

## Analysis of the Narrative Structure of the Novels of Bernard Malamud

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### Abstract

English literary world of fiction is full of stories that follow multiple narrative structures. Bernard Malamud, a Russian Jew, migrated to America, exhibited varied strains of existential crisis in his works as he wrote in the post-World War-II era. He has created compelling narrative structures in his novels and stories to unleash complexities and tensions. The age in which he wrote too provided him the requisite substance to set his tensions across and delineate through convincing characters. Yiddish symbolism, fantasy, mysticism, surrealism, and reality- all are conglomerated in the Malamudian narrative structure.

### Keywords

Narration, Narrative Structures, Malamud, American Writers, Symbolism

### Introduction

Malamud is one of the best-selling, critically acclaimed authors and has accomplished a respectable place in the arena of American fiction. Malamud's is a unique voice in the field of the contemporary literary world, as has been recurrently established through the array of commentary on him. "The quarter-century since the World War-II has not been an era of great creativity, but it has been given distinction by several writers of fiction. One of these is Bernard Malamud, who had a steady development as a novelist and as a short story writer." (Hicks)

Norman Podhoretz wrote, "That whacky wonderful voice we hear in a Malamud story is one of the few sounds remaining in our world that cannot be accounted for in terms of anything but itself. For it is a voice that speaks of people who belong to no period in particular, and in a language that belongs not to history but to nature." (Podhoretz)

Most of Malamud's critics while analyzing Malamud, have constantly tried to make a strong connection of his writings to his Yiddish background and culture and they tend to co-relate his characters with the ethnicity of the writer. More than his art, the subject matter becomes a debatable issue whether it entices the readers or creates a kind of uneasiness in their hearts. Maybe because of his backdrop and locale, Malamud has presented stereotypical Yiddish figures and, therefore, the question of influence becomes really confrontational for the critics. Eminent critic on Malamud, Irving Howe has tried to analyse the substance of Malamud's subject matter. He felt that it could be the outcome of the conversations at home or through the reading of news etc. It could also be the result of inner knowledge or such figures and motifs of the past, which were lost for a time in the silence of cultural repression. Yet they came to him "through the air" particles of culture floating about, still charged with meaning and potent enough to be reshaped in American fiction. (Irving Howe, p.595)

### Malamud a Storyteller

Although a literary writer cannot be placed in a single tradition, yet it can be safely suggested that Malamud is a master craftsman of fiction who has adopted the age-old technique of Yiddish storytelling in his works. It is true for all his characters- be it Morris Bober for whom suffering is an integral part of his life or Yakov Bok who

suffers so that others don't have to suffer.

Critics also have given utmost value to the story telling technique of Malamud. As a great story writer,

"Malamud captures the elusive tones and shadows of the traditional Yiddish tale, he is not at all a teller of tales in the traditional manner...His manner is frequently that of the teller of tales, but his technique of structure is poetic and symbolic. He seems, as it were, to construct his stories backwards- beginning with his final climatic change and then manipulating his characters into the appropriate dramatic poses which will contribute to the total significance of that image." (Earl H. Rovit, p.3)

Malamud's forte is not only the use of Yiddish tradition or the use of Yiddish symbolism, but as a master craftsman, he has also woven his craft into the beautiful blending of tragic prevalence and comic presentation like a film of Charlie Chaplin. Humour in Malamud becomes a carrier of a tragic tale of Morris or even of Yakov Bok or Willie Sparement. Why to crib and not to laugh away at life the way it comes before one, seems to be the lighter tone of Malamud's characters in the face of unsympathetic realities. Laughter at the miseries of life leaves an indelible mark on reader's mind as well and becomes an agent of an inhuman callous attitude of the milieu on troubled souls.

Malamud has adopted the ironic tone of the Yiddish storyteller but he has distanced himself from the grotesque elements. Even if there are such elements, they are countered with the possibility of realizing the Diaspora dream of earthly redemption. His technique is the adaptation of the Yiddish mode with less vibrant tone suited for the modern man's life.

But the same critic Marigold is so mesmerized with the style that he comments, "Where Malamud experiments, it works best when anchored to Yiddish idiom- enjoy the stylistic wit, even if you miss the message ..." (Ibid.)

Then the Medieval literature seems to have an ineffaceable influence on the backdrop of many fictional motifs of Malamud. Like the Knights of Medieval literature, Malamud's protagonists are involved in heroic and un-heroic adventures. Where the Medieval Knight went in search of conquest and glory, Malamud's protagonists get set on a physical as well as emotional and spiritual journey for their betterment- sometimes the fulfilment of the American Dream and at the other time the accomplishment of the self.

1.1 The story of the first novel *The Natural* is about heroism and natural use of talent. The epigraph of the novel '*The Natural*' might have been regarding the potential of heroism but it is not just a literal figure rather it involves the Grail legends as under-current of myth and archetype. The baseball drama goes as a type of ritual: the hero, slain once with a silver bullet and miraculously resurrected, returns in a time of drought to a disease-ridden team called the Knights, presided over by a manager called Pop Fisher (which sounds like King Fisher of the Arthurian legends).

Sam Bluefarb has presented a comparative study of the mythic patterns in Malamud's *The Natural* and T S Eliot's *The Wasteland*:

"... a dry season (baseball) of no wins, the hopes (or prayers) for rain (victory), and the "romantic agony in their attempted attainment. Roy Hobbs, the baseball hero is the 'knight' in search of the Holy Grail of a game (a quest), which in this instance involves not the winning of a lady's favor but the world series. And even the lady assumes the role of la belle dame sans merci when she kills Roy... so that he may rise again 'reborn'...Admittedly, all of this fits too neatly into the mythic grail-quest pattern." (Sam Bluefarb, p.73)

1.2 This is the archetype in the life of modern man. The myth has been incorporated so beautifully that it gives special beauty and richness of narration for which readers owe Malamud a lot.

In the same article Sam Bluefarb has tried to exemplify the concept of syncretism in the other novel of Malamud- *The Assistant*. He has pointed towards the diverse strands of proletarian, mythic and Dostoevskian and the fusion of these elements in this novel. The proletarian strain can be found in the fable of blindness and discovery; the

mythic in the death of the father, Morris Bober and his 'resurrection' through his 'son', Frank Alpine and the third element of Dostoevskian can be traced in Alpine's sin against Morris by robbing the store and later on his repentance and redemption through his love for Morris's daughter and his final conversion to Judaism, a conversion which presumes the acceptance of the prophetic and social values of that religion. (Ibid.)

Malamud is a master of narrative experimentation and he has created his characters so diligently that they seem to be living an ordinary life and with the passing of years, they transform themselves. Therefore, his creations are very unadulterated and legitimate:

"What distinguishes Malamud's fiction is that characters are transformed, if not in their relationship to the world, then by our attitude toward them.... Malamud's love for his characters, failures and all, is genuine and they do not become the butts of artistic jokes. There is no maliciousness in him. With his large heart, Malamud lets his characters make their own jokes." (Charles Deemer, pp. 19-20.)

Along with the medieval overtones and Jewish milieu, Malamud presents an influence of biblical inclusions. Giving a mythological treatment to the characters of the first three novels, *The Natural*, *The Assistant* and *A New Life*, Granville Hicks compares the heroes to the sufferers from mythology. In a sense, Malamud has moved from the story of Samson, punished for the misuse of powers, to Job, suffering because chosen to suffer, to Jesus, suffering voluntarily to redeem. (Granville Hicks, pp. 223-24)

Malamud has also made ample use of allegory in his novels as well as stories. His moralistic vision has been beautifully conveyed through the medium of allegory, which is a part of the main American tradition. It is remarkable that this allegory is not the conventional allegory of personification or metaphor rather it has taken a modern hue and shape, where the hidden meanings are conveyed in an ironic way.

In the use of allegory, Malamud comes closer to Hawthorne but he is not able to keep the grip of strains too tight throughout. The allegory helps to convey the persistent internal and spiritual conflict of different characters. Malamud has, in fact, used the device of a character as the voice of conscience, particularly the character near to the protagonist. Through them is objectified the inner self of the central character and it is used in two ways— at the one level, other characters work as allegorical conscience for the protagonist and at the other level, the protagonist works for the reader.

In all his novels and almost all his short stories, there is at least one character who works as the voice of conscience for the central character and in many cases this character happens to be a woman. If the hero rejects that voice, he fails as it happens with Roy Hobbs whereas S. Levin listens to that voice and accepts the burden of responsibility, love for him now no more remains the initial lust.

Malamud is also very dexterous in presenting an allegory of Jewishness as he has the conviction of humanity and this conviction leads him to "construct an allegory of expiation, prodigious labors, self-sacrifice, and what might be called – after the two millennia of the Christian ascendancy – re-conversion." (Marvin Mudrick, p. 210)

In *The Natural*, Malamud has written a sustained and elaborate allegory in which the "natural" player, who operates with ease and the greatest skill without having been taught, is equated with the natural man who, left alone by, say, politicians and advertising agencies, might achieve his real fulfillment. The story here is of a natural man

Roy is a natural man who is a representative of transcendent demi-god. He makes himself a baseball bat called *Wonderboy* known to possess mystical powers. With this magical bat, Roy is remarkable in the field. His bat is the symbol of 'rudimentary romantic primitive innocence' and 'transcendental divinity'. (Arthur Coleman, p.11)

But this demi-god will be 'side-tracked' (TN, p.70) into becoming a lesser man as his bat becomes impotent as "Wonderboy resembled a sagging baloney." (TN, p.146)

Critics have tried to discover and analyze the use of myth, allegory, ritual, symbolism, archetypes, pathos, surrealism and imagery along with different patterns of meanings. First, let's take into account the pattern of the names of the characters. Yakov Bok in *The Fixer* has something to do with the old Hebraic use of scapegoat as Bok means goat. Thus, the meaning itself carries the meaning extended to a person or a group who bears the guilt for a larger group. The charge of ritual murder against Yakov is, in fact, a denunciation against the whole Jewry.

The name of the (anti-) hero of *A New Life* is S. Levin or Seymour Levin, Pauline calls him 'Lev'. Malamud opens the novel with the epigraph from *Ulysses* whereas; the literal meaning of Levin is 'lightening'. When Pauline explains to him that he was chosen because of his 'Jewish' looks, he wants to be called as 'Sam' – "Sam, they used to call me at home" (NL p.366). And the name Sam suggests the image of the first Hebrew Prophet– Samuel.

The name of Lesser in *The Tenants* itself is suggestive of the lesser talent than the master writers. Willie Spearment insolently tries to manipulate with his name so that it sounds like 'Willie Shakespeare' which presents a humorous-ironic peculiarity.

Some critics have tried to find a kind of parallel between Malamud and the master of absurdity and existentialism, Samuel Beckett. A friend and contemporary writer who is also put in the parentheses with Malamud as a Jewish American writer, Philip Roth, tries to find the equation between the two in the form of obituary:

1.3 "In the early 50's I was reading Malamud's stories, later collected in "The Magic Barrel," as they appeared -- the very moment they appeared -- in Partisan Review and the old Commentary, he seemed to me then to be doing no less for his lonely Jews and their peculiarly immigrant, Jewish forms of failure - for those Malamudian men "who never stopped hurting" - than was Samuel Beckett, in his longer fiction, for misery-ridden Molloy and Malone. Both writers, while bound inextricably to the common life of the clan, severed their racial memories from the larger social and historical setting, and then... created, improbably, parables of frustration charged with the gravity of the grimmest philosophers." (Philip Roth)

He again continues in the same stroke, "Not unlike Beckett, Malamud wrote of a meager world of pain in a language all of his own. He tried to say some sweet thing but his tongue hung in his mouth like dead fruit on a tree, and his heart was a black-painted window." (Ibid.)

The pathos of the life of Frank Alpine comes in the form of pity, who alternatively robs and aids the Morris family. The absurdity of the conclusion of the novel can be termed as religious absurdity as Frank takes the final step: "Frank went to the hospital and had himself circumcised.... The pain enraged and inspired him. After Passover he became a Jew." (TA p.246)

1.4 Is conversion into Judaism an absurdity or sentimentality, without knowing what Judaism is? Frank has converted without knowing what conversion is and what Judaism is. It is not sentimentality as he converts to take the place of Morris, the one who himself had never been to a synagogue in twenty years, who could never answer what a Jew is but who becomes a sheer symbol of Judaism.

Thus, especially in the case of *The Assistant*, it is a conglomeration of myth of Catholicism, in the form of dancing St. Francis and Judaism, which ultimately makes it a mystical humanistic novel. A certain kind of paradox is prevalent throughout the novel which can be well gauged from the paradoxical statement of Frank, "Even when I am bad, I am good" (TA p.140).

The symbolic confrontation between two ethnic groups in *The Tenants* becomes a paradigm of the strained relations in our own society. The surrounding and setting is surrealistic. Realism and fantasy are so beautifully blended that it becomes very difficult to determine the elements of both. Malamud pours tons of fantasy in this sordid gloomy story that makes it an artistic piece.

Shift from past tense to present tense is also used as a vehicle to move between fantasy and reality in the novel, *The Tenants*. The effect of surrealism is achieved through grammatical tenses. Initially past tense is more predominant whereas present is more occasional and at times there is an over-lapping of one by the other. Through

the concluding sections of the novel, the contours of space, time, action and thought are blurred by the devices handled so exquisitely throughout by the novelist like the mingling of the past and present tense, the inter-changing of 'he' and 'I' and the surrealistic setting of the novel.

Malamud emphasised more on form and story than for characters. He himself had admitted, "With me it's story, story, story. Writers who can't invent stories often pursue other strategies, even substituting style for narrative. I feel that story is the basic element of fiction—though that idea is not popular with disciples of the 'new novel.'"

## Conclusion

Bernard Malamud's narrative style frequently combines elements of realism and myth, incorporating influences from Jewish traditions and existential themes. His novels generally unfold in a straightforward, linear fashion but are layered with symbolism and moral conflicts. Malamud effectively portrays the challenges faced by his characters—usually everyday people thrust into unusual situations—to delve into profound themes of suffering, redemption, and perseverance. Although rooted in realism, his narratives often take on the tone of a parable, where the actions and experiences of the characters extend beyond their specific circumstances to convey broader truths about the human experience.

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