



Article : The Theme of Suffering in the Fiction of Bernard Malamud

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ABSTRACT :

Bernard Malamud is one of the most important Jewish-American authors of Post world war II. His writings have a Universal appeal. He presents the suffering of the Jew, whether he is European, American, or Israeli. His themes take on the overtones of the Universal suffering of all mankind, both Jew and Gentile. Bernard Malamud uses his knowledge of Jewishness to express larger universal truths and values through his Unity of "realism and allegory". Malamud's recurrent theme in his short stories, based on his belief that life is a tragedy full of joy, highlights the Jews as a symbol for suffering mankind.

Research Paper :

Of all the Post-World War II Jewish-American authors, Bernard Malamud appears to be the most problematic when these writers are defined in terms of their Jewishness. Malamud's critics range from Harold Bloom (1986:1), who believes that Malamud has a personal and original vision, which is "almost wholly unrelated to the most characteristic or normative Jewish thought and tradition," to Robert Alter (1982:12-13), who assumes that even though Malamud's "protagonists are avowedly Jewish, he has never really written about Jews, in the manner of other American Jewish novelists." In his early writings, Malamud sets out to tell a truth - a Jewish truth - that presents the suffering Jew, whether he is European, American, or Israeli. As he progresses, though, Malamud's retelling of the tradition of the suffering Jew changes, and his theme takes on the overtones of the universal suffering of all mankind, both Jew and Gentile. In this attempt, says Guttman (1986:158), "Malamud seems in his heart of hearts to be, like Ludwig Lewisohn, a believer in people."

In 1950, Malamud (1983:viii) confesses that when he started writing, "almost without understanding why," he was thinking of the suffering of his immigrant father and the disillusionment of his mother. For Malamud his parents and their tragic life became his fiction: "I had them in mind as I invented the characters who became their fictional counterparts," (ibidem) he says. But Malamud sees others also suffering in America and he tries, in his works, to spread his Jewishness

to help, even if the attempt seems to be largely based on intent and ambition rather than on actual aid and rescue. In so doing, Malamud's Jewishness takes on a combined form of experiential and creative conceptions in his writings.

Criticism of Bernard Malamud's writings, especially his short stories, have raised several questions about whether this Jewish author is protesting the social treatment of Jews (Hoyt 1970:171) or is he using his knowledge of Jewishness to express larger universal truths and values through his unity of "realism and allegory" (May 1986:93). Earl H. Rovit (1970:7) states that Malamud's characters are in conflict between the orthodox and the new values of Jewish behavior in modern America, while Sam Girgus (1984:4) concludes that Jewish-American writers, including Malamud, are developing a new American way which "demolishes the wall dividing Jewish from American identities and heals conflicting loyalties by making Judaism and Americanism mutually re-enforcing ideologies." The question that needs to be answered here is: Just what is Malamud doing in his short stories? In a collection titled *The Stories of Bernard Malamud*, a recurring theme persists, one that seems to present the unnatural history of the Jew: he is born, he suffers, and then he dies. However, because of Malamud's portrayal of the stories' major characters and their dichotomous personalities, this unnatural history becomes more complex. The characters' actions are contradictions of the lives they lead, resulting in the fatalistic belief that man does not govern himself and his actions, and therefore will never succeed in his attempts to transcend his fate of isolation and suffering. As a matter of fact, Malamud might be saying that the Jew in America is contented not to even try; that he suffers from paranoia and lethargy, which ultimately separates him from the society in which he lives.

Let's take, for example, Kessler, the protagonist of "The Mourners." He undergoes Malamud's ritualistic process that leads to isolation. Actually, Kessler chooses to be alone in his world. He walks out on his wife and children and into a life that teems with loneliness and suffering. In the world of work, he is shunned by employers who fear his quarrelsome nature. In the decayed tenement building where he lives alone he has no visitors for over ten years, except for the janitor, Ignace, with whom he plays pinochle. But even Ignace, lower on the New York class structure than Kessler, deserts him when Kessler's apartment, which represents his entire world, begins to stink. Kessler becomes lethargic; he joins forces with the non-living. When Ignace tells Kessler about his eviction notice, the janitor "watched as the door slowly opened. To his surprise he found himself frightened at the old man's appearance. He looked in the act of opening the door, like a corpse adjusting his coffin lid" (Malamud 1983:28). However, Malamud writes, if Kessler "appeared dead, his voice was alive His eyes were reddened, his cheeks sunken, and his wisp of beard moved agitatedly. He . . . shouted [and]

swore they would have to kill him and drag him out dead" (p.28). For one instant, a spark of life comes to Kessler's eyes, a spark that shows a rebellion that would shake him out of his inactive state. But the moment is short-lived and dies with Kessler in the same way that his predecessors let themselves be annihilated by Hitler's dominant forces, without offering much resistance.

Malamud paints a pitiful picture of Kessler after the marshal's two brawny assistants evict the over-sixty-five-year-old Jew and drag his belongings on to the sidewalk. Even though Kessler "shouted, struggled, pleaded with his neighbors to help him . . . they looked on in a silent group outside the door" (p. 30), not unlike the rest of the world quietly looking on as Hitler methodically exterminated the Jews in Europe during the Holocaust. Kessler sits in the rain, the sleet, the snow, without hat or coat, and stares at nothing. However, the picture shows a reversal of roles in the Holocaust because, in America and unlike Europe, the old Jew is pitied and helped by two families: one German-American, the other Italian-American, the two ethnic groups that united in Europe to perform the Final Solution. Here in America, Malamud says, the Jew has only one thing to be afraid of: himself, his own kind. Eventually the landlord, Gruber, who only thinks of financial matters which bolster his blood pressure, repents and banishes the ignominious Ignace to "his hold." He realizes his inhumanness towards his fellow Jew as he ponders Kessler's question: "Are you Hitler or a Jew?" (p.32). The answer leads to self-realization as he shamefully cries out, pulls the sheet off Kessler's bed, sinks to the floor, and joins the old Jew in mourning. The Jewish Gruber finally returns to his Jewishness.

Malamud's experiments in misery and the paranoid Jew continues in the story "Take Pity." Rosen drives himself into a state of paranoia through his insane desire to help the Kalish family. The lethargy of the Kalish family starts in Poland where Eva says Hitler took away everything from her. And even though this family is transported to post-World War II America, their philosophy of life remains constant. They live in their own do-nothing world that they've grown accustomed to during the war in Europe. As if predicting the future, Rosen tells Axel Kalish after he has bought the grocery Store "Kiddo, this is a mistake. This place is a grave. Here they will bury you if you don't get out quick!" (p. 5). Not long after, and not surprisingly, Axel Kalish drops dead.

When Axel dies, Eva constantly rejects Rosen's offer of help. He advises her to get rid of the business, but she refuses; he offers her marriage, but she refuses; he sends her money in the mail, but she returns it. As a matter of fact, in his unsuccessful frenzied obsession to give something to Eva and her two daughters, Rosen is driven to attempted suicide. He is afraid to live; he's afraid of the light. When Davidov comes to interview Rosen, he finds the ex-coffee salesman

restless and seeming "to be listening to or for something, although Davidov was convinced there was absolutely nothing to listen to" (p.4). Rosen avoids the window and the light that shines through it. There is an unexplained fear of light and the suffering that it will bring to Rosen.

Eva's constant refusal of Rosen's help affects his mind and his actions. He tells Davidov:

I went home but hurt me in my mind. All day long and all night I felt bad. My back pained me where I was missing my kidney. Also too much smoking. I tried to understand this woman but I couldn't. Why should somebody that her two children were starving always say no to a man that he wanted to help her? What did I do to her bad? Am I maybe a murderer she should hate me so much? (p. 10)

The questions posed here by Rosen, besides putting him into a questionable state of mind, show Malamud's treatment of the dichotomous actions and responses of the New York Jews. Rosen can't give away thousands of dollars, two houses, furniture, and a car, even if his life depended on it; actually, the only way he can give his wealth away is if he gives his life away. Yet, Eva wants nothing as she beseeches him with haunted eyes, at the end of the story, to take back his possessions. In "Take Pity," we pity Eva for living her life away; we pity Rosen more for not living.

Being born and dying are both lonely journeys, but the suffering of life in between being born and dying is the loneliest journey of all. Malamud presents this theme in "The Jewbird," the ever-present theme of the lonely, wandering Jew. Nobody knows where the Jewbird, Schwartz, comes from; nobody knows where he's been and where he's going, not even Schwartz himself. Schwartz knows only that "God (does not) tell us everything" (p.146); that he's tired and that wherever he's going, "it's a long way" off (p.147).

"The Jewbird" is a striking illustration of the baneful world, often a Jewish one, that Malamud projects. In this story, Malamud writes, "The Window was open so the skinny bird flew in. Flappity-flap with its frazzled black wings. That's how it does. It's open, you're in. Closed, you're out and that's; your fate" (p.144). The Jewbird cannot explain to the Jewish family, the Cohens, how he happens to be in their house; it's just his fate. Ironically, the Jewbird comes to the Cohens because he is escaping from anti-Semites; however, in the Jewish world in which he finds himself, he is hated and persecuted from the outset by Mr. Cohen, who tries to drive him away. Certainly, in the Jewish world, says Malamud, not all Jews are in.

Although he likes Maurie, Cohen's dull-witted son, and he helps him to improve his grades, the Jewbird does not fare well in Cohen's presence. After a campaign of terror, Cohen torments the bird and then murders him. Afraid to leave Cohen's world because the anti-Semites would catch him, the Jewbird dies at

the hands of a Jewish anti-Semite. Even if the entire world consisted of people with similar backgrounds - race, religion, color - Malamud says, there would still be an inconsistency in their treatment of one another. In "The Jewbird" the wandering Jew who has been persecuted for thousands of years finally arrives safely in Jewdom, only to lose his life by his own kind.

Leo Finkle's conclusions about the Jews in the short story "The Magic Barrel" largely summarizes Malamud's intent in his writings. Finkle, miserable because of the emptiness in his life - he is unloved and loveless can only console himself with the thought that "he was a Jew and that a Jew suffered" (p.136). Finkle a rabbinical student, realizes that he is incapable of finding, on his own, a woman to love and marry. However, Finkle is able to admit his incapacities which hit him fully in the face. 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" (p.135).

Finkle guiltily consoles himself that even though he is imperfect, his ideals are not. With this new self-knowledge, he hopes to find a Jewish bride in whom he can work his own redemption. And he does get that opportunity in the Jewish prostitute, Stella. Finkle meets Stella, appropriately enough, under a street lamp. As he rushes toward her, he pictures "his own redemption" (p.143) in her. Meanwhile the Jewish marriage broker and Stella's father, Saltzman, hides around the corner and chants prayers for the dead. But what has died? It is the Jewish marriage broker's responsibility to his profession; it is the Jewish prostitute's responsibility towards her own guilty youth; it is the Jewish rabbi's responsibility towards his God; and it is the responsibility of all three towards their fellow man - all need chanted prayers.

Malamud's ever-present theme of suffering sheds light on the plight of the characters in "The Magic Barrel." They want to belong, they want to be loved, they want to be responsible, often without knowing it themselves. Malamud believes that the Jews need to belong to each other, or at least be concerned for each other. He subscribes to the idea of "I live for you, you live for me."

In "The Last Mohican," Shimon Susskind, a refugee European Jew, teaches Arthur Fidelman, an American Jew that he has just met, a lesson on humanity and the responsibility of the Jew for his fellow Jew. To Fidelman's question, "Am I responsible for you then, Susskind?" the latter's reply is, "Who else?" (p.56). The dialogue continues:

"Why should I be?" [Fidelman asks].
"You know what responsibility means?"
'I think so.'
Then you are responsible: Because you are a man.

Because you are a Jew, aren't you?"
"Yes, goddam it, but I'm not the only one in the whole wide world. Without prejudice, I refuse the obligation. I am a single individual and can't take on everybody's personal burden' (p.56).

Malamud preaches the universality of Jewishness, and the responsibility one Jew should have for another. Fidelman, at the end of the story, triumphantly realizes this responsibility that he should have for Susskind, but it is too late. As Fidelman chases Susskind to get back his suit, "he comes to a dead halt but the refugee [Susskind] ran on. When last seen he was still running" (p.72). Again, the theme of the displaced and wandering Jew surfaces. But now, as opposed to the past, it is the Jew, says Malamud, who is responsible for the dilemma of his Jewish brother.

For Malamud, the substance of his art is the suffering of the Jews. His emphasis is on the Jews because he is a Jew, and he understands Jewishness. Malamud's recurrent theme in his short stories, based on his belief that life is a tragedy full of joy, highlights the Jews as a symbol for suffering mankind. This is as it should be. His emphasis upon the universality of the Jew, and thus the insistence upon the community of human suffering, warns the world that if we practice misanthropy, then we are challenging history to repeat itself.

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