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AN INTERJECTION BETWEEN HUMANISTIC APPROACH AND USE OF ARCHETYPES  
AND MYTHS IN MALAMUD'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

The saga of human suffering and struggle in Malamud is beautifully presented through myths and archetypes, surrealism and realism, symbolism and allegories, irony and humour, and various techniques in which the language itself presents a kind of distinction. The journey of the hero from a *schlemiel* to *mensch*, in Malamud, passes through a variety of techniques mainly consisting of naturalism to a kind of expressionism. Of course, one cannot forget the use of the Yiddish storytelling technique and its merger with medieval symbols and modern American sensibilities. Various techniques have been intertwined so magnificently that the characters can feel through them and see themselves. An intermingling of a humanistic approach with myths and archetypes has impacted the themes, characters, and overall artistic achievement of Malamud's works. Effective use of humour and irony, too, has added to the depth of characterisation and thematic strength, though some of Malamud's approaches and techniques have not gone well with a few critics.

**Keywords:** Humanism, myths, archetypes, symbols, techniques

Introduction

Bernard Malamud, a prominent American writer of the 20th century, crafted novels that resonate with profound human experiences, incorporating elements of myths and archetypes to enrich his storytelling. Through the lens of universal symbols and patterns, Malamud explored the complexities of human nature, redemption, and the struggle between good and evil. Malamud embraces humanism, a philosophical stance that places the individual and their experiences at the centre of moral, ethical, and literary considerations. Here, an effort is being made to delve into the intriguing incorporation of myths and archetypes in some of Malamud's notable novels, illustrating how these literary devices contribute to the enduring appeal and thematic depth of his works.

Malamud's novels often draw inspiration from ancient myths, infusing them with contemporary relevance. Mythical motifs and archetypal figures resonate with readers due to their universal nature, transcending time and culture. Malamud skillfully incorporates these elements to explore fundamental human experiences and dilemmas. Myths and archetypes are enduring motifs that transcend cultural and temporal boundaries. Myths are traditional stories rooted in a particular culture, often explaining the origins of the world,

human existence, and various natural phenomena. Archetypes, on the other hand, are universal symbols and characters present in the collective unconscious of humanity. Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist, extensively explored archetypes and their significance in literature, art, and dreams. These fundamental symbols and patterns tap into our shared experiences, emotions, and fears, making them powerful tools for writers to communicate profound themes.

One of Malamud's notable works, *The Natural*, encompasses mythical elements through its protagonist Roy Hobbs, whose life trajectory mirrors the hero's journey. Hobbs is an extraordinary baseball talent, blessed with remarkable abilities. However, his tragic flaw lies in his pursuit of fame and personal glory, leading to moral dilemmas and self-sabotage. Roy embodies the archetypal figure of the "tragic hero" from Greek mythology, facing obstacles, temptations, and ultimately redemption. Through this archetype, Malamud examines themes of ambition, sacrifice, and the corrupting influence of fame and fortune.

Malamud also introduces the femme fatale archetype through the character of Memo Paris, who tempts Hobbs towards the path of destruction. Memo embodies the seductive and destructive female figure found in numerous myths and legends. Through such archetypal characters, Malamud weaves a tale of moral growth, redemption, and the triumph of the human spirit over adversity. In the novel, the mythic elements evoke themes of fate, temptation, and the corruption of innocence. The character of Roy Hobbs, entangled in a web of moral choices, symbolises the human longing for success and the price one must pay for it.

Another example of mythic elements in Malamud's novels can be found in *The Assistant*. The character of Frank Alpine represents the archetype of the "wounded healer," a figure who has suffered and seeks redemption through healing others. Frank's journey is reminiscent of ancient tales where individuals rise above their own flaws and help others find solace and redemption. Frank's transformation from a troubled young man to a responsible and caring individual represents the journey of redemption and self-discovery, often found in classic myths and hero's tales. The novel beautifully illustrates the human capacity for change and growth, offering a glimmer of hope in the face of adversity.

The other prominent character in the novel, Morris Bober, is a Jewish immigrant facing economic hardships and ethical dilemmas. Bober's humble existence reflects the universal struggle of ordinary individuals to find meaning and dignity in their lives. Bober represents the archetype of the "everyman." An impoverished store owner, he struggles against adversity while maintaining his integrity and humanity. The Everyman archetype symbolises the struggles, hopes, and aspirations of ordinary individuals, resonating with readers on a personal level. This archetype reverberates deeply with readers, as it mirrors the struggles and aspirations of many people throughout history.

The inspiration for archetypal myths is there behind the motifs and methods of Malamud's fictional rudiments. The protagonist of *The Natural*, Roy Hobbs comes to Chicago city by train to become the best in baseball. Levin of *New Life* reaches the Cascadia College in West to be a man of principles and Yakov Bok of *The Fixer* reaches the city of Kiev in the pre-Czarist Russia to become better. This archetypal journey is for the unseen untrodden horizon which lies ahead of them.

One of the very distinguished elements used by Malamud as a mythic tool is the search for their father, at times real and at times spiritual. The search for a father has always been a great theme in Greek as well as Jewish writings.

Sidney Richman, a Malamud critic points towards the role of the mother in the assimilative task. He comments, "Where once in Jewish American literature the mother was celebrated for her support of the assimilative task, Malamud's characters must regain the way of the father, the carrier of ancient traditions." (Richman, p.22)

Most of his (anti-)heroes or using the more Jewish term *schlemiels*, are still young and either they had been orphans or even if they had fathers in the background, they did not have any formative influence on them. Thus, they have not got any proper guidance, therefore, the characters like Frank Alpine (*The Assistant*), S. Levin

(of *The New Life*), and Yakov Bok (*The Fixer*) look for someone, consciously or unconsciously, as a real or substitute father.

Frank Alpine is guided and influenced by Morris and then eventually turns himself into a Morris. A close relationship develops between Frank and Morris, although both of them refuse to accept it but which ultimately leads to the 'son' taking the place of the father. Morris keeps mourning his long-dead son, Ephraim and unknowingly accepts Frank as his surrogate son. When Frank tells him the story of his life and wants to know his elderly advice, Morris comments to himself, "Poor boy...I am sixty and he talks like me" (TA p.37).

Initially Frank hates Morris' suffering but later on, when he is acquainted with the tragic side of the sufferings of Morris, Frank understands that one has to suffer for others and people must make a relationship of trust even in the face of hardships. This understanding of the other helps Frank to turn from the assistant of a shopkeeper to the son of a father. He takes over the store completely and sends Helen to a day college, he is, in fact, keeping Ida and Helen alive. Thus, one father dies but the son takes the role of father, i.e., Frank becomes a symbolic father. Helen also realises the complete change in him, "It came to her that he had changed...there could be an end to the bad and a beginning of the good" (TA p.243).

Frank is reborn not just as a father but as a new lover. Now for him, his love is not an extension of his ego but the other person whose responsibility he has to take. Love for him has become just the giving part, where there is no expectation of returns. It is, of course, the transition from romantic egotistic love to nutritive love.

Myth and archetypes in Malamud's novels contribute to the exploration of essential themes and add layers of symbolism. They provide a framework through which readers can interpret the narrative and derive deeper meanings. Malamud skillfully crafts characters that embody archetypes, making them relatable and resonant with readers. These archetypes serve as vessels through which Malamud explores universal human experiences and emotions. In *The Fixer*, the protagonist Yakov Bok embodies the archetype of the "scapegoat." As a Jewish handyman wrongly accused of a crime, Yakov becomes the sacrificial figure upon which society projects its fears and prejudices. Through the archetype, themes of injustice, persecution, and the burden of collective guilt are highlighted. Malamud portrays the oppressive and dehumanising nature of the authorities, embodying the tyrant archetype present in many cultural myths and legends. Yakov's resilience and endurance in the face of extreme hardship reveal the indomitable spirit of the human underdog. The scapegoat archetype underscores themes of anti-Semitism, religious persecution, and the struggle for identity. The novel explores the consequences of a society's intolerance and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of injustice.

Malamud's novels often portray characters who grapple with profound personal challenges, reflecting the humanist belief that individual experiences are crucial for understanding the human condition. Yakov endures an unjust imprisonment, becoming a symbol of human suffering and persecution. Malamud delves into the depths of Yakov's thoughts and emotions, allowing readers to empathise with his pain, fear, and hope for justice. Through Yakov's experiences, Malamud sheds light on the broader issue of oppression and the resilience of the human spirit. Yakov's ordeal and his search for justice provide a chance for the author to examine the profound ethical questions surrounding prejudice, injustice, and the struggle for identity. Malamud's portrayal of Yakov's unwavering determination to maintain his humanity in the face of adversity underscores the humanistic values of empathy and compassion.

Yakov was an orphan who was unconsciously seeking a father. Then Yakov himself yearned to be a father. He is cold to his wife because she could not fulfill his yearning. Then in his life, one possible father figure is of the Tzar, the father of people. Yakov talks to him in his dreams but Yakov rejects him later on as he is a supporter of oppression and injustice.

Yakov also keeps listening to the problems of a guard, Kogin with his son. Slowly he develops a kind of sympathy for this man. The same kind of softening can be seen in the case of his own ex-father-in-law against whom he had bitterness initially as he believed that in spite of being faithful to God, he could not condition a faithful daughter. Later on in his anguish when in a dream he finds him dead, Yakov cries out: Live, Shmuel... live. Let me die for you...if I must suffer let it be for something. Let it be for Shmuel." (TF pp.272-73)

Moreover, it is in the acceptance of a life of suffering so that others could live without suffering, Yakov takes upon himself the role of a protecting father. Yakov accepts the community as his family and in a way follows the Judaic history of patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Even Roy Hobbs, the hero of *The Natural*, with his 'knighthood' in search of the Holy Grail (victory at the baseball field), tries to find a father figure in Pop Fisher (sounds like King Fisher of Arthurian legends), the club manager.

Levin (*TNL*), towards the end, is too happy to take the responsibilities of a father when he carries with him a wife and children, adopted as well as biological even at the cost of his long-cherished dream of a teaching job in a college.

A central theme that permeates Malamud's works is humanism, which emphasises the inherent worth, dignity, and potential of every individual. Malamud's novels, highlight how his literary portrayals of characters, themes, and ethical dilemmas reflect a profound understanding and appreciation for humanity. Humanism emphasises the importance of ethical decision-making and the examination of moral dilemmas. Malamud's novels are replete with characters facing complex choices that reflect the nuances of human behaviour. Malamud's novels consistently champion the value of the individual and the unique experiences that shape their lives. By placing his characters at the forefront, Malamud emphasises their struggles, dreams, and aspirations, giving voice to their hopes and fears.

In *The Natural*, Roy Hobbs grapples with temptations and moral ambiguities on his journey to baseball stardom. The novel explores the consequences of ambition, the corrupting influence of fame, and the clash between personal desires and societal expectations. By presenting these dilemmas, Malamud urges readers to ponder the complexities of human motivations and the consequences of our choices. Malamud showcases Roy's fallibility and his struggle to reconcile his desires with the principles that define him. Through Roy's journey of self-discovery and redemption, the novel illustrates Malamud's belief in the potential for personal growth and transformation.

A core aspect of humanism is the capacity for compassion and empathy, and Malamud's novels exemplify these qualities. Through his characters, he portrays the struggles and vulnerabilities that unite humanity. In *The Assistant*, the relationship between Morris Bober and Frank Alpine, the young man who attempts to redeem himself, showcases the transformative power of empathy. As Frank learns from Morris's wisdom and kindness, he becomes more attuned to the suffering of others, reinforcing the humanist belief in the potential for growth and understanding through compassion.

Humanism recognises the limitless potential for growth, creativity, and goodness within individuals. Malamud's novels celebrate this potential and the redemptive power of human connections. In *The Natural*, despite the tragic consequences of Roy Hobbs' actions, Malamud leaves room for hope and redemption. Through Iris Lemon, Roy finds a glimpse of salvation and a chance to reconcile with his past mistakes. The novel highlights the capacity for growth and transformation even in the face of adversity.

Through the struggles, ethical dilemmas, and redemptive arcs of his characters, Malamud embraces the essence of human nature with empathy and compassion. His exploration of the human condition encourages readers to reflect on their own experiences and confront their moral complexities. By celebrating human potential, emphasising empathy, and portraying the strength to endure and overcome adversity, Malamud's works inspire us to connect with the shared humanity that unites us all.

Although a serious writer, Malamud uses humour and irony to underscore the preposterous, to highlight grief, and to instruct readers. Irony is one of the dexterous tools used by Malamud to express his humanistic views. Irony, in the simplest form, occurs when the implied attitude of the author is different from the literal attitude expressed. The Jewish irony highlights the complexity and uncertainties of life, which in other words, is the existential painfulness of life present in the works of existentialists. Malamud's presentation of irony comes within the humanistic outline where the brutal and dehumanising is in contrast with the civilised and human. Jewish irony arises from the social situations in the overall Christian culture where East European Jews are

fighting the very fundamental battle of survival. These are the chosen people of God, in a way, spiritually very high but at the same time, aware of their social position in society.

Therefore, Jewish irony is used to bridge the gap between spiritual aspirations and material situations. With the rise in skepticism, and the faith in religion decreasing, the gap between hope and reality has become more ironic. Malamud uses such folk traditions of the *schlemiel*, the ineffective but good-hearted unfortunate person who makes us laugh/ cry at his lot. Thus, the use of Jewish irony makes us understand Malamud, the humanitarian, and Malamud, the artist both.

To deal with his peculiar characters– his schlemiels, Malamud required a particular type of language and narrative:

“Malamud has found a sweetly humorous dialect for the insularity of his characters...Malamud has found a narrative language whose tone derives from the characters’ unawareness of any world but of their own. Turning the tables on those who fear that the son of Yiddish-speaking immigrants might not be ‘proper’ in his English, Malamud adopted a style essentially make-believe and fanciful, a style so patently invented by Malamud.” (Alfred Kazin, p.140)

In *The Fixer* Yakov’s life is full of ironies. He is a non-believer of God, rather he retorts at God for being unjust to Job, the suffering archetype of the Bible but how ironic the situations become that Yakov is charged with the murder of a Christian boy for some fanatic Judaist purposes. Moreover, he understands the meaning of freedom only after being imprisoned in inhuman conditions for two and a half years. After reading the New Testament, Yakov cannot believe why the followers of Christ can keep other innocent people in jail. Later he himself is also chained to the wall with arms outstretched like Christ on a cross.

Even in the last novel, *God’s Grace* Malamud has created a beautiful and extraordinary fable of a post-holocaust scenario in a funny as well as somber way as retorted by Alan Lelchuk, “*God’s Grace* is the most upfront fable he has yet written, complete with a defensive Yahweh, an ironic Moses, Jesus, talking chimps and perverse gorillas, Biblical rites of sacrifice, plus, of course, the pointed moral wisdom- this time full of a dark prophecy.” (Alan Lelchuk)

Some critics feel queasy about Malamud’s obsession with Yiddish imagery. Marigold Johnson considers it as Malamud’s placate with Jewish culture which makes him write about them:

“There are more Jews in New York than in all Israel; over 50% of book-buyers in America are Jewish. Such statistics are relevant to Malamud- not necessarily as a factor in his winning both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer, but because they mean he can take a lot for granted. He can write in the knowledge of a shared cultural idiom, play about with Yiddish shorthand imagery- above all, he knows he can tap that inexhaustible pre-occupation with the conflicts and anxieties of being Jewish, and still speak with the voice of the assimilated man who has chosen to be an outsider.”

Although Malamud has used the Yiddish story-telling technique yet he has not written about Hitler’s ovens or the Hiroshima-Nagasaki burnings. Except for *The Fixer*, Malamud’s novels, to a certain extent, are distanced historically from the Nazi period. The parables of Jewish life don’t fit into the Holocaust experience. The allusive tales do not directly deal with anything ‘directly’ called Jewish. His characters do not even seem to be the survivors of the holocaust or the remnants of the dream figures.

Even the use of irony as a tool for suffering has not gone well with many critics. They believe that although Malamud has been termed as a master of tragic vision yet it is this particular point which fails him as observed by Earl H. Rovit, “At the crucial point of his dramas, when his characters are most acutely aware of their impotence before the inevitable and are aware of themselves being aware, his tragic vision fails him and he retreats into his ‘Jewish irony’– a defensive humor which deflates the portentous momentum of his art.”

Thus, Bernard Malamud's novels masterfully incorporate myths and archetypes, providing a multi-dimensional depth to his characters and themes. By drawing on these timeless symbols and patterns, Malamud's works resonate with readers across generations, transcending cultural boundaries and appealing to the

fundamental aspects of human nature. His exploration of the hero's journey, the wounded healer, the scapegoat, and the everyman archetype illuminates the human experience and provides profound insights into the complexities of life. The interplay of myths and archetypes and the depth of human emotions makes Malamud's works interesting and profound.

Malamud's novels embody the spirit of humanism, illuminating the multifaceted nature of human beings and celebrating their inherent worth, resilience, and capacity for compassion. Through his vivid portrayals of characters, exploration of ethical dilemmas, and recognition of the human potential for growth and redemption, Malamud creates a rich tapestry that captures the complexity and beauty of the human experience. His works serve as a reminder of the importance of empathy, personal integrity, and the belief in the transformative power of individuals. Bernard Malamud's humanistic approach continues to resonate with readers, inspiring them to reflect on their own lives and the shared humanity that connects us all. Through the exploration of heroism, redemption, struggle, and the triumph of the human spirit, Malamud's novels continue to be a significant contribution to the rich tapestry of world literature.

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