

Separation of the
past and present:
malamud's integral
use of setting in the
fixe...



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"Life is a tragedy full of joy." The view advanced by Bernard Malamud, while somewhat morbid, is mirrored in his life's work. To express the futility of life in Russia, Malamud creates a setting which seems entirely removed from this century. Through his use of a foreign setting and different time period, he reinforces the confusion and anguish of the protagonist, Yakov Bok. The separation he creates between the present and the past enables Malamud to present a series of events that, were they set in a more current time or place, would be incomprehensible to the reader. By setting his story in Russia during the early twentieth century, Malamud portrays a social and political reality without fighting against the disbelief of his readers. The harsh climate of Russia and the conditions of his confinement continually challenge Yakov's tenacity and will to survive. This natural conflict enhances the central struggle between Yakov and the Russian legal system. During his imprisonment, Yakov contends with bone-chilling cold as well as extreme heat. "Time was summer now, when the hot cell stank heavily and the walls sweated" (215). Against this heat he is provided little protection and no ventilation; even cleanliness becomes impossible to maintain. The winter provides no relief: the "acid cold" disheartens Yakov to the same degree as the harsh summer (205). While a small fire is lit twice a day, it can hardly contend with "the wind seeping through the split glass" that gnaws at Yakov's "head and hands" (205). All this Yakov must endure without the comfort of a companion to share his hardships. His solitary confinement, complete with shackles, is as trying as the natural forces of weather which he is also fighting. Yakov is "stricken to be so absolutely alone" and reaches out even to his guards for friendship (215). Even beyond the setting of his solitary confinement, Yakov must fight for his survival in an environment

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where poisoning is both practiced and acceptable. “ Poison! My God, they’re poisoning me!” (180). This reality, when exacerbated by the larger issue of inhumane confinement standards and the harsh conditions of Russian weather, creates an overwhelmingly harsh setting that Yakov must conquer. While Russia is a well-known country, the customs and legal system are relative mysteries to many readers of the novel. This mystery adds to the compelling confusion of the novel and emphasizes the point of view Yakov must also share. Initially, Yakov is unaware of the reason for his incarceration, claiming that his supposed crime is a “ confusion in my mind” (73). Because the reader knows nothing more than the prisoner, the reader is dragged through the trials of uncertainty just as Yakov is. In addition to magnifying the insecurity of Yakov’s situation, various customs are touched on to add to the atmosphere of the novel. Little examples (such as when Shmuel “ sucked tea through sugar”) are distinctly Russian (9). Other traditions, specifically of the religious persuasion, allow Malamud to maintain the thread of Judaism throughout the novel. Although Yakov is not a practicing Jew, phylacteries, prayer shawls, and even matzo bread become crucial aspects of his fight for freedom. The confusion of foreign cultural and religious traditions is accented continually by the legal system of Russia, a mystery to even those who participate actively in it. Yakov is never informed of the status of his case and instead is forced to inwardly wonder “ what will happen to me now?” (96). Because Russia lacks the fundamental systems to protect his rights as a prisoner, however, no answer is forthcoming. Through these varying aspects of Russian and Jewish culture, Malamud creates a setting that adds to the suspense and ultimate tragedy of the novel. Even more important than the physical setting of the novel, however, is the time

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period in which it takes place. During the early twentieth century, society encouraged racial discrimination against Jews as an acceptable way to provide scapegoats and increase unity. Organizations such as the Black Hundreds flourished under the sanctions of the Russian state despite their continual harassment of innocent Jews. Even condemned criminals discriminated against Yakov based on his Jewish heritage. Their taunts-“ So you’re the bastard Jew who killed the Christian boy and sucked the blood out of his bones?” and ‘ You’re a stinking Jew liar” (98, 99)-expose the unsubtle hostility directed towards Jews. While Malamud may interpret historical events in such a way as to increase drama, modern readers find it hard to believe that this level of intolerance would be allowed to occur in the modern day. Naturally, communication is another aspect limited by the time period chosen by Malamud. Unlike today, where something happening on one side of the world is broadcast to the other side of the globe within minutes, the only source of information in Russia was the newspaper, which was often edited. Information only trickled out to the public slowly, adding to the suspense and anguish of Yakov and the reader. Even when a “ clever journalist” discovered damaging evidence towards Marfa Golov, “ the publisher was fined and the press shut down by the police for three months” (274). The time period also allows Malamud to show the inhumane treatment of prisoners within state-run institutions. The power of Malamud’s portrayal of Yakov stems in large part from the ordeals that he must endure for a crime he did not commit; if those ordeals were made more humane, Yakov’s status as a martyr would be lessened. “ Three times each day” Yakov is “ searched to desperation” during a full body cavity search that serves only to torture the prisoner (215). By depicting a world removed from the current

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time, Malamud can more easily show events that modern times would not allow. The conditions, customs, and historical setting in which Yakov Bok must fight for his life add to the power and suspense of his struggles. By creating a world foreign to the reader, Malamud enrobes the narration in a cloak of mystery and confusion almost impenetrable by the reader. These qualities are responsible for the power and significance of Yakov's struggle. While Malamud may use the setting of *The Fixer* to evoke the futility of Yakov's tragedy, even this can not prevent the triumph and joy of human determination.