The Assistant Study Guide

The Assistant by Bernard Malamud

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

The Assistant is a morality drama in which human kindness and honesty, despite appearance, triumph over callousness and greed and transform lives. Morris Bober and his family live in poverty because he refuses to exploit his equally impoverished neighbors. Honesty and morality prevent the realization of the American Dream for him and his family. An attempted robbery at his store acts as a catalyst in forging a surprising working relationship and friendship that transforms the arrogant and antiSemitic attitude of a petty thief, who learns to respect the Jewish values of integrity, honesty, and the redemptive power of suffering.

About the Author

Bernard Malamud was born on April 26, 1914, in Brooklyn, New York, the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants, Max and Bertha Fidelman Malamud. Bernard Malamud's mother died when he was fifteen, during the time when he worked helping his father in the small grocery store they had established in Brooklyn. After graduating from Erasmus Hall High School in 1932, Malamud entered the City College of New York and was awarded his bachelor's degree in 1934.

In 1942 he obtained a master's degree from Columbia University. For nine years he taught evening classes at Erasmus Hall and Harlem High Schools. Malamud married Ann de Chiara in 1945; her heritage inspired him to people his stories with a number of Italians. In 1949, he joined the English Department of Oregon State College, Corvallis, where he taught for twelve years, rising to the rank of associate professor. In 1961, he joined the faculty of Bennington College, in Bennington, Vermont.

Malamud died of natural causes in New York City on March 18,1986.

One of the outstanding writers of post-World War II America, Malamud began writing short stories at the age of seventeen.

Two of these were published in 1943, "Benefit Performance" and "The Place Is Different Now." By 1950 his stories were appearing regularly in Harper's Bazaar, Partisan Review, and Commentary. In 1952, Malamud's first novel, The Natural, was published.

Unique among his works, this book deals with the Arthurian legends transferred to American baseball—star players replace knights and the diamond is the field of combat. With the publication of his second novel, The Assistant (1957), written in a more mature writing style, Malamud embarked on subjects that would characterize his writing for the rest of his career: the situation of Jews in the modern world as emblematic of modern men generally, and the necessity of suffering and compassion in human life. He received the Rosenthal Foundation Award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the Daroff Memorial Fiction Award of the Jewish Book Council of America, both in 1958. The shortstory collection, The Magic Barrel, 1958, won the National Book Award in 1959. His third novel, A New Life, was published in 1961. In 1966 Malamud published The Fixer, a fictionalized account of a real victim of persecution in Czarist Russia. The Fixer is considered by some critics to be Malamud's best work. It received the National Book Award for Fiction and a Pulitzer Prize in Literature in 1967. A film version was made the same year. Throughout his career, Malamud was one of the most honored of contemporary American writers, garnering several awards, including the Jewish Heritage Award of B'nai Brith (1976), The Governor's Award of the Vermont Council on the Arts (1979), the Creative Arts Award for Fiction from Brandeis University (1981), and the Premio Mondello, a major Italian award (1985).

Plot Summary

This is a typical Malamud novel containing Jewish themes such as sin and redemption, as well as societal and familial conflicts. It is about an old man who owns a grocery store. He is helped by his wife and by his daughter, who works fulltime to help out her parents, but who deeply desires to go to school and somehow improve her lot. The story takes place in New York, in a neighborhood where Jews hardly live anymore. The old man's grocery store is an anachronism; and he barely makes expenses from day to day. It is impossible for him to give up the store, though he has generous offers to buy it. Illness and old age are weighing him down, along with his old-fashioned methods and poor ways of doing business. A young man comes into the story, once as a criminal and then in a lengthier way as an assistant, bringing himself redemption. The story is long and dark, in typical Malamud style.

Morris and Ida Bober live upstairs from their grocery store, an old, ill-lighted, badly supplied, old-fashioned concern that barely makes a living. They have one daughter, Helen Bober, who works full-time in order to give her parents money, and helps with the store as well, but who also reads a lot and hopes to attend evening classes with a burning desire to accomplish great things in this world. This is something as yet indefinable but passionately strong in her character. As the novel begins, she is carrying a copy of *Don Quixote,* which is symbolic of her powerful drive to achieve more than her parents ever did.

Morris is being pressured to sell his store, but he will not give in to selling because this is the only living that the family has and it is all that he has ever known. He refuses, even though the business is clearly in the red. One night, a robber and an accomplice hold him up. Morris is injured but loses almost nothing financially because there is hardly anything worth stealing in the store, certainly not much cash.

A stranger has been hanging around the store and in the candy store opposite, staring at the grocery. His name is Frank Alpine and he looks unhealthy and unhappy. This stranger strikes up a conversation with Morris once the old man is up and about after the assault. Frank eventually ends up helping Morris and when Morris becomes ill later in the book, doing all the grocery store work. Since Frank is Italian and the Bobers are Jewish, Ida Bober has a deep distrust of him.

Frank struggles throughout the book with his inclinations to bad character, including a peripheral participation in the initial assault and later pilfering from Morris' cash register. Frank wants to be a good person but he struggles with his bad behaviors. When he falls in love with Helen, she wants nothing to do with him, partly because he is not Jewish and partly because he does not seem to be a lofty character who can take her to the high potential she envisions for herself. At one point, he sexually assaults her, which distances her from him even further.

Still Frank works on in the grocery store until finally his daily persistence and moral efforts pay off. Instead of feeling that he is not a part of the Bobers' life, that he is alien

from their Jewish ways, he somehow and mystically finds himself to be a real Jew himself with the hope and potential of winning Helen's heart and eventually taking over the grocery store and making a success of his life.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

At ten past six o'clock in the morning, a grocer opens his store, hauling in the milk boxes and serving an old Polish Jewess who has been waiting since six. She wants a hard roll from the bag at the door, paying him three cents for it. The grocer eats a roll with some coffee and gives charity to a starving family of a drunken mother.

The grocery store has hardly changed over 21 years, a poor grocery with a small delicatessen. The grocer, Morris Bober, grieves because his store is losing customers to the larger and more modern store across the street. Morris receives and pays for deliveries this morning. He feels entombed in this store. Morris' wife Ida enters the store as the morning proceeds; the two speak in typical Yiddish-flavored English, obviously Jews. Ida nags Morris quite a bit and he does everything he can to deflect her nagging.

Helen comes home from work and hands her father her entire paycheck. Morris gives her five dollars in the store and then, as Helen comes upstairs, five dollars more. Helen wishes to refuse but Morris wants Helen to have more than she does. He feels badly that the girl has given up her college education in order to help her parents.

Julius Karp, the liquor storeowner who has turned the everyday running of the store over to his son, comes to visit, explaining that there is a potential buyer for the grocery store called Podolsky. Karp advises Morris to get a telephone for safety's sake in this uncertain neighborhood. There is a gray car hanging around the neighborhood containing "holdupniks," people who may rob stores. Morris realizes too late that the hooligans are after him.

One robber has a gun and is in charge, while the other seems to be holding him back, especially not wanting violence. The robber in charge strikes Morris on the head. They hunt through the store and find the cash register empty. The robber is angry and strikes Morris again, and Morris falls to the ground accepting his fate and ill luck.

Chapter 1 Analysis

In this chapter, Malamud introduces all the main characters and most of the peripheral ones. Each person enters the stage of Bobers' store, almost as if on a stage. In one scene, Helen appears on a bus with Nat Pearl, which is important because Helen wishes to create a life for herself separate from the draining demands of her parents and their store. She cannot seem to separate herself, however, because she must return home, sleep upstairs in the apartment above the store, and give all her money to her father, Morris. Morris tries to give her money back for expenses and just for pocket spending, but Helen is driven by typical Jewish guilt to give everything she has to her dad and mom. However, she takes out her angst on her boyfriends, both Nat Pearl, whom she holds back from because she has slept with him without him giving her any

deep emotion in return, and Louis Karp, who is almost attractive but who cannot offer Helen the higher, lofty goals that she longs for.

This chapter ends with the assault on Morris Bober. Although in this beginning chapter, Frank Alpine is masked and not yet revealed, the reader receives a first impression of his character. He has agreed to participate in the holdup, but he doesn't want to hurt the old man. He believes that Bober has nothing to steal and tries to convince the thief of that. He is horrified that the assailant hits Bober and tells him so. Frank is introduced here as a person of weak character, in that he agrees to participate in the robbery, but as a person who does not wish to do harm, as he tries to stop physical harm from coming to Bober.

This chapter reveals the grocery store in its context in a New York neighborhood. Although there used to be many Jews in this area, there are only three families left and they are constantly interacting in various ways, mostly in commerce. There are many assumptions here, especially that the young men will naturally be involved with Helen Bober, since she does not have other Jewish associations. When it comes to business, however, the neighbors are willing to give advice but never actual help. It is clear in this chapter that Morris, Ida and Helen Bober know very well that their dark, dank, badly lighted and badly supplied grocery store is failing. Morris gives charity but hides it from Ida because he knows she will yell at him. This is a dismal, dark view that hardly lets up throughout the rest of the book.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

During the week that follows the attack, Morris is injured badly enough not to be able to descend the stairs to work. Ida cannot work all the time because she has bad legs and feet. This leaves the grocery store vulnerable, which it is already anyway because there is hardly any clientele. Ida notices a man watching the store from across the street, from the candy store. Sam Pearl talks with this man, identified as Frank Alpine.

While Morris is laid up in bed, the Polish lady who comes at 6:00 in the morning for her roll and milk has taken the goods without help, but when Morris comes down the next day, she pays him for what she's taken. That day Frank Alpine comes into the store and talks to Morris. He has a cup of coffee and explains that he is looking for work, especially in a grocery store. Next day, Frank comes in again for another coffee. He explains that he has had a hard life, coming close to success in many ways but then always missing it. He talks to Morris at length in this way giving many examples. He elicits information on Morris' attack and hotly condemns such attackers. He talks to Morris about his family.

The next day, Frank shows up to the store and cleans the window. Ida is suspicious and thinks that Morris must be throwing away money to have a worker like that, but Frank says it is just a favor. Ida says Morris should pay for the favor, not to be in debt. Morris offers Frank coffee and a sandwich. Then Frank asks Morris and Ida to be able to work there, just for experience, not even for wages. They refuse, but Morris is not feeling well and Ida cannot do the work herself. Frank puts on an apron but Morris makes him take it off.

In the next scene Louis Karp and Helen Bober, the daughter of Morris and Ida, are walking by the ocean. Louis wants to settle down and marry, get a good life together, but Helen is restless, wanting something wonderful but yet unnamed. Louis wants a kiss, but Helen doesn't give him much, just a brush of the lips. She asks him what he wants from life, but his answers are unsatisfactory. He tries for another kiss and feels her breast, but she asks him not to because "it give me no pleasure." In the past, he mentions, they spent time necking but now she won't give him anything.

Next day and for a few days following, Morris notices that a roll and some milk are missing. He gets up early to find out who is stealing. No one on the block has seen a thief. Morris is worried but afraid to tell Ida. He finally calls a detective, Mr. Minogue, who also happens to have a wayward son, Ward Minogue, who has assaulted a girl sexually in the past. Next morning, Morris finds that Frank Alpine has been sleeping in his basement and stealing the milk and rolls. Frank indicates that he has no place to stay, that he has been lying about having a sister to stay with, and that he only takes what he needs to stay alive.

Ida wants to send Frank away immediately, but Morris has pity on him and invites him to stay on the couch. Frank says that he'll work to pay off everything but Ida doesn't want him. However, she and Morris are in no shape to run the store. In fact, Morris collapses at the end of the chapter and must be taken away by ambulance, so Frank takes off the apron from Morris and puts it on, saying that he needs the experience in grocery store management.

Chapter 2 Analysis

This chapter reveals more about each character. The reader gets a view of Frank Alpine first from a minor character, Sam Pearl, who sees Frank almost as a monk or like Saint Francis of Assisi, probably because of Frank's Italian background and appearance. Frank is suffering because he can't get a job. He tells a great deal of his life's woes to Morris, where the reader gets a good view of Morris' basic sense of compassion and charity. Morris is henpecked by a wife who seems to lack this compassion. This is partly because of her sad background escaping the pogroms in Europe, but she tries to prevent Frank from encroaching on their life in the grocery store.

Morris and Ida are both suffering in health from chronic conditions, and Morris is suffering further from the blow on the head in the attempted robbery. Still, Morris tries to do good things without Ida knowing because Ida is so suspicious that she thinks that people will harm Morris and take advantage of him. Therefore Morris tries to hide some theft of rolls and milk from his wife. However, soon he reveals it to her and they call in a detective, who is also worried about his son, possibly as being implicated in the attempted robbery.

This chapter also reveals Helen's character. She is not afraid of sex but she is tired of men attempting advances when she doesn't really want the men. She keeps expressing some hard-to-delineate desire for great things in this world, a great education, higher values, but Helen doesn't even really know what she wants for herself.

Finally, Frank expresses his desire to work in the grocery store, but the Bobers firmly refuse. Things would stand this way except that Morris collapses. It is hard for the reader as well as for the Bobers to understand why Frank keeps offering his services for free. The revelation of his motive comes out as the book progresses.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Morris has collapsed and reopened the wound on his head. The doctor insists that Morris stay in bed at least two weeks, but Ida says it will be hard to make him. When the couple returns to the store, Frank indicates $15 he has earned that morning, far more than the store usually takes in, a busy morning, according to Frank. Ida weakly agrees to let Frank stay on for a little while in these difficult times. Frank makes himself busy cleaning up the place and fixing things. He makes little changes, such as changing from milk bottles to cartons. Ida is suspicious of Frank, who is writing down all sales to prove his honesty. Ida teaches Frank how to do things, such as wrap groceries neatly and to charge correctly for deli items. He learns fast and does well; but Ida reserves judgment, because Frank is a stranger and a goy (non-Jew).

This chapter describes many of the grocery store duties that Frank learns. Along the way, he imagines what he would do to improve the store if he owned the "dump." Ida appreciates how fast he learns, while Frank appreciates Ida's sacrifice in touching ham for the baked beans, because she is Jewish and keeps kosher. Ida suggests that Frank take some time off during the slow hours, but Frank remains, in the back of the store, reading.

For a short time, Frank finds himself sampling many foods in the grocery store, tearing the packaging up in small pieces and flushing it away after he's done. He fixes himself thick sandwiches sometimes as well and then finally gets over this petty thievery. Customers, both Jew and non-Jew, warn Frank to escape this dead business. Sometimes Ida insists he take a day off, giving him fifty cents spending money, apologizing for the small amount. Frank visits the Fusos, an Italian family upstairs, or goes to the movies. Frank notices that Ida always shoos him out before Helen gets home from work.

Frank is noticing Helen. He notices her bras and panties on the clothesline. He has a growing desire to get to know her and begins to watch for her. He likes to watch her, but she doesn't seem to notice him. One day he gets cleaned up and waits for her, noticing how pretty she is. He also notices that she seems discontented, hunting for something. Now Frank is getting a little obsessed over Helen, looking for her all the time, attributing motive to her behavior. He tries to cross paths with her but is constantly disappointed. He is so lonely. He pretends there is a phone call for Helen so she will come downstairs, but there is no one on the line. He says it was a girl, but cannot give details. He is lying and cannot stop himself. Helen feels disappointed and vaguely disturbed. She has become aware of Frank in the store and is annoyed with her mother for trying to keep Helen away from Frank simply because he is a goy. Helen thinks she would never be interested anyway because he is just a poor grocery clerk.

The grocery store is bringing in more money since Frank has appeared and Ida is glad, although she is still concerned at this stranger and goy among them. More customers are coming in, and everyone is buying more. The customers like Frank and spend some time talking to him. He is drawing in customers they have not had before. Frank urges customers to buy more and better things and customers say he is a great salesman. Because of these things, Ida convinces Morris to pay Frank five dollars a week. Frank feels guilty about this because he is "paying" himself out of the till when Morris and Ida are not around. He tries to get himself to stop stealing and suffers a great deal from the guilt, but he keeps stealing the money anyway, not a lot, but constantly.

Suffering from guilt one night, he reminisces about the night of the robbery. It was Ward Minogue who instigated it. Frank argues with Ward's idea to rob the place, but Ward heckles him into it, especially since the owners are only Jews. There was a gun used in the robbery, belonging to Frank, but Minogue has it. One day Frank asks for it back, but Minogue refuses, saying that he wants to rob Karp the liquor storeowner. When Frank refuses to participate, Ward Minogue snickers that he only wants a "nice ripe Jewish lay."

One night Frank wedges himself into the dumbwaiters and hoists himself up the shaft to spy on Helen in the bathroom. She disrobes to take a shower, and Frank is fraught with desire for her. Even as he lusts for her, he sees her loneliness and self-mocking at her situation. When she smiles a mocking smile for a moment he thinks she is looking at him, but she isn't. When she steps into the shower, he quickly lets himself down the dumbwaiter, silently. He is filled with joy, not guilt, from the experience.

Chapter 3 Analysis

At the very time that Frank is making inroads into Ida's good graces by being a good employee, learning fast, and bringing in more customers and better business, Frank is still indulging his bad character traits. He steals from the cash register when no one is around, and although he beats himself up with guilt during his off hours, he still continues this bad behavior. He refuses to participate in another robbery with Ward Minogue, but in a lesser way, he is a thief himself.

Frank is a normal guy who cannot help noticing the pretty Helen Bober. He tries to place himself in the way of seeing her, even to the point of lying about an incoming telephone call for her. He becomes more and more obsessed with her, finally crossing another ethical line by peeping at her while she takes a shower. Frank does not seem to know the difference between right and wrong. In his head he knows, but he does not possess the inner strength to stop himself from doing what is wrong. The incident with the dumbwaiter foreshadows a greater violation of Helen later in the book.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Morris is convinced that Frank's good luck and hard work have brought money to the grocery, but Ida thinks there have to be other reasons, including a new apartment building that has opened up. Morris wishes to pay Frank more, and he also tells Helen she can keep the $25 a week she gives to the family. Helen is overjoyed because she needs shoes, a decent coat, and perhaps some dresses. She also attributes this good fortune to Frank. She thinks he is better than just an ordinary guy. He often visits the library and she sees him there. Sometimes they walk back together, although other times one will ride the streetcar and the other will walk. She reads a great deal and is happy to learn that he does as well.

Frank tells Helen he is going to start college in the fall. She is excited and imagines him refined, well-dressed, well-educated, on campus. She begins to recommend novels for him to read, mostly Russian authors including *Crime and Punishment* and *Anna Karenina.* Frank doesn't like these at first and finds it difficult to read through all the complicated names of characters, but soon he gets into the books and relates to the stories, although he finds them pretty depressing.

Nat calls Helen one evening, but she brushes him off, although she has recently imagined herself madly in love with him. Nat wants Helen to loosen up and resume their sexual relationship, but Helen says she only wants to sleep with someone she truly loves. Ida is cross with Helen, reminding her that she is getting older and moving toward being an old maid.

Frank buys Helen an expensive pair of presents, a beautiful scarf and a leather edition of Shakespeare. She decides to return them, not wanting to owe Frank anything. He throws them into the garbage, and she rescues them. She takes them back to Frank insisting that he get his money back but he refuses. She wants to return the things but he also refuses. Finally she agrees to keep the book if he will return the scarf. Helen is softening toward Frank and she mentions that she is Jewish. None of this gets by Ida, who is worried. She shares her concerns with Morris, who simply says that nothing will happen, although Ida predicts dire outcomes... a tragedy.

The next morning, Frank asks Morris what it means to be a Jew. Frank has noticed that Morris doesn't go to synagogue very often, occasionally eats pork, and doesn't keep kosher. He keeps the store open on Jewish holidays. Morris explains that being Jewish is not about outward appearances but by being good, by being honest, to do what is right. Frank confesses he has been hard toward Jews but now thinks better of them.

One afternoon, Morris sees he needs a haircut. He leaves Frank in charge of the store. Morris observes several people come and shop and expects a certain amount of money. He checks the cash register when he gets back but there is not enough money

there. He realizes that Frank has been stealing. And he reveals his generous character by thinking that Frank would not steal if he were paid well. He offers more to Frank, who doesn't want it, but finally takes it. Morris doesn't mention any of this to Ida.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Here Helen is beginning to like Frank more and more. She begins to imagine a person she could love, one that goes to college, reads books and has refinement. She gives Frank books to read. At first he finds them difficult and unpleasant because they are long, depressing Russian novels. Soon he gets used to them and Helen is able to spend more time with him. When he gives her expensive presents, she realizes that he has perhaps misunderstood her attention, although she can see why since she has been spending time with him. He demonstrates that he is a manipulative character by convincing her to keep at least one of the presents.

She mentions she is Jewish as a way of discouraging him, but he thinks about it and goes to Morris to understand about Judaism. This is a key passage in the book, as Morris explains the heart and essence of Judaism to Frank. When Morris discovers Frank is stealing from the cash register he demonstrates that he really is a good man. He does not blame Frank but himself for the theft, since he is underpaying the young man. When he offers more payment, Frank is uncomfortable and refuses, but Morris insists, although he demonstrates the power his wife Ida has over him by yet again refusing to tell her about the raise. Since Ida doesn't like Frank and also since Ida is terribly concerned about making money, Morris wishes to avoid conflicts.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Helen is falling in love with Frank although she doesn't want to. She is somehow uncomfortable about it all and begins having disturbing dreams for no discernible reason. She begins to make excuses for Frank, feeling that if there is something hidden or wrong about him, it is just his sad past. Whenever she reads or hears Shakespeare, she thinks of Frank. He walks home with her from the library more often. One evening, walking home, they embrace and kiss. Helen loves it but feels doubt, even a touch of illness about it at the same time. She is sad, thinking that she has a fault in accepting the young man for who he is. She argues with herself about it all, especially that he is not Jewish, is poor, and is not preferred by her parents, especially Ida. She finally decides that it is her life, not her parents', to decide what to do.

She makes plans in her head. She will help Frank through college and then go herself. They will travel and see the world! As she thinks through these things, she meets Frank more and more frequently at the library. They often find secret places to kiss and caress one another. Soon Frank is tired of waiting for sex. He thinks they should have it in the warmth and comfort of their own home. How silly is it to sneak out in the cold! Helen wants to wait till marriage, and this makes Frank very upset. One rainy night the parents and other roomers go out and Helen agrees to come to his room. They lie down and kiss; he touches her breast. When he lifts her skirt, she stops him. He is upset and somewhat rude, but then apologizes. He explains that even when he's bad, he's still a good person. They both settle down but agree not to repeat a rendezvous in the house.

One afternoon Detective Minogue brings a suspect into the store to see if he was one of the holdup men. Morris says no. The detective inquires if Morris has seen his son Ward but Morris doesn't think so. Frank sees Ward later and warns him away from the store. Ward presses Frank to join in more criminal jobs, but Frank refuses. Ward threatens Frank with exposure if he does not pay money, and Frank eventually does but threatens Ward never to come back.

Ida follows her daughter into the park and sees her kissing Frank. She tries to bully Helen into stopping the relationship and taking up with Nat again. Ida goes home and shares her worries with Morris, who again dismisses the subject, while Ida again direly prophesies a great tragedy to come from all this.

Julius Karp is the owner of the liquor store and father to Louis. His son will eventually inherit the business. Julius is thinking about the Bobers and Frank. Julius knows that Frank steals because he buys good liquor and occasionally bets on the horses, obviously with Morris' money. Julius wants his son, Louis, to marry Helen, although Julius realizes Helen will not be easily convinced of this. Julius goes to talk to Morris and talk about it. He notices the grocery is doing better and Morris says it is all due to Frank. Julius says that the competitor Schmitz has been sick and has sold the grocery

to two Norwegians who are spiffing up the new place and improving it greatly. Julius makes an offer to Morris, to help him if he will consider a match between his son and Morris' daughter, but Morris is too upset to even hear it.

After a dreadful sleepless night, Morris decides he must sell the store but not lose Frank until he does. Frank can hardly pay attention to Morris' dilemma because he again is fretting about confessing the whole theft to Morris and making things right. He is playing the game in his mind of becoming clean and upright once more. He puts back all the money in his pocket and plans out how to pay back all the rest. Then Helen agrees to go out with Frank and he curses himself for being without a penny. In the meantime, Morris leaves Frank alone and pretends to go out but resolves to watch Frank for thievery. Frank snitches a dollar from the cash drawer for the date and Morris sees him. He is furious! At first Frank lies but then tells the truth. He just needs a dollar till payday. He cannot ask for it because he has only known theft throughout his life. Morris tells Frank to go in the morning and Frank is broken-hearted.

Helen goes out with Nat as planned and later gets set to meet Frank. Meanwhile, Ward Minogue approaches Helen while she waits for Frank. He tricks her and grabs her, to rape her. He tears her blouse. Just in time Frank appears and beats Ward off. Helen is so grateful and falls into his arms, but he is half drunk and aroused by the experience. They are kissing and Frank presses further. He silences Helen's rebuffs with kisses and rapes her. Afterward she calls him an uncircumcised dog.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Things are coming to a crisis with Frank's bad character. Helen is falling in love with Frank, which sets up a crisis if Frank wants to be honest and straight with her. However, Morris begins to doubt Frank for the first time when Julius Karp presents irrefutable evidence that the grocery store's success has *not* been due to Frank but to the illness of Morris' competitor. When Julius tells Morris that a pair of Norwegian brothers is buying and improving the competitive grocery, it just about kills Morris. He is so unhappy! He begins to suspect Frank and sure enough, he finds the young man stealing. No matter that Frank has turned over another good leaf. Morris insists that Frank go. However, Frank still has a date with Helen in the evening.

Helen has agreed to see Nat, on her mother's insistence, but later gets together with Frank. As Helen waits for Frank, she is put in real danger when Ward Minogue assaults her. Frank saves her and at first Helen thinks that Frank is yet again a fantastic person, but Frank is upset at losing the job, has been drinking heavily, and is aroused by the sight of Helen's breast because Ward Minogue has torn her blouse. The two begin to kiss and Frank goes ahead and rapes Helen, although she keeps protesting she doesn't want it. She yells at him afterward calling attention to the fact he is uncircumcised.

Perhaps Frank really does want to be good, but he has pursued a life of bad behavior and self-deception that he is really improving. Raping Helen demonstrates fully that Frank has a long way to go before he shows he has good character.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Morris receives a flyer about the opening of the Norwegians' new grocery next morning. He is not sure that he has done the right thing dismissing Frank, who left without his $15 weekly pay. Morris sees that Frank really is trying to pay back his thefts, but Morris knows he needs to have let Frank go, for Ida's sake and also for Helen's. The shock of the news of the new grocery opening has chilled Morris who cannot get warm again. He goes upstairs to bed, cold and sick. In his dreams he fights with the Norwegian grocers and with Frank, as though his lungs will burst.

Frank has slept upstairs but wakes unhappy, realizing that he has lost his job and worse, that he has violated Helen, who he loves. He is disgusted with himself, right down to his smell. He is eaten up with guilt. He wishes he could explain to Helen that he was loving her with his love, but she screamed at him and rejected him. Helen has awakened crying. Ida hears her but thinks that Nat has harmed her in some way. Helen showers and soaps herself to get rid of her shame, and then leaves early so as not to face her mother.

There is a smell of gas in the air. Nick smells it and bursts in to tell Frank. Frank realizes it is not he who stinks because it is gas. Morris is upstairs and nearly dead from the gas. Morris has not attempted suicide but just forgot to light the gas, he says. Morris is very sick and must go to the hospital. Because the whole family is at the hospital, Frank goes in the back door, cleans up, and opens the store. He determines to stay as long as anyone lets him. When Ida gets back the next day, at first she is furious to see Frank there in the store, but he shows her he has brought in good money. She says that Morris has pneumonia. Frank convinces Ida to let him stay, though he agrees not to see Helen. Frank is grateful that Ida does not know why Morris dismissed him; nor does she know about Frank's assault on Helen.

Morris is in the hospital for ten days. When he returns he must stay in bed indefinitely to recover. Frank determines to see him, commit to his honest life, and ask if he can stay and help. He sometimes sees Helen but the time he runs into her, though he is filled with love, she is full of anger and contempt. Frank is trying everything to improve the store, including buying cheap and selling cheaper, and including painting the store, but the Norwegians truly seem to be stealing the clientele. Frank tries to collect from debtors, such as the housepainter that owes over $70, but when he gets to the house, he realizes that the children are hungry and the painter cannot take care of his family. He runs into Ward Minogue on the way home. Minogue is carrying the gun from the robbery. He gives it to Frank for $4, for he is hard up too.

Frank takes a night job to help out with expenses. He still grieves for the wrong turn with his relationship with Helen. Still, he continues to study and reads a long book on the history of the Jews. Soon Frank begins experimenting with woodcarving and finds he

has a talent for making beautiful things. He makes a gift of a carved flower to Helen, but it saddens her, reminding her of her unhappiness. She throws it away.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Things can hardly go worse with the Bober family and with Frank as well. When Morris nearly loses his life to gas poisoning and then to pneumonia, Frank steps in to work in the grocery although he is afraid he will be turned out. This may be the crisis for Frank because for the first time he realizes that no matter what he tells himself about his good intentions, he really has been stealing and he really has raped the girl he loves. These things stare him in the face and perhaps for the first time in his life, he sees the result of them. Although Frank has not deliberately deceived Morris about being a valuable asset in the store, even that is revealed to be untrue as the competing grocery gets on its feet with new owners and again draws away the business at Bober's grocery. For the first time, too, Frank gets a strong dose of reality and the resulting compassion it brings when he sees others in hardship, as in the housepainter's situation. Frank is in a tough situation with no visible way out.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Morris, now at home, wishes he could just jump out of bed and get down to work; but the doctor absolutely insists that he stay down, especially privately to Ida. Morris is beginning to have bright memories of things he did as a boy, the fields he ran in, his father, his deceased sister. Morris is sweaty with illness but is taken with a fierce desire to go downstairs to the store. Ida stops him and tells him that Frank is taking care of the store and bringing in consistent money. Morris wishes he knew why Frank keeps doing this. Morris goes down to talk to Frank, who hears him coming, with fear. Frank hurriedly goes through all the possible scenarios in dealing with this.

Morris says he has to leave, but Frank says he never stole "a red cent" since that day. Then Frank confesses his part in the robbery, but Morris says he already knows! He tells how he figured it all out. He is heavy in the heart. Frank asks for one more chance and says he will pay for his own expenses out of his other job. Morris insists that Frank leave. Frank writes a note to Helen and goes.

Morris realizes that the grocery store will not pay its way even with the improvements Frank has made. The family discusses the pros and cons of selling the store, auctioning it, or other alternatives. Ida goes to visit Julius Karp to ask if he will buy it and hints that Helen could be part of the bargain, to marry his son. Karp sends a prospective buyer, Podolsky, to discuss buying the store. Podolsky leaves without an offer.

Morris finally realizes he wants to go visit Charlie, a guy who cheated Morris in the past, But Morris has the idea that Charlie can give him something, buy the store, give him a job, anything. He arrives at Charlie's store and sees that it is thriving even though Morris knows it was gotten with dishonesty. He works for a day for Charlie but realizes that it is a dead end when Charlie makes him give a dollar to make the register right. He tries another business but cannot find a job. On the way home he visits a peddler, a poor man with a boy. The peddler is gone but Morris gives the boy some money, as a charitable act.

He stops at another friend, Al Marcus, to ask for a job, but Marcus is in the hospital. He goes home, distressed, but later that night wakes with a craving for cream and bread, as he had when he was a boy. A thin, ghastly man, a "macher," a fire-starter, is waiting by the store, saying that he can set a fire and get fire insurance for the Bobers. Morris refuses but later sets a fire himself. Horrified, he tries to put out the fire; but it is out of hand. Frank appears at the last moment and puts it out, saving Morris and the building. He begs for Morris to take him back, but Morris refuses.

Chapter 7 Analysis

This is the shortest chapter in the book. In it the character of Morris is revealed. He is a tired, defeated man trying to do whatever he can to take care of his family, even humble himself to the point of working for someone who had cheated him earlier in life. No one wants to hire an old man. On the way home, Morris reveals his character by giving charity even when he is poor himself. When he gets home, a "macher," a fire-starter, says he can use celluloid to start a fire so Morris can collect the insurance. Morris sends him away but is taken with the idea and starts a fire himself. He tries to stop the process, but it is out of hand. Frank appears, evidently hanging around the store, and puts out the fire. Yet Morris will still not take Frank back. His misdeeds are still too egregious for Morris to forgive.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Ward Minogue tries to find Frank at Bobers' but finds Frank gone. He goes to the liquor store and steals a bottle of liquor since he doesn't have the money to buy liquor himself. Ward's father sees him, chases him, catches him hiding in an empty shed, fires a gun at him, and beats him senseless with a billy club, threatening his life if he shows up near the neighborhood again. Detective Minogue knows his son is guilty. Ward breaks into the liquor store and sits there drinking bottle after bottle, throwing them around. He sets the store afire and dies in the blaze before help can come. When Morris sees this situation, he blames himself because he has been bitter toward Karp's success. Karp shows up sometime later and offers to buy the store and the house. He can reestablish the liquor store easier than rebuilding. They agree on a good price and Morris can hardly believe his good luck.

The next day, a spring snow falls. Morris insists on shoveling it, though Ida says it's needless since their customers will soon be a thing of the past. He waits all day while the snow falls and in the evening, goes out to shovel. Ida is not there to stop him. He is shoveling without a coat in the cold evening. Ida screams at him for his foolishness, with his history of pneumonia. He lies in bed, making plans for the future, but soon breaks into chills and a fever. He is sick again with pneumonia. He dreams of his dead child, Ephraim.

So sick, he dies three days later in the hospital. Old friends and customers all come to the funeral. The rabbi gives a simple, moving sermon about Morris. The rabbi says that Morris was a true Jew because he lived a good honest life in the Jewish way, with a Jewish heart. The rabbi reiterates how honest Morris has been all his life. Frank is at the funeral. He slips and falls into the grave! Ida is horrified, Helen wails, and Nat yells at him. Later Louis Karp comes and tells the family that his father is ill and cannot buy the store. Ida says that Morris is better off dead than seeing this day.

Chapter 8 Analysis

A great deal happens in this short chapter. Morris seems like a man with a foot in the next world, with images, memories and cravings from his early life and of people who have passed on. He cannot believe his good luck when Julius Karp offers to buy the store and the house. Now he and his family can live out the rest of their lives comfortably in a small apartment. Then a late spring snow starts, and Morris stares at it all day with an irresistible urge to shovel it. Ida deters him all day but after she has gone to bed, and after the snow finally stops falling, out Morris goes, even without a coat. His renters and his daughter are horrified but he shovels till it's clear. When he goes to bed, Morris knows he's sick. He sees a vision of his late son Ephraim. When he dies after three days, the family goes through the whole experience of having a funeral, including

a lengthy sermon by the rabbi who identifies the core of Judaism, being kind and honest and good, which Morris was. At the burial, a strange thing happens. Frank has attended the funeral and somehow falls into the grave! He scrambles out. This is a symbol of Frank overcoming his bad nature and being resurrected into a better life associated with Judaism. When Ida finds out later that Karp cannot buy the property, she sinks into further depression. First she loses her husband, and now this happens.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

During the obligatory week of Jewish mourning, when Ida and Helen remain in their home, Frank keeps the store running, though his night earnings barely keep things going. People come in and pay off debts they owe to Morris because of their sympathy at his loss. He pays rent and Ida augments that with little sewing jobs she takes. Frank tries to tell Helen he is not the same man, but she still refuses him. He asks her if she even understands the books she'd given him to read.

Helen dreams of Frank and wakes afraid. She sees him in the hall in the morning. He tries to think of something, anything, to make her happy and finally figures that he can somehow put together the money to send her to college. In the morning he begins to revamp the store, including more interesting and delicious deli items. He hears that the Norwegians are fighting in front of the customers and that they close early, so Frank keeps the store open later for more business. Frank has added pasta and pizza to his menu; and during the summer, he sells a great deal of these things as well as lots of beer. Frank makes homemade soup as well. He pays more money to Ida to use the store and the room. He offers to give money to Helen, but Ida discourages him. Still he plans to send her to college.

Helen comes home one night from the library. Frank is shaved and groomed to meet her. He blurts out his desire to send her to college. She realizes that if circumstances had been different, she would have chosen Frank. Still, she says no. Please, he says, in your father's name. He says he owes it to Morris, but Helen says he is simply trapped in the store the way Morris was. He confesses that he was there for the crime but that he didn't hurt Morris. Helen screams and screams.

Frank struggles to keep the failing store afloat. He loses weight and has a narrowing life, just as Morris did. He worries because Helen is seeing Nat. Once in a while he slips back into spying on Helen and stealing from people, but then he sets himself straight, seemingly for no reason.

One night Helen comes home and happens to see Frank working at his night job. She realizes Frank has kept Ida and Helen alive and even allowed Helen to go to school. She realizes that he truly is not the same man he was before. He has changed, even from the evil he did to her. She comes into the store and thanks him, but he says there is nothing to thank. She mentions that she's still using his Shakespeare, and a day or two later Frank hears a fight between Helen and Nat. Helen has slapped Nat.

Early one morning the Polish lady pounds at the door for her three-cent roll. Frank gets up to serve her. His hair is growing too thick and long, just as Morris' had earlier. He keeps trying to get customers despite the ups and downs of business. He has taken to reading the Bible to keep him occupied during down times in the business day. He

imagines St. Francis, an earlier inspiration and topic of conversation with Helen, rescuing the wood flower from the garbage, turning it real, and tossing it to Helen, with Frank's love. That spring Frank becomes circumcised and after Passover he becomes a Jew.

Chapter 9 Analysis

This chapter takes the reader through the curious transformation and redemption of Frank. Although he is still troubled by impulses to do wrong, Frank is taking care of Ida and Helen and improving the store. He works the extra night job to pay expenses and somehow, with great difficulty, keeps things afloat. How he longs for Helen, but he sublimates his desire by wanting to send Helen to college. One night Helen sees him at his night job and thinks about how Frank has served her and her mother. She realizes yes, that Frank is not the same man he used to be. She argues with Nat, a foreshadowing that she is clearing her life to let Frank back in. She mentions that she still treasures his gift, another hint of the relationship to come. However, the obstacle remains that Frank is not Jewish.

The end of the book shows Frank becoming circumcised, which is a painful but necessary part of being a Jewish man. Frank "dies and is reborn" to his bad nature, as symbolized by his falling into Morris' grave. He converts after Passover, the great redemptive holiday of Judaism, and the reader is left to imagine the rest of the story, Frank's eventual relationship with Helen.

Characters

Morris Bober

Morris Bober is a 60-year-old Jewish grocer with a rundown store in a mostly non-Jewish neighborhood. In addition to having been wounded in an attempted robbery, Morris has longstanding health problems. Morris works endless hours in the store, from early morning to late at night, relieved only for a nap and other minimal time off by his wife, Ida, and his daughter, Helen. Morris worries constantly about money. He has had offers to buy his store but he adamantly refuses, which infuriates his wife, who feels that there is no hope in this grocery store.

Morris seems to have naturally bad luck. He works long hours and is absolutely honest. Some critics have compared Morris Bober's character to the great Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber. When Morris explains Judaism to Frank, it is clear that Morris is delving into deeper spiritual and philosophical realities than simple outward observance.

Ida Bober

Ida Bober is Morris Bober's Jewish wife. She is fifty-one years old, quite a bit younger than Morris and certainly not elderly as he seems to be. Still, she is beginning to feel her age. Although she has a full head of black hair, she suffers with sore feet and legs when she stands too long in the store. She is a fussy, over-attentive, nagging Jewish wife who misses the friendships, family and connections of her old Jewish neighborhood. She is constantly worried about money, so much so that she is deeply bitter about their impoverished life. She feels that her husband Morris is an impossibly immovable object. She worries that their daughter will never marry and generally worries about the girl.

Helen Bober

Helen is the daughter of Morris and Ida Bober. She feels obligated to help her parents with their store, but she also deeply desires to attend school and reads a great deal on her own. Helen feels trapped by the store and her parents' poverty, but she has great dreams for herself. These are dreams that she cannot clearly articulate sometimes, but she does not want to be trapped in a conventional Jewish marriage, have babies, and live out her life unhappily as she has seen her mother do. Helen has had a sexual relationship Nat Pearl, a nice and up-and-coming Jewish boy that Ida wishes Helen to marry.

Helen, however, feels that Nat does not have lofty aspirations for his life. Helen does not trust Nat's intentions and stays away from him. Since Helen has slept with Nat and feels that he used her, she does not love him, and feels that he finds her too convenient without any deep feelings or commitment. Helen is embarrassed, and therefore avoids Nat if she can. Another young Jewish man, Louis Karp, is interested in Helen; but she

wants to escape the trap of Jewish wifehood and motherhood, wishing for some ethereal higher ground.

Helen works during the day, handing over her paycheck to her parents to help with the failing store, though she saves what she can to go to night school to fulfill her dreams. She has given up college to support her parents' store and her father deeply feels it.

Nat Pearl

Nat is a second-year law student who is mildly romantically interested in Helen. He has slept with her a few times in separate incidents, making Helen feel like trash because she feels that Nat does not love her. Nat comes from a well-to-do family, which makes him a prime candidate for marrying Helen as far as Ida is concerned.

Sam Pearl

Sam Pearl owns the candy shop across from the Bober grocery. In addition to the income from the store, Sam is a bookie, making enough money from the betting to support his son in law school. Sam is one of the three remaining Jewish businessmen in this neighborhood.

Julius Karp

Julius Karp owns the liquor store on the same street as Morris Bober's grocery store. Julius is one of the three remaining Jewish businessmen in this neighborhood. Julius formerly owned a shoe store but determined there was more money to be made in liquor after Prohibition ended. He is very rich and overweight.

Louis Karp

Louis is the son of Julius Karp, the liquor storeowner. He is described as slightly popeyed, a young man who repeatedly clips his fingernails to the quick. Louis has taken over the counterwork at the liquor store while his father pursues his work as a bookie and generally takes it easy. Louis is barely attractive, according to Helen, but he is working hard. He wants to make a good living for an eventual wife and children; and since there are few Jews in the neighborhood, he looks to Helen as being his best possible choice. He wants a straightforward American life, to work hard, take care of his family, and follow the American dream of commerce and well-being. He cannot understand Helen's drive to do something more and better, especially since she cannot particularly articulate what it is he wants.

Frank Alpine

This young man is introduced anonymously first, as an accomplice in a robbery turned into an assault on the grocery owner, Morris Bober. The main thief and assaulter wants more from the robbery so he gets mad and gives Morris a terrible blow on the head, but Frank tries to talk him out of this, saying that this is a poor man with a poor grocery and there is nothing more to steal.

Later Frank appears first as a stranger, perhaps a malingerer, in the neighborhood, but soon he offers his services gratis to Morris Bober, saying that he wants to learn the grocery business. At first Morris refuses, and his wife Ida is adamantly against it, saying that he will demand payment or probably steal. However, Morris has been seriously hurt from the assault. Ida cannot tend the store because she has leg problems and cannot stand the long hours necessary to keep the store open. Helen is working elsewhere and the family needs her income. So Frank works for a while, then they have him leave, but he eventually finds his way to return to the store and work.

He is attracted to, and eventually obsessed with, Helen. However she doesn't want him, ostensibly because he isn't Jewish, but truly because he doesn't seem to answer her desire for higher things in life. But Frank preserves.

Ward Minogue

This is the son of the policeman in the neighborhood. He is a self-indulgent, dishonest thief, the one who robs Morris Bober. He is acquainted with Frank and gets him to participate in the robbery and tries to get him to participate in others. He is ill-mannered, selfish, and disgusting in his manners.

Nick and Tessie

These are upstairs roomers in Morris and Ida Bober's building. They pay rent to the Bobers and are happy to share their space with Frank. They are Italian.

Taast and Pederson

These two men are Norwegians who have bought the neighboring competing grocery. They are fixing up the grocery and adding an up-to-date delicatessen. Morris realizes that his store will not thrive when he learns of this purchase and operation.

Podolsky

Podolsky is a prospective buyer of the Bober store. He is young, shy and oddly dressed.

St. Francis of Assisi

St. Francis does not actually appear in the book, but he is an important character in engineering Frank's redemption. Note that Frank's name derives from St. Francis as well. When Helen is falling in love with Frank, his description of St. Francis of Assisi helps her visualize a beautiful side of the young man. Later, when Frank's transformation is nearly complete, St. Francis of Assisi appears and turns his wooden flower to a live, beautiful flower.

Objects/Places

The Grocery Store

This is the most important place in the book. Morris Bober takes on the grocery store when he gives up his dreams for education and travel, when he gets married and begins a family. Morris is saved and trapped by the store at the same time. The attempted robbery takes place in the store.

The grocery store is both a burden and a blessing to the Bobers. Morris and Ida are trapped by it. Ida's feet and legs hurt too much to work enough, but she still feels obliged to try. Helen is trapped by the store because she cannot go to school, as the grocery does not produce sufficient income. Frank uses the store as a way to redemption. He struggles there to learn honesty, which he did not learn as a child growing up in foster homes and dangerous situations. He uses the store to serve Morris and somehow redeem himself for his bad behavior. He also uses the store to prove himself to Helen, who finally sees his service there as a true kindness and gift to herself and her mother. Helen does not want to be trapped in the store and feels her parents have been trapped, but oddly, Frank uses the store to produce the income to give Helen what she most wants, a college education.

The Liquor Store

Morris detests the lower-class Julius Karp, a Jew to be sure, but one who has lower ideals. However, Karp owns a thriving liquor store. Morris bitterly resents Karp's successful business. When the liquor store burns down, Morris feels terribly bitter because he has at times wished such a thing would happen.

The Library

Helen spends time at the library because she wants to better herself. She reads a great deal. Soon Frank begins to spend time at the library. He also reads, and it does not seem clear at first whether he does so to get closer to Helen or simply to read. The single librarian smiles knowingly at the romance developing there. Helen uses library books to help Frank become a better man.

The Park

During Frank and Helen's budding romance, they meet often in the park. There, in the evening shadows, they sit and kiss and caress. This is safer than their home, where someone could see or hear them. Frank wants to consummate their affair at home or anywhere, but Helen does not want to do it until they're married. Ida sees them kissing

in the park when she tails them one day. Ward Minogue assaults Helen in the park and sadly, the park is the setting for Frank's rape of Helen.

Russian Novels

Helen gives Frank long and difficult Russian novels such as *Crime and Punishment* to further his education and create a more refined person, one more like a man of her dreams. Frank does not like these novels at first, but soon he gets into the stories and begins to understand these difficult books. Near the end of *The Assistant,* Frank asks Helen if she really understands these novels, since they are about repentance and redemption.

The Volume of Shakespeare

Frank gives Helen two gifts, a scarf and a leather volume of Shakespeare. She gives them back and he throws them away. He agrees to take the scarf back if she keeps the Shakespeare. Whenever she reads Shakespeare, she thinks of Frank. When she begins to forgive him at the end of the book, she mentions that she is still using the Shakespeare.

The Wooden Flower

As part of his maturation process, Frank discovers he is good at woodcarving. He makes a wood flower for Helen but she tosses it in the garbage. As Frank enters into his redemption, he visualizes St. Francis of Assisi turning the dead wood flower into a beautiful live one.

Morris Bober's Grave

At the burial, Frank somehow falls into Morris' grave. People are horrified and make derogatory comments about this; and Frank quickly climbs out. But the grave is a symbol of Frank's own death and rebirth, and of his bad nature into a better one.

The Bible

Frank has taken to reading the Bible during his down times in the store, symbolizing his reformation. Interestingly, Frank comments to himself that he might have written sections of it himself, reflecting back to the foreshadowing comment he makes when he says, "Even when I'm bad I'm good."

The Delicatessen

Frank quickly learns the basics of preparing foods for the delicatessen and later in the book, demonstrates his evolving character by designing and preparing new foods to increase sales. Frank also uses realities of the deli, such as Morris and Ida having to prepare pork, to understand the essence of Judaism.

The Cash Register

One of Frank's ongoing temptations and downfalls is theft from the cash register. Morris and Ida have always been anxious about the cash register because they don't keep accurate books. They just count up their money to see how much has come in during the day. By watching Frank at the cash register, Morris discovers the young man has been stealing. By checking the cash register later in the story, Morris realizes that Frank is indeed putting the stolen money back.

The Dumbwaiter

This is an old-fashioned small elevator formerly used to transport things up and down the stairs. It is hardly big enough for a person to fit into, but Frank squeezes into it and raises it up to spy on Helen in the bathroom while she undresses and bathes. Although this is for erotic reasons, Frank also notices that Helen is very lonely and there is compassion in his arousal.

The Gun

Ward has Frank use a gun for the holdup although Frank never fires it. Still, Frank's fingerprints are on the gun. Ward retains the gun and uses it to blackmail Frank for money. Later in the book, with his resources exhausted, Ward sells the gun to Frank for a pittance and that pressure is relieved from Frank's mind.

Setting

Bober's grocery, where most of the action takes place, is in a section of the city (possibly Brooklyn though never specified) that is almost a slum. The story occurs in a two-year span during which nothing happens to improve the lot of the Bobers except slight increases in business after Frank Alpine, the assistant the title refers to, allies himself with the family and becomes a clerk in Bober's store. A bleak grayness characterizes the atmosphere of the book. The grocery is a prison in which Bober spends his exemplary life and to which Frank Alpine will later commit himself. Bober's sense of morality makes escape from his dingy prison impossible.

The time of the novel, like its locale, is never specified. Trolleys are still operating in this city, and supermarkets have cut into Bober's business, which seems to indicate that Malamud is depicting the period sometime between the late 1930s and the early 1950s. Flashbacks take Bober back to the Jewish Pale in Czarist Russia and Frank Alpine to his earlier life in the West. Time and seasonal changes do little to alter the hopelessness of the Bobers' fate. Toward the end of his life, Bober tries to find employment in the city to no avail. During his final days, it seems at last that he can sell the store, but thanks to another ironic twist of fate, this hope proves illusory.

Social Sensitivity

The Assistant demonstrates Malamud's deep compassion for suffering humanity and his conviction that good rather than evil is the basic human quality. An old -fashioned moral man is contrasted to other people who believe his honesty is out of place in contemporary America. While the novel takes place in post-depression America, the Bobers seem to live in a neighborhood still frozen in the hopelessness of the 1930s, untouched by the prosperity enjoyed by the rest of the country.

The Victorian writer Thomas Carlyle complained that his society was dominated by "cash nexus," the belief that the only viable relationships among people are determined by money. Malamud does not use this term, but he does say that morality and ethical behavior are seen in our time as ideals that have failed, and those who try to practice them are hopelessly lost. The choices of the lifestyle by which Morris Bober and Frank Alpine live condemn them to the fate of imprisoned victims. Malamud's sympathy is clearly with those few individuals who try to hold up the ideal with which America began. This ideal values average human beings by their importance as persons, rather than their financial success.

Literary Qualities

Malamud sustains a tone of sadness throughout the novel. The critic Mark Shechner, in his essay "Sad Music," observes that this tone characterized the works of Jewish writers in the decade following World War II when the full extent of the Holocaust was realized. The impoverished sons of immigrants living during a worldwide economic depression, they felt that sadness was the only emotion that fitted their era. However, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and other writers moved on to more varied situations for their characters. Not Malamud.

He could not express himself in any other way and The Assistant, his second book, is a dirge that commemorates the inescapable misery of the human condition. He places his characters in a dismal limbo area from which they cannot escape. His minor characters fit their environment precisely. Breitbart, ill and crippled, peddles light bulbs from store to store, dragging himself painfully along. Al Marcus, dying of cancer, continues to sell his paper bags although he has had a good business. Malamud describes him as looking "as if he had lapped up cyanide." One figure, "The matcher," is a professional arsonist who appears to Bober on one occasion, offering to burn down the store. He demonstrates how easily this might be done. The grocer refuses, but the grotesque redhead has presented a temptation that Bober decides to try. As a result, he almost incinerates himself. His uncharacteristic act is a painful fiasco.

The Matcher is seen as a demonic counterpart to Bober. Malamud shows skill in presenting Dostoyevskian doubles in the story. Ward Minoque is what Frank Alpine might have become had their partnership in crime continued. Ward dies in a fire he set in Karp's liquor store, destroying the business.

Contrasting fathers and sons are featured as well. Ward Minoque's father is a police detective who has only one method of dealing with his son: he beats him mercilessly. Nat Pearl will doubtlessly far surpass his father's prosperity when he begins to practice law. Ed Karp is too simple to match his father's business acumen. After the liquor store is destroyed, his soft life comes to an end, and he finds a routine job.

Morris Bober had lost his little son Ephraim years before, but acquires another one in Frank Alpine. Bober never comes to realize this, but Frank becomes an almost exact replica of Bober after the older man dies. He runs the grocery, continues to treat his customers very charitably, and sacrifices his life to care for Helen and Ida. His transformation from petty criminal to a kind of secular saint is an ironic touch in a novel permeated by irony.

Malamud enhances his text with a variety of styles in the dialogue of his characters. The older Bobers speak a dialect of English that reads like a translation from Yiddish, the language of Jewish immigrants.

Their speech patterns are well suited to the ironic events that make up the plot of the novel. Their tone is typically wry, tinged with sarcasm and commentaries on the unexpected twists of the characters' lives.

Malamud grew up hearing Yiddish spoken by his parents, and understood it well, although he never spoke it. Morris and Ida, of course, know no other way to express themselves. Helen speaks standard English.

Alpine's English is in the highly colloquial American vein.

Malamud writes a supple, unadorned prose, as unadorned as Hemingway's writing but with occasional lyrical touches. One instance of this lyricism comes when Frank's reaction to Helen's nude body is described as he spies on her. Another poetic touch is provided by Frank when, in his imagination, St. Francis of Assisi, his lifelong idol, presents Helen a rose. These touches occur more commonly in Malamud's short stories and call to mind the pictures of the famous Jewish artist Marc Chagall. Malamud uses an omniscient style of narration for the most part in his books, a style that enables him to view each of his characters with ironic detachment. The novel is at once a realistic picture of urban poverty and, on another level, something of a fable in which Malamud expresses his beliefs about what constitutes a truly good human character.

Themes

Redemption

Probably the most important theme in this book is redemption. Frank Alpine first appears in the book as an unredeemed character. He is unkempt, hungry, has no place to live, and his first act in the book is to be swept into a robbery scheme that hurts one of the main characters of the book, Morris Bober. The perpetrator of the crime, Ward Minogue, is the son of a policeman. During the book, Ward does not take the steps necessary to bring about his redemption. He continues lying, stealing, and hurting people, and he continues to drink and use illegal drugs till he ends up dead after a great deal of dissipation and crime. Interestingly, Ward Minogue's father understands perfectly that his son is unredeemed. When Detective Minogue sees Ward one day in the neighborhood, he insists that Ward leave the neighborhood and never return. He even beats his son.

On the other hand, Frank has not had the good upbringing that Ward has had. Abandoned early in life, he has learned to lie, cheat and steal to get his way. Frank really wants to do what is right, but he keeps on doing wrong! He steals, lies, and plays the peeping Tom on Helen. He even rapes her, the woman he loves, on a bad night in his life when he is drunk. One might think that Frank could never be redeemed. He keeps messing up! But slowly, Frank's optimistic but self-deceptive version of himself, one who does right even though he keeps doing wrong, catches up to the sinning side of himself. He really does stop peeping; he begins to pay back the money he has stolen; and he serves the Bober family without a thought for himself, even working evenings to put money into the family till. At the end of the book, his conversion to Judaism symbolizes the personal journey of redemption that he has undertaken.

Religion and Personal Choice

Helen's parents, especially her mother Ida, reject Frank as a possible suitor simply because he is a goy, a non-Jew. The family lives in a Jewish neighborhood, or at least one that was mostly Jewish in former times, although now that has changed and there are only a few Jewish families left. Ida and Morris wish that Helen would marry one of the sons of these remaining families. They simply cannot understand why Helen will not do so. However, Helen has somehow created a vision in her mind of what she wants out of life, and neither of the Jewish suitors fit her criterion.

She wants someone who has imagination, high values, and a view toward a higher existence. Oddly, the person who can supply these things for her is at the time improper, Frank Alpine. When Helen begins to fall in love with Frank, despite the religious prejudice against this choice, she justifies to herself and later to her parents that the religion and the family do not have the right to make choices for her. She alone can choose, whether it is consistent with Judaism.

Just as important as Helen's choice is Morris' version of Judaism. While many people would think that living a Jewish life consists of many outward observances such as the dietary laws, attendance at services, and careful observance of the holidays, Morris explains that these things are not what make a Jew. To be a good Jew, one must do the right thing, be honest, and never hurt anyone. When Morris is confronted with Frank's wrongdoings, Morris unerringly chooses to blame himself for Frank's trouble. He always reaches out to help even with Frank or others have done wrong. These things point up the essential theme in this book of personal choice over religious expectations.

Value of Education

Helen is holding out for an education for herself and to marry an educated man. It is not clear where she obtained these ideas, because Morris did not get an education, although he dreamed of one before he had a family. Helen works hard and occasionally can afford to take a night class. She spends a great deal of time in the library and at home reading books to improve her life. When she begins to imagine Frank as a potential lover and husband, she helps him choose library books of great literature. Oddly though, they are heavy, depressing Russian novels, to improve his education.

She is greatly impressed that he goes to the library to improve his lot. At first she is suspicious of this, but then gives over to a real admiration of Frank's reading habits. When Frank is sure he has lost Helen, the main thing he desires to do for her, other than the great work he is doing supporting her and the family, is to pay for her college. She has dreamed of supporting him in college in the days before the rape, when she imagines that they can be married. She will work to put him through and then go herself. She gives up this idea when she rejects Frank after the rape.

However, Frank has devised this very dream for her! He is saving money for her to go to a community college. He will pay for her tuition and books. Even the relationship between the two contains intellectual elements, as Frank purchases a leather-bound volume of Shakespeare for Helen, as a gift, and Helen reads it and keeps it. The theme of a valuable liberal arts education might have been more pertinent during the early part of this century when the book takes place. Nowadays, ordinary people do not seem to evidence such a great passion for learning and for an education. The thematic material of education may be a powerful tool for changing one's attitude toward education.

Themes/Characters

Malamud was an acute observer of the human condition during his career as a writer. Suffering was for him an inescapable part of human existence. He felt that all humans are afflicted with suffering and, therefore, should view each other with deep compassion. Unfortunately, many of the more prosperous humans fail to do this.

Morris Bober's neighbor, Julius Karp, for example, exploits the poor of the area by making great profits in a liquor store. Of no concern to him is the fact that alcohol only increases the misery of the poor.

Morris Bober seems to be a compulsively moral man and his Lincolnesque honesty prevents him from cheating his customers and from adopting business practices that would come naturally to less scrupulous men. His charity to others, which taps his already meager earnings, prevents Bober from realizing the life he wants. His life is one that fails utterly in achieving the American Dream of wealth and prosperity. He deserts the Czarist army in Russia because Jews were only too aware of the relentless persecution they faced in the ranks of that army. Coming to America, he attends night school briefly, hoping to become a pharmacist. He never finishes his courses, but gets married instead and opens a grocery store in an impoverished neighborhood. Nothing goes right for him. He has a daughter, Helen, who desperately wishes to get an education and to better herself. She earns $25 a week as an office worker, all but five of which she gives to her father to keep the store operating. Her mother, Ida, helps Bober in the store and complains constantly about their miserable lives. She misses the old Jewish neighborhood where they formerly lived. Helen and Ida—like Bober—are prisoners of the store.

Bober becomes the victim of a holdup, although the robbers had originally targeted Karp, his wealthy neighbor. Bober is struck on the head by one of the holdup men, but before losing consciousness, the grocer again reviews the predicament that characterizes his life.

He had hoped for much in America, and got little. And because of him Helen and Ida had less. He had defrauded them. He and the bloodsucking store.

He fell without a cry. The end fitted the day. It was his luck. Others had better.

Rather than depict Bober as a religious man who follows the dictates of his faith, Malamud creates a character with an unshakable belief in the Jewish Law as he understands it and whose life and death become an allegory for goodness. His clerk, Frank Alpine, has noticed that he does not follow the dietary laws of strict Judaism.

Bober gives Frank his credo.

Nobody will tell me that I am not Jewish because I put in my mouth once in a while, when my tongue is dry, a piece of ham.

But they will tell me, and I will believe them, if I forget the Law. This means to do what is right, to be honest, to do good.

This means to other people. Our life is hard enough. Why should we hurt somebody else? For everybody should be the best, not only for you or me. We ain't animals. This is why we need the Law.

This is what a Jew believes.

The theme of Jewishness is dramatized throughout the book. Two other Jewish families live in the neighborhood, the Karps and the Pearls. Julius Karp has made money the main goal of his life. Ed Pearl has a candy store, but he makes more money by betting on horse races. Neither they nor their families have the abiding faith in the Torah exemplified by Bober.

Frank Alpine, the principal character of the novel that is named for him, has been a petty criminal. Together with Ward Minoque, he had robbed the store. Minoque is partly motivated by hatred of Jews, and at the offset Frank does not particularly like them, either. But Minoque's attack on the grocer repels Frank, and he hangs around the neighborhood waiting for a chance to atone for his crime. His capacity for guilt is proof that his character has a potential for change.

Raised in an orphanage on the West Coast, Frank had gradually drifted to the East. For a brief time, he had thought crime might be the way of life for him. He discovers later that he has no real talent for crime, or for much of anything else. During his first long conversation with Bober, he explains that his life has been a series of failures. He is only twenty-five, and the grocer thinks ". . .

I am sixty and he talks like me." Despite different backgrounds, they have an affinity. Frank maneuvers his way into Bober's confidence and into a job in the store. Ida Bober never loses her suspicion of him. Her daughter Helen at first pays no attention to the young drifter.

Helen, a lovely young woman, functions as a sort of love goddess. The sons of the other storekeepers are drawn to her and so is Frank. Nat Pearl, a law student who has graduated summa cum laude from Columbia University, has an affair with her that she terminates. She dates Ed Karp, but he is not ambitious enough to take her out of the neighborhood. Frank wins her trust and it seems that she loves him. She even plans to help him get an education. After preventing Ward Minoque from raping her, Frank, on a desperate impulse, rapes her himself.

His talent for bungling every real opportunity in his life has again left him with nothing but additional guilt. His redemption, however, forms the principal theme of the novel. He persists in his determination to help the Bobers, and he finally replaces Bober in the store, taking it over completely after the grocer's death. Bober, without ever intending to do so, becomes Frank's model, and by taking over Bober's hopeless poverty, Frank realizes his desire to become a human being, a mensch who succeeds in living

according to the dictates of his conscience. He supports the Bober family and helps Helen get the education she has always wanted.

Style

Points of View

This book is written in third person, and some of the narrative is straightforward third-person storytelling. However, much of the book contains shifting points of view. Morris Bober will see the grocery, the Polish lady, Frank Alpine, his wife, and his daughter as the third-person narrative slowly and gently evolves around his point of view. Another time, Frank will be explaining to himself why he is stealing and how he plans to make it up. The third-person narrative reflects the duality of the thrill of stealing and the delicious misery that comes with sinning. Another time, Helen will be thinking about her prospects in life. As she rides along in the streetcar, she longs for something, some indefinable thing that will bring her to a bright and fascinating future. She receives a phone call from Nat and rejects his invitations. She takes a long soapy shower after the rape and leaves early to avoid seeing her parents. Although the points of view constantly shift, even including the view of Julius Karp the liquor store owner as he notices Frank's dealings in the store (and even including the point of view of the fire-setter later in the book), the style continues unerringly in third person. The transitions are invisible and smooth.

Setting

This book takes place in a big city, Brooklyn, New York, although it is never specified. However, the placement of ethnic neighborhoods, the universal public transportation, and the description of public services such as parks and libraries suggest Brooklyn, especially the Jewish neighborhood transforming into a more diversified ethnic area. It is well known that Malamud's parents were immigrants who owned a grocery in Brooklyn, so Malamud probably drew on much of his own childhood memories to create the setting for this book. The time is in the 1930's or 1940's, during the Great Depression.

Everyone is out of a job. Things cost very little, but then there is little money to pay. Jobs are scarce and part of Frank's redemption is to realize that he cannot take money from people who are suffering themselves. The grocery store is the main setting in the book. It is dark, dismal, old-fashioned and slow-moving. Time seems to stand still in the grocery. Helen realizes that her parents are trapped there, especially her father. She does not want to be trapped in the store. One can almost smell the delicatessen smells and feel the worn wood under the feet in this grocery store. When Morris prepares to die, he entertains images that are outside the store and indeed outside the city. He remembers running in the wind in open fields in his childhood. These images are in direct contrast to the dingy grocery store in the crowded Brooklyn street. The upstairs housing in the store is the same: small, dingy and dismal, even though the renters seem to be happy in it.

Language and Meaning

Malalmud's style is slow, straightforward, declarative and deceptively simple. The story moves slowly, so much so that eager, action-hungry modern readers may think nothing will ever happen. The early chapters in this book are very long, while the last three chapters are much shorter. Even when big events happen, such as the rape of Helen or the death of Morris, Malamud relates these in a very cool, dispassionate way.

One the other hand, there are many Jewish tones to the book, especially in the dialogue. Ida speaks in unerringly immigrant Jewish vernacular, such as when Ida confronts Helen about Frank: "Why do I cry? I cry for the world. I cry for my life that it went away wasted. I cry for you. . . . .you have killed me in my heart." On the next page, page 177, she says, "Let him go and fine someplace a shikse that he likes, not a Jewish girl." Some Jewish terms such as goy, shikse, masher, and others appear in the book.

However, this book does not come across strictly as a Jewish book. Its themes and concerns are universal. The book addresses problems with sexuality in a very straightforward way that transcends religion. When Frank rapes Helen, the reader understands Helen's sense of violation right along with Frank's unmet sexual needs and frustrations, and the larger issues of needing to love this girl as a man loves a woman. Readers may find the lack of judgment on this act and other immoral acts as troubling; but it reinforces the thematic material that people can form and reform their lives without people judging them.

Structure

The very long chapters in the beginning of the book reflect the endless, unchanging grind of the days working in the grocery store: barely making ends meet, dealing with cold, early mornings, lack of money, inability to pay creditors, worry about competition and, more than anything, the unchanging boredom and entrapment of such a life. Even when Frank enters the picture, his appearance hardly makes a change at first, because the Bobers are so entrenched in the long grind of their everyday life. Morris finally registers Frank's appearance with some hopefulness, since the income has increased with Frank's help in the store. Morris holds onto this belief, even when Ida is against it; and there is not a shred of actual evidence to support it. Later, when Frank rapes Helen and Morris discovers that Frank is stealing from the cash register, the chapters shorten and the action moves faster.

It seems as though everything is still happening in slow motion without real attachment to reality. The novel seems to go forward in neutral, with Frank's bad actions continuing without much relief, until he is found out by everyone including, finally Ida. This is somewhat ironic because she has been the most suspicious of the young man, yet she is really the last one to hear of all his bad acts. When everything comes out, Frank is rejected and ousted from the Bobers' life, yet he continues to linger around the place. Even Morris' illnesses support the eventual redemption of Frank Alpine, since Morris cannot be in the store and Ida is gone tending him in the hospital.

Frank slips in and takes on the work without hope for compensation, although he still deeply longs for Helen's love. Finally Morris seems to bring on his own death, thus making room for Frank's final redemption. The book ends somewhat unresolved, but since Frank takes the definite step of converting to Judaism, the obstacle preventing his marriage to Helen is removed. However, Frank assimilates Morris' life in another way: he becomes entombed in the grocery at the end of the book, just as Morris was entombed. Evidently Helen will step into the role of her mother and give up her dreams. In one sense the structure of the book is hopeful and in another sense, dreadfully disheartening.

Quotes

"In a store you were entombed." Page 4

"She [Helen] walked on, lacking, wanting, not wanting, not happy." Page 15

"He [Morris] labored long hours, was the soul of honesty - he could not escape his honesty, it was bedrock; to cheat would cause an explosion in him, yet he trusted cheaters - coveted nobody's nothing and always got poorer." Page 18

"He fell without a cry. The end fitted the day. It was his luck, others had better." Page 30

"Her body was young, soft, lovely, the breasts like small birds in flight, her ass like a flower." Page 89

"For gifts you pay." Page 134

"This means to do what is right, to be honest, to be good. This means to other people. Our life is hard enough. Why should we hurt somebody else?. . . This is what a Jew believes." Page 150

"Even when I am bad I am good." Page 169

"'Yes, Morris Bober was to me a true Jew because he lived in the Jewish experience, which he remembered, and with the Jewish heart." Page 277

"'For what I worked so hard for? Where is my youth, where did it go?' The years had passed without profit or pity. Who could he blame? What fate didn't do to him he had done to himself. The right thing was to make the right choice but he made the wrong. Even when it was right it was wrong. To understand why, you needed an education but he had none. All he knew was he wanted better but had not after all these years learned how to get it." Page 249

"Was it more important to insist a man's religious beliefs be exactly hers (if it was a question of religion), or that the two of them have in common ideals, a desire to keep love in their lives, and to preserve in every possible way what was best in themselves?" Page 160

Adaptations

Most of Malamud's works focus on the problems of the Jews. A New Life, his third novel, also has a Jewish hero. The Fixer, partially based on history, is set in the final years of Czarist Russia when anti-Semitism was part of the government's policy. The leading character, Yakov Bok, is arrested and tortured for allegedly making a blood sacrifice of a Christian child. Despite this, during his two years of imprisonment, he becomes a wiser and stronger human being.

The reader might find Malamud's short stories equally interesting. Some critics have maintained that Malamud is a better short story writer than a novelist. The Magic Barrel, his first collection of stories, won the National Book Award in 1959. The title story blends realistic details with fantasy touches something like the "magic realism" made famous by Gabriel Garcia Marquez in his One Hundred Years of Solitude.

Topics for Discussion

1. Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment was one of the books that influenced Malamud when he wrote The Assistant.

Frank reads Crime and Punishment at the suggestion of Helen Bober but does not like the book much. Why?

2. Malamud has admitted that Charlie Chaplin's character the little tramp had an impact on this novel. Does Frank Alpine resemble the tramp? To what extent?

3. Critics have seen Helen Bober as a rather divided person, torn between the desire to realize the American Dream of a successful life and the idealism of her father. Do you see Helen this way?

4. St. Francis of Assisi is possibly the most attractive of medieval saints. He has a generosity of spirit lacking in some other great ascetics. To what extent does Morris Bober resemble him?

5. Ward Minoque is a petty criminal who has none of Frank Alpine's aspirations to become a better person. Is this the result of his father's brutality?

6. The seasons in The Assistant come and go during the two-year time span of the novel. What significance do they give to the lives in the story?

7. Morris Bober is human enough to envy the financial success of Julius Karp but also holds him in contempt. Why is he so conscience stricken when Karp's liquor store burns down?

8. The Bobers live in a neighborhood inhabited by other people who have migrated from Europe—Greeks, Poles, and Italians. Does the fact that Malamud places his Jewish families here rather than in a Jewish neighborhood give his novel a distinctive touch?

9. Mark Twain is considered a master in reproducing dialects in his works. Is Malamud equally skillful in capturing the speech patterns of his characters?

10. Anti-Semitism still lingers on despite all efforts to put an end to it. What is it in their character that causes people like Ward Minoque to become anti- Semites?

Essay Topics

Frank seems to be constantly sinning; yet at the end of the book he is redeemed and changed. Is it possible for people to change this radically in their lives? Explore Frank's process of redemption and cite other similar changes from literature and from observation in your life.

Helen rejects Frank because she feels vaguely uneasy. Is this because she knows something about him or is it because she imbibes her mother's Jewish prejudices? Discuss Helen's evolution toward loving Frank, including the inference at the end of the book that she will accept him.

Discuss the nature of sex as revealed in this novel.

Morris Bober appears as almost an archetypal sage in this novel. He discusses the nature of Judaism and religion generally as something far greater than simple observance. With examples from the novel, explore Morris' character as a philosopher and sage.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the Jewish culture and religion and write about your findings regarding the religious beliefs, rituals, diet, etc. of this culture.

2. Research the Great Depression of the 1930s. What was life like then? How did people get by? How was life in Brooklyn in particular during this time?

3. Many people immigrated into the United States from all over. How was life for them once they reached American soil? Why did they come to America? How did they get here?

4. What is the American Dream? Do you believe many people in America are living this dream? How do people reach that goal? What are some of the positive and negative consequences of reaching this goal?

5. How does Malamud maintain the mood of his novel from beginning to end? Do any of his other novels present such a bleak outlook for his characters?

6. Is Helen Bober a convincing character? Compare her to some of Malamud's other heroines.

7. The Assistant has been compared to Fyodor Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment. What is the basis of this comparison? To what extent are Frank Alpine and Rodion Raskolnikov similar?

8. Why didn't Malamud use a character like Nat Pearl as his hero? Does he in any of his novels present successful characters as his protagonists?

9. The Bobers and their neighbors are first or second generation immigrants. Malamud knows immigrants very well. Compare his presentation of people in a new world with those found in the works of other writers, for example Irving Howe's World of Our Fathers or Isaac Bashevis Singer's stories set in America.

10. The critic Alfred Kazin is also a product of Brooklyn, New York. Kazin's A Walk in the City presents scenes from his old home. Malamud's novel never specifically mentions Brooklyn, but Malamud spent his maturing years there. What do the fictional Bobers and the real life Kazins have in common?

11. Compare the more fanciful scenes in The Assistant—the ones involving St. Francis—and Malamud's use of such moments in his short stories, "The Magic Barrel," for example. Compare these with some of the paintings of Marc Chagall.

12. What is a fable? Critics have called The Assistant this type of story. Does the book have similarities to Aesop's tales, Samuel Johnson's Rasselas, and Voltaire's Candide? What do these works have in common?

13. Malamud has set his story in a neighborhood that is very close to being an urban slum. He does not, however, exclude nature from the story? What use does he make of it?

Further Study

Abramson, Edward A. Bernard Malamud Revisited. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993. This booklet evaluates Malamud's vision in relation to his work as a whole, which was impossible when Richman's book for Twayne's American Authors was published in 1966. The work contains a judicious critique of all of Malamud's works and a good bibliography.

Alter, Iska. "The Good Man's Dilemma:

Social Criticism in the Fiction of Bernard Malamud." In AMS Studies in Modern Literature, vol. 5. New York: AMS Press, 1981. Alter offers a convincing critique of American materialism in his analysis of The Assistant.

Chense, Alan, and Nicholas Delbanen. Talking Horses: Malamud on Life and Works.

New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. This book contains interviews with Malamud and essays written by him during his career. It also includes "A Note to My Norwegian Readers on The Assistant" and explains his method of writing.

Field, Leslie, and Joyce W. Field. Bernard Malamud and the Critics. New York: New York University Press, 1970. Critics write on themes in Malamud's works up to and including The Fixer. This book includes Ihab Nassan's article on The Assistant, "The Qualified Encounter." Hassan shows that Morris Bober and Frank Alpine are "heroes of irony," rather than tragic heroes.

Rajagopalachari, M. Theme of Compassion in the Novels of Bernard Malamud. New Delhi, India: Prestige Books, 1988. This study stresses Malamud's humanitarianism and his sympathy for those who suffer, an inescapable fate for all men.

Richman, Sidney. Bernard Malamud. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1966.

Richman admits that his book is tentative because Malamud was still a productive writer. The book traces Malamud's development as a writer through 1966.

Salzberg, Joel. Critical Essays on Bernard Malamud. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1987.

This book is a good source of reviews on all of Malamud's works. Eleven essays survey the entire range of Malamud's development as a writer.

Shechner, Mark. "Sad Music." Review of The Stories of Bernard Malamud. Partisan Review, vol. 51, 3 (1984): 451-58. This review of Malamud's stories analyzes the tone of ironic sadness in his novels and his short fiction.

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