

ONOMASTIC CENTRALITY

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The nature of naming demands from critics an acuity that often obscures, perhaps escapes, analysis, for seldom do they establish or even note the relationship between name and metaphor, despite the structural transfer between the two that definitely, as well as necessarily, an author is forced to make in order to focus on character, event, and place, for all three must interact and have identity. A quotation from Jacques Lacan seems appropriate, since it provides some bits of vocabulary that can be significant: "...it is between the signifier in the form of a proper name of a man, and the signifier which metaphorically abolishes him that the poetic spark is produced...."¹ This submerging of name within structure centers the signifier as metaphor, yet allows the name to become central to the structure of the art form, as well as central to discourse. Any number of anecdotes and real-life situations confirm the affective enclosure of signifier as name-metaphors.² In such cases, the name is superficially obliterated, becoming mythic, dominating structure distinctly and obscurely at the same

time, much like the recently discovered star that is traveling great distances both toward and away from our universe. Thus does the name-metaphor as it accrues mythic qualities in art and discourse.

Indeed, here the obvious may be overworked, but by ranging through some texts, we can possibly heighten our awareness of the name-metaphor. Let me begin by quoting a slightly humorous sketch, valueless in art but illustrative of the dominance of name within a dramatic setting and climactic discourse. Russell Baker, columnist for The New York Times, met Lyndon B. Johnson, then vice-president and politically a lonely man, who

threw his arms around Baker, pulled him into his office and began a long, intimate, anecdote-filled confession of his hopes for the coming political season..., but as the great man spoke he scribbled something on a piece of paper, buzzed for his secretary and handed the paper to her. Soon she returned and handed the paper back. Some time after that the interview ended with Johnson still effusing. Another reporter who followed Baker into Johnson's office got a look at the scrap of paper, on which it was written, 'Who is this I am talking to?' and below that, 'Russell Baker of the New York Times.'³

Analysis of the structure of this piece of discourse would take us into serious areas of statesmanship, human needs, contrasts of character, and eventually into the name-symbol, in this case, that dominates.

The mythic qualities of a name do not absolutely benefit from a name being used in a text, for Faulkner often avoided the name per se in A Fable. Jerzy Kosinski never mentions the narrator by name in The Painted Bird, nor does Marilyn French in The Women's Room, to name only a few instances. Generally, however, the name is centered but of no great importance, as in a short story by Nora Ephron, "Veronica and Betty":⁴ "Veronica has a luscious name, an excessive name, a name that promises mysterious curves and sinuous hair and tricks in the boudoir. Veronica's name, however, is the only luscious, mysterious, sinuous, and tricky thing about her." The recall image reveals the late actress Veronica Lake, but Ephron disqualifies the signifier by distributing other characteristics than those to which she says the name attributes, such as "efficiency," laconic speech, directness, and abstraction. By this time, we have forgotten the name, even when it becomes contrasted with Betty, a common enough name attached to a rather common metaphor, for Betty's career ostensibly is man-hopping, the last man hopped being a Johnny-Appleseed type who distributes babies and is named Arthur C. Jugkopf, known as Jughead. Two other men are named Archie and Reggie. By this time, the light dawns, and the comic strip characters come into focus as real persons living a real life, "worming" with each other but unable to communicate. The Freudian analyses occurring

throughout underline the mythic qualities of the comic strip originals.

In the United States, the symbolic quality of names appears most often in the changing of names among ethnic groups, especially Blacks and American Indians. Lately, the phenomenon has begun to occur among women. Murray Heller has succinctly pinioned the frustration, insecurity, and identity-crisis of Blacks in name changes, paralleling personal, political, and religious phases, illustrated in the life of a late Black leader: "He begins as Malcolm Little and progresses through life as Homeboy, Detroit Red, Big Red, Satan, Malcolm X and completes his destiny as El-Hajj Malik El Shabazz."⁵ Although the American Indian naming situation is different and not fraught with the same kind of difficulty as avails itself in Black names, the confrontation of English with Indian names creates a hiatus, not an interfacing, since translations and too-often hideous transliterations of Indian names allow for a ludicrous situation when the descriptive and symbolic names of Indians are forced into "English equivalents," such as Sixkiller, Clubfoot, Siteye, Cutfinger, and the like. One of my ancestors was named Mary Alsobrooks. Fortunately, Indians, not being literally cut off from a former home land, retain their linguistic names and have no desire to conform, except to cope with their conquerors for survival and for buréaucratic purposes.⁶

Parallel with recognition of sexism in language has come the concern with names of women, definitely one of the inherent cultural problems that demand attention. First, the English language, as well as just about all others, differentiates women from men by a linguistic dualism, a set of names having developed to tag women and a different set for men, with some minor overlappings, such as Leslie, Kimberley, Shirley, Evelyn, Chris, or Pat. In a patriarchal society, women have pretty much been legally forced to change from a "maiden" surname to that of a husband. The identity concept is fractured two ways, the forename anchors the condition while the surname shifts. Consequently, through names, an author can disregard physical attributes and abstract into name symbol by mere insertion, "slotting," of names such as Mary, Jake, Jenny, Jim, Kate, Bill, Matt, or Karen. In a set of three otherwise undistinguished short stories appearing in a current popular but slick magazine, I found the following slotters: Jenny (Jennifer), Mrs. Lane, Mrs. Weston, Landon, Chris, John, Mrs. Preston, Karen, Ben, Kenny (Karen's date), Matt, Amy, Claire (female), Professor Hughes (a male chauvinist), Bill, Kate, Aunt Lulu, Aunt Isabel, Ralph, Pat ("for Patricia," we are told), Alyse ("an actress who makes wonderful scrambled eggs"), and that lists all.⁷ Each story could have had a different set of such bland names, with no restrictions resulting in the text or story. When an ambiguity

exists, which I presume can happen only in writing, though I am not always sure, the name is explained, as "I'm Pat, for Patricia."

Whether this dualism will continue as women become more recognized as authors who do not write "masculine" books remains to be seen. Unless a neutered (not non-sexist) language develops, not an impossibility, the sexual dualism in literature will almost certainly continue into the foreseeable future. Already, however, experiments are occurring in both discourse and naming. As long as the male controls, male language will dominate, but this condition can consciously be changed, despite its being solidly embedded in the "patriarchal social arrangement," for which its purpose is being served, as Julia and Susan Wolfe note:

The most obvious and striking evidence of women's concern for language and its role as a naming process is the frequency with which women are choosing new names for ourselves. There are several ways that are particularly common. Women are changing patronymic endings; one woman recently lost a lawsuit in New York where she attempted to change her name from Cooperman to Cooperperson (she has won her case since we first wrote this!), and the novelist Elana Dykewoman was formerly Elana Nachman. Women choose from nature names that appeal to them, such as Chocolate Waters and Woodwoman, or select goddesses and heroic women, such as Morgan and Artemis March.⁹

They quote examples of experimental writing in which names are omitted; that is, the characters do not have labels. Instead, processes and references occur as the situations change in the stories. To the uninitiated, the prose seems to be awkward, but then so does all experimental writing to those whose psyches have been strangled in the strait-jacket of what can be called masslore basics, the rage of the times, as the ambiguous, no doubt sincere, statement by one of us pedagogues makes clear: "Reading, writing, speaking, understanding and appreciating language are central to our discipline. And with a constantly developing command of these basic skills, our students...will acquire a minimum competence, to use currently popular jargon, in the skills that a literate society requires of those who would be fully participating members."¹⁰

Masslore basics aside, creativity, change by definition, occurs. Finding different, not deviant, ways of signification has been with us since "naming day in Eden." Using process for names has occurred quite often, but the degree of consciousness becomes a degree of style. Hemingway's "A Well Lighted Place" comes to mind, since occupational slots take the place of bland-name slots: the old waiter, the young waiter, etc. Stephen Crane approaches this in "The Open Boat," finally succumbing to giving the oiler the name of Billie, while the others are the correspondent,

the captain, and the cook. Ironically, only the one given a specific name drowns. Although Crane uses processes, such as "the man at the oar," or "the voyagers scanned the shore," he does so stylistically. He is content with occupational titles only in order to develop the theme that nature does not regard man as important, "and that she [nature] would not maim the universe by disposing of him...."

Contrast this method with an experimental attempt by Maud Haimson, who works with "active, process verbs and concrete nouns," a structural device that mingles the levels of object and concept:

She waited a moment until this little woman came in. She wasn't regular little, smaller than that even. At first the little woman didn't pay attention to the other woman, instead she moved her looks toward the rocks as though they were a matter of now importance. The new-to-the-cave woman nodded and waited. The cave woman picked up a small rock, touched it all around, and brought it to the older woman. The older outside woman took it, touched it and holding it asked the inside woman if she'd been outside. The stone woman shook her head and taking a look at her stove picked up some rocks and put them in her many pocketed cloth-like thing going to the ground, pockets in the back too with bulges from stones. She followed the other woman out.¹¹

A new language, without using new words, emerges. By avoiding

particular names and by substituting identifiers and shifts in positions, the author has altered both the patriarchal and the semantic context. Naming, being universal, must somehow occur, if only to differentiate one individual (or process) from another. Perhaps by forcing awareness onto and into authors, naming can be expressive without the conscious awkwardness that attends any change.¹²

Identity, then, infringes upon the poetic synapses, sometimes cutting the clear, unobstructed crossings of metaphor and finally making demands on an author that must be met; otherwise, a story line, a character, an event, will be destroyed. Somehow, the eerie consequences can be only dimly understood, as in Dubin's Lives, where biography, plus naming, plus fictional naming converge in the guilt of the central character, and in How to Save Your Own Life, where consciousness of identity clearly obstructs. The latter shall come first here. Erica Jong has a habit that afflicts many writers: she alludes to her literary background, dropping names of famous writers and quoting from them, as she does in the front matter of her novel, where she includes Lord Byron, Chaucer, Kierkegaard, and Krishnamurti, each quotation providing wise, provocative, and sometimes plaintive commentary on fame, love (read "sex"), and vulnerability. Within the text the name becomes metaphor, not extension of name, such as "I felt grateful to Bennett, grateful and

obligated. He was my Leonard Woolf, I thought. My soothing live-in muse. After all, he hadn't left me when my novel Candida Confesses (which everyone but me seemed to think was so outrageous) became a best seller."¹³ This is Candida Wong as character replacing Erica Jong as author, the latter masking under the front matter quotations, which undoubtedly she emotionally cared about for story structure. Name dropping does not assemble a name-metaphor, but confidence spices ability, for soon the author meets a critic who calls Candida, the character, "a mammoth pudenda." The critic also hated "Franz Kafka, Saul Bellow, Simone de Beauvoir, Anaïs Nin, Gore Vidal, Mary McCarthy, and Isaac Bashevis Singer--so it was almost an honor to be attacked by him...."¹⁴ The critic also mistakes her name for Ms. Wing, a faux pas that a psychiatrist would interpret into a ball of fear of flying, airplane wings, sexual fantasies, ad nauseum.

Erica Jong, however, creates more ingenious complications when she uses the Conradian cover, with Isadora White Wing as the author of Candida and the narrator of How to Save Your Own Life. After the introduction of the narrator, the name-metaphor becomes symbol, with Isadora Duncan representing the tumultuous, famous, tragic life of the artist and eroticist, both being the same. Names as metaphors appear too often to form a structural outline, for they do not contribute to the central metaphor, cum allegorical-symbol;

of Isadora Duncan. As stylistic devices they have a place, albeit unhappily lacking in combination with the text, since the vehicle of the name escapes concreteness of description. A few examples will suffice: "She too immediately left for Yaddo to complete her new book on adumbrations of the Industrial Revolution in the imagery of Keats." "...her Norman Rockwell freckles." "Of course he's a pig. Who did you expect--John Stuart Mill?" "How best to describe her style? Georgia O'Keeffe crossed with Francis Bacon?" "...read Dickens and feel like an orphan along with Pip and Oliver Twist." "I answered in groans. I was looking melodramatically up at the blazing sky and thinking of The Snows of Kilimanjaro...." "Oh dear, I really am in a bad way if my very first Lesbian experience makes me think of Norman Mailer...." "I lay in bed, thinking of my posthumous life. Keats had been twenty-five and dying of TB when he used that term." She invokes the name of Keats often.

One chapter deals with naming, important here for both its contemporariness and its centrality. The heading reads, "To name oneself is the first act of both the poet and the revolutionary. When we take away the right to an individual name, we symbolically take away the right to be an individual. Immigration officials did this to refugees; husbands routinely do it to wives...."¹⁶ She is married to Bennett Wing, Dr. Know-it-all, Dr. Face-up-to-yourself, a psychiatrist, cuckold,

philandering shrink who makes no noises when he orgasms. She wonders, "What kind of a man is that?" Her father was a Weissmann, shortened to Weiss, anglicized to White. So she took Bennett White's name--"perhaps unconsciously realizing the appropriateness of the pun." What then must her nom de plume be? Why should she credit a husband who accuses her of "infantilism" whenever she uses her maiden name, which is no name anyway? A dissertation on Bennett's name does not help, for his background is much the same, except that some American embassy clerk in Hong Kong transliterated it from something in Chinese and created lots of Wongs, Wengs, and Wangs. "I am not Chinese," she thinks. When her first book is accepted, she has to choose. But what? She fantasizes Isadora Orlando, Isadora Icarus, Isadora White, but she becomes merely Isadora Wing. She prolongs the controlled association that expresses something critically apt: "I look at my name on a book and remark on the strangeness of it all. My grandparents from Russia and Poland, my parents from Glasgow, London, and Brownsville, and me with a Chinese name. At times I feel I have no identity at all. I float in and out of different souls. And, who knows, perhaps that is the best state for a poet."

While Erica Jong enmeshes herself in details that, though humorous, detract from the centrality of the name

Isadora and its controlling the structure, she, nevertheless, extends the metaphorical connotations into the legendary, if not completely into the mythic outlines of freedom restrained by both identity and lack of identity, chaos mythologized: "My name is written in syllables of water. My name bubbles itself to you. You may dip your foot in my name." She may have indulged too much in literary allusions, but she has pushed--"shoved" would be better--the boundaries of name-metaphor beyond the ordinary in writing style, meanwhile leaving much to a reader who has to grasshop mentally about to decipher just what attribute of the name of a real or fictive person must be experienced. She does this so often that it can be argued that no metaphor exists, just a dropped name.

| Bernard Malamud in Dubin's Lives¹⁸ structures the life of his character William (not Bill or Billy) Dubin around the biographies that Dubin writes for a living, to him a parasitic, ghoulish kind of livelihood for an otherwise intelligent man to pursue. And intelligence resides in Dubin, as does guilt, one of the worst cases in the existence of literature, a bleak sub-zero debilitation that gnaws away during a winter of unrequited desire for Fanny Bick and of foolish jogging to keep youth somewhere in grasp. Dubin is fifty-six years old. Fanny is twenty-two, a nubile, near nymphomaniac from the older generation's point of view, but

just another college woman trying to make psychic ends meet, so to say, meaning that sex is only much like an itch out of reach and needs someone to scratch it. Dubin also has a wife, Kitty, his age; a step-son Gerald (a Vietnam-war deserter); and a daughter, Maud, younger than is Fanny. Other characters and relationships need not detain us, except that Kitty always compares Dubin with her dead husband, meaning that another dead life, besides the bones in the lives and biographies of H. D. Thoreau and D. H. Lawrence, a combination calculated to induce enough schizophrenia in Dubin to make central opposition continuous and pertinent, has to be balanced in Dubin's mind.

The Thoreau-metaphor, becoming symbol, portrays the "celibate nature lover"¹⁹ aspect of Dubin's mind, with just enough antifeminist element to make him into a macho jogger and a 56-year-old realist who knows that the body cannot function much longer but aging must somehow be stayed, if not warded off. On the other hand, Lawrence's sexuality and sexual theories stimulated him, not as much in a nostalgic way as one would or should suspect. Grizzled or not, Dubin still can be changed from a woodsman and pseudo-hermit lover to a devotee of Priapus with a serious case of satyriasis by the projection of the assets of a young woman, and throughout he makes the most of his fortune-- or misfortune. The contrasts between the presence of

Thoreau and Lawrence in Dubin's mind and writing permeate the novel and are really never resolved. While Thoreau works out the ritual of the seasons in his Walden, Dubin lives his guilt through the seasons. Finally, Dubin reconciles the two, but satisfaction becomes merely an adjunct to aging. He keeps his Kitty, manages a workable relationship with Fanny, and lives to write more lives, or so the afterword says.

Malamud uses names as metaphors as much as does Jong, but usually they are functional, stylistic devices that further the action; also they relate biographical details:

"The composer Mahler was helped in a similar circumstance by a long walk with Freud in Leiden...."

"'...the shaping force,' Hardy called it."

"Now 'that time is past,' as Wordsworth had felt it."

"Robert Frost and his doomed brood had lived a summer in one of the farms not far away."

"Emerson had counted one hundred and twenty-eight trees on his property... Emerson could name every one of his trees; not Dubin."

"And Dr. Samuel Johnson was a noisy beehive of crackpot mannerisms."

"'Montaigne's motto was, 'What do I know?'"

Such comments stud the pages and are relevant to the action at the time. Such attention to biographic details as metaphors causes Dubin to say, "I am a biographer."

Malamud also has Dubin choose some of the characters for name analysis. After describing the genesis of the name of Maud, Dubin's daughter, he exclaims, "Who's in a name?"²⁰ An argument had occurred between Dubin and Kitty as to what to name the child. Maud later despised her name and tried to achieve another identity. Paralleling the love life of her father with the young Fanny, she falls in love with her Black professor, a fatherly type who is sixty years old, and becomes pregnant. Her unhappiness and search for a father, friend, and lover began with the, to her, unhappy name, which both Dubin and Kitty regretted having given her when they learned that it was derived from Magdalene, but "Maud was by then Maud," with a middle name of Hannah, Dubin's mother's. Maud is very much upset with it:

"Maud, Maud, the birds cawed," she had parodied Tennyson when she was in high school.

'Boy, what a jackass name.'

"On you it sounds good."

"It sounds like a cow call. I'm maudlin is what it amounts to. In grade school the kids made it 'Muddy' and now all I hear is 'Moody.' What a shitty thing to do to your little girl."

Fanny Bick, however, has a literary name, that of the niece of Jane Austen. Dubin discovers this through association of names. While staring out a window toward No Name Mountain, he asks Fanny how she got her name. Her mother named her after Fanny Price in Mansfield Park: "She was on

a Jane Austen kick when she was pregnant."²¹ Dubin, who seems to have all biographical facts in his lumber-room of a mind, incredulously asks, "Do you know Jane Austen had a favorite niece named Fanny Knight? She was charmed by the girl, reread her letters the day she was dying. The sad thing was that Fanny wrote her sister that their Aunt Jane lacked refinement. She was ashamed of her aunt, and, in essence, betrayed her memory." Fanny Bick, sitting with her lemon-colored underpants visible, did not respond. Whether Dubin knew it or not, Malamud certainly knew something of the frivolous character of the original Fanny, whose character, given the time and age, forms a pattern for Dubin's nymph. Miss Knight has been described as one who "seems continuously to have been involved in affairs of the heart, in love at one moment, out of love the next."²²

Other parallels occur, such as the names of Henry David Thoreau and David Herbert Lawrence, a reversal of initials, with David occurring in both. The two were also 44 years old when they died, a fact Dubin patronizingly teaches to Fanny.²³ Both died of tuberculosis, as did Anton Chekhov, also dead at 44, another biographical tidbit Dubin tells Evan Ondyk, the local psychiatrist who is having a mild, unsatisfactory affair with his patient, Kitty Dubin. Other parallels can be found,²⁴ but they seem to have little influence on the structure of the novel, other than as

names. The Thoreau-Lawrence similarity and disparity control the dualistic monism of the central character, Dubin. This discussion, of course, by no means exhausts the richness of the symbolic possibilities and realities that inflict Dubin, whose winter hell of intense sexual desire and escapades and of diabolical impotence is symbolized so well in the last line of the novel as Dubin leaves a love-making episode with Fanny while her would-be young lover waits outside under a maple tree: "Dubin ran up the moonlit road, holding his half-stiffened phallus in his hand, for his wife with love."²⁵

The centrality of the name in both fiction and other types of discourse remains often unnoticed when particulars clothe out the extension of the subject, which is the onomastic metaphor in every instance. Authors have to work from a tag, a name, which becomes a symbol, sometimes an allegorical personification, that predicates as well as disturbs the action. A recent novel, The World According to Garp,²⁶ by John Irving, has the catalyst of Technical Sergeant Garp (T. S. Garp) to promote or stimulate the action, with all the connotations, including the obvious literary allusion, with attendant Christian and classical myths. The title of William Styron's Sophie's Choice²⁷ itself is ambiguous in its predication, much as occurs when "nothing" in the title Much Ado About Nothing is equated with "nothing" ("pudendum") as used by Hamlet in Hamlet. "Nothing,"

however, is not a name, but it is part of the name of a title and hence takes connotative properties and deserves critical attention. These examples will suffice to illustrate the conditions and manner in which names become the center of gravity, so to speak, of much of discourse, fictional or otherwise.

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NOTES

1 "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious," in Structuralism, ed. Jacques Ehrman (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1970), p. 116.

2 Here I exclude the common interpretation of charactonym, "metaphor derived from the denotation of a common noun when transferred to a proper name," as illustrated by Allworthy, Backbite, Doctor Doze, and the like. René Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1956), p. 219, say that this is the "simplest form of characterization... Each appellation is a kind of vivifying, animizing, individuating."

3 Jake Skow, "The Good Humor Man," Time, 113:23 (June 4, 1979), 52.

4 "Veronica and Betty," Esquire, 91:10 (May 22, 1979), 67 ff.

5 "Black Names and Black Prejudices: Perceptions of Reality," in Connecticut Onomastic Review, No. 1, ed. Arthur Berliner (Madison Center, Conn., 1979), 59.

6 See Charles Linck, Jr., "My Name is Sioux," in Ethnic Names, ed. Fred Tarpley (Commerce, Texas: South Central Names Institute Publication 6, 1978), 13-17.

7 Ladies' Home Journal, 96:6 (June, 1979): Joellen Heckler, "Lucky for Jenny," pp. 147-8, 173-4; Mary Elmlad, "Promises to Keep," pp. 149-51; Helen Pastore, "Someone's in the Kitchen," pp. 152-54. The section is headed: "The Journal's June Reading Bonus: A trio of the season's best stories."

8 Julia Penelope Stanley and Susan J. Wolfe (Robbins),

"Toward a Feminist Aesthetic," Chrysalis, A Magazine of Women's Culture, No. 6 (1978), p. 59, quoting Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father.

9 Ibid., 60.

10 Ouida H. Clapp, "Introduction," Teaching the Basics--Really! (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1977), p. xi. The "Introduction" should be read in full for the sensible, though traditional, comments concerning the teaching of language arts in the schools.

11 "Hands," The Lesbian Reader (Oakland: Amazon Press, 1975), p. 60, quoted by Stanley and Wolf, pp. 60-61.

12 Although not germane to the argument here, Una Stannard, Mrs Man (San Francisco: Germainbooks, 1977), traces the history of the abuse of women's names by both men and women. A novelist herself, she does not comment on names in fiction.

13 The Candida alludes to her novel Fear of Flying, but also echoes Voltaire's Candide, Shaw's Candida, and Terry Southern's Candy.

14 p. 14.

15 passim.

16 "My posthumous life...."

17 p. 11.

18 (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979).

19 Ibid., 23.

20 Ibid., 166.

21 Ibid., 37.

22 David Cecil, A Portrait of Jane Austen (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), pp. 169 ff.

23 Malamud, 32.

24 Kitty's first husband, Nathanael Willis, may have been based on Nathaniel Parker Willis (1806-1867), poet, short story writer, and novelist. His Paul Fane (1857) was an attempt at "a psychological novel about a young American artist who determined, after being shunned by a cold English girl, to make the noble and high-born women of England accept him on a basis of equality by whatever methods were available. Though several women fell in love with him, he spurned them." Robert E. Spiller, et al., Literary History of the United States (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1949), pp. 280-81. Another unexplored parallel is that of Nathanael Willis and Kitty with D. H. Lawrence and Frieda. Kitty is beaten, at least "hit," once by her husband; "Katherine Mansfield saw bruises on [Frieda's] body when they went bathing together." Malamud, p. 34.

25 Malamud, 362.

26 (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979).

27 (New York: Random House, 1979).