

NEW MILLENNIUM CHRONICLES

A LITERARY ODYSSEY

Editors

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New Millennium Chronicles: A Literary Odyssey

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CHAPTER 7

Patriarchal Domination in Malamud's *The Assistant*

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Malamud is concerned with man's lack of commitment in contemporary life; his purpose is to re-establish the moral obligation all men have towards society. The individual's maturity and communal responsibility are the two crucial elements which form the basis for this moral imperative. He emphasizes that before man can realize the full implications of his responsibilities, he must define and reaffirm the basic values of humanity; in other words, he must accept the idea of commitment towards all other men.

In *The Assistant* the father-son ritual is the vehicle which expresses Roy's confrontation and defeat. This pattern is essential to the novel as it is in all Malamud's novels because it means by which the protagonist rises to heroism or sinks to defeat. By rejecting both Pop, his father, and Iris the symbol of his paternity, Roy shows that he cannot accept the moral obligation which is required. He renders himself both fatherless and childless and retreats isolated into the pain of his past. This acceptance and replacement of a surrogate father along with acceptance of personal paternity is a necessity for

Malamud, but Roy denies the pattern. Richman reinforces this idea by concluding that, "the process which turns the lover into a father in all of Malamud's novels the basis for redemption generally; and in case it can be altered. Before the hero can win through, he must submit to this final trial of love." Roy fails this test, achieves no new identity and loses his heroic status.

At the beginning of the novel Frank Alpine is a variation of the Roy Hobbs character, but at the end of the novel he has radically reformed his character in a way Roy never does. The key to the learning process, and indeed the crucial element in Malamud's moral philosophy, is wisdom through suffering. Roy operates at one end of the Malamud spectrum because he will not deny his basic impulses for the greater good of his duties to society. Frank, on the other hand, originates in selfishness and then proceeds to a total redefinition of his personality through sacrifice.

The Pearls, Sam and Nat, are on the surface the closest approximation of Malamud's ideal love-sacrifice relationship between father and son. Sam scrimps and saves in a commendable manner to allow his industrious son the privilege of higher education, and his reward is apparently a successful, ambitious heir. In reality, however, Nat Pearl is merely a superficial, egotistical phony whose selfishness is illustrated by his encounter with Helen. There is no real learning, no wisdom through suffering in Pearl relationship. The empty father produces an empty son who in his self-centeredness becomes only one more parasite on society. Nat's greatest flaw is his inability to love someone else; because of this, he will never be able to achieve the moral heroism which defines Frank's new life.

The key to the father-son pattern in the novel is the moral quality of both Frank and Morris. Their relationship, particularly as seen in relation to those of

the Minogues, Pearls, and Karps, is exemplary because of its adherence to the ritual pattern of replacement and rebirth. In of higher education, and his reward is apparently a successful, ambitious heir. The empty father produces an empty son who in his self-centeredness becomes only one more parasite on society. Nat's greatest flaw is his inability to love someone else; because of this, he will never be able to achieve the moral heroism which defines Frank's new life.

The father-son relationship which figures prominently in the novel functions primarily as a structural device but also as a vehicle for the expression of Malamud's theme. Both heroes and sons follow the ritual pattern up to a point. The differences between these themes merge as one breaks the father-son pattern and fails to attain his personal identity. The other fulfills the ritual and is rewarded with spiritual success although his material status remains questionable.

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