

ISSN 0976 - 8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

11th Year of Open Access

**Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed
Open Access e-Journal**

Vol. XI, Issue -4 (August 2020)

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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

An Archetypal Analysis of Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant*

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Article History: Submitted-31/07/2020, Revised-22/08/2020, Accepted-23/08/2020, Published-31/08/2020.

Abstract:

Born and brought up in Brooklyn, New York Bernard Malamud is an American novelist and short story writer. His famous novels include *The Natural* (1952), *The Assistant* (1957) and *The Fixer* (1967). Being a member of a Jewish family of Russian descent, Malamud in his writings depicted a vivid picture of the despair and difficulties of the immigrants living in America.

The Assistant (1957) by Bernard Malamud deals with the complicated interplay of desire, guilt, suffering and redemption through selfless love. Being a bildungsroman novel, it is structured around the psychic transformation of its protagonist Frank Alpine, which involves various concerns including religious intolerance, the question of suffering and the constant struggle to become exactly human. His psycho-spiritual journey is portrayed against the backdrop of materially flourishing American society which is essentially contaminated by spiritual erosion and moral degeneration. The present paper aims to analyze Bernard Malamud's well acclaimed novel *The Assistant* and the psychic growth of its protagonist Frank Alpine from the perspective of archetypal criticism.

Keywords: Archetype, Shadow, Persona, Anima, Self, Wise Old Man, Jew-gentile.

The archetypal criticism draws its origin from the Swiss psychoanalyst and a famous pupil of Freud, Carl Gustav Jung who professed that the human psyche draws upon a set of primordial images that are often cross-cultural and have been existent for a long time in the collective imagination of the human race itself. These images and ideas often find representation in myths and legends. He termed these images as archetypes as they emerge from a collective unconscious, occurs across cultures and the time spans and are common to all mankind. Ian Buchanan in *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory* defines archetypes as:

the inherited dimension of the psyche according to the analytical psychology of Carl Jung. Archetypes are the ways of thinking and acting that derive from the most primitive aspects of our psyche, which for Jung means that dimension of the psyche we have in common with our most distant ancestors. (25)

Jung called mythology “the textbook of the archetypes” (Abrams, 1999). These archetypes can be divided into archetypes of characters, archetypes of places and archetypes of images. Archetypal critics identify these archetypal patterns and discuss how they function in the literary text. They believe that these archetypes are the source of much of literature’s power (Delahoyce, 2001). Hence, every character, symbol, incident, theme, color, setting or dialogue can hold an archetype which has a great meaning beyond. In the present paper, we shall analyze *The Assistant* from the perspective of archetypal criticism with a special focus on the psycho spiritual transformation of its protagonist Frank Alpine.

The narrative comprises the hardships of the impoverished family of an old immigrant Jewish storekeeper Morris Bober. In a moment of weakness, Frank Alpine, a Jew hating Christian and a young drifter commits robbery at Bober’s grocery store. But being a sensitive soul, he is haunted by the pangs of guilt for what he has done. To overcome his guilt, he tries to help Morris as a meagerly paid assistant. In this struggle, the deeper potential of his personality come to the fore front. His determination to cleanse his soul, his close relationship with Morris, an amorous but more spiritually fulfilling relationship with his daughter Helen, his acquaintance with the ruthless criminal Ward Minogue and his fascination for Saint Francis of Assisi contribute to this fundamental change in his psyche. In Jungian terms, Frank Alpine follows the classical route of the archetypal journey of the individual ego towards self-realization. On the way, he encounters the archetypes of Shadow, Anima, Wise Old Man and Self in his unconscious projection upon the callous Ward Minogue, the attractive Helen, Morris Bober and the vision of saint Francis of Assisi.

A close textual analysis of the narrative reveals the deeper strands of his psychic transformation which can be divided into three stages:-

I. Frank before he comes in contact with Morris.

- II. Onset of Frank's psycho spiritual voyage through his confrontation with the archetypes of Shadow, Wise Old Man, Anima and Self.
- III. His final transformation towards the end.

The novel has a typical wasteland setting where New York is portrayed as the wasteland city with the images of bleakness and stagnation symbolizing the moral and spiritual wasteland it has become. Metaphors of waste and imprisonment are used here and there. It somehow gets reflected through the character of Morris Bober, who endures a bleak existence in the marginal 'tomb like' store which has brought him close to bankruptcy. He laments, "I slaved my life for nothing." (11)

The novel opens with Morris Bober, a migrant Jew grocer who is barely able to meet both ends as the store is doing bad business because of the new grocery store that has opened across the street. He has to depend upon the salary of his daughter Helen, who works as a secretary. Helen is an ambitious girl who is very fond of reading and wishes to join college to complete her education. In the opening of the novel, Morris is robbed at his store by two men and is knocked down by them with a blow on his head. One of those men appears to be quite generous who offers him a glass of water to drink. Soon a new man named Frank Alpine appears in the neighborhood who helps him to drag in the heavy milk crates. Frank who had come from a rough life at west offers Morris to join him as a meagerly paid assistant so that he can learn the trade. Morris refuses his proposal but observes the stealing of one quart of milk and two rolls of bread from his daily deliveries. Morris eventually finds Frank sleeping in his cellar. Next morning, Morris slips while dragging the heavy crates and gets injured. Frank rescues him and takes the responsibility of his store. As Morris recovers, Frank has been able to improve the earnings of grocery which Morris wants to return by paying something to Frank. But Frank feels distributed by this because he has been already stealing money from the cash register and secondly it was Frank who along with Ward Minogue robbed Morris that night.

Frank feels deeply drawn towards Helen. He sees her almost every day returning back from the job. Helen has recently broke up her relationship with Nat Pearl knowing that he was only interested in her body and she has also rejected the marriage proposal of Louis Karp whose father owned a liquor store across the road. One day he climbs up the dumb waiter to see her bathing naked but felt so bad that he promised himself to never do it again. They start spending time

together as they meet in the library. But Helen warns him to control his amorous advances as she is not ready to enter in a physical relationship yet.

The relationship between Morris and Frank starts to develop as Frank learns a lot of things from him. Slowly and gradually he starts following Morris's philosophy of returning goodness, morality to the society and practicing ethical values. Morris suspects Frank of stealing and fired him after catching him red handed while the latter was actually returning the money. At the same night, Helen comes to meet Frank in the park where a drunken Ward Minogue tries to rape her. Frank arrives and rescues her from Ward but proceeds to rape her himself. The following day, Morris gets himself almost killed as he goes to sleep with the gas radiator unlit. Fuso and Frank saved him. While he recovers in the hospital, Frank takes the responsibility of the store. He starts using his own personal savings, works pretty hard and even takes different hard jobs at night to make the things afloat but fails as a new store opens in their street. As soon as Morris returns from hospital he again throws Frank out of the store. But this time, Morris fails to run the grocery. One night a mysterious man appears and offers to set Morris's store on the fire so he could at least get the insurance money. Morris rejects his proposal but in an effort to do it himself almost got himself killed. Frank saves his life again. At the same night Ward sneaks into Karp's store and accidentally sets the store on fire. Karp offers to buy Morris's store so that he can continue his business. The news makes him happy, he starts shoveling the snow from the pedestrian, catches pneumonia and dies. Frank takes the whole responsibility of the store and helps Helen to go to college. He has inherited the philosophy of Morris, he soon has himself circumcised and become a Jew.

The Archetype of Wise Old Man

The archetype of wise old man gets its unconscious projection in Morris Bober who is a truthful, honest, empathetic and compassionate person who serves the people though the world constantly delivers bad luck to him. He works hard in his store but his store is doing constantly bad business. He has to rely upon the wages of his young daughter Helen. He labored honestly for more than sixteen hours a day but becoming poorer every day. But instead of becoming cynical he is full of compassion. He empathizes with other poor and suffering people. He even helped a drunken woman. He is filled with an uncompromising sense of duty:

He labored long hours, was the soul of honesty- he could not escape his honesty, it was bedrock;...yet he trusted cheaters-coveted nobody's nothing and always got poorer.(19)

Morris Bober is a man of values among corrupt people. His simple and moral lifestyle is an anti-thesis of the prevailing spirit of the age in America which is marked by vulgar materialism and moral degeneration. Morris is fighting a losing battle against the dominant culture of commercialism and corruption. These cultural currents are personified in the text through the character of prosperous Julius Karp, a rich liquor dealer of the same street. Whereas Morris is contended to sell people health and nourishment by selling milk and bread. Thus, Morris is not following the American dream of success. The philosophy of his life is simple, "When a man is honest, he don't worry when he sleeps. This is important than to steal a nickel."(78)

Thus, Morris stands as the symbol of resistance to the dominant cultural currents of the age. Instead, he stands for the moral purity and ethical values. The narrative also hints towards finding a way out of this spiritual wasteland which can only be achieved by raising your moral standards just like Morris Bober.

Morris appears as a saintly Christ figure. He is a liberal, religiously tolerant Jew who has no interest in the religious rituals, he does not even observe Sabbath and eats ham. From the very beginning, he knows that Frank has robbed him that night, still he gave him a chance to change his personality and become exactly human. He dies when he caught pneumonia while shoveling the snow from the path of the 'church goers'. It is the acceptance of the redemptive values of the vicarious suffering which leads to his spiritual liberty, "What do you suffer for Morris? Morris calmly replies, "I suffer for you?"(113) Being a wise old man figure, Morris appears as a superego image (what Frank wishes to become). A strong bond between Morris and Frank develop as they enter in a father-son relationship. They are connected not by blood but by thought. Frank is an orphan since infancy and Morris has lost his only son Ephraim. They fill each other's emotional lack as Frank assumes the role of a foster son. Frank arrives to learn Morris's trade and philosophy of life and became the one to inherit his grocery as well as moral values. In the novel, Frank saves his life almost three times and takes the responsibility of the Bober household while Morris recovers from illness. Their growing bond and affection is contrasted with the breakdown of other father-son pairs in the novel which represent the failure of passing one's ethics and values to one's

own children. Julius Karp's lethargic son Louis gives up the family business he inherits. Sam Pearl's lawyer son Nat Pearl forgets the moral law of religion. Detective Minogue's son Ward Minogue turns out to be an unscrupulous criminal. In contrast to other sons, Frank proves out to be more of son to Morris as he inherits in true sense the good moral values and philosophy of life adopted by Morris.

Archetype of Anima

Carl Jung considers encounter with the archetype of the contra sexual 'other', anima or animus as the masterpiece of individuation. He says, "Every man carries within himself the eternal image of the woman, not the image of this or that particular a woman, but a definite feminine image". (A Very Short Introduction, 64)

In Helen, Frank meets the anima archetype or his inner ideal femininity through his psychic process of projection. Helen appears before us as an aspiring but frustrated girl looking for a fulfilling relationship with a man, which she neither finds in Nat Pearl, a rich Jewish lawyer nor in Louis Karp who proves not even close to her expectation of an ideal man. She usually visits a library and is very fond of reading. She wants to attend college to complete her education but she has to work as a secretary to support her family.

She gives Frank books to read like *Anna Karenina*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Madam Bovary*, *War and Peace* which are all great stories of transformation. Though unconsciously, she leads Frank toward the path of transformation and self-realization. His transformation can be realized through Frank's changing attitude towards her which shifts from physical to a spiritual one. Initially, Frank feels drawn towards her as soon as he saw her. He even muses her in the typical anti-Semitic way, "These Jewish babes could be troublesome." (58)

One day, just to see her he plays a trick and lies that she is wanted on the phone realizing that he has been "Staring out the wrong way." (64) One day, he even climbs up the dumb waiter to peep through the shush window at bathing Helen. As he catches sight of nude Helen:

"He felt a throb of pain at her nakedness, an overwhelming desire to love her, at the same time an awareness of loss...Her body was young, soft,

lovely, the breasts like small birds on flight, her ass like a flower. Yet it was a lovely body.”(70)

This purely carnal experience is elevated to the spiritual heights by using the poetic metaphors like ‘birds’ and ‘flowers’ which symbolize beauty, roundedness, imagination and spirituality respectively. Helen slowly and gradually got attracted towards Frank. After the park incident, she discards him but after seeing Frank’s selfless efforts to save her father’s life and business, his tiresome efforts to support their family, her attitude towards him changes. She even realized that the night when Ward attacked her; she had also craved to give herself to Frank. Realizing her fault, she accepts Frank as the bread winner of their family and accepts his proposal to pay her fee for the college. She breaks up her relationship with Nat Pearl and rejects Louis Karp’s marriage proposal .She starts using her Shakespeare anthology that Frank had gifted her.

Helen forgives him when he confesses before her about the robbery. Realizing that “since he has changed in his heart” she forgives him. Her change, in a way, reflects Frank’s psycho spiritual transformation.

Archetype of Shadow

Jung defines shadow as:

The darker side of the personality. Recognition and acceptance of one’s own shadow is a step further towards self-realization. Facing the truth of one’s self, the acceptance of the darker part of our psyche. We got self-knowledge only when we take full responsibility of our shadow.” (A Very Short Introduction, 64)

Ward Minogue, the callous criminal and former associate of Frank represents the dark shadow side of Frank himself and constantly keeps him remind of the primitive drive of the ‘Id’. Frank steals from his store, spies on bathing Helen, saves her from Ward but is unable to control his deep delved desire for her and tries to rape her. Ward reminds him of his own repressed instinct which is opposite to Frank’s superego ideal of doing good to the Bober Family. It is Ward who makes Frank conscious of his attraction for Helen, “It can’t something else. I hear those Jewish girls make nice ripe lays.”(58)

Frank being led by his 'Id' commits crime. He assists Ward in the act of robbing Morris but he has got the courage to accept his own shadow by going back to Morris. He badly suffers from the guilt which gets reflected in his act of offering water to Morris and his trying to stop Minogue from hitting him. Frank is a sensible soul, to overcome his guilt, he decides to help Morris and breaks away all connections with Ward. In a symbolic scene, Ward comes to return Frank's gun which Frank throws in a sewer. Frank's breaking up with Ward and his world of crime is complete after this action which gives him the courage to confess his crime of robbery before Morris. Doing so he felt, "*a moment of extraordinary relief, a tree full of birds broke into a song.*"(176)

He starts toiling hard and even starts putting back the stolen money. He takes up a night job and was using his personal savings to keep the store running, "He hadn't intended wrong but he had done it, now he intended right. He would do it with discipline and with love."(183) His changed attitude towards Helen from the purely carnal desire to the self-sacrificing aesthetic love gets reflected through the flower symbolism. In a vision, Saint Francis transforms his carved wooden flower into a real one and presents it to Helen on his behalf symbolizes the realization of his self through the anima archetype. Frank's final transformation is reflected through the burial scene. At the burial of Morris, Helen tosses a flower in the grave which Frank leans forward to see. He loses balance, falls in and lands feet on the coffin. In a metaphorical sense, the act of re-emerging from the grave symbolizes his psychic resurrection.

Archetype of Self

In the narrative, Saint Francis of Assisi appears as the archetype of self. The deepest desire of a human is to realize his inner self (the wholesome and complete personality). Frank reaches at the heights of psychic growth as he had a dream vision of Saint Francis, the typical archetypes of self, who comes out of the woods symbolizing wilderness dancing with spiritual ecstasy. He converts the wooden carved rose into a real one which signifies the conversion of carnal lust into pure spiritual love, "One day, for no reason he could give though the reason felt familiar, he stopped climbing up the air shaft to peek at Helen and he was honest in the store."(214)

The final description of his conversion into a Jew signifies his complete acceptance and assimilation with the 'other'. "One day in April, Frank went to the hospital and had himself circumcised. He became a Jew."(217) It also signifies his liberation from the shackles of religious

bigotry and reflects the expansion of his psychic horizon as he has learnt to assimilate his “self” with “other”. He has learnt to sacrifice his own desires for the happiness of others and the act of shouldering the responsibility of the Bober family marks the completion of his psychic transformation. This transformation converts Frank from a Jew hating Christian, a drifter and criminal to a religiously tolerant, responsible and sympathetic person who finds contentment in sacrificing his own happiness for the sake of others.

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