

The Psychology of Conflict and Creativity in Bernard Malamud's *The Tenants*

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Abstract

The Tenants (1971) contrasts two writers of different backgrounds, the Jewish Harry Lesser and the Christian, Willie Spearmint. Harry Lesser writes in order to make up or console his past failures. On the other hand, Spearmint “sees art as action and writing as an act of violence”¹⁶. But as the narrative proceeds, the roles change because Willie, basically associated with sexuality and violence, starts creating aesthetically, on the other hand Lesser is devoted more towards physicality and violence which rules Willie's world. Irene Bell, the elementary feminine, a girl friend of Spearmint plays a positive role in the life of Spearmint. She is the carrier of Lesser's anima and he experiences a transformative power after his mutual contact with her. After her communion with Lesser, Irene too feels a change in her way of thinking. She quit acting as she feels that she is not ‘natural’. She has the feeling of redemption as she becomes more organized, objective and reasonable. Thus, she plays a transformative role in the life of Willie Spearmint and she becomes more self-realized through her contact with animus.

Keywords: Anima, Animus, Female, Psychology, Relationship

The Tenants is the sixth novel by Bernard Malamud and it reflects the conditions of late sixties by juxtaposing the lives of two writers. In this novel, Malamud chooses a theme that expresses his lifelong concern with the racial groups especially the Jews and the blacks. To serve this purpose, he takes up the encounter between two writers of which one is Jew and the other is black. In a dismal wasteland setting, they confront each other for mutual understanding. However, they fail in their effort to establish a dynamic, meaningful and interpersonal relationship and finally, destroy each other. It can be said that the novel is an absurd map of relationship interlinking life, love, and art. The story ponders well upon the subjects of racial prejudice, art and its comparison with love, life and extravagant opinions of all types. It uses a queer mixture of realism and fantasy to achieve this purpose. The extremely symbolic encounter between the two writers, Harry Lesser and Willie Spearmint, occurs in a realistic setting of an urban wasteland. Malamud mingles the elements of realism and surrealism technically to impress the reader with the sense of uncertainty and ambiguity marking life.

Harry Lesser, a thirty-six-year-old Jewish writer, writes his book in his rented apartment on East 31st Street in Manhattan. On the sixth floor of a fifty-year-old brick apartment, he is persistently busy finishing his third novel which he has been writing for the last nine years. Obviously, he expects his hard labor to yield a perfect novel. Lesser is the only tenant in this building because his neighbors have accepted the incentive of four hundred dollars to vacate the old building to permit for more profitable architectural projects. Lesser ignores the painful pleas of Levenspiel, the landlord, and obstinately sticks to his apartment as he is preoccupied with an unmanageable desire to complete his third novel in the same place where he had conceived its idea. His fear is that a change in location will distract him from his creative act. As he is enduring a massive writer's block, finishing the novel seems in peril.

Harry is leading the isolated life of a sequester living off sparsely on the forty thousand dollars that he made on a film sale of his last novel. He has given a deaf ear to Levenspiel's escalating offers to vacate and the sob stories of his family's illness. Willie Spearmint lurches on in his solitary existence as he steals into one of the other vacant apartments to type the manuscript of his first novel.

Initially mistrust prevails between the two writers but gradually, they come to a sort of accommodation. They are involved in a social and creative dialogue which has a positive effect on their writing while Lesser introduces Willie to the world of discipline and form; Willie takes him to the world of experience and sensation. Slowly Lesser comes out of his shell to engage himself in social activity and form relationship with a black woman and then with Willie's own white girl-friend Irene Bell. On the other hand, Willie is urged to spend more time on his typewriter. As one reveals himself to the world of emotional relationships, the other shares the world of form, discipline and craftsmanship. Their mutual respect for each other's strengths reduces with the conflict ignited by Willie's plea to Lesser to critically appraise his writings, although he is sure that a white man cannot understand the black experience.

Lesser's critical judgement of Willie's revolutionary writing aimed at defining the predicament of his people is not welcomed by Willie. Lesser, who is fanatical after form, pursues the end of the novel which baffles him. So, he criticizes Willie's writing from the point of view of style and form. Ultimately their sparring turns into an open war when Harry steals Willie's white girl friend Irene Bell. The racial gulf is widened and the offended black attacks the Jew when he comes to know that Lesser intends to marry his girl. Levenspiel eventually puts the fight to an end. The aversion between the white and the black, the Jew and the anti-Semite, comes to the fore. In his blind fury, Willie destroys the white man's manuscript, the sweat, toil and the desires of a decade's hard labor. Lesser curses himself for not keeping a copy of the manuscript in his bank locker and sets down again to rewrite the novel. He

promises to marry Irene and move to San Francisco after finishing his book. Irene is unable to compete with Lesser's first love, i.e., art, and she assumes that life with one writer is same as life with another as she must occupy a secondary slot. Thus, strongly averted, she leaves for San Francisco. After some time, Willie comes back to the old tenement and breaking his vow to never write again, begins writing a new novel. Finally, after weeks of stalking through reading discarded pages from the Irish cans, the two meet in the hall of the building and Harry Lesser hacks Willie Spearmint's skull, while Willie Spearmint slashes Lesser's balls.

As in other novels of Malamud, woman plays a subservient role; nevertheless, she is the one responsible for the drastic transformation in the personalities of both the protagonists. Her presence in the life of Harry makes it more colorful and enjoyable for him although giving attention to her diverts him a lot from his aim. On the contrary, her absence from the life of Willie Spearmint helps him to concentrate upon his book, which has become the only target in his life especially after meeting Lesser. Irene bell plays the role of elementary feminine of the positive type in the life of Willie. She is an off-Broadway actress who holds him up by paying him money. Lesser finds him anima in her as she, with her cultivated feelings, offers an excellent vent for this. It is important to note that Lesser is introduced to her by Willie. In other words, he draws near to his anima through his shadow, i.e., Willie. While he is still having a struggle with his shadow, Lesser is disclosed to the archetypal energies of anima. Introduced to the Dionysian ways by Willie, he presents his "creative Juice"¹ to Irene at the get together. She rejects this offer with disdain. He tells Irene, "When you came into the house tonight I felt this sense of something I'd lost in the past." When Irene enquires about the past, he relates in detail his failure, "As though I hadn't been where I should've been once when you wanted someone." His remorse that he could have been with Irene when she wanted love is anima visitation.

Apart from Irene, Lesser encounters another anima visitation. He admits that form and content are inseparable. This is reflected in the unconscious vision of Lesser in which he “beaches his battered raft” and finds a black woman dancing in her “nude blackness.” Excited, he runs towards her, a black crow “swoops between her legs and flies off with a puff of black wool.” The crow symbolizes Lesser suppressed instincts which when explicated assume an aggressive character. The black woman is representative of the primary secrets of ethnic sexuality. She is archetype of anima in the deepest and darkest recesses of the primordium of the collective unconscious. The plunge of the crow is a call to Lesser’s natural impulse to dive into the primitive feminine and get an inspiration from it. Extensively viewing, Lesser is like the crow as his restrained instincts have gained a coagulated antique nature relegated to the unconscious like the crow, he merely twitches the public hair, i.e., merely touches the outer region of his anima inspiration and fails to dig into the deep fountains of her pelvic energy. Lesser also encounters Willie’s black friend Mary Kettlesmith. Because he has faced the mysterious world of feminine for the first time, his meeting with Mary has a paranoid quality about it. It ends with a phallic gesture by Sam Clemence, Mary’s boyfriend, who assertively takes out an eight-inch switchblade knife. But Lesser brushes aside this reverie and gets back to his work.

Lesser’s repeated confrontations with the shadow, i.e., Willie Spearmint, heightens his psychic stability. He moves out of his hole like room and goes to make a visit to the Museum of Modern Art. The incomplete painting of a woman sketched by his former friend Lazar Kohn itself refers to the mysterious side of the anima which, being the primitive model of sensibility, remains a riddle to the intellectual inquiring mind.

It is significant to note that Lesser meets Irene as he comes out of the museum after watching the unfinished painting of the woman. Lesser suffers from a deprivation of the anima which is interposed to the son by the mother when he is young. Jung says,

The first bearer of the soul image is always the mother; later it is borne by those who arouse the man's feelings, whether in a positive or in a negative sense.²

Lack of anima may be termed here as an undermining of the capacity for relationships. Lesser projects upon Irene his own mother image. In context of such a situation, Jung says:

A man's Eros is passive like a child. He hopes to be caught, sucked in, enveloped and devoured. He seeks, as it were, the protecting, nourishing, charmed circle of the mother, the condition of the infant released from every care in which the outside world bends over him and even forces happiness upon him. No wonder the real world vanishes from the sight!

In his projection of the mother anima on Irene, Lesser encounters the positive transformative feminine. After confronting Irene, in which she discloses facts about her past and present life, Lesser undergoes a libidinal release, "What she has told him has set off an excitement. He feels in himself a flow of language, a surge of words towards an epiphany." Making a cognizant move towards his anima, he experiences a new growth of the creative drive as his consciousness is fertilized by an energy charge from the unconscious. As a mediator between the conscious and the unconscious and the unconscious contents of the psyche, the anima asserts its transformative character.

Lesser couples with Willie and his "soul people" and goes with them to a party being held at Mary Kettlesmith's place. In relation to the external collective, Lesser experiences "the promise of spring in the February night." He is no longer the hermit but unites with these people and experiences intensified delight. Discussing the impact of anima archetype on human consciousness, Edward Whitmont holds:

It is the drive towards involvement the instinctual connectedness to other people and the containing community or group. Whereas separate individuality is personified as a male element connectedness – the “containing” unconscious, the group and the community – experienced and personified as a feminine entity.⁴

Listening to music, a common representation of the anima, Lesser feels a “yearning, longing for life.” Lesser reacts in an uneasy way to Mary and mediates afterwards, “I write about love because I know so little about it.” Finally, Lesser seems to be moving towards a clear apprehension of his inferiorities.

Unable to get through to Irene, who is occupied in dancing with Sam Clemence, Lesser agrees to Mary’s offer and follows her into one of the vacant bedrooms in her friend’s apartment across the hall. He makes love to the cold, frigid Mary who fails to respond. She has undergone a traumatic shock to which she was disposed as a child when a boy raped her. To add a heathen touch to their love intrigue, she puts after the lovemaking a string of green and violet beads around Lesser’s neck. However, this affair is short lived as Sam Clemence detects them and informs the “brothers.” The racial cleft comes to the front and the displeased blacks want vengeance. To pacify them by averting their attention, Willie uses insolent speech for Lesser and calls him names. Through this stratagem, he curbs the blacks from physically assaulting Lesser. Exposed to the crude reaction of his shadow, Lesser feels his “testicles tighten” and leaves the party. Consequently, he discovers that he has fallen in love with Irene as she has become the carrier of his anima projection.

Lesser accomplishes fellowship with his anima in an epiphanic moment which comes as he feels the force of earthly love and passion. He experiences this epiphany while making love to Irene. He finally apprehends vividly, “I’ve got to write but I’ve got to more than write.” He avows his love to her and they undergo mutual orgasm in their passionate

lovemaking, which is, “touched by lightening.” After this climactic communion with his anima, Lesser has a release of the unconscious energy charge of creative urge:

But mostly what happened was that he was often high on reverie and felt renewed energy for work when passing under a leafless maple trees he thinks of Irene and blessing descends.

He has a “livened hunger to write” and feels “a fluent breath to his emotions” giving him “a sense of the open sea” of the great mother. In other words, he experiences the transformative power of the anima:

Because of Irene he lived now with feeling of more variously possible possibilities, an optimism that boiled up imagination. Love’s doing.

His inert Eros is activated to animate his constricted libido. On the other hand, Irene has a communion with her animus and we find that “she had redeemed her fact, and perhaps something inside her for she seemed kinder to herself.” She decides to abandon acting as she realizes that she is not a “natural.” It bestows of a new momentous to Lesser’s writing as the novel starts “working itself out really moving lately.” Jung writes:

Thus, the animus is a psycho pump, a mediator between the conscious and the unconscious and a personification of the latter. Just as the anima becomes, through integration, the Eros of consciousness, so the animus becomes the Logos; and in the same way that the anima gives relationship and relatedness to a man’s consciousness, the animus gives a woman consciousness a capacity for reflection, deliberation and self-knowledge.

While Lesser makes use of his Eros in reacting feelingly to art and life, Irene has the feeling of redemption as she becomes more organized, objective and reasonable. In accordance with this new understanding, she decides to quit acting while Lesser’s work starts progressing rapidly.

However, the anima archetype is only nascently realized by Lesser. His retarding nature makes him highly wary of any new development in his life. Lesser starts remaining away from the book and spending more time with Irene. Though he moves a bit towards self-realization, his obsession with the ego-ideal remains fully. He tells Irene, "I'd want to marry you after I finish my book." Even while he is lying with her after their passionate love-making, he "thinks of Bill Spear alone in the vast empty house writing at his kitchen table." This professional jealousy may be seen as a sign of the psychosomatic tension in Lesser's personality arising on account of the conflict between anima obligation and ego-ideal both of which demand attention. Unable to resolve this conflict, he fails to do justice to either of the two.

A man can reach an anima consciousness only when the shadow darkness between the ego and the anima is sufficiently absorbed by him. However, the archetypes can be assimilated fully only when the contaminating factors in projections are withdrawn, and the contents of the archetypes are absorbed and fully recognized as intrapsychic phenomenon. Elaborating the bivalent nature of the primordial images, Edward Whitmont writes:

The energy which is conveyed through the eternal images is as such neither constructive nor destructive, neither healthy nor pathological; health or disease, growth or decay, depend upon whether or not consciousness is ready and able to confront, mould and integrate the archetypal energies into a concrete life as material for the expression of the creative impulse of the mythologem – albeit within the restrictions imposed by the material at its disposal namely by the particular personal capacities and limitations.

As the shadow remains unintegrated, the anima cannot be at the disposal of the conscious ego. Lesser sees Irene only on weekends as he works at night on weekdays. Lesser's libido flows back to his book as Irene asks, "Why don't you fuck your book and save time all around?" The

transformative accomplishment of their reciprocal anima-animus comparison wears off as Irene recapitulate her acting career and decides to go on with her analysis and Lesser draws back to his monkish seclusion. Like his fictional writer-hero, Lazar Cohn, Lesser is unable to give love and to understand the female self. The name Lazar Cohn itself reminds us of Lesser's artist friend Lazar Kohn who failed to finish the painting of a woman. The ambivalent nature of the archetypal feminine proves an enigma for these three – Lesser, Lazar Cohn, Lazar Kohn – as their undifferentiated feeling function fails to grasp the profundity of the great mother. They try to approach love through thinking and not through feeling and therein lies the unexpected difficulty. In writing the book, Lesser seeks an answer to this dilemma, "Thus Lesser writes his book and his book writes Lesser."

Lesser stays on as Irene departs for San Francisco fed-up with being the subordinate one on Lesser's priority list. She leaves a note saying, "No book is as important as me." Lesser goes on writing his novel about love. Ironically, he tries to have intellectual understanding of a concept which is emotional in its nature. The emotional nature of the concept evades him even after this violent convulsion as his inferior feeling function fails to respond to the situation. Doubtlessly, he has failed to assimilate the instinctually of the shadow and the feeling content of the anima archetype.

Devoid of the feeling charges from his unconscious, Lesser slips into a sterile existence. His block as a writer comes back. It is due to a lack of conscious relationships and the shadow and anima. It is a relationship that alone makes artists creative, but Lesser's creative activity suffers from this block. "The writer was nauseated by not writing. He was nauseated when he wrote by the words, by the thought of them."

Thus, Lesser's encounters with the shadow and anima archetypes of the collective unconscious remain unredeemed. Unable to incorporate the feeling contents of these

archetypes, he goes into a barren situation of living marked by bondage to his ego ideal.

Discussing the ambivalent nature of the effect of the unconscious mind, E. Whitmont writes:

Like the energy of the atomic nucleus, the energy of the psychic Nucleus of the unconscious constitutes a dimension of so far unfathomed and terrifying elementary energy potential, equally capable of destroying as well as of aiding us, depending upon whether we become its victim owing to our continuing lack of comprehension or whether we acquire the capacity to relate to it adequately and turn its energy potential to our benefit.

With his debilitating “lack of comprehension”, Lesser is unable to grasp the profundity of his encounters with the archetypes of the unconscious psyche. Instead of their creative aspect, he experiences the destructive view which devitalizes him in physical and psychological terms.

In the final analysis, Lesser moves towards becoming a psychic man from the elementary stage of an ego man. In the beginning, he is partly successful and later throws away the gains. His massive encounters with the shadow and the anima archetypes prove futile in his progress towards the path of individuation. In psychological terms, it can be said that he must encounter his shadow and come to terms with it before he can recognize his anima and functionally reintegrate it into his unconscious. However, he fails to conquer the shadow darkness between the ego and the self. As a result, he is unable to realize his anima. Failing to absorb the energies of the great mother, Lesser comes off worse at the end of the novel than he is in its beginning.

Lesser suffers from a negative mother complex in the sense that he has a traumatized past for having lost his mother in an accident when he was of a very young age. He is withdrawn from an active participation in life's affairs, but he tries to experience it through his writing by substituting it for living. He tries to achieve a Jamesian – Flaubertian perfection of form which

would immortalize him through art. Instead of experiencing it, he only writes about life. In the archetypal terminology, Lesser is pure alternes, the eternal young man, and suffers from the fallout effects of that archetype. He has a soaring and ambitious aptitude and undergoes inflation and grandiosity. He extols in his role as an artist, claiming that writing in his life, “He lives to write, he writes to live.” “For Christ’s sake”, Levenspiel pleads, “what are you writing, the Holy Bible?” “who can say?” comes the complacent reply.

Lesser, because of his mother-complex, fails to establish dynamic interpersonal relationships. He is unable to grasp the numen of his anima, Irene Bell. So profound is the anima loss that Lesser cannot handle the complexities of relationships with women nor with men, for that matter. Love for him is not a dialectical relationship. Governed by his self-interest, he lies about the quality of his work to Willie who feels infuriated. Later, he disregards the legitimate demands of Irene for proper attention. Consequently, the encounter with the anima proves unredemptive as he is consumed by the shadow energies.

In the end, it can be said that, in the triangular relationship between the Jewish Lesser, the black Willie and the Christian Irene, the intricacies of the social dimension of the shadow problem are made alive. The union of art and life, discipline and passion, is successfully achieved. Malamud as the creator of *The Tenants* has presented this novel as a rich amalgam of Lesser and Willie, of form and content. Whereas on the one hand, the novel puts forward the frontiers of self-reflexive novel and creates a dual image to represent the conflicting ideals of novelistic and artistic creation, on the other it gives a unique literary statement of the archetypal ramifications of the shadow problem in the spheres of intrapsychic reality and the external collective. Thus, *The Tenants* fuses social concerns with artistic problems.

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