

THE MORAL DIMENSION OF HUMANISM IN BERNARD MALAMUD'S THE ASSISTANT

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Bernard Malamud (1914-1986) – one of the great Jewish American humanist writers of the twentieth century. The purpose of this research work has been to throw light on the morality of Malamud – this being an issue that concerns us all as human beings – following a qualitative and theoretical analysis of the author's most critically acclaimed novel “The Assistant” (1957). The study has analyzed the novel in question with a view to shedding light on the humanist philosophy of Malamud, who accentuates the need for his characters to embrace real moral values, and guiding moral principles which, however, must not be very strict. Even though humanism supports reason as its final arbiter on what is called truthful, good, and beautiful, it also takes a firm stand on reason having to fully recognize the emotional side of human beings, in attaching a great importance to the feelings of love, pity, compassion, and affection for others. Likewise, in *The Assistant*, Malamud emphasizes the fact that the protagonists in this novel, instead of being guided by clichéd principles of behavior, discover and comply with their moral code – even without the presence of religion or God – for the good of themselves and community. In conclusion, it should be stressed that Malamud's moral dimension of humanism takes on special importance with the heroes being ordinary on the surface, only to become role models in making difficult moral choices, and undertaking moral responsibility for themselves and other people.

Key words: *Morality, humanism, altruism, moral responsibility*

Introduction

The study starts with a brief introduction to morality, Malamud's moral vision, which is followed by an illustrative analysis of his novel *The Assistant*.

Morality

Morality has always preoccupied human beings, be them philosophers, writers, leaders, or simple people. Each society has its standards of right or wrong conduct, good or bad deed, accepted by members of the social community as written or unwritten laws that govern their lives. Except external norms, there also exist internal moral values that apply to the individual capable of forming their own moral judgment.

Malamud's moral vision

Bernard Malamud is an important representative of moral realism following World War II. This realism attempted to find a proper vision that would rise above the overwhelming despair, nihilism, and cruelty of the time. Specifically, the post-war realism centers on the human being struggling to cope in a mass society. At his acceptance address on receiving the National Book Prize, in 1959, Malamud expressed his anxiety about the human condition.

I am quite tired of the colossally deceitful devaluation of man in this day; for whatever explanation: that life is cheap amid a prevalence of wars; or because we are drugged by totalitarian successes into a sneaking belief in their dehumanizing processes; or tricked beyond self-respect by the values of the creators of our thing-ridden society; . . . or because, having invented the means of his extinction, man values himself less for it and lives in daily dread that he will in a fit of passion, or pique or absented-mindedness, achieve his end. Whatever the reason, his fall from grace in his eyes is betrayed in the words he has invented to describe himself as he is now: fragmented, abbreviated, other-directed, organizational, anonymous man, a victim, in the words that are used to describe him, of a kind of synecdochic irony, the part for the whole. The devaluation exists because he accepts it without protest (as cited in Lasher, 1991, p.14).

Unlike many fellow writers, who depict a fragmented society and alienated individuals, Malamud emphasizes the importance of individual's integration into society. To Malamud, being civilized consists in possessing feelings of brotherhood and compassion, without which many evils would result. Only through communication and human interaction can the individual know himself/herself, and others better, while being able to develop his/her personality, and the future of the society. The latter becomes absurd when human beings do not take the right direction in life, when there is no trust or hope for the future. As a social being, the individual must always defend his/her rights and dignity, even when violated by the state.

Malamud wrote in the tradition of allegorical American literature, but displayed his originality by not treating moral issues emptily, but fusing them naturally into his works. The Malamud heroes become moral beings not in word, but in deed, which makes them more responsible for themselves and others.

The writer's humanist and moral vision has especially been impacted by Judeo-Christian tradition, and the Old Testament. However, Malamud is not a religious writer, but a secular one, whose Hebrew origin is more of an ethnic identity and moral perspective than religious conviction. In holy Hebraic writings, God is the focal point of morality. In the prose of Malamud, the central place is occupied by human beings, them being free to choose between good and evil, without the Almighty's intervention.

Illustrative analysis of *The Assistant*

Malamud's moral concern is best expressed in the novel *The Assistant* (1957), which describes the life of Morris Bober, a Jewish immigrant who fled the czarist regime, only to find some other form of imprisonment in his grocery store opened in Brooklyn, 21 years ago.

Morris is the universe of morality and goodness in the non-Jewish neighborhood where he lives. Although unable to secure his family's livelihood, he never forgets the moral obligation toward others. For example, every day he opens his store at six in the morning to give a three-cent loaf to an old Polish woman. Also, he gives on credit to a drunken woman, though he knows that she will not ever pay. Even to the poor people he extends his trust.

Morris Bober's qualities stand out best when compared with the materialistic Jew Julius Karp, who mainly causes the financial ruin of Morris. Although the latter begged him not to lease out a place for another grocery store in the neighborhood, Karp replies coldly: "Who will pay my taxes?" (p.11) Karp himself managed to turn his former shoe shop into a liquor store after Prohibition, which appears quite successful financially. Karp has lost every human value, as to him only money counts. He appreciates Morris, however, as a virtuous and honest man, qualities that prevent him from moving ahead in a materialistic society. Like Karp, Morris' wife, Ida, is materialistic and has embraced the corrupt values of American society. In saying to her daughter, Helen, "Who gets rich from reading?" (p.132), she pushes her into developing a lasting relationship with Nat, the Jewish lawyer with a bright future, or Louis, the son of Karp, and not waste time with books.

Helen, on the other hand, is greatly affected by this money-ridden society. At the funeral of his father, she cannot see anything impressive at his ordinary existence:

I said Papa was honest but what was the good of such honesty if he couldn't exist in the world?... 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 knew, at least, what was good... 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 (pp.277-8).

Though to some extent, she is right, morally she is completely wrong. It is not true that Morris transformed himself into a victim; he simply resigned himself to his cruel fate. Just as Jonathan Baumbach (1965) has observed: "Morris's victimization is not limited to man's inhumanity to man, but is compounded by the fates; he is a predestined, inexorable sufferer" (p.113). It is exactly this fact, along with the sympathy for other sufferers, which gets Morris to not compromise with his moral standards.

Josephine Zadovsky Knopp (1975) defines Morris' moral conduct as a concept of *mentshlekhkayt*, which:

has as its fundamental premise the innocence of man, man free of the sins of the Fall. It recognizes that within man run opposing tendencies toward good and evil, and that within this context man is completely free to choose. It rests its ultimate faith in man's basic goodness and the implicit assumption that, in the final analysis, he will always choose what is morally and ethically right. It believes in action as the path toward moral redemption...It is an ethic concerned with improving man's lot in this world...To those who accept, perhaps even unconsciously, the ethical code of *mentshlekhkayt*, the concept of an "absurd" universe is foreign; to them the universe has a definite structure and meaning... At least a part of this meaning resides in the code's implicit faith in the

moral significance of man's action..and that he has the obligation to apply this power in the cause of good.

Mentshlekhhkayt also encompasses the very strong sense of community that has traditionally been a feature of Jewish life. The paramount characteristic of this community feeling is the moral imperative of man's responsibility to his fellow man...

The code...is an order, a Law in a world of chaos and suffering, and thereby brings sanity and significance to life (pp.6-7).

While this clearly explains Morris's creed, Knopp does not seem to notice the irony in a society which considers the grocer's values and ethics a failure. Given the American culture, as portrayed in *The Assistant*, this admirable moral structure becomes more a source of passive resistance than an active participation for change.

Morris ends up like a prisoner and victim, because the country that Morris chose to live and succeed does not adhere anymore to the virtues of a truly good man. Although Karp occasionally addresses Morris for approval and spiritual support, such a thing brings no good to the liquor store owner because he continues to debase, spurn, and betray the values espoused by Morris.

In a community where every penny is important, and money is seen as an icon, Morris offers trust and gives on credit.

“My mother says...can you trust her till tomorrow for a pound of butter, a 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...The total came now to \$2.03, which he never hoped to see. But Ida would nag,...so he reduced the amount ...His peace – the little he lived with – was worth forty-two cents (p.4).

His honesty is unmatched, but improper in this civilization: Helen, his dear daughter, remembers from when she was a small girl that her father ran two blocks in the snow to give back to a poor Italian lady a nickel that she forgot on the counter” (pp. 275-6). Thus, the grocer is a responsible man in a society with irresponsible people. He dies from pneumonia caught while shoveling snow to clear the path for Christians going to church. Considering his life wasted, the grocer dies uttering the words: “I gave away my life for nothing. It was the thunderous truth” (p.273). However, the reader is led to think otherwise if one takes into account the positive influence that Morris has had on many people. The grocer's human kindness and moral responsibility culminates with Frank, in helping transform the latter from a wanderer and criminal into an honest and conscientious individual at the end of the novel. Frank, who robbed the old grocer at gunpoint, just after the story starts to unfold, has returned to expiate his guilt and is found hiding in the basement by Morris, in a deplorable state. Instead of informing the police about the theft, or turning him away - Frank admits to having stolen a bottle of milk and two loaves of bread for a week, out of hunger - the grocer takes him in and hires him as his assistant.

Despite having returned to make amends for his wrong deed, Frank, having passed a difficult and bleak life, has a long way to go to achieve goodness. Initially, his life is completely out of control. “With me one wrong thing leads to another and it ends in trap” (p. 41). Due to this he is easily deceived by Ward Minogue – his accomplice in the robbery. Likewise,

affected by Hollywood movies, he believes in the get-rich-quick philosophy including criminal behavior. “When someone does a bad action”, said Socrates, “he always does so thinking it is somehow a good one...Since man desires to be happy, he chooses to act in a certain way hoping to find happiness” (as cited in Stumpf, 1994/2007, pp.40-41, *my transl*). Just as Karp, Frank has a distorted image of the American Dream. However, later on he has to choose between the material wealth and spiritual one.

Hearing Morris speak about some grocers tricking their customers in different ways, Frank opens up the dialog:

“Why don’t you try a couple of those tricks yourself, Morris? Your amount of profit is small.”

Morris looked at him in surprise. “Why should I steal from my customers? Do they steal from me?”

“They would if they could.”

“When a man is honest he don’t worry when he sleeps. This is more important than to steal a nickel” (p.100).

Since as a child in orphanage, Frank has held dear the image of San Francesco d’Assisi. His challenge is to resemble the saint and Morris to eventually become a good person, though this seems to be an insurmountable task. He steals from the cash register justifying the act with his hard work. Like his saint who followed Christ, he must listen to Morris, who is transformed into the image of Jesus suffering for the sins of humanity. Frank, in this way, eventually abandons the corrupt American values and embraces the immaterial values of humanism and kindness.

To Kant, moral is a rational concept which has to do with our awareness of rules or “laws” which we consider as universal and indispensable. . . “As a rational being”, said Kant, “I do not just ask ‘What I am going to do’, but I am also conscious that I am under the obligation to act in a certain way because ‘I must’ do something (as cited in Stumpf, 1994/2007, p.305, *my transl*). Likewise, Frank *must* do something after Morris’ death, by applying the goodness and humanism of the latter. Frank, in this way, assumes moral responsibilities for Ida, Helen and the community, in general.

Frank reaches the height of human responsibility and altruism after conversion to a Jew. But this does not make him any less of a Christian or synagogue-goer. Like Morris, he has placed righteousness, honesty and moral responsibility for others above religious formalisms.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that Malamud attaches a great importance to humanism, highlighting humaneness, love, and altruism. In this regard, the novel “The Assistant” places considerable emphasis on the value of adopting an appropriate moral behavior. Frank Alpine, under the spiritual guidance of Morris, and his self-determination, manages to change for the better, becoming thus a responsible person for himself/herself, and others. Through this novel, Malamud conveys his humanist philosophy and the firm belief that each and every individual possesses internal positive goodness and qualities, of which he/she should become aware, in order to make the right choices stemming, primarily, from the exercise of free will.

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