

Americanizing the Holocaust as a Metaphor in the Works of Three Jewish-American Post-World War II Authors : Miller, Malamud and Roth

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Abstract

Jewish-American fiction is a reaction as well as a product of its authors' experiences in the United States, the world's most culturally kaleidoscopic society. This paper, as its title suggests, studies the procedure of Americanizing the Holocaust as one of the World War II gravest events by means of metaphorical symbolism in three fictional works written by the post-World War II Jewish American novelists, Miller, Malamud and Roth. While almost all Holocaust writing has approached its subject directly and frontally, those writers dealt with it symbolically and metaphorically, rarely confronting it directly. The aim of the metaphorical approach of the Holocaust is the introduction of the suffering of the main Jewish characters into the mainstream of the American culture by means of universalistic and humanistic presentation of that suffering. However, this humanistic message is exclusive as it is only the non-Jewish sympathizing character—even to the extent of conversion into Judaism—that is deemed humanistic. After this Americanization of the Holocaust as a metaphor, academic curricula are not void of the study of the Holocaust which has become a staple mark in the collective public awareness far more important than any other national event.

أمركة الهولوكوست كصورة مجازية فى ثلاثة أعمال لكتاب يهود امريكان فى ما بعد الحرب العالمية الثانية ميلر و ملامود و روث

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ملخص

أن الكتابة الروائية اليهودية الامريكية هى ردة فعل كما هى نتاج لتجارب مؤلفيها فى الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية ،أكثر مجتمعات العالم تنوع من الناحية الثقافية. يعمل هذا البحث كما يشير عنوانه على دراسة عملية تقديم حادثة الهولوكوست إلى الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية كواحدة من أكثر حوادث الحرب العالمية الثانية جسامةً من خلال استخدام الرمز و المجاز فى ثلاثة من الاعمال الروائية التى كتبت بواسطة الكتاب اليهود الامريكان فيما بعد الحرب العالمية الثانية ميلر و ملامود و روث. وبينما تعاملت معظم الكتابات عن حادثة الهولوكوست مع موضوعها بشكل مباشر و بمواجهة صريحة، كتب هؤلاء الكتاب عنها بشكل رمزي و بأسلوب المجاز و نادراً ما واجهوها بشكل مباشر. ان الهدف من المعالجة الرمزية للهولوكوست هو تقديم معاناة الشخصيات اليهودية الرئيسة إلى عموم الثقافة الأمريكية عن طريق تقديم آلام تلك الشخصيات اليهودية كآلام أنسانية عامة. إلا ان رسالة الانسانية تلك هى رسالة حصرية فالشخصية الغير يهودية التى تتعاطف مع آلام الشخصية اليهودية إلى حد التحول عن الدين إلى اليهودية هى فقط التى تتصف بالانسانية. و بعد هذه الأمركة لحادثة الهولوكوست كصورة مجازية أصبحت المناهج الدراسية فى الولايات المتحدة لا تخلو من دراسة الهولوكوست التى أصبحت علامة ثابتة فى الوعى الثقافى الامريكى تفوق أهميتها أى مناسبة قومية أخرى.

America, the world's largest ethnic melting pot, hosts millions of hyphenated citizens among whom the Jewish-Americans are of a considerable cultural stature. Jewish-American fiction, by necessity, is a reaction as well as a product of its authors' experiences in this culturally kaleidoscopic society. Studies of Jewish-American fiction refer to the dichotomy of the Jewish American authors' existence and their ambivalent affiliation; and subsequently, the way these factors impact their literary production. For instance, in *The Conversion of the Jews and Other Essays*, Mark Schechner explains that it is the experience of the modern American Jew to be "neither wholly Jewish, nor cozily American, a predicament that renders the hyphen in his identity the cutting edge of his wit" (57). Likewise, in *American Jewish Fiction*, Alan Berger refers to the generational development of the thematic interests of Jewish American writers as a product of their symbiotic as well as tug-of-war dual existence:

For many years this duality resulted in concerns with alienation, marginality, and the lure of assimilation in the face of unyielding *halakhic* [Talmudic] demands. The conflict between the demands of the Jewish tradition and the expectations of American culture was frequently resolved in favor of the latter, although not without mixed feelings. The novels of Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth amply illustrated this phenomenon during the sixties and early seventies. The seventies, however, inaugurated the appearance of an American Jewish Fiction which advocated the norms of Jewish tradition, although not necessarily *halakha*, rather than Americanism as its standard. (221)

This latter paradigm shift in favor of advocating "norms of Jewish tradition" comes, in fact, as a consequence of a long-term Americanization of Jewish dogma and ideology, or Jewishness in general, as Linda Grant writes, in "*Delmore Schwartz and Me: a Literary Rediscovery*," that Jewish American writers like Bellow, Roth and Malamud did not universalize their Jewishness as much as they made "Jewishness an aspect of modern consciousness." Thus, issues pertaining to Jewish ideology and culture made their way into the mainstream of American culture through a long process of rediscovery and re-representation of the Jewish self at the hands of consecutive generations of Jewish-American authors.

This paper, as its title suggests, studies the procedure of Americanizing the Holocaust as one of the World War II gravest events by means of metaphorical symbolism in three fictional works written by the post-World War II Jewish American novelists, Miller, Malamud and Roth. To begin with, the introduction of Holocaust memory into post-war American literature is concomitant with the self-assured proclamation of these Jewish-American authors of their Jewishness. This, in turn, incepted a “radical change,” as Mark Schechner writes in *The Conversion of the Jews and Other Essays*, which has become an acknowledged fact that “between roughly 1945 and 1960 the terrain of American literature underwent a radical change, and that Jewish writers, critics and intellectuals played an essential role in that change” (1). Schechner adds that the Holocaust “was a hidden wound, shrouded in darkness and suffered in silence, felt everywhere but confronted virtually nowhere” (4). Still, Jewish American writers—Schwartz, Bellow, Rosenfeld, Miller, Malamud, Howe and Fiedler, among others—began to tackle their Jewishness from a new perspective and to take relish in it as Norman Podhoretz writes in *Making it*, “[they] wrote stories, poems, articles about it...more was involved here than the influence of Freud: Hitler’s altogether irrefutable demonstration of the inescapability of Jewishness was no doubt as even more important factor in the emergence of this new attitude” (122). In other words, the attitude of the American Jewish authors toward their Jewishness changed from pre-war indifference into post-war identification with their Jewishness.

The pre-War attitude of those writers, David Brauner explains in *Post-War Jewish Fiction*, was that they “distanced themselves from [...] their Jewish roots. Many were affiliated to or at least in sympathy with some branch of Marxism, one of whose tenets, of course, is the rejection of all religious ties”(9-10). Saul Bellow, for instance, as James Atlas writes in *Bellow: A Biography*, was troubled by the failure to address the Holocaust directly and often spoke of it as a significant omission in his work,” in spite of the fact that “the experience filled him with “a deeply troubling sense of disgrace and human demotion””(126). However, the ensuing contrastive shift of attitudes Bellow and other writers was treated with “some cynicism by

a younger generation of Jewish writers,” who suspected those elder writers of opportunism (12) as Brauner explicates:

Whether rational or not, the suspicion that this generation of American Jews was somehow complicit in the fate of their European brethren was clearly a key factor both in the post-Holocaust examination of consciousness of Jewishness among their heirs. Yet, as Leslie Fiedler candidly confesses, there was also perhaps an element of opportunism, a willingness to exploit what had become, by the 1960s a fashionable ethnicity, in the alacrity with which he and others embraced their Jewishness, and became ambassadors of Jewish culture[...]. At any rate, the progress of critics like Howe, Kazin and Fiedler within the American academy was mirrored in the careers of writers like Saul Bellow, Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud, all of whom moved from the margins into the mainstream of American culture during this period, gathering numerous literary awards and impressive sales figures along the way. (13)

In *Metaphor for Holocaust and Holocaust as Metaphor: The Assistant and The Fixer of Bernard Malamud Reexamined*, Michael Brown writes that “Holocaust writing has generally sought to overwhelm rather than interpret,” and novelists have been “reluctant” to tackle this incident creatively and “more reluctant to distance themselves” by writing in metaphor. As a consequence, these writers opted for writing diaries or fiction in memoir form in which “almost all Holocaust writing has approached its subject directly and frontally: the characters are participants; the setting is Europe during the war or survivor milieu afterwards; the plot is the destruction of the Jews” (479). Still, Bernard Malamud, Arthur Miller, and Philip Roth—along with a host of Jewish American authors—write of the Holocaust “symbolically and metaphorically, rarely confronting it directly” (481). For Malamud, for instance, “the Holocaust is a potent symbol of the dangers posed by the modern world to anyone who would be different, to anyone who would insist on being man” (487). Similarly, David R. Mesher explains, in *Arthur Miller’s Focus: The First American Novel of the Holocaust?*, that Miller “tried, at least indirectly, to treat the Holocaust as a subject for imaginative exploration” by the end of which the myopically anti-Semite Laurance Neman learns through perilous progressive stages of metaphorical

“metamorphosis” to be a “new man” (478) and to become an ally of the persecuted Jew, Finkelstein. Likewise, in *Eli, the Fanatic* Philip Roth, as Hana Writh Neshet suggests in *Resisting Allegory, or Reading “Eli, the Fanatic” in Tel Aviv*, emphasizes that in “the ability to empathize with the victims of the Holocaust and to identify with the collective trauma of the Jewish people lay the only hope for a meaningful existence in 1950s America” (107).

However, the humanistic messages here are not inclusive; they are rather exclusive as these writers figuratively breach Jewishness as the epitome of humanism: only by the metaphorical adoption of the Jewish dogma and suffering of the Jewish protagonist the anti-Semite becomes a philo-Semite; consequently human. For instance, Michael Brown explains that Malamud states “being Jewish means asserting humanity; and being humane in the modern world inevitably leads to suffering from man’s inhumanity to man” (488). Nevertheless, the pathos suffered here are exclusively Jewish as the old Jew Morris Bober breaches the repentant anti-Semite disciple Frank Alpine in *The Assistant*:

‘Why is it that Jews suffer so damn much, Morris? It seems to me that they like to suffer, don’t they?’

‘Do you like to suffer?’

‘Don’t they?’

‘Do you like to suffer? They suffer because they are Jews.’

‘That’s what I mean, they suffer more than they have to.’

‘If you live, you suffer. Some people suffer more, but not because they want. But I think if a Jew don’t suffer for the Law, he will suffer for nothing.’

‘What do they suffer for, Morris?’

‘I suffer for you’ [...]

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean you suffer for me.’ (113)

The enigmatic replies of Morris Bober in Malamud’s *The Assistant* are duplicated by rabbi Tzoref in Philip Roth’s *Eli, the Fanatic*. The assimilated lawyer of Woodenton suburb, Eli Peck, is designated by the Jewish and Protestant suburban community to get rid of Tzoref and his Talmudic pupils who shocked the Americanized middle-class suburb with their Hassidic appearance. Tzoref faces Eli’s ordinance law with his enigmatic replies:

“You have the word ‘suffer’ in English?”

“We have the word suffer. We have the word law too.”

“Stop with the law! You have the word suffer. Then try it. It’s a little thing.”

“They won’t,” Eli Said.

“But you, Mr. Peck, how about you?”

“I am them, they are me, Mr. Tzoref.”

“Aach! You are us, we are you!” (265)

Similarly, the ambivalent Laurence Neman, in Miller’s *Focus*, cannot answer Finkelstein’s direct question why he and the Christian community want to get rid of him. In fact, Laurence is painfully myopic at this stage of his exonerating metaphorical metamorphosis from an anti-Semite into a philo-Semite; he does not recognize himself and does not even think that the Jewish other is visible:

“I am asking you why you want to get me off this block, Mr. Newman.”

They halted before the lighted window of Mr. Finkelstein’s store. The block was deserted.

“You don’t understand,” Newman said shortly, pressing his trembling hand against his stomach. “It’s not what you’ve done, it’s what others of you people have done.”

Mr. Finkelstein stared at him a long time. “In other words, when you look at me you don’t see me” (184)

Thus, the imaginative exploration of an ethnic persecution possibility in post-War American society is the common ground upon which Miller, Malamud and Roth stand in their metaphorical Americanization of the Holocaust experience. The common setting of their novels is modern, middle-class and suburban USA and their thematic interest is a literary replica: the plea for compassion on the grounds of shared humanistic claims that have been once Shylock’s from centuries old.

In *America as a Civilization*, Max Lerner writes that until the turn of the twentieth century anti-Jewish feelings in America was “little different from that of anti-immigrant feeling in general.” However, anti-Semitism gained “cumulative force” in the era of Depression and Nazism as “the most serious movement of ethnic hatreds in America. This was not due so much to capitalism or

economic exploitation, nor to any logic in the racial doctrines themselves, but to aggressions and frustrations of life in a rapidly changing, highly charged society. The Jews became in a sense the residuary legatees of other stored-up unexpected hatreds” (507). In mid 1930s America, controversial Roman Catholic priest Charles Coughlin was the strongest Nazi propagandist whose weekly magazine *Social Justice* and radio broadcast attracted millions of American followers. Coughlin called for the nationalization of American banks and industries and hinted at attacking the Jewish bankers and businessmen by an increasing number of restive anti-Semites. By the late 1930s, according to Camilla Charles in *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*, “his program, which at the height of his popularity reached as many as 40 million listeners, was becoming increasingly demagogic, anti-Semitic, and favorable to fascism. He was finally silenced by Church superiors in 1942.” Meanwhile, Arthur Miller, a Jewish-American contemporary, pledged himself to use his literary talent to combat the widely spreading notions of ethnic persecution as malign as those provoked by Coughlin’s propaganda. Thus, in his autobiography *Timebends: a Life*, Miller writes:

I had somehow arrived at the psychological role of mediator between the Jews and America, and among Americans themselves as well. No doubt as a defense against the immensity of the domestic and European fascistic threat, which in my depths I interpreted as the threat of my own extinction, I had the wish, if not yet the conviction, that art could express the universality of human beings, their common emotions and ideas. (83)

The vehicle Arthur Miller chose for expressing his universalistic-humanistic message was his first novel, *Focus* in 1945.

This novel, written in the immediately aftermath of World War II, deals with the dilemma of ethnic persecution against Jews in America ironically encountered by the Christian English-descendant Laurence Newman who is mistaken by his suburban community for being a Jew due to a slight change in his appearance. Newman is proud for being “employed for more than twenty years by one of the most anti-Semitic corporations in America” (163). Newman is responsible for interviewing and hiring new employees in the international corporation he works for. So we learn that “With a few aged exceptions he had hired every one of the seventy girls who

worked at the seventy desks on the sixteenth floor of that building” (13). He has always been swollen with self-righteous pride for “the importance of his work and the exceptional nature of his talents,” (16) which have to do with guessing and recognizing people’s ethnicities upon examining their facial features. Among these different ethnicities are the Jewish people whom he has developed a daily habit of recognizing on the subway train on his way to work. For instance, the novel begins with the account of a regular workday with Newman heading to work on a train and busying himself by scrutinizing the face of a man sitting in front of him; “a man whose type to him was like a rare clock to a collector. Probably he alone on this train knew that this gentleman with the square head and the fair skin was neither Swede, nor German, nor Norwegian, but a Jew” (15).

Still, Newman’s pride of his ethnic discriminatory “talent,” his main self-proclaimed qualification for working in the “Corporation,” is jeopardized by his increasing myopia. Thus, we learn that before taking the train to work he stands “with his face a hand’s width from the dented center of the steel I-beam” and screws “The pupils of his eyes into focus” (12) in order to be able to read the carefully printed racist slogan:

kikes started WAR. Below it Kill kikes kill ki.
Apparently the author had been interrupted by the arrival of his train. Mr. Newman swallowed and stared as though caught in the beam of a hypnotizing light. Above the fierce slogan stood the exclamation, *Fascists!*, with an arrow pointing down at the call to murder. (13)

Newman, however, knows for sure how it has become a “terrorizing experience” to sit in his office in full view of a hall filled with typists because “when he raised his eyes he could see nothing through the glass. At this moment someone might be beckoning to him out there, and getting no response” (21). In *Arthur Miller’s Focus: The First American Novel of the Holocaust*, David Mesher refers to the irony of Newman’s situation which is basically part of the overall myriad visual metaphors of the book:

Appearances are a part of the novel’s central, visual metaphor,

already present in the title, *Focus*. Throughout the work, Miller develops variations on that metaphor: appearance and reality, eyesight and insight, vision and visions. The initial irony of the title, however, is that Newman cannot focus; his eyesight has deteriorated. (470)

Still, in spite of his self-proclaimed talent to detect Jews, Newman commits the mistake of hiring a Jewess in the company. This instigates the anger of Mr. Gargan, his higher official, who tells him to replace her with someone else according to the company's ethnic requirements; "Miss Kapp is obviously not our type of person, Newman," Gargan says. "I mean she's obvious. Her name must be Kappinsky or something" (17). Mr. Gargan, in addition, advises Newman to wear eye glasses if his poor eyesight is affecting his ability to execute his job professionally. Nevertheless, trying out the new glasses in front of his bathroom mirror, Newman, witnesses the beginning of the metaphorical metamorphosis of his looks into Jewish physiognomy:

A long time he stood staring at himself, at his forehead, his chin, his nose. It took many moments of detailed inspection of his parts before he could see himself whole. And he felt as though rising off the floor. The beating of his heart caused his head to nod slightly in rhythm. Saliva filled a little pool in his throat and he coughed. In the memory in his bathroom, the bathroom he has used for nearly seven years, he was looking at what might very properly be called the face of a Jew. A Jew, in effect, had gotten into his bathroom. (24)

Newman's shock is gravitated because he has always feared going against the norms of the suburban community where he lives and the regulations of the anti-Semite corporation he works for. For instance, he goes out of his house every morning and scans his front lawn for any "scraps of paper the night might have blown up," then rapidly picks up any rubbish and drops it in his garbage because he is a man who "seemed afraid of being seen loitering" (4). Newman is also apprehensive of the size of the company, which has become "a weight upon him whenever the possibility arouse that he might have to defend himself against it. He had seen other men trying to defend themselves against it, and he had seen them crushed [...]" (13). Similarly, Newman is hesitant towards taking a part in his neighbors' anti-Semitic scheme to "clean out the neighborhood" and evacuate

Finkelstein, the only Jewish drug store owner on the corner. It is remarkable, therefore, how Newman is shocked as he sees his transformation in the bathroom mirror into the embodiment, rather than the metaphorical projection, of his worst fears; “the glasses did just what he had feared they would do to his face, but this was worse because this was real” (24).

Thus, beneath the American surface of this novel, David Mesher explains in *Arthur Miller's Focus: The First American Novel of the Holocaust*, Miller's *Focus* seems to be an attempt to deal with the Holocaust as its central theme though “hidden in the camouflage of the author's metaphors” (477). Consequently, Newman's fears of losing his job are less professional than they are psychological: his self-esteem and personal identity had depended on his affiliation with the anti-Semitic corporation. Therefore, when socializing with his neighbors “Carlson or Bligh or Fred next door about conditions he had always been the man who worked for the corporation. It was who he was” (51).

It is also noteworthy that Newman at this stage of his metamorphosis into a Jew has come to realize that “His racist conviction that Jews can be identified by their appearances is both confirmed and undermined,” as David Brauner explains in *Post War Jewish-Fiction*. It is confirmed, Brauner adds, in that “others now see in his physiognomy the same unmistakable signs of Jewishness that he does; undermined in that if he, a Gentile, can be mistaken for a Jew, then these facial characteristics cannot, after all, be uniquely Jewish” (46). This comes to light when Newman interviews Gertrude Hart for the vacant job of the dismissed Kappinsky.

Miss Gerturde Hart is thirty-six and “unmarried Episcopalian. Born in Rochester, New York” (29). When she comes into Newman's office, he becomes momentarily bedazzled by her appearance because she is “like the woman of his vision—an odor and sighs and an erect back.” He tries to read her application but finds the “words on the sheet turned grey then vanished” (30). As Newman cannot give a professional interview, his repeated moments of silence and staring at Gertrude arouse her suspicion that he is taking her for a Jewess. Newman, too, was suspicious that she gave false information in her

application form because she looked like a Jewess to him. Still, he is equally suspicious that she was now taking him for a Jew because of his new appearance.

“Gertrud’s character brings another dimension to the metaphors of vision,” writes David Mesher in *Arthur Miller’s Focus: the First American Novel of the Holocaust*. Newman has always dreamt of and desired the woman of his vision, who is “large, almost fat, and she had no face that he could make out, but he knew she was congenial to him” (27). However, during the interview Newman is quite bedazzled and dysfunctional because Gertrude represents the body of his faceless vision but with a face he myopically thinks of having Jewish features. So “during the interview,” Mesher adds, “Newman’s two views of the other—the hated Jew and the desired woman—clash when he suspects her of being Jewish” (472). Ironically, both the one who suspects and the one suspected are not Jewish. It is a moment of heightened suspicion on both sides as David Brauner explains further in *Post War Jewish-Fiction*:

Hart’s hostile scrutiny makes a Jew out of Newman. In this instance, Newman’s own anti-Semitism is reflected back at him, so that his hatred of the other becomes hatred of himself...[H]ere Newman’s fear of being seen as a Jew is projected onto Hart, whose own fear of being seen as a Jew is projected onto Newman, so their mutual (self-)hatred binds them together in a cycle of self-perpetuating suspicion. (46)

It is, in fact, a turning point in the narrative context of the novel in which both Newman and Gertrude misjudge one another by their appearance and misunderstand the fact that they are both Christians. It is also another stage in the metaphorical metamorphosis of Laurence Newman:

He sat there unable to speak to her through his hate... [H]e could not say he was not Jewish without coloring the word with his repugnance for it, and thus for her. And in his inability to speak, in his embarrassment she seemed to see conclusive proof, and strangely—quite insanely—he conceded that it was almost proof. For to him Jew had always meant imposter [...]He was sitting there in the guilt of the fact that the evil nature of the Jews and their numberless deceits, especially their sensuous lust for women [...] all were reflections of his own desires with which he had invested

them. For this moment he eyes had made a Jew of him; and his monstrous desire was holding back his denial. (34)

Newman tells Gertrude that he cannot hire her. Gertrude, now furious, retaliates, ““You know what they ought to do with people like you?” she threatened. “They ought to hang *Yiz!*”” (34). Still, ironically, Mr. George Lorsch, “the Vice-President of the company,” (28) notices Neman’s new Jewish looks and gives orders that Neman is to exchange his job with Mr. Hogan, the clerk; “with no authority whatever, no appointments, no phone,” (38) because they don’t feel he will “make a good impression on people who might come into the outer office for the first time” (39). This does not satisfy Newman who has been proud of his job and his position in the company and so he decides to quit.

The corporation has been Newman’s sole pride among his neighbors. His compliance with its racist requirements and observance of its anti-Semitic regulations are his strongest credentials. The corporation, therefore, has the significant connotation as a symbol of Post-World War II American society with racial discrimination looming in residential and professional premises alike. Quitting his job because of his change of appearance into the physiognomy of a social nemesis is a shattering experience to Newman as it is tantamount to the obliteration of his *raison d’être*. The afternoon he quits his job he feels estranged from his neighborhood in spite of the regular neighborly salutations:

Until now it had been alright to wear the glasses on the street; yesterday or the day before he could have overridden their new stares. Yesterday he had been the man who worked for the corporation [...] Whatever they might see in his glasses would be dispelled by the sheer fact of who he was. But it was all vanished from behind him now, and he knew he would be standing before them all alone and he would blush if they noticed, like a stranger he would shift his feet before them, like one who was ashamed of how he looked. (42)

Newman seeks employment in a number of companies and he is repeatedly rejected because of his new unwelcome Jewish physiognomy. It is remarkable how he used to behave according to his belief of being a member of the majority anti-Semite society, and now

he is being persecuted by the same majority for the change in his appearance. The situation is verily summarized and explicated by David Brauner in *Post-War Jewish Fiction* that the “we” for Newman has become now “a ‘they’, the crime that ‘they’ suspect him of, because of his appearance, is the very crime he used to convict others of, on the basis of the their appearance: the crime of being Jewish” (48). The irony of the situation is basis of the mechanization of the extended metaphor of racial persecution: Newman still thinks of himself as “a man of many private distinctions” (90)—forgetting that his ability to detect Jews would be desired by the very employer who rejects him now on the basis of his new metamorphosed Jewish appearance.

A twist of fortune brings Newman and Gertrude Hart together again. This time, however, Gertrude is the interviewer and Newman is the interviewee. In his desperate attempts at finding a vacant job in a business milieu overridden by the WASP anti-Semite majority, Newman applies for a vacant post in a company that turns out to be the same company where Gertrude Hart works. Miss Hart is the secretary of the human resources manager, who after moments of suspicion, anger, and regret, tells him that he can be given the job because they hire any applicants regardless their ethnicities, “Jews, niggers, wops, anybody” (93). Newman, has been thus taught a hard lesson; as a result, he gives up his racist haughtiness and accepts the insignificant job because “they hire anybody in this place” (473). Likewise, as his infatuation with Gertrude wins over his bigotry, Newman begins to see Gertrude in a different manner. Miller’s description of the change is of course allegorical and concomitant with the extended metaphor of changeling visual appearances throughout the narrative context of *Focus*; “like seeing in a movie change and dissolve, [Newman sees Gertrude] taking in a new character and yet remaining the same face” (93).

After a short period of courtship, Newman marries Gertrude Hart. However, he learns that Gertrude worked for sometime as a secretary of an anti-Semitic activist before quitting and moving to New York. Ironically, Newman and his wife both Episcopalians and previously working for the anti-Semitic WASP majority are now looked at with suspicion and even denied equal rights as citizens

because of their suspicious Jewish features. Thus, Miller's metaphor of ethnic persecution, the possibility of Holocaust on American soil, extends geometrically to a wider antagonistic social circle that circumvents both Newman and Gertrude. For instance, as soon as the newly-wed couple arrives at a resort hotel, they are told by the manager that there are no vacant rooms, in spite of the fact that Newman used to be a regular guest at this place before his appearance has changed metaphorically into a Jew. Likewise, because of his hesitance to join the neighborhood's "Christian Front," or to take part in the neighborhood's evacuation scheme against Finkelstein, the only Jewish store owner, Newman starts facing persecution as equal as to that faced by Finkelstein. On repeated occasions, he comes out of his house in the morning to find his lawn and Finkelstein's around the corner loitered with the contents of their garbage cans. Newman's neighbors, in addition, start marginalizing him because of his rejection of the idea of joining their anti-Semite front and its meetings.

When Newman finally decides to attend one of that front's meetings, after repeated threats from the neighborhood and so much pressure from his wife, he is severely beaten by the attendants because of his suspicious new Jewish looks and his reluctance to give a standing ovation to the anti-Semitic speaker. No matter how Newman pleads with them that he is not a Jew, he cannot prove otherwise:

They had to understand that he was Laurence Newman of a family named Newman which had come from Aldwych, England, in the year 1861, and that he had pictures at home showing his baptism and [...] he could explain how he had been employed for more than twenty years by one of the most anti-Semitic corporations in America. (163)

At this stage of his metaphorical metamorphosis, Newman is utterly disoriented as his past anti-Semitism is now turned back on him. The antithesis of the anti-Semite and Gentile inside him is now turned metaphorically into a disturbing symbiosis. Thus, this "secret new Identity," (185) is perplexingly seen through his Gentile self as well as his anti-Semitic one. This allegorical myopia is not only personal but also societal as it dims Newman's vision and that of his neighbors'. He is also aware and wary of his loss of identity and self-

image therefore he cannot explain to Finkelstein why the neighborhood wants to evacuate him as much as he cannot understand why they cannot see him as one of them. Newman is invisible both to his Gentile and Jewish social milieu:

“I am asking you why you want to get me off this block, Mr. Newman.”

They halted before the lighted window of Mr. Finkelstein’s store. The block was deserted.

“You don’t understand,” Newman said shortly, pressing his trembling hand against his stomach. “It’s not what you’ve done, it’s what others of you people have done.”

Mr. Finkelstein stared at him a long time. “In other words, when you look at me you don’t see me” (184)

Newman, therefore, knows that if he were to be beaten by anti-Semites in the street, as the Front threatened they would do, his WASP neighbors would not come to defend him because “he would be a Jew in their eyes, and therefore guilty. Somehow, in some unsayable way guilty” (158). The metaphorical transformation into a new identity—into a *new man*—shows clearly in the ultra-apprehensive way Newman begins to deal with his social milieu:

He could no longer simply entre a restaurant and innocently sit down to a meal. [...] he found himself speaking quite softly, always wary of any loudness in his tone. Before reaching for something on the table, he first unconsciously made sure that he would not knock anything over. When he spoke he kept his hands under the table, although he had always needed gestures. [...] to destroy any impression of tightfistedness, he left larger tips than he used to [...] the things he had done all his life as a gentile, the most innocent habits of his person, had been turned into the tokens of an alien and evil personality, a personality that was slowly, he felt, implacably being foisted upon him. And wherever he went he was trying to underplay that personality, discarding it in every way he knew while at the same time denying that he possessed it (185-6)

Eventually, the anti-Semite Front executes its threat and comes to the beating of both Finkelstein and Newman, who are now equally regarded by the neighborhood as unwelcomed Semites. Newman goes to the police station to file a complaint, still in torn and bloody clothes. A policeman asks him, “How many of you people live there?” (234).

There, in the police station, Newman is mistaken for a Jew again, and for a few disturbed moments, he seems hesitant and unable to explain to the officer that he is not a Jew. It is the moment when Newman decides to become a Jew—metaphorically, of course—after having been suspected for being one throughout the novel. Newman chooses not to correct the officer and to accept his assumption that both he and Finkelstein are Jews:

As he stood there about to reply, he longed deeply for a swift charge of lightning that would with a fiery stroke break away the categories of the people and change them so that it would not be important to them what tribe they sprang from. It must not be important any more, he swore, even though in his life it had been of highest importance. And as though the words would join him forever to his fury of the few moments past, and separate him forever from those he hated now, he said.

“There are the Finkelsteins on the corner...”

“Just them and yourself?” the policeman interrupted.

“Yes. Just them and myself,” Mr. Newman said (234).

In fact, Newman’s decision to side with Finkelstein, and his final utopian wish that there would be no boundaries between people make him feel “as though he were setting down a weight which for some reason he had been carrying and carrying” (217). David Mesher refers to the thematic as well as technical similarities between the Miller’s *Focus* and Bernard Malamud’s *The Assistant*, in which Frank Alpine an anti-Semite converts to Judaism after working for sometime as an assistant for a Jewish grocer. Mesher writes that the conversions of both Alpine and Newman to Judaism are not “conversions to Judaism as a religion but to Jewishness as a metaphor.” Mesher also writes that Miller’s “scheme” was to create “allegory from a novel-of-the-absurd” (474).

Frank Alpine, the Christian shop assistant of the Jewish grocer Morris Bober, in Bernard Malamud’s *The Assistant* drags himself around with a pain that both “enraged and inspired him” (217). Frank Alpine decides to convert to Judaism and so he gets circumcised, but the pain he suffers is not only physical but also metaphorically spiritual. In spite of the fact that twelve years separate Miller’s *Focus* (1945) and Malamud’s *The Assistant* (1957), there is a definite

intertextual relationship between both novels. Both writers' delineation of the metaphorical metamorphoses of their anti-Semite Christian characters into philo-Semites—with universalistic-humanistic highlights—aims at Americanizing the concept of Jewish suffering in general and introducing the Holocaust incident *per se* via the mechanization of allegorical presentation. Both novels, therefore, revolve around the central idea of the anti-Semitic Gentile who is existentially perplexed in the dilemma of dealing with the infliction of his prejudice upon himself as he gets entangled with the Jewish other. In both novels, the ambivalent gentile denies and defies the metaphorical Jewishness that he and others locate in him.

In fact, the ambivalence of these main characters is also a reflection of the perplexity of their authors' dichotomized existence and their common endeavors to Americanize their Jewishness. For instance, in *Reading Myself and Others*, Philip Roth, comments on his, Saul Bellow's, and Malamud's accomplishment in introducing a school of Jewish writing into the mainstream of American fiction:

If we constitute a Jewish school, it is only in the odd sense of having each found his own means of transcending the immediate parochialism of his Jewish background and transforming what had once been the imaginative property of anecdotal local colorists [...] into a fiction having entirely different intentions, but which nonetheless remains grounded in the colorful specificity of the local.(126)

Likewise, in *Conversations with Bernard Malamud*, Lawrence Lasher writes that Malamud was against the term American-Jewish writer and that he rather insisted on defining himself as “an American, a Jew, and [that he] write[s] for all men” (63). Thus, Malamud's definition reflects his desire to transcend the peculiar to the universal, so he tries to “see the Jew as a universal man” and for him “the Jewish drama is prototypic, a symbol of the fight for existence in the highest possible human terms” (30). This is also concomitant with what Miller wrote in his autobiography *Timebends: a Life*, to have the “psychological role of mediator between the Jews and America” in order to find a way so “art could express the universality of human beings, their common emotions and ideas” (83). Thus, in *The Assistant*, the conversion of Frank Alpine to Judaism is meant by Malamud to be a “rite of passage” to humanism as David Brauner

writes in *Post-War Jewish Fiction*:

In these humanistic terms, Alpine's transformation from anti-Semite to Jew is a rite of passage: Alpine rejects his immature hostility and prejudice toward others, learning to accept his essential kinship with them, their common humanity. For Sartre, however, the attraction of humanism for Jewish intellectuals was precisely that it enabled them to deny their difference (that is their Jewishness). (43)

Still, the conversions for both men, Laurence Newman in Miller's *Focus* and Frank Alpine in Malamud's *The Assistant*, "seem more like penitential acts of moral solidarity than affirmation of belief," (51) as David Brauner further explains. Frank Alpine's circumcision, furthermore, is a "self-inflicted punishment, a self-emasculation, as well as a declaration of religious commitment" (43) that comes after so much identification of Jewishness with masochism that "persists throughout the novel" (44).

Frank Alpine, a hopeless drifter, who had come from San Francisco, "the west, looking for a better opportunity," (30) engages with the local delinquent Ward Minogue in a hold up against the old and poor Jewish grocer Morris Bober. In spite of the fact that Morris pleads with the two bandits that "times are bad," Minogue hits him on the head with a gun and calls him "a Jew liar" (27). At this horrifying moment, Morris realizes that "he had hoped for much in America and got little. And because of him [daughter and wife] Helen and Ida had less. He had defrauded them, he and the bloodsucking store" (28).

In fact, Morris Bober's wounded head, the result of a gentile robbery overshadowed with anti-Semitic remarks, and the multiple physical and spiritual stigmata of his presence in the poor grocery house, indicate Malamud's effort to extend a metaphor associated with the martyrdom of Jesus Christ. Jeffrey Helterman notes in *Understanding Bernard Malamud*, "Morris is wounded in the robbery staged by Frank and the detective's son, Ward Minogue. This wound doubles as the Fisher King's wound and the original stigmata of Christ" (39).

Morris Bober, the son of Russian immigrants, feels nostalgic towards his childhood when as a boy he was "always running in the muddy, rutted streets of the village, or across the fields, or bathing

with the other boys in the river,” but now as a man in America he is “entombed” in his store and “rarely [sees] the sky” (9). Morris Bober’s only “true refreshment,” the only thing that excites him is to go to sleep, and always “the going up [is] easier than coming down” (13). The grocer’s wife Ida and his daughter Helen are his embittered family whose impoverished state is the source of his deep remorse over his and their entrapment in the store. It has been “always a marginal one, up today, down tomorrow—as the wind blew,” however, the Bobers can “still eke out a living”(14).

After the holdup, the compunctious Frank Alpine becomes “under stress, [and] sighs much and mutters inaudibly to himself,” (29). We also learn that he was raised in an orphanage and that his favorite saint is St. Francis of Assisi who “gave away everything away that he owned, every cent, all his clothes off his back...enjoyed to be poor. He said poverty was a queen and he loved her like she was a beautiful woman” (31). This admiration of sainthood in relation with poverty is, however, a key point in understanding Frank’s attraction to the Bobers family whose name echoes the destitution of pauperism.

Meanwhile, the idea of martyrdom as embodied by Morris Bober gains momentum as we learn that he has always been a poor and an unfortunate man, yet he seems to accept his lot in the spirit of a martyr. His luck has never changed unless “degrees of poverty meant alteration” (19). This, however, does not mean that he was an idler. Instead, he was “the soul of honesty,” and he diligently “labored long hours.” In fact he could not escape his honesty because

It was bedrock; to cheat would cause an explosion in him, yet he trusted cheaters—coveted nobody’s nothing and always got poorer. The harder he worked—his toil was a form of time devouring time—the less he seemed to have. He was Morris Bober and could be nobody more fortunate. With that name you had no sure sense of property, as if it were in your blood and history not to possess, or if by some miracle to own something, to do so on the verge of loss... It was, [Helen] thought, surely a talent. (19)

The reference to poverty in relation to martyrdom on part of Morris Bober and Frank Alpine is integral to our understanding of the central metaphor of *The Assistant*. Malamud takes the idea of enduring poverty as a referential to martyrdom, as well as a catalyst of the eventual metaphorical metamorphosis of the gentile Frank Alpine into

the Jewish Morris Bober. Brian Beer, in *Bernard Malamud's Religious Duality: Frank Alpine and Morris Bober*, explains:

The Jewish Malamud uses Morris Bober in *The Assistant* to demonstrate the similarities between Jews and Christians. Just as Frank Alpine represents in the initials of his name and in his actions the person of Saint Francis of Assisi, Morris represents not only Martin Buber but also Jesus, the Jew who sought to bring the faithful into an I-Thou relationship with the deity. To demonstrate the affinity of the two religions, Malamud identifies his Jewish protagonist with Christ. (78)

To further highlight the metaphorical reference to martyrdom, Bernard Malamud locates Morris Bober in a social milieu that is quite anti-Semitic. In fact, the neighborhood is an allegorical recreation of the Holocaust geographical locale circumvented by Poland, Italy, and taking place in Germany. For instance, Morris Bober's first customer, as early as 6 o'clock every morning for "fifteen years," has been "the sour-faced, grey-haired" (7) Polish laundry worker, who buys her roll of bread for just three pennies. Ida did not like this Polish customer and Morris "did not know her name." Ida used to call her "die anti-Semitke," and this part did not bother Morris, although he "suspected she needled him a little by asking for a 'Jewish roll,' and once or twice, with an odd smile, she wanted a 'Jewish pickle'" (32). Reference to anti-Semitic neighborhood does not pertain to the Polish woman, but also to Bober's upstairs Italian Tenant Nick Fuso whom he once watches from behind his front window stealthily "tottering around the corner" while "carrying a bag of groceries," (9) which he bought from the new grocery store owned by the German Heinrich Schmitz. Thus not only Morris Bober's shop was a "marginal shop," but also a new German competitor opened up his store with "new fixtures—streamlined counters, the latest refrigerator, fluorescent lights, a fruit stall, a chromium cash register" (15). Allegorically of course, the German's store is an enormous threat to Bober's meager livelihood and the owner is unconquerable; "an energetic German dressed like a doctor, in white duck jacket. And that was where many of his customers had gone, and stayed, so that his poor living was cut in impossible half" (16).

Now determined to atone for his offense against Morris, Frank

asks the Bobers to work for them but he is rejected because he is a *goy* and because the store cannot afford to pay him a salary. Frank, however, sneaks into the cellar under Bober's store and lives stealthily on a daily portion of two bread rolls and a bottle of milk, which he steals from Morris's goods every morning. Morris spends a long time in waiting for the robber to show up, but he finds out that it is Frank Alpine, whom he finds in the cellar with a "haggard face," sleeping "with his hat and coat on, [and] sitting on a box against the wall" (48). Although Morris had a hatchet in his hand, he does not attack the trespasser. He decides to give him a chance to work in the shop as his assistant. Next morning, the old grocer, who is still weak and convalescent, goes out into the street to grab the heavy milk boxes but falls unconscious. Frank steps out literally to rescue him and steps in figuratively to take his place. Frank drags Morris in and lays him on the couch. The Jewish Grocer, we are told, laid "white and motionless on the couch. Frank gently removed his apron. Draping the loop over his own head, he tied the tapes around him. 'I need the experience,' he muttered" (52).

The relationship between Christian Frank Alpine and the Jewish Bobers develops as he becomes more attached to the store and more infatuated with Helen. Ida, however, exerts every possible effort to keep the Italian "*goy*" away from her daughter. She even orders Helen to "eat when he leaves," because she is "not used to goyim in [her] house" (57). Still, Frank becomes perplexed by his feelings toward Helen. For instance, he climbs the dumb-waiter shaft to the bathroom window and peeps on naked Helen while she is taking a shower. As Frank looks with lust at her body, he is stricken with pangs of compunction because "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" (70). In fact, Frank is deeply bedazzled by his perturbed emotions of lust and love towards Helen. Likewise, he is remorseful at his newly developed habitual embezzlement from Morris's cash register, though he still looks at him through the eyes of an anti-Semite. Frank says, "there were times stealing made him feel good. It felt good to have some change in his pocket, and it felt good to pluck a buck from under the Jew's nose" (78).

This perplexity in Frank's relationship with the Bobers is intended by Malamud to develop the metaphorical image of a shared existence of Jews and Gentiles. Frank's ambivalence in dealing with the Bobers is projected in his stealth from the Bobers and his growing psychological attachment to them. In *Jewish-Gentile Relations and Romance* in "*The Assistant*," Claudia Grog writes that the romance "plot" in *The Assistant* helps in tackling the central idea about Jewish-Gentile relations from several points of view as "It is not coincidence that there are many parallels and repetitions between Morris and Frank and Helen and Frank. A lot of what holds true for the father-son relationship of Frank and Morris holds true for the love relationship of Frank and Helen" (63).

Ironically, Frank's attraction towards Helen develops into infatuation, which, in turn, motivates the change of his attitude towards the Bobers in general and towards Helen in particular. His remorsefulness now is not for taking part in the hold up against the Jewish Bober as for getting emotionally involved with this particular Jew and his daughter. Frank thought "It was a funny thing about that; he wasn't really sorry they had stuck up a Jew but he hadn't expected to be sorry that they had picked on this particular one" (82). Frank knows "from the way she carried herself," that Helen has "plans for something big in her life". He is also aware how impossible his situation is for first being a "goy," and second, for being an assistant in the grocery shop. Still, Frank was determined to change his fate as he "continued to feel he deserved a better fate, and he would find it if he only once—once—did the right thing—the thing to do at the right time" (85). Having learned about Helen's habitual visits to the public library, he buys a new suit and shoes and starts paying visits to the library at the time he knows she would be there. A mutual feeling of xenophobic repulsion is soon displaced by liking between Frank and Helen. She even gets him books to read and he buys her presents. Still, as Helen checks out the novels "*Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina* and *Crime and Punishment*" in order to help Frank "prepare for college," (96) he Frank finds that Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* "gave him a pain, with all his miseries. Frank first had the idea he must be a Jew and was surprised when he found he wasn't" (97). Likewise, the

connection between Jewishness and masochism is so deeply imbedded in Frank's mind, that he sarcastically thinks this is what Jews live for: "[...] to suffer. And the one that has got the biggest pain in the gut and can hold on to it the longest without running to the toilet is the best Jew. No wonder they got on his nerves" (81).

Meanwhile, as Morris Bober recovers and resumes his daily routine around the store, Frank keeps him company. To a certain extent, a father-son relationship ensues between them, in spite of their awareness of their ethnic heterogeneity that hinders any fulfillment of such a relationship. This father-son relationship is integral to understanding *The Assistant* as a metaphor. The Jewish Grocer's passes on his martyrdom and/or masochism to the Christian Frank as a teacher to a student. Thus, the Christian tormentor of the Jewish Grocer is being taught a lesson to become benign and humanistic, though exclusively from a Jewish perspective. The poor old Jewish grocer and his aimless young Christian assistant converse with each other on daily basis and Frank assumes the role of the disciple as Claudia Gorg explicates in *Jewish-Gentile Relations and Romance in The Assistant* "This relationship might have also taken on symbolic meaning as Judaism can be interpreted as the religion that fathered Christianity" (60). Frank, who now works for Morris in order to atone for his guilt in taking part in the hold up—and partly because of his growing attachment to his daughter Helen—begins to change his unreflective stereotypical anti-Semitism into a more inquisitive curiosity. This ideological paradigm shift begins with the indifferent thoughts of why should he care now for the "Jew," if he, Frank says, "held him up because he was a Jew. What the hell are they to [him] so that [he] gave them credit for?" (66). He, then, wonders why Morris continues "waiting on the same lousy customers day after day throughout the years," and asks "what kind of a man did you have to be born to shut yourself up in an overgrown coffin [...]" and he only manages to answer, "you had to be a Jew. They were born prisoners" (79). Ironically, Frank seems to be bedazzled by the Bobers and keeps binding himself more to them and their poor store; similarly, he feels a "curious pleasure in his misery" (64).

Out of that thoughtful curiosity Frank raises the question of Jewish identity with Morris: "What I like to know is what is a Jew anyway?"

(112). This question unsettles Morris, who tries to find an answer so he tells him in order to be a Jew “all you need is a good heart.” Then he recurs to the abstract notion of a respect for the Jewish Law: “the important thing is the Torah. This is the Law—a Jew must believe in the Law” (112). Frank, however, is perplexed because he regards Morris not as an observant Jew; on the contrary, he thinks of him more as a masochist than a religious person. In fact, Frank associates masochism with Jews in general, so he asks Morris:

‘Why is it that Jews suffer so damn much, Morris? It seems to me that they like to suffer, don’t they?’

‘Do you like to suffer, don’t they?’

‘Do you like to suffer? They suffer because they are Jews.’

‘That’s what I mean, they suffer more than they have to.’

‘If you live, you suffer. Some people suffer more, but not because they want. But I think if a Jew doesn’t suffer for the Law, he will suffer for nothing.’

‘What do they suffer for, Morris?’

‘I suffer for you’ [...]

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean you suffer for me.’ (113)

Morris’s enigmatic replies, however, imply reference to a relationship between Jewishness and martyrdom and/or masochism. Malamud, however, intends Frank’s metaphorical conversion from anti-Jewishness to Jewishness to take place only when he starts bridging the gap between his understanding of the nature of Morris’ withstanding suffering as an act of masochism and Morris’ own idea of enduring his pains as an act of martyrdom. Therefore, this conversation about suffering, as David Brauner writes in *Post-War Jewish Fiction* “seems to cast Bober in the role of Christ [metaphorically of course], taking on the sins of Alpine” (41). Jeffrey Helterman, in addition, writes in *Understanding Bernard Malamud*, that Malamud makes Jewish Morris acknowledge a Christ-like burden on his shoulders as he tells Frank, “I suffer for you.” These words, Helterman notes, further the metaphorical reference to suffering and martyrdom:

The reader must always know that being human carries two moral imperatives, one of strength and one of weakness, “I suffer for you”

and "I am responsible for you." The final step recognizes that these two statements are one and that the Jew who embodies this duality was the savior of the Christians. (21)

Likewise, Claudia Grog in, *Jewish-Gentile relations and Romance in The Assistant*, regards the father-son, teacher-student relationship between Frank and Morris as a relationship that could be interpreted symbolically as "Judaism...the religion that fathered Christianity" (60).

However, the relationship between Frank and the Bobers is perturbed because of Ida's discovery of his illicit rendezvous with Helen in the public park, and because of Morris' discovery of his repeated embezzlements from the store's cash register. Morris orders Frank to leave the store and the latter pleads with him to give him another chance but to no avail: "Frank stared at the grey and broken Jew and seeing, despite tears in his eyes, that he would not yield, hung up his apron on a hook and left" (147). Later on the same evening, Frank saves Helen from Minogue who tries to rape Helen in the park then he goes on and rapes her himself. Helen then cries, "Dog, uncircumcised dog!" (151).

Frank becomes agitated by pangs of remorse and wishes he could undo what he has done. Frank thinks "he should somewhere have stopped and changed the way he was going, his luck himself, stopped hating the world, got a decent education, a job, a nice girl. He had lived without will, betrayed every good intention" (156). A second chance for Frank comes as Morris forgets to turn off the gas cooker and barely dies of suffocation. The gas incident is of course intended as a direct reference to Hitler's "Final Solution" of gassing Jews in Nazi Germany. Later, the same evening Morris develops a fever and is admitted to the hospital. Consequently, Frank puts on the apron and takes care of the store. Yet, although Frank redecorates the store and repaints it in an attempt to maintain the meager business, Morris kicks him out another time as soon as he recovers from his pneumonia.

Frank, anyhow, comes to Morris' rescue another time, as he was about to catch fire in his desperate attempt to burn the store in order to cash back its insurance. Frank pleads Morris to take him back as his assistant, but Morris kicks him a second time. Morris tries to sell the store and fails in doing so. One evening, however, snow falls and

Morris decided to shovel it away from the side walk because “it’s Sunday, it don’t look so nice for the goyim that they go to church”(196). Morris catches pneumonia and is rushed to the hospital a third time, where he dies three days later. Frank comes to the ceremony in order to give his condolences to the Bobers, and while standing close to the edge of the grave, he leans forward and “[loses] his balance, and though flailing his arms, land[s] feet first on the coffin” (205). Frank, then, resumes taking care of the store and thus he takes over Morris’ role as the family’s breadwinner. He promises Helen to provide for her education by working in the store. Later on, Frank converts to Judaism as he goes to the hospital one day and has “himself circumcised. For a couple of days he dragged himself around with a pain between his legs. The pain enraged and inspired him. After Passover he became a Jew” (217).

The conversion of Frank Alpine, though a literal one at the end of the novel, comes out as the result of an allegorical journey of metamorphosis throughout the novel. Thus, unlike the stereotypical overwhelming iconic treatment of Holocaust, Malamud’s *The Assistant* aims at a metaphorical presentation of it with an aim of “universalization,” as Michael Brown explains in *Metaphor for Holocaust and Holocaust as Metaphor: The Assistant and the Fixer of Bernard Malamud*:

[Malamud’s] understanding of Judaism and of Jewish suffering is unquestionably heterodox...and if [his] sense of Jewish suffering and of the Holocaust helps us to comprehend those stunning phenomena in any way and to learn from them, it does so because his presentation is not frontal and overwhelming. Rather, it is submerged and encompassable in the way that metaphor for harsh, unbearable reality can be. It does so, too, because Malamud attempts to universalize the Holocaust experience so that we may see our lives in terms of it. (488)

The universalistic-humanistic aim in Malamud’s *The Assistant*, as well as Miller’s *Focus*, is also an aim of an Americanization of the Holocaust and submerging it into Post-World War II mainstream American fiction.

Unlike the conversions of Newman in *Focus* and Alpine in *The Assistant*, the conversion of Eli Peck in Philip Roth’s short story *Eli*,

The Fanatic, is not from gentile into Jew, but from an Americanized and assimilated Jew into an ultra Orthodox *Hassid* one. The incidents take place in Woodenton suburb, “the home of well-to-do Protestants,” where Jews, since the war, have been able to buy property and to live beside Gentiles “in amity” (262). Eli Peck is the suburb community lawyer designated by his fellow assimilated Jews, and disaffected Protestants, to negotiate with Leo Tzoref, the headmaster of a newly established Orthodox school for war survivor European orphans, to move away because it is against the law to have a “boarding school in a residential area” (251). The community thought it better to warn the yeshiva headmaster before any legal action is taken. It is disheartening for the suburb dwellers and Eli to see the yeshiva assistant, who does not speak English, dressed in an out-of-place Hassidic attire; “the black coat that fell down below the man’s knees,” and “round-topped, wide-brimmed Talmudic hat” (253). The Hassidic school and its headmaster and his assistant are collectively a direct referential to the incident of the Holocaust and a fictional recreational hypothesis of the possibility of persecution, though this time at the hands of Americanized Jews. The attitude of Woodenton suburb and their lawyer Eli Peck is the typical denial of Jewishness for the sake of prosperity and societal ascendance, as David Brauner notes in *Post-War Jewish Fiction*:

That some Jews have often wished themselves Gentiles is incontestable: whether the result of a desire for cultural assimilation, for socioeconomic advantage, or as a safeguard against religious persecution, Jews have, for centuries, changed names, neighborhoods, professions and religions in order to pass themselves off as Gentiles. Even when remaining recognizably Jewish, they have often sought to minimize or elide difference between themselves and their host communities. It is hardly surprising that many protagonists in post war Jewish fiction are, to use Ivan Kalmar’s term, distinctly ‘eji’ about their Jewishness, if not actually at pains to disguise or deny it. (40)

After the failure of the first meeting with Mr. Tzoref, the Yeshiva headmaster, Eli sends him a letter of compromise with two conditions that “religious, educational and social activities of the yeshiva of Woodenton will be confined to the *Yeshiva* grounds,” and that “Yeshiva personnel are welcomed in the streets and stores of

Woodenton provided they are attired in clothing usually associated with American life in the 20th century” (262). Still, Eli receives the reply that “the [black] suit the gentleman wears is all he’s got” (263). In fact, the situation becomes intricate as Eli the lawyer of Woodenton’s Americanized Jews asks this particular Holocaust victim to change his suit, the only thing this man has got—his identity—as Tzoref argues:

“But I tell you he has nothing. *Nothing*. You have that word in English? *Nicht? Gornisht?*”

“Yes, Mr. Tzoref, we have the word.”

“A mother and a father?” Tzoref said. “No. A wife? No. A baby? A little ten-month-old baby? No! A village full of friends? A synagogue where you knew the feel of every seat under your pants? Where with your eyes closed you could smell the cloth of the Torah?” Tzoref pushed out his chair, stirring a breeze that swept Eli’s letter to the floor. At the window he leaned out, and looked beyond Woodenton. When he turned he was shaking a finger at Eli. “And a medical experiment they performed on him yet! That leaves nothing, Absolutely nothing!” (264)

This polarization between the representative of the American suburb and the representatives of the conventional world of the Yeshiva is obviously a projection of the typical inner struggle within the assimilated Jew between his religious commitment and his yearning to submerge himself in modern America. This tug-of-war contention is, however, the primary source of resentment on part of many of Philip Roth’s assimilated Jewish characters, as Victoria Aarons writes in *Is it “Good-for-the-Jews or No-Good-for-the-Jews”?: Philip Roth’s Registry of Jewish Consciousness*:

In the short story “Eli, the Fanatic,” one of Philip Roth’s early pieces, we find the prototype for many of Roth’s later characters, a Jew deeply ambivalent about his history and identity, so much so, in fact, that he is not even sure whether he has an identity or history outside the limited confines of his own unconscious desire to manufacture both. And so, Roth creates his protagonists ‘double, an ironically insistent reminder of the failure of self-invention. (7)

Thus, the Americanized Eli Peck tries to explain to the Hassidic Tzuref that the demands of the community are in accordance with the norms and rules of modern American society; the latter replies “What you call the law, I call shame. The heart, Mr. Peck, the heart is the law! God!” (266). Perplexed by Tzuref’s enigmatic replies, Eli pleads with him not to “talk metaphysics,” and reminds him that they are in the twentieth century. Tzuref, however, says that it might be the Twentieth century “for the goyim” but for him it is “the Fifty-eighth,” which is “too old for shame” (266). The situation becomes extremely complicated, as there is a wide ideological gap separating Tzuref’s enigmatic, as well as metaphysical, reasoning and Eli’s legal, as well as contractual, negotiation:

“It’s not me, Mr. Tzuref, it’s them.”

“They are you.”

“No,” Eli intoned, “I am me. They are them. You are you.”

“You talk about leaves and branches. I’m dealing with under dirt.”

“Mr. Tzuref, you’re driving me crazy with Talmudic wisdom. This is that. That is the other thing. Give me a straight answer.”

“Only for straight questions.”

“Oh, God!” (267)

Eventually, Eli decides to give Tzuref’s assistant, referred to throughout the story as the “greenie,” two of his suits. As soon as Eli arrives home, he finds that his wife is about to give birth. Eli admits his wife into the hospital and returns home soon to pack a gray and a green suits, with accessories and underwear, in a box. Eli takes the box to the Yeshiva with a letter that explains to the yeshiva headmaster that the Woodenton community welcomes their presence as long as they follow the rules. With a remorseful tone Eli writes, “Do you see what I’m saying, Mr. Tzuref? I am not a Nazi who would drive eighteen children [...] into homelessness. But if you want a home here, you must accept what we have to offer” (274). This compromise, however, comes as a result of Eli’s personal initiative and does not satisfy the restive Woodenton community who thinks of the Yeshiva members as mere religious fanatics; “talking a dead language that does not make sense. Making a big thing out of suffering, so you’re going oy-oy-oy all your life” (278). Eli, argues defensively that they should give him and them a chance as he is “all wrapped up [there] with Miriam having a baby. Just give me the

day—them the day” (279).

On the next day, Eli finds out that the Yeshiva assistant has changed his clothes and is now strolling around in the green suit. Eli also finds the assistant's old black suit left in a box at his doorstep. As Eli takes the box inside, he becomes entranced by the blackness of the clothes that seems to cause a total eclipse of his identity. This metaphorical image of the darkness of the Orthodox clothes that eclipses the brightness of the Americanized self fits in Roth's larger scheme of the metaphorical representation of the Holocaust:

The shock at first was the shock of having daylight turned off all at once. Inside the box was an eclipse. But black soon sorted from black, and shortly there was the glassy black of lining, the coarse black of trousers, the dead black of frying threads, and in the center the mountain of black: the hat. He picked the box from the doorstep and carried it inside. For the first time in his life he smelled the color of blackness [...]" (285).

Metaphysical transformation ensues as Eli begins a process of metamorphosis by putting the Orthodox hat on his head and checking himself “naked...Especially in that hat” (285) in front of the mirror. The images of the naked Eli with a Hassidic hat and the newborn baby in the hospital are all concomitant of the metaphorical rebirth of Jewishness. Ironically, Eli drabs himself in the black clothes of the Hassidic assistant, and instead of the previous eclipse, he comes “to the center of his lawn and in full sight of the trees, the grass, the birds, and the sun,” all that “revealed that it was he, Eli, in the costume” (287). Eli goes around the neighborhood saying “Sholom” to everybody he meets. In fact, Eli's act of assuming the character of the Hassidic rabbi is an act of a shocking revolt against the intolerance of the Americanized community. Similarly, his choice of the greeting “Sholom” is another metaphor of extending peace to his xenophobic society as Andrew Furman explains in *The Ineluctable Holocaust in the Fiction of Philip Roth*:

Eli [...] knows that he can use the clothes to take a stand against the Jewish community's morally unacceptable rejection of the yeshiva's Hassidic survivor. Eli then, does not assert his true identity when he strolls through Woodenton in Orthodox clothing. Rather, he enforces

the most irritable aspect of the Hassid's identity—his appearance—onto Woodenton's Jews in protest. Eli says "Sholom" to those who passes in the street not so much to express his love for Hebrew that he has for too long suppressed (he probably knows few other Hebrew words), but to admonish the townspeople for their intolerance toward any such outward display of Jewishness. (122)

Eli, then, goes to the yeshiva and meets the yeshiva assistant. This moment of confrontation is, in fact, another moment in the process of metaphorical metamorphosis from Eli's Americanized anti-Jewish self into a self-identification with a Holocaust victim Hassidic Jew:

The recognition took some time. He looked at what Eli wore. Up close, Eli looked at what he wore. And then Eli had the strange notion that he was two people. Or that he was one person wearing two suits. The greenie looked to be suffering from a similar confusion. They stared long at one another. Eli's heart shivered, and his brain was momentarily in such a mixed-up condition that his hands went out to button down the collar of his shirt that somebody else was wearing. What a mess! (289-290)

It is also another metaphorical reference to the ambivalence and contention between Eli's Americanized and Jewish selves, as Victoria Aarons explains, in *Is it "Good-for-the-Jews or No-Good-for-the-Jews"?: Philip Roth's Registry of Jewish Consciousness*, "In a fictive conceit characteristic of Roth, we find in Eli a divided self, a protagonist whose attempts to reconstruct himself result in uneasy and often fantastic stratagems of self-deceiving disguise" (7).

Leaving the Yeshiva, Eli takes to the streets of the luxurious suburb in the attire of an Orthodox Jew. Moving around in those clothes gives an impression to people who already know him that Eli Peck "the nervous young attorney with the pretty wife was having a breakdown." Still, in spite of the fact that everybody around Woodenton was aware of Eli's psychological disturbance and the insanity of his situation, he knew "what he did was not insane," because "he felt those black clothes as if they were the skin of his skin" (293). Nurses in the hospital become aware of his hysteria and sarcastically tell him "Excuse me—Mr. Peck [...] Excuse me, rabbi, but you're wanted...in the temple." Later on a needle is slid under his skin and though the drug calmed his body, it "did not touch it down

where the blackness had reached” (298). In *Escape and Confrontation in the Short Stories of Philip Roth*, Norman Leer writes that the image of unreachable blackness is integral in understanding the strength of the new identity into which Eli has metamorphosed:

Eli has made his confrontation, and the nominal community of Woodenton can no longer inject its own spirit into him. That it is a false spirit is shown by Eli himself, and by the fact that it must be maintained through evasion and temporary drugs that do not really work. The townspeople are left in the dangling world that they have made for themselves, a world from which, ironically, it seems that they cannot escape. (145)

In *Resisting Allegory, or Reading “Eli, the Fanatic” in Tel Aviv*, Hana Writh-Nesher notes that the tense contention between the Yeshiva and Eli Peck is a metaphorical representation of the hypothetical inquiry about the possibility of the persecution of Holocaust survivors in modern America. It is also an allegorical projection of the inner struggle inside the ambivalent Eli Peck towards his Jewishness. Hana Writh-Nesher writes:

Designated to represent his community in a legal struggle to remove Holocaust survivors on the pretext of zoning laws, Eli undergoes a transformation, a conversion of sorts, when he is faced with the vapid and callous attitudes of his neighbors. His exchange of clothing with his double is the sign of this crossing over to the side of collective memory and responsibility, an act that is diagnosed as a nervous breakdown. Surely this was an allegory about the perils of assimilation, about the moral price paid for turning one’s back on one’s heritage. (105-106)

Thus, the main source of Eli’s ailment are his perilous compunctious qualms about being an Americanized Jew assimilated to one culture that obliges the total obliteration of another. Philip Roth’s *Eli, The Fanatic* is a metaphorical recreation of the Holocaust persecution in Eli Peck’s conscience; as a result, his breakdown is symptomatic of his shameful feelings of negligence of his Jewish legacy. Victoria Aaron explicates in *Is it “Good-for-the-Jews or No-Good-for-the-Jews”?: Philip Roth’s Registry of Jewish Consciousness* that Eli’s final act of exhibitionism in the Orthodox garb is an act of self-flagellation:

And the shame that Eli experiences comes in large part from the recognition that, while the “greenie’s” history was purloined, Eli has given up his willingly; he has no one to blame but himself, and he can’t see clearly through the convolutions of history and repression. And so Eli punishes himself. His masquerade throughout the town in the guise of the Hasidic Jew is, for Eli, self-inflicted punishment.(18)

In fact, the conversions of the three characters—with varying degrees from Alpine’s actual ritual of circumcision; to Eli’s flaring masquerade in Orthodox attire; and to Newman’s unwillingness to correct others who mistake him for a Jew—are unanimously metaphorical in nature. These characters metamorphose from anti-Semites into the philo-Semites by passing through perilous stages of masochism and self-obliteration in order to accept the Jew they had never been able to accept. The hypothesis of the possibility of Holocaust persecution in modern America, especially in the immediate aftermath of the World War II, is the pivotal theme of the fictional creations of the three Jewish-American writers Miller, Roth, and Malamud. These writers’ aim in choosing the Holocaust as a referential, though never directly declared, is the Americanization of the pathos of Jewish suffering as a common ground for humanism.

In her study, *Is the Holocaust the Chief Contribution of the Jewish People to World civilization and History?: A survey of Leading Literature Anthologies and reading instructional Textbooks*, Sadra Stotsky wonders whether the Holocaust is the main chief contribution of the Jewish writers to the American educational curricula. Stotsky hypothesizes that it is “quite possible that most American Students will complete 12 years of school thinking that Holocaust is the chief contribution of the Jewish people to world history and to world civilization.” This “appalling” thought as she writes came to her mind after she had “surveyed the contents of six leading anthologies for grades 6-12 and six leading reading instructional series for the elementary school” (52). Likewise, in his most controversial book *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of the Jewish Suffering* Norman Finkelstein accuses the American-Jews of exploiting the incident of the Holocaust for political and financial gains. Finkelstein proves that the Holocaust incident has been deeply embedded in the mainstream American culture and has become a

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staple mark in the collective public awareness far more important than any other national event:

Most college professors can testify that compared to the Civil War many more undergraduates are able to place the Nazi holocaust in the right century and generally cite the number killed. In fact, the Nazi holocaust is just about the only historical reference that resonates in a university classroom today. Polls show that many more Americans can identify The Holocaust than Pearl Harbor or the atomic bombing of Japan. (8)

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