

Irene as Moral Norm: A Note on Malamud's *The Tenants*

By Helge Normann Nilsen

University of Trondheim

In *The Tenants* (1971), Bernard Malamud portrays the frustrations of a writer and the reverberations of the racial and political antagonisms of the 1960s. The theme of blocked love and the failure of male-female communication are also of central importance in the book. Harry Lesser is writing a novel about love, or the quest for it, hoping that the writing will teach him how to love. However, his mistress Irene feels compelled to leave him, and he becomes obsessed with hatred of the black writer Willie Spearmint, who moves into the building where he lives. *The Tenants* is sombre in its depiction of the two male antagonists and the bleak world that they inhabit. Lesser is a suffering Jew, a writer carrying a cross of his own making, his unfinished novel. He leads a life of deprivation and self-sacrifice, devoted to his craft, in obedience to an impossible artistic standard, "to state the truth in unimpeachable form."¹ But he destroys his life because of his inability to involve himself seriously with others and his relentless search for literary perfection. He commits the unpardonable sin of placing his ambition before the concerns of human love and fellowship, and his acquaintance with Willie and affair with the latter's girl Irene expose Lesser to a deadly test of his spiritual capacities.

The sexism of the two writers is exceptional. Willie refers to women only as "meat" or "bitches," and Lesser regards both Mary, his black paramour, and Irene, as creatures that exist for the purpose of his sexual gratification. Both men suffer from an emotional impoverishment which diminishes their capacity to empathize with men as well as women. Lesser pursues Mary because she is a novelty, a black girl, and loses interest in her as soon as he has bedded her. His sexual performance is remarkable, which may be explained not only by his pent-up needs, but also by his tendency to relate to others as objects or stereotypes. When Irene is introduced and placed in a position between Lesser and Willie, she represents a new dimension of compassion in the story.

Though imperfect, she is not such much so as the males, and she emerges as the human norm of the novel, embodying the mercy that Levenspiel, the landlord, vainly begs for from Lesser. The writer refuses to move out of the deserted building, although Levenspiel offers him a very large sum for the favor. If there is any hope at all in *The Tenants*, it resides in Irene and the fact that she survives, physically as well as spiritually. In the traditional critical view of her, she is "the all-too human female character ... whose gift of love tends to be a dubious blessing."² But if Irene is all-too human, Willie and Lesser are not human enough.

When Lesser first sees Irene, she is said to wear "a depleted smile, sour at the edges, and troubled eyes. Some sadness." (P. 42) Ironically, neither Willie nor Lesser seem to understand that her sadness has anything to do with the way in which they both treat her, as an adjunct to themselves rather than a person with rights equal to their own. The quality that she represents is aptly suggested: "Irene sat as though to say she was no more than he saw, had no statement to make about herself." (P. 44) She offers herself, her being, whereas her men are driven by obsessions which lead to their denial of their own humanity. They are morbidly devoted to their writing and regard each other with paranoid suspicion.

Nevertheless, Lesser must bear the greater part of the responsibility for the enmity that develops between himself and the black writer, above all because he steals Irene away from Willie under his very nose and fatally misjudges the strength of the man's jealousy. Lesser's behavior shows a callousness which is another manifestation of his inability to put himself in another's place, and Willie responds by typing down stories that become increasingly violent and anti-Semitic. But he does not commit any violent acts until he discovers that Lesser has replaced him as Irene's lover. The fact that Willie's and Irene's relationship is in trouble of its own accord does not mitigate Lesser's offense. Irene is aware of this and blames both herself and Lesser for treating Willie badly. She insists on regarding Willie as a human being and not as a creation of myth, although he, like Lesser later on, disappoints and neglects her. Irene's strength is her capacity for devotion to others, her ability to relate to both Lesser and Willie as human beings. Willie declares that she had believed in nothing when he met her, but neither he nor Lesser realize that Irene never stops believing in her own feelings and intuitions and thus has a firmer sense of self than they. She has waited for Willie, as she later does for Lesser, to accept her love and be less obsessed, but the two writers remain blind to the meaning and value of what she offers.

Lesser's interest in Irene seems to derive from mixed motives. For example, she points out that he may want to save her, a Jewish girl, from such a primitive black man, which would both reinforce his feeling of cultural superiority and bolster his sexual confidence. He wants Willie to know about the new relationship as soon as possible, but Irene hesitates and insists that she must be the one to tell Willie. Lesser wants Irene for himself and Willie out of her life even though he, Lesser, is finally more loyal to his manuscript and his apartment than to her. He demands commitment from Irene but refuses to give her any room for maneuver. She tries to point out to him the extra difficulties that Willie has experienced because he is black, but Lesser turns a deaf ear to this and repeats his request that Willie be told at once. Irene is pained and exasperated by his persistence, but a moment later she is kind to him, letting him put his head on her breast, perhaps realizing that his selfishness is a manifestation of a sheer lack of emotional resources. The image of Irene cradling Lesser's head is Madonna-like, invoking powers of mercy and charity that stand out in the context of this novel. Lesser, for all his problems, experiences a renewal of his creative energies when he can nourish himself on Irene's attention.

Unable to wait, Lesser tells Willie everything, and Irene becomes furious with him for breaking their agreement and accuses him of "pride." (P. 170) She perceives that his high standards, in art and life, of integrity and honesty have made him insensitive and overbearing. She herself is made to suffer for Lesser's impatience when Willie hits her twice when he comes to her place to fetch his things. It is hardly Irene who is the guilty party in this odd triangle because of her reluctance to break the news to Willie: "In this respect she betrays Lesser just as much as she betrays Willie. In this trial by love it is the woman who fails the man."³ The stereotype of the *femme fatale* seems to underlie this interpretation, which neglects Irene's own view and judgments of her situation.

Irene is willing to give Lesser time to himself after Willie has left, but she also expects him to begin to take herself and her needs seriously. When he fails to do so she confronts him with his neglect and exploitation of her, but all Lesser can do is to return to his flat and write her a note in which he states that he truly loves her. His habit is always to attempt to solve problems by an act of writing. The final pages of *The Tenants* depict the complete deterioration of Lesser as well as Willie, who has returned, and in a final fantasy scene they murder each other. Irene, however, goes to San Francisco and to a new life, leaving Lesser a message to the effect that "No book is as important as me." (P. 226)

Malamud's novel presents a clear example of female love and tolerance in the midst of a fictional world dominated by egotism and hatred.

NOTES

1. *The Tenants* (New York, 1971), p. 40. Subsequent citations are to this edition and have page references in brackets.
2. B. Lindberg-Seyersted, "A Reading of Bernard Malamud's *The Tenants*," *Journal of American Studies*, 9 (1975), 85.
3. Sandy Cohen, *Bernard Malamud and the Trial by Love* (Amsterdam, 1974), pp. 115-116. Another version of this reading is given by Gerald Hoag, who places the character of Irene in a mythic context: "Unknowingly and unwillingly, though she might have been their fructifying anima, she is the 'terrible mother' who looses the dragons." "Malamud's *The Tenants*: Revolution Arrested," *Perspectives on Contemporary Literature*, 2 (1976), 5.