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Father and Sons in Bernard Malamud's The Natural and The Assistant

John Timothy Dailey
Eastern Illinois University

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JOHN TIMOTHY DAILEY

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One of Bernard Malamud's primary goals in his fiction is to explore the possibilities for improvement in society through the efforts of individual man. As a moralist, Malamud is concerned with man's lack of commitment in contemporary life; his purpose is to re-establish the moral obligation all men have towards society. His thesis is that individual maturity and communal responsibility are the two crucial elements which form the basis for this moral imperative. He emphasizes that before man can realize the full implications of his responsibilities, he must define and reaffirm the basic values of humanity; in other words, he must accept the idea of commitment towards all other men. Only after he confirms this necessity of individual moral development can man proceed to make a positive contribution to society.

Malamud's basic philosophy is optimistic although his novels have a reputation for unmitigated despair. He is no determinist; he believes that environment plays a secondary role in shaping and influencing a man's character. The key issue to Malamud is man's inherent goodness; he believes that given the proper moral education, man will inevitably rise to heroic heights. His view of his own profession is that the writer must strive to maintain a moral standard by constantly re-examing the need for ethical conduct. Malamud has faith in the individual man; he describes his own role as a reinforcement of man's basic tendencies to do good. His

professional position is illustrated by his comment that "the purpose of a writer is to keep civilization from destroying itself."[1] This quotation also sums up the apparent contradictions of his style; he appears pessimistic even when he is expressing an idealistic hope.

All Malamud's fiction stresses the fact that man must take the initiative in accepting the moral obligations which confront him. Man must learn that individual maturity (of attitudes) is the primary step in this process; this is then followed by a gradual awareness that social commitment is a necessity. According to Malamud, all men have the potential for moral heroism regardless of environment. This potential becomes reality through love, sacrifice, and suffering because these are the elements with which man transcends the limitations of self and society to attain a new life of social awareness. Jonathon Baumbach explains the function of love in the Malamud world when he says, "Love is sacred in Malamud's universe; if life is holy, love is the holy of holies."[2] Love, however, must be accompanied by intense suffering if man is to achieve any sort of final salvation. To Malamud, this notion of sacrifice is the ultimate proof of an individual's desire to redefine his life in terms of worthwhile service. All Malamud's major characters suffer, and through this process they attain a recognizable maturity. Mere suffering, however, is meaningless without a corresponding desire to affect someone through the act of

sacrifice. Thus, love and suffering are inseparable to the truly moral individual since suffering brings wisdom while love shows concern.

Malamud's intense moral philosophy is evident in all of his major novels; indeed, his emphasis on practical morality forms the thematic content of almost all his writing. Marcus Klein, in After Alienation emphasizes this point by stating that, "Malamud has become an emphatic moralist... His constant and his total moral message is, quite simply, the necessity in this world of accepting moral obligation... Morality is a reluctant mode of accommodation... there are better possibilities available to the imagination, but they are not here and now."[3] The means by which man accepts this moral obligation, according to Malamud, are a redefinition of the self through suffering and a subsequent commitment to humanity. This process turns all Malamud's heroes into questers; all of them try to find a new sense of spiritual awareness which constitutes a break from past failures. Since many of them have failed consistently in the past, the effect of their success is measured by their ability to adequately understand past failures, change their basic natures, and attain new life for themselves and others. Consequently, the thematic narrative of Malamud's novels is a basically simple pattern wherein the protagonists' journey becomes an attempt to trace the elusive nature of personal identity. Klein elaborates on this quest-initia-

tion structure: "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, but in either case he proceeds from the comfort of some more certain contemplations... The moral act, no matter what moral act it is, is itself charged with significance because any moral act is difficult and unlikely... His hero's heroism is his hero's loss. And the luminous moment for Malamud... is always that in which the loss is revealed."[4]

Malamud's first two novels, The Natural and The Assistant, vividly illustrate the two extremes man may take in this quest for moral fulfillment. Both books are thematically structured by Malamud's two concepts of man's search for personal identity and his responsibilities towards others, but the contrast between the two conclusions exemplifies man's dilemma. In The Natural, Roy Hobbs is seeking a new life; he is trying to escape the failures of his past by giving himself to a cause — the winning of a pennant. His immature behavior never changes, however; his great sufferings do not teach him that only a selfless attitude will be able to negate the effects of his past. He tries to help his team, but he cannot make the ultimate sacrifice of giving himself in love to another individual. Frank Alpine, on the other hand, shows in The Assistant just how far man must go if he truly wants to achieve real happiness. Frank also suffers, but he learns from his

experiences that he must continue to suffer if his life is to have any meaning. He also learns the art of unselfish love as Roy does not, and this is the ultimate test of his moral success. Malamud is showing in these two novels the moral alternatives man may choose from as he moves through life. As a humanist, Malamud is terribly concerned about the moral indifference into which so many men resign themselves. His message is that we must realize the responsibilities we face in our desire to achieve identity; we must recognize the necessity of not only ethical but communal behavior. Malamud is nothing if not a realist, however. He is aware that the temptations of a corrupt society are often too demanding for man's weak nature. Thus, in The Natural he shows specifically how man may fail in his duties and deny his heroic moral potential. The situation is exactly reversed in The Assistant because there Frank heeds his obligations and gives us a blueprint for success. The important point is that as a unit the two novels express the same moral philosophy; the significant thematic difference between them is that The Natural offers one conclusion while The Assistant offers the opposite.

In examining The Natural, the first point to note is that it illustrates both how man may achieve moral heroism and also how he may deny his potential and ultimately fail. Unlike Malamud's other novels in which the protagonists only appear to be failures because of their economic status (such as Frank Alpine whose material condition at the end of the

novel seems hopeless), The Natural shows man actually rejecting his moral obligation and prolonging his pain. Roy Hobbs achieves no maturity in the novel, no real sense of personal responsibility; as a consequence, he cannot assume his obligations to society. He does not attain personal redemption because in spite of his suffering, he remains unaware of the necessity of selfless behavior. As Sidney Richman aptly explains, "the message of The Natural is clear: It is only by the act of succumbing to the good within, by renouncing the demands of the world, that man may find the way to re-attain the world."[5] The thematic pattern of the novel which thus emerges is essentially moralistic; Roy Hobbs is a quester in search of a meaningful set of values which will justify his existence. He does not find these values because he cannot give himself unselfishly in love to anyone. He is doomed to repeat his sufferings because in the Malamudian world of moral responsibility, man finds salvation only if he can learn from his experiences.

The didactic implications of this moralistic point of view are modified in The Natural by Malamud's use of various myths. Instead of presenting Roy Hobbs's failure in merely realistic terms, Malamud uses a mythic structure to give the novel the semblance of a fable or parable. In this way, "Roy's baseball career becomes, not merely representative, but symbolic of man's psychological and moral situation. Roy at bat is every quester who has had to shape his own

character to fulfill his goal, whether it be the Grail or the league pennant. By drawing his material from actual baseball and yet fusing it with the Arthurian legend, Malamud sets and sustains his novel in a region that is both real and mythic, particular and universal, ludicrous melodrama and spiritual probing - Ring Lardner and Jung."[6]

The father-son relationship is exceedingly important within the context of this mythic development. Malamud's two primary mythological metaphors are the Wasteland and Grail quest, and the father-son ritual is integral to both. There is a definite problem in this novel, however, because Malamud does not fully illustrate either myth in its totality. He only partially develops the significance of both mythic traditions; thus, the overall effect is often obscure and lacking in consistency. Nevertheless, there is a specific pattern to the father-son relationship in The Natural; very briefly it is a process of displacement followed by rebirth which is repeated several times in the novel. Tony Tanner explains this pattern in greater detail in City of Words.

> The hero travels somewhere in quest of a new life. He is a figure of some distinct practical ability (on the pitch, in the shop), but he has no faith in anything beyond the urgencies of his own hungers and appetites... To be born is to be born into history; and various thoughts and theories concerning the freedom and invulnerability of the individual self fade before the experienced fact of involuntary involvement in the lives of other people. This discovery is either preceded or accompanied by a ritual slaying (or replacing or dispossessing) of a symbolic

> father figure of failing powers (never an actual parent). This coming-of-age is signalled by the fact that the hero has to decide whether or not to take on the symbolic role of father (i.e. before he can have his own children he has to demonstrate that he willingly accepts all the ramifying responsibilities and limitations on self that the role involves, by agreeing to be the nominal father of children not his own). If he refuses, then his suffering - and they all suffer - has been for nothing, and his life remains devoid of meaning. This is the fate of Roy Hobbs who, with all the valuable energies necessary for heroic status, at the end is no hero at all. If the burden and role of nominal paternity is accepted then the schlemiel quester finds his true freedom, not in further gratification of self, but in the willing undertaking to live for other people.[7]

The crucial difference between The Natural and Malamud's other novels is that Roy does not complete the pattern as do Malamud's other heroes. He denies the necessity of suffering as exemplified by Pop Fisher, his surrogate father, and he refuses his own paternity by rejecting Iris Lemon and their unborn child. Thus, at the end of the novel he has still not learned moral responsibility nor discovered his own true identity.

The novel itself is divided into two parts, the first part of which prefigures the second. "The events of the first part of The Natural clearly parallel the events of the second; and, taken together, they recapitulate the mythic formula of Initiation, Separation, and Return. But most importantly, the repetition serves to dramatize the author's belief that the way to redemption lies in part in the hero's reactions to his own past and his ability to understand it,

thereby escaping its inherent limitations. Roy's inability to do so is his failure."[8] Roy is introduced in the first section, "Pre-Game," as a nineteen year old Grail-type hero who is both innocent and ambitious. Headed east as a prospective pitcher for the Chicago Cubs, Roy is naively determined to be "the best there ever was in the game."[9] Armed with his phallic bat Wonderboy (a name suggesting his image of himself), Roy has already decided with unforgivable pride that "I bet someday I'll break every record in the book for throwing and hitting."[10] He is accompanied on his mythic quest by Sam Simpson, a good but ineffective baseball scout who hopes that Roy will bring both of them the fruits of prosperity and fame. The Grail myth of initiation begins to unfold during the train trip, and the father-son ritual pattern begins to emerge. The first step in this pattern, a displacement of a father-type figure, occurs when Roy strikes out the Whammer, the current American League batting champion. As he walks away defeated, Whammer is clearly aware that he has been superseded by a younger, stronger individual. His career is over, and in the mythic fertility tradition, Roy should emerge as the new recognized champion. But Roy's pride, his inability to see beyond the selfishness of his personal goals, has already begun to work against him. While striking out the Whammer, Roy accidentally causes the death of his protector, Sam. Sam is Roy's first surrogate father in the Morris Bober

tradition, and he shows him the necessary values to fulfill his heroic potential. By killing Sam, Roy seals his own doom because without guidance, he immediately succumbs to the temptations of the flesh. Harriet Bird, the first dark lady of the novel, is the avenging goddess who strikes Roy down for his sins of pride and lust. She punishes him for the superficiality of his immature goals and destines him to failure and disappearance. Without the advice and the example of a father-mentor, Roy is fated to fail in his quest until he suffers and learns. This is the general thrust of Malamud's message, and the repetition of the same events in "Batter Up" seems to confirm it.

As Roy re-enters the novel in Part II he is an older but not necessarily wiser individual. He has suffered long and hard for fifteen years since his original failure, and he now thinks he is ready to assume his role as an authentic hero, a role he feels was inexplicably denied him long ago. Malamud's mythic structure in this section parallels Part I in that Roy is still a representative Grail hero playing for the New York Knights. His Excalibur, Wonderboy, is still potent, and Roy himself has the same confident attitude which promises success. In keeping with the Grail tradition, Malamud has Roy repeat the initiation process of Part I with the idea that he will now succeed.

Besides this Arthurian symbolism, Malamud introduces in Part II his second primary myth, the Wasteland. This metaphor gives added significance to Roy's performance as a hero

because his Grail is no longer personal; he must now revitalize the Wasteland by securing a pennant for the team. His moral obligations are now more community oriented in this concluding section, and Roy must succeed for all those who depend on him. This wasteland motif also adds complexity to the father-son relationship because Roy's mentor, appropriately named Pop Fisher, is no longer an individual but a Fisher-king whose land and people are slowly dying: "It's been a blasted dry season. No rains at all. The grass is worn scabby in the outfield and the infield is cracking. My heart feels dry as dirt for the little I have to show for all my years in the game."[11]

Of all the figures in "Pre-Game" who have counterparts in "Batter Up," the most important is Pop Fisher, an expanded version of Sam Simpson. Pop, whose name is so indicative of his function, is the key father-surrogate of the novel although like all the others, he is eventually displaced by Roy. Pop has all the humility and patience of Sam, and he also possesses the insight Roy needs in his quest for heroic achievement. As a Morris Bober-like character, he figuratively adopts Roy and alternately praises and disciplines him. Roy is also Pop's salvation because like Sam, Pop sees only one more chance to attain immortality by winning a pennant. He even pleads with Roy to "keep us alive"[12] in the ninth inning of the final game, but by then Roy has already taken the bribe which destroys

him. In betraying Pop this way, Roy loses his chance for salvation and effectively kills Pop. He denies his moral obligation and ultimately causes his own failure by refusing to successfully complete the father-son ritual. He spurns the moral virtues exemplified by Pop and breaks the mythic pattern, thus killing his father, and in the process destroying himself. Unlike Frank Alpine, Roy does not replace the father he destroys, thereby insuring immortality of a sort. He selfishly places his own well-being ahead of both his relationship to Pop and his duty as fertility hero to the Wasteland.

The other key figures of Part II who have parallels in the "Pre-Game" section are Bump and Memo. Both have crucial importance to the father-son pattern in that Bump is another father surrogate in the tradition of Whammer Wambold and Memo is the evil successor to emasculating Harriet Bird. That Bump is the figurative reincarnation of Whammer is evident when Roy hears him for the first time and immediately thinks of Whammer's voice. Shortly after joining the team, Roy is inadvertently responsible for Bump's death when he causes him to crash into a wall while chasing a fly ball. Thus, he is once again the potential knight-hero who for a second time disposes of a father-rival through the use of his natural skills. After displacing Bump, however, Roy somewhat angrily finds that his own identity is being confused with Bump's and by extension, Whammer. This is the

logical progression of the vegetation myth in which all three are examples of the fertility father who is invariably killed and replaced by a younger, stronger successor. Roy is much greater than Bump, though, because, unlike Bump, he originally treats Pop Fisher with respect and devotion. Bump scorns Pop before his death so that despite the potency of his bat, he cannot bring salvation to the team. Roy brings about the exact opposite effect because he accepts his adoption by Pop and strives to emulate the latter's ideals. The proof of his success is seen when he is instructed to "knock the cover off the ball"[13] and literally does so, thereby bringing rain. This action integrates the Grail and Wasteland myths as Roy initiates his quest for the pennant-Grail while bringing rain (life) to the drought-afflicted Wasteland. Following this, Pop's various illnesses heal and the team itself becomes revitalized.

This apparently successful quest by Roy is soon halted, however, by the intervention of Memo Paris, the dark-eyed enchantress prefigured by Harriet Bird. After killing Bump and assuming his position as slugger-hero, Roy disastrously decides that he will also assume Bump's girl. This fateful lust, so clearly foreshadowed by his desire for Harriet, once again leads to his doom. Apparently disregarding his previous experience in Chicago, Roy becomes infatuated with Memo even though she holds him directly responsible for the death of her lover. Even Pop tells Roy that she seems to be

some sort of bad luck omen, but Roy disregards the advice. He continues to pursue her and suffers not only a batting slump but eventual public disgrace through her machinations. Memo is the catalyst, the fatal attraction which prompts Roy to sell out and lose his chance for moral heroism. When he accepts her offer of a bribe, he, in effect, denies his moral obligation by agreeing to an unethical code of conduct. He does not learn his lesson from Harriet and so must repeat the pain of sacrifice again. The most vivid proof of this failure is when Roy and Memo are driving his new car and apparently strike a child on the dark road. Memo tells Roy he heard only his own cries; in reality it is his own death that is being shown. Memo is a purely destructive force who kills a child (symbolically) just as she effectively kills Roy spiritually. As long as he remains with her, Roy will continue to disregard the virtues of his father and be unable to assume his own fatherly role. His only hope of personal salvation is to reject Memo and the selfish values she represents in favor of Iris Lemon, the personification of his moral commitment.

Iris, as opposed to Memo, brings life to Roy twice within the context of the father-son ritual. In the midst of Roy's slump, which is the immediate result of his affair with Memo, Iris suddenly appears in the stands as an inspiration to his heroic qualities. At the same time, in a description reminiscent of a favorite Babe Ruth legend, a man pleads with Roy to save the life of his child by hitting

a homerun for him. Largely as a result of Iris' efforts, Roy succeeds, this saving the child's life and assuming symbolically a paternal obligation. Later, Iris' role as a life-bearer, in contrast to Memo's as a life-negater, is even more explicitly shown when she becomes pregnant with Roy's child.

Iris, in the mythical sense, is the Great Earth Mother, the symbol of female fertility. A grandmother at thirty-three, she is also the Arthurian Lady-of-the-Lake who confronts Roy with his moral responsibilities. "Iris functions as the exemplar of human potential, the living actuality that one can win through from suffering to a larger and more meaningful life... But if Iris' life represents a commentary on Roy's own blasted history, and its transmutation into a larger and more human status, she is also the mysterious healer who can salvage the hero through a crucial test. Indeed she is the mirror of indoctrination and the way of salvation; and her analysis of the hero-as-hero is significant in this regard."[14]

Iris is also Malamud's spokesman on more than one occasion when she explains to Roy the value of sacrifice. "Suffering is what brings us toward happiness."[15] It is his final tragedy, and his most significant failure that Roy denies both Iris' philosophy and Iris herself. She personifies not only the suffering that is required for moral heroism but also the love that accompanies it. Roy damns himself when he tells her he is sick of suffering and

wants only the good things in life from now on. This exemplifies his unchangeable nature which cannot see the value of either sacrificial pain or unselfish love. This immature attitude leads to a total rejection of Iris and her values which is completed when Roy joins Memo and hits Iris in the head with a foul ball during the last game. This action concludes the father-son ritual on a pessimistic note. By betraying Pop, his surrogate father, Roy rejects his values and thus refuses to accept his own position as hero-son. At the same time, he negates the possibilities for his own paternity by neglecting fertile Iris and his own child in favor of barren, child-killing Memo. He has therefore disrupted the father-son ritual of displacement and rebirth because he has learned no lesson and has achieved no redemption. As a consequence, he loses his powers as fertility hero and is replaced by the new god, Herman Youngberry (whose name is also obviously symbolic), who strikes him out just as Roy once did Whammer. This mythic repetition serves as a reminder of the cyclical quality of life which has already brought Roy back from oblivion once before. But here at the end, Roy definitely fails in his quest and betrays his responsibilities to the people of the Wasteland. His heroic potential is once more negated, and he realizes he will now have to suffer all over again.

Malamud's primary goal in this novel is to show the possibilities for moral heroism and how they may be rejected. Roy has the opportunity to become a genuine hero, but his

own flawed nature condemns him. His superficial weaknesses are lust and greed, but the actual sins of selfishness are far more complex. Malamud is showing that, above all else, it takes love and sacrifice to transcend the limitations of self and achieve moral identity: "Like many of Malamud's heroes, Roy is the image of the unintegrated man, the hero who acts incorrectly despite his awareness. From this lack of integration, his pain proceeds. Trapped between the way of spirit and flesh, natural man and hero, there is only wave after wave of agony."[16] Roy rejects this idea of suffering, and he cannot give himself in love to anyone. His intense experiences profit him nothing because he cannot comprehend their moral significance. Klein summarizes this failing when he states, "Therefore to be engaged with this world, or to love in this world - is to suffer. For the hero who can imagine something higher suffering is the one possibility of love. Therefore, it is morality itself. Suffering is good-willed and deliberate acknowledgement and acceptance of the common life of men. It is the expression of the way in which men are bound together, in their loss."[17] Roy, after once experiencing this loss, fails to learn its meaning. His subsequent failure at the end of the novel fates him to further wandering; the only hope is that the third time around he will recognize and assume his obligations.

The mythic superstructure of this highly moralistic fable

adds depth to the novel while sustaining its form. The utilization of Grail and Wasteland symbols gives added significance to the basically simple narrative while the father-son ritual is the vehicle which expresses Roy's confrontation and defeat. This pattern is essential to the novel as it is in all Malamud's novels because it is the means by which the protagonist rises to heroism or sinks to defeat. By rejecting both Pop, his father, and Iris (the symbol of his paternity), Roy shows that he cannot accept the moral obligation which is required. He renders himself both fatherless and childless and retreats isolated into the pain of his past. This acceptance and replacement of a surrogate father along with acceptance of personal paternity is a necessity for Malamud, but Roy denies the pattern. Richman reinforces this idea by concluding that, "the process which turns the lover into a father is in all of Malamud's novels the basis for redemption generally; and in no case can it be altered. Before the hero can win through, he must submit to this final trial of love."[18] Roy fails this test, achieves no new identity and loses his heroic status. He is the ultimate loser in all Malamud's fiction, but his story is not merely pessimistic. Sidney Richman puts the novel in perhaps the best perspective when he states, "it is precisely Roy's dismal failure which also makes The Natural a clear introduction to the morality which informs Malamud's later work. In none of his other novels has he so directly, if abstractly, indicated the nature of the forces

against which his later heroes must struggle, nor the ritual gestures by which they must preserve themselves."[19]

There is no question that the moral purpose of Malamud's second novel, The Assistant, closely parallels that of The Natural. In The Assistant, Malamud again utilizes the fable technique to illustrate his complex theme of man's need of self-knowledge and service to humanity. To Malamud, such moral imperatives are essential if man is to achieve any kind of final redemption. Man must refuse the temptations of the materialistic universe and actively give himself in love to those who need him. Roy Hobbs never fully understands the implications of his responsibilities to others, and he continues to suffer accordingly. In The Assistant, Malamud does show both man's redemption and the exact price he must pay to achieve it. At the beginning of the novel Frank Alpine is a variation of the Roy Hobbs character, but at the novel's conclusion he has radically reformed his character in a way Roy never does. The key to the learning process, and indeed the crucial element in Malamud's moral philosophy, is wisdom through suffering. This is always followed by a rejection of self interests and a corresponding personal growth through love of other. Roy operates at one end of the Malamud spectrum because he will not deny his basic impulses for the greater good of his duties to society. Frank, on the other hand, originates in selfishness and then proceeds to a total redefinition of his

personality through sacrifice. He learns to dismiss personal desire in favor of the acceptance of social responsibility to other men. His original lust, never really satisfied, becomes modified to the point where he realizes the true meaning of love for a woman. His immoral tendencies are finally stifled by his intense struggle to do good, and he is, in effect, a new man, as he says, at novel's end. This thorough purging of his past attitudes constitutes a realization of his new identity and prepares him for re-integration into society through the acceptance of social obligation. This process is exactly opposite the course of action taken by Roy in The Natural. Roy achieves no new self identity and makes no commitment to humanity; he remains a self-centered, immature failure alienated from himself and the world.

The important point about these two novels is that they both reveal the same impressive moral determination of the author. Both The Natural and The Assistant are illustrations of Malamud's moral philosophy which emphasizes man's obligation to society. The Natural is an example of how man ultimately fails in his responsibilities; The Assistant is almost a blueprint for man's affirmative course of action in contemporary society. Sidney Richman, in his study of Malamud, analyzes the moral foundations of the novels and concludes that they are similar. He stresses the point that the greater value of The Assistant lies primarily in

its illustration of a positive rather than a negative example of moral behavior: "To round out his distinctive themes - again an echo of The Natural - Malamud suggests that alienation from self is the grounds of isolation from other men. The measure of Frankie's fulfillment, his potential for victory, is inevitably equated with his sumbission to others, to a will-breaking responsibility."[20] This affirmation, muted as it is in The Assistant, is precisely what is lacking in The Natural. Nevertheless, both works spring from Malamud's same basic ideal of love and suffering as moral prerequisites. Malamud's mood is affirmative, his theme is humanistic, and both novels are in essence, variations of his philosophical concerns, one showing moral failure, the other illustrating success.

The most obvious and indeed the most crucial difference between Malamud's first two novels is not his moral outlook, which remains the same, but his expression. If one accepts the fact that both books are rooted in essentially the same moral foundation, then it is not only the varying conclusions but the styles which differentiate them. There is no doubt that Malamud attempts to present an inflexible moral obligation as the basis of his theme in both novels; the development of this theme, however, takes on a radically different form in The Assistant than in The Natural. Malamud himself admits that his obsession with mythic structure in The Natural is an outgrowth of his undergraduate fascination with myth as a fictional device.

Indeed, The Natural is loaded with mythical allusions which are unfortunately obtrusive at times. But it is this mythic structure which illustrates Malamud's themes of suffering and responsibility in the novel and thus remains indispensible to the thematic development. It is only the symbolic parallel of the quest motif, for instance, that gives Roy Hobbs's actions any sort of coherent logic. By utilizing elements of the Arthurian quest and the Wasteland myth and incorporating them into a modern fable about our own myth-ridden national sport, Malamud is able to express his philosophy concerning the reintegration of man and society. In this novel he illustrates man's failure, and thus, he shows the dangers for any man who cannot spiritually grow. The essence of the fable is clear — only through love and sacrifice can man actually succeed — but Malamud's message would be unmitigated preaching without the mythic overtones. His consistent, but sometimes careless, overlapping of the mythic and the realistic in the novel gives it a layered appearance. The story itself (moral included) would be shallow without the mythic implications, but the complexity of the allusions sometimes tends to obstruct detail and blunt theme.

There is no such problem in The Assistant because Malamud has radically altered his technique in presenting basically the same theme of quest, initiation, and response. Technically there is still a great deal of underlying mythic-ritual symbolism, but on the surface level the allegory has

been replaced by a grimly realistic tale, brooding and pessimistic in its tone. The euphoria of the sports world has been replaced by a bleak, claustrophobic setting which is referred to constantly as tomb-like. The naturalistic details of The Assistant have nothing in common with the fantasy of The Natural; it almost seems as if Malamud deliberately rejected the zany, symbolic style of The Natural as unfit for his moral purpose. This surface impression is misleading, however, because even though there is no apparent mythic structure to The Assistant, there is still a strong emphasis on myth-ritual. Malamud does not repeat his limited development of the Arthurian or Wasteland symbols in his second novel; instead he utilizes elements of these myths to bring into sharper focus the themes of responsibility and suffering he emphasizes in both books. Thus, in effect, there is a fairly consistent use of ritual in The Assistant despite its surface appearance of unmodified realism. The form of this mythic element is not nearly so obvious or extensive as it is in The Natural; Malamud makes no attempt here to identify Frank specifically with Sir Percival - Grail Knight - Fertility King. Nevertheless, as Richman has noted, there is a definite ritualistic pattern which centers around the relationship of Frank and Morris.

> What lies then at the heart of The Assistant is a ritual composed of fragments of myth, Catholicism, and Judaic thought — all pressed into the service of the author's 'mythical' humanism.

> In the final chapter of the novel, all three traditions curiously blend together in a foreshortened cycle which recapitulates all of Frankie's history in the story and decisively reorders it. An entire year — from spring to spring — surrounds the events of the epilogue that begins with the death of Morris, and within this frame the seasons also reassert themselves in the ancient ritual of rebirth. Though Morris dies in the spring, he reappears in the form of the son become the father. Taking over the store completely, Frankie struggles against the lingering claims of the 'old self.' At times he succumbs, but finally he reasserts the truth of his transformation: 'I am not the same guy I was.'[21]

From this description of the ritual structure it can be clearly seen that the dominant mythic element is again the father-son relationship. Just as in The Natural, this theme in The Assistant is the mythic device by which Malamud illustrates his characters' moral development. There is no clumsy repetition of the displacement pattern here as there is in The Natural; nevertheless, the father-son relationship is again a specifically defined pattern of behavior which links the mythic structure to the overall themes of self-identity and human concern.[22]

This relationship includes the mythic process of displacement, rebirth, and replacement which for the Malamud protagonist constitutes the primary step towards redemption. Thus, in The Assistant as in The Natural, Malamud tells his story on two levels, the realistic or moral and the symbolic or ritualistic. Frank, like Roy before him, must fulfill the conditions of his role as son in order to attain ultimate salvation. The obvious difference of course, is that Frank accepts his respon-

sibilities and succeeds where Roy fails. In both books, however, Malamud reveals his themes by means of mythic, symbolic action. The father-son relationship in both works is the means by which Malamud's themes about maturity, identity, and responsibility are linked to the mythic pattern of quest, initiation, and reintegration. As William Freedman explains, "The Assistant likewise shows the author's unashamed familiarity with the stuff of myth and ritual: It is a fusion of initiation rite and initiatory quest. But Malamud is more at home in a Jewish grocery store than he is on the ballfield, and the dressing is mixed to suit the salad, not the other way around. What Malamud wants to say determines how, when, and whether he will employ the materials of rite and myth."[23]

Stripped of the overt mythical conventions so prevalent in The Natural, The Assistant moves along different lines to its expression of moral dogma. As noted, the ritual myth is primarily a recapitulation of the father-son displacement which climaxes in Frank's acceptance of Morris's role. Since there is no attempt by Malamud to sustain a Grail-Quest or Fertility King type allegory as in The Natural, the mythic quality of the work is overshadowed by the moral drama of Frank's spiritual conversion. The sometimes obtrusive quality of Arthurian legend combined with Wasteland heroics has no place in The Assistant; the actual mythic tradition is limited to the father-son replacement process. Richman explains this technique, "The

theme of redemptive suffering in The Assistant is clearly akin to that of The Natural. But, unlike his first novel, Malamud supports the concept in The Assistant not with an ancient mythic ritual but with Talmudic ethics."[24] Since Frank is bound by no mythical framework, he encounters only one aging father symbol in the person of Morris. He follows the pattern of displacement and rebirth, but he completes it successfully as opposed to Roy who does not. At the same time, he encounters a group of fathers and sons who, in their totality, provide him with the same false examples of Roy's rejected patrons.

> In The Natural it is Roy's unwillingness to assume the father role himself that issues in his rejection of the authentic father for whom he is searching. Just the reverse is true in The Assistant. Frank Alpine's acceptance of the moral values of his spiritual father Morris Bober leads him to assume a father role vis-a-vis Morris's daughter, Helen. Although Frank does not seem to be confronted with another choice of a father, he is confronted with alternative value systems than the one Morris represents. These values are embodied in men who themselves are fathers to sons who bear resemblance to Frank.[25]

The first of these father and son pairs who illuminate the goodness of Frank's relationship with Morris are the Minogues. Ward is not only Frankie's original partner in crime but he also represents all that Frank could become given the wrong circumstances. Ward is basically a repulsive, emotionally ill individual who needs a strong father figure to guide him. His physical deterioration, manifested in his wracking cough and slovenly appearance,

parallels his spiritual degeneration; and his attempt to entice Frank into his criminal activities signifies his desire to ruin another uncorrupted individual. Ward has always been alienated; his father's stories of the boy's childhood are evidence of his earliest ostracism. Ward's real tragedy, however, lies not in his moral failure but in his inability to transcend his past as Frank does. The reason behind this lack of spiritual growth is that Detective Minogue does not fulfill the type of fatherly role which would permit his son any sort of progress towards goodness. The father in this case is a harsh, unfeeling tyrant whose means of paternal communication is a billyclub. Ward emerges as an adult in mortal fear of his legitimate father, and his subsequent feeling of betrayal prompts many of his criminal actions as means of revenge. The relationship between these two is thus the direct antithesis of the Frankie-Morris mythic tradition. As a contrast to Morris and Frank, the Minogues are the negative extreme to which the father-son relationship can be taken. In the other two examples in the story, neither the Pearls nor the Karps are quite so pathetic; both, however, illustrate through their own weaknesses the strength of the relationship between Morris and Frank.

The Pearls, Sam and Nat, are on the surface the closest approximation of Malamud's ideal love-sacrifice relationship between father and son. Sam scrimps and saves in a com-

mendable manner to allow his industrious son the privilege of higher education, and his reward is apparently a successful, ambitious heir. In reality, however, Nat Pearl is merely a superficial, egotistical phony whose selfishness is illustrated by his sexual encounters with Helen. There is no real learning, no wisdom through suffering in the Pearl relationship. The empty father produces an empty son who in his self-centeredness becomes only one more parasite on society. Nat's greatest flaw is his inability to love someone else; because of this, he will never be able to achieve the moral heroism which defines Frank's new life.

Julius and Louis Karp represent probably the most depressing father-son relationship in the novel because quite simply they epitomize the materialistic, hypocritical values so characteristic of American society. Julius Karp is the money-hungry father who is slowly, relentlessly molding his son into his own shallow, greedy image. There is certainly no wisdom, no suffering on the part of Karp; on the contrary, he promotes immorality by paying his son an inadequate wage and then expecting and condoning his son's subsequent thievery. Louis Karp is content with this system since he realizes he will one day inherit not only his father's material goods but the paternal prerogatives as well. He is thus as superficial and hypocritical as Nat Pearl although he is without Nat's apparent ambition.

The importance of these three relationships is that they all illustrate by means of contrast the strikingly unique

values of Frank and Morris. The latter are the only two in the novel who are not legally related, yet their relationship is the only one founded on mutual respect, love, and self-denial. Through this contrast with these other three father-son examples, Malamud emphasizes both the goodness and the redemptive qualities of the Bober moral relationship. Neither the Minogues, the Pearls, nor the Karps comprehend the necessity of love and sacrifice in contemporary society. It is inevitable then that they represent defeat and failure as opposed to the moral success of Frank. By his repeated comparisons of the four families, Malamud emphasizes that only the growth process of Frank and Morris is capable of achieving any kind of moral heroism. Ducharme explains this process when he notes, "These three father-son relationships illustrate exactly the opposite qualities listed by Morris Bober when Frank asked him what it meant to be a Jew. 'This means to do what is right, to be honest, to be good. This means to other people.' (p. 99) Louis Karp is not honest, Nat Pearl is not good, and Ward Minogue is far from doing what is right to other people. But Morris Bober himself has all these qualities."[26]

The key to the father-son pattern in the novel, then, is the moral quality of both Frank and Morris. Their relationship, particularly as seen in relation to those of the Minogues, Pearls, and Karps, is exemplary because of its adherence to the ritual pattern of replacement and rebirth. In comparison to Roy Hobbs who betrays the myth

by rejecting the morality of his father (Pop Fisher), Frank eagerly accepts the pain and suffering of a Bober-like existence. Because he willingly denies himself the material advantages of a comfortable life, Frank is able to erase the failures of his past in order to attain new identity. In doing so he fulfills Malamud's ritual structure and epitomizes the crucial theme of search for the true self through beneficial action for humanity. In this novel, as opposed to The Natural, Malamud shows the distinct possibilities for successful reintegration into society. And again, as in The Natural, the father-son theme has the dual purpose of giving a sort of mythic-ritualistic structure to the novel while functioning more importantly as the vehicle for Malamud's expression of moral development. The use of three contrasting father-son relationships is Malamud's substitute in The Assistant for his extended treatment of the Arthurian-Wasteland myths and their successive father-son confrontations. These false relationships point to the fact that there is only one true value system in the world of The Assistant just as there is only one path to salvation in The Natural. This means of attaining redemption is through a conscious expression of love and commitment which is epitomized by both Morris and Frank.

Morris, often called the secular saint of The Assistant, is truly heroic in his dedication to the Judaeo-Christian concept of the good man. Not orthodoxically inclined,

Morris is nevertheless the ideal man in Malamud's literature. This does not mean he is perfect; in fact, there is much of the schlemiel about him. His daughter best sums up his flaws at his funeral when she says, "He was no saint; he was in a way weak, his only true strength in his sweet nature and his understanding... He made himself a victim. He could, with a little more courage, have been more than he was."[27] But this paradoxically confirms the goodness of the man. His very suffering, in the Malamud scheme, makes him a great man because it teaches him the necessity of ethical action. Morris suffers, he inadvertently causes others to suffer (his family), and he fails to make anyone truly happy; but to Malamud, he is a moral individual. His constant misfortunes, many of which are simply bad luck, vividly illustrate his endurance. Where other men might curse their fate and despair, Morris simply welcomes his destiny with all the stoic patience of an ancient Hebrew. Morris's attitude is that he must willingly accept whatever role has been fated for him. He rarely complains; he is the stereotypical Jew in that he makes no attempt to rebel against his destiny. If his life is less than satisfactory, then it is his duty to live in pain. His incessant bad luck has convinced him that it is not his destiny to enjoy life; by refusing the inevitable despair, he achieves a greatness of spirit which sets him apart from all but a few of Malamud's characters. The rabbi sums up this heroic

existence at Morris' funeral when he says, "Yes, Morris Bober was to me a true Jew because he lived in the Jewish experience, which he remembered, and with the Jewish heart... He suffered, he endured, but with hope. Who told me this? I know. He asked for himself little-nothing, but he wanted for his beloved child a better existence than he had. For such reasons he was a Jew."[28] This is the crux of Malamud's moral philosophy. Morris is a saint because he accepts the pain of life without bitterness, envy, or despair while striving to maintain an ethical sense of basic goodness. His influence on Frank Alpine, of course, is the crucial action of his life. His examplary attitude, that universal tolerance of betrayal and pain, makes him a truly moral man. Malamud is in no way implying that Morris' Jewishness is either the cause or the result of his behavior; he uses Jewishness simply as a metaphor for all those who strive towards moral perfection while usually falling short. This is the reason for Frank's conversion at the story's end. He does not need to literally become a Jew in order to attain a new life of moral salvation; his conversion simply emphasizes the fact that he truly displaces Morris in every sense as he commits himself in love to others.

Frank's actual progress towards transformation, of course, is the moral theme around which the book is structured. As in The Natural, the father-son motif provides for a young,

helpless idealist to be profoundly affected by a wise, suffering father who leads him to salvation by means of a specific code of conduct. Frank certainly adheres to this pattern in the early section of the novel because originally he is hopelessly adrift.

> Frank is trapped in an endless circle of uncertain origin but proved result. Like Roy Hobbs he wants too much too soon. Lacking a clear sense of where he is going he is afflicted with compulsive over-eagerness to arrive. He is the drowning man who, by lunging at what at least may be driftwood, only succeeds in pushing it further away... Alpine's trap is a fatal circle of guilt, recrimination, and failure. An impatient, often criminal act leads to guilt. Self-hatred born of guilt demands punishment in the form of another self-destructive gesture which adds to the weight of guilt, renews the demand of punishment, and genders another crime, and so on.[29]

Under Morris' conscious example, however, Frank with great difficulty transcends this vicious cycle and finally attains a limited peace of mind in his hopeless attempt to provide for the Bobers. He forfeits material comfort; indeed, he reduces his own desires to the basic physiological needs of food and sleep. He is materially a great failure, but his soul has been reborn. He is a new man, having achieved redemption through Morris' dictum of suffering for others. But the price he pays is almost exorbitant.

> In Malamud's world, full recognition and reversal come only after all external supports have been removed; they come when the assistant has lost all outward assistance and is thrown back entirely on his own resources. Instruction is the necessary first step, but ultimately the initiate must face the dark alone. Not until the step is discovered and he is evicted from the store like Adam from a dubious Eden, and not

> until his importunate love drives Helen all but irredeemably beyond his reach does he arrive at a full understanding of the tragic pattern of his life and basic goodness, and Jewishness — of his buried self. This is the heroe's moment of reattainment, of rediscovery.[30]

The important point is that Frank completes this transformational process and becomes a new, morally alive individual. By doing this, he gives coherence to the mythic father-son relationship and fulfills the ritual structure of the novel. Frank's transformation is Malamud's theme throughout The Assistant, and it is accomplished only through his acceptance of love and responsibility in the father-son ritual framework. Frank accepts Morris as a paternal image by imitating his example of sacrifice; he subsequently accepts the responsibility of providing for others at the expense of his own comfort thus illustrating his actual love. This attitude on his part is the moral imperative in all Malamud's works and is brought to a successful, if somewhat depressing, conclusion here.

The most crucial point in concluding this discussion of Malamud's two novels is that his moral concern is of paramount importance. Both works revolve around the concept of man's moral obligations to a society which accomodates evil. This means that man is constantly faced with a hostile universe which can be conquered only by a universally acknowledged set of moral principles. Malamud's contention is that man, in his search for personal identity, must learn to reject his selfish tendencies in favor of a

strong commitment to society. His quest must incorporate the elements of love and suffering because these are the only meaningful qualities which promote selfless behavior. Above all, man must learn that these two elements are inevitable accompaniments to his search for happiness; one without the other leads only to false satisfaction, not truth. Malamud, as a humanist, believes that when men learn to accept these conditions as prerequisites for successful living, society will start to improve. His idea is that social change begins with an awareness of a moral obligation; once this is perceived, man can integrate himself with society for the benefit of all.

The importance of the two novels, The Natural and The Assistant, within this thematic framework is that they present man's two extreme alternatives. Roy Hobbs is the unequivocal loser in Malamud's world; he suffers more than most, but his experiences are wasted. He is fated at the end of the novel to repeat his quest because he simply cannot cope with his selfish nature. He never learns that love is the only value which will secure his future; he remains blind to the fact that material pursuits only certify his continued failure. At the end, we sense that perhaps he will now act sensibly and reject his false ambitions, but this does not negate the certainty that his sufferings will continue. Frank Alpine is at the opposite extreme because unlike Roy he learns exactly how he must act in order to attain moral redemption. Frankie suffers and

loves, and his torments define him as a spiritually reborn individual. Malamud's point in this novel is that everyone must meet the awesome responsibilities of sacrifice in order to achieve any sort of salvation. Frank is a success because he learns from his mistakes; Roy is a failure because he places no value on intangibles.

Malamud's emphatic moralism in these two novels is modified by his imaginative use of fantasy and ritual. In both books he employs extended ritualistic symbols to emphasize his moral concerns. The most important of these is the father-son relationship which figures prominently in both novels; it functions primarily as a structural device but also as a vehicle for the expression of Malamud's theme. Both heroes are sons and both follow the ritual pattern up to a point. The differences between them emerge as one breaks the father-son pattern and fails to attain his personal identity. The other fulfills the ritual and is rewarded with spiritual success although his material status remains questionable. Thus, the father-son relationship helps illustrate Malamud's thesis of the necessity of moral commitment. As an integral element of both the structural and thematic divisions of the novels, this relationship is crucial to Malamud's art form.

Footnotes

[1]Leslie and Joyce Field ed., Bernard Malamud (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1975), p. 7.

[2]Jonathon Baumbach, Landscape of Nightmare (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 105.

[3]Marcus Klein, After Alienation (New York: World Publishing Co., 1962), p. 252.

[4]Ibid., p. 253.

[5]Sidney Richman, Bernard Malamud (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1966), p. 27.

[6]Earl Wasserman, "The Natural: World Ceres" in Bernard Malamud and the Critics (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 47.

[7]Tony Tanner, City of Words (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 333.

[8]Richman, p. 30.

[9]Bernard Malamud, The Natural (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1952), p. 27.

[10]Ibid., p. 26.

[11]Ibid., p. 34.

[12]Ibid., p. 184.

[13]Ibid., p. 62.

[14]Richman, p. 37.

[15]Malamud, p. 126.

[16]Richman, p. 35.

[17]Klein, p. 263.

[18]Richman, p. 43.

[19]Ibid., p. 41

[20]Ibid., p. 55.

[21]Ibid., p. 71.

[22]Ibid., p. 72.

[23]William Freedman, "From Bernard Malamud, with Discipline and with Love" in Bernard Malamud (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1975), p. 160.

[24]Richman, p. 69.

[25]Robert E. Ducharme, Art and Idea in the Novels of Bernard Malamud (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, Inc., 1971), p. 99.

[26]Ibid., p. 102.

[27]Bernard Malamud, The Assistant (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1957), p. 278.

[28]Ibid., p. 277.

[29]Freedman, p. 161.

[30]Ibid., p. 163.

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