

## Sentimental Workers: Reading Malamud's *The Assistant* as a Working-Class Fiction

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### Introduction

Many anthologies and critical works on working-class literature have been published since the final decade of the twentieth century, such as Laura Hapke's *Labor's Text: The Worker in American Fiction* (2001), Robert Coles and Randy Testa's *Growing Up Poor: A Literary Anthology* (2002), and Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy's *American Working-Class Literature: An Anthology* (2007). These publications coincided with the rise of working-class studies in American academia, as well as with the period when more and more Americans began to pay attention to economic inequalities. This social tendency produced several bestsellers on the working poor in the early 2000s, such as David K. Shipler's *The Working Poor: Invisible in America* and Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, and built up a foundation for today's anti-globalism and active protest movements, including Occupy Wall Street.

In this study, I will examine the depiction of working-class lives and its sentiments by contemporary American writers, mainly Bernard Malamud. This is mainly because Malamud's works, especially *The Assistant*, clearly show sentimentalism, which has traditionally been regarded as remote from the male sphere. Secondly, reading Malamud as a working-class writer leads to a new interpretation of his works, since he has not been categorized as a working-class writer in previous studies of his works.

In the course of analysis, I will assert that he not only portrays the sufferings of working-poor Americans but also presents the resisting figures that suggest an alternative way of living in capitalist America. The sentimentalism of Malamud, and of their characters, will be central to this paper for, as Lew Rosenbaum asserts, the working-class literature deals with "the sufferings of the mass of humanity, thereby awakening the sympathies of the millions" (Para. 23). Malamud's writing style that suggests his compassion with the working-class will be probed throughout the comparative analysis of his character's radical deviation from the American success myth with the similar characters in the works of his following writers in the 1980s: Raymond Carver and Russell Banks. Following Rosenbaum's argument, my analysis will focus on the way these writers portray the possibility of human compassion with others and working-class solidarity.

### I. Malamud as a Working-Class Writer

As I have already pointed out, Malamud has not generally been categorized as a working-class writer. His name is not on the list of Working-Class Writers on the website of the famous Youngstown State University's Working-Class Literature Project. He is not dealt with in any anthologies of works or critical studies regarding working-class literature, either.

One of the reasons why Malamud is not categorized as a working-class writer is probably because he has been accepted mainly as one of the most successful Jewish writers, and Malamud studies have primarily focused on his Jewishness. However, Malamud did not like to be categorized only as a Jewish writer:

*How would you respond to this categorizing of you and your work? Would you reject the term Jewish-American writer categorically?*

Malamud: The term is schematic and reductive. If the scholar needs the term, he can have it, but it won't be doing him any good if he limits his interpretation of a writer to fit a label he applies (Field and Field, 39-40).

Renny Christopher and Carolyn Whitson assert that it is possible and meaningful to read writers whose works have not been tagged under "working-class writings" in the new context of class because:

"Class" is almost always ignored in the contemporary critical discourse of "race, class, and gender." Many working-class authors, such as Toni Morrison, have received critical attention as writers but not as working-class writers. They are tagged instead "African American" or "woman," as in Morrison's case [...]. (Christopher and Whitson 72)

Likewise, it is worth trying to focus on the political elements of Malamud's writings and to read him as a working-class writer to shed new light on his fictions and enlarge their literary potential. I would like, therefore, to pick up *The Assistant* (1957), which reflects Malamud's working-class background the most, and try to analyze how his sentimentalism is constructed in his works, and how it mirrors his political attitude towards capitalist America.

## II. Privatized Working-Class Literature and Sentimentalism

When read as working-class fiction, one of the most notable features of *The Assistant* is its minimalistic worldview. Its plot development is limited only within the poor neighborhood in New York. More than once in the novel, Morris Bober's seedy store is portrayed as a metaphor for prison. Morris's psychic confinement shows his lack of a larger, national understanding of the economic and political situation during economic downturns, the worst of which was the Depression, which led to his financial predicament. That is, while portraying the experiences of poor Jews, Malamud seemingly refrains from the overt ideological statements or giving his protagonist any political or class consciousness.

Such representations of privatized work by Malamud anticipated the future tendency in working-class literature. Commenting on the general characteristics of the American working-class literature written in the 1970s and 80s, Laura Hapke points out: "What is new about the novels published in the 1970s and 1980s is that the writers provide little sense that they have any programs for reform. Although they produce a fiction filled with rage, they do not seem to be radicals with authority" (Hapke 316). The implication here is that, compared with the proletarian novels back in the 1930s, working-class writings after the "Red Scare" are less theoretical both politically and ideologically. Hapke's comment is indeed applicable to the working-class writers of the era, such as Raymond Carver and Russell Banks. Carver's characters in his short fiction are often jobless and divorced, and they are not able to connect their personal sufferings to the larger social, cultural, and economic circumstances. Banks also writes about the white underclass, whose financial and psychic crises are depicted only in their private sphere.

In short, Malamud, Carver, and Banks's portrayals of the working class are quite personal. That is, while the older proletarian literature used to be set in the workplace, which has been closely related to male rationalism, the works of Malamud, Carver, and Banks are privatized working-class literature set in the home, which has traditionally been regarded as feminine. As a result, they are closely related to sentimentalism. Mary

Chapman and Glenn Hendler refer to the ideology of separate spheres as below:

According to this history, as the ideology of separate spheres took hold in the early nineteenth century, the domestic realm came to be considered the locus of feeling. In the process, the culture of sentiment became less directly identified with public virtue and benevolence and more associated with women's moral, nurturing role in the private sphere (3).

In fact, the recent studies in working-class literature emphasize the importance of comprehensive analysis of the daily working-class experiences, including their private life. That is, the main focus of the working-class studies is not limited only to the class conflicts that workers experience in their work space, such as oppressing bosses or exploitative working environments. Michael Zweig points out that:

Class has its foundation in power relations at work, but it is more than that. Class also operates in the larger society: relative power on the economic side of things translates, not perfectly but to a considerable extent, into cultural and political power. These forms of power in turn reinforce, adjust, and help to give meaning to classes (4).

Such privatized working-class literature tends to be regarded as apolitical. Indeed, Carver once was criticized for being apolitical by his leftist critics.\* However, their being personal and the smallness of the characters' worldview do not necessarily mean that they are not "political" —as feminists back in the 1960s said, "The personal is political." It is true that the fiction by these writers provides limited political commitment in terms of the Marxist theories of the national and ideological revolution. Malamud's radicalness, along with that of Carver and Banks, however, lies in the transformation of characters' consciousness that occurs in their daily personal experiences in the private sphere, which has conventionally been regarded as a home of sentimentalism in the binary opposition of masculine workplace and feminine home.

### III. Sentimentalism in *The Assistant*

It is Morris that embodies the working-class sentimentalism the most in *The Assistant*. As Sanchez-Eppler says, if sentimentalism is defined as "the capacity to feel the sentiments of someone else" (67), Morris is a highly sentimental man because he easily sympathizes with Frank's loneliness and decides to allow him to live in his store despite the fierce counterargument from his wife and daughter. We should also note that the male characters in this novel frequently cry, which is exceptional considering the typical male ideals in the tradition of American literature. Frank, for example, cries over his shady identity of doing such a dirty act, even while he is peeping on Helen's naked body in the bathroom.

He felt greedy as he gazed, all eyes at a banquet, hungry so long as he must look. 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.

Frank's eye grew moist and he wiped them with one hand. (70)

Morris, as well as Frank, cries over the suffering of his impoverished friend Breitbert. These crying male figures clearly point to the novel's focus on sentimentalism.

In addition to the sentimentalism that functions inside the novel, we should not overlook the fact that Malamud tactfully uses a type of sentimentalism that connects the characters and the reader. This strategy of Malamud is most clearly reflected in the scene where Morris sheds tears thinking of his children. For example, he cries over and over again throughout the novel remembering the premature death of his son, named Ephraim.

Constructing spiritual identification between the character and the reader through the image of a dead child is a typical writing technique in 19th-century women's fiction. Karen Sanchez-Eppler, for instance, says that Harriet Beecher Stowe uses the technique of drawing the reader's compassion using the image of a dead child, considering that many of them experienced the death of their own children because of the high mortality rate at that time: "Explicitly adding the reader's presumed losses to the novel's chain of mourning, Stowe casts the reader as a participant both in Eliza's pain and in Mary Birds's capacity for sympathetic action" (67). Following the precedent tradition of sentimental fiction, Malamud utilizes the same imagery of dead child. Also, in the scene directly before his death, Morris sheds tears seeing Ephraim dressed very shabbily and poorly in his dream:

Ephraim wore a beanie cut from the crown of an old hat of Morris's, covered with buttons and shiny pins, but the rest of him was in rags. Though he did not for some reason expect otherwise, this, and that the boy looked hungry, shocked the grocer.

'I gave you to eat three times a day, Ephraim,' he explained, "so why did you leave so soon your father?"

Ephraim was too shy to answer, but Morris, in a rush of love for him—a child was so small at that age—promised him a good start in life.

'Don't worry, I'll give you a fine college education.'

Ephraim—a gentleman—averted his face as he snickered.

'I give you my word...'

The boy disappeared in the wake of laughter.

'Stay alive,' his father cried after him.

When the grocer felt himself awaking, he tried to get back into the dream, but it easily evaded him. His eyes were wet. He thought of his life with sadness. For his family he had not provided, the poor man's disgrace. (200)

Compared to the era of Stowe, the child mortality rate must have dropped—thanks to the development of medical and sanitary technologies in the 1950s when this novel was published. It might have been more difficult for a writer to stimulate the reader's sentiment by merely presenting the fictional fact of the child's death. Malamud not only presents that Morris has a dead child, but also resurrects the dead child as a miserable ghost—note the child is in rags and is small and hungry—to emphasize the tragic financial circumstance of Morris's family. By doing so, Malamud tactfully and successfully arouses the reader's compassion simultaneously for the dead child and for their impoverishment, to emotionally identify them with Morris. Shortly after this, Morris also regrets he could not give a good life to his daughter, Helen. The sentimentalism constructed through the image of a miserable child functions as a fictional hub, which connects the reader and the character using the essential human compassion toward the child's death and misfortune.

#### IV. Radical Deviation from the Success Myth in Carver and Banks

As we have seen so far, sentimentalism plays an important role in *The Assistant*. I would like to examine how this novel reflects Malamud's political attitude toward the suffering of the working-class. It is necessary to analyze his fiction's political stance toward capitalism if we try to understand the novel as a working-class fiction. Since the 1980s, in the political situation of the growing global economy and the end of ideological

antagonism between capitalism and socialism, it seems that the political consciousness of some literary works tended to focus on the resistance inside capitalism rather than to the ideological, social reform once glamorized in the proletarian literature. In fact, Carver and Banks commonly present us with the radical way of thinking that deviates from the capitalist success myth, in which one's financial triumphs overlap his or her ideal self-realization. For example, in Carver's short story entitled "Elephant" (1986), the narrator is a middle-aged man who is entrapped in poverty because of repeated requests for money from his family members. In the early stages of the story, the narrator is described as a cynical man who despises his family for dragging him down financially.

However, in the latter half of the story, he arrived at a sort of epiphanic moment triggered by a dream of his father, who carries the narrator, who was then a child, piggybacks, and gives him a feeling of riding on an elephant. After the dream, the narrator is able to affirmatively accept the circumstances surrounding his impoverished self. The narrator keeps his front door unlocked and ignores the possibility of theft when he decides to walk to work instead of driving his car. He enjoys the morning scenery and gets in his friend's unpaid automobile. They drive crazily on the highway, passing far beyond their workplace. In this story, Carver succeeds to decentralize capitalist values throughout the narrator's personal transformation, who deviates from the social norms of possession and discipline.

Banks's *Continental Drift* (1985) similarly portrays a member of the white underclass in America, a man named Bob Dubois. This novel foregrounds devaluated individuals in the era of growing globalization. Driven by the myth of the American Dream, which is premised upon financial success, Bob abandons his dead-end job as a boiler engineer in New Hampshire and emigrates to Florida to "make a killing" (to make lots of money). His role models are his elder brother Eddie, who has succeeded as a liquor store owner, and his friend Ave, a seemingly successful leisure boat owner. Their wealth, however, is based on shady investments, and Bob falls into utter impoverishment because of their failures.

Christopher Douglas comments on Banks's political attitude in *Continental Drift* and problematizes the influential dissemination of the American success myth: "Banks's rage against the clichés of the discourse of the American dream is directed at their internalization and against the culture that nurtures the circulation of such clichés" (Douglas 53). Banks himself once criticized the fantasy of the American Dream in an interview: "The delusion is that you can change through success, success will change you—it's the American Dream—you can kill the old person and become a new one" (Reeves 25). As if mirroring the author's political statement, Bob finally acquires a new point of view and affirmatively accepts his escape from the dominant social codes, which force individuals to climb up the economic ladder: "It seemed to Bob that he was now truly poor, that he could begin to give up clinging to fantasies of becoming rich. [...] [H]e gave up envying those he saw as rich. That's what freed him" (*Continental* 342). Although Banks presents us with a rather ironical ending, in which Bob discharges his monetary desire once again, Bob's personal awakening to a fresh worldview and relativizing such capitalist greed is definitely one of the highlights in the novel.

## V. Malamud's Radical Deviation from the Success Myth

We need to look at Malamud's remark in considering his radicalness. He once commented on Frank, arguably the "hero" of *The Assistant*, stating that "I have not given up the hero—I simply use heroic qualities in small men. Sometimes, my characters do things so heroic that I myself blanch at their accomplishment"

(Suplee 116). Frank Alpine's heroic element lies in his remorse about his past criminal acts and in his decision to support this poor Jewish family, who he once regarded as wholly "other." Iwao Iwamoto points out the importance of poverty in Malamud as follows:

[Malamud] tries to see the fundamentals of human beings in poverty, which his father's generation experienced. It is because living in an impoverished life puts a person in a kind of extreme situation. In that situation, human beings show their true nature and find out their most basic desires (Iwamoto 75, translation mine).

In such extreme poverty, Frank realizes that his fundamental desire is, after all, to live in the Jewish community, the center of which for him is Morris' family. That means, on the one hand, that Frank, out of shame for his past criminal behavior, chooses to live within the bounds of traditional Jewish ethics. On the other hand, that means he makes up his mind to live in a moral matrix based on selfless exchange and mutual support, which Morris embodies.

Frank's decision is foreshadowed in the scene where he talks with Sam Pearl, a neighbor of Morris, about St. Francis of Assisi:

'For instance, he gave everything away that he owned, every cent, all his clothes off his back. He enjoyed being poor. He said poverty was a queen, and he loved her like she was a beautiful woman.'

Sam shook his head. 'It ain't beautiful, kiddo. To be poor is dirty work.'

'He took a fresh view of things.' (31)

Amazed by such a "fresh view of things" and by the selflessness that St. Francis and Morris Bober share, Frank subsequently practices charity to the poor around him even when he and Morris are in an acute financial crisis.

What Malamud denounces in the novel is, firstly, those who selfishly pursue profit regardless of the harm they create to the whole community, and, secondly, the ascension ideology that approves of these people, and both are depicted as an antithesis to Morris's sentimentalism based on the compassion towards others. Morris's neighbor, Julius Karp, accepts a new grocery store into his building, knowing that it will severely damage Morris's business. Morris's old partner, Charlie Sobeloff, opens up a large supermarket with the money he cheated from Morris. Both are portrayed as inhumane. Sobeloff, for example, hardly pays any attention to Morris when Morris visits him for a humble cashier job.

As I mentioned before, this novel consists of the characters' narrow worldviews. Twice in the novel, however, Malamud exceptionally has the narrator make a solid objection against mainstream American society, where these selfish acts rule. In one of the scenes, Morris is not even allowed to sit on a bench for a brief rest and is cast out when he visits an employment agency in vain for a job:

The boss of the agency, a man with a broad back and a fat rear, holding a dead cigar butt between stubby fingers, had his heavy foot on a chair as he talked in a low voice to two grey-hatted Filipinos.

Seeing Morris on the bench he called out, 'Whaddye want, pop?'

'Nothing. I sit on account I am tired.'

'Go home,' said the boss.

He went downstairs and had coffee at a dish-laden table in the Automat.

America. (186)

Malamud successfully contrasts the selfish pursuit of wealth in American society, which leads to the degeneration of human solidarity, with Frank's heroism. Frank abandons the ambition of financial success and lives in the mutual network of selfless care, which is based on sentimental compassion towards other people.

Malamud once said, “Jewishness is important to me, but I don’t consider myself only a Jewish writer [...]. I have interests beyond that, and I feel I am writing for all men” (Benedict 135). Considering this remark, it seems to be insufficient to recognize Frank’s repentant gesture as merely Malamud’s nostalgia for traditional Jewish morality. Rather, Malamud tactfully utilizes Frank’s heroic act in order to represent Jewish ethics, which embrace the notion of solidarity in the community, as a metaphor of human resistance against the growing selfishness in capitalist America and its subsequent degradation of human bonds. In this sense, *The Assistant* offers us a concrete image of the Jewish working-class experience, which can be enlarged upon all workers of different ethnicities, who seek to find a way out of the suffocating enforcement of the ideology of American “success.”

American literature has traditionally been based upon ascension ideology, which naturalizes climbing up the economic ladder as a goal of all human beings. Hapke points out:

Whatever the type or antitype, writers, whether addressing middlebrow readers, liberal or radical sympathizers, or far less often, the proletariat itself—look at the worker through the lens of upward (or selective) mobility. [...] [F]or a century and a half, worker depictions have remained married to the ideology of American exceptionalism. (14)

Against this general tendency of American literature, Malamud portrays an affirmative and heroic deviation from the success myth. This radicalness to decentralize the dream of self-realization through financial prosperity, which is also shared by Carver and Banks, is something hard to find in the tradition of American literature.

## Conclusion

*The Assistant* presents us with an image of an anti-capitalist way of thinking, affirming the importance of the solidarity of community, which can ultimately overturn the traditional acceptance of the ascension ideology in American society. This novel represents a political attitude through sentimentalism, which connects the reader and the characters. Through sentimentalism, the novel provides readers with the possibility of changing our attitude towards capitalist culture, valuing a less-competitive, humanitarian society based on the economy of mutual care and solidarity. What Malamud provided with us in the novel comes very close to the values Michael Zweig advocates against the logic of market and the politics of egoism: “Our obligations to others form the basis of respect, compassion, sympathy, caring, nurturing—all that we associate with the humanity that, as Adam Smith taught us, market behavior disregards” (100).

The sentimental and sympathetic acts of Frank and Morris are inspiring and thought-provoking. They ask the reader to reflect upon his or her own deeds. And that is what the working-class literature is all about because, as Michelle Tokarczyk asserts, “we are at a point in the field where we can ask not so much what working-class literature is but how it works, how it affects the reader and reflects its community” (Tokarczyk 1). *The Assistant* tries to fulfill the task of working-class literature by enlarging the domain of sentimentalism, which has traditionally been regarded as feminine, and bringing it to the representation of working-class male.

## Notes

\* For criticism of Carver from leftist critics, see, for example, Kaufman.

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