

**The Role of the Grocery Store in Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant***

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## Introduction

Bernard Malamud's work has been greatly admired and was reviewed thoroughly throughout the twentieth century. His novels *The Fixer* (1966), *The Natural* (1952) and *The Assistant* (1957) in particular received critical acclaim. Although most reviews were published around the time of the novels' appearance and current criticism has decreased, Malamud remains an important figure in Jewish American literature. A recurring theme in Malamud's novels and short stories is the Jewish grocery store. "The Prison," for example, from the collection of short stories *The Magic Barrel* (1958), is centred on a young man whose destiny seems to dictate a life in his grocery store. Malamud often uses elements from his own life for his writing. When he was growing up, Malamud's family lived above a grocery store in Brooklyn that his father owned. With a manic mother, who eventually died in a mental hospital when Malamud was in his early teens, and a sickly brother, "the store had been the prison from which Malamud had wanted to escape" (Davis 115).

Malamud's most famous novel that is centred on a grocery store is *The Assistant*. The store in the novel is situated in a poor neighbourhood in New York City and the owner of the store, Morris Bober, struggles to attract customers. The main characters feel trapped in the store and struggle to survive under the poor conditions. The characters, both Gentile and Jew, suffer greatly. The theme of suffering is represented by the grocery store as it serves as a catalyst for the suffering of the main characters, Morris the grocer and Frankie the criminal assistant. Furthermore, the relationship between the story's main characters plays out in the grocery store. Their relationship and shared suffering in the store initiates the formation of a new identity. The opposing characters of Morris and Frankie show through their actions in the store. Frankie internalises Morris' moral Jewish identity by taking on his suffering and his morals, forsaking his criminal life. Frankie on the other hand gives meaning to Morris'

suffering and reaffirms his Jewish identity. Both main characters form a Jewish identity that gives meaning to their suffering. The role of the grocery store in the formation of the two main characters' Jewish identity is complex. Focusing on *the Assistant*, I will examine the role of the grocery store as the setting for suffering and as catalyst and metaphor for the formation of Morris' and Frankie's Jewish identity.

The element of suffering in Malamud's work has been extensively discussed by scholars such as Leslie and Joyce Field, Ihab Hassan and Tresea Lavender. According to Lavender suffering is the experience that unites all the characters in Malamud's work (5). While most of Malamud's main characters are Jewish, *The Natural* features predominantly Gentiles and one of *The Assistant*'s main characters, Frankie Alpine, is also a non-Jew. Like Morris the owner of the grocery store, Frankie has suffered throughout his life and is stuck in a situation with no prospects. Both characters are sucked into the grocery store which causes them pain but also offers them a chance to give meaning to suffering. Most notably, Frankie converts to Judaism in the closing chapter of the novel, taking on the responsibility of the grocery store and the legacy of Morris's moral attitude. The notion of suffering can be viewed from different aspects and the interrelation with the Jewish grocery store will be discussed in detail.

Additionally, both protagonist and antagonist form a Jewish identity through the general theme of suffering brought on by their connection to the grocery store. Thus, Malamud's characters all have a Jewish identity that develops in the course of the novel. The aspect of Jewishness and Jewish identity in Malamud's work has been a subject of debate for many years between scholars, and most notably, between scholars and Malamud himself. In a letter correspondence between Malamud and Joyce Field and Leslie Field Malamud rejects the label of Jewish American writer and notes that while he is "sensitive to Jews and Jewish life" he rejects the idea that one must be Jewish to understand his work (101-2). Furthermore,

critics like Alter claim that, although most of Malamud's main characters are Jewish, "Malamud does not 'represent a Jewish milieu'" (Field 104). Indeed, the novel contains several references to Christianity. For example, Frankie's hero is the Christian Saint. Francis. Rather, Malamud uses Jewishness as a metaphor for the suffering of humanity. According to Lavender "[t]he Jew seems to be a perfect choice as a symbol for the inhumanities which mankind must bear, for no other minority group has had to experience more pain and hardships than the Jews" (3). Critic Martin Shaw suggests that Malamud's Jewish characters, such as Bober, are used to reflect upon the moral attitude of other characters in his novels (169). The juxtaposition between the good and moral Morris and the criminal Frankie is revealed in their actions in the grocery store. Eventually, Frankie internalises Morris' moral identity and converts to Judaism.

Furthermore, the grocery store is both an important metaphor and location in the story. The grocery store forms the prison that often features in Malamud's stories, such as *The Fixer* (Guttman 119). The store is described as a tunnel or a tomb in which Morris Bober is buried alive. This imagery underlines Frankie's transformation, while the transformation is described as a rebirth, coming out of the tomb of the grocery store as a new man and a Jew.

Furthermore, the grocery store functions as a central location for both the story and the main characters. The financial burden of the store suggests that being Jewish is both a choice and a destiny forced upon Morris and Frankie. On the one hand, they choose to remain at the mercy of the store's income and continue to suffer. On the other hand, the central role of the grocery store forces the characters to remain in one place and develop their identities through the events that take place at this location. In his article "Zen Buddhism and *The Assistant*: A Grocery As a Training Monastery" Abramson suggests that the grocery store reveals Frankie Alpine's Jewish identity by removing the metaphorical stains of his past actions (83). Morris reaffirms his Jewish identity by functioning as Frankie's teacher. According to Abramson the

store can be seen as a “training ground” where both Morris and Frankie develop their identity (72).

In summary, I will examine the complex role of Malamud’s grocery store in the transformation of the main characters’ Jewish identity. The store is both the origin of the main characters’ suffering and the reason for their transformation. The grocery store functions as an important setting, as well as a catalyst and metaphor for the formation of Morris’ and Frankie’s Jewish identity. This paper will be organized into three separate sections: the first will focus on the major theme of suffering, the second on the formation of a Jewish identity, and the third on the grocery store itself. The final conclusion will outline the various roles the grocery store plays and their interrelation in *The Assistant*.

## 1. Suffering

Suffering is a theme that goes hand in hand with the tumultuous history of the Jewish people and features prominently in Jewish American literature. Well-known authors such as Chaim Potok, Saul Bellow and Sholom Aleichem wrote some work in response to the hardships and the injustice inflicted upon the Jewish people. The theme of suffering in *The Assistant* and the way it is interrelated with the grocery store is complex and can be approached from four different angles. Firstly, suffering is closely related to the Jewish element in Malamud's work and reveals the importance of morality in the formation of the main characters' Jewish identity. Secondly, by trying to escape their past Frankie and Morris come together in the grocery store which creates the juxtaposition of their personalities. Moreover, the grocery store is a direct cause of suffering. Finally, the grocery store provides Morris and Frankie with the opportunity to give meaning to their suffering. These four aspects of suffering will show the importance of the grocery store in relation to suffering and its role in the formation of Jewish identity in the novel.

There is a clear focus on Jews and their suffering in Malamud's work. Critic Oscar B. Goodman even argued that Malamud was "the most Jewish of American Jewish writers" (qtd. in Guttman 112). However, Malamud had humanistic reasons to create Jewish characters. During his career Malamud gave few interviews about his work. According to Field and Field he was very apprehensive about explaining the reasoning behind it, afraid to "betray" his work in the process (8). He, however, gave a glimpse of the reasoning behind the importance of writing about suffering in an interview with Lawrence Lasher when he said:

"The suffering of Jews is a distinct thing to me. I for one believe that not enough has been made of the tragedy of the destruction of 6,000,000 Jews. And I felt exactly the same in 1936 when the Yellow River flooded and six to ten million Chinese were

drowned. Not enough has been made of such tragedies. Somebody has to cry – even if it’s just a writer, 20 years later.” (Conversations with Bernard Malamud 5-6)

In another interview Malamud said that he felt “it is the writer’s business to cry havoc, because silence can’t increase understanding or evoke mercy” (Benedict 28). In other words, to Malamud suffering is an aspect of life that is too easily ignored. As a writer he felt the responsibility to document the effect and the meaning of suffering. According to critic Norman Podhoretz “Malamud [felt that] the Jew is humanity under the twin aspects of suffering and moral aspirations” (165).

Moral responsibility is significant in the novel and is visible in the main characters in *The Assistant*. Morality, in connection with Jewish Law is significant to Morris’ identity. According to Daniel Walden, when Malamud speaks of Law in his work, he refers to a “man’s relationship to the Law, meaning doing what is right when it has to be done, no matter the suffering” (qtd. in Aarons 59). The importance of morality is revealed when Frankie takes on the responsibilities for the grocery store. While Morris is responsible for his family and therefore suffers in a grocery store that can barely support his family’s needs, Frankie learns to take moral responsibility for his actions by taking on Morris’ role as grocer. According to Samuel Weiss “Judaism lays great emphasis on the importance of leading a moral life and achieving salvation through meritorious deeds, rather than asceticism, celibacy or self-imposed suffering” (145). The grocery store gives Frankie a chance to change and take over the grocer’s suffering in order to gain a moral and Jewish identity.

Equally important to the moral responsibility of the main characters is the historical origin of suffering which is visible in the characters’ attempt to escape the past. Firstly, Morris feels the responsibility of his Jewish identity. According to Lavender “[t]he hero’s pain comes directly from his status as a member of the minority group” (6). Morris escaped his past by coming to America. He fled his hometown in Russia to avoid being drafted into



the Czarist army and to avoid a life of misery. Yet, Morris cannot escape his destiny of suffering. “He had hoped for much in America and got little. And because of him Helen and Ida had less. He had defrauded them, he and the blood-sucking store” (The Assistant 28). Secondly, Frankie uses the grocery store to escape his past actions that have led him to a life of crime and disappointment. The moral identity of Morris Bober provokes a change in Frankie’s actions that change the criminal’s morals, eventually leading to the formation of his Jewish identity. The opposition of good and bad actions and morals is evident in both Morris and Frankie. The two characters are juxtaposed as the honest grocer versus a lost criminal who “is depicted as lawless and base” (Zlotnick-Woldenberg 459). Morris is incapable of a criminal or immoral act. “Morris never cheated or thought of cheating a customer, nor would he mislead a potential buyer of his store about the amount of business he could expect” (Zlotnick-Woldenberg 463). Morris’ moral identity increases his suffering because “he puts duty above his own comfort and well-being” (Lavender 25). For example, the grocer would rather lose income than refuse a crying girl to buy food on trust. “His peace – the little he lived with – was worth forty-two cents” (The Assistant 8). Frankie on the other hand, continues his criminal behaviour by stealing from Morris. Slowly, by experiencing Morris’ suffering and internalising his morals Frankie forms a new, Jewish, identity. By escaping their past Morris and Frankie develop a relationship that eventually leads to the formation of their Jewish identities. The grocery store plays an important role as the setting for their suffering.

Thus, the suffering of Malamud’s heroes is directly affected by the grocery store. Whether their suffering stems from past actions or is influenced by a history marked by persecution, the immediate suffering is caused by the grocery store. Morris’ physical health is compromised by the poor conditions inside the store. Thus, he does not only suffer mentally but also suffers physically. The dismal income from the store keeps both Morris and Frankie prisoner. Morris is unable to sell the store and retire because no one wants to buy a poor

grocery store. To add to Morris' frustration another store opens on the same street, reducing his income to an all time low. Frankie is unable to escape the grocery store because of the low wages he receives. Consequently, he decides to steal from Morris to supplement his income. Critic Allen Guttman points out that Morris' suffering is everlasting (118). Accordingly, it is not surprising that Malamud never leaves the place which is the cause of his suffering. Moreover, it is the store that causes Frankie to inflict harm upon Morris. He chooses to hold up Morris' grocery, because it is a Jewish store (Hays 220).

Besides functioning as an important cause of suffering in the novel, the grocery store provides the main characters with a reason to suffer. Training Frankie to be his assistant gives meaning to Morris' suffering. At the same time being an apprentice gives Frankie a reason to suffer. Frankie challenges Morris to explain why Jewish people have to suffer. He asks Morris: "...why is it that the Jews suffer so damn much, Morris?" (The Assistant 113). At first Morris answers that it is because Jews are supposed to, but when Frankie presses him for a better explanation Morris tells him that he suffers for Frankie. The grocer's answer seems to imply a "[c]artesians minimum: I suffer, therefore I am" (Friedman 930). Morris suffers for Frankie in order to make the formation of his Jewish identity possible. Training Frankie to be his assistant reaffirms his Jewish identity. Frankie undergoes a transformation, essentially becoming Morris by "accepting a code of moral responsibility, limit[ing] his options and sacrific[ing] certain freedoms" (Zlotnick-Woldenberg 464). Running the store and taking care of Ida and Helen Bober, Morris' wife and daughter, after Morris has passed away gives Frankie a direction in life and provides him with a reason to suffer. The grocery store gives meaning to the suffering of the two main characters.

In conclusion, the grocery store serves as both an important location and as a catalyst for the suffering of both Jew and Gentile, the grocer and his assistant. The origin of suffering

comes forth from the past, both from personal mistakes they have made and historic and religious legacy. The grocery store, however, is the place where suffering manifests itself. The suffering is displayed through the miserable lives of the store's occupants. Furthermore, the grocery store gives meaning to the suffering that the characters live with. Training Frankie gives meaning to Morris' suffering and taking on the responsibilities of being an assistant gives Frankie a reason for his suffering. The theme of suffering goes hand in hand with the important issue of morality. The interrelation between morality and suffering is significant for *The Assistant* as a Jewish novel while they are pillars of Jewish Law and are vital for the main characters' Jewish identity. As the personification of morality, Morris is pitted against the low morals of Frankie the criminal. By taking on the responsibilities for the grocery store and Morris' suffering, Frankie takes on the moral identity of Morris Bober.

## 2. The Formation of a Jewish Identity

Both Morris the Jew and Frankie the Gentile form a Jewish identity through the grocery store. The Jewish element in Malamud's work has been debated for many years. The recurring theme of suffering in Malamud's writing shows a focus on the troubles of humanity rather than solely Jewish people. In the search for their own identity all of Malamud's heroes wrestle "to establish unity with some unacknowledged center of one's personality" (Richman 22). In addition, the presence of Christian imagery that surrounds Frankie also suggests a non-Jewish element in the formation of his identity. For example, Frankie is named after Saint Francis who also functions as Frankie's role model. Critic Sidney Richman comments that the use of Jewish characters in Malamud's work is "a peculiarly dramatic symbol for a man's struggle in the modern world" (18). Malamud used Jewish characters, such as Morris, as representatives for the suffering of mankind. Berger maintains that Malamud was a writer who was "concerned with drawing what [he] perceive[d] to be appropriate societal lessons from the Jewish catastrophe" (qtd. in Zierler 54). The Christian element in the novel works together with the Jewish view that living a moral life requires self-sacrifice. Morality is an important element in the formation of the main characters' Jewish identity. Morris is a prime example of a suffering Jewish character with a set moral identity. Frankie's character serves as the antagonist and is contrasted with Morris' moral identity. Frankie enters the story as a young Gentile who has made many mistakes that have led him to a life of crime and disappointment. Frankie describes his misfortune as: "With me one wrong thing leads to another and it ends up in a trap" (The Assistant 36). According to Hays, the trap Frankie describes is in fact the grocery store (220). Throughout the novel Frankie struggles to improve his life and his moral identity. In the final chapters of the novel Frankie reaches his desired identity by internalising Morris' moral Jewish identity and converting to Judaism. In other words, Frankie is reborn by taking Morris' place in the grocery store. The relationship

between the two main characters is also important for the formation of Morris' Jewish identity. The conversion of Frankie and Morris is surrounded by images of rebirth.

Morris' moral Jewish identity provides Frankie with a role model. Frankie was raised in an orphanage and was never able to establish a functioning relationship. Although Frankie is not devoutly religious his character is surrounded with Christian imagery. Critic Zlotnick-Woldenberg comments that Frankie is described with images of St. Francis, a Christian saint known for his choice to live in poverty (461). Frankie has always admired the saint but has strayed far from his hero's ideal morality together with his partner in crime, Ward Minogue. While Morris functions as the representative of morality in *The Assistant* and can be seen as Frankie's conscience, Ward represents Frankie's immoral side. The two sides of Frankie's identity come together at the grocery store when he and Ward rob Morris' store. By accepting the role as assistant in the store Frankie starts his journey to establish his true identity. According to critic Ben Siegel Frankie is not ready to affirm his identity, despite his willingness to change "nor is he ready for redemption" (126). The struggle to establish his moral identity is visible in Frankie's actions in the grocery store. Throughout the novel Frankie steals from the store's register but starts to feel guilty about his actions. "He could not explain why, from one day to another, he should begin to feel bad about snitching the bucks from Morris, but he did" (*The Assistant* 78). Morris serves as an example and "becomes Frank's surrogate father and hence his identification figure" (Zlotnick-Woldenberg 462). Critic Charles Hoyt even states that the relationship between Morris and Frankie is the main focus of the book (175). Frankie's worst fears come true when Morris catches him in the act and fires the assistant. Once more his best efforts end in disappointment. It is not until Morris dies of a pneumonia that Frankie can return to the grocery store to take over Morris' place as grocer. Thus, after being torn between two sides of his moral identity, both of which are

represented by his actions in the grocery store, Frankie accepts Morris' moral identity (Zlotnick-Woldenberg 462).

Frankie slowly establishes his Jewish identity. While living in the grocery store he experiences the poverty that both the St. Francis and the Jewish Law prescribe. In the final chapters of *The Assistant* Frankie converts to Judaism by getting a circumcision. "The pain enraged and inspired him. After Passover he became a Jew" (The Assistant 217). The grocery store is a metaphor for Frankie's conversion to Judaism and is accompanied by images of rebirth and imprisonment. Frankie enters the store as a Gentile and is reborn a Jew. The store is often described as a tomb. Morris, contemplating his misfortune in coming to America, thinks: "In a store you were entombed" (The Assistant 9). Zlotnick-Woldeberg calls Frankie's introduction into the store an "initiation" into "the living tomb of the grocery store" (462). Imprisonment is another important image that underlines Frankie's conversion to Judaism. Before Frankie meets Morris and is able to establish his Jewish identity he is judgmental of Jews. Alter uses the following quote from Frankie who wonders why Morris lives in the miserable conditions of the grocery store: "What kind of man do you have to be to be born to shut yourself in an overgrown coffin? ...You had to be a Jew. They were born prisoners" (qtd. in Alter 120). The grocery store forms Frankie's prison, the trap that he was so afraid of. While Frankie's struggle with his identity is initiated when he enters the grocery store the most symbolic conversion takes place when he leaves the grocery store. When Frankie stands too close to the grave at Morris' funeral he tumbles into the grave and rises as a new man. He is reborn as Morris and takes over his life as grocer and provides for Morris' family. Thus, Frankie establishes his Jewish identity through the grocery store by accepting the role as a suffering Jewish grocer and being trapped in the store.

The formation of Morris' Jewish identity is initiated by his ties to the grocery store and his relationship with Frankie. Although Morris is a Jewish character he undergoes a journey in the course of the novel to form a Jewish identity. The grocery store is Morris' prison that functions both as the cause for his suffering and the tomb that confines him in his unfortunate situation. As the moral voice of the story Morris can be seen "as Malamud's image of a man who has achieved spiritual fulfilment, a man who understands human suffering and who accepts it as a norm of existence" (Handy 78). Regardless of Morris' adherence to Jewish Law and his strong moral identity he struggles with his desperate situation in the store and his moral conscience. Morris harbours resentment towards Julius Karp, the owner of the liquor store across the street from Morris, for admitting another grocery store to open its doors on the same street. "For years the grocer had escaped resenting the man's good luck, but lately he had caught himself wishing on him some small misfortune" (The Assistant 24). Additionally, Morris is not satisfied with his life of suffering. The store imprisoned him when he was young and he was never able to leave. On his death bed "he thought about his life with sadness. For his family he had not provided, the poor man's disgrace" (The Assistant 200). When Frankie questions Morris about what it means to be a Jew, Morris is flustered and is forced to take a closer look at his own conception of Jewishness. He stresses that being a Jew "means to do what is right, to be honest, to be good" (The Assistant 112-3). The qualities Morris names describe the ideal morals of the everyday man rather than an ideal morality just for Jewish people. Altogether, the grocery store provides Morris with the opportunity to act on his idea of Jewishness and his idea of what makes a good man. Additionally, the idea of conversion also applies to Morris. Like Frankie he enters the tomb of the grocery store as a young man. The tough conditions of the grocery store provide him with the opportunity to exercise his belief in Jewish Law. He leaves the store with a set Jewish identity. "Yes, Morris was to me a true Jew," says the rabbi at Morris'

funeral. The relationship with Frankie forces Morris to re-examine and reaffirm his Jewish identity.

In conclusion, the relationship between Morris and Frankie, which is initiated by the store, creates an opposition of two personalities. Their contrasting personalities show through their actions in the store. Morris on the one hand shows his moral identity through his kind actions towards customers and his willingness to undergo suffering. Indeed, Morris' "dingy and starving store is charged with his goodness" (Mary 25). Frankie on the other hand continues his criminal behaviour by stealing from the store's register. However, his actions also show the formation of a moral identity when he starts to feel guilty about stealing from Morris. Additionally, the store is a metaphor for the trap that keeps Frankie and Morris in a situation that causes suffering but also brings them together to form a Jewish identity. The imagery of the store as a tomb or prison shows Frankie's and Morris' journey as they form their Jewish identity and are reborn. Lastly, Frankie forces Morris to reaffirm his Jewish identity by questioning his Jewishness. The grocery store plays a significant role in the formation of the Jewish identity of the main characters.



### 3. The Grocery Store

Morris' grocery store is a complex motif that Malamud employed as both an important locus for the story's main characters and as a metaphor and catalyst for the formation of their Jewish identity. The grocery store is a staple in Jewish American immigrant history. Over a million Jewish people immigrated to the United States between the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and the early 1900's. The groceries provided immigrants with the opportunity to prosper economically and climb the social ladder. However, working in a grocery store was hard labour and "the family [that owned the store] worked long hours seven days a week" (Half a Day 1-2). The idea for *The Assistant's* location came directly from Malamud's past. His father owned a small store on Gravesend Avenue in Brooklyn. Although Malamud had tried to escape the grocery store by educating himself he dove back into his past to write *The Assistant* (Davis 115). As a child of the depression Malamud knew the meaning of suffering in tough economic times. His experience in the Depression changed Malamud's perception of society. "It was personally and emotionally, not politically, that Malamud's grocers belonged to the tradition of Jewish socialism" (Davis 116). The grocery store is the central location in the novel where most of the action takes place. The main characters are trapped by the store and they are forced to endure the economic hardships. On the one hand the store keeps the main characters prisoner while on the other hand they choose to stay in the store and endure their suffering. Their imprisonment also initiates the friendship between Morris and Frankie and provides them with the opportunity to develop their Jewish identity. The metaphor of entrapment of Frankie and Morris is accompanied by images of the store as a tomb and a prison. Additionally, Abramson offers the interesting idea of the grocery store as a training facility. Frankie is trained to be a morally responsible Jew by Morris. Taking Frankie on as an assistant allows both Frankie and Morris to develop their Jewish identities.

The grocery store is the primary location in *The Assistant*. Most of the action takes place inside the store. Additionally, the store is the incendiary behind the relationship between Morris and Frankie. “A Jew is a Jew, what difference does it make?”, Frankie thinks when he and his accomplice Ward are about to rob Morris (*The Assistant* 66). But Frankie’s struggle with his moral identity is immediately visible through his actions in the store. During the robbery Frankie is unwilling to hurt Morris and gives the grocer some water after Ward has struck him across the head. He continues to struggle with his morality as he steals from the store’s register. “Despite his good intentions, [Frank] gets frustrated and behaves immorally, underscoring his inability to achieve a middle ground between sainthood and depravity” (Zlotnick-Woldenberg 462). He keeps track of his debt to Morris and vows to pay the grocer back. At first he does not feel guilty and even feels cunning that he manages to “pluck a buck from under the Jew’s nose” (*The Assistant* 78). But Frankie starts to feel guilty about his crimes. Furthermore, his conscience brings him back to beg for an apprenticeship. Thus, it is Frankie’s own choice to become a prisoner of the grocery store, but his struggle with morality and his longing for a better life keep him there. Morris is stuck in the store because of circumstances that are beyond his control. The dwindling economic conditions in Morris’ neighbourhood and the arrival of a new non-Jewish grocery store keep Morris prisoner. Critic W.J. Handy notes that the main “characters are indeed victimized by the forces of their ... environment” (66). However, Morris refuses to sell the grocery store or cheat his customers for profit and, consequently, chooses to continue to suffer. Both Morris and Frankie are victims of circumstances outside their control but also choose to suffer while it is beneficial to their development. Morris and Frankie “experience ...self-sacrifice, a willing sacrifice, for others” (Mary 25). They choose life of suffering over selfish behaviour that would benefit their own lives. The grocery is not just a prison but offers the main characters a location and a reason for suffering where they can develop their Jewish identities together.

The imagery that is used to describe the grocery store underlines the imprisonment of the main characters. References to the store as prison or tomb are plentiful in the novel. “The store was a fixed, cave, motionless” (The Assistant 55). “A store is a prison” (The Assistant 33). According to Alter the grocery store as a prison is not an original idea. He refers to Jewish authors who wrote about the “the stifling in the life of the shtetl” (121). Imprisonment forms an important metaphor in Malamud’s work. The grocery store forms a prison with invisible bars. Circumstances beyond their control, such as the poor economic conditions, keep Frankie and Morris entombed in the store. According to Alter Judaism imprisons Frankie and Morris (120). In other words, Malamud’s Jewish characters are destined to suffer. However, the two main characters both enter and remain in the store voluntarily. In an interview Malamud explained that the theme of imprisonment is “a metaphor for the dilemma of all men throughout history” (Malamud par. 45). The invisible prison suggests that the main characters are all in some way responsible for their own imprisonment. Helen Bober, Morris’ daughter, underlines Morris’ own choice to suffer. “He made himself a victim. He could, with a little more courage, have been more than he was” (The Assistant 204). The imprisonment is essential for the identity struggle of the main characters.

The store as metaphor for the transformation of the main characters is supported by images of the store as a tomb. Morris and Francis enter the store uncertain of their identity. Although Morris is a Jewish character and has a moral identity, the relationship with Frankie and the suffering caused by the store reaffirms this identity. The rabbi affirms that Morris has a set identity when he is finally able to leave the store. “Yes, Morris Bober was to me a true Jew because he lived in the Jewish experience, which he remembered, and with the Jewish heart” (The Assistant 203). Frankie descends into the grocery store as a Gentile grocery store but reemerges with a Jewish identity. His conversion is completed when he takes over Morris’ responsibilities and accepts a life of suffering.

Abramson suggests an interesting theory that supports the significance of the role that the grocery store plays in the novel and the importance of the relationship between Morris and Frankie. He describes the store as a “training monastery”, where the two main characters develop their religious identities (69). He underlines the theme of suffering in Malamud’s work and argues that it can be compared to the teachings of Zen Buddhism. “Suffering in Buddhism is the base from which religious training flows and is an essential source for human growth” (Abramson 72). Similarly, in *The Assistant* suffering leads to the formation of a Jewish identity for the main characters. Suffering is a “training device for the development of a spiritual life” (Abramson 72). Morris and Frankie are at different stages of their Buddhist development. There are four different phases of the teachings of Zen Buddhism “that are applied to the characters that enter” the store (Abramson 72). Morris is “close to enlightenment” and has progressed further than Frankie in the formation of his Jewish identity.”(Abramson 72). Consequently he functions as a teacher to Frankie who is classified as “a trainee, monk” (Abramson 72). An important teaching from Zen Buddhism is the significance of living in the moment (Abramson 75). Frankie has always been on the move and unable to stand still and form his identity. The store forms the prison that keeps him in one location and forces him to live in the present. For Morris, the store presents him with the opportunity to exercise his belief in Jewish Law. Thus, the store functions as “an appropriate setting ...for training in order to grasp one’s essential nature” for both main characters (Abramson 78). Abramson also comments on the Christian element in the novel. He stresses it underlines the development of the main characters’ morality and that suffering, like in Judaism, is an important element of Christianity. “While Frank embraces Judeo-Christian beliefs, Morris becomes a semitic St. Francis, and the store a Christian monastic cell” (78). Thus, Morris functions as Frankie’s teacher, who is modelled after the morals of the Christian St. Francis. “He instructs [Frankie] in the meaning of Jewishness” (Mary 25). The store

functions as a training ground where Frankie must make the decision between a criminal and a moral life. The formation of his Jewish identity is affected by a series of choices that Frankie made in the past. Abramson describes his journey as the climbing of a mountain. Frankie continues on to climb a steeper mountain as his actions in the store are more difficult for him that will “cleanse...the course of his karma” (Abramson 79). In other words, the grocery store provides Frankie with the opportunity to expunge his past and form a moral Jewish identity. Although Morris is further along in his identity struggle, the relationship between the teacher and the apprentice is significant in his development. The store functions as an important locus in the novel and as a training ground for identity formation of Frankie the trainee and Morris the teacher.

In summary, the role of the grocery in the novel is complex. As the primary location, the store brings the main characters together and is a cause of their suffering. Because suffering is an important element in their identity struggle, the grocery functions as a catalyst for their identity formation. The actions of Morris and Frankie that influence the formation of their Jewish identity take place in the store. Furthermore, the store forms both a literal and metaphorical prison. The economic circumstances create an invisible prison for the two main characters while they are unable to escape their poor conditions. Additionally, the actions of the two main characters create their own metaphorical prison with invisible bars. Frankie chooses to become an assistant in the grocery store while Morris refuses to sell the store. The idea of the grocery store as a prison is supported by images of the store as a tomb and prison. Moreover, the images of the store as entombing the main characters support the formation of their Jewish identity through conversion. In addition, Abramson suggests that the grocery store is a training facility using similar teachings to Zen Buddhism. Indeed, Morris functions as a teacher to Frankie teaching him about morality and Judaism. Abramson also stresses the

importance of suffering in the conversion of both main characters. Suffering is necessary for the formation of Morris' and Frankie's Jewish identity.

## Conclusion

The role of the grocery store in *The Assistant* is multifaceted. The store is an important setting as well as a metaphor and a catalyst for the formation of Morris' and Frankie's Jewish identity. Morris' and Frankie's new identity is decidedly Jewish. However, the novel does contain references to Christianity and Morris can be seen as the personification of Frankie's hero St. Francis. Malamud's protagonists are based on his interest in human suffering and their struggle with morality and the formation of an identity. The Christian and Jewish elements in the novel show the importance of the interrelation of suffering and morality. As Berger suggested, Malamud wished to learn from the Jewish experience (qtd. in Zierler 54). The formation of Morris' and Frankie's Jewish identity is representative of Malamud's concern for human suffering and his interest in morality.

As the primary location in the novel, the grocery store provides the two main characters with the opportunity to develop and act upon their beliefs in morality and Jewish Law. Frankie' and Morris' struggle for identity is evident in their actions in the store. Morris shows his morality through his kindness towards his customers while Frankie develops his morality by struggling with his conscience. Their personalities are juxtaposed and reveal their struggle to form a new identity. The relationship between Morris and Frankie is significant for their development while Morris functions as Frankie's teacher, as Abramson suggests. The grocery store is indeed a "training ground" for both Frankie and Morris (Abramson 72). The relationship between the two main characters gives meaning to their suffering. Morris teaches Frankie about Jewish Law and the importance of suffering. Morris' role as a teacher reaffirms his Jewish identity. There is a clear connection between morality and suffering in the novel. In order to have a moral and Jewish identity the main characters must suffer. "While suffering

can make individuals bitter, both Morris and Frank become better men through their responses to it” (Abramson 72).

Besides the grocery store’s role as primary locus, the store also functions as a catalyst for the formation of Morris’ and Frankie’s Jewish identity. The poor economic circumstances of the store play a major role in the development of the main characters’ identity and serve a dual purpose. The store is a direct cause of their suffering and serves as an incendiary for the main characters’ transformation as the store creates a situation in which Morris and Frankie suffer both mentally and physically. The grocery store provides the suffering that the two main characters need in order to resolve their identity struggle. The economic circumstances turn the grocery store into a prison. Frankie and Morris are stuck in the store because they are both unable and unwilling to leave. The imprisonment forces the two characters to deal with their conflicting moralities and resolve their identity struggle. Although economical circumstances beyond their control create a prison, it is Morris and Frankie’s own choice to remain in the grocery store.

Moreover, the grocery store forms a metaphor for the formation of the Jewish identity of the main characters. Their conversion to Judaism is underlined by images of the store as a tomb and as a prison. Both Morris and Frankie enter the store unsure of their identity but in the course of the novel Frankie converts to Judaism and Morris reaffirms his Jewish identity. Their conversion can also be seen as a rebirth. The idea of rebirth is supported by the description of the store as a tomb and Frankie’s unfortunate fall into Morris’ grave after which he rises as a Jew. Frankie completes the formation of his Jewish identity by converting to Judaism and taking on Morris’ responsibilities and morality. He essentially becomes Morris in order to form his new identity. For Morris the store literally becomes his tomb where he dies with a set Jewish identity.



In conclusion, the grocery store motif in *The Assistant* is complex and plays a major role in the formation of the Jewish identity of the main characters, Morris and Frankie. The use of the store as important setting and catalyst underlines the significance of the interrelation of suffering and morality in the novel. Both elements are important to Morris' and Frankie's identity struggle and are characteristic of Judaism. Malamud used the grocery store as metaphor for Morris' and Frankie's struggle for a moral and Jewish identity.

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