

Bernard Malamud's Use of History in *A New Life*

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ABSTRACT

Bernard Malamud (1914-1986) often uses history in his fiction. Besides the stories like *The Fixer* (1966), which is based on the real historical event, there is one like "The Last Mohican" (1958), which depicts the protagonist's recognition by making use of the multiple layers of Roman history. In *A New Life* (1961), Malamud shows how the protagonist changes by using the double history of the U.S.: McCarthyism, which had just become history at the time, and the history of founding fathers.

KEYWORDS

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1. Malamud and Jewish History

Malamud often used history in his stories, and the ways roughly fall into two categories: Jewish history and contemporary American history, reflecting the social and political current of the time. His most famous use of Jewish history is seen in *The Fixer*, in which Malamud used the Mendel Beiliss case in Czarist Russia as the framework of the story. *The Fixer's* protagonist, Yakov Bok was unjustly arrested and charged with the ritual murder of a child. The novel depicts the protagonist's redemption in prison.

The prison image in the early stories of Malamud suggests some physical restriction a person has to bear in the world, or some lack a person cannot make up for. In Yakov's case, even before he was confined in a real prison, his unfaithful wife, poverty, and unfulfilled life were a kind of prison for him. He tried to escape from the prison of his unsatisfied life by leaving the Jewish village for Kiev, where he seemingly fortunately gets a job at a brick kiln in an area prohibited for Jews by hiding his Jewish identity. Being a Jew itself is also a form of prison. Robert Alter describes the prison image as follows:

The prison, like the schlemiel who is usually its chief inmate, is Malamud's way of suggesting that to be fully a man is to accept the most painful limitations: those who escape these limitations achieve only an illusory self-negating kind of freedom, for they become less than responsible human beings. (Alter 35)

The prison image, which is interchangeable with the metaphorical Jew, is seen in many of Malamud's early stories and novels. In *The Fixer*, the persecution of the Jews manipulated and backed by the Russian Empire policy confined the Jews within the Pale, a spatial prison, and then confined Yakov Bok in a real prison for a ritual murder he hadn't committed. History is also a kind of prison which suddenly descends on human beings and binds us by the time's own difficulties. The narrator tells us that "Being a Jew meant being vulnerable to history, including its worst errors. Accident and history

had involved Yakov Bok as he had never dreamed he could be involved.” (155) Yakov Bok accepts the limitations history imposes on him and fulfills his commitment to the people around him and the world.

2. Malamud and Contemporary History

Malamud explains the reason he wrote about a Jew in czarist Russia as follows:

After my last novel I was sniffing for an idea in the direction of injustice on the American scene, partly for obvious reasons—this was a time of revolutionary advances in Negro rights—and because I became involved with this theme in a way that sets off my imagination in terms of art. I had hoped to portray an American experience, possibly concerned with a negro protagonist, but that didn’t work out into a usable plan for a long fiction. (TH 88)

It is interesting to see that Malamud originally wanted to write about injustice not in Jewish history but on the American scene. This indicates his intended theme is not affected by whether he uses Jews in his fiction or not, or by whether the history used in the story belongs to the past or to the present. Some of Malamud’s novels, like *A New Life* (1960), *The Tenants* (1970), *Dubin’s Lives* (1979) and *God’s Grace* (1982), are heavily tinged with the background of the time, which suggests that Malamud was always sensitive to the current of the time and picked it up as material of his fiction, but these novels and their background have not been discussed much, compared to other stories set in the Jewish world. Now more than a century has passed since Malamud’s birth in 1914, and even the various social situations and events in his fiction, which were contemporary when they were written, have become part of history. So, when we look back on a novel written within the context of contemporary American history, what can we find, at the present moment? Here, I’d like to discuss his third novel, *A New Life*, and its use of history.

When *A New Life* was published in 1961, it drew a mixed reaction, because Malamud shifted his time and place of the novel from Jewish immigrants’ New York to the contemporary Northwest academic scene. For example, John Hollander considered the novel as “Mr. Malamud’s attempt to break out of a limited almost regional area of performance in which ... he has been most successful” and Jonathan Baumbach saw it as “a breaking away from the airlessness and intensity of his two earlier novels, an attempt to extend the range of his concerns.” In spite of this significant change in his fiction, however, *A New Life* has been discussed mainly in terms of its protagonist’s maturity, just as the other Jewish stories have been, but not much on the new side of the novel. The novel’s protagonist, S. Levin, a Manhattan-bred New Yorker, leaves the East to the Northwest. In the novel, Levin was repeatedly asked, “Why from New York?” He answers, “One always hopes that a new place will inspire change—in one’s life.” (17) Levin, ambitious in pursuing his career as a college teacher, escapes his old unhappy self to the West. As Malamud himself admits, the novel contains a spiritual quest in common with other stories. From Roy Hobbs to Yakov Bok, all the protagonists in his four novels move from their original place to the West or to the East to begin a new life aspiring to invent a new self there. Tony Tanner describes this recurrent pattern and says one of Malamud’s lessons in his tales is “the man who attempts to deny the past ... may find himself imprisoned and trapped in ways which are worse than the physical impositions of history.... The penalties for attempting this sort of personal leap out of history in egotistical freedom may dire.”(Tanner 137) Here, however, Tanner’s focus is so

much on the protagonist's personal recognition of his past and his maturity that the realistic, contemporary aspects of the novel are dismissed merely as the cause of the novel's flaw. Tanner writes, "I think that *A New Life* is less successful than Malamud's other novels precisely because he strains to maintain an uninterrupted continuity of realistic detail" (Tanner 138). It seems to me, however, that the very realistic part of the novel, including the contemporary history of America, was also necessary for Malamud to describe Levin's realization of something important to his maturity.

3. Double-Layered Use of History

I would like to focus on the double-layered use of history as a key to understanding how factual, realistic details are told in *A New Life*. The novel begins from the scene in which Levin sets foot in a station of Cascadia, a fictional Northwest state.

S. Levin, formerly a drunkard, after a long and tiring transcontinental journey, got off the train at Marathon, Cascadia, toward evening of the last Sunday in August, 1950. Bearded, fatigued, lonely, Levin set down a valise and suitcase and looked around in a strange land for welcome. (3)

This opening passage of the novel reminds us of another ambitious protagonist, Arthur Fidelman of "The Last Mohican." The story begins like this:

Fidelman, a self-confessed failure as a painter, came to Italy to prepare a critical study of Giotto, the opening chapter of which he had carried across the ocean in a new pigskin leather briefcase, now gripped in his perspiring hand. (155)

These two scenes bear a close resemblance. Both are failures and go to other places, Levin to the West, Fidelman to Italy, to start a new life seeking for a new career there: Levin as a college teacher, Fidelman as an art critic.

In "The Last Mohican" in his wandering in Rome, that is, in the process of Fidelman's awakening to others' suffering, Malamud uses two aspects of Roman history: ancient Roman history and 20th century Jewish history. When Fidelman first meets Susskind, a refugee from Israel, he comes to know that he had also escaped from Germany, Hungary, Poland, but Fidelman's response is "Ah. That's so long ago." (158) Even though Fidelman is deeply impressed by the history of ancient Rome, the history of Jewish persecution only a decade ago is "so long ago," an event which he doesn't care about. After he had his manuscript about Giotto stolen by Susskind, Fidelman comes to encounter the Jewish history of Rome in his search for Susskind in the ghetto: a beadle of a synagogue whose son was "killed in the Ardeatine Caves" (174), "the present-day poor, Fidelman among them, oppressed by history" wandering in a mazed streets of the ghetto (175), an epitaph on a tombstone saying "My beloved father / Betrayed by the damned Fascists / Murdered at Auschwitz by the barbarous Nazis / O Crime Orribile." (176) Fidelman finally finds Susskind's home, rather a shelter, "not more than an ice-box," and he never fully recovers from the visit, when for the first time he understands the true meaning of Giotto's painting, "St. Francis Giving his Mantle to a Poor Man." Fidelman offers Susskind his suit which he really needed. In "The Last Mohican," Fidelman's Jewish American identity represents two aspects of the freedom he yearns for. Fidelman's Americaness represents his selfish ambition, while his Jewishness is the symbol of the responsible commitment as a human. In the process of his recognizing his own

ignorance and understanding the meaning of responsibility as a man, history serves as a catalyst.

4. *A New Life* and American History

On the other hand, in *A New Life*, Levin's Jewishness is mentioned vaguely only once at the end of the novel. Although it might be because "the identification of Levin as an 'urban Easterner' is intended to say it all since that phrase in such a Western small town as Levin inhabits is often a euphemism for 'Jew'" (Fiedler 157), as Leslie Fiedler and other critics pointed out, or for some other reasons, part of the reason might be the fact that Malamud wanted it to be an American novel. Malamud told an interviewer about this novel: "My next book will be an American novel. It's different from anything I've done. ... It's the story of a New Yorker who goes out West to begin a new spiritual life. ... It is about a teacher who is Jewish, but he will be operating in a non-Jewish milieu." (CBM 4) It can be said that this novel is about a Jewish man in a totally American circumstances apart from his Jewish neighbors. This obscured Jewishness makes Malamud unable to use Jews as a symbol. Instead of the two layers of ancient Roman and Jewish Roman history in "The Last Mohican," two aspects of American history are used to depict Levin's recognition of his responsibility in *A New Life*. History of both early and contemporary America scattered throughout the novel may function as a kind of indicator of the protagonist's awareness of his own fault. As Fidelman wandered among the ancient and Jewish history in Rome, Levin also shifts back and forth between the early American history and his contemporary history of the Cold War. The former history not only symbolizes the protagonist's ambition to create a new world in the West, but also represents idealistic American democracy and freedom. The latter is the real 1950s America in which democracy and freedom are suffocated.

Levin, an ambitious American who came to the West, arrives in the Northwest and explores the college and nature. His exploration gradually unfolds his attitude toward history. His move from the East to the West is compared to the pioneers'. Arriving in the West, he was impressed by his own coming all the way to the West and imagines the pioneers "in covered wagons entering this valley for the first time." (4) Likewise, he tells one of his colleagues that he left New York seeking his "manifest destiny." (108) Similarly, when he was asked by Gilley why he wears beard, he answers, "It's...given me a different view of myself," and compares his beard to Lincoln's. He identifies himself with the people in the early American history, although a beard was then a sign of "a radical" or "an oddball" in the West, and he is even mistaken for a foreigner, not American, due to his beard.

His admiration toward early American history is quite a contrast to his attitude toward his contemporary American history.

To stay at peace he let days go by without opening a newspaper or turning on a broadcast. He knew what the news was and preferred to forget it: The cold war blew on the world like an approaching glacier. The Korean War flamed hot, although less hopelessly for America. The country had become in fear and self-accusation, a nation of spies and communists. Senator McCarthy held in his hairy fist everyman's name. And there were rumors of further frightening intercourse between scientists and atomic things. America was in the best sense of a bad term, un-American. Levin was content to be hidden amid forests and mountains in an unknown town in the Far West. (95)

In spite of his admiration for the American past, he stays aloof from the ongoing un-American situation although he calls himself “liberal.” (12) Just like Jewish contemporary history is dismissed as a small matter by Fidelman, the un-American situation in America, as well as his own past, is something Levin doesn’t feel responsible for nor want to face. Levin’s break from the East is also his break from his past. Although he habitually tries to subdue or hide his own past, and make a new self-image as a college teacher, it is impossible to make a new self by shutting off one’s own past. Levin’s life remains unchanged, lonely and his future is “imprisoned in the Old Levin,” (125) because his move to the West is a kind of seclusion.

Levin’s attitude toward history also is visible in his awareness of the town’s history. First, Levin thinks the college town has no history.

During the day Levin enjoyed the town though it seemed entirely contemporary, without visible or tangible connection with the past. Nature was the town’s true history, the streets and park barren of fountain spray or sculpture to commemorate word or deed of any meaningful past event. Lewis and Clark had not slept here, nor Sitting Bull, Rutherford B. Hayes, nor Frank Lloyd Wright. After the covered wagons apparently little had happened that was worth public remembrance except a few serious fires and the expulsion, not hanging, of Leo Duffy. (74)

Just like Fidelman who can see only the magnificent ancient Roman history, Levin cannot see the town’s real history here, but Leo Duffy plays the role of a guide to Levin’s understanding of history.

Duffy was a teacher at the college before Levin. He was denounced and fired in front of all the teachers as “a fellow-traveling radical.” (46) As Levin is not sure of the reason Duffy was fired, he asks everybody he meets about Duffy. Duffy seems to Levin like “a sympathetic person” (72) and he is always in Levin’s mind. The more Levin knows about Duffy and the college, the more doubts he has about his colleagues’ tepid attitudes. He comes to think like this:

The country was frightened silly of Alger Hiss and Whittaker Chambers, Communist spies and Congressional committees, flying saucers and fellow travelers, their friends and associates, and those who asked them for a match or the time of day. ... At Cascadia College the American fear manifested itself, paradoxically, in what was missing: ideas, serious criticism, a liberal position. (229)

In the course of having a further glimpse of the college, he comes to recognize that the West also is not extraneous to the contemporary history but part of it. He can no longer seclude himself from history; he is *in* history. He also thinks, “Let’s admit—wherever Levin had been, someone had been before. (no Chingachgook he, even in the primeval forest, even forest of the night).” (327) He admits the existence of history even in the small town in the West and realizes wherever he is, he cannot get away from the burden of history.

Eventually he becomes a candidate for the department head election to change the college’s rigid “status quo” which Duffy also tried to change. He gathers all his courage to resist a sense of stagnation at the time for the democratic ideal of America, but finally, because of his affair with the wife of a rival candidate, he was fired as a “frustrated Union square radical.” (346) While Levin, like Duffy, is called a “lousy goddamn un-American radical” (318) by one of his colleagues, he is also given the words of

Santayana ironically from his enemy Gilley: “Americans are eminently prophets; they apply morals to public affairs; they are impatient and enthusiastic.” (291) Levin is called both “un-American” and “American.” These two addresses to Levin suggest the two aspects of American history in this novel. In the code of the contemporary American circumstances, Levin is called “un-American” radical, but in the other ideal democratic American history, he becomes “American.” Levin answers to Gilley that Santayana also said “if you don’t remember the past you were condemned to relive it.” (291) Although Levin fails to attain his dream as a college teacher, he chooses to be true to the ideal of American history according to his belief.

Despite his final exertion to fight the apathy overwhelming the college, he is not a dramatic hero. Every time he makes a blunder, he is unusually afraid of losing his job; he often tells himself not to do anything which will jeopardize his future as a college teacher; he is afraid of Duffy’s fate. Malamud presents Levin as a timid person like all the other people under the circumstances. Malamud makes his protagonist a life-size person struggling to overcome his fear and follow his own belief. What’s important is not the result of his struggle but his ludicrously human effort to break through his own shell. When asked by his enemy Gilley why he takes on that much responsibility, Levin answers “Because I can, son of a bitch.” (360) This answer might mean not only he can take on the responsibility to live with a woman and her children but also he can take on the responsibility as an American to take over the past American ideal.

5. Malamud and Freedom of Expression

There is an episode of censorship in *A New Life*. A student’s father comes to the college to remonstrate against the use of Hemingway’s “Ten Indians” in the class. Malamud himself experienced a similar kind of censorship in his own novel, *The Fixer*. The book was banned by a Long Island School board in 1977. The reason was *The Fixer* was said to be anti-Semitic, an incredible reason. He mentioned this case in his address when he quit the president of PEN American Center. In the opening of his speech, he says, “After serving for two years as president of PEN American Center, I am more than ever convinced that one of our most serious obligations as writers, in a democracy whose history and meaning too many of our people can’t describe or comprehend, is to preserve and defend our Constitutional right to freedom of expression.” (TH 166) This speech was made 21 years after the publication of *A New Life*, which shows that Malamud’s faith in freedom was consistent throughout his life.

Malamud’s stories were often discussed (perhaps too much) around Jewishness; other contemporary American aspects have not been taken up much as a result. Looking back from the vantage point of the 21st century, we can see his fiction from a longer historical perspective and cast his stories in a new light. In *A New Life*, by using the contemporary situation of the Red Scare and the Cold War, where people, even at universities, moves away from the ideal of democracy, Malamud depicts how a man can act to protect freedom of mind and at the same time how important freedom under democracy is. (3,381 words)

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【要旨】

バーナード・マラマッド（1914-1986）の小説には、歴史を使用するケースがしばしば見られる。歴史的な事件を題材とした『修理屋』（1966）のような作品の他に、「モヒカン族の最後」（1958）のように、ローマの歴史の多層性を利用して主人公の認識を描いた作品がある。『新しい生活』（1961）では、当時はまだ「歴史」になりたてのマッカーシズムとアメリカの建国の歴史という二重の歴史を使用して主人公の変化が描かれていることを示した。