

THE THEME OF INTIMACY
IN THREE WORKS BY BERNARD MALAMUD

by

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Bernard Malamud's heritage has created a problem for the literary critic. "The hub of the problem," as Sidney Bellman points out, "is precisely his Jewishness. In reading some of Malamud's critics, one suspects that it is less his art than his subject which is the center of interest. Too often there is the uneasy sensation that the subject is not really a writer who happens to be a Jew but a Jew who happens also to be a writer."¹ Malamud's fictional world is frequented by Jewish protagonists involved in personal, social, and spiritual struggles, and certainly that dimension of his art should be examined by the critics. But to limit one's study of Malamud's work to defining and isolating his use of the social and religious implications of the Jewish heritage is an implicit denial of the author's broader concerns.

"Malamud, like all great writers before him," declares Leslie Field, "is concerned with man, the human animal evolving his world within a world he never made. And how man chooses his own world and what happens to man in the process of that choice constitute the significant world of Bernard Malamud's fiction."² Field rightly stresses Malamud's broad humanistic range. However, a study of Malamud's recurring themes offers a more refined assessment. Malamud is indeed concerned with man and his choices. But the one choice which Malamud consistently offers his heroes is whether or not to enter into intimate, significant communion with others.

In three novels, The Assistant (1957), A New Life (1961), and The Tenants (1971), Malamud demonstrates an ever-growing concern with

the necessity for human intimacy. This is a developmental interest; the intensity and breadth of this theme grow from one work to the next. The theme becomes increasingly important, more central to the plot and to the interaction of character, in the later novels. Malamud's emphasis on intimacy is realistic; he is not sentimental, nor idealistic. Personal encounters are often painful and seldom easy. But they are necessary, according to Malamud, for it is interaction which makes growth possible. In The Assistant, A New Life, and The Tenants, the major characters--Frank Alpine, Seymour Levin, and Harry Lesser--are at the outset loners, misfits, men outside the mainstream of human contact for one reason or another. Each is given the chance to venture forth from isolation. The role that meaningful contact can play in reconciling the isolated individual to some form of community is a major thematic consideration in the fiction of Bernard Malamud--and the chief concern of this paper.

In The Assistant, the opportunity for movement from isolation toward community is given to Frank Alpine. The theme of communion, however, is not the central concern of the novel, nor are the effects of Frank's relationship with Morris Bober and his family detailed or psychologically analyzed. Nevertheless, the groundwork for Malamud's later focal concern with the issue of isolation and intimacy is definitely laid in this early work.

Frank is young, hard, self-centered and inconsistent. He is also immature and, at the outset, unaware of the significance of intimacy and commitment. He is drawn to, but terrified of, stability; stability demands responsibility and Frank wants to remain outside

the entanglement of obligation. He rationalizes his thievery and deceit as the result of necessity to survive in a hostile world, but he is, at the same time, shaken with guilt about his dishonesty. Guilt is a prevalent motivation for Frank. That is what drives him to hang around the corner grocery after he has participated in a robbery there during which the grocer Morris Bober was injured. Morris, "who knew a poor man when he saw one, invited him in."³

Morris offers Frank the love of a father for a son. Frank is drawn into the family; he is given responsibility in the store; he is offered a place in the world, a place to belong. Frank, however, seems unable to shed former habits; he steals food and money behind Morris's back. Although he wants this safe haven, he destroys it for himself. He seems unable to follow through; "I work like a mule for what I want, and just when it looks like I am going to get it I make some kind of a stupid move, and everything that is just about nailed down tight blows up in my face" (p. 40). Frank tries to ride the fence between uninvolvedness and commitment; he reaches his hand out to take the friendship and trust given him, but he keeps his total self out of the complication. This is Frank's "stupid move." He realizes only after he has lost Morris's trust how important the old grocer's affection and high regard were to him. "What I mean to say is that when I need it most something is missing in me, in me or on account of me" (p. 42). Frank seems aware that he is a limited person, but he doesn't have what it takes to change. He can't utilize the potential offered him via friendship with Morris because he is basically weak. "Something is missing."