine's effect on Fanny. Malamud's story seems to say that every once-in-a-while a miracle is offered to men, if only they were open enough to recognize one when it comes along. In this story, at least, the author seems to make his own declaration of faith in "man," [14] and Manischevitz's triumphs over suffering suggest that man has a potential for miracles.

2.2 "On 'Idiots First'"

Although "Idiots First" is clearly another fairy tale in which fantasy predominates, the light-hearted tone of "Angel Levine" has been replaced by a more serious one as the author presents the dilemma of man's commitment to his fellows.

As in "Angel Levine," circumstances are clearly against the suffering protagonist; in this case Mendel, father of Isaac the idiot, has just been told by Ginzburg, the messenger of death, that his time is up. At the beginning of the story, penniless Mendel is allowed just one last favor by this black-bearded stranger -- enough time to raise the money needed to send his son to an aging uncle in California. In order to raise the money, Mendel is forced to ask his acquaintances for charity, and so in the process tests their willingness to share with others, to be good "Jews." (Henry D. Spalding has said, "Jewish tradition requires that those who have must share with those who have not." [15]) Ironically, Mendel, who is forced by circumstances to beg like a schnorrer, [16] has a serious tale of woe, but two out of three possible providers of handouts are indifferent, cold. While the third person called on, a rabbi, seems to be exemplary when he, having no money to speak of and struggling against the protests of his practical wife, gives Mendel his new fur-lined caftan, he does so at the "cost of his own living": "the

rabbi pressed both hands to his temples and fell to the floor." [17]

Yet Malamud does not allow the rabbi's sacrifice to be the magical solution Mendel needs. When Ginzburg bars the entrance to the train to California, Mendel must plead for one more little favor -- that Isaac be allowed on. Ginzburg, however, cannot relent, for he has a role to play, a job to do:

> "You shoulda been dead already at midnight. I told you that yesterday. This is the best I can do....What will happens happens. This isn't my responsibility. I got enough to think about without worrying about somebody on one cylinder" (pp. 19-20).

As Alan Warren Friedman has pointed out, [18] Ginzburg cannot see beyond the rules:

> "What then is your responsibility?" [Mendel asks.]
> "To create conditions. To make happen what happens. I ain't in the anthropomorphic business....The law is the law... the cosmic universal law, goddamit, the one I got to follow myself " (p. 20).

The light-hearted tone of fantasy now disappears as Mendel, believing he has ultimately failed with Isaac, laments his whole bitter life:

> "All my life," Mendel cried, his body trembling, "what did I have? I was poor. I suffered from my health. When I worked I worked too hard. When I didn't was worse. My wife died a young woman. But I didn't ask from anybody nothing. Now I ask a small favor. Be so kind, Mr. Ginzburg" (p. 20).

Despairing, Mendel cries out, as Roy and Manischevitz do, against a passive world, against a painful and unjust fate, and we are reminded, in spite of the story's frame of fantasy, not only of "man's feeble, hopeless existence," but also of "the irrelevance of his death." [19] When the simple favor is still not granted, Mendel, enfuriated to the point of violence, lunges at Ginzburg and accuses him of not knowing what it means to be "human." Obviously Ginzburg does not know, for he, the messenger of death, is literally not human. Surprisingly, Mendel's accusation shames the messenger and actually does cause him to relent, to be "humanized." Isaac is allowed to board the train, and Mendel, no longer the preoccupied father, can go to his death in peace: "When the train was gone, Mendel ascended the stairs to see what had become of Ginzburg" (p. 21).

Although Ginzburg at first seems to be the least likely of all of Malamud's characters to relent, he is in fact the character who responds the most positively and who undergoes the greatest change. This is due to the persistence of the loving father, Mendel. Thus, in Richman's words, "Mendel, wasted and

past his time, is also the carrier of human possibilities." [20]

A. W. Friedman has also pointed out the greatness of Mendel's final achievement:

> For Malamud, man has nothing but the misery and intensity of his suffering--but the point is that it <u>is</u> intense; he is committed to it because it defines his uniqueness, his humanness. As a consequence, he can--at least at odd moments--impose meaning where God has not. He can make the universe take notice of him and pay some attention to his claims. [21]

"Idiots First," then, becomes one of Malamud's most affirmative stories because it expresses a belief in man's potential to "better" his situation in spite of his suffering and in spite of the indifference of the majority of his fellows. Like "Angel Levine," "Idiots First" suggests that man's protest against the "irrelevancy" of his suffering is sometimes (divinely?) answered.

If we do question this story's affirmation by wondering what Mendel has really accomplished when he manages to send Isaac to an aging uncle and to an unsure fate, when he only momentarily postpones his own inevitable end, we must remember that Malamud is allowing his character not only to accomplish what he most desires, but also to triumph over the messenger of death. It is in this sense that the story seems to contain tremendous hope for what man can do.

2.3 "Some Final Thoughts on Suffering and Malamud's Use of Fantasy"

Although both "Angel Levine" and "Idiots First" end on a note of hope, no conclusion about human triumph in Malamud's fiction as a whole should be drawn on the basis of these two stories alone. A generalization like Friedman's -- "out of the dungheap seemingly conducive only to despair, glimmers of values begin to assert and affirm themselves" [22] -- applies, in my opinion, only to these two fairy tales, for other Malamudian works dealing with suffering depict crueler social and psychological realities which lessen the "redeeming" power of suffering portrayed in these two stories.

Because the form chosen for these two works was so different from that used in the majority of Malamud's others, it is probable that his intentions in them were not the same as those of his more naturalistic stories like "The Cost of Living," "The Bill," or almost anything else he wrote up to and including The Fixer (the work in which the suffering of the protagonist is more excruciating than in any other Malamudian work). [23] Except in "Take Pity" [24] (1958) and in "The Jewbird" [25] (1963), fantasy was not again utilized by Malamud in those works he wrote from 1950, the approximate beginning of his publishing career, to 1966, the year he published The Fixer; furthermore, fantasy did not return as an important element of his later works until the

"short cheerful stories" he wrote for Rembrandt's Hat (1973). [26]

In both "Angel Levine" and "Idiots First" social judgements are implicit. We have seen that in "Angel Levine" Malamud suggests the need for faith in man at the same time that he ridicules, in Goldman's words, "the Jew's sense of his unique role as sufferer;" [27] in "Idiots First" he likewise deals with the contemporary problem of man's reluctance to commit himself to others. However, Malamud's intention in these two works does not seem to have been that of depicting our world realistically, for the author himself has stated that he has written fantasies specifically to entertain:

> "I don't believe in the supernatural except as I can invent it. Nor do I look for a 'neutral ground' for my fiction. I write fantasy because when I do I am imaginative and funny and having a good time." [28]

In addition, Malamud may simply have been trying out the fantastic form characteristic, in critic Robert Alter's words, of the Yiddish folk tale:

> Though such influences are hard to prove, I suspect that the piquant juxtaposition in his fiction of tough, ground-gripping realism and high-flying fantasy ultimately derives from the paradoxical conjoining of those same qualities that has often characterized Jewish folklore. [29]

Grebstein has also commented:

> The fantasy could be described as the leavening in Malamud's realistic bread, making it rise a little toward heaven; it can be thus interpreted as an extrapolation of that something in man which insists he is more than animal. It also functions to modulate, making the bread easier to get down by alleviating the dry taste of misery with some fun. [30]

Thus, it is clear that the happy endings of "Angel Levine" and "Idiots First," like most happy endings, do not necessarily reflect the reality of the world as we know it. In fact, through the very use of fantasy, Malamud may be making another depressing point about suffering: that man's dreams come true and his needs are fulfilled not in the real world, but only in the realm of the fairy tale.

Notes for Chapter Two

1
Bernard Malamud. The Magic Barrel (New York: Pocket Books, Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1972), pp. 47-48. (All subsequent page references to The Magic Barrel are to this edition and will be included in parenthesis within my text.)

2
This is an expression used by Fidelman, protagonist of "The Last Mohican" (included in The Magic Barrel, op. cit., p. 165), to describe what he believes to be the moment of his true awakening. I find the expression useful to describe other Malamudian characters' awakenings as well.

3
Her essay "Literary Blacks and Jews" is reprinted in Field and Field's Bernard Malamud, op. cit., p. 81. (All subsequent references made to this article will be made to Field and Field's reprinting.)

4
Ibid., p. 82.

5
Ibid., p. 83.

6
In "An Interview with Bernard Malamud," by Field and Field in their collection Bernard Malamud, op. cit., pp. 11-12.

7
According to Field and Field in their collection Bernard Malamud, op. cit., p. 7, Malamud said this in the Jerusalem Post (Weekly overseas Edition), April 1, 1968, p. 13.

8
Field and Field's Bernard Malamud, op. cit., p. 7.

9
Ibid., p. 4
In addition, there have been a number of critical articles written on Malamud's use of the Jew as metaphor. For example, Theodore Solotaroff has said: "Malamud's Jewishness is a type of metaphor--for anyone's life--both for the tragic dimension of anyone's life and for a code of personal morality and salvation that is more psychological than religious. To the extent that the Jew and his

problems become a way of envisaging the human condition, he becomes more symbol than fact, fashioned to the service of an abstraction," in "Bernard Malamud's Fiction: The Old Life and the New," reprinted as "The Old Life and the New" in Bernard Malamud and the Critics, op. cit., p. 237.

Similarly, by equating the Jews to all men, according to Ben Siegel, Malamud "attempts to raise the alienated Jew's deep personal suffering to the level of universality....His Jews are not 'good' in the traditional sense; few, in fact, reveal any concern for Judaism as a coherent body of doctrine. They share only a communal sensitivity to persecution and suffering. Ritual and custom are for Malamud mere surface trimmings; all that matters is the human heart--that is, man's essential dignity and responsibility to his fellows in a grim, inhuman world," op. cit., pp. 125-126.

10

Sam Bluefarb in "Bernard Malamud: The Scope of Caricature," reprinted as "The Scope of Caricature" in Bernard Malamud and the Critics, op. cit., p. 143.

11

Ibid., p. 144.

12

Ibid., pp. 145-146.

13

In "The Bill," included in The Magic Barrel, op. cit., p. 134, storekeeper Panessa states that moral commitment should be a two-way proposition: "...what was credit but the fact that people were human beings, and if you were really a human being you gave credit to somebody else and he gave credit to you." In "Take Pity" and "Black is My Favorite Color," Malamud also focuses on the failure that results when commitment works only one-way.

14

Richman, op. cit., p. 145.

15

Henry D. Spalding. Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1973), p. 31.

16

A schnorrer (or shnorrer) is a cadger, or, as Goldman has said, a "beggar with style," op. cit., p. 161. Dorothy H. Rochmis explains that "frequently, competition among shnorrers was so keen that it became a contest of wit, brass, and resourcefulness to wheedle money from others. When it was forthcoming it was accepted as if it were the shnorrer's right," in the glossary to

Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor, op. cit., p. 156.

17
Bernard Malamud. Idiots First (New York: Pocket Books, Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1975), p. 19. (All subsequent page references to this story will be made to this edition and will be included in parenthesis within my text.)

18
Alan Warren Friedman in "Bernard Malamud: The Hero as Schnook," reprinted as "The Hero as Schnook" in Bernard Malamud and the Critics, op. cit., p. 290. (All subsequent references to this article will be made to Field and Field's reprinting.)

19
Ibid.

20
Richman, op. cit., p. 125.

21
Friedman, op. cit., p. 291.

22
Ibid., p. 290.

23
In his article "Myth Inside and Out: Malamud's The Natural," reprinted as "Myth Inside and Out: The Natural" in Bernard Malamud and the Critics, op. cit., p. 109, Frederick W. Turner III, though dealing basically with The Natural, has commented that The Fixer marks the high point of Malamud's career: "The Fixer...is one work toward which all the writer's previous fiction has been pointing." (All subsequent references to this article will be made to Field and Field's reprinting.)

24
"Take Pity" deals with the protagonist's recollections of his noble efforts to help a poor widow named Eva and of his failure to convince her to accept his charitable assistance. As Rosen the protagonist is in limbo at the time of his narration to Davidov the census taker, the elements of fantasy are evident. Yet this fantasy does not lead to another miracle such as that seen in "Angel Levine" or in "Idiots First." Self-destruction is the end result of Rosen's desperate need to give, for he had committed suicide in order to leave everything he owned to the poor widow ("'Here ...is a very strange thing -- a person that you can

never never give her anything. --But I will give'" (The Magic Barrel, op. cit., p. 90). To Rosen's surprise, Eva follows him into limbo, putting a final frustrating end to his "noble" efforts. Instead of the glorified triumph of the sufferer, we see, as Richman has pointed out, the horror attendant on the frustration of man's need to give" (op. cit., p. 109). Instead of affirmation, there is a sense of waste, as Solotaroff has noted:

> [There is nothing] very reassuring about the fate of the two characters...who both are eventually driven to suicide by the difficulties of extending and accepting charity (op. cit., p. 236).

What is evident from this story is the fact that ingratitude is one of the greatest obstacles on the path to achieving a sense of "community," for as Ben Siegel has said, "Take Pity" shows that "the human animal, as Malamud sees him, neither understands nor appreciates kindness" (op. cit., p. 129). Idealistic men like Rosen who search for paradises to share with their "Eves" find the world more like a spiritual limbo than a heaven. If in "Angel Levine" we see that a little bit of faith goes a long way, in "Take Pity" we see that a little bit of disbelief, Eva's, has its strong repercussions as well. Besides the defeat of the protagonist's noble ideals, there is a bitterness in Rosen's final words to the widow -- "'Whore, bastard, bitch,' he shouted at her. 'Go 'way from here. Go home to your children'" (p. 90)--which is found in few Malamudian works. The author, then, surely uses fantasy in this work to alleviate the oppressing weight of his realism, as both Grebstein (op. cit., p. 27) and Alter (op. cit., p. 30) have pointed out, rather than to express a happy-go-lucky view of the world.

25
See footnote 34 of my discussion of The Natural.

26
In his introductory note for Rembrandt's Hat, Malamud quotes James T. Fields saying to Henry James: "'What we need is short cheerful stories.'"

27
Goldman, op. cit., p. 157.

28
Quoted by Field and Field in Bernard Malamud, op. cit., pp. 10-11.

29 Alter, op. cit., pp. 30-31.

30 Grebstein, op. cit., p. 27.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ANTITHESIS OF IRIS LEMON'S VIEW OF SUFFERING SEEN IN FOUR OF MALAMUD'S EARLY STORIES

"Introductory Note for Chapter Three"

In Manischevitz and Mendel, Malamud depicts two enduring sufferers whose situations, at least, have been "bettered" through suffering. However, in several of Malamud's early works such as "The Cost of Living," "The First Seven Years," "The Bill," and "The Loan," situation, setting, conflict, and aspects of the character's own personality all work together to bring about the character's defeat. With these terrible odds against the protagonist, are there still opportunities to learn through suffering?

3.1 "On 'The of Cost of Living'"

In "The Cost of Living," protagonist Sam Tomashevsky is, like Manischevitz, another enduring sufferer Malamud seems to hold up to the world as an example. This honest, hard-working grocer silently endures poverty, gives "credit to the impoverished," [1] and "heroically" resists the corruption to which the ordinary man might long ago have succumbed. For this, it may seem fitting, according to Iris' philosophy, that such a righteous man should receive his just reward ("'Experience makes good people better...through their suffering'"). Yet, in this story there is no black angel and no relenting messenger of death; instead of any miracle or reward, what "life" has given the grocer for his honest efforts is the worst: a chain store competitor, which makes his ruin inevitable. The conflict of the small grocer pitted against a supermarket monopoly which he cannot begin to fight is so unbalanced and one-sided that Sam can only be seen as a helpless victim of circumstances. In addition, Sam is "boxed in" by poverty and environment, which have limited his opportunities and imagination and which have deprived him of the tools and training with which to fight back.

Furthermore, Sam, like Roy, is limited by certain aspects of his own personality. For example, there is Sam's simplicity. Despite the fact that Sam's wife Sura is already "mourning"

their economic deaths from the first page of the story and despite the fact that Sam too fears that he will be "ghastly murdered" by the chain store (p. 129), he still experiences "an unexpected burst of optimism" (p. 137) which lasts six entire months after the chain store has already drawn away most of his former customers. During this burst of optimism, Sam pathetically tries to save himself by washing and polishing everything in the store and by reducing prices on signs "[lettered] with black crayon on wrapping paper" (p. 136), even though, as his practical wife reminds him, nobody would be impressed by his efforts because nobody came in to buy. Then there is Sam's honesty. Although "Sam schemed to give short weight on loose items...he couldn't bring himself to" (p. 137); being honest is "what, for the character, is the easiest [most natural] course." [2] Ironically, his moral decision not to earn a living "at the cost of others" cancels out whatever small chance he might have had of staying alive. Sam remains honest, but he is so "at the cost of his own living," and it is ironic that this honesty and this simplicity become, in modern America, manifestations of incompetence and vulnerability, as Shear has pointed out. [3]

In sum, conflict, situation, setting, and Sam's own values work against him, and in this way, Malamud seems to have predetermined Sam's consequent economic ruin to depict Sam's reaction to his own suffering. As in The Natural, Malamud conveys the anguish of the protagonist, for in "The Cost of

Living," we are made to feel the disillusion Sam feels as he awakens to the indifferent world he lives in.

As in The Natural, Malamud again conveys his protagonist's thoughts, though blended with those of an omniscient narrator. In this case we note that, as owner of a small grocery, Sam has only one fear -- Big Business. This fear is evident when Sam laments that the small business of his shoemaker friend Pellegrino "had slackened off as if someone were shutting a faucet" (p. 129). This image, worded in simple, mundane terms, represents Sam's impression of the ease with which Big Business can shut off a trickle of water -- the small businessman's life. Even before the chain store actually appears across the street from him, Sam is already experiencing this same fear:

> ...whenever he shut his eyes the empty store was stuck in his mind, a long black hole eternally revolving so that while he slept he was not asleep but within revolving: what if it should happen to me? What if after twenty-seven years of eroding toil (he should years ago have got out), what if after all of that, your own store, a place of business... after all the years, the years, the multitude of cans he had wiped off and dragged in like rocks from the street before dawn in freeze or heat; insults, petty thievery, doling of credit to the impoverished by the poor; the peeling ceiling, fly-specked shelves, puffed cans, dirt, swollen veins; the back-breaking sixteen-hour day like a heavy hand slapping, upon awakening, the skull, pushing the head to bend the body's bones; the

> hours; the work, the years, my God and where is my life now? Who will save me now, and where will I go, where? (p. 130)

Pellegrino's empty store had terrified Sam, as a haunted house of his childhood had, with its "ravenous silence...a pit of churning quiet from which, if you thought about it, all evil erupted" (p. 130). When the chain store does move in, Sam is awed by the workers' ability to set up in seven hours what had taken him twenty-seven years, and finds that his "heart beat so hard he sometimes fondled it with his hand as though trying to calm a wild bird that wanted to fly away" (pp. 135-136). When the store owners announce their grand opening, Sam's "heart bled" (p. 131), and his face, though "winter had fled the city streets," "was a blizzard" (p. 128). When Sam is forced to call in an auctioneer, he notes that his own economic funeral provides a festive occasion for others: the "auctioneer...moved in with two lively assistants and a red flag that flapped and furled in the icy breeze as though it were a holiday" (pp. 137-138).

Perhaps Sam suffers his greatest disillusion when he sees that his Old World belief in a united community, in which individuals naturally helped and were helped by each other, does not seem to exist in his American ghetto. Despite his own poverty, Sam had once offered the declining Pellegrino an Old World helping hand; he had given the poor shoemaker his own "paper thin"

> hours; the work, the years, my God and where is my life now? Who will save me now, and where will I go, where? (p. 130)

Pellegrino's empty store had terrified Sam, as a haunted house of his childhood had, with its "ravenous silence...a pit of churning quiet from which, if you thought about it, all evil erupted" (p. 130). When the chain store does move in, Sam is awed by the workers' ability to set up in seven hours what had taken him twenty-seven years, and finds that his "heart beat so hard he sometimes fondled it with his hand as though trying to calm a wild bird that wanted to fly away" (pp. 135-136). When the store owners announce their grand opening, Sam's "heart bled" (p. 131), and his face, though "winter had fled the city streets," "was a blizzard" (p. 128). When Sam is forced to call in an auctioneer, he notes that his own economic funeral provides a festive occasion for others: the "auctioneer...moved in with two lively assistants and a red flag that flapped and furled in the icy breeze as though it were a holiday" (pp. 137-138).

Perhaps Sam suffers his greatest disillusion when he sees that his Old World belief in a united community, in which individuals naturally helped and were helped by each other, does not seem to exist in his American ghetto. Despite his own poverty, Sam had once offered the declining Pellegrino an Old World helping hand; he had given the poor shoemaker his own "paper thin"

soles (p. 129) to fix though he could not afford to do so. He had, in turn, expected this same self-sacrifice from his other friends and acquaintances in his own time of need. Yet when they seem to be indifferent to his plight, Sam naturally feels betrayed. He lashes out against his landlord, a barber, for intentionally renting Pellegrino's abandoned store to the only occupant who could destroy him -- a chain store ("he felt for the barber a furious anger" p. 136), when, in reality, it was impossible for the landlord, a poor man with his own load of troubles ("when he walked one had the impression he was dragging something" p. 132), to assist Sam. He also lashes out against the rich Jew Kaufman for his indifference when, in reality, Kaufman tries to protect Sam's economic interests by advising him to sell out. Even Sura, Sam's wife, is aware of Kaufman's wisdom and "ridiculed [Sam], seeing how Kaufman had progressed and where Sam was" (p. 133). Sam, in contrast, "pounded his fist on the table," scoffing at Kaufman's advice to sell out for being cheaper than a commitment: in Sam's opinion, Kaufman gave "good advice the way a tube bloops toothpaste" (p. 134). Moreover, Sam laments the indifference of the ten, fifteen, and twenty-year customers, whom he had treated so well over the years, when they repay his Old World sense of commitment to them by "ducking" around the corner instead of continuing to buy from him.

Perhaps more than his own economic ruin, Sam laments the death of the Old World value of service to others. Early in the

story, the vanishing of Pellegrino, the shoemaker, had frightened Sam because Pellegrino, like Sam, had been one of few men who had still honored both individuals and service to them:

> ...it seemed in the dark recesses of the empty store, where so many shoes had been leathered and hammered into life, and so many people had left something of themselves in the coming and going, that even in emptiness the store contained some memory of their vanished presences, unspoken echoes in declining tiers, and that in a sense was what was so frightening (p. 130).

At the end of the story, Sam dreads finding his own empty store haunted by the same kind of ghosts:

> So long as he lived he would not return to the old neighborhood, afraid his store was standing empty, and he dreaded to look through the window (p. 138).

With Sam's economic defeat, we have seen that suffering clearly does not "better" Sam or bring him "toward happiness." Like Roy's "long, long years of suffering" and like Manischevitz's "many reverses and indignities," Sam's "twenty-seven years of eroding toil" (p. 130) give him only a heart-breaking vision of the nature of the world he moves in. Sam's cry -- "the work,

the years, my God and where is my life now?" -- echoes Manischevitz's cries, and Sam's "bleeding heart" reflects Roy's anguish and remorse.

3.2 "On 'The First Seven Years'"

"The First Seven Years" deals with the futile attempts of a poor Polish shoemaker named Feld to make "a better life" [4] for his daughter Miriam. Poverty-stricken in his new home in America and suffering from a heart condition which had forced him to hire a helper and thereby to divide his already meager profits, Feld had only one dream: to see his daughter Miriam married to "an educated man" (p. 14) such as "Max the college boy" (p. 13), whom Feld believed to be an ambitious law or medical student embodying all the good qualities he would have liked in a son as well as the ambitions he himself had lacked. To Feld's surprise, Miriam dismissed Max, declaring: "'He's nothing more than a materialist. ...He has no soul. He's only interested in things'" (p. 20); she preferred her father's assistant, a gentle Pole -- (sober and noble) Sobel.

Thus, Feld and Miriam have two different attitudes towards their economic prisons and towards the role of money and ambition in lessening their suffering; their two different choices of a proper suitor come to represent their respective value systems. In this way, "The First Seven Years," like "The Cost of Living," presents another clash of values -- practical vs. impractical -- although, in this case, the values Shear identifies as Old World and New World values are reversed. [5] Feld, the Old World Jew, is now the practical businessman, who believes, unlike Miriam, that

economic advancement is the only way out of his and Miriam's prison of necessity. On the other hand, Miriam, the New World offspring, is apparently Old Worldly "wise," for she places more value on genuine human relationships than on material gain. As in "The Cost of Living," Malamud may seem to glorify a moral choice, to uphold Miriam's decision in favor of love instead of profit as heroic and ideal. Richman, for example, has written that Malamud's theme is the "promise of salvation through love" and "the possibility of a leap beyond determinism." [6] Richman also praises Feld for finally accepting Sobel as a suitor for his daughter, a decision which, in his words, distinguishes the "mensch," the feeling human being from the simple shoemaker." [7]

However, despite the fact that Miriam and Sobel's dedication to each other is heart-warming, in my opinion it should not necessarily be implied that either one of them has taken the road to "salvation." It is evident to Feld that this love, though perhaps powerful and even necessary in the world, is impractical because it cannot guarantee a better future for her:

> ...[Feld] realized that what he had called ugly was not Sobel but Miriam's life if she married him. He felt for his daughter a strange and gripping sorrow, as if she were already Sobel's bride, the wife, after all, of a shoemaker, and had in her life no more than her mother had had. And all his dreams

> for her -- why he had slaved and destroyed his heart with anxiety and labor--all these dreams of a better life were dead (p. 23).

Poverty and suffering had taught Feld not to glorify his lack but to avoid further suffering at all costs, even if it meant being "materialistic" when considering a match for his daughter. Contrary to Richman, I find that the story's resolution showing Feld's own thoughts about "Miriam's ugly life" rules out the possibility of glorifying either Miriam's choice or Feld's approval of it.

However, the author does not favor either Feld's or Miriam's value system, but instead concentrates on the characterization of Feld at the moment of his awakening. First, like Sam of "The Cost of Living," Feld suffers disillusion; he comes to see that he had idealized Max for the wrong reasons when in truth, the poverty of Max's appearance corresponded to the poverty of his real ambitions as well as the poverty of his "soul."

Yet the greatest part of Feld's awakening involved his helper Sobel. At the same time that Feld had overestimated Max, he had underestimated Sobel and had been totally unaware of Sobel's love for Miriam:

> ...though Feld frequently asked himself what keeps him here? why does he stay? he finally answered it that the man, no doubt because of his terrible experi-

> ences as a refugee, was afraid of the world (p. 17).

Entangled in his own romantic dream for his daughter, Feld had not understood the meaning of Sobel's violent protests against Max and had even been

> ...annoyed that his helper, Sobel, was so insensitive to [Feld's] reverie that he wouldn't for a minute cease his frantic pounding at the other bench (p. 13).

Sobel's pathetic but touching confession of his love for Miriam opens Feld's eyes:

> "So when you will come back to work?" Feld asked him.
> To his surprise, Sobel burst out, "Never."
> ..."I will raise your wages."
> "Who cares for your wages!"
> ..."I always treated you like you was my son."
> Sobel vehemently denied it. "So why you look for strange boys in the street they should go out with Miriam? Why you don't think of me? ...Why do you think I worked so long for you?" Sobel cried out. "For the stingy wages I sacrificed five years of my life so you could have to eat and drink and where to sleep?"
> "Then for what?" shouted the shoemaker.
> "For Miriam," he shouted--"for her" (p. 22).

Thus, Feld comes to see that Sobel is not "insensitive," as he had thought, but totally dedicated, and he cannot help but be impressed by Sobel's story of his years of sacrifice:

> Watching him, the shoemaker's anger diminished. His teeth were on edge with pity for the man, and his eyes grew moist. How strange and sad that a refugee, a grown man, bald and old with his miseries, who had by the skin of his teeth escaped Hitler's incinerators, should fall in love, when he had got to America, with a girl less than half his age. Day after day, for five years he had sat at his bench, cutting and hammering away, waiting for the girl to become a woman, unable to ease his heart with speech, knowing no protest but desperation (p. 23).

Thus, Feld's confrontation with Sobel also makes him realize that it is human nature to believe in love and to idealize its remedial powers. For this reason he is helpless to impede their relationship or to kill the hope Sobel and Miriam had for their future. Feld has no choice but to let Sobel continue to wait for her, for he has been "boxed in" by these emotions. On the one hand, Feld the practical father, had felt that his daughter would be closing all the doors to an economically brighter future; on the other hand, Feld, now the man of "feeling," could not deny his young daughter the opportunity to love and to dream.

Thus, rather than leaving us, as Richman says, with a

sense of the "promise of salvation through love...or the possibility of a leap beyond determinism," [8] the story ends in an impasse. While Miriam is to be pitied for making an idealistic, uncertain decision which may turn out to be impractical or unwise, Feld is also to be pitied because, with his final acceptance of Sobel, he acknowledges the fact that his efforts have been in vain. Not only had he "wasted his youth" in a "snowy Polish village" (p. 13) but he had also "wasted" a good many of his later years by attempting to spare his daughter from suffering what he had suffered. Iris' idea that "experience teaches" is nullified in this story, for Feld is forced to accept the fact that it was useless to try to make his daughter learn from his years of experience; Miriam would have to choose for herself, to learn for herself, to find her own way out of her "prisons."

Because Malamud has made us, then, sympathize with the viewpoints of each of the three characters -- Miriam, Sobel, and Feld, it is difficult to call any one of them right or wrong. In this way the story serves not to glorify suffering but to re-emphasize the fact that, contrary to Iris' way of thinking, there are no simple solutions to most of man's problems, whether they be moral, psychological, or economic. While one might like to believe that when one has used up a "first life" in learning, one can sit back in a "second life" and enjoy the

fruits of this learning, "The First Seven Years" suggests that it is impossible to tell if one has desired the "right things" or if one has made the "right" choices.

3.3 "On 'The Bill'"

In "The Bill," janitor Willy Schliegel is given the opportunity to learn about the need for mutual "trust" when storekeeper Panessa "gives him credit," trusting that Willy will one day pay him back.

Panessa's spontaneous and generous offer may seem to be one of Iris' "right things." However, Malamud does not glorify Panessa as Iris might. Instead, Malamud emphasizes Panessa's insignificance by describing him (in contrast with "tall, broad-backed" Willy) [9] first as "a small bent man" (p. 134) and later as a "child" (p. 139). Panessa and his wife are also seen in Willy's own eyes as "scrawny, loose-feathered birds" and "skinny, leafless bushes" (p. 137), images which further emphasize the storekeeper's smallness and innocence, as well as his wasting away after Willy has failed to keep his half of the bargain. We have noted that Sam of "The Cost of Living" and Feld of "The First Seven Years" suffer symbolic "heart failure;" in "The Bill," Panessa seems to die from similar "heart failure," such disillusion being the end result when Malamud's child-like characters awaken to the lowly nature of their fellows.

Yet the matter of Willy's guilt -- whether or not he is actually responsible for Panessa's death -- is a complex one. "Broad-backed" (p. 134) and "looming large" (p. 135), Willy only seems to have the qualities of the "moral giant" or the

possibility of becoming one, that is, of becoming the responsible man, mature enough to comply with the second half of Panessa's bargain:

> He said that everything was run on credit, business and everything else, because after all what was credit but the fact that people were human beings, and if you were really a human being you gave credit to somebody else and he gave credit to you (p. 134).

When Willy resists all pressures to pay, he appears to be the villain; associated with ashes and smelly garbage, he is the "garbage man" on a literal and figurative level. In the tableau ending, both Willy and the widow know that if Willy had paid the debt, they could have obtained the proper medical care and Panessa might not have died so soon from "old age" (p. 139). When Willy learns that his own selfishness has ended in another man's death, "his tongue hung in his mouth like dead fruit on a tree, and his heart was a black-painted window" (pp. 139-140). These images imply that his spiritual and moral development have, apparently, reached a "dead"-end.

However, like Sam of "The Cost of Living," Willy is also a victim of his situation and environment. His poverty dooms him even before the conflict actually unfolds, making it impossible for him to even begin to pay a bill of the nature of what his turns out to be. Likewise, the setting, the "land-locked

and narrow street" (p. 133), encloses Willy in a self-contained world in which it is not only impossible but unthinkable to seek outside help. Willy sums up the desperateness of his predicament with a bitter but true protest:

> ..."What have I got that I can pay? Ain't I been a poor man every day of my life?" ...
> "With what?" he shouted, his face lit up dark and webbed. "With the meat off my bones?
> "With the ashes in my eyes. With the piss I mop up on the floors. With the cold in my lungs when I sleep" (p. 136).

Accepting the credit is clearly a responsibility which Willy takes up, irresponsibly, but as willingly and as consciously as Panessa gives it. Yet again, such weakness would not necessarily have become the character's "tragic flaw" had the situation and setting been different. Succumbing to the temptation of buying on credit might have been a mere whim had the main character been a richer man who ended up paying. However, in the story as it is, the unpaid debt of one poor man to another makes Willy almost criminal for bringing so much misfortune on the Panessa family.

Yet, as the story continues, Malamud makes Willy's predicament both familiar and moving. The janitor, who had never before heard a storekeeper say he would be willing to extend him credit, is lost in what seems to be an impossible dream

come true. For once he has been given trust as if he were a richer man; for once he is able to buy his poor wife Etta something. With the money he saves by not paying Panessa, Willy can give her a gift symbolic of his many years of love. But the black beaded dress he chooses for her is a terribly impractical gift for a prison dweller with a debt. A poor man in Malamud's fictional world cannot afford such a luxury, such a dream. Thus, as Willy's troubles multiply and paying the debt becomes just one more in a long series of woes, Willy's anguish becomes deeper and more moving:

> Hard times set in. The landlord ordered cut down on heat, cut down on hot water. He cut down on Willy's expense money and wages. The tenants were angered. All day they pestered Willy like clusters of flies and he told them what the landlord had ordered. Then they cursed Willy and Willy cursed them. They telephoned the Board of Health but when the inspectors arrived they said the temperature was within the minimum though the house was drafty. However the tenants still complained they were cold and goaded Willy about it all day but he said he was cold too. He said he was freezing but no one believed him (p. 137).

Willy, unjust victim of the tenants' wrath, draws our pity. And when he hides in the cellar like a frightened animal, feeling remorse but finding no solution to his inevitable limi-

tations, Willy is more human and less of a victim.

Thus, Malamud's story reaches another impasse. We have been made to pity both the victimized janitor and the noble storekeeper who trusted him, and to wish that Panessa's impossible dream could have been fulfilled through Willy. We have also noted the mistakes of both men -- Panessa was too innocent, too impractical; Willy was too irresponsible. In addition, we have noted that both men fail because the proposition which must work both ways does not.

However, it seems that Malamud is overly cruel to both Willy and Panessa in his resolution; the Malamudian character who chooses to commit himself must be willing to sacrifice everything, to suffer unbelievable hardships, even death; the character who steps off the "straight and narrow path" finds that his actions bring him and everyone around him overwhelming and unbearable misery. This very special "illusion of reality" [10] seems even crueler than reality itself. One might argue that Willy's spiritual decay may not be completely irreversible. "Dead fruit" does contain within itself the seeds of a new life, and a "black-painted window" can be washed to let the light shine through again. One might also argue that the world may need "pioneers" like Panessa, people with the "right answers," who give others the opportunity to develop their potential, even though the "learners" may at first misuse this opportunity and may need several "lives" to perfect their potential. Yet the ul-

timate question that the author leaves for each reader to decide is whether or not the life of a man is an adequate price to pay for the "learning" of such lessons.

In Willy's case, however, we cannot be sure if there was a lesson to be learned. For a man like Willy, to see his error is to see his limitations; to feel remorse is to feel his helplessness.

3.4 "On 'The Loan'"

In "The Loan," Malamud's couple, Lieb and Bessie, adopt two different attitudes toward suffering. These attitudes become clear during a confrontation with a schnorrer named Kobotsky, who, by cornering them and trying to make them share what little wealth they have, is actually testing, in the mythic sense,[11] the strength of their commitment to the "community."

On the one hand, we note that Lieb, the simple man of integrity, is willing to give money to Kobotsky depite the fact that they had some years ago parted over an unpaid debt. Suffering has taught Lieb to hold no grudge ("The wrong was in the past. Forgiven: forgiven at the dim sight of him"[12]), and because Lieb is , like his name implies, so willing to love, he seems to pass Kobotsky's "test" with commendation. However, although Lieb's generosity may in theory be praiseworthy, his innocent eyes are "clouded by cataracts" of sentimentality:

> "Kobotsky," the baker cried almost with a sob, for it was so many years gone Kobotsky reminded him of, when they were both at least young, and circumstances were -- ah, different. Unable, for sentimental reasons, to refrain from smarting tears, he jabbed them away with a thrust of

> the hand....Lieb did the talking: ah, of old times. The world was new. We were, Kobotsky, young. Do you remember how both together, immigrants out of steerage, we registered in night school?...
> Lieb, acting the life of the party, recited, to cheer his friend: "'Come,' said the wind to the trees one day, 'Come over the meadow with me and play.' Remember, Kobotsky?" (p. 167).

On the other hand, we note that Bessie, unlike Lieb, is cautious and practical and unwilling to commit herself to a ghost from the past, even though she is moved by Kobotsky's woes ("One gaze at Bessie's face -- at the odd looseness of neck and shoulders -- told him that she too was moved," p. 172). Suffering has taught her the need to look out for herself. Despite the fact that they attend to "customers in droves" (p. 166), they have a box of bills to pay; emptying its contents out onto the table, she reminds Lieb of their debts and ambitions.

Furthermore, the final image of the burnt loaves makes a symbolic statement about Bessie's view of what their "sacrifice" for a <u>schnorrer</u> would mean:

> Tears streaming from her eyes, Bessie raised her head and suspiciously sniffed the air. Screeching suddenly, she ran into the rear and with a cry wrenched open the oven door. A cloud of smoke billowed out at her. The loaves in the trays were blackened bricks--charred corpses (p. 173).

The burning of the loaves is a bad omen, representing the terrible waste of the "sweet..white bread [which] drew customers in droves" (p. 166), a waste which Lieb the baker, the "dispenser of...communion," [13] has brought on himself by becoming sentimentally involved with Kobotsky's suffering and neglecting his responsibility to his small community. It is also a premonition of future harm that might come to their business if they extended another loan they cannot afford; the few dreams they have left might be automatically cancelled out, burned up. Suffering may have embittered Bessie and may have left her committed to only a small family circle, but at least this is a real and workable commitment, unlike Lieb's impossible dream of extending "credit" to everyone who asks for it.

At the same time, because the loaves are described as "blackened bricks--charred corpses," we are reminded of the Nazi persecution, not only of Bessie and her family, but of the Jews in general. The Nazis become an easily recognizable symbol of the worst in man, of the forces of anti-life (as Mellard has pointed out, "in Malamud...to be anti-Semitic is to be against the human being" [14]). In contrast to the passive, "turn-the-cheek" attitude of the "ideal man," Lieb, there is the indignation and protest of those like Bessie who have suffered such injustice and senseless suffering. Even Lieb may realize something of the emptiness of his own attitude, feeling like the empty "shell of a loaf" (p. 173) he throws away

when Bessie finishes her tale of woe.

Thus, while Bessie adopts a practical view of suffering, she also emphasizes the simple fact that all men suffer and that suffering is nothing to glorify. Kobotsky may have undergone many domestic trials -- sickness, an operation, arthritis, economic worries, death in the family -- but Bessie's suffering at the hands of the Bolsheviks and the Nazis far outweighs his woes. Thus, Lieb's sentimental response appears ridiculous when contrasted to the somber nature of what she has undergone. Kobotsky can do little more to compete with her. All he can do is understand, recognize that she, like him, has suffered, that all men suffer, though some do more than others:

> Kobotsky [at the end of Bessie's story] held his hands over his ears....
>
> Kobotsky and the baker embraced and sighed over their lost youth. They pressed mouths together and parted forever (p. 173).

Richman has also pointed out Bessie's triumph over Kobotsky:

> The finale belongs to Bessie, and it is her tale which transforms the incipient sentimentality into a dreadful glance at demonic frustration....
>
> Against Bessie's past and her wretched dream of the future, Kobotsky's woe expends itself. Woe and woe, fused together in opposi-

> tion, deny them the expression of anything but compassion. [15]

Malamud brings the conflict to another impasse, and as in "The First Seven Years," it is again clear that there is no solution to the protagonists' suffering: "[each of the three characters] ...has learned that life's recurrent crises have no solution," as Siegel has pointed out. [16] A confrontation with suffering is not necessarily meant to teach "good people" like Bessie and Lieb the "nobility" of "sacrifice" that Iris talks of: "'I don't think you can do anything for anyone without giving up something of your own.'" [17] Suffering has made these characters "[remember] their common identity as Jews" [18] only in the sense that they recognize that all men suffer absurdly.

3.5 "A Final Thought on the Metaphor of the Prison of Necessity"

Thus, in "The Cost of Living," "The First Seven Years," "The Bill," and "The Loan," Malamud depicted his "prisoners of necessity" enduring anguish, frustration, and a feeling of helplessness when they are faced with their limitations. Sam Tomashevsky experiences disillusion in his fellows when he realizes that no one around him seems to have a sense of moral commitment to others. Feld the shoemaker despairs when he learns that he cannot live his daughter's life for her. Willy Schliegel grieves when he sees that the lesson he has learned -- responsibility -- comes too late to help the man who had inspired his learning. And Lieb, Bessie, and Kobotsky are united in their shared vision that to live is to suffer hardship after hardship.

In these early works it is clear that the learning that the protagonists experience is limited to a vision (as Yakov Bok of The Fixer later puts it) "that the ocean is salty as you are drowning, and though you know it you are drowned." [19]

Notes for Chapter Three

1

Idiots First, op. cit., p. 130. (All subsequent page references will be to this 1975 Pocket Book edition and will be included in parenthesis in my text.)

2

Walter Shear in "Culture Conflict in The Assistant," reprinted as "Culture Conflict" in Bernard Malamud and the Critics, op. cit., p. 215. (All subsequent references to this article will be made to Field and Field's reprinting.) Although Shear has discussed the collision of Old and New World values evident in The Assistant, I find that this same clash of values reappears in other Malamudian works and believe Shear's commentaries on The Assistant are certainly applicable to "The Cost of Living":

> In The Assistant two cultures, the Jewish tradition and the American heritage (representing the wisdom of the old world and the practical knowledge of the new), collide....For the characters these two systems of values become burdens, handicaps, imposers of demands which they cannot meet, most frequently because these demands pull them in opposite directions. ...In addition all of the major characters are the "have-nots" and blunderers in a country which sanctifies success and efficiency....As Solotaroff states, "Malamud's Jews (and his Gentiles) are connected to each other not by religious and social ties but a common fate of error and ill luck and sorrow, of having lost much by their mistakes and recovered little by their virtues."
>
> ...For the most part, [Malamud's] social focus is confined to the American dream as nightmare, in particular terms to a poor neighborhood in New York [in The Assistant as well as in other works] where success, instead of being a goal or source of hope, serves to mock and eventually to envelope everyone like a shroud (pp. 208-209).

3

Ibid., p. 209.

4
The Magic Barrel, op. cit., p. 14. (All subsequent page references will be made to this same edition and will be included in parenthesis in my text.)

5
Shear, op. cit., pp. 208-209.

6
Richman, op. cit., p. 103.

7
Ibid., p. 102.

8
Ibid., p. 103.

9
The Magic Barrel, op. cit., p. 134. (All subsequent page references will be made to this same edition and will be included within parenthesis in my text.)

10

In Theory of Literature (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1956) pp. 212-213, Rene Wellek and Austin Warren talk of all literature creating an "illusion of reality." They first point out the

> danger...of taking the novel seriously in the wrong way, that is, as a document or case history, as -- what for its own purposes of illusion it sometimes professes to be -- a confession, a true story, a history of a life and its times. Literature...must, of course, stand in recognizable relation to life, but the relations are very various: the life can be heightened or burlesqued or antithesized; it is in any case a selection, of a specifically purposive sort, from life (p. 212).

In their opinion, "the earnest writer...knows well that fiction is less strange and more representative than truth" (p. 213). And they continue:

> the reality of a work of fiction -- i.e., its illusion of reality, its effect on the reader as a convincing

> reading of life -- is not necessarily or primarily a reality of circumstance or detail or commonplace routine.... Versimilitude in detail is a means to illusion, but often used, as in Gulliver's Travels, as a decoy to entice the reader into some improbable or incredible situation which has 'truth to reality' in some deeper than a circumstancial sense" (p. 213).

Following Wellek and Warren's line of thinking, I find that Malamud has exaggerated Willy's effect on the Panessas in order to probe the "deeper than circumstancial sense" in which one man's personal decisions, however personal they may seem to be, always have social repercussions, even ones he might not anticipate when he makes them.

11

It might be said that Kobotsky's role in the story is that of "tester." A number of critics have identified the role of several Malamudian characters like Kobotsky to be similar to that of various mythical testers. For example, Eigner, in his mythical interpretation of a number of Malamud's works (op. cit., 89), has discussed the role of many of Malamud's women, including Harriet and Iris of The Natural, as testers. These women take on various identities, from "gentle and helpful Ladies of the Lake" to seductive, cruel Loathly Lady types. Both of these types test the main character's "potential to redeem himself" and attempt to prepare him for her love and for his manhood," or for his role as a mature father figure (p. 89). This view of Malamud's women can also be applied to such men as Kobotsky (and later to Susskind of "The Last Mohican") for they also confront the protagonist and test, as Frederick W. Turner, III, as said, either the strength of his "membership in the human community" (op. cit., p. 11) or his resistence to such temptations as "greed or corruption." (op. cit., p. 18), the former applying to Lieb in "The Loan."

12

The Magic Barrel, op. cit., p. 169. (All subsequent page references will be made to this same edition and will be included in parenthesis in my text.)

13

Richman, op. cit., p. 108.

14

Mellard, op. cit., p. 80.

15 Richman, op. cit., p. 109.

16 Siegel, op. cit., p. 130.

17 The Natural, op. cit., p. 123.

18 Goldman, op. cit., p. 152.
Referring to "The Loan," as well as to other stories in The Magic Barrel, Goldman has said:

> ...[Malamud's] characters confront one another and themselves in a Kafkaesque parable of pain and suffering, to emerge in some kind of moral perception.... [Malamud captures] the moment of moral crisis when his characters transcend their suffering by remembering their common identity as Jews, and recognizing their human stake in the tragic predicament....He seems to suggest that the Jew's symbolic value is his suffering and what he makes of it. By extension, of course, the moral value of this view extends to all men....

19 Bernard Malamud. The Fixer (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1967), p. 256 (original published 1966).

CHAPTER FOUR

SUFFERING AND LEARNING AND MALAMUD'S USE OF THE TABLEAU ENDING: A PREPARATION FOR AN ANALYSIS OF THE ASSISTANT

"Introductory Note to Chapter Four"

As we have seen in "The Bill" and "The Loan," Malamud employs a tableau ending, a technique which Earl H. Rovit has explained in the following manner:

> [Malamud] seems...to construct his stories backwards--beginning with his final climactic image and then manipulating his characters into the appropriate dramatic poses which will contribute to the total significance of that image. These final images usually resemble tableaux, as in the old children's game of "Statues." The dramatic action of the story attempts to lead the characters into a situation of conflict which is "resolved" by being fixed poetically in the final ambiguity of conflicting forces frozen and united in their very opposition.
>
> Thus, for example, "The Magic Barrel" establishes the pervasive conflict between the orthodox and the "new" values of Jewish behavior in modern American life....The resultant tableau is tense and richly ambiguous. The conflicting forces are held in poetic suspension--each receiving its full measure of representation--Finkle with the bouquet, Salzman reciting the prayer, and Stella dressed in white with red shoes, smoking under a lamp post. Each point on the triangle enlists the reader's sympathy, but each is also treated with a a basic irony...and the "meaning" of the story--the precise evaluation of forces--is left to the reader....
>
> In the best of his stories in <u>The Magic Barrel</u>, the same pattern of ul-

> timate poetic resolution by metaphor is evident. In "The Mourners," ...in "Take Pity," ...in "The Last Mohican," ...as in "The Magic Barrel," Malamud successfully develops his dramatic conflicts and then freezes them into a final image which can be dissolved only by the reader. [1]

There are a number of works in which an analysis of Malamud's tableau ending is the key to an interpretation of the protagonist's process of "learning" through suffering -- "The Magic Barrel" (1954), "A Summer's Reading" (1956), and The Assistant (1957), for example, each of which ends with a final image of imperfect learning. I would like to take a moment to consider the ambiguity in the endings of the two short stories because such consideration prepares us to interpret suffering and learning in relation to the ending of the novel The Assistant. That is, because in the ending of The Assistant, Malamud again suggests the imperfection of learning, he thus repeats a pattern through these three works. As The Assistant is one of his major works on suffering, it deserves such a preparatory discussion to clarify the author's thematic achievement in it.

4.1 "On 'The Magic Barrel'"

In "The Magic Barrel," Malamud at first seems to express a belief that love and suffering can make men "better." In fact, Leo Finkle, the young rabbinical student who self-repudiatingly calls in a matchmaker for assistance, has an awakening to the nature of his true self in a way that no other Malamudian character (except perhaps Kessler of "The Mourners") does.

It is Leo's contact with matchmaker Pinye Salzman which provokes his own self-examination and puts him in a potential learning situation. Because this "commercial cupid" [2] is something less than what Leo had expected, confronting disillusion leads Leo to confront himself. Going through Salzman's barrel of leftovers makes Leo feel scorn for himself and for the scholarly profession which had left him "without time for a social life and the company of young women" (p. 175), a deficiency which slowly comes to symbolize to him a lack of touch with reality. When Leo's "match," Lily, places all her hopes on him as "a sort of semi-mystical Wonder Rabbi " (p. 186), he sees that this image does not fit him and regretfully realizes that he is even less religious than he had thought, that his own self-image had been an inflated one:

> "...I came to God not because I loved Him, but because I did not."
> This confession he spoke harshly because its unexpectedness shook him....

> ...Her probing questions had somehow irritated him into revealing--to himself more than her--the true nature of his relationship to God, and from that it had come upon him, with shocking force, that apart from his parents, he had never loved anyone. Or perhaps it went the other way, that he did not love God so well as he might, because he had not loved man. It seemed to Leo that his whole life stood starkly revealed and he saw himself for the first time as he truly was--unloved and loveless (p. 184).

The nature of Leo's awakening is extremely moving, for it is a profound revelation which questions the nature of his very existence.

The story, however, does not end with Leo's awakening. Instead, we are to get a "glimpse" of Leo's "second life," which, for several reasons, seems imperfect. First, Leo consciously chooses to continue living a lie. Although he had considered giving up his vocation, he cannot bear "...the thought of the loss of all his years of study--saw them like pages torn from a book, strewn over the city" (pp. 184-185). Despite his doubts concerning his vocation, Leo's own thoughts, still phrased in terms of his booklearning, show that he is the intellectual after all. Turning to another profession would thus not be easy, so Leo decides "to go on as planned:- Although he was imperfect, the ideal was not" (p. 185). Thus Leo, who has just had a vision of himself as a hypocrite, agrees to keep up a hypocrisy which is only perfect in the ideal.

Second, Leo nonchalantly justifies his decision with an "Oh, well, that's life" - like phrase: "he was a Jew and...a Jew suffered" (p. 185). This weak justification stands in direct contrast to his profound vision of his "loveless" self.

Third, his final choice to pursue his "redemption" with Stella, the matchmaker's prostitute daughter, an unlikely candidate for a rabbi, changes Leo "from moral initiate to moral bunglar...in the sense that his goal of spiritual regeneration is incommensurate with his activity." [3] It is ironic that the rabbi is attracted to the very evil in Stella, to that extreme contact with reality which she has had and which he lacks: "only such a one could understand him and help him seek whatever he was seeking" (p. 188).

Finally, as in many of Malamud's works, the ambiguous ending leaves us with doubts as to the value of the protagonist's awakening. On the one hand, the "rendezvous" holds promise when Leo thrusts forth a bouquet, like a schoolboy on his first date, to the matchmaker's lovely daughter, who matches Leo's own innocence by wearing a dress of immaculate white ("although in a troubled moment he had imagined the dress red, and only the shoes white," p. 192). On the other hand, the romantic spell of the moment is broken when we realize that Leo's hopes -- "he then concluded to convert her to goodness, himself to God. The idea alternately nauseated and exalted him" (p. 187) -- are most likely lost on a prostitute, for while Leo

heard "violins" and saw "lit candles revolve in the sky," around the corner, Salzman, leaning against a wall, chanted prayers for the dead" (p. 192). For Leo, Stella means redemption, his and hers; for Salzman, in my reading of the work, she is Leo's spiritual death, which he is already mourning.

The real nature of Leo's final choice, poetically frozen for eternity, is of course ambiguous. [4] At one point it is even uncertain if Leo's choice of Stella is really his own ("he planned it all to happen this way," (p. 192). However, at several points in the story, Malamud's caricature of the Old World matchmaker and his effect on Leo is treated with a tone of humor. For example, there is the incongruity of the comparison of the fish-eating "skeleton with haunted eyes" (p. 185) to a "cloven-hoofed Pan:"

> ...score another for Salzman, who he uneasily sensed to be somewhere around, hiding perhaps high in a tree along the street, flashing the lady [Lily, on their first date] signals with a pocket mirror; or perhaps a cloven-hoofed Pan, piping nuptial ditties as he danced his invisible way before them, strewing wild buds on the walk and purple grapes in their path, symbolizing fruit of a union, though there was of course still none (p. 182).

There is also Malamud's mocking description of Leo when Leo,

feeling older and wiser for his self-revelation, chooses Stella and thereby unknowingly contradicts an earlier insistence that love, "'by-product of living and worship'" (p. 186), could never result from a photograph:

> Leo had grown a pointed beard and his eyes were weighted with wisdom.
> "Salzman," he said, "love has at last come to my heart."
> "Who can love from a picture?" mocked the marriage broker (p. 191).

There may be a similar tone in the ending, for while Leo's search into self seems to be more profound than that of other Malamudian characters, while "the life Leo learns with" seems to have been worthwhile for the learning, and while Leo's intentions to modify his life seem sincere, his ultimate choice of Stella is incongruent because this choice is something less than what his awakening would call for. In fact, he may well be choosing, as Salzman seems to believe, that which will damn him.

In sum, there is an affirmation in "The Magic Barrel" in the sense that the story suggests man's ability to learn about himself; yet this affirmation is, at the same time, ironic in that Leo's subsequent actions suggest that man's "second life" -- the life he leads after he has "learned" -- has not necessarily been changed for the "better," regardless of the greatness of the "wisdom" he has acquired. [5]

4.2 "On 'A Summer's Reading'"

In "A Summer's Reading," the situation is one in which the protagonist, George Stoyonovich, dissatisfied dreamer trapped by circumstances and tenement environment, wastes time "thinking of a better life for himself" [6] but doing nothing. In this story, Malamud implies that George's static and closed environment, like Willy's in "The Bill," is at least partially to blame for stunting the growth of his will power: that is, that George is a weak character because he is the product of a limiting environment which breeds self-defeat (the story could have been different if the main character had been placed in an upper-middle class setting). As it is, George belongs to a neighborhood where people do not change, where the Cattanzaras eternally read their newspapers while their fat wives eternally lean out of the windows (an image which appears four times in this short story [7]). Yet at the same time, Malamud's characterization of George shows that George's attitude (like Roy's) is his worst enemy. Paralyzed by his own fatalism, he finds that only self-deceit can break the bonds of his prison. Thus, George, desperately needing love and respect, fashions a lie to obtain them. He pretends that he is reading to better himself and lives a momentary dream in which he sees himself as someone better than he really is, someone to be admired: "He could tell they regarded him highly" (p. 128).

Yet Malamud concentrates on George's consequent inner conflict. Guilt and anxiety take hold of him as he fears discovery. "Sick of the human voice" (p. 129), he locks himself up in the sweltering heat, in a symbolic hell of his own making:

> He stayed in his room for almost a week, except to sneak into the kitchen when nobody was home. Sophie railed at him, then begged him to come out, and his old father wept, but George wouldn't budge, though the weather was terrible and his small room stifling. He found it hard to breathe, each breath was like drawing a flame into his lungs (p. 131).

George's self-inspection soon leads to an awakening to his own hypocrisy when Cattanzara, the "changemaker," tells George, in a drunken stupor, to grow up and not to do what <u>he</u> had done. George "sees" that he is still not a "big guy" (p. 130), for "big guys" face the truth about themselves and their limitations. As a result, George feels the need to act, to become what he has said he is, in order to set it all right. This need to "turn honest" leads him one night to the public library to begin to read the one hundred books he has said he has read, and his conflict is, apparently, resolved:

> One evening in the fall, George ran out of his house to the library, where he hadn't been in years. There were books all over the place, wherever he looked, and though he was struggling to control an inward trembling, he easily counted off a hundred, then sat down at a table to read (p. 132).

As Rovit has said, this tableau is again ambiguous. It suggests that George may not have conquered his paralyzed will, may not have found the answer that will make up for his hypocrisy, for his "running out of the house one fall evening" seems to represent more of a spontaneous whim than any deliberate change of heart. Likewise, George merely counted off a hundred books arbitrarily. His decision to read them (the last line also sounds as if he is convinced that he can read them in one night) seems to be a futile attempt to wipe away in one night's reading the mistakes of a whole summer, of a whole life. George, like other Malamudian characters, has a yearning to be something different, something better, but cannot pinpoint what the nature of that yearning is nor how to go about fulfilling it; as Pinsker has pointed out,

> ...the schlemiels of Malamud's canon bear a striking resemblance to the classical folk figure; both desire to change the essential condition of their lives, but each is inadequate to the task. [9]

George may have learned from Cattanzara that self-deception is not the way to better oneself; however, the solution he chooses --actually reading the books--is again only an attempt to keep face. The road he chooses is not in keeping with the "greatness" of what he has supposedly learned, and thus, in a sense, nullifies the learning; while George's vision of self "dignifies man" by suggesting that he has the potential to learn, George's failure to put this learning into practice also suggests that man is locked in a prison of his own limitations.

4.3 "Introductory Note to The Assistant"

The Assistant initially seems to depict the atoning quality of suffering as well as man's ability to learn from his mistakes and consequently to live anew. However, we must look closely at Malamud's treatment of both Morris and Frank to see the author's sympathy for yet distance from his characters.

4.4 "On Morris Bober"

The first part of the novel focuses on the suffering of Morris Bober, a poor grocer locked in the same kind of devastating economic prison already seen in "Angel Levine" and in "The Cost of Living." Although Morris, like Manischevitz and like Sam, has every reason to be desperate and bitter, he seems to have stoically accepted his fate throughout his impoverished ordeal. Bad luck and constant misery have not changed his hard-working, kind, and helpful nature. He continues, for example, despite his own poverty, to give credit to needy customers like the drunk woman and to take in strangers like the drifter Frank.

In Morris' opinion, he is still the person he is because of his adherence to "Jewish Law," which is what he considers to be the disciplining force governing his relationships with others:

> "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." [10]

It cannot be denied that throughout the novel Morris' life of endurance, self-discipline, and generosity to others reflects his continual efforts to remember "Jewish Law," to do, as he says, "'what is right, to be honest, to be good.'" It cannot be denied that as a person Morris has many qualities which are appealing and praiseworthy. There is no doubt that the kindness Morris is able to extend towards all men without discrimination is, as Ruth Mandel has pointed out, remarkable:

> Morris Bober is a pure soul because he is by nature a man of heart, charitable, tolerant and human to all men--to Breitbart the peddlar as well as Karp the moneyman, to the customers... as well as to Frank Alpine the thief. [11]

Likewise, Sidney Richman is justified in praising Morris for his conscious and unyielding adherence to "Jewish Law" in the

face of exaggerated trials and temptations:

> The nature of [the Jewish Law], as Morris defines it, consists of moral principles which, on the surface, sound simplistic in the extreme....
>
> But if simplistic in presentation, there is nothing simple about Morris' adherence to principle, for it is tested in a world so complex and so redolent with reversal and pain that it is at times difficult to gauge success from failure. Morris Bober's lacks become, whether acknowledged or not, everybody's gains. To win, in Malamud's universe, is also to lose. As Solotaroff has strikingly indicated, "It is Malamud's pessimism that has allowed him to make convincing the main idea that a man is not necessarily bound within his limits." And the record of Bober's pain illustrates this point. To suffer out of love and principle is to see the ego die and the self dissolve in the terror of complete dispossession. "I suffer," Morris tells Frankie, "for you."
>
> ...Morris Bober suffers for all. [12]

However, while Malamud is clearly sympathetic to the character he has created, it is a mistake to assume that the author has glorified Morris' suffering. A closer look at the situation and characterization of Morris as well as at the narrative technique shows that Morris' principle -- "'to do what is right, to be honest, to be good'" -- has enslaved him.

First, if we consider Morris' situation, it is ironic that a man as poverty-stricken and "boxed-in" as Morris is can-

not afford such integrity. Morris is simply too poor to be so charitable to every customer who asks for credit; he is too old and over-worked to get up at 6:00 every morning to sell the anti-Semitic Polish woman a three-cent roll, to shovel snow so that the "goyim" can go to church, to run two blocks in the snow to give back a nickel change. While all of these examples are clearly kind acts, they also "cost" Morris money, time, and health, forcing him to live off his daughter and to perpetuate his economic prison ("'for myself I don't care, for you [Helen] I want the best but what did I give you?'" p. 20. Moreover, Malamud has avoided being sentimental about Morris' righteousness by placing him in a world in which he not only receives no reward, but receives even worse than the "evil men" in it. For example, it is ironic that although Morris was the one who needed a fire so that he could collect the insurance money, his rich rival Karp is the one who benefits: "Whereas Karp in whatever he touched now coined pure gold, if Morris Bober found a rotten egg in the street, it was already cracked and leaking" (p. 118). In contrast to Morris, the men who succeed, at least materially, are either dishonest, inscrupulous men like his ex-partner, Charlie Sobeloff, or dealers in "vice," like Karp, who sells liquor, and Sam Pearl, who bets on horses. [13] Morris' honest efforts, however, entitle him only to more poverty, sickness, grief, and disillusion.

Second, at different points in the novel, the author contrasts the theoretical value of Morris' good deeds with their impractical results. When we consider Morris' characterization, we see that one of his outstanding traits is his innocent trust in everybody, his reluctance to condemn anyone. Although Ida cautions Morris to "'count what everybody delivers,'" (p. 39), Morris displays no suspicions: "'The baker will steal from me? I know him twenty years'" (p. 39). On the one hand, this trust, when extended to Frank, is a kindness which allows the assistant multiple opportunities to reform. On the other hand, such trust occasionally works against Morris' best interests. When he was robbed, for example, Morris preferred not to call the police so as not to incriminate "some poor person stealing a breakfast" (p. 40). Yet his unwillingness to persecute the thief cancels out the possibility of returning Morris' goods and peace of mind. On another occasion, when Morris' suspicions of Frank's stealing are confirmed, instead of dismissing the assistant, Morris blames himself and even gives Frank a raise, thinking "the fault was...his for paying slave wages for a workman's services" (p. 102). These examples imply such a "dying of the ego" that Morris no longer has a protective sense of self-preservation.

Like Sam of "The Cost of Living," Morris lives by "a personal set of humanistic values" [15] which he shares with

other immigrant characters, such as Breitbart, the vendor, and the "Poilisheh" (p. 29). Although the Polish woman, for example, was an anti-Semite ("She had come with it from the old country, a different kind of anti-Semitism from in America" (p. 29), she, like Morris, had come with a certain "integrity" symbolized in her paying for a roll Morris did not know she had taken:

> She didn't ask him about his bandaged head though her quick beady eyes stared at it, nor why he had not been there for a week; but she put six pennies on the counter instead of three. He figured she had taken a roll from the bag one of the days the store hadn't opened on time (p. 29).

Thus, despite their differences, there is an understanding between them based on their mutual trust and mutual expectation of service to one another, as I have already mentioned in relation to Sam and Pellegrino of "The Cost of Living," Yet, in the New World, in a society which values, as Walter Shear has said, "practicality...success and efficiency," [16] this same trust in everybody makes the grocer vulnerable. Because he either ignored or was unaware of the underhanded intentions of other men around him, such as his ex-partner Charlie and his assistant Frank ("'Because somebody is a stranger don't mean they ain't honest,'" p. 35), he allowed them to cheat

him. When Frank advises Morris to trick his customers, Morris protests saying, "'Why should I steal from my customers? Do they steal from me?'" Yet, he ignores the fact that in the New World, there is much truth to Frank's answer: "'They would if they could'" (pp. 68-69). Even the prosperous Jew Karp, who had only occasional contact with the grocer, recognized, when Morris himself did not, that the assistant's spending money on alcohol and horse races "added up to only one thing--he stole" (p. 119). He called Morris a "shlimozel," [17] labelled him "inept, unfortunate," and concluded that "because he was, his troubles grew like bananas in bunches" (p. 119). Thus, while Morris' willingness to overlook people's faults is at times a manifestation of his "integrity," on other occasions, poor judgement when applying this principle made him, as Helen says, everybody's "victim" (p. 181).

Third, Malamud's narrative technique shows that Morris' family and acquaintances have mixed feelings toward Morris as a person. While those closest to him, his wife and daughter, express tenderness and praise for Morris, they also realistically point out his shortcomings, seen when Malamud's narrative technique repeatedly takes us into the thoughts of Ida and Helen. Ida, for example, occasionally feels bitter about Morris' incompetence in the business world:

> She has awaked that morning resenting the grocer for having dragged

> her, so many years ago, out of a Jewish neighborhood into this,...On top of their isolation, the endless worry about money embittered her. She shared unwillingly the grocer's fate (pp. 10-11).

Helen, likewise, laments that her father had nothing to show for all of his years of honest toil:

> [In contrast to the other Jews on the block] the grocer, on the other hand, had never altered his fortune, unless degrees of poverty meant alteration, for luck and he were, if not natural enemies, not good friends. He labored long hours, was the soul of honesty--he could not escape his honesty, it was bedrock; to cheat would cause an explosion in him, yet he trusted cheaters--coveted nobody's nothing and always got poorer. The harder he worked--his toil was a form of time devouring time--the less he seemed to have. He was Morris Bober and could be nobody more fortunate. With that name you had no sure sense of property, as if it were in your blood and history not to possess, or if by some miracle to own something, to do so on the verge of loss. At the end you were sixty and had less than at thirty. It was, she thought, surely a talent.
>
> Helen removed her hat as she entered the grocery. "Me," she called, as she had from childhood. It meant that whoever was sitting in the back should sit and not suddenly think he was going to get rich (p. 17).

She notes that bad fortune and vulnerability were part of Morris' life, and thus her comments resemble Hoyt's comments on the Jewish folk figure, the schlemiel:

> Struggling, striving, always en route, but destined never quite to arrive, the schlemiel is both the butt and terror of the gods. At heart he is decent, but whatever he touches turns to ashes; because he cares, he exposes himself continually to rebuffs, absurdities, humiliations.[18]

Ironically, Morris' funeral is the high point of his life in the sense that it is the only time in the novel that Morris' good points are publically acknowledged although these good points are, ironically, exaggerated by a rabbi who had never known him. Both Ida and Helen have to admit that Morris had never been a "good provider" and had never been "admired," in spite of the fact that his personal ethic should have been, in theory, as praiseworthy as the rabbi makes it sound:

> Helen, in her grief, grew restless. He's overdone it, she thought, I said Papa was honest but what was the good of such honesty if he couldn't exist in the world? Yes, he ran after this poor woman to give her back a nickel but he also trusted cheaters who took away what belonged to him. Poor Papa; being naturally honest, he didn't believe that others come by their dishonesty naturally. And he couldn't hold onto those things he had worked so hard to get. He gave away, in a sense, more than he owned. He was no saint;

> he was in a way weak; his only true strength in his sweet nature and his understanding. He knew, at least, what was good. And I didn't say he had many friends who admired him. That's the rabbi's invention. People liked him, but who can admire a man passing his life in such a store? He buried himself in it; he didn't have the imagination to know what he was missing. He made himself a victim. He could, with a little more courage, have been more than he was....
>
> Ida, holding a wet handkerchief to her eyes, thought, So what if we had to eat? When you eat you don't worry whose money you are eating--yours or the wholesalers'. If he had money he had bills; and when he had more money he had more bills. A person doesn't always want to worry if she will be in the street tomorrow. She wants sometimes a minute's peace. But maybe it's my fault, because I didn't let him be a druggist.
>
> She wept because her judgement of him was harsh, although she loved him. Helen, she thought, must marry a professional (pp. 180-181).

There is a certain satisfaction for Helen in the fact that her father knew "what was good;" yet such an affirmation, as Ruth Mandel says, is, in itself, ironic:

> ironic in that the state of grace is unaccompanied by paradise. Redemption is at once hopeful and hopeless, a redemption realistically conceived for a world where a personal set of humanistic values does not effect a

> change in society and does not offer material comfort for the ethical man. [20]

Whatever spiritual "redemption" Morris might have earned for himself offers no "material comfort" to the poor widow and daughter he has left behind. Ironically, it is only after his death that they begin to prosper, when Ida is forced to take in sewing and Frank handles the store.

Fourth, because the narration takes us inside Morris' own thoughts, we see that he is not a silent stoic. Morris often envies the rich Karp and the other successful Jew on the block, Sam Pearl. More than once Morris wishes bad fortune on Karp, a thorn in his side ("'God made Karp so a poor grocery man will not forget his life is hard," (pp. 22-23). Though Morris, like Sam of "The Cost of Living," cannot bring himself to "short weight his customers on loose items," when under pressure, he tries a more drastic, underhanded scheme--setting fire to his store in order to collect on his insurance policy. When the scheme "backfires" in his face, resulting in his near death, we see that Morris is, as Walter Shear has pointed out, clearly inept at anything that cannot be included within his definition of "the right, the honest life." Shear states that Morris (like Sam of "The Cost of Living") is the product of a value system he would at times like to escape but cannot:

> [Morris is generous, for example, to the drunk woman], not with the conscious pride of doing a good deed--indeed, his conscious thoughts are that this is foolish, bad business ["His heart held no welcome for her," p. 7] -- but with the half-awareness that he has done what, for his character, is the easiest course. Morris is the fool of goodness; he does good and helps others because it is his nature, an integral part of the world-view he can only vaguely formulate.[21]

Furthermore, Morris has no vision of himself as a saint and clearly laments, from the beginning of the novel to the end, the ineffectiveness of his goodness:

> In a store you were entombed (p. 9).
>
> I slaved my whole life for nothing (p. 23).
>
> Morris saw the blow descend and felt sick of himself, of soured expectations, endless frustration, the years gone up in smoke, he could not begin to count how many. He had hoped for much in America and got little. And because of him Helen and Ida had less. He had defrauded them, he and the bloodsucking store (p. 25).
>
> Morris was incensed by thoughts of the long years he had toiled without just reward (p. 119).
>
> ...he had little love left for nature. It gave nothing to a Jew. The March wind hastened him along, prodding the shoulders. He felt weightless, unmanned, the victim in motion of whatever blew at his back; wind,

> worries, debts, Karp, holdupniks, ruin. He did not go, he was pushed. He had the will of a victim, no will to speak of.
>
> "For what I worked so hard for? Where is my youth, where did it go?"
>
> The years had passed without profit or pity. Who could he blame? What fate didn't do to him he had done to himself. The right thing was to make the right choice but he made the wrong. Even when it was right it was wrong. To understand why, you needed an education but he had none. All he knew was he wanted better but had not after all these years learned how to get it. Luck was a gift. Karp had it, a few of his old friends had it, well-to-do men with grandchildren already, while his poor daughter, made in his image, faced - if not actively sought - old maidhood. Life was meager, the world changed for the worse. America had become too complicated. One man counted for nothing. There were too many stores, depressions, anxieties. What had he escaped to here? (p. 162)

Shortly before his death, Morris is totally disillusioned. With his suspicions about Frank's thefts confirmed, with his business reaching an all-time low, and with the realization that only astute connivers like his indifferent ex-partner seem to thrive in the business world, Morris, like Sam of "The Cost of Living," suffers the pains of disillusion:

> I gave my life away for nothing. It was the thunderous truth (p. 177).

Morris goes to his grave with a vision of the absurdity and the "gratuitousness of what he was and what he had endured." [22] The pathos of Morris' outcome is, as Richman has said, the fact that Morris dies "without awareness of his own value," without a sense of "the beauty of his ways." [23]

Again we note the absurdity of Iris Lemon's explanation of suffering, for while suffering may have taught Morris to "want the right things," it brought him only bitter moments, and not happiness. [24]

4.5 "On Frank Alpine"

Most of the novel, however, centers on the inner conflict of Morris' assistant, Frank Alpine, as he attempts, through suffering, to atone for the robbery he had committed against the weak old man. Frank is depicted as being similar to Morris in that he too is basically "good at heart," for a guilty conscience leads him back to the store where he hoped to be given work in order to return the stolen money, to confess his crime, and to thereby expiate his guilt.

Frank chooses to "learn" self-discipline at Morris' side because he is in need of a father figure not only to make up for the lonely years spent in an orphanage and later with a cruel foster father, but also to orient him, as his initial chats with Morris show. When he is found hiding in Morris' cellar, Frank appeals to Morris as would a frightened child who does not know how to take care of himself:

> "I couldn't find any job. I used up every last cent I had. My coat is too thin for this cold and lousy climate. The snow and the rain get in my shoes so I am always shivering. Also I had no place to sleep. That's why I came down here" (p. 43).

At another point Frank actually asks Morris for guidance:

> "All my life I wanted to accomplish something worth while -- a thing people will say took a little doing, but I don't. I am too restless -- six months in any one place is too much for me. Also I grab at everything too quick -- too impatient. I don't do what I have to -- that's what I mean. The result is I move into a place with nothing, and I move out with nothing. You understand me?"
>
> "Yes," said Morris.
>
> Frank fell into silence. After a while he said, "I don't understand myself. I don't really know what I'm saying to you or why I am saying it...."
>
> "Rest yourself," said Morris.
>
> "What kind of a life is that for a man my age?"
>
> He waited for the grocer to reply -- to tell him how to live his life, but Morris was thinking, I am sixty and he talks like me (pp. 32-33).

Depicted as a young man whose character is not yet definitely formed, Frank is, at the beginning of the novel, still the adolescent in search of an ideal and a life style. Although he is at first seen as a "hoodlum," it soon becomes clear that at the age of twenty-five, Frank has in fact held many odd jobs and tried out a number of roles, "the king of crime" being only one of the latest. At one moment in his life, he had thought that his true vocation was to be found in crime:

> he was meant for crime....At crime he would change his luck, make adventure, live like a prince. He shivered with pleasure as he conceived robberies, as-

> saults--murders if it had to be--each violent act helping to satisfy a craving that somebody suffer as his own fortune improved (p. 74).

Yet his first assault -- on Morris -- had quickly demonstrated to him that he had, as many times before, made a poor choice of career. The young man who had "shivered with pleasure as he conceived robberies, assaults -- murders if it had to be" now sets out equally enthusiastically (though somewhat hopelessly) to achieve "a new life" (p. 50) for himself in Morris' store.

Yet there are several factors which suggest the unlikelihood of Frank's achieving "a new life " there. Frank chooses Morris' store out of a romantic notion that poverty will redeem him. With St. Francis (though at times with Napoleon) as his spiritual hero, Frank accepts the store as a penance and masochistically falls in love with the idea of being poor: "'[St. Francis] enjoyed to be poor. He said poverty was a queen and he loved her like she was a beautiful woman'" (p. 28). Yet the painful ordeals of the other long-imprisoned storekeepers contrast with Frank's idealistic view of poverty: "Sam [Pearl] shook his head. 'It ain't beautiful, kiddo. To be poor is dirty work'" (p. 28). Sam is not the only "prisoner" who tries to make Frank see the cold, cruel reality of life in a grocery store like Morris'. Practical Morris himself points out the absurdity of Frank's willed imprisonment from the beginning of the work:

> "Personally I like a small store myself. I might someday have one."
> "A store is a prison. Look for something better."
> "At least you're your own boss."
> "To be a boss of nothing is nothing."
> "Still and all, the idea of it appeals to me...."
> "Try the A. and P.," advised the grocer (p. 36).

Morris suggests that there is nothing to learn but suffering:

> "It happens I forgot some of the things about cutting and weighing and such, so I am wondering if you would mind me working around here for a couple-three weeks without wages just so I could learn again....I know I am a stranger, but I am an honest guy...."
> Ida said, "Mister, isn't here a school."
> "What do you say, pop?" Frank asked Morris.
> "Because somebody is a stranger don't mean they ain't honest," answered the grocer. "This subject don't interest me. Interests me what you can learn here. Only one thing" -- he pressed his hand to his chest -- "a heartache" (p. 35).

Malamud further complicates our view of Frank's learning process by switching the focus of his narration from page to page, by jumping from Frank's thoughts to Ida's, Morris', or Helen's, and back to Frank's again. Like a four-sided mirror reflecting many different perspectives on the same personality, Malamud's technique establishes various opinions about Frank's

intentions and character, opinions which are continually changing. These opinions are further contrasted to Frank's own deeds. For example, Malamud's narrative conveys Ida's conflicting attitude toward Frank. When Morris reopens his head wound, Ida is apprehensive:

> Recalling her dreams, she connected [Frank] with their new misfortune. She felt that if he had not stayed the night, this might not have happened (p. 46).

Though Frank's helpful acts contrast with Ida's early suspicions, her doubts continue:

> ...anything he happened to be doing was helpful. Her suspicions died slowly, though they never wholy died. ...Since he learned so fast, and since she had seen in him not the least evidence of dishonesty (a hungry man who took milk and rolls, though not above suspicion, was not the same as a thief), Ida forced herself to remain upstairs with more calm....Yet she felt, whenever she thought of it, always a little troubled at the thought of a stranger's presence below, a goy, after all, and she looked forward to the time when he was gone (pp. 47-48).

Ida then momentarily believes in Frank:

> ...the sudden pickup of business in the store, Ida thought, would not have happened without Frank Alpine. It took her a while to admit this to herself....
> One of the women customers called Frank a supersalesman....He was clever and worked hard. Ida's respect for him grew; gradually she became more relaxed in his presence. Morris was right in recognizing that he was not a bum but a boy who had gone through bad times (pp. 56-57).

However, a paragraph later, Frank disappoints us when he admits that he daily "sold at least a buck's worth, or a buck and a half, that he made no attempt to ring up" (p. 56). Frank's lucrative thievery contrasts to Ida's faith in him at this particular moment and reminds us of her earlier premonition that Frank was emptying the store of its stock (p. 45). At times, however, Ida's negativism is confirmed by Frank's own acts. For example, early in the novel, Ida suspects that Frank is only interested in Helen:

> [She] dreamed, too, that the Italyener had sneaked up into the house and was peeking through the keyhole of Helen's door (p. 45).

These suspicions are enhanced a few pages later by Ward Minogue who, because he reflects the sinister side of Frank's personality, verbalizes Frank's ulterior motives:

> "That ain't your conscience you are worried about....It's something else. I hear those Jew girls make nice ripe lays" (p. 60).

These suspicions are actually confirmed on the next page by Frank himself when he begins to spy on Helen through her bathroom window. Furthermore, Ida's suspicions grow as Helen's interest in Frank increases:

> ...when Helen later happened to mention that Frank had plans to begin college in the autumn, Ida felt he was saying that only to get her interested in him....
>
> "...I am afraid....Tell him to leave now....Morris, he will make trouble....Wait," she said, clasping her hands, "a tragedy will happen."
>
> Her remark at first annoyed, then worried him (p. 98).

When Ida has verified Helen's secret meetings with the clerk, she repeats her warning:

> "By summer could happen here ten times a tragedy."
>
> "What kind tragedy you expecting -- murder?"
>
> "Worse," she cried (p. 118).

This time her warning occurs only a few pages before Frank is caught stealing and shortly before his rape of Helen.

Likewise, Helen's conflict reflects her mother's. Even after Helen has agreed to date Frank, her doubts concerning his identity continue:

> Thinking about Frank, she tried to see him straight but came up with a confusing image: the grocery clerk with the greedy eyes, on top of the ex-carnival hand and the future serious college student, a man of possibilities (p. 82).

Frank's hard work impresses her:

> [when] earnings in the grocery, especially around Christmas and New Year's, continued to rise...Helen felt like her father about Frank -- he had changed their luck (p. 83).

Yet when Frank shows a deepening personal interest in her, by buying her presents and asking her to the movies, Helen's suspicions return:

> He was not the kind of man she wanted to be in love with. She made that very clear to herself, for among his other disadvantages there was something about him, evasive, hidden. He sometimes appeared to be more than he was, sometimes less. His aspirations, she sensed, were somehow apart from the self he presented normally when he wasn't trying, though he was always more or less trying; therefore when he was trying less. She could

> not quite explain this to herself, for if he could make himself seem better, broader, wiser when he tried, then he had these things in him because you couldn't make them out of nothing. There was more to him than his appearance. Still, he hid what he had and he hid what he hadn't. With one hand the magician showed his cards, with the other he turned them into smoke. At the very minute he was revealing himself, saying who he was, he made you wonder if it was true. You looked into mirrors and saw mirrors and didn't know what was right or real or important. She had gradually got the feeling that he only pretended to be frank about himself, that in telling so much about his experiences, his trick was to hide his true self (pp. 96-97).

These doubts later turn into a belief that Frank is changing:

> Helen felt herself, despite the strongest doubts, falling in love with Frank. It was a dizzying dance, she didn't want to....She had a rough time, fighting hesitancies, fears of a disastrous mistake....One night she dreamed their house had burned down and the her poor parents had nowhere to go. They stood on the sidewalk, wailing in their underwear. Waking, she fought an old distrust of the broken-faced stranger, without success. The stranger had changed, grown unstrange....She felt she had changed him and this affected her.... She had, she thought, changed in changing him (p. 104).

Yet this new faith in the clerk occurs only a few pages before he tries to seduce her in his room. After the rape in the park,

Helen vehemently condemns Frank:

> She felt a violent self-hatred for trusting him when from the very beginning she had sensed that he was untrustable. How could she have allowed herself to fall in love with anybody like him? She was filled with loathing at the fantasy she had created, of making him into what he couldn't be -- educable, promising, kind and good, when he was no more than a bum (p. 139).

Yet this condemnation of Frank, which seems so final, is followed by still another more lenient view of Frank as a new man; one of the final images Malamud conveys of Frank is Helen's:

> It came to her that he had changed. It's true, he's not the same man, she said to herself. I should have known by now. She had despised him for the evil he had done, without understanding the why or aftermath, or admitting there could be an end to the bad and a beginning of good.
>
> It was a strange thing about people -- they could look the same but be different. He had been one thing, low, dirty, but because of something in himself -- something she couldn't define, a memory perhaps, an ideal he might have forgotten and then remembered -- he had changed into somebody else, no longer what he had been. She should have recognized it before (pp. 190-191).

Morris' feelings toward Frank are less volatile. While

Morris basically trusts Frank at the beginning of his relationship with him and firmly mistrusts him after Frank's stealing has been confirmed, Ida and Helen never seem to reach any definite conclusion as to Frank's true identity. Their many-sided images of him create ambiguity as to what kind of person he is and ultimately as to what he learns and what he becomes at the end of the novel.

Frank's learning experience is further complicated by the fact that his attitude toward his "teacher" is a conflicting one. Because Malamud's narrative technique gives us the assistant's own thoughts behind his repeated attempts and failures at self-discipline, we see that, although Morris' years of suffering, sacrifice, and discipline impress Frank ("'To be truthful to you, Morris, once I didn't have much use for the Jews....But that was long ago,' said Frank, 'before I got to know what they were like'" p. 100), his view of Morris as the "perfect father" is at times only a half-hearted one. While Morris' interpretation of Jewish Law ("'to be honest, to be good... '" corresponds to Frank's own goal to discipline himself ("'I think other religions have those ideas too,' Frank said" p. 99), Morris' life lacked the concrete proof that his principles had gotten him "somewhere:" "Frank thought about the story Morris had just told him. That was the big jig in his life but where had it got him? He had escaped out of the Russian Army to the U.S.A., but once in a store he was like a

fish fried in deep fat" (p. 67). As far as Frank could tell from Morris' story of his escape to "freedom," what one did seemed to make little difference in one's life. It is at this point that Frank keeps on stealing from the man he continually swears to repay and keeps on lusting after the daughter he continually swears to cherish. At this point, the relationship which began out of guilt ("'I felt sorry for him after you [to Ward Minogue] slugged him so I went back to give him a hand while he was in a weak condition....I put [the lousy seven and a half bucks] back in the cash register....I did it to quiet my conscience'" p. 66) and which grew deeper due to Frank's curiosity about Morris ("'What I like to know is what is a Jew anyway?'" p. 98) reaches a point at which Frank's respect for Morris as an individual alternates with the scorn he feels for Morris as a vulnerable old man he could easily take advantage of. Though Frank knows Morris is like the father he lacks, during this period he is harsh toward the grocer, whose only offense is to offer kind advice:

> "...I didn't have the patience to stay in night school, so when I met my wife I gave up my chances." Sighing, he said, "Without education you are lost."
>
> Frank nodded.
>
> "You're still young," Morris said. "A young man without a family is free. Don't do what I did."
>
> "I won't," Frank said.
>
> But the grocer didn't seem to be-

> lieve him. It made the clerk uncomfortable to see the wet-eyed old bird brooding over him. His pity leaks out of his pants, he thought....(p. 68)

Though on several occasions, Frank asks Morris to explain the suffering of the Jews to him, he also occasionally scorns Morris for his apparently meaningless endurance:

> And there were days when he was sick to death of everything. He had had it, up to here. Going downstairs in the morning he thought he would gladly help the store burn if it caught on fire. Thinking of Morris waiting on the same lousy customers day after day throughout the years, as they picked out with dirty fingers the same cheap items they ate every day of their flea-bitten lives, then when they were gone, waiting for them to come back, he felt like leaning over the banister and throwing up. What kind of a man did you have to be born to shut yourself up in an overgrown coffin and never once during the day, so help you, outside of going for your Yiddish newspaper, poke your beak out of the door for a snootful of air? The answer wasn't hard to say -- you had to be a Jew. They were born prisoners. That was what Morris was, with his deadly patience, or endurance, or whatever the hell it was; and it explained Al Marcus, the paper products salesman, and that skinny rooster Breitbart, who dragged from store to store his two heavy cartons full of bulbs.... (p. 70)
>
> That's what they live for, Frank thought, to suffer. And the one that has got the biggest pain in the gut and can hold on to it the longest with-

> out running to the toilet is the best Jew. No wonder they got on his nerves. ...(p. 71)
>
> "But tell me why it is that the Jews suffer so damn much, Morris? It seems to me that they like to suffer, don't they? ...They suffer more than they have to" (p. 99).

And though Frank admits that he read about the Jews' "civilization and accomplishments" with interest, he scorns the Jews in general for their self-righteousness:

> ...He also read about the ghettos, where the half-starved bearded prisoners spent their lives trying to figure out why they were the Chosen People. He tried to figure out why but couldn't. He couldn't finish the book and brought it back to the library (p. 151).

In addition, Malamud's technique allows us to see that Frank's conflicting attitude towards Morris reflects his own conflicting attitude towards himself. Like Roy, Frank is "a man with two minds" (p. 97); while a part of him desires "to change his life before the smell of it suffocated him" (p. 73), the other part of him struggles to remain the same. Frank points out his awareness of his own inner conflict when he says that some fated part of his own personality continually thwarted his desire to be good: [25]

> "Don't ask me why, but sooner or later everything I think is worth having gets away from me in some way or other. I work like a mule for what I want, and just when it looks like I am going to get it I make some kind of a stupid move, and everything that is just about nailed down tight blows up in my face....(p. 35)
>
> "With me one wrong thing leads to another and it ends in a trap. I want the moon so all I get is cheese....
>
> "Sometimes I think your life keeps going the way it starts out on you" (pp. 31-32).

Malamud devotes much time to portraying this conflict and its consequent cycle of behavior; a period of discipline followed by a loss of control, followed by self-justification and/or remorse, leading to renewed discipline, followed by further failure, etc. [26] A closer look at the chronological events of the story shows that this cycle of attempt-failure-attempt recurs several times.

When Frank first enters the store as Morris' clerk, we see his first period of discipline and sacrifice for others:

> "I'll work it off for you," Frank said. "Whatever I cost you I'll pay you back. Anything you want me to do, I'll do it" (p. 45).

Frank is able to keep this promise for a while, and even Ida ad-

mits that whatever Frank happened to be doing was helpful (p. 45). Frank himself declares that his sacrifices are for Morris:

> [The Polish dame] he didn't like; he would gladly have slept longer. To get up in the middle of the night for three lousy cents was a joke but he did it for the Jew (p. 48).

Yet only two paragraphs after Frank has declared this dedication to Morris, he admits that he has already lost control: "alone, he did a lot of casual eating" (p. 49). Such eating, hidden from the storekeepers, was like stealing from them. Two paragraphs later, we see that this "casual eating" provokes Frank's first period of regret:

> "Alone, afterwards, he stood at the window, thinking thoughts about his past, and wanting a new life. Would he ever get what he wanted?" (p. 50)

Yet this desire for a new life contrasts, only three paragraphs later, with Frank's lowly thoughts about Helen:

> The girl was in his mind a lot. He couldn't help it, imagined seeing her in the things that were hanging on the line.... (p. 50)

And, despite his desire for a new life, Frank's stealing increases:

> During the day, while she was not around, he sold at least a buck's worth, or a buck and a half, that he made no attempt to ring up on the register. Ida guessed nothing....At the end of the second week he had ten dollars in his pocket. With this and the five she gave him he bought a shaving kit, a pair of cheap brown suede shoes, a couple of shirts and a tie or two; he figured that if he stayed around two more weeks he would own an inexpensive suit (p. 56).

Frank justifies this further loss of control in the following way:

> He had nothing to be ashamed of, he thought -- it was practically his own dough he was taking. The grocer and his wife wouldn't have it if it wasn't for his hard work. If he weren't working there, they would have less than they had with him taking what he took (p. 56).

As a result, Frank again feels remorse:

> Thus he settled it in his mind only to find himself remorseful. He groaned, scratching the backs of his hands with his thick nails. Sometimes he felt short of breath and sweated profusely. He talked aloud to himself when he was alone, usually

> when he was shaving or in the toilet, exhorted himself to be honest. Yet he felt a curious pleasure in his misery, as he had at times in the past when he was doing something he knew he oughtn't to, so he kept on dropping quarters into his pants pockets (pp. 56-57).

Thus Frank's struggle continues, for his resistance to change is as strong as his desire for a new life. The pleasure Frank feels from "dropping quarters into his pants pocket" is followed by another resolution to discipline himself:

> One night he felt very bad about all the wrong he was doing and vowed to set himself straight. If I could do one right thing, he thought, maybe that would start me off; then he thought if he could get the gun and get rid of it he would at least feel better (p. 57).

In his consequent talk with Ward Minogue, Frank declares that he has tried to make amends with Morris in order to "quiet his conscience." [27] Yet, as we have already seen, Ward believes that Helen is Frank's only goal, and Frank confirms Minogue's ugly estimate of him when he begins to lust after her. During his act of spying on her through the bathroom window, Frank's conflict is clear:

> Frank struggles against himself but not for long....
> But if you do it, he told himself,

> you will suffer....(p. 61) He felt greedy as he gazed, all eyes at a banquet, hungry so long as he must look. But in looking he was forcing her out of reach, making her into a thing only of his seeing, her eyes reflecting his sins, rotten past, spoiled ideals, his passion poisoned by his shame.... In the cellar, instead of the grinding remorse he had expected to suffer, he felt a moving joy (p. 62).

A little later we see that when Morris speaks to Frank about the value of honesty, Frank agrees, yet continues to defy him:

> "Why should I steal from my customers? Do they steal from me?...When a man is honest he don't worry when he sleeps. This is more important than to steal a nickel."
>
> Frank nodded.
>
> But he continued to steal. He would stop for a few days then almost with relief go back to it. There were times stealing made him feel good. It felt good to have some change in his pocket, and it felt good to pluck a buck from under the Jew's nose....
>
> When he felt pepped up about stealing, it was also because he felt he had brought them luck. He was doing them a favor, at the same time making it a little worth his while to stay on and give them a hand....(pp. 68-69)

The next paragraph again shows Frank's remorse:

> For this reason he could not explain why, from one day to another, he should begin to feel bad about snitching the bucks from Morris, but

> he did. Sometimes he went around with a quiet grief in him, as if he had just buried a friend and was carrying the fresh grave within himself....On days he felt this way he sometimes got headaches and went around muttering to himself. He was afraid to look into the mirror for fear it would split apart and drop into the sink. He was wound up so tight he would spin for a week if the spring snapped. He was full of sudden rages at himself. These were his worst days and he suffered trying to hide his feelings. Yet they had a curious way of ending. The rage he felt disappeared like a windstorm that quietly pooped out, and he felt a gentleness creeping in. He felt gentle to the people who came into the store, especially the kids whom he gave penny crackers to for nothing. He was gentle to Morris, and the Jew was gentle to him. And he was filled with a quiet gentleness for Helen and no longer climbed the air shaft to spy on her, naked in the bathroom (p. 69).

His consequent, momentary reform is further contrasted, in the next paragraph, to his digust with everything -- the store, the customers, Morris and his endurance, and the Jews' suffering in general (a passage which we have already seen on page 167 of my text). A new urge to confess follows this disgust:

> a repulsive need to get out of his system all that had happened -- for whatever had happened had happened wrong; to clean it out of his self and bring in a little peace, a little order..,the impulse came on him to spill everything now, now, he had strained to heave it up, but it was

> like tearing up your whole life, with the broken roots and blood (p. 73).

And this desperate urge to confess again leads, in the next paragraph, to a desperate effort to justify his inability to confess:

> He argued with himself that he was smart in not revealing to the grocer more than he had. Enough was enough; besides, how much of a confession was the Jew entitled to for the seven and a half bucks he had taken, then put back....And who was it, after all was said and done, that had waited around shivering in his pants in the dark cold, to pull in Morris' milk boxes, and had worked his ass to a frazzle twelve hours a day while the Jew lay upstairs resting in his bed? And was even now keeping him from starvation in his little rat hole? All that added up to something too (p. 73).

Following the failed seduction, Frank is inspired by Helen's self-discipline:

> "I want to be disciplined, and you have to be too if I ask it. I ask it so I might some day love you without reservations."
>
> "Crap," Frank said, but then to his surprise, the idea seized him. He thought of himself as disciplined, then wished he were. This seemed to him like an old and faraway thought, and he remembered with regret and strange sadness how often he had wished for better control over him-

> self, and how little of it he had achieved (p. 111).

This inspiration seems to last and is even repeated some fifteen pages later:

> Often since the time Helen had been in his room he had recalled her remark that he must discipline himself and wondered why it should now bang around in his head like a stick against a drum. With the idea of self-control came the feeling of the beauty of it -- the beauty of a person being able to do things the way he wanted to, to do good if he wanted; and this feeling was followed by regret -- of the slow dribbling away, starting long ago, of his character, without him lifting a finger to stop it....From now on he would keep his mind on tomorrow, and tomorrow take up the kind of life that he saw he valued more than how he had been living. He would change and live in a worthwhile way (pp. 125-126).

At this high point, Malamud could have ended the work with this being the protagonist's "triumphant insight." [28] Instead, Malamud has more failure and frustration follow. Frank begins to return the stolen money, but he compromises his values when he decides to re-steal one of the six dollars he repays. He then despairs when Morris dismisses him: "'This shouldn't be happening to me, for I am a different person now'" (p. 129). It seems that as Frank's ideals become more noble, his loss of control becomes more drastic, for following Morris' dismissal

of him, his consequent depression leads to his desperate, drunken disgracing of the woman he supposedly loves. The rape of Helen is, of course, followed by more regret at not being able to discipline himself "the way he wanted to:"

> 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 (p. 137)....
>
> Oh my God, why did I do it? Why did I ever do it?
>
> ...His thoughts would forever suffocate him. He had failed once too often, He should somewhere have stopped hating the world, got a decent education, a job, a nice girl. He had lived without will, betrayed every good intention (p. 138)....
>
> ...His goddamned life had pushed him wherever it went; he had led it nowhere. He was blown around in any breath that blew, owned nothing, not even experience to show for the years he had lived (p. 139).

This regret leads to another resolution to start a new life:

> He hadn't intended wrong, but he had done it; now he intended right. He would do anything [Helen] wanted, and if she wanted nothing he would do something, what he should do; and he would do it all on his own will, nobody pushing him but himself. He would do it with discipline and with love (p. 145).

This new resolution leads to another period of self-sacrifice

for the Bobers, the longest in the novel. Frank pays back the stolen money, works in the store in Morris' absence, schemes to make more money for them, gets a night job, and confesses his earlier crimes. After both Ward Minogue and Morris die, Frank literally becomes the grocer (pp. 191-192). Likewise, he becomes the father who schemes to send Helen to college: "All he asked for himself was the privilege of giving her something she couldn't give back" (p. 186). Had it been Malamud's intention to do so, he could have ended the work with one of his typical tableau endings, one showing Frank actually achieving self-discipline. However, again the author makes it clear that failure follows every period of self-control. Even during Frank's longest period of self-control, he again despairs, becomes impatient, momentarily loses control, and regains it:

> "...why am I killing myself so?" He gave himself many unhappy answers, the best being that while he was doing this he was doing nothing worse.
>
> But then he took to doing things he had promised himself he never would again....He climbed up the air shaft to spy on Helen in the bathroom....And in the store he took to cheating the customers....
>
> Then one day, for no reason he could give, though the reason felt familiar, he stopped climbing up the air shaft to peek at Helen, and he was honest in the store (pp. 189-190).

Thus, it is clear that the cycle of attempt-failure-

attempt is repeated several times in the novel. This seemingly endless cycle is resolved with a tableau ending showing Frank's conversion to Judaism:

> One day in April Frankie went to the hospital and had himself circumcised. For a couple of days he dragged himself around with a pain between the legs. The pain enraged and inspired him. After Passover he became a Jew (p. 192).

4.6 "On the Ambiguous Ending of The Assistant"

The basic critical debate concerning the novel has centered on whether or not his resolution shows that the assistant has actually learned, from his grocery store ordeal, to discipline himself.

Several critics who believe that Frank has definitely changed his life have made declarations such as the following: Sam Bluefarb has said that "redemptions do take place in Malamud and that the best [is] exemplified in Frank Alpine;" [29] William Freedman has said that Frank "has been painfully transformed from 'uncircumcised dog!', from undisciplined beast, to circumcised Jew, the 'man of stern morality;'" [30] and Ihab Hassen has written that "the regeneration of Frank -- his literal and symbolic conversion to the Jewish faith -- is the true theme of the book" (though he adds that this "regeneration, at best, is a strange and mixed thing"). [31]

While these critics have made no distinction between Frank's final period of self-sacrifice and his conversion to Judaism, Bellman has pointed out the fact that Frank first "atones for all his wrongs to Morris Bober's family, and then converts to Judaism." [32] In my opinion, it is important to note that the resolution of the conflict is divided into these two parts.

On the one hand, concerning Frank's final period of self-

sacrifice, it is clear that Frank is on the right road to self-discipline. He has demonstrated that he can consciously overcome temptation for longer and longer periods of time. Helen's declaration that Frank is not the same man occurs precisely after Ward Minogue, the sinister side of Frank Alpine, has died. However, as we have seen, throughout the novel the image of Frank as basically a well-intentioned man, "struggling, striving, always en route," [33] has been complicated by the ambiguity of Frank's reflected images and by his characterization as a man full of conflict. Thus, by the time we reach the part of the novel dealing with Frank's attempt to atone for his past sins by literally taking the dead grocer's place, we have been prepared by Malamud's portrayal of the repetitive attempt-failure-attempt cycle to wonder if Frank's new identity is really more promising than any of his former attempts at a new life. In contrast with this endless cycle, Helen's exclamation that "there could be an end to the bad and a beginning of good" (p. 190) resembles Iris Lemon's arbitrary division of the process of learning into only "two lives," one to learn with and one to live with afterwards. The attempt-failure-attempt pattern repeated throughout The Assistant as well as throughout The Natural suggests that learning takes many "lives," as William Freedman has said:

> the lessons of The Natural are the

> lessons of The Assistant. Habits nourished a lifetime do not readily loosen their bite. Nor can past sins be brushed away with a flick of the will....
>
> To die out of the old life and be reborn is not the work of days.[34]

Frank himself notes, "'To do what he had to do he needed years'" (p. 147).

On the other hand, because Malamud has refrained from giving us his own editorial comments as well as Frank's thoughts on the matter, the meaning of Frank's actual conversion remains ambiguous. As in "The Magic Barrel" and "A Summer's Reading," the novel ends with an ambiguous tableau; it could hold, as Ihab Hassen has pointed out, several different yet simultaneous symbolic meanings:

> The act is one of self-purification, of initiation too, in Frank's case, but it is also an act of self-repudiation, if not, as some may be tempted to say, of symbolic castration.[35]

Following Frank's final period of true sacrifice, his final choice of Judaism, like Leo Finkle's final choice of Stella and George's decision to read, seems anti-climatic for several reasons.

First, as Sanford Pinsker has pointed out, there is some doubt as to whether or not Frank actually understood Morris'

definition of what it meant to him to be a "Jew." [36] The interest Frank took in the Jews shortly before his conversion (some forty pages before it) indicates his mixed feelings of curiosity and scorn, rather than any interest in their religious philosophy:

> He read a book about the Jews, a short history. He had many times seen this book on one of the library shelves and had never taken it down, but one day he checked it out to satisfy his curiosity. He read the first part with interest, but after the Crusades and the Inquisition, when the Jews were having it tough, he had to force himself to keep reading. He skimmed the bloody chapters but read slowly the ones about their civilization and accomplishments. He also read about the ghettos, where the half-bearded prisoners spent their lives trying to figure out why they were the Chosen People. He tried to figure out why but couldn't. He couldn't finish the book and brought it back to the library (pp. 150-151).

Only two paragraphs before his conversion, when Frank is again reading about the Jews, this time in the Bible, he admits that he reads it to pass the time,"to keep from getting nervous" when there were few customers (p. 192). Frank's identification with its content -- "he sometimes thought there were parts he could have written himself" -- may be only an identification with the descriptions of suffering and not with its religious or ethical principles. In addition, Frank, who had

earlier noted that the grocer was not a man of ritual -- that he did not go to the synagogue, keep kosher, wear a skull cap, or close the store on Jewish holidays (p. 99) -- makes a final choice in favor of ritualistic circumcision. This choice of ritual indicates that he may have misunderstood Morris' insistence that to be a Jew is to follow the moral principles of the Law, as we have already seen ("'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'" p. 99). As Pinsker has said, Frank has most likely converted to "a Judaism he does not understand and which cannot possibly sustain him." [37]

Second, instead of a serious, well-thought-out plan representing his conviction that Judaism was a superior creed to to his former Catholic faith, Frank's final act, in my opinion, is somewhat impulsive and spontaneous ("One day in April Frank went to the hospital and had himself circumcised"). Although Frank chooses spring, the appropriate time for rebirth, the narrator's use of "one day," is like his earlier use of the term to describe his sudden "brainstorms": "One day he got another idea. He pasted a sign in the window: 'Hot Sandwiches and Hot Soup to Go'" (p. 184). The final use of "one day" again shows the suddenness of Frank's decision, for in the paragraph just before the one telling of the conversion, Frank

still sees himself as St. Francis ("St. F."), p. 192. Likewise, we have seen this same type of temporal adverb used to describe other resolutions, which, although they seemed to be sincere, were followed by conscious trangressions:

> One night he felt very bad about all the wrong he was doing and vowed to set himself straight. If I could do one right thing, he thought, maybe that would start me off (p. 57).

This is the resolution which precedes Frank's conscious spying on Helen. Another period of loss of control is followed by an equally spontaneous resolution also described with the term "one day:"

> But then he took to doing things he had promised himself he never would again....He climbed up the air shaft to spy on Helen....A couple of times he short-changed an old dame who never knew how much she had in her purse.
> Then one day, for no reason he could give, though the reason felt familiar, he stopped climbing up the air shaft to peek at Helen, and he was honest in the store (p. 190).

Likewise, we have seen the use of the same term for other rash acts: "one day while he lay in some hole he had crawled into... he had this terrific idea that he was really an important guy.... he had another powerful idea, that he was meant for crime" (p.

74). Thus, the simple use of "one day" makes us compare Frank's conversion to his several different resolutions and makes its true significance ambiguous. While Richman argues that Frank's conversion is not to any specific religion but to "humanism," [38] I point out that the real nature of the conversion does not seem to make much difference to Frank, who like the volatile young drifter at the beginning of the work, sees himself "one day" as the "king of crime," another as "St. Francis, and the next as a new-born Jew.

In addition, we recall that this same type of temporal adverb is used in the tableau ending of Malamud's "A Summer's Reading" in which , with the expression "one evening in the fall," Malamud gives ambiguity to the lesson this protagonist learns: "One evening in the fall George ran out of the house where he hadn't been in years,..." [39] George's final choice of reading the books he has only claimed to have read is only an attempt to keep face, a sudden whim-of-a-solution which is not in keeping with the grandure of his insight concerning his own hypocrisy. Frank's final choice is similar then to George's.

Third, Frank's sudden decision may only be his sudden realization of the way to Helen's heart. Again it is Ida's negativism which causes us to doubt Frank's motives during the time that he was supposedly working out his redemption in the store. While Frank claims that his sacrifices are the result

of his dedication to Morris, Ida mistrusts him, believing he is hiding his real motivation:

> "...I feel I have a debt to Morris for all the things he has done for me. That's my nature, when I'm thankful, I'm thankful."
> "Please don't bother Helen. She is not for you" (p. 144).

During the time Frank works in Morris' absence, he continually hopes for reconciliation: "He wanted to be back with Helen, to be forgiven" (p. 138). Yet one of his own dreams, emphasizing his desire to regain the right to her bedroom, seems to confirm Ida's suspicions that Frank's motives are impure:

> ...he dreamed he was standing in the snow outside her window. His feet were bare yet not cold. He had waited a long time in the falling snow, and some of it lay on his head and had all but frozen his face; but he waited longer until, moved by pity, she opened the window and flung something out. It floated down; he thought it was a piece of paper with writing on it but saw that it was a white flower, surprising to see in wintertime. Frank caught it in his hand. As she tossed the flower out through the partly opened window he had glimpsed her fingers only, yet he saw the light of her room and even felt the warmth of it. Then when he looked again the window was shut tight, sealed with ice (p. 146).

Converting in order to eventually satisfy carnal desires lessens the ideal behind the act, and Helen is clearly on his mind in the paragraph just before the conversion, when Frank sees himself as the St. Francis that Helen would listen to:

> As he was reading [the Bible], he had this pleasant thought. He saw St. Francis come dancing out of the woods in his brown rags, a couple of scrawny birds flying around over his head. St. F. stopped in front of the grocery and reaching into the garbage can, plucked the wooden rose [which Frank had earlier carved for Helen and which she had thrown away] out of it. He tossed it into the air and it turned into a real flower that he caught in his hand. With a bow he gave it to Helen, who had just come out of the house. "Little sister, here is your little sister the rose." From him she took it, although it was with love and best wishes of Frank Alpine (p. 192).

In this paragraph his religious ideals are still confused with his romantic ambitions. If his being a good Catholic meant that he might soften Helen, then he would consider being one; if his being an observant Jew meant that he might reach her, then he would consider becoming a Jew instead. Recognizing the fact that for a Gentile there was little hope of winning a Jewish girl ("He wanted her but the facts made a terrible construction. They were Jews and he was not" p. 72), he opts to become a Jew. Earlier, Helen's warning, "'Don't forget I'm

Jewish'" (p. 97), had provoked Frank to ask Morris "the next morning...'What I like to know is what is a Jew anyway?'" (p. 98). Later her cry, "'Dog, uncircumcised dog'" (p. 133), which had terminated their relationship, provoked Frank to search for the "magic word" (p. 186) that would make him "exist" again (p. 146). Yet even the word "Jew" may not be the answer. If we recall Helen's attitude towards her predicament and towards her future ("'I want a different life from mine now or yours [speaking to Louis Karp]. I don't want a storekeeper for a husband'" p. 38), we see that Frank may still be making the wrong decision as to how to win her, as Eigner has noted:

> [Helen's] own attitude towards her father's poverty makes it clear that she will never respect Frank once he has completed his new project of taking the saintlike Morris Bober's place. "Who can admire a man passing his life in such a store?" she says of her dead father. "He buried himself in it; he didn't have the imagination to know what he was missing. He made himself a victim. He could, with a little more courage, have been more than he was." [40]

Fourth, Frank's words "the pain enraged and inspired him" show the same masochistic inclination he has had in general throughout his "fatal circle of guilt, recrimination, and failure" [41] and in particular in his attitude toward one of the books Helen loved,-- Crime and Punishment, which, similarly,

"repelled and yet fascinated him:"

> Crime and Punishment repelled and yet fascinated him, with everybody in the joint confessing to something every time he opened his yap -- to some weakness, or sickness, or crime (p. 86).

In Frank's eyes, if the robbery was his "crime," perpetuality in the "rat hole" -- the store -- had to be its proper "punishment," for his final period of sacrifice corresponds to his obsession to stay in the store at whatever cost:

> He thought endlessly of escape but that would be what he always did best -- beat it. This time he would stay. They would carry him out in a box. When the walls caved in they could dig for him with shovels (p. 152).

The pain of circumcision ensures his willed identity as a sufferer, as a "born prisoner" (p. 70), as a Jew ("Suffering, he thought, is like a piece of goods. I bet the Jews could make a suit of clothes out of it. The other funny thing is that there are more of them around than anybody knows about" (himself, for example, p. 181). Yet Morris sheds doubt on Frank's change of heart when he thinks, "Who could stay in such a place but a goy whose heart was stone?" (p. 153). Whether or not such masochism can lead to purification as Frank thinks it does in

Crime and Punishment is a question left outside of the novel's scope. What is clear from the attitudes of the other characters in the novel is that, by becoming another Morris down to the very last detail -- circumcision, Frank is choosing only more imprisonment. If we recall that Morris believed that "the store had improved not because this cellar dweller was a magician, but because he was not Jewish" (p. 63), then we see that Frank is choosing that which may well doom both the store and his future relationships with people in the neighborhood ("The goyim in the neighborhood were happier with one of their own. A Jew stuck in their throats" p. 63). Even Helen had found it hard to believe that any virtue was to be gained by such imprisonment, that anyone could be grateful to Morris for "'taking [him] into his stinking store and making a prisoner out of [him] '" (p. 188). In sum, as Pinsker has pointed out, Frank's circumcision shows that he

> [confuses] his own masochism with the martyrs from his Catholic sensibility and the Jewishness of his grocer boss. In this way, he becomes the moral schlemiel, the man whose estimate of the situation is as wrong-headed as his strategies for attaining moral perfection.... [42] Frank Alpine emerges as more schlemiel than authentic Jew, more a victim of his desire for sainthood than actual "saint" ....[He] speeds toward a destiny (or destination?) he does not understand, duping himself with the belief that he is no longer the

> "assistant" and that Bober's humanity will soon be his. [43]

Furthermore, Frank's final words "the pain enraged and inspired him" remind us of Leo Finkle's thoughts on his final choice of redemption through Stella: "He then concluded to convert her to goodness, himself to God. The idea alternately nauseated and exalted him." [44] We therefore recall the ambiguity Malamud has fashioned around Leo's final choice -- that Stella is an unlikely candidate for the rabbi when we contrast his desire to be close to "the evil in her" with the greatness of his self-revelation, as we have seen. As Frank's final insight parallels Leo's in construction, it also holds similar ambiguities.

Fifth, Frank chooses circumcision as an outward sign that would indicate to others ("'All my life I wanted to accomplish something worth while -- a thing people will say took a little doing'" p. 32) how much he had changed:

> How could [Helen] know what was going on in him? If she ever looked at him again she would see the same guy on the outside. He could see out but nobody could see in (p. 148).

Yet, although Frank's final sacrifices show that he is no longer the adolescent, at the end of the novel he is still relying on "external supports" to discipline him -- a new moustache, Mor-

ris' apron, a circumcision -- rather than "on his own resources." [45] The unanswered question still remains -- will circumcision and conversion to Judaism keep him from "going astray" when his old Catholic faith had not?

In conclusion, the two-part resolution does not represent Frank's actual "redemption," but rather one more symbolic attempt to reach it. The contrast of his final period of sacrifice with the short loss of control which interrupts it and with his uncertain conversion to Judaism shows that his "struggle is not arrested but in a sense is only beginning." [46] As in "The First Seven Years," the ambiguity of the ending demonstrates that there is really no sure way of knowing whether one has made the right choice. To reduce the theme to a simple statement about the "success" Frank achieves at Morris' side is to ignore the complexity of the psychological realities Malamud has depicted throughout the novel. As in The Natural, the cycle of the protagonist's attempts and failures shows that one may need many "lives" in order to learn from suffering and suggests that, even then, learning may be unlikely, though it is not totally absurd. Neither Frank as learner nor Morris as teacher is glorified by the author; the contrast of their small "victories" with their inescapable weaknesses shows not their sainthood, but only their ultimate humanity.

4.7 "A Final Note on Malamud's Vision of the Imperfection of Learning"

In "The Magic Barrel," "A Summer's Reading," and The Assistant, Malamud has shown that one can "learn" something about one's nature and can have an awakening which leads to a desire to change one's life accordingly. Yet, despite one's good intentions, change does not necessarily follow just because one has learned. "The Magic Barrel" and "A Summer's Reading," which give us only a brief glimpse of the protagonist's "second life," leave us with a view of the protagonist's "new life" as imperfect and inadequate to effect the desired change. The short story form, however, allows the author to show only the first and second lives of the vicious circle that is suffering and learning; he uses his tableau endings to impart a feeling of the continuity of the same process outside of the story's range. The Assistant also ends with a view of the protagonist's new life as imperfect. Yet the longer length of the novel form gives the author the time and space necessary to demonstrate just how endless the process of learning can be, how absurd the first and second life-concept is. The Assistant and The Natural, as novels, both have lent themselves to a demonstration of learning as a repetitive, never-ending cycle of attempt-failure-attempt as man approaches the desired goal, though he may never really reach it.

Still in all, in "The Magic Barrel," "A Summer's Read-

ing," and The Assistant, what is outstanding is each protagonist's attempt at self-improvement. Such resolutions as those in these three works then are in keeping with the personal philosophy Malamud expressed in a 1958 interview, just a year after The Assistant appeared:

> The purpose of the writer...is to keep civilization from destroying itself. My premise...is that we will not destroy each other. My premise is that we will live on. We will seek a better life. We may not become better, but at least we will seek betterment.[47]

Notes for Chapter Four

1
In "Bernard Malamud and the Jewish Tradition," reprinted as "The Jewish Literary Tradition" in Field and Field's Bernard Malamud and the Critics, op. cit., pp. 6-7. (All subsequent page references to Rovit's article will be made to Field and Field's reprinting.)

2
The Magic Barrel, op. cit., p. 179. (All subsequent page references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in my text.)

3
Sanford Pinsker in "The Schlemiel as Moral Bunglar -- Bernard Malamud's Ironic Heroes, " reprinted as "Bernard Malamud's Ironic Heroes" in Field and Field's Bernard Malamud, op. cit., p. 49. (All subsequent page references to Pinsker's article will be made to Field and Field's reprinting.)

4
As Pinsker has said:

> The concluding tableau crystallizes the matter of Finkle's "salvation" and/or "destruction" without providing the luxury of a clear reading direction. On the one hand, Finkle runs toward Stella seeking "in her, his own redemption" in ways which make this passionate rabbinical student seem almost akin to the Biblical Hosea. On the other hand, however, Salzman is always just "around the corner...chanting prayers for the dead." Is the kaddish for Finkle? for Stella? or, perhaps, for Salzman himself? In much of Malamud's early fiction, a kind of ironic affirmation is an integral part of his aesthetic--almost as if movement toward moral change were not enough, but total regeneration was not possible, Ibid.

5
Because this learning cannot be put into practice, I disagree with Hoyt who says that "The Magic Barrel" has an ending of powerful affirmation," op. cit., p. 179.

6
The Magic Barrel, op. cit., p. 125. (All subsequent page references are to this edition and will be given in parenthesis in my text.)

7
This image appears on page 125, twice on page 126, and again on page 129.

8
"Malamud returns repeatedly to man's frightened need for success and status," Ben Siegel, op. cit., p. 129.

9
Pinsker, op. cit., p. 47.

10
Bernard Malamud. The Assistant, op. cit., p. 99.

11
Ruth B. Mandel in "Bernard Malamud's The Assistant and A New Life: Ironic Affirmation," reprinted as "Ironic Affirmation" in Field and Field's Bernard Malamud and the Critics, op. cit., p. 262.

12
Richman, op. cit., pp. 69-70.

13
Alter has noted that:

> The only clearly visible alternative to the stance of the shlemiel in Malamud's fiction...is the stance of the manipulator. Gus the gambler and the sinister club owner, the Judge, in The Natural; Karp the "lucky" liquor store neighbor of inveterately luckless Morris Bober in The Assistant; Gerald Gilley...of A New Life.

He continues that these alternatives show "moral withdrawal," for their idea is to use others "to stay on top," op. cit., p. 32.

14
Richman, op. cit., p. 70.

15
Mandel, op. cit., p. 262.

16
Shear, op. cit., pp. 208-209.

17
Robert Alter has said:

> The Jewish folk figure on which Malamud has modeled most of his protagonists is, of course, the shlemiel, the well-meaning bungler, compounded with the shlimazel, the hapless soul who is invariably at the wrong end of the bungling (op. cit., p. 31).

In addition, Siegel has written:

> The traditional shlimazel [is] the ill-starred blunderer who can expect the worst return for the best intentions, evil for every kindness, punishment for every misdeed (op. cit., pp. 134-135).

18
Hoyt, op. cit., p. 175.

19
Marc L. Ratner has gone so far as to call Helen's remarks "cynicism" in "Style and Humanity in Malamud's Fiction," Massachusetts Review, V (Summer, 1964), p. 665.

20
Mandel, op. cit., p. 262.

21
Shear, op. cit., p. 215.

22
A. W. Friedman, op. cit., p. 287.

23
Richman, op. cit., p. 66.

24
Hassen has noted that in The Assistant "the point of view encourages us to perceive how ludicrous pain can be, how unhappy virtue," in "The Qualified Encounter: Three Novels by Buechner, Malamud and Ellison," reprinted as "The Qualified Encounter" in Bernard Malamud and the Critics, op. cit., p. 205. (All subsequent references to Ihab Hassen's article will be made to Field and Field's reprinting.)

25

In this sense Frank reminds us of another Malamudian character, Tony Castelli of "The Prison," another grocery store prisoner who also fights a feeling of having wasted his youth, a feeling of being "trapped in old mistakes" (The Magic Barrel, op. cit., p. 88), even though he is already living his "second chance." Tony had been given a new life when he was rescued from the Mafia by "a friend" (p. 88) and given an opportunity to reform by his Italian father who had arranged his marriage with a decent girl. Her very name -- Rosa -- ought to have been enough to cover up the smell of his "stinking day" (p. 90), and her dowry, a candy store, which should have been a chance "for him to make an honest living" (p. 88), held every possibility for "salvation." Still to Tony it had been a tomb ("he cursed the candy store and Rosa, and cursed, from the beginning, his unhappy life," p. 90). He had changed his name from Tony to Tommy but everything else had remained the same. Like Frank, Tony seemed to have everything he needed for a new life except the right attitude: "The whole day stank and he along with it. Time rotted in him" (p. 90). Although he had been a "kid of many dreams and schemes" (p. 88), one bad deed had led to another until "everything had fouled up against him" (p. 88), until he was so tired of mistake after mistake, defeat after defeat, that he wanted to scream out in protest (at twenty-nine, [his] life was a screaming bore," p. 88). In The Assistant, Frank's complaint -- "'Sometimes I think your life keeps going the way it starts out on you'" (p. 36) -- reminds us of Tony's in "The Prison:" "You never really got what you wanted. No matter how hard you tried you made mistakes and couldn't get past them. You could never see the sky outside or the ocean because you were in a prison" (pp. 93-94). Malamud repeatedly shows that man's own attitude toward his past is his worst enemy, his greatest obstacle on the path toward change, and "The Prison," like The Assistant, suggests that the psychological kind of prison is as confining as the economic.

26

William Freedman has talked of this cycle:

> Alpine's trap is a fatal circle of guilt, recrimination, and failure. An impatient, often criminal act leads to guilt. Self-hatred born of guilt demands punishment in the form of another self-destructive gesture which adds to the weight of guilt, renews the demand for punishment, engenders another crime, and so on (op. cit., p. 161).

27 See page 166 of my text for the direct quote.

28 An expression used by Fidelman, protagonist of "The Last Mohican," to describe the moment at which he believes he has awakened to the nature of his true self (collected in The Magic Barrel, op. cit., p. 160). See Chapter Six, Section Two of this thesis.

29 Bluefarb, op. cit., pp. 73-74.

30 Freedman, op. cit., p. 165.

31 Hassen, op. cit., p. 202.

32 Bellman, op. cit., p. 15.

33 Hoyt, op. cit., p. 175.

34 Freedman, op. cit., p. 163.

35 Ihab Hassen in Radical Innocence, p. 168, quoted by Bellman, op. cit., p. 15.

36 Pinsker, op. cit., p. 53.

37 Ibid.

38 Richman, op. cit., p. 71.

39 The Magic Barrel, op. cit., p. 128.

40 Eigner, op. cit., p. 96.

41 Freedman, op. cit., p. 161.

42 Pinsker, op. cit., p. 51.

43 Ibid., p. 54.

44 The Magic Barrel, op. cit., p. 187.

45 Freedman, op. cit., p. 163.

46 Richman, op. cit., p. 74.

47 Quoted by Field and Field in Bernard Malamud, op. cit., p. 7.

CHAPTER FIVE

IMPERFECT LEARNING SEEN IN THREE LATER STORIES BY MALAMUD

5.1 "On 'The Mourners'"

In "The Mourners," an unsociable old man named Kessler, who had some thirty years earlier deserted his wife and family, is forced to recall his long-forgotten mistake when some of his fellow tenement dwellers get together to have him evicted.

At first, Kessler feels that he is the victim of unjust cruelty:

> "What did I do to you? ...Who throws out of his house a man that he lived there ten years and pays every month on time his rent? What did I do, tell me? Who hurts a man without reason? Are you a Hitler or a Jew?" [1]

In part, Kessler's protests are justified, for he becomes a mere scapegoat, the target for the frustrations of the revengeful janitor, Ignace, and the ambitious landlord, Gruber; the brute force they instigate against the weak and bony Jew [2] makes us pity him:

> ...the marshal appeared with two brawny assistants....Despite Kessler's wailing and carrying on the two assistants methodically removed his meager furniture and set it out on the sidewalk. After that they got Kessler out, though they had to break open the bathroom door because the old man had locked himself in there. He shouted, struggled, pleaded with his neighbors to help him, but they looked on in a silent group outside the door. The two assistants, hold-

> ing the old man tightly by the arms and skinny legs, carried him kicking and moaning, down the stairs....Kessler sat on a split chair on the sidewalk. It was raining and the rain soon turned to sleet, but he still sat there. People passing by skirted the pile of his belongings. They stared at Kessler and he stared at nothing. He wore no hat or coat, and the snow fell on him, making him look like a piece of his dispossessed possessions (pp. 28-29).

Yet later Kessler realizes that he "gets what he deserves" in the "eye for an eye" tradition. When he is forced to cling desperately to the dirty apartment as his only refuge, when he passionately begs for mercy but receives none, he obviously experiences some of the same feelings of helplessness and desperation that his family must have experienced. Although Gruber and Ignace know nothing of Kessler's black past or of the cruelties he had inflicted, they provoke his sudden vision of his own true self and of the horror of his past actions:

> He had thought through his miserable life, remembering how, as a young man, he had abandoned his family, walking out on his wife and three innocent children, without even in some way attempting to provide for them; without, in all the intervening years -- so God help him -- once trying to discover if they were alive or dead. How, in so short a life, could a man do so much wrong? This thought smote him to the heart and he recalled the past without end and moaned and tore at his flesh with his fingernails (p. 32).

Moreover, Kessler's deep remorse, like Manischevitz's faith in "Angel Levine," is contagious, for his mourning over his own "dead self" causes still another awakening, this time in Gruber, who has a sudden recognition of the wrong of his own cruelty. Knowing nothing of Kessler's real reasons for mourning, he sees himself as the only breaker of "The Law," and so joins in the mourning for himself. Malamud's tableau ending leaves us with both Kessler and Gruber as "repentant reprobates. [3] There is "affirmation" in the story in that both of these common, cruel men come to learn something about the nature of their shortcomings. They were not born "saints," but each seems to become the "man with a soul." [4] There is something positive about both awakenings, and so Siegel may be right in saying that Malamud is, at least in this story, "reluctant to give up on anyone." [5]

Yet, in my opinion, the story ends with a sense of loss, for while other Malamudian characters who have experienced a similar sense of having wasted their lives seem to do so while there is still, theoretically, time to change their lives (Roy and Frank, for example), Kessler, already "past sixty-five" (p. 25) and beyond hope of reclaiming his wasted past or of finding his lost family, comes to his awakening when it is too late to matter. Such an awakening is tragically pointless and only serves to re-emphasize, as Siegel has said, "the melancholic

state of the human condition," [6] for the story ends with a gloomy feeling of mourning. In the last frozen image, Kessler and Gruber are left eternally mourning for the dead, not only for themselves, but also for all men who, like the unchanged janitor, have no knowledge of their own dark nature. Gruber's thoughts about Kessler's situation apply to man's in general: "Something's wrong here -- Gruber tried to imagine what and found it all oppressive" (p. 32). The point here, as in "The Bill," is not the effectiveness of learning through suffering, but "the theme of realization too late." [7]

5.2 "On 'The Last Mohican'"

In "The Last Mohican," [8] narcissistic Arthur Fidelman is forced by circumstances and by a schnorrer named Susskind to learn that he is not an island, but a member of a "Jewish community." [9]

Fidelman's confrontations with this beggar continually remind him of his responsibility to other Jews, a responsibility which Fidelman does not want:

> To my mind you are utterly irresponsible [here Fidelman is right] and I won't be saddled with you. I have the right to choose my own problems and the right to my privacy [here, Fidelman's conscience later tells him that he is wrong] ...just give me some peace of mind. [10]

Susskind replies with one of the more significant lines of the work: "That [peace of mind] you have to find yourself" (p. 153). Yet despite Fidelman's protests, the circumstances of the story force him to continue to confront the schnorrer not only every time he ventures out of the hotel, but also in the privacy of his room. There is no escape to be found, not even with a change of address, and with each encounter Susskind becomes more and more troublesome to Fidelman's conscience. His

"lesson" culminates with what would be a harsh measure for anyone to bear -- the irony of ironies -- the theft of Fidelman's precious manuscript, a symbolic gesture because the manuscript represents not only Fidelman's all-engaging egoism, but also because it deals with a subject matter -- Giotto's paintings -- which he has not understood.

Consequently, Fidelman embarks on a vengeful search for the refugee, which leads him, supposedly, to a more thorough search into self. His wanderings take him to highly significant places, from a synagogue in the heart of Christiandom, in which he so philosophically asks, "Where in the world am I?" (p. 157) to a cemetery where a tomstone reminds him of the "barbarous Nazis" (p. 160) and ultimately of the suffering "Jews." There are reminders of his "Jewishness," of his responsibility, everywhere, although at this point Fidelman still feels "oppressed" by the role "history" or "Jewish tradition" [11] is forcing on him (p. 159). When Fidelman stumbles on Susskind's humble abode, he begins to feel that he is awakening:

> ...a pitch black freezing cave....The place was not more than an ice-box someone probably had lent the refugee to come in out of the rain. Alas, Fidelman sighed. Back in the pensione, it took a hot water bottle two hours to thaw him out but from the visit he never fully recovered (p. 163).

The fact that Fidelman "never fully recovered" from the visit may mean that he has been greatly moved by Susskind's poverty, at least he believes he has been. However, the use of the word "alas" makes him seem overdramatic and even a little ridiculous. Likewise, later when Fidelman is suddenly inspired by a dream about Giotto's fresco of St. Francis giving his cloak to a poor man, the author again makes fun of Fidelman for his late and obvious inspiration; even Susskind, no art expert, had understood Giotto: "'You don't have to tell me about Giotto (p. 144)....Who doesn't know Giotto'" (p. 162). As Goldman has said, "the moral of the vision is clear: the Giotto scholar has missed the meaning of Giotto himself."[12] Nevertheless, as a result of this "inspiration," Fidelman returns to give Susskind his spare suit (too late!) only to find the refugee using the typed pages of the art critic's manuscript to light a puny candle: "'You bastard,'" Fidelman bellows, "'you burned my chapter,'" in a momentary rage which shows that his change of heart may have only been superficial. Susskind chastisingly replies, "'Have mercy...I did you a favor....The words were there but the spirit was missing'" (p. 164).

Yet somewhat unconvincing is Fidelman's subsequent forgiveness as well as his sudden realization of what it means to be a "Jew:"

> ...Fidelman, stout and short of breath, moved by all he had lately learned, had a triumphant insight.
>
> "Susskind, come back," he shouted, half sobbing. "The suit is yours. All is forgiven."
>
> He came to a dead halt but the refugee ran on. When last seen he was still running (p. 165).

It is not clear exactly how Fidelman comes to accept the manuscript-burning vagabond as his "burden." Supposedly Fidelman has come to this conclusion after he, like Leo Finkle of "The Magic Barrel," has contemplated what it means to be a "Jew" -- something to the effect that because the Jews have suffered, every Jew (Fidelman) should know what suffering is, should understand every other man who suffers (Susskind), and should therefore happily fulfill his "obligation" of lessening the suffering of a fellow sufferer.

On the one hand, several critics have written that Fidelman's "insight" -- the learning of moral commitment to others -- is truly "triumphant." For example, Richman has said that "the spirit [Fidelman] had lacked is no longer missing;"[13] Goldman has written that the story's ending represents a "moment of true self-recognition" for the protagonist. In addition, he has said that " [Susskind] has served as the comic corrective of Fidelman's false image of himself and has brought him full circle to the final revelation rooted in the real past."[14]

And Ratner states that "the irony of [his] failure to catch Susskind is balanced by Fidelman's 'triumphant insight' about himself."[15]

On the other hand, in my opinion, there is "affirmation" in the story only in the hope implied for Fidelman beyond the range of Malamud's story, and not in the "success" of Fidelman's insights or deeds, for Fidelman learns "too late." Furthermore, though the author writes that the character has "lately learned" (p. 165), Fidelman's "insight" is not necessarily definite or serious. There are other factors in the work which make this "learning" ambiguous.

First, although Susskinds magical appearances and disappearances are sufficient evidence for Siegel to call him a "heavenly agent" and to believe that his supposed purpose -- awakening Fidelman to the need for commitment -- has been fulfilled,[16] in my opinion, the real identity of Susskind is ambiguous. He is a number of things at the same time -- schnorrer, vagabond, escapee from Israel, as well as citizen of the world.[17] This uncertain identity sheds doubt on Susskind's "heavenly" purpose and his final accomplishment, even though the final image seems to be that of Fidelman eternally frozen in an attitude of repentant awakening.

There are other elements concerning the tableau ending which lessen Fidelman's insight and attitude of repentance. For example, the lack of any detailed evidence from Fidelman's

own thoughts makes us question what Fidelman has really learned. We can only speculate as to what he really feels and as to what he will become. Questions like -- Has he really corrected his false image? and Does he take up an ethical life of giving after the story has ended? -- remain unanswered. It might be argued that these questions deal with events that are out of the range of the story; however, I feel that, since many of Malamud's endings raise precisely this type of answered questions, we cannot ignore the fact that at least part of his intention, as he himself has stated, was to create precisely this ambiguity:

> "'As a writer, I want uncertainty. It's part of life. I want something the reader is uncertain about. It is this uncertainty that produces drama. Keep the reader surprised. That is enormously important.'"[18]

Next, it is important to note that instead of any deliberate or definite affirmation in the final resolution (which the author might easily have achieved by having Fidelman and Susskind frozen in a final repentive embrace), there is a final image in which the reconciliation of the two characters remains forever lost. If Fidelman has learned, Susskind is not to benefit. Instead, Susskind, earlier described as a "cigar store Indian about to burst into flight" (p. 145), has, in the

final paragraph, now burst into flight and will be eternally running from an avenging, uncommitted Jew. Fidelman, in contrast, has reached a "dead halt," which implies moral stagnation and not the achievment of the "peace of mind" he was told to seek. Instead of having arrived at any "insight," Fidelman has really only taken the first step towards it.

In fact, the tone of the story may well be that of a playfully mocking creator who, with Fidelman's final decision of self-sacrifice, implies that Fidelman is still guilty of narcissistic self-righteousness. Since Malamud's technique is, as we have seen, a difficult-to-distinguish blend of objective narrative with the character's own thoughts, the use of the word "triumphant" may well be Fidelman's own boast. Likewise, his sighing "alas," his feeling "moved," and his "half sobbing" may also be evidence of an ego which expects the world to stand up and applaud, evidence of the same inflated attitude of "dignity" and the same "intense sense of being" Fidelman showed at the beginning of the story (p. 142). [19] For this egoism, we might say, Fidelman receives not praise from the author and not even a position of triumph; instead, he receives a cruel surprise -- the revengeful theft of his precious manuscript -- in answer to his own insincerity.

Finally, I would add that Fidelman's decision to give and to forgive is not necessarily made as freely as it ini-

tially seems. Fidelman may be acting basically as Jewish "history" commanded him to; however, although this "history" dictates his conscience, it is not necessarily implied that he willfully embraces any particular moral or ethical code. Perhaps his own background and his own past religious training are facets of his personality which he protests against but which he cannot escape. That is, like Sam of "The Cost of Living," Fidelman may be taking only, what is for him, "the easiest course." [20] If this is so, then perhaps the story, instead of suggesting the triumphs man can achieve through suffering, serves to remind us of the fact that our decisions, even when made much more seriously than the final one Fidelman makes, are to some extent determined and limited by psychological prisons we may not be fully aware of.

5.3 "On 'The Lady of the Lake'"

In "The Lady of the Lake," Henry Levin's search for "romance" [21] initially places him in a potential learning situation. "Tired of his past -- tired of the limitations it had imposed upon him" (p. 99), believing that the past is "expendable" (p. 117), and regretting an "unlived life" (p. 102), this New York Jew attempts to escape into a world of adventure abroad.

Henry Levin, like Fidelman of "The Last Mohican," is characterized in many ways as an ordinary man; yet the high point of Levin's adventures as a typical tourist is an encounter with a "princess of an enchanted island." Thus, the ordinary man, Levin, becomes a rather unlikely "questing hero," and Isabella del Dongo, "elusive," "evanescent" (p. 113), and shrouded in "opaque mystery" (p. 113) as well as in "a Walter Scott mist," [23] becomes a mythical lady of the lake who has come to test Levin three magical times, asking him such "searching" questions (p. 117) as, "'Are you, perhaps, Jewish?'" (p. 106). Her questions are meant to uncover his hidden identity as a Jew and to test him, in the mythical sense, as to the strength of his commitment to his past, to a personal ideal, and to "the human community." [24]

While the story of this self-searching, thoughtful middle-class man abroad seems to hold more possibilities for affirmation than those of Malamud's "ghetto stories" dealing with more absurd physical suffering, [25] and while the magic of the moment promises to turn this average man into a hero, to our dismay we see "affluent" Levin, who has had few of the trials of the "ghetto characters" and none of their excuses, denying his birthright and his responsibility on these three different occasions. [26] While characters like Willy of "The Bill" and Lieb of "The Loan" are denied the opportunity to demonstrate what is in their hearts because their economic states do not allow them to transform their good intentions into acts, Levin is actually given three different opportunities to prove his worth. In this respect, of all Malamudian characters, Levin is truly fortunate; however, three times he fails to live up to ideal expectations, for he is, like Fidelman of "The Last Mohican," lost in the depths of self. Thus, Levin ignores the plentiful warnings concerning the dangers of concealing his true identity. The Padrona of the boarding house, for example, warns him "not to have anything to do with anybody on the Isola del Dongo, [explaining that] the family had a perfidious history and was known for its deceit and trickery" (p. 109); yet Levin does not understand. Then Isabella herself confesses that the palace's art treasures are only reproductions, but Levin, though distressed that he could not "tell

the fake from the real" (p. 114), still does not realize that the hidden message is meant for him. Even when Isabella summons up enough courage to confess that she was only the caretaker's daughter and no aristocrat, Levin refuses to follow her example.

Despite these warnings, Levin's third and final denial causes him to suffer the loss of his dream girl forever. To his astonishment, Isabella is not only a Jew herself, but also a victim of a Nazi concentration camp; in contrast to Levin, who believes that the past is "expendable," she philosophically says: "'I can't marry you. We are Jews. My past is meaningful to me. I treasure what I suffered for" (p. 123). Levin is left groping for her tatooed flesh, for her understanding, for another chance,

> but she had stepped among the statues, and when he vainly sought her in the veiled mist that had risen from the lake, still calling her name, Freeman embraced only moonlit stone (p. 123).

As Hoyt has said, Levin obtains a symbolic hell of his own choosing:

> Because he tries to sell his Jewish birthright for a glamorous dream, both his past and his future are taken from him. He sees on a tapestry a figure tormented in hell: "What did he do to deserve his fate?" -- "He falsely said he could fly." [27]

On the one hand, several critics state that insight and redemption are the end results of Levin's suffering. Siegel has written that Levin, like Fidelman, "learns the consequences of moral cowardice and self-denial." [28] That is, he actually learns, though too late to apply on this occasion, that one must stand up for what one is and for what one believes, and that one's past is not "expendable." Similarly, Bluefarb has said that Levin,

> an ungallant Deceiver, comes, by way of a counter deception, to learn the price of deceit, and the "innocence" of his prevarication gives way, through experience, to a greater knowledge....He consequently is to learn at last that he has hidden from himself what is most precious about himself. [29]

Both of these critics suppose that Levin's cry "I-I am [Jewish] " represents his repentance and constitutes his awakening.

On the other hand, Levin's insight, in my opinion, is ambiguous and is not necessarily substantiated by the line "I-I am." In fact, Levin may have been made in the image of Frank of The Assistant (or Roy of The Natural) in that he probably would say anything, any time, to win "the lady." "I-I am"

may simply be Levin's futile attempt to call Isabella back, to undo the wrong that had lead to her loss, for had he known about her true identity earlier, he surely would not have concealed his own. Proclaiming his Jewishness does not necessarily indicate that he has awakened to the need for commitment to others. Again the tableau ending is ambiguous, and Levin is left permanently frozen in an attitude of defeat, eternally embracing, instead of Isabella, "moonlit stone" (p. 123). With this image of loss, Malamud seems to imply that even three chances are not enough to "teach" the average man. Through his own choice, Levin shows that Isabella's efforts to make him take up his responsibility to his past and to the "Jewish community" have come to nothing. [30]

Thus, while Malamud implies the need for a search into self, he also implies (as he does in The Natural, The Assistant, "The Last Mohican," and other works) that such a search is never completed. Even in an ideal learning situation, the ordinary individual like Levin may suffer defeat as a result of his own weaknesses such as egoism, ambition, and lust. However, through his character's failure, the author makes a realistic commentary on the human condition: Levin's denial of his Jewish birthright is not so much a denial of his "humanness" as it is a declaration of his very humanity, and this denial suggests that human nature itself often interferes with the process of learning about oneself.

5.4 "A Final Note on Learning Too Late"

In at least three works that Malamud wrote after The Natural (1952) and before The Fixer (1966), it is clear that the protagonist has a sudden realization as to his own nature and mistakes. Yet this realization does not lead to the characters' happiness, as Iris would have us believe. In "The Mourners" (1955), "The Last Mohican" (1958), and "The Lady of the Lake" (1958), Malamud leaves us with a view of the protagonist forever alienated from reconciliation. Kessler grieves over his lost family, past wrongs, deadened feelings; Fidelman halts when he realizes that Susskind is already out of reach; Levin embraces a cold stone statue.

We have seen that the lesson learned has come too late for the character to "right the wrongs" he has committed. In each case Malamud freezes his protagonist into a tableau which gives no view of his "second life;" thus, the author gives him no second chances.

Notes for Chapter Five

1
The Magic Barrel, op. cit., p. 30. All subsequent page references are to this edition and will be included in parenthesis in my text.

2
As Marc L. Ratner has said, Malamud's Jew, in this case Kessler, represents every man who has suffered injustice, op. cit., p. 665. Furthermore, Gruber and Ignace, two of Malamud's "Hitlers," represent all men who inflict suffering on others; as Mellard has said, "in Malamud...to be anti-Semitic is to be against the human being," op. cit., p. 80.

3
Bluefarb in "The Scope of Caricature," op. cit., p. 139.,

4
My adaptation of an expression used by Miriam in "The First Seven Years," collected in The Magic Barrel, op. cit., p. 20: "'[Max's] nothing more than a materialist. He has no soul.'"

5
Siegel, op. cit., p. 133.

6
Ibid., p. 123.

7
Richman, op. cit., p. 137.

8
Although the protagonist of "The Last Mohican" is obviously an intellectual artist (see footnote 2 of my introduction), I have chosen to include this work in my discussion because the story itself deals with the learning of the lesson of commitment to a greater degree than with the role of the artist. In addition, Malamud's handling of Fidelman's "triumphant insight" provides a key to the interpretation of the lessons "learned" by many of his other protagonists. Although I have referred to Fidelman's "triumphant insight" previously, I have left my discussion of this story for the latter part of my thesis so as to maintain an idea of the chronological order in which Malamud wrote the works I have chosen in relation to The Natural.

9 "Jewish community" is, according to Turner, synonymous with "human community," op. cit., pp. 110-111.

10 Collected in The Magic Barrel, op. cit., pp. 152-153. All subsequent page references are to this edition and will be given in parenthesis in my text.

11 Although Spalding says that "Jewish tradition requires that those who have must share with those who have not," op. cit., p. 31, obviously many "traditions" -- religious, philosophical, humanistic -- "require" this same attitude. It is in this sense that many critics have said that Malamud uses the term "Jew" as a metaphor for "every man."

12 Goldman, op. cit., p. 162.

13 Richman, op. cit., p. 118.

14 Goldman, op. cit., p. 163.

15 Ratner, op. cit., p. 668.

16 Siegel, op. cit., p. 133.

17 Richman, op. cit., p. 116.

18 Quoted by Granville Hicks in his article "One Man to Stand for Six Million," Literary Horizons (September 10, 1966), p. 39.

19 As Goldman has noted, Fidelman's ego is, at the beginning of the story, inflated:

> Arriving in Rome, he stands before the railroad station, breathing in the romantic air of the city, bathing blissfully in a sudden moment of complete self (satisfied) knowledge (op. cit., p. 160).

This inflated ego is illustrated in the following passage from the story:

> In the midst of his imagining, Fidelman experienced the sensation of suddenly seeing himself as he was, to the pinpoint, outside and in, not without bittersweet pleasure; and as the well-known image of his face rose before him he was taken by the depth of pure feeling in his eyes, slightly magnified by glasses, and the sensitivity of his elongated nostrils and often tremulous lips, nose divided from lips by a moustache of recent vintage that looked, Fidelman thought, as if it had been sculptured there, adding to his dignified appearance, although he was on the short side (pp. 141-142).

20 Shear, op. cit., p. 215.

21 The Magic Barrel, op. cit., p. 99. (All subsequent page references are to this 1975 edition and will be given in parenthesis in my text.)

22 Eigner, op. cit., p. 88.

23 Goldman, op. cit., p. 159.

24 Turner, op. cit., p. 111.

25 Since most of Malamud's intellectual characters, like those of his Italian stories, are less victims of circumstances than are the Jewish or immigrant characters of his stories set in American ghettos of various kinds, the former seem to have more opportunities and possibilities open to them than the latter. Because they have been able to escape to a different city or even to a different country, because they are not "landlocked" in the way the ghetto characters are, their affirmations seem more logical and less dramatic while their failures may be more disappointing and less tragic, as Marcus Klein has pointed out in his discussion of

A New Life in his article "Bernard Malamud: The Sadness of Goodness," reprinted as "The Sadness of Goodness" in Field and Field's Bernard Malamud and the Critics, op. cit., p. 249. (All subsequent references made to this article will be made to Field and Field's reprinting.)

26 Levin's three denials have a mythic counterpart for Christian readers, for example, in Peter's three denials of Christ, as Goldman has pointed out, op. cit., p. 133.

27 Hoyt, op. cit., p. 180.

28 Siegel, op. cit., p. 131.

29 Bluefarb in "The Scope of Caricature, op. cit., p. 148.

30 Eigner explains Isabella's mythic role as the following:

> Turning for a moment to the sources of this material in medieval romance, we should first note that the gentle and helpful Lady of the Lake is only one of the forms assumed by the shape-shifting Fairy Queen. Another of her identities is that of the wicked temptress Niniane, or Vivian. In the first aspect the queen nurses her orphan knight and heals him when he is wounded; in the other guise she seems bent on luring him to his destruction. Actually, though, for her temptation of the knight is simply a test which he must pass before she can transform him into her ardently desired lover. All her actions, in both forms, are attempts to prepare him for her love and for his manhood (op. cit., p. 89).

CHAPTER SIX

ON THE FIXER

Many critics (Mellard, [1] Eigner, [2] Friedberg, [3] and Alter, [4] for example) agree that Malamud's artistic expression reached its highest point in The Fixer. As Frederick W. Turner III has pointed out,

> critical comment on [the novel]... has been strikingly uniform in its conviction that this work is one toward which all the writer's previous fiction has been pointing. [5]

The Fixer certainly marks the culmination of the author's works on suffering in the sense that it is Malamud's most exaggerated portrayal of the victim of circumstance. In fact, the protagonist Yakov Bok is surely the Malamudian character who suffers the greatest trials. A poor Jewish fixer from a small town in Russia, Yakov curses his fate ("opportunity here is born dead"), [6] and so moves to Kiev to seek a change in his luck. Relying on the fact that he did not "look Jewish" and denying his God and his birthright, Yakov ventures into a district forbidden to Jews and takes up a new "goy" identity as overseer of a brickyard. When his true identity is discovered, Yakov, lamenting his apparently sinful denial of God and lamenting his meager ambitions ("he did not envy the rich, all he wanted was to share a little of their

wealth -- enough to live on while he was working hard to earn a living (p. 18)....The fixer wanted better, at least better than he had had, too much of nothing"(p. 32), declares remorsefully that he has learned his lesson:

> he had stupidly pretended to be somebody he wasn't, hoping it would create "opportunity", had learned otherwise...and was paying for learning (p. 64).

However, Yakov's "learning" has, at this point, only just begun, for he soon finds himself the helpless victim of a state plot to incriminate the Jews in a ritualistic murder of a Christian boy and so instigate a nationwide persecution of them. Victim of bribed witnesses and corrupt religious and political leaders, Yakov is pressured to confess that the Jewish Nation had compelled him to commit the crime they had nothing to do with. But from the beginning Yakov, innocent himself, cannot condemn innocent people. Supposedly waiting for his indictment, he is imprisoned for some "270 pages and two and a half agonizing years in solitary confinement," [7] designed to break his spirit and make him confess. In the end, Yakov is denied occupation, companions, exercise, shelter, warmth, food, as well as personal privacy and dignity through drastic prison measures so cruel and so vividly portrayed (often in a timeless present tense [8]) that they dare us readers

to imagine anything worse, as Friedman has noted:

> ...against this poor schnook, this apparently will-less excuse for rational, heroic man, are arrayed all the forces of organized despotic society, with its prejudices and power, its bland indifference to the individual and its degrading and abusive violence. The contest is so utterly uneven that we are appalled...as the odds against Yakov become even more impossible, and as he curses loud and long, and curses still more when he receives in response neither freedom nor damnation, but nothing, nothing, nothing at all -- and then still more injustice and meaningless suffering. And we find ourselves desperately clinging to our own cherished verities...in order to avoid sharing the fate of a human life being crushed like an egg beneath a tank.[9]

Yet Yakov is not "crushed;" even in the face of such excruciating pain, Yakov refuses to trade his own freedom for that of the Jewish Nation, and this refusal to incriminate his fellow Jews is the novel's "supreme affirmation:"[10]

> No one -- and certainly not us -- could have made such a grand refusal under such circumstances. But Yakov Bok, the littlest of men, ...refuses.[11]

Thus, on one level of the novel, Yakov Bok is the mythic hero whose refusal to condemn his com-patriots represents his final

choice in favor of commitment to the human "community;" Alter has stated that Yakov's commitment to a whole nation's fate is certainly one step ahead of Morris' vision of "to be honest, to be good;" [12] Schulz has written that Yakov "wins a moral victory over his old self through his conversion to concern for the larger unit of the group;" [13] and Freedman, upon comparing Frank Alpine and Bok, has noted that Bok

> discovers himself through the private recapitulation of the sufferings, trials, and history of the larger group....He discovers that his personal identity is indistinguishable from his group identity. [14]

On the mythic level, then, Yakov is, as Friedberg has implied, a "martyr;" [15] while other Malamudian characters only approach "redemption,"Yakov, the mythic scapegoat, "finally arrives." [16]

However, Malamud has also developed the characterization of Yakov Bok on another level. [17] He has made use of the same psychological realism we have already seen in his other novels in order to substantiate his mythic hero's motivation and thus to make him believable. [18] As Friedberg has stated (in his comparison of The Fixer with Maurice Samuel's Blood Accusation, a historical account of the Mendel Beiliss case, source of much of the historical material in Malamud's work [19]), one of Malamud's basic concerns in his novel is the development of

the psychology of the common little man enduring such a great trial. Grebstein has further noted that Malamud's narrative technique reveals this intention:

> ...Malamud's most deliberately limited and intensive use of the selective omniscient is in The Fixer, in which the concentration entirely upon Yakov Bok and the total immersion in his perspective, undistracted and unmodulated by side glances into any other character, reinforces the claustrophobic atmosphere in the novel. This is the formal equivalent to the action, which consists largely of Yakov's experiences in solitary confinement. In a sense, by using this narrative mode, Malamud makes the reader undergo solitary confinement with Yakov.[20]

The numerous descriptions of Yakov's dreams, fantasies, hallucinations,[21] and philosophizing distinguish the work immediately from its historical counterpart. In the novel Malamud has depicted the terrible anguish within the mind of this simple man who finds himself suddenly and overwhelmingly caught up in "history" and who, like Roy and like Manischevitz, consequently asks himself time and again, "'why me?'" From the beginning of the work, Yakov, like Roy and Manischevitz, curses his fate:

> "I don't want people pitying me or wondering what I did to be so cursed. I did nothing. It was a gift. I'm innocent. I've been an orphan too

> long. All I have to my name after thirty years in this graveyard [the shtetl] is sixteen roubles that I got from selling everything I own. So please don't mention charity because I have no charity to give" (p. 12).
>
> "I've been cheated from the start" (p. 15).
>
> "Who invented my life?" (p. 25).

After three months in prison, Yakov continues to protest while he searches for some possible explanation:

> What had he done to deserve this terrible incarceration? ...Hadn't he had more than his share of misery in a less than just world? ...True, the world was the kind of world it was ....One dark night a thick black web had fallen on him because he was standing under it....He sometimes thought God was punishing him for his unbelief (p. 127)....
>
> Yet he knew there was something from the outside, a quality of fate had stalked him all his life (p. 128).
>
> But after the visit to the cave he had stopped thinking of relevancy, truth, or even proof. There was no "reason", there was only their plot against a Jew, any Jew; he was the accidental choice for the sacrifice (p. 125).

Even only about twenty pages before the end of the work, Yakov still continues to ponder his fate and his role in history, and

we see that even after two years, he has been unable to settle the matter in his own mind:

> "Why me?" he asked himself for the thousandth time. Why did it have to happen to a poor, half-ignorant fixer? Who needed this kind of education?... Each time he answered his question he answered it differently. He saw it as part personal fate -- his various shortcomings and mistakes -- but also as force of circumstance, though how you separated one from the other -- if you really could -- was beyond him (p. 254)....It snows history, which means what happens to somebody starts in a web of events outside the personal. It starts of course before he gets there. We're all in history, that's sure, but some are more than others, Jews more than some. If it snows not everybody is out in it getting wet. He had been doused. He had, to his painful surprise, stepped into history more deeply than others -- it had worked out so (p. 255).

Through his psychological characterization, Malamud shows how a poor, ordinary man who protests his lamentable fate time and again ("'I'm sick of prison, also I'm not a brave man,'" p. 145; "'How long can I stand this?'" p. 152) comes to make two "supreme affirmations," one as a mature father-figure ("He will protect [the Jews] to the extent that he can. This is his covenant with himself" p. 223) and another as an activist ("There's no such thing as an unpolitical man, especially a Jew," p. 271).

First, Malamud creates (as he does in his other novels) the picture of an "everyday [man] in a world whose basic quality is uneventfulness." [22] Yakov is a simple peasant whose life-long situation, the shtetl, is synonymous with "useless poverty and drab experience" (p. 22):

> "I was practically born an orphan.... Throughout my miserable childhood I lived in a stinking orphans' home, barely existing. In my dreams I ate and I ate my dreams (p. 11)....I've had to dig with my fingernails for a living....I fix what's broken -- except in the heart. In this shtetl everything is falling apart....Half the time I work for nothing.If I'm lucky, a dish of noodles (p. 12).

This simple man's move to Kiev in order to find "work" and "education" (p. 37) reflects his modest, ordinary ambitions: "The fixer wanted better, at least better than he had had, too much of nothing" (p. 32).

In addition to his modest background and goals, there is Yakov's apathy, which further characterizes him as an ordinary man. At the beginning of the novel, Yakov tries to disengage himself from his Jewish background and community and from his own entanglement in the Jewish fate. Early in the novel, he abandons his Jewish identity, explaining, "the shtetl is a prison....It moulders and the Jews moulder in it" (p. 15). After three months in a real prison, Yakov, a pronounced "free-

thinker," "cursed history, anti-Semitism, fate, and even, occasionally, the Jews" (p. 129). And towards the end of his confinement, Yakov, like Fidelman of "The Last Mohican," refuses to accept his own Jewish past:

> his fate nauseated him....From birth a black horse had followed him, a Jewish nightmare. What was being a Jew but an everlasting curse? He was sick of their history, distiny, blood guilt" (p. 187).

In fact, Yakov's later declaration of sympathy for the Jews ("What have I earned if a single Jew dies because I did?" p. 222) is, in Yakov's words, the declaration of only "half a Jew" (p. 223); his desire to protect them is a startling turnabout when we consider the fact that Yakov never fully identifies with the perils of the Jews [23] and never acknowledges the "beauty of their ways."

Although the man who once swore that he had no charity to give makes a later decision to suffer for others, his decision is not inspired by religious ideals: [24] a Jew "'by birth and nationality' ...'I'm not a religious man'" (p. 75). Malamud makes it clear that Yakov, like the average man, is no holy "saint." In fact, Yakov's religious attitude throughout the work is that of a heretic. From the beginning of the novel, the fixer finds no guiding light in God:

> He's with us till the Cossacks come galloping, then he's elsewhere. He's in the outhouse, that's where he is" (p. 16).

When his father-in-law, Shmuel, cautions him not to forget his God, Yakov loudly protests:

> "Who forgets who?...What do I get from him but a bang on the head and a stream of piss in my face. So what's there to be worshipful about? ...We live in a world where the clock ticks fast while he's on his timeless mountain staring in space. He doesn't see us and he doesn't care. Today I want my piece of bread, not in Paradise" (p. 20).

His long suffering in prison does not soften him to "the ways of God." We see, for example, that when he is given some prayer beads and an old prayer shawl, he shows no interest in worshipping God, but rather concerns himself only with survival:

> he examined the phylacteries, then put them aside, but he wore the prayer shawl under his great coat to help keep warm....When Yakov put the prayer shawl on, Zhitnyak [a guard] watched through the spy hole, often looking in unexpectedly as though hoping to catch the fixer at prayer. He never did (p. 109).

and at the end Yakov remains a heretic, disbelieving in God, in mercy, in pity:

> When he looked at God all he saw or heard was a loud Ha Ha. It was his own imprisoned laughter (p. 172).
>
> "Whatever I said he never answered me. Silence I now give back (p. 210) ....To tell the truth, I've written him off as a dead loss" (p. 211).

Rather than a declaration of Yakov's religious or sentimental identity with the Jews, Malamud has made Yakov's final "affirmation" into a political alignment with a group of oppressed people against an unjust government. Likewise, we see how the political consciousness of an ordinary man can change according to circumstances. At the beginning of the novel, Yakov, like many average men, "disliked politics" (p. 20) and refused to believe that the opinion of a simple, only self-educated man could have a social or political impact, could effect the workings of the Governmental Machine, which seems to function independently of the commoners:

> "I am not a political person," Yakov answered. "The world is full of it but it's not for me. Politics is not in my nature (p. 43).

> "I am in history...yet not in it. In a way of speaking I'm far out, it passes me by....Best to stay where one is, unless he has something to give to history, like for instance Spinoza"(p. 55).
>
> "...if you're poor your time is taken up with other things that I don't have to mention. You let those who can, worry about the ins and outs of politics (p. 68)....If I have [a philosophy], it is all skin and bones" (p. 69).

It is on this political level that Yakov really changes in the course of the novel, for during his prison ordeal he comes to agree with his first lawyer that his common life had been uncommonly "mixed up in the worst way with the political situation" (p. 247), "with the frustrations of recent Russian history" (p. 249). When political persecution effects him personally, he aligns himself to the group which his oppressors believe he belongs to and to an identity which he has never been able to fully escape:

> ...for a Jew it was the same wherever he went, he carried a remembered pack on his back -- a condition of servitude, diminished opportunity, vulnerability. No, there was no need to go to Kiev, or Moscow, or any place else. You could stay in the shtetl and...die in bed and pretend you had died in peace, but a Jew wasn't free. Because the government destroyed his freedom by reducing his worth. Therefore wherever he was or went and whatever

> happened was perilous. A door swung open at his approach. A hand reached forth and plucked him in by his Jewish beard -- Yakov Bok, a freethinking Jew in a brick factory in Kiev, yet any Jew, any plausible Jew -- to be the Tsar's adversary and victim....Why? because no Jew was innocent in a corrupt state, the most visible sign of its corruption its fear and hatred of those it persecuted (pp. 255-256).

Although to his prosecuters he publically denies political alignment ("'I am not a revolutionist. I am an inexperienced man. Who knows about such things? I am a fixer'" p. 186), his later imaginary killing of the Tsar is followed by the words of a new-born revolutionary:

> As for history, Yakov thought, there are ways to reverse it. What the Tsar deserves is a bullet in the gut. Better him than us....
> One thing I've learned, he thought, there's no such thing as an unpolitical man, especially a Jew. You can't sit still and see yourself destroyed.
> ...Where there's no fight for it there's no freedom. What is it Spinoza says? If the state acts in ways that are abhorrent to human nature it's the lesser evil to destroy it. Death to the anti-Semites! Long live revolution! Long live liberty! (p. 271)

Thus, it seems that Malamud, pressured by critics and by

"the times," [25] attempted to glorify the "workers' cause," [26] and to show how suffering can teach even the ordinary man "political lessons." [27] Malamud took several measures, however, to prevent Yakov's lofty political declarations from sounding forced or unconvincing in the mouth of a simple peasant.

First, Malamud provides for the plausibility of the peasant's increased intellectual response to Spinoza by characterizing Yakov early in the novel as an uncommonly gifted learner and a devout reader:

> "Torah I had little of and Talmud less, though I learned Hebrew because I've got an ear for language. Anyway, I knew the Psalms. They taught me a trade [at the orphans' home] and apprentised me five minutes after age ten....So I work...with my hands, and some call me 'common' but the truth of it is few people know who is really common. As for those that look like they got class, take another look. Viskover, the Nogid, is in my eyes a common man. All he's got is roubles and when he opens his mouth you can hear them clink. On my own I studied different subjects, and even before I was taken into the army, I taught myself a decent Russian, much better than we pick up from the peasants. What little I know I learned on my own -- some history and geography, a little science, arithmetic, and a book or two of Spinoza's"(pp. 11-12).

> "I want to get acquainted with a bit of the world. I've read a few books ["Smirnovsky's Russian Grammar, an elementary biology book, Selections from Spinoza, and a battered atlas"

> are the ones he takes to Kiev] and it's surprising what goes on that none of us knows about"(p. 15).
>
> "I incline toward the philosophical" (p. 20).

Even the sophisticated Russian girl Zina finds him "more intelligent" than "an ordinary common laborer," "sensitive" (p. 40), "serious, and well-informed" (p. 47).

Second, despite the fixer's "philosophical inclination," much of the political "wisdom" in the work is phrased in the words of intellectuals other than Bok -- Spinoza, Inspecting Magistrate Bibikov, and Yakov's first lawyer Julius Ostrovsky, for example. Even after two hundred pages of the prison ordeal, Yakov's consequential political insights are not original. One of the novel's political adages -- "the purpose of freedom is to create it for others" (p. 259) -- comes to Yakov's thoughts in the mouth of the dead Bibikov. In addition, his final "triumphant insight" is only his recapitulation of Spinoza: "What is it Spinoza says? If the state acts in ways that are abhorrent to human nature it's the lesser evil to destroy it" (p. 271). Furthermore, Malamud has Yakov say that he has only half understood Spinoza's philosophy:

> "Although I've read the book I don't understand it all....I'm a half-ignorant man. The other half is

> half-educated. There's a lot I miss even when I pay the strictest attention" (pp. 66-67).

Moreover, Malamud's narrative technique shows that, although fragments from Spinoza fill Yakov's mind throughout his imprisonment, they appear along with fragments from varied sources -- from the Old Testament, from the Gospels, from stories he had read, and from academic subjects he had studied. For example, when Yakov is reduced to living like an animal, he tries to recall, even memorize, each of these things in a desperate attempt to remain mentally alert, and to maintain his sanity (Yakov "tried with ten fingers to hold on to his mind " pp. 93-93 and tried "to keep in the dark unsettled center of [it] a candle burning," p. 204):

> He remembered incidents from Spinoza's life: how the Jews had cursed him in the synagogue; how an assassin had tried to kill him in the street for his ideas; how he lived and died in his tiny room, studying, writing, grinding lenses for a living until his lungs had turned to glass....Spinoza thought himself into the universe but Yakov's poor thoughts were enclosed in a cell.
>
> Who am I to compare myself?
>
> He tried to recall the biology he had studied, and reflected on as much history as he could bring to mind.... And Yakov also recalled tales by Peretz, and some pieces he had read in the papers by Sholem Aleichem, and and a few little stories he had read

> in Russian by Chekov. He recalled things from the Scriptures, in particular, fragments of psalms he had read in Hebrew on old parchment. He could, in a sense, smell the Psalms as well as hear them. They were sung weekly in the synagogue to glorify God and protect the shtetl from harm, which they never did. Yakov had chanted them, or heard them chanted many times, and now in a period of remembrance he uttered verses, stanzas that he did not think he knew. He could not recall a whole psalm, but from fragments he put together one that he recited aloud in the cell in order not to forget it, so that he could have it to say. In the morning he said it in Hebrew, and in the dark as he lay on his mattress, he tried to translate the verses into Russian (pp. 170-171).

Such mental exercising with selections from Spinoza, biology, the Psalms, and so on was simply a part of Yakov's efforts to survive.

In fact, the inspiration which leads to Yakov's covenant with the Jews, within its proper context in the novel, is also only an effort to survive. It is only when Yakov is chained to the wall and is no longer allowed even to pace at free will that he comes to the conclusion that "in chains all that was left of freedom was life, just existence; but to exist without choice was the same as death" (p. 218). At this point the only characteristic which distinguishes him from a caged animal is his ability to choose or to refuse. It is within this context that Ya-

kov, longing for death as the ultimate choice, five pages later suddenly decides to live, choosing an alignment which would help him to endure:

> ...What have I earned if a single Jew dies because I did? ...If I must suffer, let it be for something....Why should I take from myself what they are destroying me to take ? Why should I help them kill me?
>
> Who, for instance, would know if he dies now?
>
> ...To the goyim what one Jew is is what they all are. If the fixer stands accused of murdering one of their children, so does the rest of the tribe (p. 222)....So what can Yakov Bok do about it? All he can do is not make things worse. He's half a Jew himself, yet enough of one to protect them....He is against those who are against them. He will protect them to the extent that he can. This is his covenant with himself. If God is not a man he has to be. Therefore he must endure to the trial and let them confirm his innocence by their lies. He has no future but to hold on, wait it out (p. 223).

There is, then, in addition to the will to survive -- "to hold on, to wait it out" -- a stubbornness on Yakov's part; his refusal to implicate the Jews in the murder of the Christian boy is his only protest; [28] his alignment with the Jews as a political group momentarily "[validates] his suffering, [making]it meaningful." [29] Likewise, his final political insight on the need for revolution emphasizes this same desire to survive:

"What the Tsar deserves is a bullet in the gut. Better him than us....You can't sit still and see yourself destroyed" (p. 271).

Next, Malamud makes Yakov's final militancy believable by emphasizing the fixer's emotional involvement in it. Only a personal revenge can partially alleviate Yakov's bitterness, and Yakov's imaginary killing of Tsar Nicholas, in addition to being the "just deserts" of an unworthy ruler, is the fixer's personal protest against the Russian Emperor for being so "convinced of of his guilt" (p. 187):

> "This is also for the prison, the poison, the six daily searches. It's for Bibikov and Kogin and for a lot more that I won't even mention."
>
> Pointing the gun at the Tsar's heart (though Bibikov, flailing his white arms, cried no no no no), Yakov pressed the trigger (p. 271).

Finally, as in most of Malamud's works dealing with suffering, the final affirmations of the protagonist, in this case "political insights," are once again surrounded by ambiguity, uncertainty being for Malamud "part of life." [30] While Grebstein has written that the only real "affirmation" of the book is the fact that in the end "the persecuted and despised Jew will at last be heard," [31] I point out the fact that, inspite of the final image of the masses cheering Yakov, not even the indictment and the promise of a trial assure Yakov's freedom or the end of his suffering at the hands of corrupt leaders. Pro-

secuting Attorney Grubeshov's words may prophesize Yakov's future: "'a trial will not save you nor your fellow Jews'" (p. 244), for Warden Grizitskoy informs Yakov that another ritual murder charge has been brought up as a guarantee of conviction: "'If we don't convict one of you we'll convict the other'" (p. 262). While Yakov's first lawyer expresses a hope that public opinion would give the accused "a chance" (p. 252), he is soon replaced by an anti-Semite. Yakov himself sees the hopelessness of his trial: "a reformed Ukranian anti-Semite would defend him in a court before a prejudiced judge and ignorant jury" (p. 254) Also he fears that he will die in the demonstration before he is ever given the chance to testify: fearing a bomb, "Yakov frantically ducked. If this is my death I've endured for nothing" (p. 267).

Turning for a moment to the author's position in the novel, it can be said that Malamud's presence is largely felt in his sympathy for Yakov as the fixer opposes the inhuman characters in the work:

> [Malamud] establishes a continual contrast between the language of all the official proceedings, innately formal and bombastic, and the spontaneous simplicity and pungency of Yakov's own speech....At the same time Malamud's voice, employing the fused style of an omniscient narrator outside the hero but never very far away, merges with Yakov's. Narrator and hero often become one in that

> both express themselves in the same way: lucidly, candidly, sometimes earthily, sometimes in short lyric flights. In sum, what Malamud does, linguistically, is to pit the good Jews (Malamud and Yakov) against the bad Russians. You can usually tell the bad guys by their bombast, if they have rank, or if lower class by their nasty, vulgar mouths. [32]

As Grebstein implies, Malamud seems to sympathize when Yakov voices his "pet peeves" with man and with the human condition. [33] For example, we seem to feel the author's presence when Yakov speaks out on man's strangely selective compassion:

> I'd like to ask him straight out, "Nikolai Maximovitch, will you please explain how you can cry for a dead dog yet belong to a society of fanatics that urges death on human beings who happen to be Jews?" (p. 39).

Likewise, we feel the author's "closeness" to Yakov when his character comments on injustice:

> "The weight of the evidence is against you."
>
> "Then maybe the evidence is wrong, your honor....Do you really believe those stories about magicians stealing the blood out of a murdered Christian child to mix in with matzos? You are an educated man and would surely not believe such superstitions" (pp. 117-118)...."'A dog hangs a dog, your honor'" (p. 119).

Furthermore, Yakov's disenchantment with hypocritical Christians may well be the author's. After reading the New Testament, for example, Yakov concludes:

> "What was there to hear that he hadn't heard before. Christ died and they took him down. The fixer wiped his eyes. Afterwards he thought if that's how it happened and it's part of the Christian religion, and they believe it, how can they keep me in prison, knowing I am innocent? Why don't they have pity and let me go? (p. 190)

Finally, Bibikov's disenchantment with society reflects Yakov's and thus perhaps the author's, also:

> "There's something cursed, it seems to me, about a country where men have owned men as property. The stink of that corruption never escapes the soul, and it is the stink of future evil"(p. 142).

> "'The more it changes, the more it remains the same.' ...[Society] has not changed in its essentials from what it was in the dim past, even though we tend loosely to think of civilization as progress. I frankly no longer believe in that concept.... [Man] has changed little since he began to pretend he was civilized,

> and the same things may be said about our society....I act as an optimist because I find I cannot act at all, as a pessimist" (p. 143).
>
> "We are all prisoners here [in Russia]" (p. 145).

Both Yakov and Malamud seem to perceive human nature as as something low, and these perceptions outweigh the affirmations Malamud makes on the mythic level. We do see Yakov take a step towards maturity when he re-commits himself to his adulterous wife and adopts her illegitimate child as his own; we also see the prophetic-like "influence he has on other men," as Mellard has noted, who "are willing to die for him: Bibikov, a socialist, Kogin, a Catholic, and Shmuel, a Jew." [34] Yet in spite of the affirmations Malamud makes through Yakov's decisions to suffer for others and to actively assist the Jews, what predominates in this work is again a view of the absurdity of the protagonist's plight. Although Yakov reasons that his own shortcomings, circumstance, history, even God's wrath, were to blame for his fate ("each time he answered his question he answered it differently" p. 254), he continually returns to the idea that his suffering is absurd:

> His frustrated innocence outraged him. He was unjustly accused, helpless, unable to offer proof or be believed.... He tried to comprehend what was happening and explain it to himself. Af-

> ter all, he was a rational being, and a man must try to reason. Yet the more he reasoned the less he understood. The familiar had become evil. What happened next was weighted with peril. That he was a Jew, willing or unwilling, was not enough to explain his fate (p. 89).
>
> What had he done to deserve this terrible incarceration, no end in sight? Hadn't he had more than his share of misery in a less than just world? ...One dark night a thick web had fallen on him because he was standing under it (p. 127)...He had fished for a herring and had been snatched by a shark (p. 129)....There was no "reason," there was only their plot against a Jew, any Jew (p. 128).

Like Roy and like Manischevitz, Yakov declares: "'What suffering has taught me is the uselessness of suffering'" (p. 270). Yakov's newly learned commitment offers only a vague transcendental value but seems to hold no practical application:

> So I learned a little...but what good will it do me? Will it open the prison doors? Will it allow me to go out and take up my poor life again? Will it free me a little once I am free? Or have I learned to know what my condition is -- that the ocean is salty as you are drowning, and though you know it you are drowned? Still, it was better than not knowing. A man had to learn, it was his nature (p. 256).

Faced with a view of the absurdity of the human condition, Yakov's

declaration -- "'if I must suffer let it be for something'" -- is a mere defense mechanism against insanity:

> "You suffer for us all," the lawyer said huskily. "I would be honored to be in your place."
> "It's without honor," Yakov said.... "It's a dirty suffering" (p. 247).

Despite Yakov's efforts to endure, there are no ideals in Yakov's life -- religious, philosophical, or political -- which can satisfactorily give meaning to the outrageous tortures inflicted upon him by his captors:

> The fixer's thoughts added nothing to his freedom; it was nil....Necessity freed Spinoza and imprisoned Yakov. Spinoza thought himself into the universe but Yakov's poor thoughts were enclosed in a cell (p. 170).

Unlike Morris Bober, Yakov Bok himself says that he

> suffers without either the intellectual idea of God, or the God of the Covenant....Nobody suffers for him and he suffers for no one except himself (p. 197).

As Friedman has pointed out, Yakov "is not a classical tragic hero whose suffering is magnificent;" [35] he is not a repentant Job or

a merciful Christ-figure. Malamud depicts Yakov instead as an extremely embittered man:

> ...when he thought of what had happened to Bibikov and how he himself had been treated and what he had endured because of Grubeshov, a bone of hatred thickened in his throat and his body shook (pp. 180-181).

Unlike Lieb of "The Loan," Yakov declares: "'I forgive no one'" (p. 193). He assures us that "what's left of [his] heart is pure rock" (p. 212). Even when his trial is finally announced, Yakov still insists that "his heart was like a rusty chain" (p. 258). Although suffering does cause Yakov to change, there's nothing saintly or sentimental about what he has learned:

> "I've had an extraordinary insight.... Something in myself has changed. I'm not the same man I was. I fear less and hate more" (p. 259).

Yakov's thoughts show us that he is only an involuntary "scapegoat," only an accidental "redeemer" ("he was the accidental choice for the sacrifice" p. 128); ironically, the "hero's" motivation is hatred, not love.

On the one hand, on the mythic level of the novel, Malamud's affirmations paradoxically culminate in The Fixer, for Ya-

kov is the only Malamudian character who does not deny his responsibility to the group; on the other hand, the inner life of the character reveals the fact that his basic reaction to suffering is bitterness. As Grebstein points out, The Fixer, following the example of most of Malamud's works on suffering,

> more often than not stresses how suffering brutalizes and [stresses] man's brutishness in general. If The Fixer teaches a lesson, I read that lesson to be how the death camps were possible. By simple tabulation there are far more demented, stupid, ruthless, or sadistic people in The Fixer than decent men. Grubeshov, Father Anastasy, Berezhinsky, Marfa Golov -- these seem to be the norm for human character. [38]

Thus, the author seems to despair over human nature more than in other works when in this novel he suggests that modern man's mythic hero ironically finds hatred to be the only sufficient motivating force.

Notes for Chapter Six

1

"Bernard Malamud has achieved a notable variety in his four novels to date [Mellard wrote this article in 1967, prior to the publication of Malamud's subsequent novels The Tenants and Dubin's Lives], for having begun with a baseball novel in The Natural and a city novel in The Assistant, he has since produced an academic novel in A New Life and a historical novel in The Fixer. But Malamud has also achieved a steady development in the handling of his own special fictional mode in the novels, and the latest work, The Fixer, represents the most powerful demonstration of its range and effectiveness. Nothing more than a modernization of the pastoral, a putting of the complex into the simple so that 'something fundamentally true about everybody' may be expressed, this method has been contemned by critics like Marcus Klein and novelists like Philip Roth because it lacks realistic specificity. But the truth is that the failure of the realism is the success of the pastoral. For Malamud, the pastoral mode is his greatest strength as a writer of fiction, because it has given him an archetypal narrative structure of great flexibility, a durable convention of characterization, a consistent pattern of imagery and symbols, and a style and rhetorical strategy of lucidity and power. Although Malamud employs different versions of pastoral in each novel, The Fixer not only does all that the others do in developing his major themes but also pushes the mode into areas never quite reached in The Natural, The Assistant, or A New Life," Mellard, op, cit., pp. 67-68.

2

"In four novels [The Natural, The Assistant, A New Life, and The Fixer] Malamud has come a long way in the sophistication of his escapes -- from baseball stardom to Spinoza -- and each way out must be rejected with a greater pang. But so has Malamud's conception of man's possibilities grown, his belief in what Wasserman called "the capacities of human strength." If he had been able to live with the Loathly Lady, emblematic of his suffering, Roy Hobbs "coulda been a king." Frank Alpine and S. Levin, because they were able to accept their shameful pasts, became lover-saints. And Yakov Bok could assume responsibilities which had proved too much even for God." Eigner, op. cit., p. 107.

3

"...The Fixer is, beyond question, a serious novel, probably Malamud's most impressive work to date," Maurice Friedberg in "History and Imagination -- Two Views of the Beiliss Case, reprinted in Bernard Malamud and the Critics, op. cit., p. 279. (All subsequent page references to this article will be made to Field and Field's reprinting.)

4

"The Fixer is clearly Malamud's most powerful novel -- and, it seems to me, his first wholly successful one. An important reason for its tight artistic unity is the identity in it between central metaphor and literal fact: the Malamudian prison is here not merely an analogy, a moral and metaphysical state, but has real, clammy, stone walls, excretory stenches, heavy-fisted jailers, dank unheated cells, lice. Similarly, Malamud's symbolic Jew is much more believable here than in his last two novels because the character's symbolic implications flow naturally from the literal fact of his Jewishness which is, after all, the real reason for his arrest." Alter explains that Malamud "means Jewishness to function as an ethical symbol; it is, as Theodore Solotaroff has written, 'a type of metaphor...both for the tragic dimension of anyone's life and for a code of personal morality.' I have had occasion to observe elsewhere that such symbolism (as in the relationship between Morris Bober and Frank Alpine in Malamud's The Assistant) can become uncomfortable; when a writer assigns a set of abstract moral values to the representatives of a particular group, the connection thus insisted on may strike a reader as arbitrary, an artistic confusion of actualities and ideals," Alter, op. cit., pp. 39 and 30.

5

Turner, op. cit., p. 109.

6

Bernard Malamud. The Fixer. (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1967), p. 12 (original published 1966).

7

Friedman, op. cit., p. 295.

8

For example:

> He waits (p. 207)....He beats his chains against the wall, his neck cords thick. He is in a rage to be free, has at times glimmerings of hope, as though imagining creates it, thinks of it as close by, about to happen if he breathes right, or thinks the one right thought....
>
> Yakov sits in the pit. An angelic voice, or so he thinks, calls his name, but he isn't sure he has heard right....The sky rains and snows on him. Or it may be bits of wood or

> frozen time. He doesn't reply. His hair is matted and long. His nails grow until they break. He has dysentery, dirties himself, stinks (p. 247).

9 Friedman, op. cit., p. 297.

10 Ibid., p. 298.

11 Ibid.

12 Alter, op. cit., p. 39.

13 Schulz, op. cit., p. 190.

14 Friedman, op. cit., p. 163.

15 Friedberg, op. cit., p. 284.

16 Pinsker in "Bernard Malamud's "Ironic Heroes," op. cit., p. 71.

17 In "Malamud's Trial: The Fixer and the Critics," reprinted in Field and Field's Bernard Malamud, op. cit., Gerald Hoag has said:

> Malamud's novel...delivers something quite other than, as Balliett would have it, "just one message: Injustice is a terrible sin (p. 132)...,The Fixer is at heart a conventional, intensive character study....The incidents and devices serve effectively to give Bok the authoritative spark we expect in the novel of character....They make him a complex, convincing man (p. 134).

(All subsequent page references to this article will be made to Field and Field's reprinting.)

Tony Tanner writes that Malamud ends the novel on a note of "inconclusiveness" rather than with the acquittal Mendel Beiliss actually received because, in Tanner's opinion, "what the judges will finally say is less important [to the author] than man's developing attitude as he moves toward his last reckoning," op. cit., p. 338.

And Granville Hicks has dared to say that Bok is "one of the most fully rendered characters in modern literature," op. cit., p. 132.

18

Explaining Malamud's inspiration for The Fixer, Granville Hicks has said: "Yakov Bok could represent not only the martyrs of Belsen and Auschwitz but all victims of man's inhumanity. We the readers could be made to feel for this one man what we could not possibly feel for the six million," op. cit., p. 37.

19

Friedberg, op. cit., pp. 276-279.

20

Grebstein, op. cit., p. 35.

21

Yakov has dreams or fantasies of the old Hasid he had helped, of Russian tortures, of food, of pogroms, of murdering Zhenia, of Zhenia's mother Marfa, of the shtetl horse he had abandoned, of his friends from the orphanage, and of the Tsar, to mention only a few.

22

Alter, op. cit., p. 36.

23

Hoag, op. cit., p. 137.

24

Tanner says that Bok "refuses to take refuge in religious quietism and pious passivity," op. cit., p. 336. After explaining that Bok's covenant is not with God but with "himself," Tanner continues: "Bok is not obeying an imposed order so much as willingly creating his own responsibilities," p. 337.

25

In Celebration in Postwar American Fiction (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1970), Richard H. Rupp notes: "Unlike Morris Rober, who originates in the Book of Job, Bok de-

rives from the Book of Maccabees. Suffering arms him to destroy the state.... This militant note is new in Malamud," p. 181.

Hoag explains this new element in the following way:

> The Fixer appeared, moreover, after some commentators, most notably Philip Roth, began to grumble that Malamud seemed selfishly content with small private issues rather than big public ones (op. cit., p. 130).

He continues to explain that this novel was Malamud's attempt at political and social relevancy, apparently because, as he says, "we have come around again to a season of crisis when writers, along with professors and other artists, are being exhorted to man the barricades, to subordinate art and scholarship to propaganda," p. 142.

26

Schulz has written that The Fixer shows "one of the persistent themes of the radical novels of the thirties and the forties -- ...the conversion of the hero from accommodation with the world of economic power to belief in the worker's cause. This engagement is analogous to the commitment of the mythic hero to the redemption of the community," op. cit., p. 187.

Malamud himself explained his inspiration for this novel stemmed from a desire to create art out of certain social issues:

> After my last novel I was sniffing for an idea in the direction of injustice on the American scene, partly for obvious reasons -- this was a time of revolutionary advances in Negro rights -- and partly because I became involved with the theme in a way that set off my imagination in terms of art.

(Malamud is quoted by Granville Hicks, op. cit., p. 37.)

27

Malamud has said:

> ...if [The Fixer] isn't about freedom I don't know what it is about. Every man must be political or where is your freedom?

(Quoted by Granville Hicks, op. cit., p. 39).

28
Grebstein points out Yakov's defense mechanism:

> He endures the dreadful misery of his imprisonment not because of any lofty ideals but because he must do it. He refuses to surrender to his captors' threats or be seduced by their deals, not because he is a saintly martyr or idealist but because he is too stubborn to give in. Hate for his tormentors sustains him much more than love for mankind (op. cit., p. 24).

29
Friedman, op. cit., p. 302.

30
See page 212 of this thesis for the complete quote.

31
Grebstein, op. cit., p. 24.

32
Ibid., p. 42.

33
Unlike Malamud, historian Maurice Samuel (whose sympathies with Beiliss was inevitable) remained "an impartial observer and truthful reporter," keeping "his feelings of outrage...under control," Friedberg, op. cit., p. 283 and 280.

34
Mellard, op. cit., p. 80.

35
Friedman has said:

> He is not a classical tragic hero whose suffering is magnificent because of grandeur of character and the height from which he falls; on the contrary he is a poor schnook distinguished only by misery and his sense of victimization. But because he embraces these, and because, in rejecting a God seemingly obsessed with the perpetuation of injustice, he finds something in

> himself and in his life to affirm, he becomes a paradigm of a new kind of hero -- one who, given the context of his meaningless, arbitrary world and his own feebleness, even irrelevance, when confronting it, triumphs because he endures (op. cit., p. 293).

36
Schulz has noted that Bok, "who began as a self-server, involuntarily assumes the contrary role of scapegoat and redeemer," op. cit., p. 187.

37
This paradox is also noted by Mellard, though he personally stresses the affirmation over the tragedy:

> More tragic in vision than any of the first three novels [The Natural, The Assistant, A New Life], The Fixer is also more affirmative, for there is a sense at the novel's conclusion that at least someone has come who may revitalize the law and lead a demoralized people out of a political wilderness (op. cit., p. 81).

38
Grebstein, op. cit., p. 24.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In The Natural we have seen that Malamud has developed Roy as an individual as well as a mythic character. Roy's inner life, revealed through Malamud's third-person omniscient narrator's simulation of the protagonist's thoughts, shows that he suffers guilt and indecisiveness as he finds his city-inspired ambitions incompatible with his country-bred conscience. Thus we have seen Roy's conflict, limitations, and failure as representative of human nature. Although Iris is confident that suffering teaches, her own life, demonstrating the repetition of past mistakes, is not exemplary of this premise. Roy's life also invalidates her premise, for we have seen that the faults he has in his "first life" are not eradicated through experience; instead, they are repeated in his "second life;" the dissatisfaction he feels early in the novel is not abated through suffering; instead, it worsens, becoming self-hatred at the end of the novel. After two symbolic "lives," Roy has acquired only a vague idea of what he does not want; the storyline has traced a full circle with Roy returning to where he was at the beginning of the work. Thus Malamud implies that self-knowledge may need not two, but many such circular lives.

In contrast, in "Angel Levine" and "Idiots First," Malamud, through fantasy, allows his enduring sufferers to triumph

in the way Iris believes sufferers triumph. At the end of "Angel Levine," Manischevitz is "better off" because of his "triumphant insight" concerning the possibility of unity with his fellows and because of the angel's resuscitation of his beloved Fanny. In "Idiots First," Mendel is allowed to postpone his deadline with the messenger of death long enough to benefit his helpless son and to satisfactorily fulfill his own obligations to him. In the face of incredible hardship and against all odds, in these two stories man's bitter protests are "divinely" answered, and a potential to work miracles seems hidden in all men. However, through his use of fantasy, Malamud makes the depressing point that only in the realm of the fairy tale does man's suffering give him some compensation.

Unlike "Angel Levine" and "Idiots First," in "The Cost of Living," "The First Seven Years," "The Bill," The Assistant, The Fixer, and, to some extent, in "The Loan," the protagonist suffers exaggeratedly, absurdly. Often whole pages are devoted to a listing of the character's woes. In these works Malamud's typical sufferer, "a drab, down-and-out little nobody," [1] whose background has been filled with every imaginable calamity even before the story begins, is barely recuperating from his latest loss when he must face still another disaster. This suffering is heightened because the protagonist is also the victim of his limiting environment. Placed in a physical prison which is dark, gloomy, cramped, monotonous, and poverty-stricken, the character,

"landlocked" [2] and isolated from the help of the outside world, not only suffers, but he suffers hopelessly alone. It can be said that, through his chosen settings and situations, Malamud "landlocks" the character, builds a box around him, and makes him his prisoner; by means of the conflict, he pushes the character towards one of the dark and lonely corners of the box. However, it is often the character himself, through his own personality or choices, who moves the rest of the way into the corner where he suffers still more, with only an occasional withdrawal of the Malamudian hand of fate long enough to give him sufficient light and air to hope for the best he can under the given circumstances: to escape from out of the corner though never completely from out of the box.

The author seems to have planned this exaggerated suffering, this "boxing-in" of the characters in the six works I have previously mentioned, in order to explore the various possible responses on the part of different sufferers to their predicaments, responses such as endurance, disillusion, and protest. In these works, situation, setting, conflict, and aspects of the character's own personality work together to bring about so much suffering that there is little opportunity for the character to learn anything other than the absurdity of suffering or the disappointing nature of those individuals who seem to contribute to it. Thus, Malamud portrays "heart trouble," not happi-

ness, as the end result of Sam's, Feld's, Panessa's, Willy's, Bessie's, Morris', and Yakov's exaggerated trials.

In addition, there are various realizations of loss. Sam laments his own helplessness in the face of suffering, laments the apparent indifference of his fellows, and the dying of the value of service to others. Feld, whom hardship has taught to avoid suffering at whatever cost, laments that even this absurd lesson cannot be passed on to others. While Iris apparently believes that the lessons learned through suffering can be taught to others, Feld of "The First Seven Years" finds to his dismay that these lessons are highly personal for each individual; since Feld's and Miriam's views of the world are compared and contrasted, we are made to see that there is no simple way of telling if a learner has chosen the "right thing." In "The Bill," Willy laments the irresponsible decision which, aggravated by economic limitations, results, apparently, in the death of the one man who had befriended him. Yet the value of the "lesson" Willy learns about his own nature and condition is left ambiguous in a frozen tableau containing images of present loss as well as of future possibility. Willy may have a glimpse of his own dark nature, but the value of such a revelation is questionable when we consider the "price" he had to pay to obtain it. In The Assistant, we note that unending, exaggerated suffering has taught Morris the need to lessen the suffering of others through the practice of of a "personal code of ethics." Although the author is sympa-

thetic towards his character, he suggests that this code of ethics makes a man of Morris' situation and weaknesses vulnerable to other kinds of suffering. A glimpse at Morris' own thoughts shows that he is not a silent stoic but an embittered man who, like Roy, Manischevitz, Sam, Feld, Willy, Bessie, and Yakov, protests against his absurd fate, and it is clear that Morris dies without having been brought "towards the happiness" which Iris believes to be the end result of having valued the "right things." In The Fixer Malamud suggests that the lessons the protagonist learns through suffering hold no definite guarantee of salvation. Like the other characters of the other works, Yakov learns of the abhorrent nature of his fellows as well as of the imprisoning human condition. Furthermore, Yakov learns to hate. Political activism seems to be an appropriate outlet for such hatred, momentarily validating his suffering and ensuring his survival. Yet because Malamud has devoted so much effort to descriptions of the atrocities committed against this poor helpless victim of man's inhumanity to man, the affirmations of Yakov Bok, a poor little nobody, seem futile when contrasted with the abhorrent human nature the author has depicted again and again in Yakov's many oppressors and their conspirators. The resolutions of these ghetto works -- "The Cost of Living," "The First Seven Years," "The Bill," The Assistant, The Fixer, and "The Loan" -- hold no solutions; instead, their final frozen images emphasize the ultimate absurdity of suffering as well as man's inevitable

imprisonment:

> [Malamud's] thematic range, even when it deals with characters of non-Jewish backgrounds, is unmistakably Hebraic... over and over we find echoed the agonized strain of Job's unanswered question: "Why is light given to a man whose way is hid, and whom God hath hedged in?" [3]

In other works in which Malamud seems to be less concerned with the complications caused by the character's physical or economic prisons he depicts other types of prisons of suffering, using the prison metaphor to aptly describe the dilemma of all men, as he himself has explained:

> "It's a metaphor for the dilemma of all men throughout history. Necessity is the primary prison, though the bars are not visible to all. Then there are the man-made prisons of social injustice, apathy, ignorance. There are others, tight or loose, visible or invisible, according to one's predilection or vulnerability. Therefore our most extraordinary invention is human freedom." [4]

In "The Magic Barrel," "A Summer's Reading," The Assistant, "The Mourners," "The Last Mohican," and "The Lady of the Lake" (as well as in other works from Idiots First not included within my discussion), confrontations with different kinds of suffering lock the characters in momentary solitary confinement and force

them to acquire certain knowledge about themselves and about their relationship to others. Yet, because the author contrasts this learning with man's limitations -- his poor judgement, his naiveté, his egoism, and his appetites -- we are never sure if suffering has made his characters better, has brought them towards happiness, redemption, or sainthood, or if it has taught them to want the "right things." As Siegel has said,

> Malamud's favorite vantage point is the dark prison of the self. From there he looks out upon a somber, cramped, and joyless world in which failure and calamity are daily staples....All his sad and bitter clowns -- Jews and non-Jews alike -- are uncertain, unlucky, and unloved. [5]

In addition, in these works, man's limiting nature makes the "learning" imperfect. In "The Magic Barrel," Leo has a profound vision of his "loveless" self; however, his second life is imperfect, for not only does Leo consciously choose to keep up a lie but he also makes the startling decision to pursue redemption through a loveless and most unlikely redeemer. Because both of these decisions seem incongruent with the profound nature of his self-revelation, Malamud suggests that "learning" itself does not guarantee that one's second life will be "better" for it. In "A Summer's Reading," George's self-

inspection leads to a sudden awakening to self-deception and hypocrisy. Yet George's decision to right his wrongs is no more than an arbitrary, precipitous attempt to keep face. This second life, like Leo's, is imperfect in that it is not in keeping with the nature of the self-revelation.

In The Assistant, suffering does, however, seem to "better" Morris' assistant Frank, for the idealistic, rash adolescent of the beginning of the novel becomes a father figure at the end by replacing Morris and doing away with his Ward Minogue alter-ego. [6] Yet the image Malamud conveys of Frank as a learner is complicated by several factors. First, the doubts and suspicions of the three other characters around him contrast with Frank's good deeds; next, their moments of faith in him seem to be nullified by Frank's own losses of control; next, his own conflicting attitude towards his teacher and towards his own ability to change continually interfere with his self-discipline; next, his irrealistic notion that poverty purifies contrasts with his hidden desire to remain the same. These many-sided views of Frank create ambiguity as to what he really learns and becomes at the end of the novel. Because his moments of self-revelation are followed by continual failure, because his final period of sacrifice is also interrupted by a momentary loss of control, and because his final decision to become a Jew represents more a desire to attain self-discipline than the actual attainment of it, it seems ridiculous to divide

the learning process into two arbitrary lives, as Iris does. Instead, through Frank as well as through Roy, we have seen the learning process as a repetitive cycle of attempt and failure: "In the end change may only be measured in inches of progress, shades of gray." [7]

In "The Mourners," the protagonist has a profound awakening to his lowly nature; yet Malamud's emphasis is on the futility of such learning when he freezes the character in a final image of mourning for all the dead. In "The Last Mohican," Fidelman's supposed awakening to the need for commitment to others is tainted by self-deception and egoism. In addition, as in "The Mourners," Malamud implies that the "insight," regardless of whether it is or not sincere, comes too late for the characters' reconciliation or mutual benefit. Even the more likely learning situation of a relatively well-off middle-class man like "Freeman" of "The Lady of the Lake" ends in failure when the author's tableau, which eternally captures the image of learning too late, offers not even an imperfect "second life of living afterwards." In my opinion, the point of these later works -- "The Mourners," "The Last Mohican," and "The Lady of the Lake" -- is to show that the character who may have the potential to learn is often too burdened with limitations to learn well.

All of the works I have included in my discussion, and especially the novels, show that life cannot arbitrarily be divided into two periods, one of learning and one of living af-

terwards. After two lives, Roy declares that he never did learn anything from suffering and that he would have to suffer again; Frank insists that what he had to do would take him years; and Yakov says:

> it takes me a long time to learn.
> Some people have to make the same
> mistake seven times before they
> know they've made it (p. 234).

Learning and living afterwards are obviously part of a never-ending struggle, for various prisons -- "necessity," "social injustice, apathy, ignorance," and others, as Malamud himself has explained -- continually impede one's learning from past mistakes, no matter how many "pre-games" one is given.

Analysis of narrative technique and tone have shown that often in Malamud's works (certainly in The Natural) there is a distance between the character's "voice" and the author's. Iris' explanation for suffering may at first seem to be Malamud's own. However, we have seen that a great deal of his works dealing with suffering convey the absurdity of Iris' statements as well as the discrepancy that exists between her concept of the world and Malamud's own, as seen through his works. The majority of Malamud's protagonists are not heroic or saintly endurers but individuals with faults and conflicts resembling those of the average person. Even in Malamud's most detailed accounts of physical and economic suffering,

he includes "a sense of the dynamics of character." [8] As Ben Siegel has said,

> Malamud does not view modern society as blameless for man's tragic plight, but neither does he consider anyone the mere passive victim of social cruelty or neglect. His people embody their own self-destructive demons.... Like their larger Greek and Shakespearean counterparts, [they] fall victim to a tragic flaw aggravated by misfortune.[9]

Rather than glorify his sufferers, the author presents a wide range of characters and uses them to comment on the human condition in general. While Malamud himself has asserted that his intention in general has been to affirm a belief in man's potential to better himself, [10] we have seen that most of his characters' triumphs and affirmations are not straightforward, but ambiguous; that man's potential to learn is continually juxtaposed with the impossibility of his putting the lesson learned into practice (also seen in Marcus of "The Death of Me," Rosen of "Take Pity," Tony of "The Prison," and Nat of "Black is My Favorite Color"):

> The Malamudian figure begins as a self-seeker....Nonetheless, in the hostile wasteland of society he rises to spiritual strength in altruism and self-analysis....Behind each Malamud account is the mythic pattern of death-and-resurrection, the renovation of the

> apparently bottom dog....But the realist in Malamud prevents any full triumph. The flawed nature of man and the callous world of his fellow men give him at best a Pyrrhic victory. [11]

Several reviewers have also pointed out Malamud's juxtaposition of affirmation with defeat. For example, Richman's comments on The Natural can be applied to most of the Malamudian works we have seen:

> If [Roy's] failures remind us of our limitations, his near success reminds us of the untapped resources for triumph which lie within. [12]

In addition, Richman has said:

> Malamud is a writer who has attempted to unite the realistic novel with the poetic and symbolic novel; and he has done so out of his very vision of the contemporary scene....Though he believes always in the resources of the human spirit, he understands at the same time -- perhaps with despair -- the weight of determinism, of history, of accidents, and of social pressures which suffocate the spirit. In his best work, both these impulses fuse in a grotesque but powerful manner, in which affirmation is beset by irony, and horror by possibility. [13]

Likewise, Grebstein has said:

> [Malamud] has a view of man which perceives the property of conscience, the seeking to be better, not as a divine mystery but as natural to humans as skin, hair, voice. Yet this basically optimistic concept of human nature is checked by an almost equally persistent view of man as greedy, treacherous, lustful, and often vicious. Cheerful idealist and hard-eyed realist peer out through the same bifocals. [14]

While there are occasional moments of triumph over the darker side of man, it is my belief that Malamud's works never contain such definite triumphs as the reaching of "sainthood," [15] and whatever "redemption" is to be found must be qualified in the way Ruth B. Mandel has qualified the "redemption" found in The Assistant:

> The affirmation itself is ironic in that the state of grace is unaccompanied by paradise. Redemption is at once hopeful and hopeless, a redemption realistically conceived for a world where a personal set of humanistic values does not effect a change in society and does not offer material comfort for the ethical man. [16]

Through Malamud's development of the themes of the inevitability of suffering and the imperfection of learning, we have seen his artistic strengths in his versatile use of the third-person omniscient point of view, which he employs to concentrate on exaggerated, absurd suffering enhanced by means of

momentary glimpses of the characters' own anguish; in his varied use of the metaphor of the prison and of the metaphor of the Jew; in his use of the photographic tableau at the moment of epiphany; in his continual use of ambiguity to allow for multiple levels of meaning and to make the reader search for social or moral solutions to the dilemmas posed; and in his juxtaposition of man's potential with man's inevitable failure, a striking contrast which may serve the ultimate purpose of expanding his readers' sensibilities to the realm of the positive. All of these factors give Malamud a worthy, individual place among twentieth-century writers, Jewish and non-Jewish alike.

Notes for Summary and Conclusions

1
Bellman, op. cit., p. 12.

2
In "The Bill," collected in The Magic Barrel, op. cit., p. 129.

3
Rovit, op. cit., pp. 7-8.

4
Field and Field quote the author in "An Interview with Bernard Malamud," included in their collection Bernard Malamud, op. cit., p. 12.
Here Malamud is obviously using the word "invention" to mean "fantasy," something made up but untrue.

5
Siegel, op. cit., p. 123.

6
Rupp, op. cit., p. 175.

7
Solotaroff, op. cit., p. 240.

8
Ibid., p. 241.

9
Siegel, op. cit., p. 123 and p. 125.

10
In 1958 Malamud said:

> "The purpose of the writer...is to keep civilization from destroying itself. My premise...is that we will not destroy each other....We will seek a better life. We may not become better, but at least we will seek betterment....My premise...is for humanism -- and against nihilism. And that is what I try to put in my writings."

He is quoted by Field and Field in their introduction to their collection Bernard Malamud, op. cit., p. 7.

11
Martin S. Day in A Handbook of American Literature (New York: Crane, Russak and Company, Inc., 1976), p. 497. "Pyrrhic victory" is also used by Schulz to describe Malamud's characters, op. cit., p. 191.

12
Richman, op. cit., p. 44.

13
Ibid., p. 48.

14
Grebstein, op. cit., p. 22.

15
Cynthia Ozick has noted that

> the idea of the usefulness of submitting to a destiny of anguish is not a particularly Jewish notion; suffering as purification is far closer to the Christian ethos. Jewish martyrs are seen to be only martyrs, not messiahs or even saints. Malamud's world often proposes a kind of hard-won, eked-out saintliness: suffering and spiritual goodness are somehow linked. The real world of humanity -- which means also the real world of the Jews -- is not like this. "Bad" Jews went up in smoke at Auschwitz too -- surely embezzlers as well as babies, not only tsadikim but misers too, poets as well as kleptomaniacs. Not one single Jew ever deserved his martyrdom, but not every martyr is a holy man. For Malamud all good men are Job (op. cit., p. 82).

Peter L. Hays has also called the protagonists of The Natural, The Assistant, and A New Life "secular saints:"

> Malamud's protagonists...struggle against a bleak, unfavorable world and their own bad luck and ineptitude; usually the world strips them of material

> goods and any sense of real accomplishment, but their author endows them with, and communicates to us, their courage, their compassion, their humanity; from hellish depths of human misery they come forth, reborn as secular saints (op. cit., p. 219).

16

Mandel, op. cit., p. 262.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Malamud, Bernard. The Assistant. New York: Signet Books, The New American Library, Inc., 12th printing (original published 1957).

-------The Fixer. New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1967 (original published 1966).

-------Idiots First. New York: Pocket Books, Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1975 (original published 1963).

-------The Magic Barrel. New York: Pocket Books, Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1972 (original published 1958).

-------The Natural. New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1971 (original published 1952).

Secondary Sources

Day, Martin S. A Handbook of American Literature. New York: Crane, Russak and Company, Inc., pp. 496-498.

Field, Leslie A. and Joyce W. Field. Bernard Malamud and the Critics. New York: New York University Press, 1970.

-------Bernard Malamud: A Collection of Critical Essays. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975.

Hicks, Granville. "One Man to Stand for Six Million." Literary Horizons (September 10, 1966), pp. 37-39.

Johnston, Robert K. "Malamud's Vision for Humanity." Christianity Today (July 20, 1979), pp. 24-25.

Ratner, Marc L. "Style and Humanity in Malamud's Fiction." Massachusetts Review, V (Summer 1964), pp. 663-683.

Richman, Sidney. Bernard Malamud. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1966.

Rupp, Richard H. Celebration in Postwar American Fiction. Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1970, pp. 165-188.

Sheppard, Ronald Z. "About Bernard Malamud." Washington Post (October 13, 1963), p. 5.

Spalding, Henry D. Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor. New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1973.

Stern, Daniel. "Commonplace Things and the Essence of Art." Nation (September 23, 1973), pp. 181-182.

Tanner, Tony. City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1971, pp. 322-343.

Trepp, Leo. Eternal Faith, Eternal People: A Journey into Judaism. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1962.

Tyler, Ralph. "A Talk with the Novelist: Bernard Malamud." New York Times Book Review (February 18, 1979), p. 1+.

U. S. News and World Report. "Novelist Malamud: Living is Reality." (October 8, 1979), p. 57.

Wellek, Rene and Austin Warren. Theory of Literature. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1956.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to Wayne Siewert for his helpful criticism given throughout the preparation of this thesis. I am also grateful to Federico Patan for his advice and support.