CHAPTER II

THE ASSISTANT

The Assistant, Malamud's second novel, further promotes the thematic ideas the author had initiated in The Natural. In the first novel Malamud had projected the dualities which operate within man and how awareness of one's weaknesses leads to the possibility of overcoming them, thus, promising a less painful future. In The Natural, Roy gains knowledge of the contradictions within him by the end of the novel. Frank Alpine, the protagonist of The Assistant, is aware of the conflicting impulses from the very beginning. However, he finds it exceedingly difficult to overcome his evil self and assert his better self.

The Natural is a story of a baseball player's unwilling and painful journey to self-affirmation and moral growth. Likewise, "in his guilt-wracked efforts to escape the determinism of his own past and the countering claims of the will, the assistant confronts on almost every level, but in a new dimension, the same cycle of experience that shapes the morality of The Natural."

The Assistant is a probing study of a weak man's painful endeavours to become a strong, principled man. In keeping with Malamud's statement, "I am quite tired of the colossally deceitful devaluation of man in this day," the novel is "an affirmation
of man's ability to realize himself even in the face of deprivation and disaster.\textsuperscript{3}

In a note for the Norwegian translation Malamud wrote, "the apprentice character interested me, as he has in much of my fiction, the man who as much as he can in the modern world, is in the process of changing his fate, his life."\textsuperscript{4} Thus, though the story is of a gentile's conversion into a Jew, it is not about Judaism. It is simply a story of one man's efforts to change himself into a better person. From a petty thief and an un­disciplined person he struggles to be honest and responsible.

Just as Roy travels east with the high hope that he is due for something big, Frank Alpine has "lately come from the West, looking for a better opportunity."\textsuperscript{5} Frank is a drifter without a home and without values (except for some good intentions which he does not know how to put into practice). Uptill now "his life was mostly made up of lost chances" (p.34). His old life having come to nothing, Frank seeks to start afresh with a new self and a new moral consciousness. Like all Malamud's protagonists, he is a lonely man trying to create for himself an identity. "Let bygones be gone.... From now on he would keep his mind on tomorrow.... He would change and live in a worth-while way" (p.142), Frank thinks. Though a weak, frustrated character, he is in search of "something worth while" (p.30), — of a set of values or "a discipline" which will give purpose to his life. Thus, unlike Roy, Frank's ambition is not self-centred and egoistic; he wants to be a better human
being and seeks to transcend his old self. The process of reformation is a painful process, full of trials. Frank must acknowledge his past mistakes and atone for them. He must discipline himself.

Nevertheless, despite Frank's keen desire to do good, he cannot resist indulging his baser instincts. He desires a "new life" yet (being an undisciplined person) looks for it by becoming a criminal: "he had this terrific idea that he was really an important guy, ... meant for something a whole lot better....Then when he asked himself what should he be doing, he had another powerful idea, that he was meant for crime" (p.84). At crime, he feels, "he would change his luck, make adventure, live like a prince. He shivered with pleasure as he conceived robberies, assaults ... each violent act helping to satisfy a craving that somebody suffer as his own fortune improved" (p.84). This is how he comes to gang up with Ward Minogue to rob "the Jew's grocery store." (Frank shows anti-Semitic inclinations in the beginning). Yet, during the hold-up when Ward hits the hapless Jew, Frank realizes that he has "made the worst mistake yet, the hardest to wipe out" (p.85) and "his plans of crime lay down and died" (p.85). He suffers pangs of guilt and to quiet his conscience he goes back to the grocery to work for its Jewish owner. For penitence he becomes Morris' assistant without pay. He won't stay there long, he promises himself: "I'm only staying there till I figure out what's my next move" (p.88). While Morris lies in bed, recuperating from
the injury inflicted by Ward, Frank makes sincere efforts to
increase the income of the grocery. The grocery becomes the
avenue of his slow and painful change to the better. The two
factors which get Frank going on the right path are his own
guilty conscience at having robbed Morris, and the grocer's
kindness towards him when he lay starving and frozen in the
cellar.

That this lowly fellow's deepest desire is to be good
(even though he is not fully conscious of it), is obvious in
his adoration of St. Francis who has been the subject of his
romantic admiration since childhood: "For instance, he [St.
Francis] gave everything away that he owned, every cent, all
his clothes off his back. He enjoyed to be poor. He said
poverty was a queen and he loved her like she was a beautiful
woman" (p.31). Goodness attracts Frank the way wealth and fame
attract Roy. He says of St. Francis: "Every time I read about
somebody like him I get a feeling inside of me I have to fight
to keep from crying. He was born good, which is a talent if
you have it" (p.31).

It is through the mirror images that Malamud projects
Frank's awareness of the duality within him. The cracked mirror
in which Frank's image is reflected makes him conscious of the
conflict in his mind. The extremes of goodness and evil to which
he wavers, make Frank "afraid to look into the mirror for fear it
would split apart and drop into the sink" (p.78). Frank's
confrontation of self in the mirror is important because self-awareness is the first step to change and development of the self. From an irresponsible, compulsively evil person, Frank gradually becomes good, self-sacrificing and responsible.

On the symbolic level, the other characters in the novel are the archetypes of the good and evil aspects of Frank's personality. It is through his relationship with the other characters that Frank learns to overcome his weak self and assert his moral self. His association with Ward Minogue, Morris Bober and Helen help him achieve self-perception and thus develop from egocistic pre-occupations to commitment towards others. Ward is the archetypal symbol of his own evil self. The criminal tendencies in Frank's character get expression through Ward. At his instigation Frank participates in the hold-up. Likewise, "if there had been no Ward Minogue, there would have been no assault" (p.211) on Helen by Frank. The only good outcome of Frank's interaction with Ward is that he begins to recognize the evil aspect of his psyche and in a bid to reject the evil in his nature Frank breaks off from Ward and turns towards Morris and Helen (symbols of his better self). Both father and daughter will be instrumental in altering his attitude towards others and in becoming a better person himself.

In Morris Bober, Frank finds such goodness and poverty as he had admired in St.Francis. Frank is attracted by Morris' endurance of all hardships that befall him, his acceptance of his
fate and above all his kind compassion for others — all the legendary virtues associated with the Jew.

Morris in the role of guide to apprentice hero demonstrates some such qualities which Frank will adopt once he begins to reform. As the luckless owner of an unprofitable grocery, Morris labours sixteen hours a day and yet barely manages to eke out a living for his family. Even though materialistically a poor man, he is spiritually rich. His goodness is evident in his kind-hearted charity; he lives for others. He has for years got up before dawn just because a Polish woman wants her three-cent roll at that time and he felt it was his responsibility to cater to her need. The sour-faced Polishch does not even acknowledge his act of kindness and is almost insolent towards him because he is a Jew.

Morris, being good himself, prefers to believe that all others are good too. He trusts all in spite of the fact that his trust has often been betrayed by his "friends." Karp rents his spare shop to a delicatessen, knowing full well that it will kill Morris' business. Charlie Sobeloff, his old partner in business, builds his own business at the cost of complete ruin for Morris. Helen when she compares her father's low estate with the successful Karp, says:
The grocer on the other hand, had never altered his fortune, unless degrees of poverty meant alteration, for luck and he were, if not natural enemies not good friends.... He was Morris Bober and could be nobody more fortunate. With that name you had no sure sense of property, as if it were in your blood and history not to possess, or if by some miracle to own something, to do so on the verge of loss. At the end you were sixty and had less than at thirty. It was, she thought, surely a talent (p. 19).

At another time she reflects, "Poor Papa; being naturally honest, he didn't believe that others come by their dishonesty naturally. And he couldn't hold on to those things he had worked so hard to get. He gave away, in a sense, more than he owned. ... He made himself a victim" (p. 20).

Morris Bober is the schlemiel figure of the Jewish folk tradition. He has a talent for attracting bad luck. Misfortune was the grocer's lot: "if Morris Bober found a rotten egg in the street, it was already cracked and leaking" (p. 134), and "if Morris earned a dime he lost it before he could put it into his torn pocket" (p. 135). Morris is inept and unfortunate and therefore "his troubles grew like bananas in bunches" (p. 134). He suffers many indignities but he accepts everything with resignation. When the two robbers beat up Morris, "he fell without a cry. The end fitted the day. It was his luck, others had better" (p. 28). Yet he manages to retain some sort of stubborn dignity. His life of values only goes to show the lack of them in the world he lives in.
Morris' wholehearted charity is obvious in the way he extends credit to his customers even when he can ill-afford to do so and, moreover, is sure that he is not going to be repaid. As always his goodness of heart overpowers his practical resolve to be more tough in demanding repayment. In the story "The Prison" the impoverished grocer Tommy Castelli's kindness to a little thieving girl is repaid by her sticking out her tongue at him. "Obviously, kindness or generosity makes man vulnerable and ashamed." Likewise, Morris gives credit to the little girl, "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." Amidst surrounding degradation and dishonesty Morris stands out for his humanity.

Frank genuinely admires such goodness in Morris but still continues to be bad himself. "He is like a man with two minds" (p.110) — an unintegrated man. His good impulses clash constantly with his bad ones. "He is not bad; it is only that he finds it prohibitively difficult to be as good as he would wish — a saint's good. This is the essential paradox of his existence: he meant to do good yet compulsively continues to do harm." Frank has become the grocer's assistant out of guilt for his part in robbing and assaulting Morris. He continues to be an assistant because he continues to add to the burden of his guilt by his misdoings. In spite of the sincerity of his repentance and the
pangs of conscience he suffers, Frank cannot resist pilfering from the grocer's register and lusting after Helen. Morris tells him "'When a man is honest he don't worry when he sleeps. This is more important than to steal a nickel.' Frank nodded. But he continued to steal.... There were times stealing made him feel good" (p.78). Frank exhorts himself "to be honest. Yet he felt a curious pleasure in his misery, 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" (pp.64-65). Still, while the baser self encourages him to steal, the better half of Frank makes him keep account of the money stolen; he intends to return it to Morris at some later date. Likewise, he climbs up the air shaft to look at Helen in the bath; yet, his excitement at what he might see merges with the thought that "it was a mistake to do it" (p.70). He feels greedy as he gazes at the naked Helen, "But in looking he was forcing her out of reach, making her into a thing only of his seeing, her eyes reflecting his sins, rotten past, spoiled ideals, his passion poisoned by his shame" (p.70). "Guilty of imperfection (the presumption of the romantic hero), he debases himself as penance. ... Since he wants more than anything else to be a good man, his crimes are a means of self punishment, each time he pockets money from Morris' register, he torments himself with guilt."9 Thus, we see that he indulges his weak self and then torments himself. "Sometimes he went around with a quiet grief in him, as if he had just buried a friend and was carrying the fresh grave within him"
(p.78). He lives in a "climate of regret" (p.171) and yet cannot restrict his evil self. That Frank has the basic sense to distinguish between his evil and good actions and is willing to improve himself in itself makes his redemption possible.

Besides all this, Frank stays on because under the good influence of Morris he has begun to change. He becomes increasingly involved with the life of the Bobers and under the tutorship of Morris, Frank's better self begins to gain over his appetitive self. He regrets "all the wrong he was doing and vowed to set himself straight. If I could do one right thing, he thought, maybe that would start me off" (p.65). He decides to practise self-control and with it "come the feeling of the beauty of it—the beauty of a person being able to do things the way he wanted to, to do good if he wanted; and this feeling was followed by regret—of the slow dribbling away, starting long ago, of his character, without him lifting a finger to stop it" (p.141).

At first, nonetheless, Frank is repelled by the Jewish way of life. His prejudices against the Jews surface now and again: "That's what they live for, Frank thought, to suffer. And the one that has the biggest pain in the gut and can hold on to it longest without running to the toilet is the best Jew. No wonder they get on his nerves" (p.81). His unfavourable attitude towards the suffering grocer is emphasised in the following words:
what kind of a man did you have to be born to shut yourself up in an overgrown coffin.... The answer wasn't hard to say—you had to be a Jew. They were born prisoners. That was what Morris was, with his deadly patience, or endurance, or whatever the hell it was (p.79).

Though unhappy at Morris' condition, Frank is attracted by Morris' attitude towards his life. Before long Frank graduates from disgust to curiosity about the Jews. He questions Morris closely about the Jewish religion for he feels that it was Morris' Jewishness which teaches him to accept suffering like a martyr. Frank's sensibility has always been drawn towards Jewish idealism though, it takes time for him to realise that. In fact, as Marcus Klein says, "Malamud has himself spoken of the similarity of sensibilities he finds existing between Italians and Jews."^11

To Frank's insistant queries about Jews, Morris explains "to be a Jew all you need is a good heart" (p.112). Morris is not a Jew in the traditional sense for he does not follow any of the Jewish rituals and customs. When Frank asks him why as a Jew he keeps his grocery open on Jewish holidays and why he eats pork, Morris replies, "Nobody will tell me that I am not Jewish because I put in my month once in a while, when my tongue is dry, a piece of ham. But they will tell me, and I will believe them, if I forget the law. This means to do what is right, to be honest, to be good" (pp.112-113). The Rabbi at Morris' funeral has the same thing to say: "Yes, Morris Bober was to me a true Jew because he lived in
the Jewish experience, which he remembered, and with the Jewish heart. May be not to our formal tradition — for this I don't excuse him — but he was true to the spirit of our life — to want for others that which he wants also for himself" (p.203). Morris follows the spirit of Judaism, not all its rules. Even then it is not his religion which defines Morris. It is his suffering and endurance which characterize him. "He suffered, he endured, but with hope.... For such reasons he was a Jew" (p.203). Any body who suffers and endures all willingly and with hope in the future, is a Jew and this brings us to Malamud's statement that all men are Jews. "To Malamud," Mr. Podhoretz says, "the Jew is humanity seen under the twin aspects of suffering and moral aspirations. Therefore any man who suffers greatly, and also longs to be better than he is, can be called a Jew."\textsuperscript{12}

Frank, still unsatisfied, further questions Morris. He wants to know how Morris developed such a capacity to suffer. To a non-Jew like Frank, Morris' willingness to suffer seems almost masochistic. However, Morris does not feel any pleasure in suffering. He accepts it as his inevitable fate, so he learns to live with it. To Frank's persistent "But tell me why it is that the Jews suffer so damn much, Morris? It seems to me that they like to suffer, don't they?" Morris replies, "Do you like to suffer? They suffer because they are Jews... if a Jew don't suffer for the Law, he will suffer for nothing." Frank wants to know for what
Morris suffers and he gets the answer, "I suffer for you... I mean you suffer for me" (p.113). One can achieve salvation through suffering for others and "each character is the instrument of the other's salvation." 13

Morris' answer awakens Frank to the knowledge of the Jew's humanity and his own lack of it in his dealings with the grocer. Scorn (once he had not "much use for the Jews" (p.113)) changes into sympathy and he begins to identify himself with the Jews. Now will begin "the apprenticeship of Frank Alpine... to the discipline of Jewish suffering." 14 And the first signs of his changing attitude are apparent when Helen says to him."'Frank, sometimes things turn out other than we plan. Don't feel hurt.' 'When I don't feel hurt, I hope they bury me,'" Frank replied (p.105).

Frank, in fact, has known suffering and pain throughout his life — quite like a Jew. He is a schlemiel — a loser by birth. He has never known what home, affection or success means,"though he tried every which way to free himself from them (failures), usually he failed, so after a time he gave up and let himself be a bum. He lived in gutters,... ate what the dogs wouldn't ... slept where he flopped and guzzled anything" (p.84). He tells Morris: "I've been close to some wonderful things — jobs, for instance, education, women, but close is as far as I go.... Don't ask me why, but sooner or later everything I think is worthy having gets away
from me in some way or other" (p.35). He seeks fulfilment in his life but "with me one wrong thing leads to another and it ends in a trap. I want the moon so all I get is cheese" (p.36), he laments. Pop Fisher had voiced the same feeling in The Natural: "You know, Roy, I been lately thinking that a whole lot of people are like him, and for one reason or the other their lives will go the same way all the time, without them getting what they want, no matter what. I for one" (p.201).

Frank has known acute suffering but he has never looked at it in the right perspective. Under Morris' guidance his attitude changes and he realizes that suffering for someone is equivalent to loving the person. By applying the Law to his suffering, by giving meaning to it, Morris converts it into something impersonal, a necessary appendage of the code of moral values in which he believes. "For Malamud suffering is a precondition of existence, the one possible mode of goodness and engagement in this world. One must suffer by virtue of being human, and the amount of suffering which one endures may be a measure of one's humanity."15

Frank slowly begins to change for the better, although his transformation does not come about easily. He is caught between material and idealistic imperatives. Like Roy Hobbs he wants much for himself yet his ambitions are not that egoistic. Frank is not lacking in moral aspirations, unlike Roy. He consciously strives for a better life after many years of a degrading life.
He desires "to clean it out of his self and bring in a little peace, a little order; to change the beginning, beginning with the past that always stupendously stank up till now — to change his life before the smell of it suffocated him" (p.82). At another time, "he stood at the window, thinking thoughts about his past, and wanting a new life. Would he never get what he wanted?"(p.57).

For his new life Frank has to change himself into a new person in the pattern set by Morris' life. Morris forces Frank to see his moral failings just as Albee makes Leventhal realize his moral shortcomings in The Victim.

In Malamud's world it is never too late to begin a new life. Roy does so at the age of thirty-four. Frank, though young in years, is prematurely old. He feels that one way to begin his redemptive journey is to confess his guilty past and thus unburden himself of the load that weighs on his mind. This urge to confess is as desperate as the Ancient Mariner had felt. Confession brings peace to the confessor. Frank feels "a repulsive need to get out of his system all that had happened — for whatever had happened had happened wrong" (p.82). Frank's attitude towards his past is different from that of Roy. Whereas Roy tries to hide his past, Frank openly confesses the ignominy of his past life and seeks to change it. Unlike Roy, Frank learns from his past mistakes and thus avoids reliving his past.

By and by Frank's transformation takes place in the pattern of Morris' life. He becomes wholly honest and begins to discipline
himself: "Then one day, for no reason he could give, though the reason felt familiar, he stopped climbing up the air shaft to peak at Helen and was honest in the store" (p.214). It is a transformation that comes about after much suffering and through self-control. Along with moral growth came compassion and charity, "he felt a sort of gentleness creeping in. He felt gentle to the people who came into the store, especially the kids, whom he gave penny crackers to for nothing. He was gentle to Morris, and the Jew was gentle to him. And he was filled with a quiet gentleness for Helen" (p.78).

The growing change in Frank is often hinted at when he reads about Raskolnikov's suffering in Crime and Punishment. Frank "first had the idea he must be a Jew and was surprised where he found he wasn't" (p.97), shortly afterwards he has "this crazy sensation that he was reading about himself" (p.98). So we see suffering constantly associated with Jews and anybody who suffers is a Jew. Frank's transformation is in process with his changing attitude towards the Jews. Others observe the growing change. Ward calls him a "stinking Kike"(p.130). When Ida refers to him as a goy, an Italyener, Helen says to her mother that he is "a man, a human being like us" (p.131); in Malamud's world to be a human is to be a Jew. Frank confirms his transformation when he says: "I am not the same guy I once was" (p.128).

The Jewish values which Frank begins to confirm are not different from the values Frank reveres in Francis d'Assisi. In
Malamud's fiction Jewish ethics are similar to Christian or humanistic ethics. "By accepting Morris' ethic, Frank puts his own suffering (undeniably real even before he met Morris) into a context that gives it value."\(^{16}\) Morris and Frank share one thing in common—a life-time of suffering. Suffering makes them indistinguishable thus verifying Malamud's statement that all men are Jews though few are aware of it. Frank has suffered, learnt from his suffering and changed himself. He is all that Morris has defined a Jew ought to be. Frank finds his new life when he identifies himself with the Jews especially with Morris at whose painfully cribbed life he had mocked at first. Even Helen recognizes the change in him: "It came to her that he had changed. It's true, he's not the same man. ... He had been one thing, low, dirty, but because of something in him—something she couldn't define, a memory perhaps, an ideal he might have forgotten and then remembered—he had changed into somebody else, no longer what he had been" (p.215).

Frank's transformation from a lowly being with sterile and selfish motives to one who is mature and responsible can be seen in his changing attitude towards Helen. It is partly Helen who is responsible for his staying on at the grocery and for his transformation. Ward is right when he says: "Your Jew girl must be some inspiration" (p.130). "Love with and without sexual involvement, is the ultimate permanent and true value in the novel of the successful quest."\(^{17}\) But Frank's love for Helen is
at first, mainly carnal. To satisfy his physical desires for her he climbs up the air shaft to peep through the bathroom window while she is at her bath. "He was the victim of the sharp edge of his hunger. So he wanted her to the point where he thought up schemes for getting her into his room and in bed" (p.121). Soon, however, his love for Helen begins to alternate between the carnal and the spiritual. He feels protective tenderness towards her at times, at others an unholy lust. However, with the passage of time it is only genuine love that he feels for her, and the moments of weakness are few and far apart. Nevertheless, it is in one such moment of weakness that Frank ruins his prospects with Helen.

Like Roy, Frank is "victimized by fate, defeated by circumstances beyond his power to anticipate or control, and yet in some way ultimately responsible for the facts of his existence." When, at last, Helen is about to respond to his love, Frank spoils his chances by molesting her. His attempts to win her back by making a clean breast of all his misdoings only makes her hate him all the more. It is his ill-fate that his long-lasting love for Helen, cultivated through dogged perseverance should end in an assault on her person by him in a moment of weakness. "His thoughts would for ever suffocate him. He had failed once too often. He should somewhere have stopped and changed the way he was going, his luck, himself.... He had lived without will, betrayed every good intention" (p.156).
Thus as was in the case of Roy Hobbs, Frank's character is fate. "All he knew was how to mangle himself more. The self he had secretly considered valuable was, for all he could make of it, a dead rat. He stank" (p.157).

Since in Malamud's fiction to love means to suffer it is natural that Frank suffer for his love, Helen; "suffering is the one possibility of love. Therefore, it is morality itself." Now to work out his redemption, Frank is expected to love Helen with unselfish love, "without hope of requital. He must further redeem the beloved, redeem evil, by offering himself as a willing victim." Frank resolves to undo the wrong he has done: "He hadn't intended wrong but he had done it; now he intended right. He would do anything she wanted ... and he would do it all on his own will, nobody pushing him but himself. He would do it with discipline and with love" (p.164).

Having lived a life of unfulfilment Helen is full of yearnings for a future which will give her all that she has looked for in her past and present. She is hesitant to respond to Frank's love because she realizes it means discarding her dreams forever and reconciling to a future which will be no better, if not worse than her present miserable condition. She fears "to tie up with a fate far short of her ideals" (p.120). Yet, her better self does wish to respond to Frank's love. She discards Nat Pearl (although he would have fulfilled her materialistic dreams) because, in their relationship there is no love, just carnal desire. She knows she can find love with
Frank so she tries to find her desire of a bright future through him. In the words of Sidney Richman, "Unconsciously drawn to Frank, and recognizing that in the palpable hunger of his spirit there exists resources which Nat lacks, she unconsciously manipulates the reality of his person into 'possibilities' dear to her."21 We read, "And if she married Frank, her first job would be to help him realize his wish to be somebody. Nat Pearl wanted to be 'somebody,' but to him this meant making money.... Frank, on the other hand, was struggling to realize himself as a person, a more worthwhile ambition" (p.120). Helen wants Frank to go in for higher studies, get a good job and then settle down with her in a pretty little house in California.

But things do not turn out so. Frank chooses to live the impoverished but saintly life of his spiritual father against whom he has sinned. For Helen, as Walter Shear says: "love with Frank becomes a resignation to fate, an accepting of the present with all its disappointments as a permanent condition and therefore love turns to hatred — as she realizes, to divert hatred for herself."22 She believes in the American Dream of success, therefore does not want to be bogged down to a bleak life in the grocery by loving Frank. "She was willing to change, make substitutions, but she would not part with the substance of her dreams" (p.120). Paradoxically Helen shows Frank "the right way though she does not know the right way."23 It is she who suggested he read Crime and Punishment and other good books which help him in his
spiritual growth, but she herself learns nothing from them. No doubt, Helen too desires a new life. Frank is "aware of something starved about her, a hunger in her eyes he couldn't forget because it made him remember his own" (p.58). But the difference is that Helen craves for both spiritual and materialistic fulfilment.

By the end Helen too begins to grow up, but she is not very sure of herself. She has already begun to realize the foolishness of her desires and her values are beginning to change. "She felt she had changed him and ... she had, she thought, changed in changing him" (p.117). Whereas formerly Helen loathed Frank for his misbehaviour, she once again begins to think well of him,

She had despised him for the evil he had done, without understanding the why or aftermath, or admitting there could be an end to the bad and a beginning of good. ... What he did to me he did wrong, she thought, but since he has changed in his heart he owes me nothing," (p.216).

Once again she speaks to him but with a shyness that suggests the reawakening of love. She tells Frank that she is still using the volume of Shakespeare, he gave her as a present. Chances of Helen's love reawakening are suggested by Malamud in an indirect manner. When (in one of Frank's day dreams) St. Francis offers her a rose "with the love and best wishes of Frank Alpine" (p.217), Helen accepts it. Frank has also got himself circumcised, thus doing away with the complaint Helen had to make when he had forced himself on her: "Dog — uncircumcised dog!" (p.151).
Thus, it is his love for Helen which makes him decide to become a Jew physically. He had become a Jew in spirit when he had adopted Morris' values. Nevertheless, circumcision is an open acknowledgement of the Jewish values that he has adopted as his own. "Frank undergoes a rite of initiation" which he began when he went back to the grocery to work for Morris after the robbery. "Fundamentally he has been a Jew throughout, as Morris has been a Christian, and the substitution of Frank for Morris in an unchanging pattern bears out Frank's early comment on the Jewish Law 'I think other religions have those ideas too.'"24

It is only after Morris's death, however, Frank decides to convert. It is at Morris' grave that Frank experiences resurrection and his life passes from a spiritually empty life to one of spiritual fulfilment. Frank starts as the Jewish grocer's apprentice; he ends as the Jewish grocer himself. His identification with Morris is complete; he takes over the responsibility of his store and along with it Morris' fate of suffering. "His rising from the grave as Morris is a symbol of resurrection, the season aptly enough is spring, shortly before Passover and Easter."25 This is the time of renewal in nature as well as the time of resurrection of Christ.

Frank's rebirth as a Jew makes him assume the living death of Morris' life: "They heard the dull clink of the register in the store and knew the grocer was the one who had danced on the grocer's coffin" (p.206). At last he takes the place of the grocer's own son who had died when still a child.
No doubt it was guilt which made Frank go back and serve Morris after the hold-up. But, by the end of the novel Frank himself has changed in his attitude towards others. Now, it is his sense of commitment and responsibility that makes him assume the burden of providing for Ida and Helen. From wanting to improve his fortune at the cost of another's misfortune, Frank develops into a self-sacrificing person for whom the needs of another take priority over his own needs. Frank plays a father's role towards Helen when he fulfils Morris' desire to send her to college. With fatherly responsibility he provides for her needs.

Frank's affirmation is ironic for it brings no material or personal gains for him, "rather it offers personal grace accompanied by continual suffering and a constant challenge daring the redeemed man to maintain his spiritual freedom and integrity in the face of a world made up of grocery tombs and cascadian vacuums." 26

By the end Frank affirms the "possibility of human salvation and identity through a consciously constructed personal ethic." 27 He attains partial salvation when he takes on the responsibility of supporting Morris' family and assuming Morris' values. Though well on the way to redemption he has not yet achieved his goal of winning back Helen's love. We see him still striving to win back Helen's love "with discipline and love." "The First Seven Years" shows a situation quite akin to that in The Assistant. An apprentice is committed to his master because of the uncompromising love he bears
for his master's daughter. Likewise, Frank is mainly committed to
the grocery because of his love for Helen. Just as we see Sobel
"pounding leather for his love"\textsuperscript{28} at the end of the story, so we
see Frank working in the grocery for his love. Both hope for the
fulfilment of love but there is no promise of it. "Love is suffering.
... It is to that recognition that most of Malamud's fiction
proceeds. ... It is the lesson learned in all his novels."\textsuperscript{29}

Nevertheless, in spite of everything Frank's is an ambiguous
fate. The kind of life he accepts as his future promises only further
pain. He will relive Morris' life with all its wants and pains in
the open tomb of the grocery and his desire for Helen's love may
never be fulfilled. To all purposes his life will be no better
than it was earlier. Only Frank is more capable of coping up with
it. Philip Roth has criticized the novel as an exercise in "evange­
listic simplifications." He states, "We might almost take what
happens to the bad goy when he falls into the hands of the good
Jews as an act of enraged Old Testament retribution visited upon
him by the wrathful Jewish author. ... The Assistant is a mani-
festation of ethical Jewhood with what one might legitimately call
a vengeance."\textsuperscript{30} Roth's interpretation of The Assistant as the work
of a "wrathful Jewish author" is both negative and prejudiced. He
fails to understand the moral growth of Frank's character and the
ensuing actions. Frank has learned to accept suffering (pain and
defeat) and to give unselfish love without expecting (though hoping)
any in return.
Morris, on whose life style Frank models his life, also meets an ambiguous fate. He eulogized suffering throughout his life but towards the end of life he wonders at the wisdom of having passed his life in suffering, "I gave away my life for nothing. It was the thunderous truth" (p.200). Even though his own life has been full of unfulfilled dreams, Morris continues to believe in the American Dream of success. He wants his daughter to have all materialistic comforts. But Frank who has faced reality at its worst, is less susceptible to the dream. Knowing full well the insatiability of the American Dream he seeks only the fulfilment of his moral aspirations.

Another important aspect of the novel is its use of myth. Unlike The Natural, The Assistant does not have a mythic understructure. Nevertheless, it uses the myth of the seasonal cycle to express the changes that take place in the lives of the main characters. In the beginning when the grocery is at its worst economically, it is cold, dark November. The icy wind claws at the grocer just the same way as his bankruptcy tears at his heart. The bare landscape of winter leaves Helen "with unearned sadness. She mourned the long age before spring and feared loneliness" (p.18). As winter wears away, so does the economic condition improve with help of the new assistant, Frank. With the approach of spring comes the renewal of life: "As the seasons change it becomes clear that Frank's role is to replace the 'scarecrow' father and to bring to fruition the 'flower like' daughter if the
human wasteland is to be revitalized along with nature." It is near Easter, in the middle of spring that the old grocer dies and is resurrected in the shape of Frank, the new grocer. Besides the myth of seasons, one can trace the Christ/St. Francis allegory in the characters of Morris and Frank. Morris is a "saintly or sacrificial hero, Christ-like in spirit, who found his being in victimization, and who acted, even though ironically as a redemptive figure, a 'savior'."32 Morris is Christ-like in his spirit of self-sacrifice and charity. Like Christ he takes on the suffering of others and thus delivers them. "The world suffers. He felt every schmerz" (p.10). Morris lives for others even at the cost of being a "social scape-goat." "He made himself a victim" (p.204), Helen says. Frank acknowledges Morris' role as Christ when Morris gives him a crusty piece of bread and he spontaneously exclaims: "Jesus, this is good bread" (p.33). Just as Morris is Christ of the allegory Frank is St. Francis d'Assisi. Frank's name recalls the saint's name and his own physique resembles that of the saint as seen in the picture, "thin-faced, dark bearded monk in a coarse brown garment, standing barefooted on a sunny country road. His skinny, hairy arms were raised to a flock of birds that dipped over his head" (p.30). Helen sees Frank in a similar situation, "coming up the block Helen saw a man squatting by one of the benches, feeding the birds. Otherwise, the stand was deserted. When the man rose,
the pigeons fluttered up with him, a few landing on his arms and shoulders, one perched on his fingers, pecking peanuts from his cupped palm" (p.107). Just as St. Francis tried to model his life on the pattern set by Christ, Frank tries to relive Morris' life.

Frank succeeds where Roy had failed. He forges for himself a new life within the novel. It is, no doubt, an absurd and incomplete rebirth, yet the best that Malamud's heroes can achieve. Thus, ironically a gentile becomes a good Jew with suffering as his fate.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


2 Reprinted in Granville Hicks, "His Hopes on the Human Heart." Saturday Review, 46 (Oct. 12, 1963), 32.

3 Granville Hicks, p. 32.

4 Ibid., p. 32.

5 Bernard Malamud, The Assistant (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1967), p. 30. All page numbers quoted in the chapter are from this text.


9 Jonathan Baumbach, p. 455.

10 Sandy Cohn, Bernard Malamud and the Trial by Love (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1974), pp. 44-45.


19. Marcus Klein, p.263.


23. Sandy Cohn, p.45.


27 Ruth B. Mandel, p. 110.


29 Marcus Klein, p. 265.

