AN ANALYSIS OF THE SHORT STORIES
OF BERNARD MALAMUD

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The surname of author Bernard Malamud is a corrupted version of the Hebrew word "melamed," which means "one who teaches." If a fictional character were to bear such a name, the reader might justifiably be alert for any literal and symbolic manifestations of the idea suggested by such a clue. Curiously enough, this is one case where life imitates art, for Malamud has indeed been and is now a teacher, first at Oregon State College and presently at Bennington College. Moreover, the name is appropriate in a less direct fashion, for Malamud, whose writing is never pedantic or "educational" in the commonplace sense of the word, has yet undertaken to transmit to his readers his own compassionate understanding of mankind and to imbue his works with his own exalted vision of the potentialities of the human spirit.

And nowhere is Malamud's all-embracing engagement with life, an appraisal that accepts mankind with all of its warts showing, more penetrating and more inspiring

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than in his short stories. Malamud's tales first began to appear in the early 1950's, in such periodicals as Partisan Review, The New Yorker, American Mercury, Commentary, and others. Not until 1958, however, was the first collection published, and readers who had responded to the banked fires of his first two novels, The Natural (1952) and The Assistant (1957), gave an enthusiastic welcome to The Magic Barrel. Winner of the National Book Award, this collection was followed in 1963 by another entitled Idiots First. Malamud's success with the short story form, like his mastery of the novel, results from the use of his delightfully unique style to provide an effective communication of the themes with which he has chosen to deal.

These themes, as employed in the short stories, will be the chief concern of this present study, for they constitute the key to full understanding and appreciation of Malamud's work. The three major thematic bases upon which the author's short stories are constructed are alienation, the quest for identity, and the sanctity of human life. Alienation refers to the concept of dislocation in the modern world, the sense that each man

\[1\text{Ibid.}\]
stands alone, irrevocably separated from his fellows. The second motif, the quest for identity, describes the search for personal meaning, for comprehension of what lies at the core of one's very being. The final motif to be discussed is the sanctity of human life, for Malamud treats with reverence the condition of being alive, no matter what the circumstances. Expression of these themes as facilitated by the use of fantasy will also be evaluated, as will the connection between the short stories and the body of Malamud's work. An examination of the author's use of the three previously named motifs in the short stories compiled in The Magic Barrel and Idiots First provides new insight into his vision of the world and of mankind's place within it. The two collections will be used interchangeably, and in order to concentrate upon thematic content, the inspection of each story will be limited to a single dominant motif.
CHAPTER II

THE SENSE OF ALIENATION

One of the most striking features of Malamud's stories is the element of alienation. The sense of tragic aloneness, of being cut off from the main current, is all-pervasive. Malamud deplores the mode of living in which each person is enclosed in a spiritual vacuum, estranged from those around him. This is not to imply, however, that Malamud advocates any state of communistic togetherness; his work contains a masterful affirmation of the personal worth of the individual. Yet he recognizes that this very individuality, a fundamental condition of existence, can function as a divisive force. As Arthur Miller writes in *Incident at Vichy*, "Part of knowing who we are is knowing we are not someone else."\(^1\) Even so, Malamud persists in his search for a connecting link between separate individuals. Concerning himself with those who dwell in solitary confinement, either symbolic or literal, Malamud never relinquishes his hope that man will strive to establish a relationship with his

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fellow human beings, a relationship engendered by the recognition of common humanity.

It is intriguing to note that Malamud often weaves a double thread of alienation into his stories. Many of his characters are Jews, a fact which immediately establishes their separateness from the majority; moreover, these Jews are in most cases divorced even from the Jewish community itself. Such is the situation in "The Jewbird," "The Mourners," and "Black is My Favorite Color," all of which deal with Jews who are estranged from the Jewish milieu. "The Lady of the Lake" adds a special twist to this idea for the floorwalker Levin assumes the name of Freeman (ironic pun!) in the hope of disassociating himself from his Jewish past, only to discover that in resolutely denying his background he has forfeited his beloved. The Italian tales are predicated on a different kind of estrangement, the isolation being that of a traveler in an alien land. As in "Behold the Key," "Still Life," and "The Last Mohican," the foreigner is cut off irrevocably from full acceptance in a land he has grown to love.

An intensive analysis of the nature of alienation and its effect on man is found in "Behold the Key," which depicts the struggle of an American scholar to find
lodgings in Rome. Carl's unsuccessful search for a home unsettles him and creates doubts about his cherished Italians. "They were aloof, evasive, indifferent to his plight. He couldn't communicate with them in their own language, whatever it was. He couldn't get them to say what was what, to awaken their hearts to his needs."¹ He begins to be "unpleasantly lonely,"² a feeling that returns to stab him when he sees a woman feeding a group of cats in the rain--the felines obviously belong.³ He assures the part-time rental agent Bevilacqua that he wishes the best to all Italians and prays them "to let me live among them for a while."⁴ Thus begins a farcical quest which meets with failure at every turn. And when finally a desirable apartment is located, the frantic Carl is once more doomed to frustration. Here Malamud portrays the lack of communication in a literal way, turning metaphors into exact descriptions of what ensues. For Carl is unable to "get hold" of the apartment's owner, he can't "get in touch" with the possessor of the key, the people he needs just "can't be reached"--

² Ibid., p. 54.
³ Ibid., p. 66.
⁴ Ibid.
communication becomes actually as well as symbolically blocked. 1 Carl seems to realize this when his wife declares her intention of calling the Contessa to explain their troubles and ask for mercy. He flatly states, "You'll get involved and you'll get nowhere," meaning that she will get nowhere because she will be unable to become involved. 2

Longing to bridge the gap and establish a place for himself in this alien land, Carl listens in anguish to Bevilacqua's summary of each man's isolation: "He lives for my death. I for his. This is our condition." 3 Shattered, the American tries desperately to refute what he does not want to believe: "You lie. I love this country." 4 But it is no use. A disgruntled former tenant ruins the apartment and flings the key (to the home which is now forever lost to the foreigner) so that the little piece of hard metal strikes Carl on the forehead, "leaving a mark he could not rub out." 5 This obvious reference to Cain completes the image of the wanderer eternally doomed to exile among indifferent strangers.

1 Ibid., pp. 69-75. 2 Ibid., p. 70.
3 Ibid., p. 77. 4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
Even on home territory, in this case Brooklyn, Malamud's characters are never really at home. The first line of "The Mourners" contains an ironic pun. "Kessler, formerly an egg candler, lived alone on social security."\(^1\) Social security, indeed! Reinforcing this flat declaration of solitariness, Malamud stresses in the opening paragraphs that Kessler has severed all ties with his family and is now "much alone, as he had been most of his life," and that even in the tenement where he has lived for ten years, "he was more or less unknown."\(^2\) The other tenants "never said hello to him, nor did he greet any of them."\(^3\) At the end of the tale, the truly dispossessed old man has, in mourning for the vacuum which has been his life, conveyed a precious lesson to the landlord who has similarly withdrawn himself from human relationships. So perhaps Kessler has partially redeemed himself; there may be value even in the communication of one's deepest misery.

Nate Lime, the yearning liquor-store owner of "Black is My Favorite Color," lives and works in Harlem, in daily contact with a people who have effectively shut

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 19.

\(^2\)Ibid.

\(^3\)Ibid.
him out. "If there's a ghetto I'm the one that's in it," he mourns. ¹ His whole life has been a series of unsuccessful attempts to make contact. "If they knew what was in my heart toward them, but how can you tell that to anybody nowadays? I've tried more than once but the language of the heart either is a dead language or else nobody understands it the way you speak it."²

The name Lime suggests the preoccupation with color that will haunt Nate's life, so that try as he will he is himself partially tainted by the consciousness of differences. A man in love and savoring the beauty of his Negro sweetheart, he cannot refrain from noting that her attractiveness is somewhat marred by "lips a little thick and nose a little broad."³ Perhaps even this minute vestige of prejudice in himself is enough to justify the prejudice by which all his life he is victimized. As a child his overtures to a Negro neighbor boy are rejected, and years later when he tries to forestall an attack by black street ruffians with a plea that "we're all brothers," they respond by clouting

²Ibid., p. 18. ³Ibid., p. 24.
him on the head.\footnote{Ibid., p. 28.} His romance with the Negress Ornita ends with her realization that marrying him would irrevocably estrange her from her own people. Even his cleaning woman refuses to eat with him, and, despite repeated entreaties on his part, takes her meals in the bathroom. A final rebuff occurs when Lime essays to assist a blind colored man along the street. Though sightless, the old man accuses him of being white, and a Negro woman arrives on the scene (very obviously in the role of rescuer!) to shove the would-be Good Samaritan out of the way. Malamud has given an ironic twist to the tale by turning segregation upside down, thus lending a universality to the element of isolation which dominates the story.

The primary characteristic of "The Jewbird" is that he has no nest. He is a homeless creature seeking to attach himself to the Cohens, whose window is hospitably, though only temporarily, ajar. "That's how it goes. It's open, you're in. Closed, you're out and that's your fate."\footnote{Ibid., p. 101.} The Jewbird is, of course, symbolically named, for he is a pariah, an eternal outsider. For the sake of having some kind of home, some illusion
of belonging, he submits to the most fearful cruelty from his host, knowing that the Cohen home is his final refuge, his last chance for sanctuary in a hostile world. "I'm running," he admits, "I'm flying but I'm also running . . . From anti-semites."\(^1\) Pressed to explain what kind of anti-semites pursue him, he sighs, "Any kind."\(^2\) He is at odds with the world of nature and can only grasp at the chance of establishing some kind of relationship with mankind.

The feathered sage is never actually welcome in his adopted home, or at least not so far as Cohen himself is concerned. While the family gladly "uses" him—he is, for example, instrumental in helping the child Maurie to improve his grades at school—he finds that such service does not guarantee security. For when the shrewd, if meddlesome, Schwartz employs the insight garnered through his tutorial experience to remark that Maurie, though "a good boy," lacks the capacity to become a scholar, Cohen pere is enraged and accelerates his campaign of persecution against the unwanted visitor.\(^3\)

(This pattern of semi-alienation, of "knowing your

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 102. \(^2\)Ibid., p. 103.  
\(^3\)Ibid., p. 107.)
place," is not unfamiliar to members of minority groups, who may be tendered a precarious degree of acceptance so long as they remain in roles expressly advantageous to society. That is, one's lack of status may be temporarily held in abeyance, at least for the duration of one's usefulness to the majority.¹)

So intense is his longing for a place to which he can belong (even little Maurie, seeing the bird poking into a large paper bag, realizes intuitively "He wants to build a nest") that he manages to endure Cohen's ruthless harassment, including the addition of a predatory cat to the household.² Finally angered beyond control, Cohen flings the disabled bird out onto the pavement. The full tragedy of this or any creature's estrangement from all others emerges when Edie and Maurie

¹This writer is reminded of an incident witnessed by a friend at a recent football game. It seems the home team's brightest star was a Negro athlete who had demonstrated remarkable prowess. During this particular contest he had captured the ball at a crucial moment, and, to the hysterical screaming of fans, was making a spectacular touchdown run when he was tackled only yards from the goal line by a member of the opposing team, also a Negro. Both men lay supine for a few seconds before play continued, and in the stadium's uproar, my friend could clearly distinguish a voice nearby yelling, "Get that nigger off our colored boy!"

²Malamud, Idiots First, p. 109.
find the bird's mutilated corpse, and in answer to the boy's tearful question, "Who did it?", the mother can only reply, "Anti-semites."¹

"Take Pity" allows Malamud full use of his tragi-comic genius in a tale of love and kindliness undaunted by obstinate and self-imposed isolation. Against an unspecified fantasy setting, probably a halfway house between this world and some afterlife, Rosen, a former coffee salesman, relates the story of his attempts to help the poor widow Eva and her two small daughters.

From the beginning she establishes herself as an entity separate from the rest of humanity. When Rosen offers to help her on the basis of his friendship for her late husband, her answer is, "My husband didn't have no friends."² When he asks if there are any other relatives, she replies, "Nobody."³ She is bitterly determined to sever all ties with the human community, even preferring that her children go hungry rather than accept help. Rosen's every stratagem—repaying imaginary loans, offering employment, housing, and even marriage—is

¹Ibid., p. 113.


³Ibid., p. 83.
contemptuously declined. She looks at him "like I was small and ugly" and impresses upon him the fact of her dislike.¹ His final scheme, committing suicide and thus leaving her as beneficiary of his estate, is perhaps at last successful, for although the widow still hovers nearby, she looks at him now "with haunted, beseeching eyes," suggesting that he may for once have managed to reach her.²

"The Maid's Shoes" is a study in alienation, tracing the professor's determination to remain uninvolved with his servant's life. As in a patterned dance, she moves toward him and he moves away. Noticing her unhappiness, his first recorded thought is that she is "none of his business,"³ while to her, "his main fault was his silence."⁴ He is truly a foreigner, and moreover, insistent upon remaining so. A single paragraph recounting his response to her obvious misery includes the following thoughts: "He never asked what, preferring not to become involved. . . . If you let yourself get involved in them you got endlessly involved. . . . I don't want

¹Ibid., p. 86. ²Ibid., p. 86.
³Malamud, Idiots First, p. 156.
⁴Ibid., p. 158.
to hear about it . . . . employer-employee relationships must be kept where they belong, on an objective level. . .

[He] preferred to stay aloof from what did not closely and personally concern him."¹ Even when she manages to force her problems upon him, he consents to discuss them only on the condition that the entire situation be examined as "essentially hypothetical."² Entangled, but against his better judgment, he makes her an impersonal gift of sturdy work shoes to prevent a more intimate selection from her would-be lover. When she admits to an affair with the other man, the professor dismisses her and she leaves the shoes behind, in recognition of his merely half-hearted response to her as a person and of the lack of human contact between them.

One of Malamud’s most moving tales, "The German Refugee," is indirectly set against the background of inhumane Nazi Germany in counterpoint to intensely human emotions. Oskar Gassner, a Jew exiled to America, has lost all faith in mankind, yet is the recipient of two personal expressions of love. The first of these experiences gives new meaning to his life; the second destroys him. His speech tutor, a youth who has become deeply

¹Ibid., p. 160. ²Ibid., p. 161.
involved with Gassner's inability to express himself in his adopted tongue (lack of communication being the very soul of estrangement) takes upon himself the task of preparing part of a lecture the refugee must give. Ironically, the subject of the talk, which for weeks Gassner has been unable to formulate, is the German response to Walt Whitman's "feeling of Brudermensch, his humanity."\footnote{Ibid., p. 209.} Although the Whitman material contributed by the youth is not quite accurate, the immigrant is so profoundly touched by his new friend's concern that he is himself reborn, no longer mute and alone, but inspired to write and deliver his lecture. The awakening has come too late, however, for Gassner receives word of the execution of the Gentile wife he has abandoned in Germany. Although he had never trusted her love, she has since proved it by being converted to Judaism, risking death to align herself with her husband. Confronted with his own lack of understanding and the effects of his voluntary estrangement, he ends his life.

"Angel Levine" is a gem of a short story, and one of that gem's perfectly cut facets is its engagement with the problem of alienation. Here is Malamud's most
penetrating attack against the walls that separate man from his fellow beings. Manischewitz, whose Job-like sufferings have pushed him to the brink of despair, prays for help yet is offended and incredulous when help is sent. For the agent of the heavenly intervention is a figure to challenge the faith of even the most pious of men. Difficult as it is to accept the corporeal presence of an angel, it is even more difficult when that angel has a Jewish surname and a black body. He actually introduces himself as Alexander Levine, with the implication that the faith and love he personifies may conquer the sorrows of the world. But sorely tried though the tailor may be, he cannot bring himself to believe in his visitor's mission, to believe that there can be any link between himself and this "gentleman of color." (Malamud employs Jew and Negro to represent extreme degrees of isolation; for if mankind in general is marked by alienation, may not the Jew represent that same quality squared, and the Negro perhaps cubed?) But Manischewitz rejects the unsuitable emissary, in spite of unmistakable signs that even the brief visit has somehow ameliorated conditions in his home. Both the tailor and his wife enjoy a three-day improvement in health, but on the fourth day their woes return. Still unwilling to believe, but
desperate for help, the tailor journeys to Harlem in search of Levine. There he finds the self-proclaimed angel at a honky-tonk, involved in various unangelic activities. Repelled by the alien environment and by Levine's presence there, Manischevitz leaves after staring "white-faced" through the window.¹

Yet home again, he finds that there is no bottom to his misery; conditions which had seemed to reach their nadir have managed to sink still further. His wife is "at death's door," and the whole situation is so heart-rending that having made his gloomy diagnosis, the doctor himself must hurry away from the depressing scene.² Racked by his suffering, Manischevitz has a vision of a winged Levine and goes forth in search of him once more. Returning to Harlem, he stumbles upon a small synagogue occupied by four Negroes involved in a Talmudic disquisition. Their discussion is carried on in minstrel show patois ("Now how did all dat happen?") as a reminder of the black bodies which wear the skull caps, reverently touch the holy scrolls, and sway with the ancient movements of prayer.³ Yet immediately upon

²Ibid.
³Ibid., p. 51.
entering the room, the tailor acknowledges his kinship to the others ("touched by this sight from his childhood and youth") and their words evoke a truth he has somehow always known. Their comments, enhanced rather than degraded by the speech pattern, emerge with stunning simplicity and significance. They speak of the totality of all material manifestations, which despite such irrelevant and superficial aspects as color, stems from a single Spirit.

"But has dis spirit got some kind of a shade or color?" asked bubble eyes, deadpan.

"Man of course not. A spirit is a spirit."

"Then how come we is colored?" he said with a triumphant glare.

"Ain't got nothing to do wid dat."  

And Manischevitz knows that truly it "ain't got nothing to do wid dat," that man is meant to rise above such trivial differences and to unite with his brothers in the knowledge of the common humanity which binds them. His last glimpse of the now-vindicated Levine is of an ascending angel, suitably rewarded with wings from which a single white feather drops. Manischevitz turns to his miraculously resurrected wife and comments, "A wonderful

1 Ibid., p. 50.  
2 Ibid., p. 51.
thing, Fanny. Believe me, there are Jews everywhere. In other words, there are people just like us everywhere. Color and creed have thus been obliterated as irrelevant, and by recognizing the bond between himself and the newly white-winged Levine, Manischewitz exultingly accepts his own kinship with all of mankind.

"Angel Levine," then, is no mere polemic against racial bigotry alone; the lesson goes much deeper. Malamud would have us learn, as Manischewitz learned, to accept the common bond of humanity and to revere in others the holy spark which each man cherishes in himself. For although alienation may be a fact of life, it is not necessarily an insuperable condition. And this is all that Malamud asks: that we recognize the fact of estrangement as universally present but that we refuse to resign ourselves to it. Step out of your isolation booths, he cries! Through love and faith you may be able to make contact, to reach out and touch the lives around you.

\[1\]Ibid., p. 53.
CHAPTER III

THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY

The quest for identity is frequently a thematic factor concomitant with the sense of alienation, creating a possible confusion between the two motifs. But there are important differences as well as similarities, and it is essential to retain the concepts as two discrete entities if a fruitful examination of either is to result. The most obvious point of contact between the two motifs is not that estranged from the majority, individual identity seems threatened, but conversely, that until the individual personality has been integrated and is at peace with itself, no real alignment with society is possible.

Among several important factors in the determination of self is the vital force of history, for Malamud possesses an acute awareness of how intensely "past-drenched" is the present.¹ Self-fulfillment is most frequently a matter of self-acceptance, for the individual still retains the choice of doing what has already

been chosen for him by destiny. That such a philosophy may tend to minimize the power of human will seems undeniable, but Malamud envisions glorious possibilities for man, whose quest for identity is often resolved not by miracles but by hope, not by actuality but by potentiality.

Malamud employs a classifying device to play an impish trick upon his readers, as if to present characters so neatly categorized that identity seems patent. Characters are introduced with such immediate and detailed identification that the unwary reader is tempted to shrug, "Well, that takes care of him!" Consider the first line of "The Death of Me": "Marcus was a tailor, long before the war, a buoyant man with a bushy head of graying hair, fine fragile brows and benevolent hands, who comparatively late in life had become a clothier."\(^1\)

Or "The Lady of the Lake": "Henry Levin, an ambitious, handsome thirty, who walked the floors in Macy's book department wearing a white flower in his lapel, having recently come into a small inheritance, quit, and went abroad seeking romance."\(^2\) While all of Malamud's

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\(^1\) Malamud, \textit{Idiots First}, p. 57.

\(^2\) Malamud, \textit{The Magic Barrel}, p. 94.
characters are not so immediately pinpointed as these, there is a definite pattern in every story of scrupulously pigeon-holing each person by physical description, occupation, and surroundings. It is as if the author would have us realize that these fundamental conditions of existence are inescapable and not to be ignored, that one can only accept such matters (poverty, boredom, age) as intransigent, with the primary effort concentrated toward developing a sense of achievement within the boundaries and limitations of the individual self.

The tale, "A Summer's Reading," illustrates the quest for identity in almost conventional terms, saving a Malamudian twist for the end. Nineteen year-old George Stoyonovich, a jobless high school dropout, is foundering in a confused and directionless hiatus. From the very first his self-image has been in jeopardy, for he admits that he abandoned school because he felt the teachers "had not respected him," only to find himself then rejected by prospective employers because of his lack of education. He is now occupied in frittering away a meaningless summer, supported by his father and older sister, and vaguely hoping that something better will

\[1\text{Ibid., p. 119.}\]
turn up in the fall. For lack of anything else to do, he walks the streets during the evenings, feeling himself without purpose or importance. He is so devoid of self-esteem that he cannot relate to others, even to young men of his own age in the neighborhood. "A couple of them he had known his whole life, but nobody recognized each other."¹ Brooding upon the variety of uninteresting jobs he has sporadically held since leaving school and upon his present lack of status, he envisions the life he would like to lead, a wistfully idealized existence based upon the primary motivation that "he wanted people to like and respect him."²

A turning point occurs on one of these aimless nocturnal strolls when George encounters Mr. Cattanzara, a thinly disguised father-figure, who inquires about George's present activities. Reluctant to confess his lack of purpose and anxious for Mr. Cattanzara's respect, George hits upon the idea of saying that he is involved in a summer's reading project of one hundred books. The older man responds with a rather startled admiration and an unsettling invitation to discuss some of the books "after you're finished with them."³

¹Ibid., p. 120. ²Ibid., p. 121. ³Ibid., p. 122.
The lie George has told is temporarily rewarding. Mr. Cattanzara, like so many of Malamud's characters a man clearly intended for better things than his present mode of living, is employed at making change in the subway, and the pun involved is significant: Mr. Cattanzara is almost miraculously a change-maker. The neighborhood soon knows of George's ambitious plans and he is accorded the fond respect for which he has always yearned. His family now seems gentler toward him, the storekeepers show that they "regard him highly," and he can "feel approval on all sides." George begins to think that "life wasn't so bad if you knew how to appreciate it," and he is no longer alienated from the people in his small world. In direct contrast to his previous unpleasant sensation of going unrecognized among his acquaintances, he now relishes his evening meanderings in the neighborhood "where people had known him from the time he was a kid." 

Identity, however, cannot be realized through the empty respect of others. George begins to feel uneasy, worrying that his lie will be discovered. Although there

1Ibid., p. 123.
2Ibid.
3Ibid.
has as yet been no revelation of his guilt, he dreads another encounter with Mr. Cattanzara, which, when it does come, is a shattering experience. As is his habit with children, the old man begins by offering the boy money for ice cream. To George's answer that "I'm a big guy now," Mr. Cattanzara retorts, "No, you ain't," and George knows that the facade has been ripped away and his inner self exposed. The change-maker then interrogates him about his reading list, and the boy's clumsy attempts to hide the truth are not successful. "George knew he looked passable on the outside, but inside he was crumbling apart." The old man departs, but not before admonishing the stricken boy, "Don't do what I did."

As if Mr. Cattanzara's knowledge were not enough, George's shame is reinforced by his sister's suspicions of his deception. She denounces him as a "bum" and the bitter accusation sinks home, even though he knows his public image is still secure; Mr. Cattanzara has revealed his disgrace to no one, which gives the boy a certain uneasy confidence, but he has at last acknowledged that

1Ibid., p. 125.

2Ibid.

3Ibid., p. 126.
a sense of personal worth cannot be founded upon the attitudes of others.¹ The closing paragraph of the story describes George's entry into the public library, where he counts off a hundred books and sits down to read. Perhaps he will never be the man of his dreams, but at least he will be the man of his lies.

Probably Malamud's most highly acclaimed short story, and justifiably so, is "The Magic Barrel," the tale of a rabbinical student's search for a bride. (Such a summary is roughly equivalent to describing Hamlet as the chronicle of a young man's return from school to attend his father's funeral.) Although the story does contain elements of the other two motifs herein discussed, it is perhaps most valuable as it exemplifies Malamud's engagement with the search for identity. For there can be no question that Leo Finkle is enmeshed in the throes of an "identity crisis," a pseudo-scientific term almost reduced to worthless jargon through indiscriminate usage but actually applicable in this instance. What has originated as a methodical quest for a bride evolves into a soul-searching examination of the young man's own inner being, and he emerges from the ordeal

¹Ibid.
shaken and no doubt irrevocably scarred, but armed for the first time with knowledge of himself and a responsible attitude toward mankind.

At the inception of the story, Finkle has enlisted the services of a professional marriage broker to find a bride, strictly in the interests of improving his own professional status, or at least so he tells himself. It rapidly becomes apparent that the young man is not so cold-bloodedly pragmatic as he had imagined, and although his objections to each of the candidates offered him by Pinya Salzman, the "commercial cupid," seem and are petty, they are not actually intended to disguise the fact that the prospective groom is searching for more than an objectively suitable match.¹

At last he reluctantly empowers the matchmaker to arrange with a female client, Miss Lily Hirshorn, a meeting with himself which is at once disastrous and sublime. As a prospective wife Finkle dismisses Lily immediately—she is too old, too faded—but his disappointment with her pales in comparison with the self-disgust her questions arouse in him. Salzman, of whose invisible presence Finkle is uneasily aware, has constructed a

¹Ibid., p. 175.
romantic picture of the dedicated young rabbi, an image which Finkle rejects in a terrible wave of self-knowledge. He realizes now that he has turned to the rabbinate solely because of his unemotional interest in the Law, and he admits, "I came to God not because I loved Him, but because I did not," and is horrified by the insight: "The confession he spoke sharply because its unexpectedness shook him." 1

This admission is followed by an agonizing period of spiritual torment. Finkle realizes that something within him caused him to seek out the marriage broker—whom he now curses—"without a true knowledge of his own intent." 2 Faced with the "true nature of his relationship to God," he is shaken to the very core of his being. 3 The self he has never known rises up to confront him and he is forced by "this terrifying insight" to acknowledge the dearth of his feeling for mankind. 4 He has never been capable of relating to others, and now he knows himself to be unloved and loveless. There is only one hope of salvation and he grasps at it feverishly. He will survive his ordeal of self-confrontation by accepting

1Ibid., p. 179. 2Ibid. 3Ibid. 4Ibid.
his imperfections and aspiring to a better future. As part of this new attitude toward life, he will choose a bride on the basis of love. Such a criterion he explains to the unconvinced Salzman, concluding with the statement, "For myself I find it necessary to establish the level of my need and fulfill it."¹

He has admitted the need but still fails to comprehend its true nature. After a period of fruitless, unspecified daydreams ("he felt not quite himself yet"), he succumbs to temptation and opens a package of candidates' photographs left for him by the marriage broker.² A random snapshot catches his attention by the quality of experience that the face possesses. He recognizes its attraction to be the suggestion that this is a girl who has been engaged with life, "has lived, or wanted to--had somehow deeply suffered. . . Only such a one could understand him and help him seek whatever he was seeking."³ Since most of his previous objections to Salzman's suggestions have stemmed from an almost fanatical insistence on absolute purity, on the person untouched by life--he has rejected females older than he,

¹Ibid., p. 182.
²Ibid.
³Ibid., pp. 183-4.
widowed, physically blemished—this high premium on experience seems a complete reversal. However, he has now admitted to himself that what was missing in the women Salzman had offered him before was the quality of being touched by life, of garnering something from it. Lily and those like her had merely accumulated their years without ever becoming truly involved: "Life, despite their frantic yooohooings, had passed them by."1 So perhaps in his new awareness of self Finkle is not so completely paradoxical as he appears.

However, the knowledge of the girl’s true character—the shocking extent of her "engagement with life"—is almost more than the rabbinical student had bargained for: she is revealed as Salzman’s disowned daughter, whose shoddy career on the streets seems to exclude the girl from further consideration. But although the blow of learning the identity of his beloved is a crushing one, Finkle manages somehow to stay doggedly on course. The insight he has lately developed into his own inner regions encourages him on his quest. Stella will in truth be his star, a guiding light toward his own redemption. Begging the marriage broker to arrange a meeting,

1Ibid., p. 183.
he suggests humbly, "Perhaps I can be of service." No longer shielded by superiority and indifference, the young student seeks to embrace the life of one whom he dreams that he can "convert to goodness, himself to God." He realizes that his salvation, his only hope of truly being, is linked to her, the creature whose eyes possess "a desperate innocence."

But the story does not conclude with the portentous meeting of the young couple. The final sentence is properly enigmatic: "Around the corner, Salzman, leaning against a wall, chanted prayers for the dead." As Sidney Richman pointed out in his study Bernard Malamud, "It is impossible to tell for whom Pinye chants—for himself and his guilt (for even Leo had finally suspected 'that Salzman had planned it all to happen this way'), for Finkle's past or Finkle's future, or for all these reasons." Richman concluded that the last alternative is probably closest to the truth, "for if Leo has graduated into saint and rabbi, it is only by succumbing to

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1Ibid., p. 187.  
2Ibid.  
3Ibid.  
4Ibid., p. 188.  
the terrors which the role prescribes. What better reason to chant when to win means to lose?\textsuperscript{1} While bowing to the clarity and wisdom of Mr. Richman's insight, this writer cannot refrain from adding in a more optimistic tone that the Mourner's Kaddish, which consists after all simply of a glorification of the wonders of God, is at least a confirmation of the fact that the people of "The Magic Barrel" have been truly alive, have known what it is to be. The mourner's prayer would be inappropriate in reference to those who have gone through life without a sense of their own identity in relation to God and man, to those who have never lived.

Malamud undoubtedly selected the title "The Lady of the Lake" in deference to the irony which invests his story, for the allusion to Scott's gallant knight and his lady fair provides a basis of bitter satire in preparation for the story itself. Levin, an American expatriate, has assumed the name of "Freeman" as fitting to the new existence he hopes to create in Europe, but of course his new identity never actually supplants the old. He does not acknowledge to himself his true motivation in selecting a different name "except that he was

\textsuperscript{1}Ibid.
tired of the past--tired of the limitations it had imposed upon him. Malamud's acute awareness of contact with the past, his profound resignation to the influence that history must unavailingly exert upon the individual, is never so determinedly expressed as in this story.

Levin-Freeman's yearning toward the beautiful Italian islands crystallizes his desire for all that is not his to possess: "He recalled a sad memory of unlived life, his own, of all that had slipped through his fingers." Even after he reaches the paradise and finds it everything that he had imagined, lush vegetation and luxuriant natural scenes which stir his senses, he is still shackled to the realization that there is really no place for him in all this. "Though it was an 'underground' reaction, he experienced a painful contracting remembrance--more like a warning--of personal poverty." The poverty, of course, is lack of being, for in changing his name and in renouncing his heritage, he has deprived himself of his richest possession. He repeatedly denies his Jewishness to the Italian

1 Malamud, The Magic Barrel, p. 94.
2 Ibid., p. 97.
3 Ibid., p. 99.
beauty with whom he has fallen in love. Anxious to ally himself with what he imagines is Isabella's illustrious heritage, he muses with approval that "her past he could see boiling in her" (which is later to be ironically confirmed), while his own background he dismisses as unimportant and irrelevant.1 "With ancient history, why bother?"2

Such a makeshift alliance is obviously doomed, and its conclusion is foreshadowed when Isabella conducts her suitor through the great castle and calls his attention to a painting of a lost soul enduring the torments of Hell. To the American's question as to the reason for such agonizing penance, she replies, "He falsely said he could fly."3 And Levin-Freeman, who falsely attempted to fly from his own self, to be what he was not, is similarly fated for punishment. (Incidentally, he does suffer a mild guilt for denouncing his background, but interestingly enough, the guilt stems from "not so much the denial of being Jewish--what had it brought him but headaches, inferiorities, unhappy memories?--as the lie to the beloved."4) The

1Ibid., p. 102. 2Ibid., p. 103.
3Ibid., p. 110. 4Ibid., p. 113.
denouement of the story occurs with Isabella's revelation of her own Jewishness, that she has been imprisoned and disfigured by the Nazis, and that she cannot accept a non-Jewish suitor. Secure within her own identity, though obviously troubled by her attraction to the American, she tells him, "I can't marry you. We are Jews. My past is meaningful to me."¹ And Levin-Freeman, stunned by the perverse emergence of his assumed identity as the destruction rather than the germinal point of a new life, confesses his own Jewishness, but too late--Isabella runs from him and he "embraced only moonlit stone," the warm human feeling they might have shared killed by his repeated refusals to accept himself for what he really is.²

"The Last Mohican" deals with one Arthur Fidelman, and again the first name, like the title of "The Lady of the Lake," implies a reference to medieval romance, for Fidelman has come a-questing. His goal is at first obscured, and Malamud disguises the true objective by introducing the American, in one of the author's capsule characterizations, as "a self-confessed failure as a painter."³ While such an immediate and stark declaration

¹Ibid., p. 118.
²Ibid.
³Ibid., p. 136.
does not necessarily preclude the possibility of change, neither does it communicate to the reader the entire truth: in what other areas is Fidelman a failure, and can he bring himself to acknowledge other deficiencies as easily? Upon the answers to these questions hinges the story, for Malamud concerns himself with the possibilities of Fidelman's spiritual growth during his pilgrimage to Rome.

At this point it may be of value to speculate upon the significance of Fidelman's conscious goal. He is engaged in the production of a critical study of the artist Giotto and the symbolic undertones of this project are too cogent to be ignored. Why has Malamud selected this particular painter? El Greco would seem to have been the logical choice, judging from the painting of St. Francis which Fidelman views in a dream. Yet Giotto is the name specified, and there are indeed grounds for hypothesizing that the coincidence of the name itself is the key factor. Throughout the story "Giotto" may be interpreted as a pun on "God," somewhat after the manner of Beckett's use of "Godot." For just as Finkle, in "The Magic Barrel," had dedicated himself to the study of his God with an intensity carefully if unconsciously calculated to rule out any relationship with man, so has
Fidelman insulated himself from any recognition of his common humanity. Early in the story Susskind tries to show him the selfishness of his preoccupation by asking, "Who doesn't know Giotto?" but the American is neither willing nor actually able at that point to accept such a revolutionary and disturbing concept. ¹

Fidelman's arrival in the Eternal City is followed almost instantly by the appearance of Shimon Susskind—his alter ego, nemesis, soul brother, landsman, whatever—for it is only through the offices of the despised alien, who plays Virgil to Fidelman's Dante that the American is to be led through a hellish maze in search of true self-knowledge. The connection between the two is made explicit in their first encounter: Fidelman, arrayed from the skin out in new clothes as symbol of his new life, gazes in rapture at the Rome of his dreams. But the awesome power of the past is suggested in his remark, "Imagine all that history," upon which he experiences "the sensation of suddenly seeing himself as he was."² However, he realizes, "this unexpectedly intense sense of his own being" actually results from the sight

¹Ibid., p. 157. ²Ibid., p. 136.
of a stranger who bears a superficial resemblance to himself. The stranger, Susskind, approaches him and introduces himself, explaining that he is a refugee from--of all places--Israel, as well as from various other countries before that. His wretched piecemeal autobiography is clearly intended to be an entreaty but Fidelman's unwilling and minimal handout is uncivilly received. Both the giving and the taking are remarkably lacking in graciousness, and Susskind then finds it necessary to be specific in his importunings: what he actually has his eye on is the tourist's other suit. This garment, however, represents Fidelman's "second skin," and he refuses even to consider giving part of himself away. Intent on his scholarly examination of Giotto, the American is irritated, though perhaps with a vague feeling of guilt, by the repeated appearances of the little peddler and he shoos him away. Soon afterward he finds that the brief case containing the precious manuscript of his study has been stolen and he is certain that a vengeful Susskind is the thief.

Then follows a period of obsessive search. Fidelman has been totally absorbed by his interest in Giotto, but

1Ibid., p. 137.
the theft has the effect of turning his attention toward his fellow men. Identifying himself completely with the manuscript, which he considers to be his "life work," he too is lost.  

It is only during a concentrated search of Rome, in which he pursues the suspected thief through a tiny synagogue, the cemetery in which he is sometimes employed, and the cathedral where he is finally apprehended, that Fidelman comes to have some understanding of the other man and thus of himself.

But it is not until he steals into the absent Susskind's lodgings to search for the manuscript that Fidelman truly penetrates the heart of their dual being. The bare squalor in which the little refugee exists is so depressing to the American that he rushes back to his own room where it takes him two hours to thaw out, and thaw out he does in more than a literal sense. That night a dream carries him to an old synagogue where he views a fresco of Giotto's which portrays St. Francis as he proffers his coat to a poor man, and Fidelman awakens transfixed by the knowledge of what he must do. He rushes to Susskind to make a gift of his second suit, a gift without conditions but with unexpected repercussions.

1Ibid., p. 155.
The purity and profundity of the American's new altruism are tested when Susskind reciprocates by handing his benefactor the missing brief case, now empty. Realizing that his work has been destroyed, Fidelman flies into a rage and attacks the refugee, who defends himself by saying, "I did you a favor... The words were there but the spirit was missing." It takes several seconds for this statement to penetrate Fidelman's fury, but then he realizes its aptness to his own relationship with Giotto-God, and "moved by all he had lately learned, he had a triumphant insight. 'Susskind, come back,' he shouted, half sobbing. 'The suit is yours. All is forgiven.' And although Susskind has already taken flight, the tale thus concludes on the uplifting note of Fidelman's new self-awareness.

1Ibid., p. 160.
2Ibid.
CH. A. J. E R IV
THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE

The final motif to be discussed in this study is in a number of ways the key to the other two themes. Malamud's reverence for life, his appreciation of the sanctity of being, almost seems to echo the words of Henry James: "The poet essentially can't be concerned with dying. Let him deal with the sickest of the sick, it is still by the act of living that they appeal to him, and appeal the more as the conditions plot against them and prescribe the battle. The process of life gives way fighting, and often may so shine out on the lost ground as in no other connexion." Malamud's acceptance of this ideal is particularly manifest in his approach to the problem of suffering. For if, as he proclaims in the title of one of his tales, life is better than death, the hypothesis must be accepted as universally true: to be alive is worth the agony, and one may at worst learn something from the misery involved. Several of Malamud's stories stress the victory to be

celebrated in the endurance of defeat (as in "The Loan," "Idiots First," "The First Seven Years," and "The Girl of My Dreams," ) while several others are so pessimistic that they can only be interpreted in the perverse sense of negative examples ("The Death of Me," "The Bill," and "Life is Better Than Death").

One of Malamud's most moving stories is "The Loan," which tells of a reunion between two old friends, Lieb the baker and his visitor Kobotsky, who has come to borrow money. As is suggested by his name, Lieb is eager to dismiss old hurts, although the joy the two men share at seeing each other is flawed by the disapproval of Lieb's second wife Bessie. Lieb explains that his whole business is founded on sorrow, that his sweet concoctions never sell while the bread, mixed with his own tears, is highly successful. On hearing this, Kobotsky merely nods, as if in a world built on suffering, such anomalies are the norm. From the first he seems to know that his request for money will be refused, even when he reveals that he needs it to buy a headstone for his dead wife's grave. And Bessie, who has "everything in her name," ¹ does deny the request, justifying such apparent stinginess by the shop's financial

¹Ibid., p. 164.
insecurity, and taunting her husband, "Have you got life insurance?"¹ But her fury stems from their shamed inability to help, for she certainly realizes that nobody has life insurance. She tells Kobotsky of her own wretched background, a recital unparalleled for tragic impact, and the three are united in the communion of human pain. The story ends on a gentle note of doomed tenderness: "Kobotsky and the baker embraced and sighed over their lost youth. They pressed mouths together and parted forever."²

A similar note is sounded in "Idiots First," which provides an allusive modification of the old saying, "Women and children first," directing special consideration for the helpless. Malamud writes of Mendel, who in his last hours of life strives frantically to amass the thirty-five dollars needed to send his feebleminded, middle-aged son Isaac to live with an elderly uncle in California. Isaac is both the traditional holy innocent, God's fool, who must be protected from harm, and the literal bearer of his Biblical name. For God reveres life and Isaac the son is not to be sacrificed. True, his existence, limited by a child's mentality, has

¹Ibid., p. 165. ²Ibid., p. 168.
little objective value, and in cold-blooded, pragmatic analysis it may indeed seem futile to send him to a great-uncle who is already eighty-one. But Mendel rises to heroic stature in the determination that his son will not be denied his chance, his birthright, flawed though it may be. The tale ends with Isaac safely aboard the train, "his face strained in the direction of his journey," the journey to which he is entitled by virtue of his very God-given existence.1

Also concerned with human transcendence of pain is the folk tale, "The First Seven Years," one of Malamud's most perfectly constructed short stories. It tells of Feld the shoemaker, whose hopes for his daughter Miriam are destroyed by the discovery that his capable assistant, Sobel, is in love with her, and by his realization that there is a sort of terrible inevitability to their union. Feld had envisioned better things for the girl than the life that she would share with the poor refugee, although it is one of the ironic twists of the story that the "better" life he desires for his child would be more truly within her grasp as the wife of Sobel than with the mate her father has selected for her. "Max the college

1Malamud, Idiots First, p. 15.
boy."¹ For she shares with Sobel an intellectual rapport—a rapport he has created through a sort of cerebral seduction in which he lends books to her and encourages her developing perceptiveness—and she recognizes how shallow are the pretensions of Max, who is entirely of the material world and "has no soul."²

The suffering of Sobel throughout the time he has toiled for Miriam in the employ of her unwitting father (the Biblical allusion to Jacob's labor for Rachel is implicit—Sobel works for Feld as Jacob labored in the "field," and though the suitor has already toiled for five years the father begs him to wait two more before claiming his bride) is surpassed by the agony of Feld when he sees that his dreams for his daughter are crumbling. But he manages to survive the pain and emerge from it a better man. He can acknowledge that although her marriage will not improve his daughter's material status, the depth of her husband's spiritual and emotional sensitivity promises a better life in yet another way. Cheated of his hopes for his child, he is able to accept the disappointment and recognize the

blessings, and he walks home through the snow "with a
stronger stride."  

Mitka, in "The Girl of My Dreams," is perhaps the
least sympathetic of all the heroes in Malamud's tales—
but hero he unquestionably is, by virtue of his mastery
of pain to create a new understanding of life. An unsuc­
cessful writer, Mitka is bitterly unhappy and cuts himself
off from everyone around him. (As in "The German Refugee"
and "The Last Mohican," failure at artistic self­
expression is bound up with the inability to relate to
others personally.) But this is not real suffering in
the Malamudian sense: Mitka's unhappiness is selfish,
almost petulant, reminiscent of a small child's temper
tantrum. In fact, he locks himself in his room very
much as a hysterical child would, refusing to submit
to any of the entreaties of his adoring landlady, Mrs.
Lutz. Finally he is moved by something beyond his own
pain, a first-person short story about another writer's
frustrated efforts. On impulse he writes a consoling
note and begins a correspondence with the woman he believes
to be the young heroine-authoress in the tale. Imagina­
tion soaring in wild flight, he arranges a meeting with

\[1\text{Ibid., p. 18.}\]
his pseudonymous correspondent and is then bitterly dis-appointed to find her middle-aged and faded, in fact the mother of the young girl he had envisioned. Although he very churlishly fails to hide his unjustified resentment, Olga is understanding and kind. Her advice to him is indeed almost maternal: "Don't worry about your work and get more fresh air. Build up your body. Good health will help your writing."¹ She is eternal Woman, maid-mother-crone, hallmark of many such females to appear in Malamud's works (Iris Lemon in The Natural, for example) and she nourishes him not only with the provisions that she brings to their rendezvous, but spiritually as well.

In telling of her now-dead daughter, a loss which she shares with Mitka, Olga speaks of her own wretched life, and explains through the metaphor of literary creation how her suffering has conditioned her for survival. "Sometimes it gets so bad that I don't feel like going on... After you've been writing so long as I you'll learn a system to keep yourself going. It depends on your view of life. If you're mature you'll find out how to work."² And Mitka has at last developed the capacity for empathy, for acknowledging the pain of

¹Ibid., p. 40. ²Ibid., p. 39.
someone besides himself—he is able to relate his own loss of the idealized Madeline to Olga’s loss of the real one. "His face showed nothing but he pitied her, her daughter, the world. Who not?" Returning to his flat, he dreams not of the young and lovely Beatrice, a mysterious tenant enticingly described by the landlady in a self-sacrificing attempt to lure Mitka from his room (Malamud has created a Beatrice so similar to the vision of Madeline that the reader is teased by the melodramatic possibility that the two girls may actually be one), but of Mrs. Lutz herself; for she is the one to whom in his ecstatic new reverence for life he will turn. Olga has truly revived and nourished him: "Mitka the camel," as he now knows himself, will be able to take on the sanctified burden that he has heretofore scorned.  

"The Death of Me" is at once the most pessimistic and the most uplifting of Malamud’s tales. It is the story of Marcus, who through a typical Malamudian paradox, "prospered into ill health" when his tailoring business improves so much that the physical strain overpowers him. He hires two helpers, a Polish presser,

1Ibid., p. 40.  
2Ibid.  
3Malamud, Idiots First, p. 57.
Bruzak, and an Italian tailor, Vizo, fine craftsmen but obsessed by a fierce conflict with each other. Both are men who have been ill-treated by life and Marcus tries to reconcile them on the basis of this common suffering. He "knew their troubles and felt they were as people much alike," but neither will acknowledge such kinship. Each continues to be absorbed with his own sorrows to the complete exclusion of the other's. Marcus' conciliatory efforts are wasted, and the bickering erupts into outright warfare. Tormented and exhausted by their conflict, the already-ill employer has a vision of the two helpers in angry pursuit of each other, ending when one of them falls from a cliff and drags the other down with him. Unfortunately, the bond between them is apparent only to Marcus, while the two involved continue to recognize only their differences.

Perhaps a hint does penetrate when the proprietor, desperate to end their quarrelling, partitions them off into separate working cubicles. The need for interaction is immediate, if perverse, for the two apparently miss the hostilities and within a few days have resumed their battles. Attacking with pointed knife and burning iron

\[1\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 58.\]
(the tools of the trade, naturally, the artifacts of everyday life), they wound each other fiercely. Such violence is too much for the saintly Marcus, who suffers a heart attack and dies. The two men who have never before been able to live outside of themselves are at last chastened by the dying man. "Although the old Jew's eyes were glazed as he crumpled, the assassins could plainly read in them, 'What did I tell you? You see?'"¹ This question refers, of course, to the story's title, and the implication is that the men do see, do finally understand that each man's actions affect the lives of others. While definitely allied to the alienation motif, this tale is by its dramatic conclusion a paradigm of the value of suffering: Marcus, unable to persuade the two antagonists by logic or pleas, has finally through the ultimate agony achieved his aim and taught them a bitter but necessary lesson in life.

"The Bill" also concerns Malamud's preoccupation with man's inhumanity to man, and here the sense of life's sanctity is almost imperceptible. This very brief tale chronicles the decline of a delicatessen run by Mr. and Mrs. Panessa and the accompanying lack of faith in their

¹Ibid., p. 67.
erstwhile friend and customer, Willy Schlegel. Schlegel, janitor of a nearby building, welcomes them to the neighborhood and becomes their friend. He and his wife shop at the store and all is well until Willy subjects the storekeepers to a sort of test. He has been complaining about the torments he endures from the tenants and owner of the building in his charge, and during his harangue he has unwittingly accumulated more groceries than he can afford. Mr. Panessa, sympathetic with the other's misery, nobly declines to add to it, and displays his own mettle by offering credit to his friend. "He said that everything was run on credit, business and everything else, because after all what was credit but the fact that people were human beings and if you were really a human being you gave credit to somebody else and he gave credit to you."¹

Willy accepts the other's trust and determinedly increases his bill, even when he has cash in his possession. His wife is aware of his duplicity and begs him to pay the bill, but he refuses, somehow justifying his mistreatment of Panessa by his own abuse at the hands of others. "Give credit, give credit," he mimics viciously.

¹ Malamud, The Magic Barrel, p. 129.
and experiences only a "grating hatred" for those who retain faith in humanity despite their own agony. ¹ He has failed to learn from his own pain. Although he cherishes a secret and unrealistic dream of someday accumulating the large sum necessary to repay the money, he is unable to do so. Only when Mrs. Panessa writes of her husband's illness and begs for even ten dollars does he rouse himself to action. The suffering of others has finally touched him but it is too late. The old man dies, Mrs. Panessa moves away, "and the bill was never paid."²

Thus Malamud makes his point in a somewhat negative fashion, by pointing out the abyss of human suffering when unalleviated by compassion. And while there is no miraculous change in Willy Schlegel's nature, there is at least some indication that he is aware of his own guilt in the Panessas' downfall, and even such a slight improvement is an optimistic sign. One cannot help but remember Swift's obiter dicta "I never wonder to see men wicked, but I often wonder to see them not ashamed," and Joseph Wood Krutch's comment upon it, "That they are,

¹Ibid., p. 132.
²Ibid., p. 135.
nevertheless, sometimes ashamed may be the last best hope of mankind."

Malamud returns to Italy for the locale of "Life is Better Than Death," a short story which very nearly belies its title. The widowed Etta has maintained an unswerving devotion to the memory of her unfaithful husband, Armando. Her suffering is intensified by guilt, for she had in an agony of jealousy prayed for his death. At Armando's very grave she meets Cesare, also betrayed by a now-dead mate, who persuades her that she must do justice to her own life by ending her preoccupation with the dead. "There comes a time when one has to return to life. It's only natural. Where there's life there's life."

They commence an affair, and Cesare's words are prophetic in a way he never intended when Etta finds herself pregnant. Her lover promises to stand by her but flees at the first opportunity. Once more bereft, she still believes that she has somehow cheated Armando, somehow stolen from the dead. But her new guilt has at least the virtue of breaking the bond


2 Malamud, Idiots First, p. 96.
with death for she never again visits the cemetery. One cannot avoid the conjecture that Malamud is employing the device of a simple pun to stress the high value he has always placed on life: has Etta merely rendered unto Cesare what is Cesare's by right of his very existence, by right of the fact that Armando is dead and he is alive?

Malamud's reverence for life penetrates still further; it is manifested not only in the capacity to transcend pain and to learn from sorrow, but also in the ability to extract real humor from the experience of misery. As critic Dan Jacobson pointed out in *Commentary* magazine, "The stories are all moral fables of the most serious kind; and there is hardly one that is not also extremely funny."¹ The faculty for laughing through tears is one which characterizes many of Malamud's creatures, and it is frequently exhibited by the author himself in his position as narrator. His total acceptance of humanity in its less-than-perfect condition sometimes results in little jibes directed toward human self-deception. Enthusiastic about the

potential values inherent in reality, he refuses to romanticize. For example, Levin-Freeman's fatuous enchantment with what he believes to be his sweetheart's aristocratic lineage in "The Lady of the Lake" is deflated when he takes a guided tour through the palazzo and is shown "where Napoleon had slept--a bed." A further example of the author's penchant for bursting the balloons of smug self-approval is his use of names which are really wry puns--"Angelo," the brutal and perverted pimp in "Naked Nude," or "Charity Sweetness," the Negro maid who insists on keeping her distance from the white race in "Black is My Favorite Color." No situation is too grim to be devoid of some sardonic twist, as when Bevilacqua in "Behold the Key" explains that his limp stems from the war, when he was wounded twice, "once by the Americans advancing and once by the Germans retreating," or when Nate Lime of "Black is My Favorite Color" recalls his boyhood on the edge of poverty: "We didn't starve but nobody ate chicken unless we were sick or the chicken was."


2 Ibid., p. 62.

3 Malamud, Idiots First, p. 19.
Malamud never allows his total vision of human life to be clouded by the tragic aspects; he is capable of creating zany situations and high-spirited characters, which are typified by the further adventures of Arthur Fidelman, as chronicled in "Naked Nude" and "Still Life." Both these tales concern the art student's sojourn in Italy, a visit which began in "The Last Mohican" and which continues to be fraught with peril for the hapless American.

In "Naked Nude" Fidelman is being held prisoner in a Milanese brothel by the brutal proprietor and his homosexual assistant, who is not above making advances to the victim. Having stolen Fidelman's passport, they force him to copy a local art treasure, with the aim of substituting it for the original. The prisoner produces the copy, though faithful to his own secret plans, and in a wild escapade manages to elude his captors, triumphantly bearing away either the valued painting or his own facsimile. The ambiguous ending is quite appropriate to the general tone of grotesque frolic. For example, when Fidelman is at first unable to copy the assigned painting, his jailers are furious. They force him to clean latrines, kick him, beat him with a rubber hose, threaten him with death, then suddenly in a marvelously
anti-climactic recognition of his mental block, decide to try amateur psychology, complete with textbook. Though the bruises they have inflicted upon him are still fresh, they sit down with their prisoner and inquire solicitously about his early relationship with his mother!¹

Labelling the story as basically a comic exercise is not to deprecate it or deny its real virtues—effective characterization, comments on alienation, self-expression, and so forth—but, as was surely Malamud’s intention, the atmosphere of wild farce is so pervasive as to prevent the reader from taking these matters seriously. To show that high-spirited victory can emerge from humiliation and abject misery is undoubtedly the author’s primary motivation.

The same note of wacky comedy prevails in "Still Life," the story of Fidelman’s hopeless infatuation with his Roman landlady. Annamaria Oliovino too is an artist, but she is utterly contemptuous of his work, as well as of his person, his attentions, and everything else about him. Fidelman is here explicitly identified as the eternal victim, for he is "ever a sucker. . . . It can’t

¹Ibid., p. 132.
be ... but it could ... It had happened to him before."¹ He accepts meekly the indignities to which she subjects him, pathetically grateful to be her cringing thrall. Once, in an almost off-hand manner, she grants him the fulfillment of his physical desires. It is his misfortune that the act means so little to her that she is preoccupied during his embraces, repeatedly postponing his climax by forcing him to answer the door. When she finally deigns to accommodate him ("'Enough of antipasto,' Annamaria said. She reached for his member."), it is too late; desire uselessly overcomes him so that he is wasted for her.² From then on his humiliation is complete and she flays him with her scorn.

In an inspired moment, however, he decides to do a self-portrait as a priest and when Annamaria sees him in cassock and biretta, she is overwhelmed by anguish. He has realized for some time that she is troubled, and in the guise of priest he becomes the recipient of her terrible confession. She has borne and murdered an illegitimate child, and since she has been unable to confess her sin, her lover has found himself impotent. She asks for penance, and Fidelman is slowly engulfed

¹Ibid., p. 32. ²Ibid., p. 48.
by the realization that the only punishment she deems severe enough is sexual intercourse with himself. Shuddering, he accepts his fate. She insists he retain the biretta so that his priestly facade will not be destroyed, but she undresses, he joins her, and "pumping slowly, he nailed her to the cross."1

The bare plot, as recounted here, is much more grim than the actual story in its entirety, for until the very ending with the revelation of Annamaria's sin, it is truly a wildly amusing tale. At any rate, "Still Life" may serve as a bitter reminder that hope remains as long as life does, for Fidelman has, in a perverse and unpalatable manner, gained the object of his desires by the very extent of his degradation.

Fidelman's role in the two stories discussed in this chapter is a markedly dichotomous one, for here Malamud has created a character capable of being both particular and prototypal. He is the sucker, the victim, the ne'er-do-well, whose every step is a wrong one, whose every act ends in failure. Yet because of Malamud's remarkable talent for revealing triumph in defeat, the reader is provided with an insight that exposes the

1Ibid., p. 56.
ultimate exaltation of a Fidelman. For if, as D. H. Lawrence once noted, "All art is au fond symbolic," then what Fidelman symbolizes is the extremities of human despair, and if the glories of life can be celebrated at those depths, surely the author has opened up marvelous vistas for the rest of humanity.¹

¹Quoted in classroom lecture by Dr. James Olney.
CHAPTER V

THE USE OF FANTASY

Not content with the intrinsic power of the three thematic motifs previously discussed, Malamud increases their impact by the incisive and carefully controlled introduction of elements of fantasy which operate as a metaphorical conveyance for his beliefs about the human condition. The use of the fantastic in conjunction with all three major themes—alienation, the quest for identity, and the sanctity of human life—serves to facilitate the reader's acceptance of Malamud's viewpoint.

Before discussing the function of fantasy, it is of importance to note how Malamud manipulates this element to give it maximum effectiveness. In every case the power of fantasy is enhanced by its juxtaposition with what appears to be the ultimate in straightforward realism. For example, when the talking Jewbird makes his entrance, is he introduced into a fairyland castle where the problems are those of the king and his eldest daughter? No, he is placed in the steamy apartment of a frozen food salesman, whose family had been plucked from their summer in Kingston, New York by the illness
of an aged grandmother in the Bronx. At every turn considera-
tions of the most commonplace are prominent. What
could be more lifelike than the assumption of Cohen,
whose son's mediocre school career is suddenly reversed
by one good report card, that "If he keeps us like this,
I'll get him in an Ivy League college for sure"?1

In "Angel Levine" the unaffected style for which
Malamud is noted becomes even more pronounced. Down-to-
earth descriptions like the following are included with
a definite purpose: "There were three rooms: a small,
poorly-papered living room; an apology for a kitchen,
with a wooden icebox; and the comparatively large bed-
room where Fanny lay in a sagging secondhand bed, gasping
for breath."2 Unpleasant this scene may be, but not
unbelievable or even uncommon. These determinedly mundane
descriptions serve as a contrapuntal background for the
elements of fantasy which are superimposed upon them in
the two stories already mentioned, as well as in "Take
Pity," "Idiots First," and "The Magic Barrel," all of
which are now ready to be examined from the standpoint
of fantasy as a metaphorical conveyance of theme.

1Malamud, Idiots First, p. 107.

2Malamud, The Magic Barrel, p. 43.
In "The Jewbird," the title creature functions as a concretization of the outsider, the victim of dislocation. The value of the fantastic expands here in direct contrast to the sternly realistic setting. For just as the apartment inhabited by the belligerent Cohen and his family seems to be the very essence of mundane actuality, so the figure of the talking bird, "Schwartz," assumes a semblance of verisimilitude. Yet by maintaining the aura of incredibility—the source of all that homespun philosophy is, after all, a bird!—the author lends universality and significance to what might in a more realistic personification have seemed merely a single sufferer. Malamud's use of a bird is especially appropriate, too, for like the potential for moral virtue inherent in human nature, so is a winged creature particularly fragile. Conversely, only the bird, like that which is best in mankind, possesses the awesome power to reach the heavens.

"Angel Levine" also utilizes incredibility as a positive force. Manishevitz's faith is subjected to the ultimate test when he is asked to accept a probationary angel with black skin and a purple suit. By reinforcing the already existing barriers between man and man with the added burden of a grotesque and fantastic agent,
Malamud places stress upon the need for human relationships regardless of the interference of alienating factors. It is in carrying his case to an impossible extreme that the author presents a guide for moral behavior in any situation.

And once Malamud has established his belief in the interrelatedness of all human beings, it is only a short step to the moral position that each man is defined by his concern for others. In "Take Pity" this aspect of the quest for identity is also examined through the use of fantasy. The meticulously plotted structure of the story permits only indirect references to the real nature of the setting, and not until the end of the tale does the reader recognize that Rosen is a dead man, and that his conversation with Davidow has taken place in limbo. Again, the fantasy is reinforced by the trappings of reality, for the room is an ordinary institutional type and the two men speak in casual language. However, Malamud makes his point by empowering Davidow with the duties of "census taker," and as Rosen recounts his determined attempts to aid Eva and her children, it is clear that the author means a man to be measured by the extent of his awareness of the responsibility he bears for his fellow beings.
In "The Magic Barrel" the agonizing search for identity is heightened by several unexplained sallies into the world of fantasy. Paralleling the young rabbi's attempt to plumb the mystery within his soul is his confrontation with the mystery of Salzman. The marriage broker assumes from the very beginning a magic quality. At their first meeting he "appeared one night out of the dark fourth-floor hallway," and from then on he seems to materialize and vanish as if attuned to Finkle's inner thoughts.\(^1\) After the initial session Finkle is so disturbed that he requires an entire day to calm himself, but as soon as he does so he finds that "almost at once there came a knock on the door."\(^2\) During his interview with Lily the potential bridegroom is haunted by the mystical presence of Salzman, "whom he uneasily sensed to be somewhere around, hiding perhaps high in a tree along the street, flashing the lady signals with a pocket mirror; or perhaps a cloven-hoofed Pan, piping nuptial ditties as he danced his invisible way before them, strewing wild buds on the walk and purple grapes in their path."\(^3\) When it begins to snow, Finkle speculates grimly

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 169.  
\(^2\)Ibid., p. 175.  
\(^3\)Ibid.
that even such natural phenomena are controlled by Salzman. Once more the marriage broker seems to sense his client's confusion and temporarily deserts him. As soon as the young man's composure is restored, however, the matchmaker is on the scene "that very night."\(^1\) Leaving a batch of photographs behind him, he disappears "as if on the wings of the wind."\(^2\) He is to be found, says his wife when Finkle goes in search, "in the air," yet by the time the rabbi arrives at his own room, Salzman has miraculously preceded him.\(^3\) The mystical quality with which the marriage broker is endowed symbolizes the magic force of love which overwhelms the young rabbi, and Finkle's pursuit of the mysterious little man is the counterpart of his quest for his own identity.

The final motif, that of the sanctity of human life, is in the tale "Idiots First" invested with the properties of fantasy in order to create a hallucinatory effect that intensifies the reader's consciousness of the suffering and pain concomitant with living, thus lending even greater exaltation to the heroic ability

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 181. \(^2\)Ibid., p. 182. 
\(^3\)Ibid., p. 185.
to rise above them. Mendel and his idiot son Isaac scramble across a frozen landscape, denied aid by most of those they approach and aware that such help as they do receive comes at great cost to the giver. It is a nightmare world in which man is deprived not only of optimism but even of stability. Resting briefly on a park bench, Mendel notices that the thick right branch of a certain tree is held aloft, while the thin left branch hangs down. Seconds later the two branches unaccountably become reversed. The meaning of this unnatural incident is clear to Mendel, who moans in sight. Nature and God seem hostile to the desperate father, after whom the Angel of Death, personified as a "bulky, bearded man" named Ginzberg, maintains a relentless pursuit. Finally, when it appears that there is no hope left at all for Mendel, he turns to Ginz in supplication. That bleak personage can merely reply that his responsibility is "to create conditions. I make what happens happen. I ain't in the anthropomorphic business." But Mendel, with Malamud, rejects this cold, naturalistic concept of life and by a terrific

1 Malamud, Idiots First, p. 13.

2 Ibid.
exertion of will succeeds in communicating to Ginzberg "what it means human."\footnote{Ibid., p. 15.} Surely the impact of this tale is magnified by the use of fantasy to convey the nightmare quality of life at its very worst so that Malamud's affirmation of its holiness seems even more impressive.
CHAPTER VI

THE SHORT STORIES AND THE NOVELS

The short stories have in common with the novels a multiplicity of thematic features, and while such overlap is to be expected, it does serve a useful purpose. For although it would certainly not be feasible to go into a protracted analysis of the longer works, it at least be profitable to take note of a few instances in which the short stories function not only as skeletons of the novels, but also as skeleton keys. For example, Malamud has joined several of the elements of "The Seven Years" (the poor assistant laboring for his life, the father who dreams of a "better" way of life for his child, the unworthy but superficially desirable university student, the daughter who prefers the employee the college swain) with "The Cost of Living" to for basis of the novel The Assistant. While this novel contains unique features that comprise its own particular splendor, it does share many similarities with the short story. The Tomashevskys in "The Cost of Living" are poor but hard-working storekeepers (along with Panessas of "The Bill," the Kalishes of "Take Pity, Tommy and Rosa of "The Prison"—autobiographical in
are in operation here, for Malamud's father was himself a storekeeper during the worst of the Depression) who like Bober in The Assistant are ruined by a competitor allowed into the neighborhood by a trusted friend.\(^1\) The brutal agony of their decline, which is merely intensified by brief periods of unwarranted hopefulness, is very much akin to that suffered by the Bobers. However, the quite revealing difference is that the longer and more fully developed work concludes on an optimistic note: whereas the Tomashefskys are bankrupted and forced out of the neighborhood, Bober's "assistant" takes his place and gives new life to the store and to the spirit of its previous owner.

Another short story which by its similarities as well as its differences emphasizes some of the significant points of a novel is "A Choice of Profession." Like A New Life the tale chronicles the experiences of a disillusioned Easterner who has uprooted himself and come to teach at a small Western college in the hope of altering his destiny. Perhaps in no more effective manner can the two works be compared than in the almost identical

\(^1\)Granville Hicks, "Generations of the Fifties: Malamud, Gold and Updike," Balakian and Simmons (eds.), op. cit., p. 217.
scenes where the professor-hero endures a conference to
discuss classroom work with a female student by whom he
is almost unbearably aroused (Cronin and Mary Lou, Levin
and Nadalee Hammerstad). Both men are attracted by
women who offer a chance of redemption and new directions,
and both women are flawed by past experience. Cronin,
however, cannot bring himself to accept the horrors of
Mary Lou's brutal past and not only rejects her himself,
but also, in a mixture of jealousy and fastidious scorn,
warns a colleague against her. Levin, choosing self-
sacrifice, attains a higher destiny by committing himself
to the soul-burdening and career-destroying bond with
Pauline.

The title of the short story, "The Prison," is a
direct reference to a frequent Malamudian theme. The
metaphor of imprisonment has been a factor in "The
Mourners" where Kessler peeking out of the door to his
room looked "like a corpse adjusting his coffin lid"\(^1\)
and in "The Cost of Living" Sam feels his heart beat like
"a wild bird that wanted to fly away."\(^2\) In "Naked Nude"
Fidelman is an actual captive, while in "Still Life" he

\(^1\)Malamud, The Magic Barrel, p. 21.

\(^2\)Malamud, Idiots First, p. 150.
cannot break the bonds of love that shackle him to Annamaria. Mitka, in "The Girl of My Dreams," is so dejected at the failure of his novel to reach publication that he "locked himself a prisoner" in his own room. This claustrophobic symbolism recurs in The Assistant where there are countless references to the grocery store as a prison or tomb, and the motif becomes, of course, a literal situation in The Fixer.

In "The Prison" Tommy detests his life, entombed in the candy store he loathes and chained to a wife who was forced upon him. His discontent creates in him "the sick-in-the-stomach feeling of being trapped in old mistakes." It seems to him that "no matter how hard you tried you made mistakes and couldn't get past them. You could never see the sky outside or the ocean because you were in a prison." His only pleasant memories are of his uncle Dom, who though he had actually served time in a real prison, has since his release left his new whereabouts a mystery to his family and has thus escaped the entanglements which burden Tommy. But reveries of childhood escapades with his beloved uncle are soured by

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1 Malamud, The Magic Barrel, p. 28.

2 Ibid., p. 87.  
3 Ibid., pp. 92-3.
the present reality, "the way his life had turned out." Even as a child Tommy had dreamed of "getting out" and away from the existence he was born to, and though he did at one time escape to Texas he found it "too much space," and so with perhaps a subconscious willingness, he returned to the prison for which he was destined.

Malamud provides several instances of schemes attempted by Tommy in order to earn extra money to finance another escape, and he speculates continually on "how far he could get on the fifty-five he had stashed away in the cellar." But his preoccupation with actual escape is interrupted by his unprecedented interest in reforming a Negro girl-child who has been stealing candy from him. The situation has special significance to him because he blames most of his present misery as stemming from petty crimes in his youth. Through his attempts to save the child from his kind of prison "before she got trapped and fouled up her life before it got started," he breaks the bonds of self which have restrained him. Unfortunately, in transcending the barrier he reckons

1 Ibid., p. 90.  
2 Ibid., p. 87.  
3 Ibid., p. 88.  
4 Ibid., p. 89.  
5 Ibid., p. 90.
without his wife, who discovers the theft and deals it in her own way. Tommy's attempt to escape from prison is thus unsuccessful, but he has at least made the effort by realizing that he is confined within himself, that freedom of a sort can be won through concern for others.

The full power of Malamud's use of the theme of confinement is employed in "The Prison," and perhaps the true nature of the theme is best evoked in these words of Robert Alter:

"Imprisonment . . . is seen here as a general image for the moral life with all its imponderable obstacles to spontaneous self-fulfillment: it is living in concern for the state of one's soul, which means knowing with an awful lucidity how circumscribed the will is in its ability to effect significant change, how recalcitrant and cowardly it can be, and shouldering the terrible onus of responsibility for one's acts, especially as they are implicated in the lives of others. The prison . . . is Malamud's way of suggesting that to be fully a man is to accept the most painful of limitations; those who escape these limitations achieve only an illusory, self-negating kind of freedom, for they become less than responsible human beings."

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1Robert Alter, "Malamud as Jewish Writer," Commentary, XLII (September, 1966), 73.
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

The short stories of Bernard Malamud, as exemplified by those in the two compilations, *The Magic Barrel* and *Idiots First*, are among the author's finest works, and on the basis of their own unique merits are without qualification worthy of the respectful attention of discriminating readers. The analysis of the tales has been approached in this thesis from the standpoint of their contribution to Malamud's philosophy concerning alienation, identity, and the sanctity of human life, and as such it has been of necessity an arbitrary examination, for each of the tales is actually engaged with at least two of these questions. However, even such a rigidly superimposed classification as this has yielded valuable insights to the understanding of Malamud's total philosophy.

The author concentrates upon the most poignant of themes and confronts them with a seriousness bordering upon solemnity—as one critic described it, "Malamud's fiction delineates the broken dreams and private grief of the spirit, the needs of the heart, the pain of loss,
the economy of love, "1—yet never fails to impress upon the reader a prevailing sense of zest and joy. This is perhaps most characteristic of Malamud's consideration of the dilemma of the human condition, that his work engenders an exultant confirmation of the richness of existence and an all-encompassing hopefulness about the future of mankind. Even when he reaches beyond the realm of human experience, it is only to reaffirm the values that lie within the grasp of man, for the element of fantasy is forever rooted in reality, and serves to intensify the impact of the three thematic bases--alienation, the quest for identity, and the sanctity of human life—which dominate the tales and combine to provide effective expression of the author’s fundamental convictions.

For what emerges finally from the consideration of these discrete elements in the short stories compiled in The Magic Barrel and Idiots First is a distinct and compelling moral attitude in which the three themes coalesce to create a spiritual principle much like the following: the individual can only comprehend the

essential meaning of the self by recognizing the kinship which binds him to the rest of humanity; this recognition effected, he then carries within himself the ethical obligation to act upon it by evidencing love, or at any rate, compassion, for those whose lives touch his; ultimately, he will in the perfect understanding of himself and his fellow human beings be endowed with the strength, courage, and dignity to endure the sufferings of this world and to achieve the fullest appreciation of the holiness of life.

This interpretation of Malamud's philosophy is given additional weight by his own explicit articulation of his sense of purpose:

It seems to me that [the writer's] most important task, no matter what the current theory of man, or his prevailing mood, is to recapture his image as human being as each of us in his secret heart knows it to be, and as history and literature have from the beginning revealed it. At the same time the writer must imagine a better world for men the while he shows us, in all its ugliness and beauty, the possibilities of this. In recreating the humanity of man, in reality his greatness, he will, among other things, hold up the mirror to the mystery of him, in which poetry and possibility live, though he has endlessly betrayed them. In a sense, the writer in his art, without directly stating it--though he may preach, his work must not--must remind man that he has, in his human striving, invented nothing less than freedom; and if he will devoutly remember this, he will understand the best way to preserve it, and his own highest value.

I've had something such as this in mind, as I wrote, however imperfectly, my sad and comic tales.

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