



## Bernard Malamud on ‘Academia’: A Reading of his *A New Life*

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### Abstract:

The present paper makes an analysis of Bernard Malamud’s novel *A New Life* and highlights the writer’s ideas on academia as reflected in it. According to him ‘a good teacher is a liberator.’ He seems concerned with the emphasis on an education which teaches students only ‘how to work.’ Malamud believes in the values of the liberal arts as ideals of freedom and rights shape the very crux of a democracy.

**Keywords:** Academia, Environment, Human Spirit, Liberal Arts, Protagonist.

‘A good teacher is a liberator.’

‘The liberal arts . . . since ancient times have affirmed our rights and liberties.’

: *A New Life*

Bernard Malamud’s *A New Life* (1961) traces the life of Sy Levin, a thirty years old Jew from New York in the search of his “manifest destiny” in the Pacific North West. A reformed drunkard, Levin has fled the past failures in order to fashion a better future, one linked to the liberal tradition of learning and thought. He takes up a job as an academic of English composition at Cascadia College where education consists of teaching students “how to work” and where there are no ‘geniuses’ around to make one feel uncomfortable.



Levin comes to Cascadia College in the hope that he would be able to materialize his humanistic ideals in a new environment. Instead he finds himself in the midst of intellectual mediocrity and indifference. He finds himself almost ‘fleeing’ when he learns that the college is not a liberal arts college but “mostly a science and technology college . . . also had the liberal arts here, beginning around 1880, but we lost them shortly after the First World War” (Malamud 27). According to Sukhbir Singh, Malamud in this novel has fictionalized “the moral apprenticeship of a sensitive protagonist” (104). Malamud also views: “One of my most important themes is a man’s hidden strength. I am very much interested in the resources of the spirit, the strength people don’t know they have until they are confronted with a crisis” (qtd. in Singh 85).

This hidden strength prompts Malamud’s protagonists to suffer and struggle against the demeaning conditions of society and to pass beyond the odds to preserve life and moral essence. But life has not been always so purposeful with Levin. He gets worried that it has taken him so long to get started. Time not converted to good use has been a torment to him. Levin, who once “lived in self-hatred,” comes to believe that “life is holy.” He tells Pauline, the wife of Gerald Gilley, soon after his arrival at their house, “I’ve reclaimed an ideal or two . . . They give a man his value if he stands for them” (Malamud 20). He believes that “A man can find an ideal worth living for in the liberal arts. It might inspire him to work for a better society. It takes only a good man to make the world a little better” (238). From his own experience he comes to realize that the source of freedom is the human spirit. He adopts a liberal attitude since “Democracy owes its existence to the liberal arts” (28).

Levin gets a reality-check when he comes to know that in Cascadia, humanities and liberal arts people are treated as “the second class citizens” (Malamud 269). Gerald tells him that Cascadia is a “conservative state, and we usually take a long look around before we commit ourselves to any important changes in our way of life . . . education for an agrarian society, which is what we are . . . is basically a ‘how to work’ education” (29). Cascadia College and the Cascadia University are two big state institutions. But the Higher Education Committee of the



legislature does not recommend an investment in a double arts programme in both the institutions. Once the college had to part with the upper level courses in the liberal arts which people there thought were not ‘so important anyway.’ However, during the Second World War, the university “got all their science back on the ground that it served the national interest” though it never got back the liberal arts (27-28).

This phenomenon is true not only with Cascadia but with many similar institutes of the time “more and more liberal arts colleges in America are going in for more and more vocational subjects”(Malamud 29). That is why Gerald warns Levin from the very beginning of his job that “a lot of very fine and upstanding people in this community don’t give two hoots for the liberal arts” (29). The problem in fact is that many students —

showed almost no interest in the humanities and arts (‘electives’). They overvalued ‘useful’ knowledge and confused vocational training with humanistic education. They consistently applied standards of technical efficiency to the values and purposes of life; so did too many of their professors. Even their fears were unimaginative; not that civilization was imperiled and might be destroyed, but if their grades were not high enough they would miss out on the ‘good jobs’ and have to settle for a ‘lower standard of living.’ They were badly informed about themselves and the world. Their intelligence, their lives, were absorbed in triviality. . . . This wasn’t, of course, true for all, but it was true for too many. (Malamud 236)

What lies in store for Levin is to get ready to fight on two fronts during his apprenticeship at Cascadia. In the college, he battles with those forces of social anarchy that are averse to moral discipline in people. Outside the college, he struggles to tame those forces of spiritual anarchy that are opposed to psychic order in him. While serving at the college, Levin puts forth his ideas on liberal arts in order to help his students grow in spirit by learning ‘what to write’ along with ‘how to write.’

Levin feels disappointed when the head of the department, Prof. Fairchild says: “Our school . . . is called The Liberal Arts Service Division” (Malamud 39). Because it has connection



with the professional courses the college offers. Fairchild says: “Our main function . . . is to satisfy the needs of the professional schools on the campus with respect to written communication. In science and technology men must be taught to communicate with the strictest accuracy, therefore we teach more composition than anything else” (39). That is why there is so much emphasis on grammatical drills and so much importance of Fairchild’s book ‘The Elements.’ Levin opines that “we ought to introduce some literature . . . so the students know that good writing means something more than good report writing” (248).

With his liberal ideas Levin wins very few friends at Cascadia. Bucket is the only one who remains loyal to him till the end of his tenure. His dream of catching an enormous salmon by the tail and hanging on for dear life when the furious fish breaks free and tells him ‘Levin, go home’ — is the dramatization of his dormant fear in the face of overwhelming opposition. The novelist makes it more explicit by creating the shadow image of Leo Duffy whose echoes are constantly audible from behind Levin’s personality. Duffy is portrayed as a victim who lost his job because of his radical activities against the academic set-up of the college which debars the liberal arts from the curricula.

Duffy succumbs to his problems and later commits suicide, living behind a note which read, ‘The time is out of joint. I’m leaving the joint’(Malamud 334). Malamud presents Levin as an extension of Duffy. He is appointed against the vacancy caused by Duffy’s exit; he entertains identical ideas, ambitions and habits. He also falls in love with Pauline with whom Duffy had an affair. By creating him as Duffy’s double, Malamud indicates the vulnerability of Levin’s situation at college and in a way, also forecasts his fate.

But Levin outruns his predictable fate by choosing to fight relentlessly in support of his ideals as Malamud says, “my characters often outwit their predictable fates” (qtd. in Field 9). He launches a campaign against the unfavourable attitude of the authorities towards the liberal arts. This is an attitude that betrays an antipathy for the growth of human spirit and their disrespect for



human dignity. And in the process realizes that the situation has existed for thirty years and nothing is going to change overnight as the majority of the faculty is not “interested in a good liberal arts programme” (Malamud 100).

Levin comes to know that the whole thing is like “a political football” (Malamud 100). He also finds the game of favouritism in the department, then he discovers Bullock’s (his colleague) list of teachers and note to the head football coach saying that the listed teachers are “lukewarm if not downright unsympathetic to athletes. I frankly can’t advise your key men to take their classes” (238). It is no wonder that Levin finds his name in the list but what angers him is “Bullock’s gratuitous defamation of his colleagues, the harm a list of this kind could do, probably had done” (238).

The situation seems to be what Ms. Fabrikant tells Lenin; “The whole point to it is . . . the reason for getting a college education in the first place is so you can tell a good man when you see him, and that’s what nobody seems to be able to do around here” (Malamud 65). Levin says that he has never heard so much talk about ‘grades’: “It’s as though grades is what everybody graduates to after batting averages” (156-7). And a question arises when Gerald tells Levin that he would have paid Levin more if he was married (99). One starts thinking about what connection being a married person has got to do with being paid more.

In the current academic system, almost everybody, as Levin finds it, seems to be more occupied with superficialities than the real spirit of teaching and learning. And this is a matter of serious concern. Still Levin believes that “Men are men before they are lawyers or physicians or manufacturers” (Malamud 238). He also believes that the technical and scientific studies cannot cater to the growth of human spirit. They have their importance too but, they cannot create a congenial environment for spiritual freedom.

At times Levin becomes dissatisfied with his own teaching. He worries that he is not teaching how ‘to keep civilization from destroying itself.’ Levin intensifies his campaign as his



sense of dissatisfaction mounts. He exercises his freedom and realizes his new identity by asserting his principles of ‘order, value, accomplishment, love.’ Malamud makes Levin’s life a metaphor of human experience, so that Levin’s career as a faculty of Cascadia College shows us ‘not man as teacher, but teacher as man.’

During his struggle, Levin’s spiritual horizon is so broadened that he feels concerned not for a few but for the whole mankind. He “had the visions of service to others, the truest form of freedom” (Malamud 236). He is indeed so intent on accomplishing the mission that he even considers giving up his love for Pauline for his ‘principles’ and decides to contest the election for the headship of the department. He loses the election and subsequently his job too. At least, he gets ‘The Elements’ removed from the syllabus finally and also forces the authorities to revise their academic regulations in favour of the liberal arts.

At the end of the novel we see Levin, heading for a new life again with pregnant Pauline and her two adopted kids. Though the future seems dark yet, he stood on the moral grounds and has taken the responsibility for his actions and for the person he loves, Richards Astro marks the book as “a serious novel in affirmation of the human spirit” (152). Ben Siegel also observes that “Levin and Malamud both view true freedom then not as the rejection but the acceptance of obligations and ties” (131).

‘A teacher committed to humanistic tradition forced with an unreasonable demand that he never again teach in college level’ may seem disheartening, But Levin is not a ‘loser’ because according to Malamud, only a ‘bad reading’ of his work would indicate that he writes about ‘losers.’ *A New Life* is actually an impressive affirmation of the possibility of human salvation and identity through a consciously constructed personal ethic. And what Malamud, according to Ben Siegel, expects from all men is “to meet the tests of charity and compassion, disappointment and defeat; he seems to expect more however, of his college teachers, wanting them to function as secular priests” (131). In this context, Malamud’s views on academia become very significant



that he would like a teacher who does everything to help those gifted few who would do more than their teachers have taught them for the sake of democracy and humanity.

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