

ANNA GAWLIKOWSKA
(UNIwersytet Jagielloński)

HOW A GOY BECOMES A JEW: A CURIOUS CASE OF MALAMUD'S HERO IN SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

Bernard Malamud is an American Jewish writer, who, in his work, was much occupied with the themes of human struggle. As a Jew, he also felt strong attachment to the matters of Jewish identity and therefore created characters which are caught up in quests for self-definition (*The Assistant*, *The Natural*), freedom (e.g. short stories such as *Talking Horse*) or Kafkaesque fights against injustice (*The Fixer*). And though Frank Alpine, the main character of *The Assistant* fits the pattern well, he is also strikingly different from other Malamudian characters. This article is to investigate how he, a person with no particular identity, a non-Jew and not a Christian, deprived of morality but also yearning for moral constraints, yields to Judaism and finds inner depth, love and suffering – how he steps across the line from the side of goyishe to the one of Jewish. Bernard Malamud (1914–1986) was an American Jewish writer, who, along with Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, is counted as the representative of the “so-called” Jewish American Renaissance – 20th-century novelists who eagerly wrote (and, in case of Roth, still regularly write) about Jewishness and assimilation in American reality. Malamud’s works have won the acclaim of both critics and general public and his *The Natural* was adapted into a 1984 film starring Robert Redford. *The Fixer* (1966) won both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. In his obituary, *The New York Times* journalist wrote: “his work showed a regard for Jewish tradition and the plight of ordinary men, and was imbued with the theme of moral wisdom gained through suffering.”¹ His second novel, *The Assistant* (1957) is set in a working-class New

¹ “The New York Times”: <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/0426.html>, Accessed: 06.11.2012; M. Rothstein, *Bernard Malamud Dies at 71; Chronicled Human Struggle*, “The New York Times” 1986, s. 1.

York and tells the story of a haunted, bleary and unhappy Italian *isolato* – Frank Alpine – who comes to New York from San Francisco in search of wealth, better life and, subconsciously, integrity. As an aimless drifter and a petty criminal, he starts his journey in search of identity with robbing a grocery of Morris Bober, a kind old Jew who mastered suffering to perfection. Unaware of the robber's identity, good-hearted Bober decides to take Frank under his wing and appoints him to be his assistant in the run down store. Frank gets entangled in the life of the Bober family, falls in love with Helen, Morris's daughter, and steps on the path to salvation. Yet, nothing is as easy as it seems, as Frank undergoes a profound inner struggle with his "dark passenger;" Morris proves to be a failure in terms of real life; Helen rejects Frank's love; and the main protagonist, though he tries to escape the entombment of grocery, stays and takes over the business after Bober's death. Frank undergoes numerous changes in the process and his transformation leaves him on the threshold of self-definition and stability.

When he enters Bober's world, Alpine is restless and impatient. He is haunted by the sense of guilt for the robbery and wants to confess to embrace his morality once again, albeit he cannot overcome the past. Consequently, he experiences a constant inner fight between pangs of conscience and readiness to confess and a feeling that the path of crime will lead him to happiness. Yet, though he suffers, his tortured soul wallows in this suffering, he finds pleasure in guilt and misery, in moral masochism:

As he had at times in the past when he was doing something he knew he oughtn't to, so he kept on dropping quarters into his pants pocket... he would stop [stealing] for a few days then almost with relief go back to it.²

When he encounters Bober's kindness and daily suffering, Frank starts thinking his life through. He lacks definitive identity and "the short history of his life in the store is continually dominated by the yearning of a fractured personality to resolve and so «fulfill itself»."³ But unready to embrace it, yet still desiring to discover it, Frank fosters a false self-image. Though at times he perceives himself as a failure, his life of crime allows for a boost of his self-esteem and a creation of dreams of grandeur:

At crime he would change his luck, make adventure, live like a prince. He shivered with pleasure as he conceived robberies, assaults – murders if it had to be – each violent act helping to satisfy a craving that somebody suffer as his own fortune improved.⁴

² B. Malamud, *The Assistant*, New York 2000, s. 69, 71.

³ S. Richman, *Bernard Malamud*, New York 1966, s. 55.

⁴ B. Malamud, op. cit., s. 86.

As justification of such immoral desires Frank uses his rough experience and constant struggle for decent living conditions.

Apart from his dreams of notoriety, Frank's split self also pursues spiritual yearnings, embodied by St. Francis of Assisi, whom he sees as his ideal and authority. He admires the saint and identifies with him. Although it is obvious he cannot be as ascetic as the saint, he still becomes frustrated every time he leaves the path of morality. The novel's nature imagery – birds and roses – suggests that Frank can be associated with St. Francis (which is also pointed at by the author with the main character's name) but, still, his identification with saint is unrealistic and unattainable. In the course of the novel, both the reader and the hero find out that sainthood is not for Frank and St. Francis is not the most accurate embodiment of Frank's split self, rather an exaggerated representation of some aspect of his morality and his morality's cravings. St. Francis seems to be too easy of a path for Frank. He eventually finds his identification figure in Bober, but first, he needs to go down the more rocky way of discovering consideration, unconditional love and suffering, all of which will lead him to resurrection from spiritually empty life to the life of values; from shallow treatment of religion, to conscious choice of Judaism; from *goyische* to Jewish. Unfulfilled love for Helen adds up to Frank's restlessness. She is an idealistic girl of twenty-three who feels old, tends toward self-dramatisation, hates her life and wants to lead it differently than her parents do, outside the store. In her eyes, Frank is both interesting and repelling. She sees him as a chance of leaving the grocery, he makes her dream, but she cannot cope with the fact that he is not Jewish and his past is vague. She also senses his duality and the fact that he is not entirely honest with her:

He sometimes appeared to be more than he was, sometimes less. His aspirations, she sensed, were somehow apart from the self he presented normally when he wasn't trying though he was always more or less trying; therefore when he was trying less... Still, he hid what he had and he hid what he hadn't... Whatever he did there was more in it than he was doing. He was like a man with two minds. With one he was here, with the other someplace else.⁵

When Helen falls in love with Frank, she does not love the man he truly is, but the man she believes she can transform him into. She envisions him, with his nose straightened, his hair shorter and reading elevated literature; expects his feelings and devotion, but is bitterly disappointed when Frank violates her, unable to control his urges.

Frank's feelings towards Helen are also complex and reveal how incoherent his personality is. At first, he only lusts after her, than he falls in love. Not only

⁵ *Ibidem*, s. 114–115.

is he a criminal and a saint, assistant and a thief (and a robber for that matter), but he also is a lover and a rapist, a luster and a romantic. He loves Helen and cares for her, almost ready to give up his physical desire for the sake of emotions, but without much struggle gives in to sexual violence when opportunity presents itself.

For his stealing and lying, rape and tainted morality a moment of moral penance comes. After hurting Helen he is dismissed by Morris who discovers his frauds. And this is a moment when Frank's sense of guilt and self-loathing reach their climax:

He lay in bed with blankets pulled over his head, trying to smother his thoughts, but they escaped and stank. The more he smothered them the more they stank. He smelled garbage in the bed and he couldn't move out of it. He couldn't because he was it – the stink in his own broken nose. What you did was how bad you smelled.⁶

Overburdened with guilt, Frank finally realises he had idealised himself. "He planned to kill himself, at the same minute had a terrifying insight: that all the while he was acting like he wasn't."⁷

This breakdown leads Frank to his rebirth as a moral being. He starts performing good deeds without any calculation. He saves the life of Morris who tries to commit suicide. When Helen and Morris's wife, Ida, go to the hospital, Frank sneaks into the grocery and decides to stay there as long as necessary to help the family, proving his persistency. He supports the store with his own money to diminish the losses caused by the newly opened rival grocery and upon seeing a starving family that owes money to Bober, he spontaneously decides to give all his money to them.

His feelings towards Helen also change, which is marked with the use of flower imagery. When Frank first peeped at Helen naked in the bathroom, he saw her "breasts like small birds in flight, her ass like a flower."⁸ Later, when his inner change started, Frank dreams about Helen throwing a flower symbolising her love, but upon trying to pick it up, he realises that the flower disappeared, hence such emotional link never existed between them. He then tries to win Helen's forgiveness by carving a wooden bird and a rose for her, which she rejects. Then, Frank dreams that St. Francis turned his wooden rose into a living one and from him his love took it. The flower's transformation and Helen's acceptance symbolise the metamorphosis of Frank's lustful love into a higher ideal. Therefore, we might conclude that Frank's development and rebirth through

⁶ *Ibidem*, s. 164.

⁷ *Ibidem*, s. 155–156.

⁸ *Ibidem*, s. 71.

suffering continue and are fuelled by love, “which seems finally the only means of breaking through the barriers of self.”⁹

Albeit for Frank, this very love also means pain and it ultimately turns out that at the heart of his transformation lies the mystery of suffering, the very characteristic of Jewishness: “In suffering... Frankie undergoes changes which in time will transform him into a Jew.”¹⁰ The concept of redemptive suffering is rooted in Talmudic ethics, the “Jewish Law” that Morris tells Frank about. The young man is at first surprised how Jews can willingly take upon their shoulders so much pain but, after some time, he takes the very same pain upon his. Love equals suffering for Frank but also morality and it is the moral link that will eventually connect Frank to the Jewish denomination.

Malamud’s hero, who at the end of the story is ready to convert from Catholicism into Judaism, upon his first entering the Jewish neighbourhood, cannot understand and despises Jews and their victimisation:

What kind of a man did you have to be born to shut yourself up in an overgrown coffin and never once during the day, so help you, outside of going for your Yiddish newspaper...? The answer wasn’t hard to say – you had to be a Jew. They were born prisoners... What’s what they live for, Frank thought, to suffer.¹¹

Looking for answers, he turns to the embodiment of a Jew – Morris – asking: “What do you suffer for, Morris?” What is his awe, when the Jew replies: “I suffer for you.”¹² Surprisingly, in the course of time, suffering for others becomes Frank’s watchword as well and his self-induced torture of conscience leads him to choosing suffering as penance and a way of life. Marcus Klein comments on that: “In the sort of itchy neutrality, in a generalized need for discipline... he apprentices himself to a Jew... He learns to suffer. The suffering he comes to make his own is the more Jewish... because it is pure.”¹³

Frank evolves from a Catholic (though his Catholicism is only delicately hinted at in the text) and an anti-Semite into a Jew in the process of continuous transformation, yet, the very essence of Jewish suffering is still beyond his grasp: “suffering, he thought, is like a piece of goods. I bet the Jews could make a suit of clothes out of it.”¹⁴ To understand it, and later to adopt it, Frank approaches Morris. In his role of a teacher, the old Jew serves him as the torch of enlighten-

⁹ S. Richman, op. cit., s. 60.

¹⁰ Ibidem, s. 57.

¹¹ B. Malamud, op. cit., s. 81.

¹² Ibidem, s. 118.

¹³ M. Klein, *After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century*, New York 1962, s. 267–268.

¹⁴ B. Malamud, *The Assistant*, New York 2000, s. 219.

ment along the shadowy path of moral development. The assistant learns the power of virtue and charity that define Jews in the gentile world. As Morris puts it: "This [the Law] means to do what is right, to be honest, to be good. This means to other people. Our life is hard enough... For everybody should be the best, not only for you or me."¹⁵ Bober's ethics and moral existence mainly comprise of responsibility for and to other human beings. Acquiring his set of beliefs, Frank is able to commit himself to honest, deeper and profound interpersonal relationships: "[He] comes to see Helen less as a sexual object and more as a person to love and Morris less as a stereotypical Jew and more as a fellow human being."¹⁶ Frank's shift of perspective comes into being also due to Morris's teachings of the basics of Jewish existentialist philosophy of Martin Buber, the concept of "I-thou" correlation. Buber believed that all human relationships are built around the core awareness of the self, the "I," and the awareness of the other person, referred to as "thou." When an individual becomes able to construct deeper relationships of that kind, to commit honestly, he or she will get one step closer to the ultimate "Thou," meaning God. According to Helterman:

Though the individual can engage in more than one such I-thou relationship, the relationship always retains its dual, rather than plural, character. In such a relationship, it is impossible to shift responsibility or blame.¹⁷

What stems from such assumption in Malamud's world is the character's responsibility for another character. Therefore, to become a paragon of Malamud's hero, the protagonist must discover such responsibility and take it on his or her shoulders. When Frank changes his "I-it" attitude into "I-thou," via coming to appreciate Helen as a person, not a sexual object and Morris as a human being, not a stereotypical suffering Jew, as well as taking over the responsibility for weaker Bober and later, for his daughter and wife – he becomes a fully-fledged moral being.

Love, devotion and engagement lead Frank to understand suffering better. Through entering the "I-thou" pattern of relationships, he is ready to stop being a victimiser and starts to be a victim himself. Although, from the very beginning of the novel, imprisonment and entombment are metaphors of Judaism; being a Jew in itself is a form of endurance and endless frustration; the grocery store is described with the use of imagery of sepulchre; Frank agrees to resign from

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, s. 118.

¹⁶ C. Zlotnick-Woldenberg, *Bernard Malamud's The Assistant: A Study of Moral Regeneration in Light of Object Relations Theory*, "Pastoral Psychology" 1998, Vol. 46, No. 6, s. 464.

¹⁷ J. Helterman, *Understanding Bernard Malamud*, Columbia 1985, s. 9.

all other opportunities and chooses constant and, probably, hopeless suffering. At first sceptical about and despising Morris Bober, unable to understand the Jews, Frank reaches self-realisation when he redeems his dubious past and sins. With Morris's and Helen's help, he finally becomes aware of the necessary link between unselfish love, suffering and salvation which enables him to grow spiritually. During Morris's funeral, Helen throws a rose to her father's grave. When Frank leans over to see it, he falls into the hole and the act of his walking out of it is a symbolic completion of the process of his moral change and rebirth.

Upon Bober's death, Alpine replaces his mentor and becomes the grocery's owner and prisoner. What is more, he becomes the longed-for son that Morris missed, the son figure. To crown his transformation just after Passover, the Jewish New Year, Frank converts into Judaism officially: "One day in April Frank went to the hospital and had himself circumcised. For a couple of days he dragged himself around with a pain between his legs. The pain enraged and inspired him."¹⁸ Though, as a Jew, he becomes imprisoned within duties and obligations, behind these bars lies freedom of spirit derived from new life of a moral being.

Malamud constructs an original hero who wilfully connects himself to the Jewry, but apart from that, there is also a more intertextual connection between Frank and the Chosen People- – history of his life and development throughout the novel is a parallel of the history of the Jewish nation. Richman has described this pattern as "First, the Prophet's way of gentleness; the Sins of the People, Punishment, Exile and Return... the primal problem of a man seeking to escape the tragedy of the past."¹⁹ "The Prophet's way" part comprises of Morris's mundane daily grinds in the grocery store. When Frank appears in Bober's life, "the Sins of People" part begins, he takes part in the robbery. Then, he endures punishment for his wrongdoings, he suffers tremendous guilt, unfulfilled lust, struggles with his indefinite identity. After being caught by Morris on stealing when he stole what he gave back to afford a date with Helen, his "Exile" begins. He is fired from the grocery and Helen throws him out of her life. Frank's triple "Return:" to the store, to Helen and to morality takes place at the end of the novel. In the last chapter, Malamud "affirms the clerk's return and his assumption of Bober's identity... His return to the «Prophet's way of gentleness» is the identity of the prophet himself."²⁰

Throughout *The Assistant*, Malamud presents the reader with an idea that morality matters. His characters are soldiers on a moral battlefield who fight their battles of determining their identity and assuming responsibility for themselves and for others. His prose is Jewish to the very core, still, what lies under-

¹⁸ B. Malamud, op. cit., s. 234.

¹⁹ S. Richman, op. cit., s. 56.

²⁰ Ibidem, s. 64.

neath Malamud's characters' morality is not necessarily Judaism in its pure form; it is more likely – humanism. Morris Bober is not a strictly observant Jew, nor is Frank Alpine an observant Catholic (or, a Jew for that matter). Jewish tradition shapes Frank's conversion and influences the novel's central plot, but, "in reality, the author would have the reader understand that Morris's saintliness stems from the same sources as Frankie Alpine's worship of St. Francis."²¹ On the top of that, in *The Assistant* Judaism is not given the license for the only truth about goodness. Actually, Frank's transformation into a Jew is parallel to his acquiring moral characteristics of St. Francis, who comes from the Catholic tradition. The protagonist re-embraces some components of his Christianity when he decides to give it up and converts to Judaism. Moreover, the plot of the novel is framed with the natural (neither purely Catholic, nor Jewish) cycle of rebirth – it starts and ends in the spring. According to Richman, "what lies then at the heart of *The Assistant* is a ritual composed of fragments of myth, Catholicism, and Judaic thought – all pressed into the service of the author's «mystical» humanism."²²

And this is his "mystical humanism", as well as devotion to human condition and to mankind's fight on the battlegrounds of morality which make Malamud's novels so deeply touching. His heroes face uphill struggles to find their inner peace, are outsiders, *isolatos* and ever-wandering questers. They enter various surroundings and cultures and are tested on their values.

Yet, under closer scrutiny, the example of Frank Alpine shows that in this particular case, Malamud's hero's quest for identity is not well-justified in terms of psychology. It seems to result from external circumstances, not inner impulses. When Frank steals money from the grocery's cash register – he is dismissed. When he returns, Morris falls sick and Frank assumes his duties towards the family. He tries to make amendments only when Morris strikes the chord of his guilt. In addition, Frank's search is motivated by his yearning for stability and therefore his quest is more social than psychological. He thinks he will find both identity and safe haven in the world of Judaism because it is this denomination that appears to be more tangible, in his reach, and its tenants are easier to be understood thanks to the existence of a spiritual leader, Morris. Still, it is worth noting that Frank Alpine is changeable and inconsistent in his choices, which makes the novel's ending inconclusive – his transformation and conversion may only be temporary and his personal wholeness shallow.

As the reader is not presented with much of a psychological insight into the reasons of Frank's quest for identity and encounters some inconsistencies in his behaviour, he or she might assume that the very search for self results from coincidence, character's boredom with mundane life and aimlessness, or simply

²¹ Ibidem, s. 71.

²² Ibidem.

his inability to cope with the reality surrounding him. From that perspective, Frank is a curious incident of a goy becoming a Jew almost accidentally and due to extraneous events. Judaism and Jewishness, combined with elements of Christianity and humanism, seem to be good enough for the moment to serve the purpose of a framing for the shattered glass of the assistant's vague and mediocre identity.

JAK GOJ STAŁ SIĘ ŻYDEM: CIEKAWY PRZYPADEK MALAMUDOWSKIEGO BOHATERA POSZUKUJĄCEGO TOŻSAMOŚCI

Artykuł analizuje ewolucję bohatera powieści *Asystent* Bernarda Malamuda jako drogę do żydowskości. Frank Alpine, główny bohater utworu, jest nieszczęśliwym i zagubionym imigrantem włoskiego pochodzenia, który znajduje pracę i schronienie u żydowskiej rodziny Boberów. Tytułowy asystent jest drobnym przestępcą, który zaczyna poszukiwanie własnej tożsamości od okradnięcia sklepu spożywczego Morrisa Bobera i zakochania się w jego córce, Helen. Nie mając żadnego celu w życiu, Frank poszukuje wytycznych, które dostarczyłyby mu odpowiedzi na pytanie, jak żyć. Jego podróż zdefiniowana zostaje przez silne żydowskie przekonania i surowy system moralny Morrisa Bobera, które to doprowadzają do ostatecznej zmiany osobowości Franka. Podobnie jak bohaterowie innych powieści Malamuda, po licznych perypetiach Frank ulega przemianie, dzięki której osiąga (częściowe) samookreślenie i stabilność. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest pokazanie, że judaizm i żydowskość w połączeniu z elementami chrześcijaństwa tworzą wartości humanistyczne, które są charakterystyczne dla Malamuda – wartości, które pozwalają Frankowi Alpine'owi odrodzić się jako istocie moralnej – przejść przemianę z goja w żyda.

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