

Waste in Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant*

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Bernard Malamud's novel *The Assistant* reminds me of the joke about a man in love with his proctologist. He struggles to find a way to express his feelings. Finally, he goes to the doctor's office and says he has something up his ass. The doctor straps on the rubber gloves and tells him to lie on the examining table. He probes, but finds nothing. The man tells the doctor to dig deeper, then deeper still. At last, the proctologist says, "Yes, there does seem to be some sort of obstruction." Very carefully, he extracts it and holds it up to the light. Astonished, he exclaims, "Why, why – it's a rose!" "Yes", says his patient as he glances at the doctor. "Now read the note!"

As William Butler Yeats wrote, "But Love has pitched his mansion in/The place of excrement" ("Crazy Jane").

The three major characters in *The Assistant* (1957) – the grocer Morris Bober; his daughter Helen; and Frank Alpine, his assistant – are in many respects similar characters with similar kinds of inner conflicts. All three seem stuck in the phase of development Erik Erikson calls autonomy versus shame and doubt. Their conflicts are over anal issues, and revolve around problems with time and self-control. Thus the novel is filled with bad smells and persistent images of rot and garbage. Yet it ends with the image of a rose, seemingly grown out of all that waste.

Because *The Assistant* is structured as a kind of fable or moral allegory, all the concerns about garbage, waste, and stench, as well as related issues concerning money, time, order, and discipline, are not hidden but made manifest. Malamud seems well aware of both the moral and the psychological issues with which his central characters are dealing, although it is possible he may be unaware of how overdetermined the novel is.

To briefly recapitulate the plot: Morris Bober and his wife Ida, both about 60, are immigrant Jews who have for twenty-two years operated a small, mom-and-pop grocery store in a working-class section of Brooklyn. Although there are two other Jewish families on the block – the Karpes, who own a thriving liquor store; and the Pearls, who run a candy store – it is a mixed, largely gentile neighborhood. Because of the Depression, times are tough, and the Bobers face stiff competition from newer groceries, so their business, which once barely eked out a living by staying open long hours, now goes from marginal to impossible. They want to sell the store but nobody is buying. Morris, the soul of honesty and charity, trusts customers who owe him money. At the end of the first chapter, he is robbed by two masked men. The leader, an anti-Semite angry at the small take, thinks Morris is holding back money and pistol-whips him on the head.

While Morris is recovering, a stranger starts hanging around the block. He is Frank Alpine, a 25-year-old Italian-American drifter. Frank offers to be the grocer's assistant for room and board so he

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can learn the trade. Ida objects, but Morris eventually takes him on. Soon we learn that Frank was one of the holdup men and is doing this as penance, although he conceals the truth from Morris.

Frank falls for Helen, the Bobers' 23-year-old daughter. Helen is frustrated that she must work full time to help support the family and has put off college. Unlike the Jewish men she has dated, Frank intrigues Helen because he has traveled and because he has lived a rough life but wants to better himself. In Frank, she sees potential. They meet at the local library and she gives him novels to read. But the suspicious Ida disapproves of the growing relationship because Frank is a bum and, worse yet to a Jewish mother, a Catholic.

At the heart of the novel is the moral transformation of Frank Alpine. The novel is Frank's rite of passage. Morris lost his son and Frank grew up in an orphanage, so the two bond almost like father and son, until Morris dies and Frank takes his place as grocer, head of the household, and Jew. Frank is continually torn between his good impulses – he loves Helen and keeps rescuing Morris and the store – and his evil ones – he spies on Helen in the shower and takes money from Morris' cash register. The plot is full of ups and downs, reversals and surprises. In the end, after Morris' death, Frank takes his place to keep the store going. Helen, who had shunned Frank because he raped her, seems to relent because of Frank's sacrifices for the family, but nothing is certain. In the last paragraph of the novel, Frank has himself circumcised and becomes a Jew, equivalent to his becoming a *mensch*.

The three central characters all have a bad relationship with time. Morris dreams of the past, when his son Ephraim was alive, but for him the present means doing hard time as a prisoner in the store. And the future seems to promise only more of the same. From the opening chapter:

Now the store looked like a long dark tunnel.

The grocer sighed and waited. Waiting he thought he did poorly. When times were bad time was bad. It died as he waited, stinking in his nose (4).

In the opening chapter, Helen too feels "as poor as her name sounded, with little promise of a better future" (14). She feels sorry for her father, who rarely leaves the store, but "Thinking about his life always left her with a sense of the waste of her own" (20). Helen's frustration with the stasis of her life is reflected in an image of Coney Island in the wintertime: "In the distance a dark Ferris wheel looked like a stopped clock".

For Frank, like Morris, time stinks. For Morris, the present is bad, dead and "stinking in his nose" (4), and for Frank, because of his festering guilt, the past is bad, poisoning the present, "the past that always stupendously stank up the now" (90).

With his burden of guilt, Frank "looked to Morris like someone who had to retch; no matter where" (34). When Frank refuses to be a partner in crime any longer with Ward, "Ward showed his disgust. 'The minute I saw you I knew you would puke all over'". He tells Frank, "I found out you were working for a Jew and living on bird crap" (73). Ward expresses a visceral disgust: Frank is weak and ready to confess, to spill his guts, and Frank eats crap. Later, after Frank has been living with the Jews for some time, Ward spits on him, saying, "You stinking kike" (145).

Like Ward, Frank at first tends to see positive human emotions in negative terms – as weak and embarrassing. When Morris expresses concern for Frank: "It made the clerk uncomfortable to see the wet-eyed old bird brooding over him. His pity leaks out of his pants, he thought..." (83). Frank thinks that Jews are masochistic. "That's what they live for, Frank thought, to suffer. And the one that has got the biggest pain in the gut and can hold onto it the longest without running to the toilet is the best Jew. No wonder they got on his nerves" (88). At this stage in his moral development, for Frank, pity is piss and suffering is shit.

Frank vacillates in his attitude toward working in the store. Sometimes he rejects it viscerally.

"And there were days when he was sick to death of everything. He had had it, up to here... Thinking of Morris waiting on the same lousy customers day after day throughout the years,

as they picked out with dirty fingers the same cheap items they ate every day of their flea-bitten lives, then when they were gone, waiting for them to come back again, he felt like leaning over the banister and throwing up” (86).

But what Frank really needs to throw up is his confession, which is why he looks to Morris like a man about to retch. Frank knows he must “start by shoveling out the load he was carrying in his mind by admitting to Morris that he was one of the guys that had held him up”. Frank’s feels his crime is something rotten within him, like excrement or puke, and he wants “to clean up the slate” (157). From the moment the burglary began, “he had got the sick feeling that he might someday have to vomit up in words, no matter how hard or disgusting it was to do, the thing he was then engaged in doing” (89). He feels

a repulsive need to get out of his system all that had happened... 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 the now – to change his life before the smell of it suffocated him (90).

At one point in his life, after many failures, Frank had become a homeless person, and treated himself like garbage.

After a time he gave up and let himself be a bum. He lived in gutters, cellars if he was lucky, slept in lots, ate what the dogs wouldn’t, or couldn’t, and what he scrounged out of garbage cans (91).

Then he resolved to elevate himself through a life of crime. “So he gave up his outhouse existence”. Shortly after that, he meets Ward. “Ward sat down and told him that it was a Jew he planned to rob, so Frank agreed to go with him” (92). For Frank, caught in an anal mode, either he is garbage and treats himself like garbage, or else he imagines he can escape “his outhouse existence” by treating others the same way. The Jew, a low, foreign object, a “stinking kike” associated with money, or “filthy lucre,” he considers an appropriate target.

When Helen gives Frank *Crime and Punishment* to read, the novel “repelled yet fascinated him, with everybody in the joint confessing to something every time he opened his yap – to some weakness, or sickness, or crime”. He thinks at first that Raskolnikov “must be a Jew and was surprised when he found he wasn’t”. Frank still equates being a Jew with being debased, with weakness and suffering, and with dirt. “He felt, in places in the book, even when it excited him, as if his face had been shoved into dirty water in the gutter” (107). It is not surprising that the novel should repel yet fascinate him, for Frank and Raskolnikov are similar characters who vacillate between treating themselves as garbage and aspiring to become Napoleons of crime. “He had this crazy sensation that he was reading about himself” (108). *Crime and Punishment* mirrors Frank’s need to confess and do penance in order to obtain absolution and self-forgiveness.

To woo Helen, Frank presents her with a book and a scarf, but she refuses his gifts. Disgusted, Frank throws them away, where Helen finds them “on top of some greasy garbage bags in the stuffed rubbish bin at the curb” (114). Helen retrieves them and tells Frank, “It was a terrible waste. You should have got your money back” (116). But Frank will not return them. Helen persists, and several days later tells Frank “‘if there’s anything I can’t stand, it’s waste’” (119), asking that he let her return the items to the store. Frank cuts her a deal, asking her to keep one and let him return the other. The entire exchange seems to return to the infant’s gift of his excrement to the mother. The gift equals money, but rejected, it is merely garbage.

When Frank asks Helen to sleep with him, she refuses to do so unless she is sure she loves him. She says,

“I don’t want to dislike myself. I want to be disciplined, and you have to be too if I ask it. I ask it so I might someday love you without reservations”.

“Crap”, Frank said, but then, to his surprise, the idea seized him. He thought of himself as disciplined, then wished he were... he remembered with regret and a strange sadness how often he wished for better control over himself, and how little of it he had achieved (140).

So Frank apologizes to Helen. It is significant, though, that his unthinking response is “Crap.” With its concern with discipline, control, and order, and its issues about appropriate timing, *The Assistant* makes the moral improvement of Frank Alpine seem like a question of toilet training.

Ward functions as Frank’s anti-self. As Ward deteriorates both physically and morally throughout the novel, Frank grows stronger. When Ward attempts to rape Helen in the park, he is “dirty, smelling of whiskey” (165). He smothers her scream “with his smelly hand... Helen felt his body shuddering against her. I am disgraced, she thought, yet felt curiously freed of his stinking presence, as if he had dissolved into a can of filth and she had kicked it away” (167).

But after Frank rescues Helen, he becomes overexcited and completes the rape himself, acting as Ward’s stand-in. When Helen rejects Frank, he hits rock bottom, and condemns himself as garbage:

He lay in bed with the blankets pulled over his head, trying to smother his thoughts but they escaped and stank. The more he smothered them the more they stank. He smelled garbage in the bed and couldn’t move out of it. He couldn’t because he was in it – the stink in his own broken nose. What you did was how bad you smelled... The self he had secretly considered valuable was, for all he could make of it, a dead rat. He stank (174-175).

In one of the novel’s many reversals, the same night Frank both rescues and rapes Helen, he also rescues Morris from being asphyxiated by a leaking gas radiator. Yet when Helen sees Frank rescuing her father, because Frank had just raped her, at first glance she misreads it as another rape, a homosexual one: “When she saw Frank in his pajamas bent over her father’s back, her throat thickened in disgust. She screamed in fear and hatred” (178). In a novel about characters all fixated in the anal stage, it is not surprising to find images of buggery.

Frank now must atone for two crimes against the Bobers: the robbery of Morris and the rape of Helen. Frank feels he has “turned a good thing into bad,” into garbage, and “the garbage smell stank in his nose” (192). He carves a wooden flower, but after he leaves it for Helen, he finds it discarded in a garbage can. “She was remote, sinned against, unfeeling, or if she felt, it was disgust of him. He cursed himself for having conceived this mess...” (237).

As Morris recovers in bed, the store below turns in his mind from prison to graveyard: “He heard heavy silence below. What else can you hear from a graveyard whose noiseless tombstones hold down the sick earth? The smell of death seeped up through the cracks in the floor” (195). Later, a man who starts fires for insurance fraud tempts Morris, saying, “It smells here... like an open grave” (211).

In the novel’s moral allegory, Ward is an emblematic character, a moral degenerate who is a walking “can of filth” (167). Ward grows both more morally repugnant and physically rotten as the work progresses, until he dies. In his first appearance in the novel, as they rob Morris, Ward’s mask is a snot rag, “a dirty yellow clotted” handkerchief as opposed to Frank’s immaculate white handkerchief (25). Ward suffers from a progressive stomach disease and grows increasingly nauseated as the story continues. Frank feels a need to vomit up his crimes; Ward literally vomits. Ward dies surrounded by his moral and physical squalor. Just before he burns to death in the fire he accidentally sets while robbing Karp’s liquor store, “a feeling of nausea gagged him and with a croak he threw up over Karp’s counter”.

Morris perishes because of his desire to escape the stink of the store. He goes out to shovel snow, telling Ida, “For twenty-two years stinks in my nose this store. I wanted to smell in my lungs some fresh air” (223). Ironically, he quickly contracts pneumonia and dies.

Frank takes over the store and even takes a second job at night to pay for Helen’s education, to give her something that would not “end up in the garbage” (235), although Helen refuses to accept it. He even confesses to Helen his role in the robbery, although “his throat hurt, his stomach heaved. He clamped his teeth tight but the words came up in blobs, in a repulsive stream” (240).

The Assistant is thus a novel about waste, failure, sin, and guilt, and the desire to lead a better life, to “come clean.” These themes are expressed in repeated imagery of garbage, vomit, and bad smells: the store stinks, and so do Ward and Frank. Frank must purge himself by vomiting up his crimes. Significantly, at Morris’ funeral, where Frank is symbolically reborn out of Morris’ grave, for the first time in the novel the air is “fragrant” (231).

Malamud created moral allegories with emblematic characters, and he draws on universal icons. In Frank’s final dream, he imagines giving Helen a rose. *The Assistant* as a novel is like a rose flowering out of a heap of garbage.

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