The dominant and pervasive theme in modern literature is the annihilation or loss of self under the pressure of a nihilistic world. Disillusioned with the chaotic conditions around us, the present-day writer projects the modern culture as hostile to mankind. It isolates man, forces him to recoil into himself, and reduces him to nothingness. It erodes his faith in his spiritual self and fills him with doubt and despair. The contemporary protagonist turns out to be a pathetic being struggling to preserve his individuality in the face of overwhelming forces of a vast, impersonal world. The pressures corrode confidence, dwarf him into insignificance, and put him in a passive stance incapable of any positive action. His efforts to assert his will seem doomed to failure; indeed, all that he can do is to keep himself from going underground and into annihilation. Dostoevski's "Underground Man," quite appropriately, describes man as an ant in an ant heap.¹

Thus most modern literature conditions us to accept the idea that a man's limitations are the main truth about him. It denigrates the individual, seeing all persons as essentially marginal disaffiliates. Moreover, it portrays ordinary life as trivial and banal, conventional or mechanical, and dismisses men as leading inauthentic, second-hand lives.
However, though the hero has undoubtedly degenerated into a little man by sociological standards, many writers feel that morally he is still capable of great strength. Most of the American-Jewish writers project such an affirmative stance. Saul Bellow comments: "It's obvious to everyone that the stature of characters in modern novels is smaller than it once was. ... I do not believe that the capacity to feel or do can really have dwindled or that the quality of humanity has degenerated. I rather think that people appear smaller because society has become so immense." With Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and other Jewish writers in mind, Max Schulz says, "This willingness to accept the world on its own terms — disorderly, incoherent, absurd ... and yet without losing faith in the moral significance of human action, underlies the confrontation of experience in the best of contemporary Jewish American novels."³

Malamud, while acknowledging the denigrating forces of society — the sterility, separatism, indiscipline, cultural and psychological upheaval, attacks the literary tradition of despair, alienation and the negation of self. He rejects the devaluation of the ordinary individuals and tries to show in his fiction the possibilities for finding meaning in such lives. Despite all odds Malamud affirms his faith in man's ability to "make it." The "unreality" of modern life exercises a brutal power which the hero can attempt to conquer but cannot evade. Malamud's protagonists stand up against the demoralizing forces not by ignoring them but
resolutely facing up to them and finding strength to live morally in spite of them. Nihilistic forces reduce man to insignificance but he can prove his worth by maintaining his dignity in spite of all afflictions and by seeking value and order in his life. "There are unseen victories all around us," states Malamud, "it is a matter of plucking them down," by striving hard and with courage.

Bernard Malamud himself affirms his stance as an artist: "My work, all of it is an idea of dedication to the human. That's basic to every book. If you don't respect man, you cannot respect my work: I'm in defence of the human." Time and again Malamud has complained that American fiction "is loaded with sickness, homosexuality, fragmented man. ... We are underselling man." Unhappy with the negative trend of modern fiction, Malamud asserts, "I am quite tired of the colossally deceitful devaluation of man in this day. ... The devaluation exists because he accepts it without protest." In his own novels Malamud consciously upholds the sanctity of life and affirms man's ability to overcome the dehumanizing forces of the world and reassert his spiritual self. Conscious of the fact that much of current fiction is "underselling man," Malamud defines the purpose of a writer as "to keep civilization from destroying itself." He firmly believes that "Art, in essence, celebrates life and gives us our measure."

Thus, as per his commitment, Malamud portrays "against the unquestionable dwarfing forces of modern society, the honest,
often successful struggle of the individual striving to define himself as a man within a narrow range of active possibilities." He believes that man is basically good, however lowly the circumstances of life may have made him. Each can redeem himself because each has the capacity to do so through suffering. In an interview in 1964 Malamud said, "A bad reading of my work would indicate that I'm writing about losers. One of my most important themes is a man's hidden strength. I'm very much interested in the resources of the spirit, the strength people don't know they have until they are confronted with a crisis."

Malamud in his fiction projects something of the paradoxical condition of contemporary man in America. The hero who emerges brings with him both the helplessness of man in the face of the forces of dehumanization, mechanization and conformity and the hopefulness, as futile as it may seem, of triumphing over these very forces. The hero is caught in a now familiar existential dilemma: man victimized by a world he never made and yet yearning for transcendent power and a privately satisfying sense of self. Ihab Hassan's rebel-victim is Bernard Malamud's and Philip Roth's typical hero for he combines in one paradoxical figure both the victim hero and the self-asserting hero.

Malamud creates a hero "who realizes the confusion and absurdity of modern (America) society but who, instead of rejecting the society, is determined to discover a truthful way of action in it." Malamud's heroes are dedicated to the "imperatives of self." They strive for a fate good enough to
fulfil a sense of a privately satisfying self. Their quest is personal but they must make it through the recognizable social world. They confront the oppressive forces that undermine their active quest for spiritual selfhood. The confrontation between the hero (activist or victim) and the world, between an individual and the shaping forces in public life, is central to the fiction of Bernard Malamud.

The ultimate achievements of the Malamudian hero, are ambiguous. In any event, a quest for freedom, a commitment to the imperatives of self, does not necessarily and inevitably bring productive results. However, what is laudable is their courage to try and forge a personal identity in the face of worldly schemes. The breakthrough they achieve, however negligible, is by a desperate act of will.

Unlike Philip Roth whose presentation of character shows a perceptible shift towards victimization, absurdity and satire in his latter fiction, Malamud has moved from the closed-structure tale to the open-structured novel and from the victim hero to the activist hero. Moreover, in his earlier fiction, Malamud projects very-sharply defined tendencies. In them the making of a moral man is what stimulates his creative imagination — a rather narrow imaginative range but at which he achieves maximum success. His "best work is built around a few obsessive metaphors and situations." It is this essentially didactic imagination which gets him typed as a moral allegorist. But with Malamud's
In this study of Bernard Malamud's novels, I intend to trace in each the hero's quest for self-realization and moral resolution and the measure of success he achieves in his efforts. I shall make a novel-by-novel study of the moral evolution of the hero. Each hero proceeds towards moral enlightenment, from a morally deficient being. In this study an attempt will also be made to trace a pattern of development from novel to novel with particular reference to the theme of suffering.

At the narrative, surface level Malamud's subject-matter is divergent in each novel. It ranges from an ace baseball player in The Natural, to a poor grocer struggling to make both ends meet during the depression days in The Assistant. From the life of a teacher in a small state college in A New Life, to the rigours of imprisonment a Jew undergoes while awaiting trial for a false accusation of murder in The Fixer. In Pictures of Fidelman: An Exhibition a self-confessed failure as a painter comes to Italy in a quest of artistic fulfilment; likewise in The Tenants Lesser pursues fulfilment through art. He struggles with a novel for which, because it parallels his own life, he can find no ending. Malamud's next novel Dubin's Lives has an aging biographer of Thoreau and D.H. Lawrence combat middle-age and unseemly lusts.
The surface story is usually about a modern quest for a more prosperous life and the failure of such a quest. Beneath each story of defeated ambitions lies the theme of moral growth of the hero through his experiences. Malamud himself affirms that he chooses to "go along the same paths in different worlds" and though the locale differs in different novels his moral vision remains consistent. The basic theme in each novel is derived "from one's sense of values, it's a vision of life, a feeling for people — real qualities in imaginary worlds." Caught between materialistic and idealistic imperatives, the hero is made to realize his moral obligations. As Marcus Klein says, "Morality is simply the name of the discipline. ... The story to be told, consequently, is of the hero who becomes heroic either by rising to acceptance of moral obligation or descending to it."  

Malamud's primary concern is with the hero's quest for a meaningful "new life." The theme is based on the experience of rebirth. Man fails but is given a chance to redeem himself by accepting his fate (for better or for worse) and within it transcending his weak self, to become an integrated self. The stress in the process to maturity falls on making the hero realize his humanity which is shrouded by egoism and expediency. In self-transcendence lies the protagonist's heroism.  

The moral evolution of the hero is pinpointed by the quest motif which underlies Malamud's fiction. "His characters go on
a journey in search of experience, romance... a new life. This is, of course, a classic mode in serious or tragic literature from Oedipus to Heart of Darkness where the spiritual or physical journey begins in innocence and ends in experience or tragic self-knowledge." Malamud's heroes must also learn to "move from blind self-being to self-revelation and reality." ¹⁶

Thus Malamud's basic theme is the "possibility of human salvation and identity through a consciously constructed personal ethics." ¹⁷ All Malamud's heroes have, at first, purely materialistic aspirations. All of them seek to break through their mediocre lives, the limitations of their unfulfilled lives. Each envisions his future in terms of the American myth of wealth and fame. However, Malamud's theme of spiritual salvation demands that the characters realize the illusory nature of their romantic preoccupations with a new life. Humanistic values rather than materialistic values must govern their lives if they seek salvation. They must learn to discipline themselves and thus transcend their selfish desires for such desires are self-destructive. It is through a painful process that the heroes are initiated into the reality of life. The process of initiation is both slow and painful but at the same time it is a comic experience. From selfish concerns the hero must pass into a life of involvement and responsibility towards others. From egocentric concerns he must proceed to ego-denial. He is expected to make his own covenant with others based on love and compassion. It is through love and suffering for others that the hero can achieve self transcendence.
Malamud's novels, indeed, are allegories of suffering. An archetypal Malamud hero does not seek suffering but suffering is his fate nonetheless. He is the ironic victim of circumstances and of his own follies, and yet, it is through suffering that the hero grows in compassion. Regarding suffering as a subject in his fiction, Malamud has said: "I'm against it, but when it occurs why waste the experience?" Suffering is an inevitable lot of mankind, therefore when it occurs, we must adopt a pragmatic attitude towards it and try to make the experience meaningful.

Malamud's general theme is, as Ducharme says, "redemption through suffering endured out of love." In his fiction to love another is to suffer for him. It is an expression of oneness with others in their fate or loss. Malamud almost automatically identifies suffering with goodness and both these with Jews. Yet paradoxically, suffering is common to all; therefore, it makes all men alike. There is nothing particularly Jewish about the experience, but then Malamud has said that all men are Jews though few of them know it.

As a writer who is a Jew and who generally writes about Jews, Malamud states, "Jewishness is important to me, but I don't consider myself only a Jewish writer" and "I have interests beyond that and I feel I'm writing for all men." Though his work is related to his Jewishness, Malamud asks for a literary rather than a narrowly, religious evaluation of his fiction; as a social
realist, he takes as his domain the society that he has seen and known — which includes, but is not limited to Jewish life, and as a humanist he is spurred by what Saul Bellow calls, "the legacy of humanism."  

Malamud is a humanist whose concerns are broadly moral and social; his artistic vision though rooted in the particularities of Jewish life, extends outwards to the common humanity shared by all men. In an interview with E.H.L.Masilamoni, Malamud said, "I write about the marginal Jew who manages to be influenced by the concepts of morality which incidentally are Jewish but not only Jewish."  

Thus Malamud's moral vision draws sustenance from the Jewish ethnicity and is within the Jewish tradition, yet it is broadly humanistic rather than narrowly religious, for it concerns the need for love, charity and selflessness. As Philip Roth has aptly put it, Jews in Malamud's fiction "are Malamud's invention, a metaphor of sorts to stand for certain possibilities and promises."  

What we have, then, is a fiction whose flavour and frame of reference are often Jewish, but whose meaning extends through and beyond the confines of the Jewish experience. Malamud is able to merge the Jewish plight with the existential plight, for, a Jew's sense of rootlessness, persecution, exile and his quest for identity makes him an archetype of the fragmented modern man.
seeking purpose in life. The Jew becomes a metaphor for the oppressed struggling to withstand the indignities of the modern world. Norman Podhoretz says, "To Malamud, the Jew is humanity seen under the twin aspects of suffering and moral aspiration. Therefore, any man who suffers greatly and who also longs to be better than he is, can be called a Jew." Malamud's Jews have roots in the schlemiel-schlimazel figure of the Jewish folk traditions. He is "vulnerable, ineffectual in his efforts at self-advancement and self-preservation, he emerged as the archetypal Jew, especially in his capacity of potential victim." Malamud's earlier heroes especially fit the role of the schlemiel character. Victimized and self-victimizing, they seem to fulfill their destiny by suffering and their main qualities are humiliation, passivity and poverty. Their fate is pitiable but hardly tragic. Their experiences are simultaneously desperate and comic. Yet, their reactions to their plight elevates them to a position of dignity; they find sustenance in their never failing hope and their innocence.

Malamud's third novel, A New Life initiates a new phase in the writer's portrayal of the hero, but it is in The Fixer that we see Malamud's most developed protagonist. The new hero is not a passivist. He refuses to accept his victimization as total. He is purposeful in his confrontation with the forces which try to bind him into being a victim. The protagonist defies
the prevailing conditions and pursues some project of an ideal despite the fact that the final outcome of his efforts is failure. He raises the possibility of a new kind of morality and a new kind of heroism, raging, impotent, and yet, expressing a moral refusal to yield to the enveloping perversity. "The new activist hero remains to the end an intrepid opportunist of the self. He is an eager, insatiable explorer of his own private experience, always on the alert in Augie March's phrase for 'A fate good enough' to vindicate the energy spent on the exploration." In him we deal with not "The Jew's story of suffering nor with the Jew's discovery of an identity in his group, but with modern man's dilemma." His particular experience is not Jewish, it is the experience of any victim of injustice. He suffers as a human being with no special reference to his Jewishness. He may be identified with the American who is on a search for values and for his true identity.

In the works subsequent to The Fixer, we find Malamud changing on us. He betrays anxiety and despair at our unhappy situation in this chaotic world. He paints a demoralizing picture and he is seemingly negative in his moral vocabulary. Yet, his heroes in Pictures of Fidelman: An Exhibition and The Tenants are shaped with a single moral intention in mind — a radical need to re-invent moral possibilities where there seems no scope for such possibilities. By emphasizing the inability of such protagonists to grow in heroic stature (as
did Malamud's protagonist in *The Fixer*) due to their deficient character, the novelist implicitly establishes a critique of the values and norms of our society that undermine heroic action. Nonetheless, the novels go back to the basic plot of the best of Malamud's early stories: "the confrontation of the insulated self with the *acher*, its repressed 'other,' the antiself which irresistibly breaks down its defences against experience, often catastrophically but usually also redemptively."29

*Dubin's Lives* presents a new completeness and fluidity. No moral strictures are imposed on the protagonist; it is through his unhappy experiences that the protagonist comes to moral awareness. "Malamud pursues his favourite myth of moral exigency without resort to folklore or to easy affirmations of packaged morality."30 Thus, it is Malamud's most naturalistic and least schematic of all his work. Nonetheless, it is the old Malamud in a new garb.

Thus, contrary to the modern trend in fiction of regression and disintegration of man, Malamud writes parables of man's capabilities to redeem himself. Well aware of the dubious lot of man in the present-day impersonal world, Malamud still declines the defeat of the human spirit in an individual. Man suffers no doubt, but by making a few adjustments to the world, he can still find joy in life. Unable to change the world, the protagonist learns to change himself to accommodate with the world and retain his own individual identity as a moral man.
The late arrival of *God's Grace*, Malamud's latest novel, prevented me from devoting a chapter to it. I regret the exclusion as the novel marks an important phase in Malamud's treatment of the theme of the necessity of moral growth in man. However, I have attempted a brief study of it in an appendix.


14 Daniel Stern, p. 51.


26 Ruth R. Wisse, p. x.


