



## The Malamud Heroes: A Quest for Existence

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Bernard Malamud stands out as a preeminent contemporary American writer who has explored the themes of immigrants and survivors with remarkable frequency and imagination.

Within his realm of fiction, Bernard Malamud populates his narratives with a diverse array of diasporans, encompassing various backgrounds. In contrast to Abraham Cohan's assimilated main character in *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Malamud's creations encapsulate substantial echoes of the Jewish history. Prevailing in his works are depictions of the lingering remnants from an earlier wave of immigrants individuals who find themselves unwillingly distanced from the affluence of American Jewry. These characters emerge as survivors of a bygone Jewish community, resolute in upholding unassimilated Jewish values. Their accents persist, as do their anachronistic professions, as testaments to their heritage.

During interviews, Malamud acknowledges the influence of his diligent "Yiddish" parents and their generation of Eastern European immigrants, who served as moral exemplars. Yet, he underscores that his thematic focus extends to humanity as a whole, using Jewish characters as vessels to convey universal experiences. This approach parallels William Faulkner's ability to create a rich universe from a distinct corner of the American South. Malamud's capacity for universality aligns him with several American Jewish writers, encapsulating the essence of his artistic identity. Describing himself in a 1975 interview, he expressed that: "an American.....a Jew, and....A writer for all men" (Hassan 16).

Nonetheless, his universal approach finds its foundation in unique character archetypes, settings, and intricate details. Embedded within grim and often perilous environments, deteriorating stores, stifling apartments, condemned structures. Malamud's characters are ensnared. They inhabit a nation where Jews face vulnerability at every turn. His creations embody the duality of archetypal Jews and a broader representation of humanity grappling with suffering.

Malamud addressed this matter during a 1964 interview with the National Observer:

“A bad reading of my work would indicate that I'm writing about losers. That would be a very bad reading. One of my most important themes is a man's hidden strength. I am very much interested in the resources of the spirit, the strength people don't know they have until they are confronted with a crisis”.

Malamud's recurrent theme of humanism has garnered him a broad readership and earned the acclaim of both readers and critics. They unanimously categorize him as a purveyor of 'Jewish Humanism,' a term that merges a humanistic moral perspective with a deep-seated sense of ethnic identity.

This paper discuss some issues bearing on the theme-a quest for existence within the scope of the novels, *A New Life* (1961), *The Assistant* (1957) and *The Fixer* (1966). The protagonist's quest for a new life is explicated through plot, theme and character development analysis embedded within the frame of Malamud's original ideas.

Bernard Malamud's novels showcase an intriguing assortment of plots and characters. Notably, his works revolve around character development, particularly the transformation of protagonists from immaturity and self-centeredness to a sense of obligation towards their community and society. Upon close examination of key figures like Sy Levin, Frank Alpine, Yakov Bok, or Morris Bober, a common thread emerges: despite their diverse vocations, they all essentially manifest as individuals grappling with adversity, in search of a more meaningful life marked by commitment and responsibility.

Questions such as why the majority of Malamud's characters are of Jewish descent, what was the prevailing social status of Jews in his contemporary America, why does suffering hold significance in Malamud's narratives, and how do his characters navigate their struggles all beckoned for thorough explanations are the series of inquiries that needs to be answered.

The primary inquiry posed by this study is whether, and to what extent, Malamud achieved his quest, and this question is addressed modestly. Consequently, the protagonists within Malamud's works emerge as symbolic representations of humanity's persistent struggle, entwined with its enigmatic destiny. This transformation makes everyone akin to a Jew, as they partake in life's bitter experiences. This notion appears to align with Malamud's intent, evident in his well-known assertion "All Men are Jews," or as one of his characters elsewhere muses, "believe me, there are Jews everywhere."

To Malamud, according to Podheretz, "The Jews is humanity seen under the twin aspects of suffering and moral aspiration and therefore, any man who suffers greatly and also longs to be better than he is, can be called a Jew" (Podheretz). Sandy Cohen has rightly pointed out that Malamud's Jewish protagonists attempt, "to become a part of and identify with the essentially gentile world of America to symbolize Everyman's quest for self-identification in....Too often hostile society" (Sandy Cohen).

Conversely, Malamud's perspective extends beyond humanity's existence solely within a naturalistic realm. His characters do indeed grapple with the impact of their cultural surroundings. Yet, the afflictions endured by figures like Sy Levin, Frank Alpine, or Yakov Bok lead to a fresh revelation, unveiling novel boundaries in the realm of human experience. In Malamud's viewpoint, human existence transcends the confines of the naturalistic world, where survival stands as the predominant impetus and only the most adaptable endure. Notably, his characters possess a distinct trait of introspection, each driven by an inherent desire and capacity for conscious awareness regarding their existence.

The modern hero presents a formidable challenge to conventional notions of heroism; however, it is worth noting that this hero is not an entirely novel concept. This contemporary hero shares a kinship with the heroes of past romances, and at its core, their quest remains similar: the pursuit of a profound and unequivocal sense of purpose in life. This quest involves the search for an ultimate answer, one that asserts that humanity transcends mere physical existence, and in some manner, is connected to the divine or possesses divine qualities. With an unwavering commitment, Malamud vividly portrays this evolution of heroism as: "against the unquestionable dwarfing forces of modern society, the honest often successful struggle of the individual striving to define himself as a man within a narrow range of active possibilities" (31).

Malamud's first novel, *The Natural* (1952), stands as one of his most emblematic creations. Though ostensibly following the journey of Roy Hobbs, an American baseball player, the narrative is enriched with underlying mythic elements. It delves into themes of imitation and solitude, while also foreshadowing what would later become Malamud's prevailing narrative focus: a suffering protagonist grappling with the conundrum of aligning actions with moral convictions and confronting the intricate challenges and hardships of life. In his second novel, *The Assistant* (1957), Malamud presents the life of Morris Bober, a Jewish immigrant who runs a grocery store in Brooklyn. Despite facing dire financial straits, Bober displays generosity by taking in Frank Alpine, a cynical and homeless young man on the brink of starvation. This novel encapsulates Malamud's signature exploration of complex human dynamics against the backdrop of adversity.

Regarded as one of Malamud's notably authentic works, *A New Life* (1961) centers on a former alcoholic of Jewish origin hailing from New York City. Seeking to evade his reputation as a drunkard, the protagonist takes on a new role as a professor at an agricultural and technical college situated in the Pacific Northwest. Skillfully entwining the protagonist's pursuit of purpose and self-esteem with a satirical commentary on academia, Malamud delves into the detrimental aspects of idealism. He also examines the ways in which love can lead to deceit and the poignant ache of solitude.

A shared thread binding both proletarian and semi-bourgeois characters is their shared experience of indignities and a history marked by struggles and setbacks. Caught in the tension between materialistic and idealistic pressures, the protagonist confronts a reckoning with their moral responsibilities. As articulated by Marcus, "Morality is simply the name of the discipline... the story to be told, consequently is of the hero who becomes heroic either by rising to acceptance of moral obligation or descending to it" (253).

Below the facade of materialistic ambitions, Malamud, a moralist, subtly infuses his ideas. His central focus revolves around the hero's pursuit of a purposeful "new life." Although man may stumble, an opportunity for redemption emerges through the acceptance of one's identity flaws and strengths alike leading to a transformative journey toward self-integration. The crux of this maturation process lies in guiding the protagonist to recognize their intrinsic humanity, often veiled by egocentric tendencies and short-term gains. Ultimately, heroism is embodied in the act of transcending oneself, constituting an act of self-transcendence for the protagonists.

The moral transformation of the protagonist is accentuated by the recurrent motif of the quest that serves as a foundational element in Malamud's literary works. "His characters go on a journey in search of experience, romance.... a new life. This is, of course a classic mode in serious or tragic literature from Oedipus to heart of Darkness where the spiritual or physical journey begins in innocence and ends in experience or tragic self-knowledge." The heroes in Malamud's works need to acquire the skill of: "move from blind self-being to self-revelation and reality" (Leviat 18).

Embedded within Malamud's novels are mythic frameworks encompassing rituals of vegetation, motifs reminiscent of the grail, and archetypal elements like the wasteland archetype. These narratives often involve the rejuvenation of the fertility cycle through the displacement of the unproductive father figure. What Malamud artfully conveys through his fictional portrayals is not a novel setting, but rather the emergence of a fresh existence within a novel connection.

Present in all three novels, a pivotal theme in Malamud's works revolves around the potential for transformation within the journey of human existence. Malamud elaborated on this theme during an interview with William Kennedy for the National Observer: "A man is always changing and the changed part of him is all important. I refer to the psyche, to the spirit, the mind, the emotions".

Malamud portrays his protagonists navigating distinct realms in their life journeys—the realm of a Brooklyn grocery store, the realm of a Northwestern university, and the realm of anti-Semitic Czarist Russia in the early 20th century. Across all three depictions, an undeniable facet of human existence emerges: suffering. Each novel ultimately underscores that the freedom to live and explore new paths encompasses not only the freedom to experience, but also, paradoxically, the freedom to grapple and endure challenges. As Yakov aptly concludes: "You lived, you suffered, but you lived" (The Fixer 211).

Morris Bober, when responding to Frank Alpine's query regarding the distinctive hardships endured by Jewish individuals, once more articulates Malamud's recurring theme: "If you live, you suffer". And as Frank inquires, "For what do you endure suffering, Morris?" the response becomes a pivotal juncture within the novel: "I suffer for

you “. Morris said calmly. Morris undergoes suffering, a representation of the human experience that Malamud presents as marked by affliction. This brings to mind Karl Jaspers' statement: “Suffering tells me that I exist”.

The essence here encapsulates another of Malamud's themes: suffering acts as the catalyst for the emergence of the potential for a fresh existence. Every one of Malamud's three major novels centers on the essence of the central characters, delving into their resolve to uncover a novel life, and delving into the essence of the pursuit, which in each instance originates with the quest for self-discovery. In each narrative, despite often absurd and ironic circumstances, the protagonist ultimately attains success, aligning with their original quest.

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