The Stories of Bernard Malamud Short Guide

The Stories of Bernard Malamud by Bernard Malamud

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Characters

Many colorful and diverse characters people Malamud's stories, but he is best known for the kind of character who is typically a loser, such as Sam Tomashevsky in "The Cost of Living," or Rosen in "Take Pity." His losers evoke sympathy for their sad lot, not always of their own making, although cleverer persons might foresee the inevitable disasters facing them and do something to head them off.

Not all of the characters are Jewish: Mr. and Mrs. Panessa in "The Bill" have experiences similar to Sam and Sura Tomashevsky, and the unlucky women in "Life Is Better Than Death" and "The Maid's Shoes" are both Italian. Malamud's special talent seems to be in portraying older people, lonely bachelors or widowers, such as the would-be painter, Ephraim Elihu, in "The Model" or Dr. Simon Morris in "In Retirement." Their loneliness speaks to a universal human condition, and their attempt to break that loneliness is one of the battles, more often lost than won, that Malamud expertly describes.

Small children do not often appear in Malamud's stories or novels (he once said he was saving them for something to write about in his old age), and young adults, like Leo Finkle, the rabbinical student in "The Magic Barrel," usually appear somehow superannuated, a characteristic that the critic Robert Alter has noted. Since Malamud is mainly interested in the central problems inherent in the human predicament, it is little wonder that his characters are mature persons, most of whom have experienced a variety of afflictions, emotional or psychic, as well as physical. If suffering is a major theme in his fiction, his characters are well equipped for suffering. How much — or whether — they learn from their suffering is again one of Malamud's chief concerns.

Social Concerns

Throughout his fiction, Malamud has shown himself to be preeminently concerned with all kinds of relationships, but especially those that involve close personal relationships between men or between man and woman. Several of Malamud's earliest published stories reveal this concern. For example, in "Take Pity," the first story in the collected edition, Rosen, an excoffee salesman, shows extraordinary compassion for Axel Kalish, a Polish refugee, and his family, who try unsuccessfully to eke out a living from a little grocery store in a poor neighborhood. When Axel dies, Rosen tries to help his widow, Eva, and her two little girls, but Eva's stubborn pride resists all attempts, driving Rosen finally to suicide. In a later story, "Man in a Drawer," the Russian-Jewish writer, sometime taxicab driver, Felix Levitansky, is not driven to such lengths to enlist the assistance of an AmericanJewish visitor, Howard Harvitz, in smuggling his stories out of the Soviet Union. But it is an uphill battle all the way, during which Harvitz reluctantly sees his responsibility — despite considerable risks (which he may or may not exaggerate) — in helping Levitansky. In the process, he also comes to the realization that his own humanity depends upon honoring Levitansky's.

"If I am drowning you must assist to save me," the writer insists.

Drowning men and women are all over Malamud's fiction, and in one way or another, people come to their aid or, when they do not, suffer the consequences. In "The Jewbird," Cohen is utterly opposed to sheltering and feeding the strange talking bird that flies into his home one evening while he and his family are at dinner. Even after Schwartz (the bird's name) helps Cohen's son achieve better marks in school, Cohen is scarcely appeased, and one night, determined to get rid of him, succeeds not only in throwing him out, but in wringing his neck. At the end, when his son Maurie discovers the bird's remains, he is heartbroken.

In "The Last Mohican," Fidelman, the art historian, refuses to assume responsibility for Susskind, the refugee who accosts him in Rome, where he has come to do research on Giotto. Susskind, nevertheless, persists in his own way, assuming responsibility for Fidelman's education both as an art historian and as a human being. Only at the last moment, when it may be too late, does Fidelman gain insight into what is happening.

Sometimes one's best efforts fail, as the young college-student-turned-tutor, Martin Goldberg, discovers as he tries to help the eminent critic Oskar Gassner learn English and, in so doing, recover confidence in himself. At other times, one may succeed, at least conditionally. Feld, the shoemaker, is at first unable to get his assistant Sobel to return to work. Sobel has left in a huff when he finds that Feld has been trying to make a match between his daughter and Max, the college boy. For five years Sobel has worked faithfully and hard for Feld, at the same time lending his books — all classics — to Feld's daughter, Miriam. Feld has been either unaware or uncaring of Sobel's devotion, but at the end he comes around, agreeing to allow Sobel to continue lending Miriam books on the condition that he not otherwise speak to her for another two years, when she turns twenty-one.

Man's inhumanity to man is sharply revealed in "The Mourners" when Kessler, the retired egg chandler, is evicted from his humble tenement home by Gruber, the landlord. Kessler's own behavior to his wife and children years earlier may make him deserving of this treatment, but, nevertheless, the sight of the old man sitting out on the street in the falling snow excites pity in almost everyone, including those who had previously shunned him. Although Emilio, the tailor, and Josip, the presser, in "The Death of Me" hold Marcus, their employer, in great respect and affection, they are unable to bring a lasting truce to their bitter enmity, which at last breaks into outright violence. The difficulty of communicating between individuals, even fathers and their children, may be a cause of much unnecessary cruelty, as "My Son the Murderer" and "God's Wrath" show, and "The Letter" also suggests. Whatever the cause, Malamud's stories seem to imply all men are brothers and, as such, must take responsibility for each other, even when they are of different races, as in "Angel Levine" or "Black Is My Favorite Color" — however insurmountable the obstacles may seem.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

Malamud's blend of realism and fantasy is an outstanding feature of many of his most effective stories, as in "The Jewbird" or "Angel Levine." In "Idiots First" he contrives to present death in the guise of one Ginzburg, who repeatedly turns up as Mendel frantically tries to raise the necessary money to send his son to an uncle in California. Here, as in his use of symbolic representation, he appears to follow in the tradition of I. L. Peretz, Sholem Aleichem, and I. B. Singer. In "Take Pity," for example, it only gradually emerges that the scene is not a room in a mental institution where Rosen is confined for attempted suicide, but the next world, and Davidov, the census-taker, is the recording angel. In "The Loan," the charred loaves that Lieb forgets during his talk with Kobotsky become "charred corpses," whether of the friendship the men once enjoyed, or of their Jewish dead, or of both — and more — hardly matters.

Malamud also owes a debt to nonJewish writers, such as Chekhov, Sherwood Anderson, and even Hemingway, whose crisp, tight style his own frequently recalls, however different both cadence and tone may strike the reader. Malamud also has suggested that Shakespeare has been an influence — he thought of becoming a playwright early on, and his fiction has close affinities with drama. Like a dramatist and like Hemingway, Malamud in his early stories severely limits commentary, except where he employs a first-person narrator, as in "Black Is My Favorite Color." But even in that story, which is essentially a monologue, bits of dialogue heighten the dramatic tension that is there from the first, as Nat Lime's maid takes her lunch into the bathroom to eat rather than sit at the kitchen table with him.

Malamud has a fine ear for dialect, especially the dialect of the New York Jews — immigrants or the children of immigrants — that he knew from his own upbringing. In his later stories, he tends to abandon his use of dialect in favor of the more sophisticated diction of the educated men and women he writes about, such as Dr. Morris or Arkin. (Similarly, I. B. Singer in his later stories less frequently invokes the accents and rhythms of Yiddish-speaking characters from the Polish Pale, as he writes more and more about contemporary Americans or Europeans.)

But in all of Malamud's stories the voices ring true, regardless of the social status or ethnic origin of his characters. Preeminent also among his techniques is the use of irony, as at the conclusion of "Take Pity" or "The Last Mohican," an irony that often forces the reader to recognize the harsh realities of existence, as in "Life Is Better Than Death."

Themes

Other themes are, of course, embedded in Malamud's short fiction, such as the nature and quality of love, political oppression, financial acquisitiveness, art, and literature. In "Idiots First," Malamud depicts filial love — a father's devotion to his mentally retarded son — in a moving and compassionate way that strongly contrasts with the more tortured portraits of failed filiality in "My Son the Murderer" or "God's Wrath." Sobel's love for Miriam in "The First Seven Years" invokes reminiscence of Jacob's love for Rachel in the Bible, and Nat Lime's love for Ornita Harris in "Black Is My Favorite Color" is as sincere as it proves hopeless. In "The Loan," the fractured friendship of Lieb and Kobotsky is mended, however briefly, when Kobotsky, swallowing pride, returns to ask Lieb to lend him money to provide a tombstone for his wife, who has been dead five years. Albert Gans in "The Silver Crown" is willing to go to almost any lengths to help his critically ill father, but at the end his innate skepticism and suspiciousness get the better of him, and Gans senior dies.

This failure of faith, important in Malamud's longer fiction, is also the subject of "Man in the Drawer," where faith in oneself is opposed to another's skepticism. Eventually, faith in this story wins out, although it does not in "Rembrandt's Hat." Both stories have something to say about art and literature, particularly the importance of the imagination. Levitansky, the writer in a drawer, remains unpublished and unaccepted by the Writers Union but will not yield to socialist realism, insisting that "imagination makes authority." Here one may detect something of Malamud's own credo: "When I write about Jews," Levitansky explains to Harvitz, "comes out stories, so I write about Jews. It is not important that I am half-Jew. What is important is observation, feeling, also art." In "Rembrandt's Hat" estrangement between Rubin the sculptor and Arkin the art historian is directly the result of Arkin's remark about Rubin's hat, intended as an encouraging compliment but which has the opposite effect, forcing Rubin to recognize his essential mediocrity and to question his reason for going on in art.

In "The Cost of Living" and "The Bill," as well as in "The Mourners," the conflict between human greed and human compassion becomes clearly defined, and in a crass commercial world, greed usually wins, especially if at least one of the antagonists is an impersonal entity (like a supermarket chain) rather than an individual. Even in "The Loan," where the issues are less clear-cut and the need is manifest on both sides, hardheaded sense triumphs.

Adaptations

Two of Malamud's stories, Angel Levine and The Silver Crown, and one of his novels, The Natural (1952), have been made into films. Chiz Schulz produced Angel Levine for United Artists, and Jan Kader directed the 1970 film. The cast included Zero Mostel as the old tailor, Morris; Harry Belafonte as Alexander Levine; Ida Kaminska as Fanny; Milo O'Shea as Dr. Arnold Berg; Eli Wallach as the store clerk; and Anne Jackson as the lady in the store.

Critics compared the film to Frank Capra's 1946 film, It's a Wonderful Life, starring James Stewart and Donna Reed, but thought it was hardly in the same class.

Produced by Paul Sheptow for the Center for Advanced Film Studies of the American Film Institute, The Silver Crown was written and directed by Jonathan Siegel, with Lorry Goldman playing Albert Gans, Zvee Scooler Rabbi Lifschitz, and Linda Pacino his daughter. Although the setting is changed from the Bronx to Los Angeles and several new scenes are interpolated, like those in the elder Gans's hospital room, the film generally follows the story closely, and much of the original dialogue is retained. It has been shown on cable television on the Arts and Entertainment network.

The Natural was made into a motion picture in 1984. Directed by Barry Levinson, it starred Robert Redford, Robert Duvall, Glenn Close, and Kim Basinger; the musical score was composed by Randy Newman.

Related Titles

"The Cost of Living" and "The Loan" are early studies for characters and situations Malamud later developed in his novel, The Assistant (1957), the story of a poor grocery owner and his family. While he was writing "The Last Mohican," Malamud already had the idea for the series of stories that became Pictures of Fidelman (1969), which some critics have described as actually a picaresque novel. Sobel's devotion to Miriam in "The First Seven Years" looks forward to Frank Alpine's love for Morris Bober's daughter in The Assistant, although Frank is not Jewish and his relationship with Helen is more difficult and complicated. Most of Malamud's novels, however, represent fresh beginnings — new challenges rather distantly removed from the subjects or settings of the stories, their central humanist concerns notwithstanding.

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Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

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Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994