

THE FIXER: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A. THE AUTHOR

1. Bernard Malamud
2. Born: Brooklyn, New York: 1914; died 1986
3. Religion: Jewish
4. Parents: Russian Jewish immigrants
5. Education: B.A.: City College of New York; Master's Degree in English from Columbia University
6. Teaching: Oregon State University: 1949-1961; Bennington College

B. CHARACTERISTICS OF MALAMUD'S WRITING

1. Most characters are Jewish. He is concerned with how Jews live and react in this world that often victimizes and stereotypes Jews, but his concerns go to how the world victimizes all people.
2. Morality is very important in his novels. At the heart of this is his conviction that man must admit and take responsibility for his fellow man. You cannot escape your moral responsibility to others, or the historical role you have had thrust on you by birth and uncontrollable circumstances.
3. To attain highest morality, the characters must overcome temptations to settle for less, and endure suffering thereby.
4. Protagonists are often idiots or fools who are the unwitting and unjust victims of fate, chance, or powers beyond their control. We laugh at them, feel pity for them, and ultimately grow to admire them for both their humanity and their ability to overcome suffering.
5. Characters fear their fate, are caught up in it, yet they outrun it.
6. His heroes are insignificant in society but grow to huge importance and significance: they show morality, commitment, and responsibility.
7. They suffer immeasurably as a result of refusing to abandon their ideals; they are hapless victims; but they grow and mature as a result of their sufferings and become moral giants. The suffering is absolutely required for the characters to attain moral insight and superiority.
8. Character names, possessions, and physical traits are often symbolically important.
9. Typical Malamud character types:
 - a. The Outsider: thrust into an alien culture and must cope with it
 - b. Representative of an Institution: someone who is part of an overarching societal machine that is impersonal and often corrupt.
 - c. The Harpy: a man devouring woman who tempts the hero to give up his principles; often physically handicapped to represent moral corruption
 - d. Schlimiehl: a fool; a moral innocent taken advantage of by people
 - e. Schlimazel: like a schlimiehl, he is a victim, but instead of being a passive victim that trouble finds, he looks for trouble.
11. Characters openly ponder the meaning of life, man's place in the universe, and man's relation to god.

12. Heavy symbolism is common, especially in dreams of characters.

C. MALAMUD'S KEY QUESTIONS AND BELIEFS

1. Why did the Holocaust and why do all atrocities and injustices happen?
2. Why does God and man let these things happen?
3. Why did the Holocaust and all of the other terrible things that happened to the Jews happen?
4. Why do these terrible things happen to God's "chosen people"--were they chosen only to suffer?
5. To be truly moral, you must affirm two things: "I suffer for you" and "I am responsible for you."

D. *The Fixer*: Historical Context

1. Czarist Russia, 1905-1911 era, with Czar Nicholas in power. Government is corrupt and economy is failing, causing massive suffering for the people. The government won't be overthrown until 1917 Russian Revolution.
2. Jews are scapegoats and are blamed for all the country's problems. Massive hatred of them. Seen as "Christ-killers," as morally corrupt, as less than human. Massive stereotyping, demonizing, dehumanizing of Jews.
3. Jews migrated to Russia to escape terrible persecution in other places. They were never really wanted or accepted in Russia or most other countries.
4. Pogroms: an organized massacre of helpless victims: Jews are often victims of pogroms in Czarist Russia. Government uses the pogroms to deflect anger and dissatisfaction from the government to the scapegoats--the Jews.
5. The Pale of Settlement: where Jews are required to live. Segregated for the most part from the Christian population. Not allowed to work or live outside the Pale without special permission from the government.
6. Black Hundreds: an anti-semitic organization committed to eradicating Jews from Russia by any means necessary. Organizers of some of the pogroms.
7. Legal system says that you can be imprisoned indefinitely without an indictment--in other words, you can be imprisoned without being charged with a crime if you are under suspicion. The legal system is used by the government in corrupt ways.

E. Important ideas in Judaism

1. Jews do not believe in the divinity of Christ or that he was a Messiah.
2. In the New Testament, the Jews are blamed for the crucifying of Christ. This may or may not be historically accurate, but many Christian peoples have justified oppression of the Jews by calling them "Christ-killers" and heretics for denying the legitimacy of Christ as the Messiah. Since the powers that be are usually Christian while Jews have less status, usually being outsiders in a foreign culture, they are easy victims and have little power to withstand and defend themselves against persecution.
3. Jews use the "Old Testament", better referred to as the Hebrew Bible, as their holy texture and scripture, and they study it very intricately. They do not grant the New Testament much importance.
4. The first five books of the Hebrew Bible are called "The Torah," or "The Law,"

and they include detailed rules about how one should conduct oneself in almost any situation in life. This is their moral guide.

5. Jews were the first to believe in monotheism--that is one god only.

6. Jews believe God, "Yahweh," made a covenant with them, that they would be the chosen people and they would worship only Him.

7. Jews believe God acts in history at crucial times. God is anthropomorphic to them--has human qualities.

8. Key historical events where God acted in history: The Burning Bush; giving of the law to Moses on Mount Horeb; THE EXODUS; Passover; Diaspora

9. Zionism: a movement to establish a Jewish national and religious community in Palestine; led to Israel. It was inspired by the need for Jews to have a homeland, the one they believed they had a claim to from Biblical times that they lost in the Diaspora.

*****9. Jew is both a religious and an ethnic label. Some non-ethnic Jews convert to the beliefs of Judaism and some ethnic Jews do not believe in or practice the Jewish faith. In the eyes of the Russian government in this story, however, they don't make this distinction: they see Jews as an ethnic group and sort of assume that all are also religiously speaking Jews.

10. Certain characteristics identify people as Jews such as: beards, shape of the nose, ear locks, certain non-Russian names, etc. Obviously if taken to an extreme these are all stereotypes.

11. The first language of the Jews in Russia is Yiddish, a language closely associated with German, or Hebrew, the language the "Old Testament" was originally written in. Russian Jews, therefore, could often be recognized by their imperfect use of Russian. Most Jews had to be bilingual.

12. A brief Yiddish/Hebrew glossary:

--shtetl: a small country village

--goy: a non-Jew; goyim is the plural

--vey is mir: a term expressing discontent, frustration, etc.

--kaddish: prayer said by mourners for the dead

--phylacteries: small square leather boxes containing slips of paper and inscribed with scriptures and worn on left arm and on head when praying

--Torah: the Law; the body of wisdom and law contained in Jewish scriptures

--Talmud: the authoritative body of Jewish tradition

--Jewess: a female Jew; sometimes offensive

--Gentile: a non-Jew

F. Yakov Bok

1. An ethnic Jew who questions deeply his religious Jewish belief

2. He is a classic schlemeihl and an outsider

3. He is a new kind of modern hero seen in much modern literature

4. His last name means "goat"--scapegoat perhaps?

5. He is framed and used by the Russian government to focus Russian hatred on Jews and deflect it from the corrupt government.