MALAMUD AND THE MESSAGE OF HOPE

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Both in his writings and in his philosophy of writing, Bernard Malamud expresses a more optimistic view of man than most other contemporary writers. As he himself states: "The purpose of the writer is to keep civilization from destroying itself. But without preachment. Artists cannot be ministers. As soon as they attempt it, they destroy their artistry. To me writing must be true; it must have emotional depth, it must be imaginative. It must inflame, destroy, change the reader." (Current Biography, New York, 1958. P. 372.) The adherence to this belief can be seen both in Malamud's short stories and in his novels. There is, in each work, a striving for some kind of morality, whether it be found in a search for personal integrity, in the successful solution of an identity crisis, or in the deflating realization that the world is not as good a place as it was thought to be. Malamud, though he creates an atmosphere conducive to morality, does not preach. He never becomes didactic because of the charm and humor of his character development, his ironic Jewish humor, and his unstinting belief that each man has embedded within him the basic quality of honesty which needs only a crisis in human relations or in the environment to be realized.

This capacity to become better, to develop a freer and thus more fulfilling personality can be seen in many of the short stories, but especially in "A Summer's Reading," and also in the novel The Fixer. In both of these works, Malamud's characters have a desire for a better life, even though they may not be aware of this in the beginning of the story. The agent which precipitates the crisis in these stories is a form of deception. Although the characters first refuse to face reality as it is, but rather try to shape it to their own lives, they eventually come to the realization that they must face reality objectively. It is this evolution from deception that shows the development of the uniqueness of each character, and the hope man gains by being strong enough to perceive a true perspective of himself and his ideology in relation to the rest of mankind.

In the story "A Summer's Reading," George Stoyonovich, a high-school drop-out with no job and not much ambition, concocts the story that he is reading one hundred books during the summer to "improve his education." The reason George dreams up such a story is that he wants people to like and respect him, especially Mr. Cattanza, who is more educated than the other people in the neighborhood. Mr. Cattanza circulates the story so that George feels more acceptable among society. The deception bothers George and he begins to avoid Mr. Cattanza, yet he fails to read even one book, and fails to realize the gravity of the deception he has become involved in until one night he meets the older man and realizes that Mr. Cattanza knows that the one hundred books haven't been

started yet. George thinks he has only a few more days of prestige left, but finds instead that people now believe he has finished all one hundred books. He realizes that only Mr. Cattanza could have circulated such a story since his own family has become quite skeptical about the situation. George knows that Mr. Cattanza has tried to help him maintain the respect of others he needs so much. He also knows that somehow he must live up to the expectations of the older man. One night in early fall, he goes to the library, counts off one hundred books, sits down and begins reading. Thus he finally becomes honest with himself, which enables him not only to accept himself for what he is, but also to try to make that self a better one.

This hope of a better life after evolution from deception can also be seen quite clearly in Malamud's most recent novel The Fixer. Yakov Bok, a Jewish peasant who lives in the Russia of the early 1900's and who has been deserted by his wife after five and one half years of a barren marriage, leaves his small village hoping to find a more rewarding life, both personally and financially, in the city of Kiev. However, he finds his situation in the ghetto of Kiev no better until the day he saves a rich Russian merchant with a tendency toward alcoholism from suffocating in the snow. The deception begins as Bok at first hesitantly accepts a commission from the man to refinish some rooms in the house. Because the merchant wears the pin of One Hundred Eagles, signifying his anti-Semitism, Bok does not reveal himself as a Jew. The deception grows as Bok accepts a job from the merchant as overseer of his brickyards. It is rather ironic to note that he is hated by the other workers for his honesty in counting and loading bricks. However, Bok's religion is discovered when a young Christian Boy whom he has often chased from the brickyards is found murdered about the time of the Jewish Passover feast. Bok is seized and although the prosecutors know who the real murderer is, they charge him not only with the murder, but also with many other unspeakable atrocities. He is beguiled, humiliated, threatened, and tortured so that he will confess his guilt, but knowing his innocence, he refuses to do so. By withstanding the hatred and punishment of those whom he realizes to be liars, Bok comes to a recognition of what he is, and his life is, and he begins to accept that knowledge. Because he has been able to become a truly free thinker, he is free as a human being, if not in the eyes of the law, at least in his own eyes. It is this personal struggle with and resolution of the question of freedom that gives the reader hope that Bok will become free in the sight of all.

However, Malamud does not limit the hope of a better life to those who have the courage to struggle with self-deception. This same hope is shared by those simple yet strong souls who spend their whole lives working for the goal they know will enable them to attain at least a semblance of happiness. In the short stories "Idiots First" and "The First Seven Year," the heroes, while not explicitly receiving their wish for life-long happiness, at least come within reasonable distance of it, because of their ability

to accept and surmount suffering. In the story "Idiots First," Mendel is a man who knows he is going to die at any time, yet he refuses to give into death until his idiot son Isaac is safely on the train on his way to living with his Uncle Leo. In order to achieve this dream, Mendel has pawned everything he owns, and must endure the coldness of the weather, the pseudo-charity of a so-called philanthropist named Mr. Fishbein, who offers a chicken dinner instead of the train fare, and a rabbi's shrewish wife. He must also elude a rather fantastic character named Ginzburg, who represents the Angel of Death. Although Ginzburg is always one step ahead of Mendel, and there is a terrifying struggle between them in the end of the story, Mendel, through his single-mindedness and selflessness transcends what Ginzburg stolidly calls the law, and gains his happiness in seeing Isaac on the train.

This same element of selflessness which leads to happiness can be seen in "The First Seven Years." Sobel, the shoemaker's assistant could have found a much better job with higher wages, but chose to remain poor because of his love for the shoemaker's daughter. For seven years, Sobel has denied himself everything that would constitute a better means of living in order to ultimately attain a happier life. Through these years, he has been content to converse with Miriam, but now that her father is trying to marry her off to those he thinks eligible, Sobel, just as Mendel has done, tackles his own Ginzburg. Because of Sobel's perseverence through the years, and his courage to speak at the right time asserting his own dignity as a man, Feld, the shoemaker comes to a moment of realization and must grant Sobel the chance to receive Miriam's love. This realization comes to Feld after Sobel's stunning demand, and the shoemaker then knows why he has been thwarted in his attempts to marry off Miriam. He has been concerned mainly with his own satisfaction of seeing his daughter well off, and has given no thought either to her desires as a woman, or to Sobel's dignity as a human being. He is enraged, but he is also helpless: "he realized that what he had called ugly was not Sobel, but Miriam's life if she married him. He felt for his daughter a strange and gripping sorrow, as if she were already Sobel's bride, the wife after all of a shoemaker, and had in her life no more than her mother had had." (Bernard Malamud, "The First Seven Years," in The Magic Barrel, New York, 1958. P. 18.) The fact that Feld realizes the selfishness of his dreams and his indignity committed against the other man leaves a chance for reconciliation between the forces of selflessness and selfishness in this story. But it is for characters like Feld who fail to see the harm in degrading oneself and in denying the dignity of men, that Malamud sees no hope. As Earl Rovit points out: "Malamud seems to insist that there is a way of escaping the fatal limitations of the human condition. Man need not remain buried in the isolation of himself. He must accept the fatality of his own identity--be it Jew or Gentile, success or failure--and working within that identity, transcend himself and burst his prison." ("Bernard Malamud and the Jewish Literary Tradition," Critique III, Winter, 1960. P. 8.)

The failure of a character such as Henry Levin to achieve any sense of fulfillment in life is due to the fact that he will not allow his basic dignity to develop. He denies his own identity, thus denying his own dignity and that of others. Levin, who has ironically changed his name to Freeman, is a handsome man of thirty, who has recently received an inheritance. He decides to go to Italy, so that he can learn how to live. However, since he knows no one, his kindly-hearted landlady suggests he take a tour of some of the neighboring islands. He does so, and discovers that no one is allowed to wander alone on the islands. However, on one of them he sees a beautiful young woman, Isabella del Dongo, after whose family the island is named. When they meet, she asks Freeman if he is Jewish, to which he replies he is not. She asks him again; again, he denies his Jewish origin. Although there are many warnings concerning honesty, Freeman insists he is not a Jew. Because he is ashamed of his identity, because he is convinced he has no dignity, Freeman is punished for his masquerade. On the night he asks Isabella to marry him, she asks him for the last time if he is a Jew. For the last time, he denies his dignity. Isabella then reveals a faint blue line of numbers on her breast, denoting her as a Jewish war victim. To marry Freeman, a non-Jew, would be to turn against her own dignity as a person. Her answer to Freeman, as she leaves him alone in a garden of cold marble statues is indicative of Malamud's philosophy: "I can't marry you. We are Jews. My past is meaningful to me. I treasure what I suffered for." (Malamud, "Lady of the Lake," in The Magic Barrel, New York, 1958. P. 118.)

However, it is not only the characters but also the humor in Malamud's works which emphasizes the fact that man can somehow denounce a cynical attitude in the most deplorable conditions and come to terms with them. Malamud's chief techniques are his outrageous sense of Jewish humor, which adds a wry touch to the sensitivity with which he views life; his irony, which shows that if men allow their basic quality of honesty to grow, they will fulfill their true desires; and his fantasy, which points out the absurdity of the rejection of one man by another.

Since Malamud is an American of the Jewish religion, he has expressed a great concern about the Jews. As he says: "I write about them because the Jews are absolutely the very stuff of drama...The suffering of the Jews is a very distinct thing for me. I believe that not enough has been made of the tragedy of the destruction of six million Jews...Somebody has to cry, even if it's just a writer twenty years later." (Current Biography, p. 372.) Yet although Malamud writes about the Jews with a true concern, he does not do so merely to point out their peculiarity as a people, as an ethnic writer or teller of folk tales would. Although the caricatures of Jewish life and expression are partially valuable in themselves, because of the preciseness and pungence of their wry presentation, they contain a universality in their portrayal that extends beyond the Jewish people to the whole of mankind. Malamud's stories cannot be classified as

tales of Jewish folklore; rather, they are stories which express a outlook on life through the eyes of people who happen to be Jewish. This makes them delightful on two counts: First, they establish a universality of theme which provides for emotional identification and response; second, for those of us who are not Jewish, as well as for those who are, they express in a graphic way the thoughts and emotions of the Jewish point of view. As Earl Rovit puts it: "Malamud is an expert at invoking the saving grace of Jewish humor, the indefinable quality of humanity which doggedly persists in twisting a smile even under the grip of total adversity; the egotistical triumph of a mock humility which testifies unwaveringly to the essential dignity of being human in an inhuman universe." (Rovit, p. 6.)

The most successful techniques used in creating a situation in which man can laugh at himself, even if his greatest illusions in life are proven false, are that of irony and caricature. Malamud does not use caricature in a burlesque or slapstick way, however. He uses it to provoke a smile that has sadness in it, or a laugh that is a little rueful. Although Malamud's caricatures are humorous, they are not basically funny. They are used in close connection with his idea of hope for a better world. The caricatures are used to prevent an ironic view of life from becoming a cynical view, even when the life one has dreamed of is being destroyed. This is true in the story "The Girl of my Dreams." Mitka, who is Malamud's caricature of the Poor Young Writer, has just burned his heartbroken novel in the trash, much to the distess of his landlady, who realizes that with the sacrifice of the novel also comes a rejection of her own advances toward the young writer. Mitka becomes a hermit, only venturing out after midnight for crackers, and tea and an occasional can of fruit. One day after all his landlady's efforts to entice him out of the room have failed, Mitka reads the morning paper, turning listlessly to the "open globe" column, to which he used to contribute, but which he now scorns being a True Artist. However, he is so moved by the story of Madeleine Thorne that he writes her a letter of consolation. The story is that Madeleine's well-intentioned landlady has cleaned her room and mistakenly burned the novel she has worked on for two years. Mitka immediately begins to conjure beautiful pictures of Madeleine, enhanced by the feminity of her handwriting when she replies to his letter of condolence. After the exchange of several letters Mitka insists on a meeting with beautiful Madeleine. With great reluctance she agrees to meet him in the public library. Mitka arrives at the library, having been delayed by the entreaties of his landlady, only to find that the beautiful, young Madeleine is a middle-aged, dumpy woman named Olga. However, Mitka does not leave until after he and Olga have talked for a while. Although he knows they will never meet again and that his dreams have been destroyed, there is still an ironic note of hope as Mitka gains the encouragement to write again. There is a note of the acceptance of fate as Mitka, who is no longer the Poor Young Writer, but rather a young man aware of reality, decides what to do about his landlady;

"He thought of the old girl now. He'd go home now and drape her from head to foot in flowing white. They would jounce together up the stairs, then, strictly a one-marriage man, he would swing her across the threshold, holding her where the fat overflowed her corset as they waltzed around his writing chamber." (Malamud, p. 72.) Mitka does not become cynical about the world; rather he pities the Olgas and Madeleines in it. His acceptance of reality is probably what prompts Sam Bluefarb to state: 'Malamud's characters are not so much objects of their own laughter as of ours--and of our commiseration, too." (Sam Bluefarb, "The Scope of Caricature in Bernad Malamud," E J, 1964, LIII. P. 322.)

However, besides using the rather twisted humor of irony and caricature, Malamud also employs a fantastic humor in some of his stories, such as "The Jewbird" and "Angel Levine," which shows the absurdity of man's rejection of another man. By creating fantastic characters, Malamud can express his judgments of the nonmorality of men and still remain an artist rather than a preacher. For instance, in "The Jewbird" which is about a talking bird named Schwartz, Malamud is able to make incisive remarks on man's inhumanity to man (in this case, as Schwartz says Anti-semeetes) by letting the bird, rather than the human characters in the story make the judgments. The same is true of the story "Angel Levine," in which Manischevitz, who is caricatured as modern Job, at first rejects, then in desperation accepts the aid of Angel Levine, a huge Negro angel who lives in Harlem, and has recently become a disincarnated Jew. It is Manischevitz' fantastic conversion to faith in a Harlem honky-tonk which leads to his redemption and to the solution of his problems.

Through Malamud's use of humor, be it funny or wry, and through his character development, he is able to give an insight into the hope which remains for mankind. Whether it is the hope of becoming a better person, the hope of attaining the happiness one has awaited for so long, or the hope that comes from an acceptance of reality, it is expressed in a truly artistic rather than ministerial way. By creating situations and characters from whom we can feel both sympathy and empathy, Malamud expresses the bittersweet attitude which should be the outlook of each of us: that although life may sometimes be cruel, we must always maintain our integrity as persons and our identity as individuals without becoming immersed in the emptiness of a bitter life.

"TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN; KEEP THIS N[redacted]ER-BOY RUNNING"

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After the prologue to Invisible Man, in the first paragraph of chapter 1, appears this statement by the narrator: "I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I,