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## Absurdism and Nihilism in Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant*

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### Biosketch

**Dr. Rupali Mirza** is an Assistant Professor of English at Era University, Lucknow. She was former Head of Department and Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Integral University, Lucknow. Her Ph.D. thesis is on the topic: "American Dream: Myth or Reality" and her field of specialization is American Literature and Professional Communication. She is a staunch feminist, her feminist roots coming from Lady Shri Ram College for Women (LSR), Delhi University, her alma-mater. She is an alumna of St. Agnes' Loreto Day School and La Martiniere Girls College, Lucknow. She is the Chief Editor of the Era University Newsletter. She has edited five books: A poetry anthology entitled *Feminist Voices Across Cultures: A Poetry Anthology*, *The Global Muse: Poetry Across Nations* and three academic anthologies entitled *Women Studies: An Emerging Trend in Higher Education*, *Twentieth Century Anthology of American Literature* and *The Dialectics of Feminist Politics in African/ Afro-American Literature*. She has authored two books entitled, *American Dream: Myth or Reality* and *Dystopia* and has co-authored a poetry book titled *Lucknow Poetica*. She has presented research papers at several National and International conferences and has many publications in International Journals and Anthologies. She has been cited internationally. Her areas of interest are American Literature and Feminism. She can be reached at: [rupalisarah@gmail.com](mailto:rupalisarah@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

Malamud often explores the theme of alienation in his fiction. There are many characters, especially his heroes who are non-natives or outsiders, who came into an unknown culture. When a hero enters a culture different from his own culture, he is able to make a thoughtful analysis of the values of his own culture in contrast with the values of the new culture that he has entered. Albert Camus discusses Nada, Nihilism or nothingness in the life of man. It is this nothingness which makes him feel that he is caught up in a biological trap. He comes out of his trap and becomes free from human suffering only at the time of his death. The early years of Malamud's life also form the reason why he chose to write for and about human suffering. He was a motherless child as he had lost the care of his mother only when he was fourteen years of age. He and his elder brother were raised by their father who ran a small grocery store and depended completely on it for their subsistence. Just like the other Post-modern authors, Bernard Malamud struggles to find the real meaning of life. His novels talk of individual responsibility of the actions, decisions and freedom to exert individual powers and take into purview the fear and anxiety which is the result of exercising individual decisions. Sartre and Camus theorize man essentially as the

subject with an indifferent objective which is often not understandable to the world. Man has no limits and can be interpreted to any limits of absurdity.

Keywords: Absurdism, Nihilism, Suffering, Alienation, Nothingness

The setting of Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* is in the late 1940s and early 1950s, in Brooklyn, New York. It is a Jewish-American as well as modern American novel. It is narrated by an omniscient narrator. Much of what Malamud wrote directly came from his own life's experiences. *The Assistant* was the second novel of Malamud. He grew up in Brooklyn and spent his youthful years running a grocery store owned by his father. The story of Morris Bober is inspired by his own business. He completed his graduation from Erasmus High School. The Wall Street Crash leading to The Great Depression formed a background of financial crisis in his literary works. He completed his B.A. in 1936 and had a Master's degree from Columbia University. In the beginning, after completion of his education, he taught night classes in Erasmus Hall High School. Malamud became a faculty at Oregon State University where he taught for many years and later moved on to teach at Bennington College. He was influenced by I.B. Singer and Isaac Babel. Malamud wrote many works including; *The Natural*, *The Assistant*, *A New Life*, *The Fixer*, *Pictures of Fidelman*, *The Tenants*, *Rembrandt's Hat*, *Dubin's Lives*, *God's Grace*, *Idiots First* and many short stories. Most of Malamud's heroes are men of high moral standards and responsibility as discussed by Helterman:

Suffering, commitment and responsibility are the hallmarks of Malamud's heroes. They are men who start with nothing before some system tries to make them into less than nothing. The greatest of these heroes grow stronger as their lives become more minimal. It is here suffering ennobles by building commitment to an ideal. Sometimes the ideal has independent validity, but more often the commitment itself gives an act its moral value. These acts of heroism at their best, are not acts of self, but derive from or create responsibility towards another human being.

Always the characters find themselves morally linked to each other. Not only do the weak, like Frank Alpine in *The Assistant*, find themselves supporting the weaker (Bober), more surprisingly, the oppressors find themselves prisoners of their victims' determination. (Helterman 8)

Helterman is correct in understanding the underlying concept of Jewish identity as being able to understand that being a human means to suffer not only for oneself but also for one's fellowmen. The idea of suffering comes from the medieval literature which talked of man's sufferings due to their own

actions. Milton has talked about the suffering of man and the reason behind their condition in *Paradise Lost*. Man has to bear the burden of his own sins, which is justified by the concept of sin and redemption. The Greek tragedy also speaks of the same concept when it talks of themis, hubris and nemesis. Themis was the personification of divine or natural law, order and justice which everybody needed to respect. When a person committed hamartia, made an error in judgement, hubris took place which was punished by nemesis or retributive justice. Therefore, the process of sin and redemption and suffering due to one's sins continued in a vicious circle.

Malamud often explores the theme of alienation in his fiction. There are many characters, especially his heroes who are non-natives or outsiders, who came into an unknown culture. When a hero enters a culture different from his own culture, he is able to make a thoughtful analysis of the values of his own culture in contrast with the values of the new culture that he has entered. Frank Alpine, the hero of *The Assistant* is an Italian drifter from the east coast. He is a Christian by faith but slowly becomes a part of Bober's Jewish family norms, traditions and values.

The heroes of Malamud are modeled on the characteristics of Schlemiehl, who is a figure from Yiddish folktales and is recurring in stories of I.B. Singer. Schlemiehl is an innocent and moral man in a world which is full of deception. The worldly men around him often make a fool of him by robbing him of his money, duping him or sleeping with his wife. However, towards the end of the literary work Malamud proves that the Schlemiehl is always better than the wise men around him all the time. There are many such Schlemiehl and Schlimazel found in pairs such as Roy Hobbs and Pop Fisher. Another such pair is found in Frank Alpine and Morris Bober. Frank is a Schlimazel and Bober is the Schlemiehl, Roy Hobbs is the Schlimazel and Pop Fisher a Schlemiehl. Such people are made to suffer because of their simplicity and high morals. The worldly wise men take advantage of the simplicity of these characters. One such worldly man is found in the character of Julius Karp, who takes advantage of the simplicity of Morris Bober and makes a fortune in the neighborhood as he automatically gets advantage due to the simplicity and poverty of Morris Bober. The latter remains rigid about his values. Pinsker has talked of three American-Jewish writers who use the figure of Schlemiehl extensively in their writings;

I.B. Singer, Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud. According to Saul Bellow Schlemiehl is a character who doesn't want to adapt to the ways of the world, on the contrary, he remains to be till the end what he actually is no matter how much profit he would get if he would change his ideology. He remains irresolute in following his own ideology based on suffering and being moral always. Thus, the "Schlemiehl" is used as an important "metaphor" in the Yiddish and Jewish-American novels as pointed out by Leslie Fielder. Seymour Levin in *A New Life* is a Schlemiehl and also a Schlimazel as his own ideals become the reason for his failure as a true academician. In Cascadia College he is unable to find any faculty whom he could follow as a role model. He ends up as a loser as he is a victim of his own process of self-destruction. When Pauline asked him what he wanted from life, Levin replied: "order, value, accomplishment, love" (Malamud *A New Life* 175)

Malamud very often weaves a plot which is based on the moral choices of the central character. This character has to make a decision out of the two choices available to him. Either he has to choose the path of morality which is tough and full of suffering or he has the easier option of going on the immoral path which brings him quick success and less boundations from the society. The latter described character is found in Louis Karp who doesn't have to follow moral living as immorality was his obvious choice. As a result he did not have to undergo any kind of suffering order to lead his life. He gets all the success by running the immoral liquor trade which ruins the lives of many. The ill-effects of alcoholism have been demonstrated vehemently in the novel. Right in the beginning of the novel, *The Assistant*, there is a description of a drunk woman:

But the front door opened and a girl of ten entered, her face pinched and her eyes excited. His heart held no welcome for her.

"My mother says" she said quickly "can you trust her till tomorrow for a pound of butter, loaf of rye bread and a small bottle of cider vinegar?"

He knew the mother. "No more trust".

The girl burst into tears.

Morris gave her a quarter-pound of butter, the bread and vinegar. He found a penciled spot on the worn counter, near the cash register, and wrote a sum under "Drunk Woman". The total now came to \$2.03, which he never hoped to see. But Ida would nag if she noticed a new figure, so he reduced the amount to \$1.61. (Malamud 4)



Malamud has reflected on the ill-effects of alcoholism and has used Morris as his mouthpiece since the latter preferred to stay poor rather than indulging in liquor trade. Frank Alpine made a hard choice by following both the moral and immoral paths and finally chose the moral path out of the two, just like Morris Bober, which was full of suffering. Therefore, we see that Malamud's protagonists always have a choice between the right and the wrong decision and there is always a moral question in his literary works. The protagonist (or the hero) has to make a correct choice. Also we see in *A New Life* that Seymour Levin makes the choice whether or not to love Pauline Gilley and whether he should accept Gerald Gilley as the chairman or not.

This is a typical moral dilemma of Malamud's heroes. The only way to obtain one good is to sacrifice another one. At his best, Malamud balances the scales so closely that only a fully developed moral character can choose wisely. . . Malamud loves paradoxes of this kind, and often the conclusion of a novel depends upon the juggler's skill of keeping several sets of values in the air simultaneously, . . . Because every extreme behaviour creates the seeds of its polar opposite, paradox is not merely common, it is even necessary in Malamud. (Helterman 19)

Malamud not only talks about the moral question for the Jews but he extends it to the entire humankind. Bernard Malamud became a prominent writer in the Second World War period and his work *The Assistant*, which he wrote in the year 1957 has amounted to being counted as a classic. Literary critics evaluate *The Assistant* as having a Jewish framework but if analysed without bias there are some things which are universal and have nothing to do with Jews or Jewishness. Still, Malamud bears the tag of a Jewish-American writer which undermines his talent of addressing the concerns of humanity universally. However, the Jewish experiences so prominent in the case of Malamud's novels is almost appropriate to judge the concerns of all humanity. The basic concerns revolve around the suffering of man in this wide universe and the concern one man should have for his fellowman for the simple reason of coexistence. Albert Camus has talked about the same concerns in his book, *The Outsider* (1942) when he discusses the whole purpose behind human existence. He has questioned the existence of man, the reason why he has come into this universe and how he has become a part of universal suffering. He has explained this with a philosophy of "absurdism". He feels that the human being is caught in a biological trap and he has to suffer if he wants to live. Everybody in this world is waiting for his eventual death and during this period of waiting they have to follow a mundane routine.

Suffering in human life becomes inextricably tangled with the daily routine of a human being. Absurdist plays such as *Waiting for Godot* reflect the factor of waiting during human life for something which remains unfulfilled. The characters of this play wait indefinitely for a certain Godot who never arrives. Human life exemplifies the same predicament in which every man waits for his ultimate fate. During the process of waiting, a human being undergoes immense suffering. Jean Paul Sartre discusses the doctrine of Existentialism in his book *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. He also talks about the existence of man and its nuances. *The Hairy Ape* projects the existential hero, Yank who is ultimately killed as he comes to explore the reasons behind his existence.

Albert Camus discusses Nada, Nihilism or nothingness in the life of man. It is this nothingness which makes him feel that he is caught up in a biological trap. He comes out of his trap and becomes free from human suffering only at the time of his death. The early years of Malamud's life also form the reason why he chose to write for and about human suffering. He was a motherless child as he had lost the care of his mother only when he was fourteen years of age. He and his elder brother were raised by their father who ran a small grocery store and depended completely on it for their subsistence. This meager income helped Malamud understand the greater concerns of life such as love and suffering which were spiritually greater issues than the acquisition of material wealth. The protagonist of Malamud, Frank Alpine in *The Assistant* begins to understand the same concerns as he slowly evolves when he undergoes a complete inner change which helps him to grow from an individual having only limited perspective. This growth helps him to become a part of the bigger picture where he could see his contribution to human existence. He is able to understand how worldly suffering can elevate the man morally and that his material failure or his failure in attaining wealth did not affect his growth as a moralistic man. This was precisely the reason why Malamud thought that the promise of material success rooted in the American Dream was not enough to make a man truly successful. Malamud sometimes addresses himself as "a real child of Depression" The Great Depression of 1929 better known as The Wall Street Crash was a crash of the American stock market and in turn crash of the entire American economy which brought a slump in the American market. People lost their jobs due to recession and business suffered. Malamud himself worked in a yarn manufacturing factory and led a tough life. Most of his characters lead a similar life which is devoid of comfort, on the contrary, the life of his characters is full of suffering so that they may learn the inner concerns of human

existence. Malamud is always called a Jewish-American writer although his reason was choosing Jewish characters is that he is able to project them better but through the Jewish experience he wants to address larger concerns of humanity and not just those concerns which are intrinsically related to Jews only. Other Jewish writers such as Saul Bellow have also showed the same concerns. They don't want to be labeled as Jewish-American writers. Philip Roth is another such writer who has raised the same protest. They don't want to be marginalized from the main pantheon of American authors. Therefore, Malamud believes that "Every man is a Jew":

His attitude toward Jews and humanity may be stated as being that "the Jew is humanity under the twin aspect of suffering and moral aspiration. Therefore, any man who suffers greatly and also longs to be better than he is, can be called a Jew." (qtd. In Abramson 3)

Malamud does not possess an intellectual capacity in comparison to Phillip Roth and Saul Bellow but he explores much deeper themes which remain untouched by the former two. Apart from Jews, Malamud also talks about Italian Catholics in his works. This was due to his marital alliance with Anne De Chiara. He also shares his themes with other literary icons such as Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Just like the other Post-modern authors, Bernard Malamud struggles to find the real meaning of life. His novels talk of individual responsibility of the actions, decisions and freedom to exert individual powers and take into purview the fear and anxiety which is the result of exercising individual decisions. Sartre and Camus theorise man essentially as the subject with an indifferent objective which is often not understandable to the world. Man has no limits and can be interpreted to any limits of absurdity.

Malamud seeks to explore the inner values of man which make him overcome the attractions of the world. The longing for the American dream is a longing that man can overcome by understanding the realities of human life. Camus and Sartre have tried to expose the real human nature in their philosophy of Absurdness (by Albert Camus) and Existentialism (by Jean Paul Sartre.) According to Sartre, life is meaningless but we can give it some meaning only through our actions. In *The Hairy Ape*, the illusion of Yank is broken when he meets the

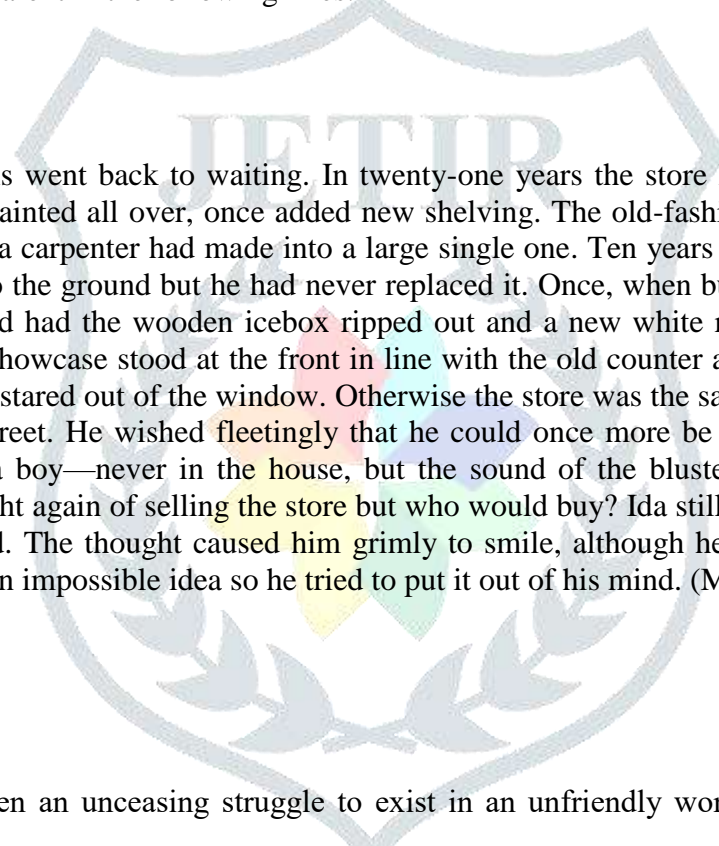
gorilla who crushes him to death. A man of steel cannot be crushed to death. Here Yank is the Existential hero who makes man realize that man knows everything except his own self. He lives in an illusion.

As English literature has always been influenced by French thought and literature, these two French philosophers, Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre dominated the intellectual scene. Albert Camus said that man came from some other place and was not welcome in this world as he came from a divine place. He became the victim of a “biological trap” which proves that the greatest tragedy of man is that he is born. He believed that man was an “outsider” and the world did not belong to him. He coined the word “absurd”, which further evolved into “absurdism”, which means belonging to a universe which is harsh and alien and does not belong to us. He raised the question of suicide and said that people would commit suicide due to the feeling of absurd which is the greatest tragedy of man as one who is born has to die one day eventually. One spends his time in a routine which is meaningless as the end is going to be the same. Albert Camus tries to explain the tangle of suicide by giving the example of the myth of Sisyphus, who is under a curse. He climbs a mountain with a boulder which falls down and he has to climb all over again. This is just like the routine of human life in which a man wakes up everyday to complete his daily chores. By the end of the day he completes all his work, only to wake up next day to get a fresh set of tasks. This routine never ends and goes in vicious circles till his death. Only the people who were sensitive to this predicament of man, raised the question of meaninglessness of man’s life. We are all modern Sisyphus and we feel that there is a sense of absurdity in our life.

The fundamental tenet of existentialism is that it views man as being with no essence or nature that cannot be determined by any supernatural agency but by the path of life one chooses. Man has to choose his own values of existence in this meaningless and absurd world. It is with this background in mind, that *The Assistant* should be studied. It was written after the Second World War, when man was looking for a life which was away from the prevailing disorder of the post-war crisis. Malamud’s characters exist in a meaningless world and face many challenges ranging from bankruptcy to lack of social values. It is their freedom of action that makes their life the way it is.



Morris Bober, the protagonist, becomes a victim of his circumstances while he is jailed in his grocery store. He becomes a victim at the hands of both Charlie Sobeloff, who makes the grocery absolutely bankrupt by his incapability of book keeping and Ward Minogue and Frank Alpine who victimizes him by robbing him of the money that legitimately belonged to him. Frank Alpine started stealing money from the grocery till, however, with the intention to return it. Bober was also victimized by Julius Karp who sold off his shop to another man who intended to start the grocery business in it. This added to further miseries of the grocer who was unable to come out of the vicious circle of misery inflicted upon him by his circumstances. Morris had no solution to the conditions he faces as is apparent in the following lines:

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Morris went back to waiting. In twenty-one years the store had changed little. Twice he had painted all over, once added new shelving. The old-fashioned double windows at the front a carpenter had made into a large single one. Ten years ago the sign hanging outside fell to the ground but he had never replaced it. Once, when business hit a long good spell, he had had the wooden icebox ripped out and a new white refrigerated showcase put in. The showcase stood at the front in line with the old counter and he often leaned against it as he stared out of the window. Otherwise the store was the same. . . The grocer gazed into the street. He wished fleetingly that he could once more be out in the open, as when he was a boy—never in the house, but the sound of the blustery wind frightened him. He thought again of selling the store but who would buy? Ida still hoped to sell. Every day she hoped. The thought caused him grimly to smile, although he did not feel like smiling. It was an impossible idea so he tried to put it out of his mind. (Malamud 5)

Morris Bober's life had been an unceasing struggle to exist in an unfriendly world which cared little for his feelings and conditions. Failure was now guaranteed as his closest relative or friend with whom he had to live the rest of his life. The circumstances in his life seemed to undergo no changes and there was no promise of meaningfulness in his life. Nothingness prevailed as an integral part of his existence. Moreover, Morris was now convinced that he could not do much to improve his situation. The plan to sell the grocery store had also turned out to be a useless proposition and he was convinced that there would be no change in his existence. The grocery store was the unchanging reality of his life and he had to lead the unsuccessful life it offered.

Frank Alpine, the real hero of the novel and the assistant to Morris's grocery store was a "drifter". He at first victimized Morris due to his moral values and later started assisting Morris in his grocery store as a repentance for his misdeeds. He fell in love with Helen who victimized him and failed to understand his true feelings for her. Even when Frank saved Helen from Ward Minogue's rape attempt on her—he was victimized by his own physical desires which caused him to almost assault her sexually. Later he suffered anguish for his behavior which he could not prove to Helen at a much later time and date. Just like the owner of the grocery, *The Assistant* too was searching for a valid reason for his existence. He was a victim of alienation as his life had led him to a completely new surrounding. He felt that the reason for his existence was not under his own control and he could not determine why he was existing at all which is apparent in the following lines:

"Sometimes I think your life keeps going the way it starts out on you," Frank went on. "The week after I was born my mother was dead and buried. I never saw her face, not even a picture. When I was five years old, one day my old man leaves this furnished room where we were staying, to get a pack of butts. He takes off and that was the last I ever saw of him. They traced him years later but by then he was dead. I was raised in an orphan's home and when I was eight they farmed me out to a tough family. I ran away ten times, also from the next people I lived with. I think about my life a lot. I say to myself, 'what do you expect to happen after all of that?' Of course, every now and again, you understand, I hit some nice good spots in between, but they are few and far, and usually I end up like I started out, with nothing." . . . He looked at the grocer then at the floor. "All my life I wanted to accomplish something worthwhile—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. . ." (Malamud 36-37)

Frank did not have any values or religious beliefs to guide him. This forced him into a spiritual emptiness due to which he lost all that he would gain. He tried again and again only to get failure just like Morris. The inertia which surrounded him stopped him from any little progress that would come his way. He had got used to this kind of a stagnant life and did not expect much to change.

Morris's daughter Helen is also tired of the poverty-stricken life that she was living in. She was victimized by the materialistic point of view of Nat Pearl who also did not mean sincerely in his romantic advances towards her. Her plans for higher education had already been thwarted due to lack of funds and to meet her expenses she had to do small time odd jobs. She had a soft corner for Frank Alpine with whom she would share her inner

thoughts but even he became boisterous and broke her faith by assaulting her sexually. She was surrounded by spineless men who had no values or code of conduct for their life.

Morris Bober is optimistic all throughout the novel believing that one day the grocery store would get its share of profits. However, this never happens. Bober also wants to sell the grocery store in order to lead a better life but this also turns out to be a hopeless plan. Frank Alpine steals from the till of the grocery to make things worse. But Morris does not lose faith in his Jewish beliefs inspite of his predicament in life. His losses don't hold him back from helping Frank Alpine, a drifter because he believes in the spirit of universal brotherhood.

Malamud uses the prison motif as the grocery is more of a jail for him and does not provide any liberation, either financial or emotional. Bober remains imprisoned in the grocery store which becomes the reason for his suffering. He remains oblivious of the factors which help others to become successful. His high ideals hold him back from adopting the racy-ideals of the capitalist society where everyone is dreaming of becoming rich by adopting any kind of means. All the characters compete for success in the bourgeois-capitalist society to make the American Dream a reality for them.

The lives of the immigrants in Brooklyn is a realistic picture of the American Dream. Most of the people suffer in making a successful career. There are exceptions of Julius Karp and Nat Pearl who get easy success by compromising with their ideals, as they are not concerned with whatever means they employ to get success but the end result. On the other hand, Morris plays righteous all the time and wants to earn his money only through legitimate means. Frank Alpine, earlier a vagabond and thief, comes to terms with the high ideals of Jewish life by conforming to the beliefs of Morris Bober.

Malamud is most apt in exploring the limits of individual freedom and struggle set by the economic and political forces. The grocery, otherwise sufficient enough to fulfill the needs of Morris and his family, turns to be a curse for him because of the forces unleashed by the market economy. These forces have such a strong effect that Frank goes against his own nature and becomes a part of the hold-up operation in Morris's dilapidated store turning almost into a fiend in which his effort to draw as much financial gains from the grocery as possible while he steals from the till, even after his feeling of remorse as to why he attacked a simpleton like Morris. Obviously

he has become a subject of the perceptions promoted by the contemporary economic set-up, and acting under that influence he is ready to discard even his close relationships, such as his relationship with Helen, a girl whom he simply adored. Finally, Frank Alpine gave up his dream of a prodigious and opulent life by following the ideals of a true Jew inspired in him by Morris. *The Assistant* depicts the people of a small town, who are enslaved by the forces of capitalism. No matter how hard Morris tried but he could not achieve financial success in his small business. The economic scenario made the rich richer and the poor become poorer. He keeps fighting for his economic freedom even against high odds.

Morris is able to see the sham behind the American Dream of success. He does not long for success after spending a significant part of his life because he understands that he cannot run his grocery business by following the capitalistic ideology. He realizes that it is only through his suffering that he will get redemption not by compromising on his values. He chooses to follow the righteous path of truth and honesty. He keeps himself away from the fruitless chase of happiness through prosperity.

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