

PATTERNS OF REDEMPTION IN
THE WORKS OF BERNARD MALAMUD

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PATTERNS OF REDEMPTION IN THE WORKS OF
BERNARD MALAMUD

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Master of Arts
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by
Patricia W. Snyder
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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Patricia W. Snyder entitled "The Patterns of Redemption in the Works of Bernard Malamud." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education, with a major in English.

Clarence Skurd
Major Professor

Accepted for the
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Dean of the
Graduate School

PATTERNS OF REDEMPTION IN THE WORKS
OF BERNARD MALAMUD

According to Robert Scholes in a review of Bernard Malamud's novel Pictures of Fidelman: An Exhibition the possibility of change in man is the author's central theme: "If we are locked in ourselves there is no hope. If we can change ourselves, remake ourselves in some good image we can save our souls."¹ The idea of redemption through personal transformation is evident in the novels and many of the short stories of Bernard Malamud. Although the protagonists, especially in the earlier novels, are remarkably similar in personality and predicament, the manner in which their transformation is effected is usually very different. Their degree of success also varies greatly from work to work and critic to critic. Malamud himself has described his fiction as telling the story of "personality fulfilling itself."² Thus this is the exploration of the protagonists of several of his short stories and his novels and their attempts to fulfill their personalities.

¹Robert Scholes, "Portrait of Artist as Scape-Goat," Saturday Review, 52 (May 10, 1969), p. 32.

²Marcus Klein, citing Bernard Malamud, "Bernard Malamud: The Sadness of Goodness," in his After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1964), p. 252.

The main characters of Malamud's short stories are often chronic failures struggling to improve their lives and their luck and overcome their personal flaws: the immigrant shoemaker with a heart condition whose dreams have shrunk only to finding an educated husband for his daughter, the dying man who fights a Kafkaesque battle with a train ticket seller--Angel of Death to send his feeble-minded son to an ancient uncle in California, and the former juvenile delinquent slowly suffocating in a loveless marriage of convenience arranged so he could manage a candy store and stay out of serious trouble. They are victims who carry the seeds of their own destruction:³ the seemingly irreversible Jobean suffering of the Jew because he is a Jew, the unforgotten, unforgiven sins of the past, the inability to escape a destiny of broken dreams and unfulfilled promise. Their journey begins with innocence and ends in experience or tragic self-knowledge.⁴

One typical Malamud hero who fails in his quest for a new life is Henry Levin of "The Lady of the Lake," a short story in the collection entitled The Magic Barrel.

³Ben Siegel, "Victims in Motion: The Sad and Bitter Clowns," Bernard Malamud and the Critics, Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field, editors (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 123.

⁴Mark Goldman, "Comic Vision and the Theme of Identity," Bernard Malamud and the Critics, Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field, editors (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 155.

Henry Levin, a New York floorwalker, "tired of the past--tired of the limitations it had imposed on him"⁵ changes his name to Henry R. Freeman and goes abroad seeking romance. "Freeman still hoped for what he hadn't, what few got in the world and many dared not think of: to wit, love, adventure, freedom."⁶ Although he finds his romance in a beautiful woman he believes to be an Italian aristocrat, he does not achieve love. His dream woman is really a survivor of a German concentration camp, deeply committed to preserving her Jewish heritage. He does not discover the true identity of the mysterious woman until he has lost her by denying his Jewish background three times, believing it will be a barrier between them. Charles Alva Hoyt explains Freeman's failure at redemption this way: "Because he [Levin-Freeman] tries to sell his Jewish birthright for a glamorous dream, both his past and his future are taken from him. . . . It was not his object that was wrong, a new life, but the lies he told looking for it."⁷

But many of the protagonists of Malamud's short stories do redeem themselves through their experience.

⁵Bernard Malamud, The Magic Barrel, 1958. rpt. (New York: Avon Books), 1980, p. 95.

⁶Malamud, The Magic Barrel, p. 96.

⁷Charles Alva Hoyt, "The New Romanticism," Bernard Malamud and the Critics, Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field, editors (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 130.

Goldman observes that salvation occurs in "... the moment of moral crisis, when his characters transcend their suffering by remembering their common identity as Jews, and recognizing their human stake in the tragic predicament."⁸ Howard Harvitz of the short story "Man in the Drawer" is just such a man. He has changed his name back to Harvitz from Harris because he believes it is closer to his "true self"⁹ and has journeyed to Russia to forget the death of his second wife and avoid "the necessity of making an unexpected serious personal decision" (p. 38), whether or not to remarry his first wife with whom he has again become friendly since being widowed. Like Levin-Freeman Harvitz soon learns that "it requires more to change a man's character than to change his name" (p. 73). He meets a translator named Feliks Levitansky who has been relegated to driving a taxi because the short stories he writes concern the plight of Jews in Russia and, being contrary to the Party line, cannot be published. Levitansky is half Jewish by birth but a Jew in name only. He has lost his profession and is risking his freedom to write what he must to preserve his "internal liberty" (p. 62) and to help his beloved Russia.

⁸Goldman, p. 152.

⁹Bernard Malamud, Rembrandt's Hat (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973), p. 37. All subsequent references to this book will be cited in the text.

"I have learned from writing my stories," the writer was saying, "that imagination is enemy of the State. I have learned from my writing that I am not a free man. This is my conclusion. I ask for your help, not to harm my country, which still has magnificent socialist possibilities, but to help me escape its worst errors. I do not wish to defame Russia. My purpose in my work is to show its true heart. So have done our writers from Pushkin to Pasternak and also, in his way, Solzhenitsyn. If you believe in democratic humanism you must help an artist to be free. Is not true?" (p. 72)

Harvitz realizes that he too disagrees with the policies of his country, especially concerning Viet Nam, but he has not used the freedom of speech afforded by Democracy to express himself. As in many of Malamud's works, the solution to the dichotomy appears in a short exchange between two men with conflicting ideas.

"What exactly is my responsibility to you, Levitansky?" I /Harvitz/ tried to contain the exasperation I felt.

"We are members of mankind. If I am drowning you must assist to save me." (p. 72)

Harvitz accepts the challenge of helping a fellow writer, Jews in Russia, and mankind. He finally rejects indecision and inaction by agreeing to smuggle the manuscript out of Russia and deciding to remarry his first wife when he returns to the United States. He is redeemed by two positive actions to help himself and his fellow man.

Manischevitz, the Jobean sufferer of "Angel Levine" in The Magic Barrel is on the verge of renouncing his God because of the multitude of troubles heaped upon his underserving head, when a black Jew claiming to be an angel of God appears to him. Many verbal exchanges and physical encounters

occur between the doubting sufferer and the self-proclaimed angel who can earn his own salvation only by being accepted as a messenger of God. Manishevitz acknowledges Levine as an angel, witnesses his ascension to heaven on magnificent black wings and returns to find his wife already recovered from her sick bed. Sam Goldfarb explains Manishevitz's redemption in this manner:

Yet from the moment that Manishevitz affirms his belief in Angel Levine as a genuine angel sent from God--and by so doing, affirming, and even accepting, the very misfortune that sent him to the black angel--Manishevitz is a man reborn. Faith has finally triumphed over suffering and doubt to bring Manishevitz the redemption that comes of that affirmation.¹⁰

In the short stories one blinding flash of self-realization or communion with another suffering human being can signify the success of redemption. This is how Sidney Richman describes this redemptive transformation found in Malamud's best stories:

In each case, the dramatic conflict, to which all else is subordinate, is between man and assistant, man and enemy, the pursued and the pursuer. The conflict is so intense at times that it breeds angels and luftmensch, doppelgangers, and ghosts: but finally it breeds a miracle, a moment of painful unmasking which resolves the conflict and often transforms the hero into something more than he was originally.¹¹

¹⁰Sam Bluefarb, "The Scope of Caricature," Bernard Malamud and the Critics, Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field, editors (New York: New York University Press, 1970), pp. 145 - 146.

¹¹Sidney Richman, "The Stories," Bernard Malamud and the Critics, Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field, editors (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 309.

The process of personal transformation and eventual success or failure of salvation develops more slowly and with more variety in the novels than in the short stories.

The Malamud hero of the novels is a man in conflict with himself. In his quest for a new beginning, he must try to forget the sins of his earlier life and fight against the flaws in his character that made him commit them. He is a man given a second chance to redeem himself. This is how Theodore Solotaroff describes Malamud's protagonists and their personal dilemmas:

. . . the Malamud hero who sees himself sees his chief adversary, and what he learns from the experience determines his life. Spelled out in terms of his most characteristic fiction, this preoccupation creates the story of the man who emerges from the past of deprivation, isolation, or failure and who struggles for fuller and better connections with life against the drag of the old hungers and habitual errors. Thus Malamud's fiction is often set in the crucial period when the disabilities of the past contend with the future's possibilities, the old defeats with the new aspirations.¹²

The stage is set for Malamud's all too human heroes to fight against their past sins and personal failings to try for a second chance at salvation.

Roy Hobbs, the protagonist of Malamud's first novel, The Natural, is just such a man at the crossroads. He is a 34-year old rookie trying to break into major league baseball for the second time after spending the last 15 years drifting

¹²Theodore Solotaroff, "The Old and the New," Bernard Malamud and the Critics, Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field, editors (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 238-239.

from job to job. On his ill-fated first journey to the majors, he had been shot in the belly by a young woman who was seeking out and attempting to kill the most promising players of each major sport.

The pattern of potential redemption that occurs in the novel consists of repetition of action and recreation of characters. Hobbs is given a second chance. But rather than learning from his past mistakes, Hobbs, because of his lack of personal insight, is destined to relive them. He must relive his own destruction. Jonathan Baumbach describes this phenomenon in this manner: "Characters from the first part of the novel, dead and half-forgotten, reappear in slightly different shapes, giving Roy as hero manque, the occasion to re-enact the failures of the past."¹³

In the first half of the novel Roy Hobbs is felled, not so much by the silver bullet of Harriet Bird, but by his own presumption and false love. He eagerly accepts Harriet's invitation to her room to receive a "welcome to the city,"¹⁴ a thinly disguised sexual promise from a virtual stranger. His reiteration that he will be "the best there ever was in the game" (p. 36) earns him the silver bullet and prefigures

¹³Jonathan Baumbach, "The Economy of Love: The Novels of Bernard Malamud," Kenyon Review, 25 (Summer 1963), p. 445.

¹⁴Bernard Malamud, The Natural, 1952, rpt. (New York: Time Incorporated, 1966), p. 35. All subsequent references to this book will be cited in the text.

the flaws that later will doom his second chance at a major league career and salvation.

Richman states that the way to redemption lies in the hero's reaction to his own past and his ability to understand it. Through understanding his past, he can overcome its limitations.¹⁵ In spite of 15 years of contemplation of his fate, he still has not come to terms with it. He wonders as he relives the nightmare of his shooting, ". . . why did it have to be me? What did I do to deserve it?" (p. 59). He deserves his fate because he has not learned through his suffering. Iris Lemon tries to teach him the essential Malamudian lesson that experience, suffering makes people better. She tells him, "We have two lives, Roy, the life we learn with and the life we live with after that. Suffering is what brings us toward happiness. . . . It teaches us to want the right things" (pp. 156-157). Although Roy suffered for 15 years, he has not learned to want the right things. His values are still shallow and self-centered. When questioned about his goals by Iris Lemon, he answers essentially as he answered Harriet Bird so many years before: he wants to be the best, to break all the records, to be immortal. On Roy Hobbs Day, this time in front of a stadium of fans, he repeats his arrogant desire to be the greatest baseball player that

¹⁵Sidney Richman, Bernard Malamud (New York: Twayne Publications, 1967), p. 30.

ever lived, again sealing his doom by tempting "the wrath of some mightly powerful ghosts" (p. 111). And he again chooses the false love of Bump's jilted, vengeful lover over the sincerity of Iris Lemon because she is a 33-year old grandmother.

When Roy is struck out in three pitches by Herman Youngberry, a 20-year old farm boy, just as he struck out The Whammer in the beginning of the novel, the action of the story has come full circle. And Roy finally realizes his mistakes. "He thought, I never did learn anything out of my past life, now I have to suffer again" (p. 241). By not learning from his mistakes, he suffers the ultimate defeat: his records will be purged from the game.

Personal regeneration is also a pattern of redemption in The Assistant, Malamud's second novel. Rather than the simple recreation of actions and personalities found in The Natural, there is more a regeneration of character through an acceptance of fate and humanity. Frank Alpine, young but worn out and disillusioned seeker of wealth through crime, becomes Morris Bober, the long suffering, compassionate grocery store owner. A gradual process of understanding and communication of values causes an acceptance of human pain and compassion. Their communion begins with Frank's giving Morris a drink, after his fellow thief has pistol whipped the old man while they were robbing his store. His guilt makes him return to help out the poor grocer, and he ends up looking to the older man for help

"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. . . . I don't understand myself. I don't really know what I'm saying to you or why I'm saying it. . . . What kind of life is that for a man my age?" He waited for the grocer to reply, to tell him how to live his life, but Morris was thinking, I am sixty and he talks like me.¹⁶

Implicit in this speech is the problem of Malamud's hero. He desires a new life but feels impeded by the errors of his past. He knows how to begin, if he can only make himself learn what he needs to know. The seed of Morris Bober's knowledge of life and love is already present in Frank Alpine. Although Frank repeatedly tells Morris that he is an honest man, he continues to steal from the grocer. But he is learning patience. "He had all his life been on the move, no matter where he was; here he somehow couldn't be. Here he could stand at the window and watch the world go by, content to be here" (p. 68). He waits for business to improve, for Helen, Morris' daughter, to love him, "There were some dames you had to wait for--for them to come to you" (p. 72). He suffers guilt, remorse and even "a curious pleasure in his misery, as he had at times in the past when

¹⁶Bernard Malamud, The Assistant 1957, rpt. (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1971) p. 42. All subsequent references to this book will be cited in the text.

he was doing something he knew he oughtn't to, so he kept on dropping quarters into his pants pocket" (p. 82). Morris explains his philosophy of honesty to Frank, "When a man is honest he don't worry when he sleeps. This is more important than to steal a nickel" (p. 100). Frank still steals from him but writes down every penny with the intention of paying the grocer back.

Frank witnesses, and finally personally accepts as his own, the suffering Morris does for his fellow man. "The world suffers. He Morris Bober felt every schmerz" (p. 5). Frank makes fun of this Jewish need to suffer: "That's what they live for, Frank thought, to suffer. And the one that has got the biggest pain in the gut and can hold onto it the longest without running to the toilet is the best Jew" (p. 105). The key to the oneness that develops between the two occurs in this short but revealing exchange:

"What do you suffer for, Morris?" Frank said.

"I suffer for you," Morris said calmly.

Frank laid his knife down on the table. His mouth ached. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you suffer for me." (p. 150)

Suffering as a means of moral purification is explored in this passage by Peter L. Hays: ". . . man inevitably suffers; to endure the suffering with as much dignity as possible is a virtue; to continue to strive to do right and to suffer for others is a mark of humanity."¹⁷

¹⁷Peter L. Hays, "The Complex Pattern of Redemption, Bernard Malamud and the Critics, Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field, editors (New York: New York University Press, 1970) p. 231.

In an ironic reversal of the three denials of Judas, three times Frank affirms his concern and affection for the old grocer by returning to help him in the store. Frank becomes Morris Bober when he accidentally falls into Morris' grave at the old man's funeral. And his transformation is complete when he is circumcised at Passover and becomes a Jew. His love for Helen, compassion for Morris and continuation of Morris' fate have made him become the grocer. He has effected his redemption through a confession of his crime, repudiation of his past life of sin and acceptance of Morris Bober's fate, philosophy and life. Theodore Solotaroff describes how suffering has refined Alpine's feelings and made him capable of love:

With tenderness for others come Alpine's insight and aspiration and, finally his wisdom and self-control --the freedom to see and do the right thing. Without this freedom conferred by connection and self-integration, life dribbles away; the will struggles but remains attached to habits of lust or defensiveness and each man lives out his mistakes and awaits the end.¹⁸

Seymour Levin, the reformed drunkard protagonist of A New Life, like Frank Alpine, is searching for a way to purge his soul of a flawed past life and begin anew. He, too, undergoes a personal regeneration but of a less drastic sort. When Levin moves from New York City to Cascadia College for his first job as a college instructor, he unwittingly continues the life at the college of Leo Duffy, his liberal

¹⁸Solotaroff, "The Old and the New," p. 239.

predecessor. He is given Duffy's old office and soon becomes the lover of Pauline Gilley, the faculty wife with whom Duffy had a short affair. Little by little he becomes more political, as Duffy was, running for the chairmanship of the English Department so that major changes can be made to add more humanistic elements to the service oriented curriculum. He, too, is dismissed on the same moral charge with the same woman as Duffy. In the following passage, Jonathan Baumbach describes how Levine uncovers the pattern of Duffy's life by reliving it.

Uncompromising with principle and the needs of the heart, Levin gradually discovers that he has been following Duffy's life, error-by-error, as though it were the predestined pattern of his own. Levin uncovers the secret of Duffy's past by reliving it.¹⁹

But with dismissal their paths diverge. Duffy had begged for his job back, left without Pauline and eventually committed suicide because he could no longer fight an inane society.²⁰ Duffy rejects life. Levin accepts the world and the suffering that is a necessary part of it in a personal moral affirmation.²¹ He faces the prospect of beginning again, now careerless, with the perennially dissatisfied

¹⁹Jonathan Baumbach, "All Men Are Jews: 'The Assistant' by Bernard Malamud," in his The Landscape of Nightmare: Studies in the Contemporary Novel (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 103.

²⁰Ruth B. Mandel, "Ironie Affirmation," Bernard Malamud and the Critics, Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field, editors (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 272.

²¹Ibid.

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wife of another man, her two sickly adopted children and the love child they await. He accepts the challenge "because he can."²²

In leaving Cascadia with Pauline and her children, Levin fulfills an implicit commitment to Duffy and redeems his spiritual father's failure in a sacrifice that becomes an act of love. He has even, to a certain extent, redeemed the English Department at Cascadia College. The great books course he has suggested is being considered and appears to have given some life to the department scholar who is now growing the beard that Levin sacrificed for Pauline. The third-rate grammar text that perpetuated the service nature of the department and which Levin despised is being replaced.

Malamud's theme of redemption through suffering reaches its apogee with his Pulitzer Prize winning novel The Fixer. Like Malamud's other heroes, Yakov Bok, the sacrificial lamb of The Fixer, is a man fleeing the disappointments of the past: his suffocating day-to-day existence in the shtetl, a ghetto where opportunity is "born dead"²⁴ and the shame of being deserted by a barren wife

²²Bernard Malamud, A New Life (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961), p. 360.

²³Baumbach, "All Men Are Jews: 'The Assistant' by Bernard Malamud," p. 105.

²⁴Bernard Malamud, The Fixer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1963), p. 7. All subsequent references to this book will be cited in the text.

after years of increasingly dissatisfying married life. He shaves his beard and journeys to Kiev, dreaming of "good fortune, accomplishment, affluence" (p. 24). To hide his Jewish heritage when it becomes necessary for his success, he calls himself a Latvian, changes his name, and even reluctantly agrees to live in a part of the city forbidden to Jews. He abandons his Jewishness, becoming a non-Jew.²⁵ Bok seems a more unlikely candidate for total redemption than Malamud's other heroes, but, according to Robert Kegan, one must leave his community, his history to understand it.²⁶

Jonathan Baumbach notes that the tales of Malamud's heroes consist of "mythic journeys to test the stuff of their heroism."²⁷ Bok succeeds because he accepts the moral message implicit in most of Malamud's fiction: the necessity of accepting one's moral obligation.²⁸ Yakov Bok gains redemption when others do not, because he accepts responsibility for himself, his family and his race.

²⁵Bernard Malamud, The Fixer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1963), p. 7. All subsequent references to this book will be cited in the text.

²⁶Ibid., p. 52.

²⁷Baumbach, "All Men Are Jews: 'The Assistant' by Bernard Malamud," p. 106.

²⁸Klein, p. 252.

By denying his people, his language, and his God, Bok has made himself vulnerable.²⁹ Because he is a Jew living in a neighborhood forbidden to Jews, he is accused of the ritual murder of a Christian boy and imprisoned. He endures two and a half years of solitary confinement, disgustingly rancid and cockroach ridden food, beatings, poison, cold, insanity and, finally, six times a day degrading searches of his naked body and all its orifices. Yet when he is offered unconditional freedom, a full pardon, he refuses because he has committed no crime. In reference to Bok's situation, Granville Hicks states that although suffering is the human condition, man need not succumb to despair.³⁰ People learn to live with misery by learning the first of the virtues, compassion.³¹

Yakov's active redemption begins with this denial of the pardon and progresses as he learns about people. Dreaming that his father-in-law, Shmuel, is dying, Yakov repents having rejected and cursed him: "'Live, Shmuel,' he sighs, 'live. Let me die for you'" (p. 272). When he learns of the old man's death, he mourns him.

²⁹Alan Warren Friedman, "The Hero as Schnook," Bernard Malamud and the Critics, Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field, editors (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 295.

³⁰Granville Hicks, "Generations of the Fifties: Malamud, Gold and Updike," The Creative Present: Notes on Contemporary American Fiction, Nona Balakian and Charles Simmons, editors (Garden City: Doubleday, 1963), p. 219.

³¹Ibid.

In a second reapprochement with his family, Yakov signs a paper stating that he is the father of the natural child Raisl bore after she had left him. His suffering has tempered his bitterness and anger. He understands his past and can accept it.

He had learned about tears. . . . "I've thought about our life from beginning to end and I can't blame you for more than I blame myself. If you give little you get less, though of some things I got more than I deserved. Also, it takes me a long time to learn. Some people have to make the same mistake seven times before they know they've made it. That's my type and I'm sorry. . . . I've suffered in this prison and I'm not the same man I once was." (p. 288)

In a dream vision of a confrontation between himself and Tsar Nicholas the Second he again acknowledges Raisl's bastard child. When asked by the Tsar if he is a father, he replies that he is "with all my heart" (p. 332). Love and compassion have made him a father, not genes. These steps toward repairing the rupture between himself and his estranged family demonstrate a newly acquired compassion and an acceptance and understanding of the past.

Richman believes that Bok has been alienated from himself, not society; his psychic journey is a quest for his lost roots, an unacknowledged center of himself.³² By renouncing the demands of the world and succumbing to the

³²Richman, Bernard Malamud, p. 22.

good within, he re-attains the world, his world.³³ He refuses an unconditional pardon for himself. When given a confession to sign that would implicate unnamed Jews, and, therefore, the whole race, he writes on it, "Every word is a lie" (p. 292). In his covenant with himself "to endure to the trial and let them [the Russian People] confirm his innocence by their lies" (p. 274), he will protect the Jewish people. He will help his race because "he believes in their right to be Jews and to live in the world like men" (p. 274). Yakov Bok has succeeded in Malamud's ultimate test of his heroes. He has found self-realization and moral resolution through ultimately meaningful suffering.³⁴

Arthur Fidelman, protagonist of Pictures of Fidelman: An Exhibition, is a "self-confessed failure as a painter"³⁵ who ventures to Italy to prepare a critical study of Giotto. As with Malamud's other heroes, the journey is one of self-discovery and self-revelation, hopefully leading to personal understanding and redemption. The understanding and eventual redemption consist of two stages in this rather disjointed, picaresque novel: the identification with another and a

³³Ibid., p. 27.

³⁴Sheldon Norman Grebstein, "Bernard Malamud and the Jewish Movement," Contemporary Jewish Literature, Irving Malin, comp. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 178.

³⁵Bernard Malamud, Pictures of Fidelman: An Exhibition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), p. 3. All subsequent references to this book will be cited in the text.

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journey of self-discovery through an exploration of life, love and art.

Studying his reflection in a window in Rome and imagining his future, Fidelman sees "an exterior source to the strange, almost tridimensional reflection of himself he had felt as well as seen" (pp. 4-5). The image he sees is that of Shimon Susskind, a Jewish refugee from Israel who is destitute and stranded passportless in Italy. Susskind dogs Fidelman's footsteps, begging for money and a still serviceable suit of clothing, which Fidelman does not believe he should give to the derelict. When an exasperated Fidelman asks Susskind why he should give him the suit, the pauper replies, "'Because you are a man. Because you are a Jew, aren't you?'" (p. 16) Susskind becomes the catalyst for Fidelman's salvation.³⁶ When Susskind steals the first chapter of Fidelman's study on Giotto he initiates Fidelman's long journey toward peace of mind. Fidelman, donning clothes like those Susskind wears, searches the ghettos of Rome for the thief, at first to recover his manuscript and later to understand Susskind and himself.

His volatile curiosity had become somehow entangled with Susskind's personality--Had he repaid generosity by stealing a man's life work? Was he so disoriented? To satisfy himself, to know man, Fidelman had to know. . . ." (p. 30)

³⁶ Richman, "The Stories," p. 324.

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Richman describes Fidelman's epic search for Susskind and an understanding of man in this way:

. . . Fidelman disappears into the Roman ghettos where following some intuitive Baedeker, he plunges out of romance and into the horrors of Jewish history, past and present, to end finally in a forlorn cemetery whose headstones testify to Nazi brutality. In the process, Fidelman, like a foetus, feeds and grows older and starts upward toward the light.³⁷

Fidelman finally relents and brings Susskind the suit. Susskind returns the scholar's briefcase minus the manuscript which he has burned. As Susskind escapes the ire of the infuriated Fidelman he cries out, "'Have mercy. . . . I did you a favor. . . . The words were there but the spirit was missing'" (p. 37). He forgives Susskind, but the refugee continues his flight. He has come to Italy seeking a new life, has suffered the psychic damage of losing his manuscript, the start of his new beginning, and has finally been redeemed through his ability to understand and help make up for the suffering of another, a fellow Jew and wanderer. Richman has defined the action described above as a quest for future identity through an unconscious purgatorial descent into self.³⁸ Fidelman, like so many Malamudian heroes, defines himself through his relation to others.³⁹

³⁷Ibid., p. 325.

³⁸Richman, Bernard Malamud, p. 116.

³⁹Hays, p. 231.

Even with his identification with Susskind, Fidelman does not complete his salvation. According to Bellman, "More than any other Malamudian character Fidelman is constantly growing, realizing himself, transforming his unsatisfactory old life into a more satisfactory new one."⁴⁰

Like a picaresque hero, Fidelman wanders through Italy experiencing physical love: with a woman who has a fetish for clergyman, to a whore, to an unexpected, unsolicited menage a trois with the gay husband of a would-be lover: experimenting with creating art: handcarved wooden madonnas, a forgery of a Titian, and surrealistic, perfectly square holes dug in the ground when he no longer has money for materials: and living: attending wild parties in Rome and unwillingly complying with art forgers in Milan.

Although Fidelman redeems himself in the first chapter of the novel by giving Susskind his second suit and forgiving him for burning his manuscript, the adventuresome artist does not find his identity until the last sentence of Pictures of Fidelman when he becomes a bisexual glassblower.

The basis of most of Malamud's best fiction is the confrontation between two men of opposing viewpoints. This is true of his strong novel The Tenants, in which two writers,

⁴⁰Samuel Irving Bellman, "Women, Children and Idiots First: Transformation Psychology," Bernard Malamud and the Critics, Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field, editors (New York University Press, 1970), p. 26.

a twice published novelist completing a decade of writing on his third work and an unpublished amateur fiction writer, occupy the same condemned tenement in New York, searching for a quiet climate in which to complete their books. The accomplished artist, Harry Lessing, is a Jew, the novice, Willie Spearmint, is a Negro. They work in filth left by former tenants, rats and the occasional wandering wino in a struggle against themselves, time, their cultures and each other to write what they must write.

Malamud's now familiar themes of personal change and redemption are the core of this novel. Harry is a "writer writing. Rewriting. That was his forte, he had lots to change--true, too, in his life."⁴¹ He planned to redeem himself with this book. Willie, too, seeks change in his life and his work. He wants to perfect his writing, explain the black experience to the world, and make lots of money. But in spite of these characters' personal transformations and identification with one another, the absence of understanding and love for one's fellow man causes a failure of redemption.

Harry and Willie represent the two ends of the spectrum in relation to attitudes toward work and art. Harry is an almost misanthropic ascetic who works long hours to

⁴¹Bernard Malamud, The Tenants (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p. 7. All subsequent references to this book will be cited in the text.

produce only a few pages a day. He writes his "lonely sentences" (p. 90) about love because he knows so little about it, being unable to sustain a relationship with another human being. His emphasis in his art is on form. He hopes his current novel will be a minor masterpiece that will win him critical acclaim. Willie, too, feels a burning need to write. His stories almost write themselves on his "smoking" typewriter (p. 152). He writes to explain the black experience and incite the revolution against "Whitey," which must come to free the new chosen people, and to make a lot of money. Willie emphasizes content, not style, producing copious pages in short writing days. He easily "shucks off the writing self" (p. 44), spending most of the day living, and at least one day a week with his sweet white bitch. Although he is an anti-Semitic racist, he has shown himself capable of caring for at least one person, his Jewish lover Irene Bell.

This introduction of Willie prefigures the identification that will occur later between the Jew and the Negro:

One early morning when the writer Lesser⁷, with his paper bag of bread and milk, was letting himself into his triple-locked door, he could have sworn he heard the sound of typing coming from one of the flats fronting the hall, and for an odd minute played with the thought he had left himself hard at work somewhere around while he was out getting his groceries.
(p. 26)

Being housemates, fellow writers, and, maybe, future friends, they communicate about life, love and art. Willie gives Harry needed contact with other people. And Harry teaches Willie about the importance of form in writing, while

helping the black to elude the landlord and police and continue his work.

Slowly they begin to change persona. Willie decides to start calling himself Bill Spear and becomes interested in Art, even in learning from "Whitey." He fights with Irene and becomes obsessed by his writing, working night and day. He even moves into the apartment building and sleeps on an old mattress he has dragged there. As Willie abandons life and love to become a more dedicated writer, Harry realizes that he can ". . . no longer see or feel except in language" (p. 107). He is living "life once removed" (p. 107). Harry discovers that he is in love with Willie's girl and begins to live with her part-time, as Willie once did. He begins to call her his "bitch" (p. 146), as Willie had, and put her off by telling her that he will marry her when his book is finished.

They have traded personalities. Each has assumed the best characteristics of the other without retaining his own best traits. When Harry informs Bill-Willie of his involvement with Irene, the Negro retaliates by destroying the Jew's almost completed manuscript. Harry loses Irene because she cannot wait for him to rewrite his book. "She had redeemed her face, and perhaps something inside her, for she seemed kinder to herself" (p. 154).

In a weirdly surrealistic scene the two now-bearded strangers, shadows of themselves and reflections of each other, meet on the stairs and forgive one another.

"I [Harry] forgive you, Willie, for what you did to me."

"I [Bill-Willie] forgive you for forgivin' me."

"For burning my book--"

"For stealing my bitch I love--." (p. 224)

Harry, unable to "create love in language" (p. 225), hacks Willie's typewriter to bits in revenge.

Harry and Willie-Bill do what they must: they murder each other as they have killed each other's creation, peace of mind and life's work. When Levenspiel, the landlord who had warned Lesser that he would get his just punishment because in "this world it's heart that counts" (p. 22), discovers the bodies of the two men, he cries out for mercy. He asks for the mercy they did not show for themselves, for Irene, for each other or mankind. Their repudiation of life and love has caused their deaths and doomed their redemption to failure.

Robert Towers, in his review of Malamud's latest novel Dubin's Lives in the New York Times Book Review characterizes Malamud's fiction in this way: "Malamud treats the Jew as victim, sufferer and purveyor of special moral insights painfully wrung from experience."⁴² But William Dubin, the protagonist of this novel, is neither a victim nor a bearer of superior moral insight.⁴³ Also, unlike the majority of Malamudian heroes, his behavior, for the most

⁴²Robert Towers, "A Biographical Novel," New York Times Book Review, February 18, 1979, p. 29.

⁴³Ibid.

part, is not admirable. William Dubin spends a great deal of the novel fantasizing about, chasing or bedding a young former hippie-type named Fannie Bick. The reader follows his picaresque sexual exploits from New York, to Venice, to the office love nest in his barn, under the very nose of his long-suffering wife, Kitty.

Although this hero or anti-hero is very unusual for Malamud, death and resurrection are still major themes of the novel. These ideas are explored through the landscape, the changing seasons and the microcosmic scale of William Dubin's life.⁴⁴ For more than two years his existence undergoes a cycle of growth, decay, death and rebirth.⁴⁵ Nature, the exterior landscape, and the cycles of nature are more important here than in any other work. The interior landscape, the personal changes, are of major concern here.

Unlike Malamud's earlier protagonists who struggle against the pain of a past full of excessive drink, thievery, or religious denial, Dubin's concerns are more minor and commonplace. The banality of change in this novel is shown in this scene between Dubin and his wife Kitty.

Whatever she had bought to wear lately seemed wrongly styled or colored. She had bought a fall hat with a bright green ribbon and returned it the next day.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

"I thought you didn't like green?" Dubin said.
 "I wondered if it might work this time."⁴⁶

That melancholy comment on unsatisfactorily effected change is typical of the changes Dubin has tried in his life. Dubin is a waiter, a figurative reflection of his late father's real occupation. He contemplates change more than actually effecting it. Even the most dramatic innovations in his life, changing careers and getting married at the age of 30 seem banal. He marries Kitty, not because of any deep passion between them, but because she seemed capable of a serious act of imagination: being willing to love someone who was willing to love her (p. 47). He wants, or thinks he wants, another chance at marriage but doesn't really try to leave Kitty, only play games of adultery, usually behind her back. A conversation with his friend Greenfield sums up the success of personal change in life presented in this novel:

"My sense of it," Greenfield said, "is that there is little serious changing of self in life, no matter what one knows. Who knows how to change? It comes or it doesn't. I don't say one mayn't try to make the wrong thing harder to repeat--sometimes he succeeds, usually no. I'd rather concentrate on improving my fluting." (p. 325)

In becoming a biographer at the age of 30, Dubin finds freedom and an understanding of his life through chronicling the lives of others:

⁴⁶Bernard Malamud, Dubin's Lives (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), p. 289. All subsequent references to this book will be cited in the text.

Dubin [he thinks], you can't relight lives but you can re-create them. In biographies the dead become alive, or seem to. . . . He felt for a brilliant moment as though he had freed himself forever. Afterward Dubin knew he had discovered --affirmed his vocation: the lives of others, there was no end to them. . . . He felt that the pieces of his own poor life could be annealed into a unity. (p. 98)

To a certain extent he takes on some of the characteristics of his biographical subjects. He becomes interested in nature and moves to the country after writing about Thoreau. While writing about D. H. Lawrence he suffers impotence, as the novelist did. He feels suffocated by the domesticity of Lawrence's life with his wife Frieda and his own life with Kitty. When he is questioned about why he chose Lawrence, he replies, "He picked me. There's something he wants me to know" (p. 171). Maybe he recreates Lawrence's life to learn from him. The problems of middle age weigh heavily on him: "Middle age, he thought, is when you pay for what you didn't have or couldn't do when you were young" (p. 140). He writes of Lawrence to learn his own fate. Fear of old age and death obsess him. He thinks: "I must stop running from Lawrence dying. I must act my age" (p. 323). But the lives he has lived vicariously through recreation cannot save him from the mistakes he must make in his own life.

Dubin, as he watched, mused: "I thought biography--the thousands of lives I've read and the few I've written--would make the difference between badly and decently knowing. I thought I would know, at my age, what to do when I had to." (p. 326)

The patterns of personal transformation and redemption in the fiction of Bernard Malamud are varied, changing from work to work. In the short stories the redemption often occurs after a moment of blinding insight followed by personal change. In the novels the alteration is usually more gradual. Except for the final novel, the protagonist-sufferer usually spends a long period of time regretting former mistakes, trying to change (successfully or unsuccessfully), suffering and, finally, reaching a stage of personal and/or communal revelation or knowledge and a commitment to an improved attitude toward society.

In Dubin's Lives the protagonist is not the typical Malamudian sufferer who changes and learns how to relate to his problems and those of his fellow man. He changes, although that transformation could not be called a redemption. Through minor personal changes and learning acquired from writing of the lives of others, he learns that change is almost impossible to effect. In Dubin's Lives Malamud may be showing that change, at least minor changes, can be effected in a banal way. Dubin does not become the essential Jew like Frank Alpine or acknowledge a higher power like Manishevitz, or give up his career for love like Seymour Levin, but he does reaffirm love. In a crazy, amoral way he reaffirms his love for his wife, children and humanity. He runs across the road "holding his half stiffened phallus in his hand, for his wife with love" (p. 262). Eventually he writes a book in collaboration with his daughter, showing

that they have made up their differences amicably. And he even tries to pass on what knowledge he has gleaned in his life and writing career by producing a work entitled The Art of Biography.

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