

Bernard Malamud (1914-1986): A Quest of *A New Life*

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1 Introduction

Works of the Jewish-American writer Bernard Malamud resonate not only because the author continues to enjoy popularity in the U.S. and in other countries but also because even now in the year 2002, sixteen years after the author's death, his literary messages still retain their cogency and can make a valid contribution to a secular search for betterment and a 'good life'. Malamud's eminence lies in his compelling the reader to meditate upon and reflect the meaning of omnipresent absurdity of human existence. He does so both in his short stories and novels through heroes whose characters and actions are very often difficult to identify with but whose lives are filled with skillfully-contrived parallels and not rarely unresolved endings clamoring for interpretation.

Through a score of parallels and hidden images, Malamud disseminates his lifelong philosophy of humanism, which as such in its broad definition exempts the many interpretations from a one-and-only correct elucidation. The reoccurring theme of humanism has won Malamud a wide audience of readers and critics who reach consensus in classifying him as a creator of 'Jewish humanism', a term combining humanistic moral vision with a sense of ethnic identity. Further, the same audience of critics sustains an ongoing debate analyzing and evaluating the realization of other salient themes in Malamud's work. Sheldon J. Hershinow (1984: 135-46) defines in his essay 'Malamud's Moral and Artistic Vision': a search for a new life, the prison motif, the necessity for moral involvement (or freedom versus responsibility), the value of suffering and its regenerative power, the ritualistic and mythical elements in life, the search for the father or a son's displacing of a father, the scapegoat and orphan motifs, and a consuming concern with love, mercy and understanding. When Bernard Malamud spoke to an English department member at a dinner reception in 1972, he defended himself against literary pigeonholing by proclaiming,

I am not an ethnic writer but neither do I write abstractly. Often, I write from a particular experience, sometimes from Italian or more frequently Jewish, but always to communicate with general readers, not just with certain groups.
(Malamud 1972)

Evelyn Avery, a friend of Malamud and critic of his work, comments on the author's overall classification: 'From his early works, Bernard Malamud has resisted the Jewish ethnic label, but he had been adopted to represent a tribe of wanderers, the tribe of American Jews' (Cheuse and Delbanco 1996: 151).

This paper discusses some issues bearing on the theme—a quest of a new life within the scope of a namesake novel, *A New Life* (1961). Consideration is given and limited to a description of the drives propelling the actions of the main hero Seymour Levin. Attention is paid to love, accomplishment and values, aspects backing up Seymour Levin's behavior, whose definitions appear most volatile throughout the novel. Consequently, Levin's quest of a new life is explicated through plot-theme and character development analysis embedded within the frame of Malamud's original ideas as they were published in the few interviews given during his life.

2 Coming To the West

Seymour Levin, an intellectual Jew from New York City, a New York University graduate with an M. A. in English, moves to the West to start his teaching career at Cascadia College in Oregon in 1950.¹ In his new job as an English teacher, Levin believes that the open prospect of creating his own new life will certainly be guaranteed by the essence of the West, which reflects the wilderness and purity of nature. To be in the far West living a far simpler, less politically active life than in New York seems easier, without so much responsibility. The West is not only a geographic circumscription of the U.S., moreover it is a metaphor for a new world, a change for the better, a realm of possibilities and new beginnings. If transcended, going West means the same as finding the Promised Land on the private exodus of Seymour Levin.

Objectively, what facilitates Levin's efforts to put his personage forward and apply his ideals of a liberal is the lower degree of urbanization in the West. In technologies and welfare the whole U.S. looked back at the rest of the developed world from a seemingly infinite distance in the 1950s, but the West was thanks to urbanization, which was still in its embryonic stage, comparatively way behind the East in introducing social and educational changes and thus could not flexibly reflect the dramatic advancement in living standard. By attaining the new identity of a Westerner in the position of a college teacher and by inseminating his recently achieved liberal consciousness, Levin sees his chance to contribute to an educational, and thus social, transformation. Early on in the novel he makes his stance clear by quoting Socrates, 'The liberal arts—as you know—since ancient times—have affirmed our rights and liberties' (*A New Life* 29).

Yet it emerges mandatory to point out that Levin arrives at Easchester, a podunk of the West and liberal arts, not only with his valise, black fedora and determination to seize his good fortune but also myth-bound. Levin's notions of the West shrink into the concept of 'The West as Eden and Paradise [...] the bastion of democracy and rugged individualism' (Abrahamson 1993: 44). At first Levin is taken aback by the general friendliness of locals who help him assimilate and start his rebirth by enlarging his views. For the first time in his life he attends a potluck, opens his senses to the rhythm of nature and passes his driving license without which in the West one is regarded socially impotent. However, later Levin sobers up because the long distances of Oregon, its vast skies, forests and coastal beaches representing freedom cannot on their own grant him free choices and the status of a good American.

The mediocrity of reality in 1950s America, a period of America's insecurity and diversity of beliefs, sublimate the Western kudos. The Korean War was in progress, Senator Mc Carthy in power and feelings towards the implementation of the atomic bomb ambivalent. Abrahamson notes that Levin's disappointment in Western democracy 'is defined by the community of Cascadia as the freedom to do as everyone else does' (Abrahamson 1993: 44). Marcus Klein refers to Cascadia as 'a society under an iron discipline of amiability [...] The

imagination, the ideals, the sap have gone out of it' (Klein 1962: 251). On account of the politically and socially difficult conditions of the times, the so much cloud-cockoo-Westernland can be defined as the land that opens, welcomes and warrants a new life for one willing to foster already established tracks but does not tread into forbidden territories.

The contrast between the up-to-date, sophisticated, European East and the old-line realistic, more democratic but in a sense ignorant West is presented as a shock. Malamud stereotypes the characters and during a relatively short time lets Levin see only the shapes of reality—the social mimicry, pretended content or false courage. The very first page of the novel provides a sample of a caricatured distinction between Levin and the wholly Westernized (and thus Americanized) society presented by Gerald Gilley. Phrases they choose for their own introduction clearly state the differences in social status and geographical origin:

“Sorry I’m late. My name’s Dr. Gilley.”

“S. Levin,” Levin said, removing his black fedora, his teeth visible through his beard. “From the East.” (*A New Life* 7)

Explicitly, Levin’s Eastern origin and Gilley’s academic title very likely express their precedence. Otherwise they would not mention them immediately after meeting a stranger.

The locals become the target of the sometimes fairly offensive social criticism that pervades the novel. Malamud does so by caricaturing their characters. Such a simplification could degrade *A New Life* into a shallow satirical college novel. However, as Abrahamson explains, this ostensible flaw is Malamud’s intention, through which he justifies their rigid behavior: ‘The political climate of the 1950s heightens the sense of the powerlessness of a liberal in the Far West’ (Abrahamson 1993: 46). It is more likely though that Malamud uses the stereotypes and caricatures to underscore his original intent—the development of a universal young American during his quest for individuality and self-definition—in the 1950s undoubtedly an overall problem.² Since Levin also ‘does carry the stereotype of the city-bred Easterner ill at ease with Western customs and attitudes’ (Abrahamson 1993: 53), his social acts serve as double lectures when the basic teaching method is self-study of the social limits in the West. Quoting Baumbach, *A New Life* is ‘principally about Levin’s heroic destiny: his discovery of what it is and his acceptance of what it entails’ (Baumbach 1965: 106). Additionally, the strong contrast between life in the East and the West first magnifies Levin’s personality enabling to self-define and self-evaluate features he was not aware of before, and secondly creates a definite summing up of his past. He is thus unable to go back.

3 Professional Career

A professional career of an academic and a dauntless advocate of liberal humanism is what Levin expects from his new life in the West. He stakes his recently completed M.A., two-year experience of teaching at a high school and cocksure determination to leave the East, ‘When the offer came I was ready to go’ (*A New Life*, 20). General disposition appears reasonably favorable: a post at a college, a decent teaching load facilitating academic work, an inspiring new place, no commitments and a challenging future. What remains obscure is whether Levin fails to fulfill his scholarly aspirations either because he does not possess adequate qualities and so can be rather classified as a beam-blind idealist or because through the course of his inapt actions he creates an image of the disagreeable radical, one of those anti-American oddballs in the 1950s.

The latter argument could be hardly defended as a sole reason of Levin's professional failure although the figure of Levin's predecessor Leo Duffy, a mysterious illuminati and spiritual father for Levin, indicates that tolerance towards any kind of individualism violating the established injunctions did not abound in those days. If nothing else, the time setting of the 1950s adds a new dimension to 'Levin-schlimatzel'³—Levin, whose college teaching career proceeds in somersaults and ultimately ends in shreds because he is forced to agree not to teach again as a price he pays for pregnant Pauline, a wife Levin steals from his former boss and with whom, burdened by two adopted kids, he leaves Easchester for San Francisco. With respect to the time setting, Leslie Fiedler summarizes the key issues accompanying the young intellectuals on their way to the West in search for a teaching career in the 1950s.

[T]he most absurd and touching of all the waves of migration that have ever moved across this country from East to West: the migration of certain upwardly mobile, urban, Eastern young academics, chiefly Jews, into remote, small-town state universities, cow colleges, and schools of education. For various reasons, including a sudden unforeseen growth in enrollment, such institutions were just then rather grudgingly opening their doors to those they would have refused a little while before on ethnic grounds. Yet the moment at which that first Jewish wave of academics reached such alien campuses was the heyday of McCarthyism, when they were most likely to be suspect on political grounds. Indeed, anyone simply urban and Eastern, much less Jewish, was likely in those hysterical times to be suspected of being a troublemaker or a Communist or both, until he had proved otherwise, though he may in fact have left the East with the cry of 'red-baiter' and 'escapist' ringing in his ears. (Fiedler 1992 [1991]: 130-1)

The true failure of Seymour Levin probably originates in his idealism and inability to accept the real world. Bound by his ideals, Levin is convinced that behavior of the community he lives in and respects should be in full accord with moral principles as they have been written down by great thinkers, philosophers and politicians, for example Socrates, Montaigne, Chekhov, R. Chase or A. Lincoln. Levin himself takes the pose of an exemplary academic and human being. He repeatedly attempts to reform the imperfect, from his viewpoint non-academic, college milieu and to overcome his own natural shortcomings of an inexperienced young teacher by strict self-discipline. Yet, his strenuous efforts fall flat, both his actions and career tumble severely and Levin acquires a new cognomen—Levin-schlemiel. This time the source of Levin's misfortune is his character. The more he himself blunders, the more he scorns actions and lives of other people, his colleagues in particular. Both Fiedler and Hershnow denominate Levin as a 'buffoon' and Hershnow further points out that Levin's dull sentimentality creates a 'Don Quixote who suffers from a temporary delusion' and 'whose excesses stem from a misguided but genuine desire to find a place for his ideals in the real world' (Hershnow 1984: 59). Levin's excessive ideals prevent him from accomplishing a career of a true academic. Significantly, within the whole Cascadia College faculty he also fails to find an academic whom he could follow as a model.

To conclude, in his new professional life Levin acquires an identity both of a schlimatzel and schlemiel and ends up as a clear loser. He loses the battle against conformity, academic paradise and ideal self, but luckily he matures to live in the real world.

4 Life With Love

No matter how infinite the definition of love can be, and how agelong and perhaps sometimes overly romantic or even droll the literary theme of love appears, Levin's third new life—life with love—is the only one he manages to launch successfully. Yet, it is requisite to say that before love becomes a new purpose in Levin's life, he is almost discouraged by the fact that 'love is never uncomplicated' (Abrahamson 1993: 50). Abrahamson further declares: 'He [Levin] is attracted by the idea of love but not necessarily by the particular person or the reality of it' (Abrahamson 1993: 49). The reality of love asks the one who has initiated a certain love relationship to accept the responsibility for its consequences. Since Levin is never mature enough to face this role, all his love affairs fail.

Levin gropes throughout the course of "love training" when he tests various approaches and partners because he is de facto of two minds—on one hand he follows reason and on the other he prefers condition. This confusion causes the disintegration of Levin's mind when making decisions, for example, in starting and finishing his affair with his voluptuous student Nadalee Hamderstad, or when returning to Pauline. Levin's indecisiveness results from his immaturity and low self-confidence. He tries to boost both with theoretical knowledge, which he uses as a defender of his unsupported truths. The confusion between reason and condition is the major element hindering Levin from accomplishing his explicitly defined goals:

Pauline: Tell me what do you want from life?

Levin: Order, value, accomplishment, love. (*A New Life*, 175)

Though he is fairly clear about the objectives of his life, Levin fails when it comes to their realization. Order, value, accomplishment and love are exactly the four areas of greatest chaos in the plot of this novel including the ending. These values create a platform for his so aspired new life that he receives as a passive victim of his own self-destruction. Levin sadly discovers that in trying to have it both ways, he often ends up having it in another, unintended way all together. Such phenomenon could be called a tragedy of divided sensibilities.

Though disputable, with Pauline Levin surpasses the qualities of a schlemiel-like character. He abandons his professional prospects in exchange for Pauline's love. Love nourishes the growth of Levin's new life, in which he becomes a better person. Being loved and being able to give love grant Levin the status of "a man of principle". For this status Levin sacrifices the promising future although it takes him some time to shake off doubts about his decision. At one stage it seems that, 'Love becomes an intellectual exercise, one of fortitude and perseverance in the name of responsibility' (Abrahamson 1993: 50). When he fully reconciles with the consequences of his decision and willingly accepts his new role, it is the moment of his personal victory of moral involvement over personal needs.

Taking a closer and more critical look, one may say that it is fundamentally Pauline who directs and controls Levin's life. In fact, she initiated his career at Cascadia College—his new life in order to repeat the relationship similar to her dead lover, Leo Duffy. Moreover, Duffy's existence and the history of his relationship with Pauline determine Levin's fate. Obviously, Pauline's and Leo's love affair plays a substantial role in the construction of Levin's new life. However, it must be attributed to Levin that the final breakthrough is only his own, which signifies an evidently moral evolution of his personality and a change in his values.

To sum up, such progress in a life of an individual is in full agreement with Malamud's basic premise: 'People can change.' Additionally, he declares: 'Their circum-

stances may remain the same but spiritually they transcend their surroundings. Things are what we make of them' (Herchinow 1984: 146).

5 A New Life for Seymour Levin

For Malamud a new life never starts spontaneously without a change of one's self but it always results from 'the conflict between human freedom and human limitations, with the stress on the latter rather than the former' (Herchinow 1984: 137). Levin does not start his new life when he decides to overcome his past as a drunkard and tries to become a successful teacher and scholar. Only after he morally matures and takes on responsibility for Pauline, her adopted children, and the new life to come, can he appreciate the qualities of a new life: love and own family. Levin achieves a partial secular redemption. This time, the new life will probably overshadow Levin's responsibilities to society (as Levin is forced to give up his teaching to gain Pauline), but will also bring new responsibilities, those of a father and husband. In addition, also Pauline, who has never been pregnant, has "a new life" inside her which gives her a new sense of motherhood and a challenging future. Hopes for new, better lives are restarted again, as expressed by the open ending.

According to the author, Levin wins over his past, hence over himself because he is able to 'take advantage of possibilities' (Cheuse and Delbanco 1996: 138). Levin's ways of doing so are sometimes laughable and the ridicule of the closing scene slightly underscores the dissatisfactory depiction of *A New Life* characters. Not being aware of the time setting, one would likely consider it as a major flaw, however, with such a notion one can perceive it as a part of a social quest of a new life. This quest takes place in a society that is looking again for a self-definition.

6 Conclusion

In *A New Life* (1961) Bernard Malamud follows the "self" motif and a hungry search for a new life similarly to two other novels *The Assistant* (1957) and *Dubin's Lives* (1979). For Malamud, the 'self' motif becomes virtually inseparable from the quest of a new life. Although the realization of a new life differs, the realization of self always remains the same. Seymour Levin finds his new life in Pauline's love, Frank Alpine in devoting himself to a bankrupt grocery shop belonging to his former employer, and William Dubin in starting to live his own life instead of the lives of people he writes about. Yet, all of them find their new life through varying forms of self-recognition. This existential quest is in full agreement with the author's own words summarizing his literary goal: 'The writer's most important task is to recapture [man's] 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' (Abrahamson 1993: 103).

Endnotes

¹ Cascadia College in Oregon = a fictional name for Oregon State College. Similarly, B. Malamud fictionalized the town Corvallis into Easchester and the Willamette River into the Sacajawea.

² This claim has been confirmed by the author himself in a question-and answer session following a reading at the University of Tennessee in the early 1980s:

[T]he action occurs in America at the time of Senator McCarthy's malign influence. I was also saying that the sickness of Cascadia was an almost universal sickness in the United States at that time, and the kind of timidity and dishonesty that occur in the story, the lack of responsibility, even understanding, was heightened by the general political and moral malaise. Levin was in a sense challenging McCarthy—the man who almost ruined the nation—possibly because for a long time no one else was, certainly not Eisenhower. (Cheuse and Delbanco 1996: 138)

³ *Schlimatzel* (Yiddish), a passive victim of bad luck which happens upon mischance. He has a penchant for lucklessness but the unhappy circumstances remain outside him.

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