



DISORIENTING NATURE OF MODERN MAN IN *THE VICTIM*

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ABSTRACT

Saul Bellow is one of the most reputed novelists of the post-war American fiction. In his fiction, Bellow has recorded the human condition and temper of the period that emerged after the Second World War a historical sense marked by tension and tedium, social misfits, psychopaths and absurdity of the postmodern years. He has been also projected the modern angst in his works. It has been presented decadent culture, dehumanization, abuse of sex, lust for power, drunks and murderers in the modern American society. It reveals man's encounters with the contemporary reality. Obviously, it is a metaphysical enquiry into the basic questions related to precarious human existence. It is clear that Bellow's works are the outcome of the modern situation. His novels are the platforms of the existing metaphysical disposition. They deal with both potential despair and human possibility. They also present the ills of modern society and dehumanization of personality.

INTRODUCTION

The First Chapter entailed "Introduction," draws the biographical sketch of the Bellow and how throughout his career as a novelist, Bellow's basic concern has been humanistic. Writing in an age when many novelists look upon man's condition with despair, he has steadfastly affirmed the charm and potential joy of life. While he acknowledges that a man's life often seems paradoxical - his heroes have the strong desire to be truly human, but the choices and

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alternatives open to them force them into positions which deny their humanity - he also suggests in his novels a way to live with this paradox.

The Second Chapter entitled “Disorienting Nature of Modern Man in *The Victim*” deals with Bellow’s novel, *The Victim*, which reveals that Asa Leventhal has made much more progress toward synthesizing his disparate experiences than Joseph had. Having been plagued by anxiety, a vague guilt, and a serious persecution complex, Asa Leventhal comes to realize that he has been the victim of his own immobilizing fears. He learns that he must accept responsibility for himself as well as for others; neither responsibility should be overemphasized or denied. In being responsible, he must make the most of what he has got, for this is the only way he will be able to avoid the extremes which threaten to make him either more or less than human.

The Third Chapter entitled “Bearing Witness to Life in *The Adventures of Augie March*” attempts to expose the delicate balance that *Adventures of Augie March* seeks to maintain is between his freedom and his fate. As he engages in adventure after adventure, Augie finds himself being determined not by his own will, but by environmental pressures, by the dominance of other wills, and by chance encounters. In order to preserve his own humanity, he characteristically welcomes the freedom of new adventures, adventures which affirm his desire to live as an individual and afford him the opportunity to shape his own fate.

The Fourth Chapter entitled “Agony of the Self in *Seize the Day*” tries to exhibit a character to the world which most men would find repulsive. A man of forty-four, Tommy is fat, vain, vulgar, rude, and adulterous. He is a fragmented, lonely individual, agonizingly out of step with his more successful peers. Thus far, his life has been nothing but failure: he has never finished college, his high hopes of becoming a Hollywood star have been dashed, his stubborn pride has destroyed his marriage, and his foolish vanity has ruined his career as a salesman.

The Fifth Chapter entitled “Conclusion” sums up how Bellow has avoided the easy declarations of alienations of alienation which have become so common in contemporary fiction. He has considered it his task to rescue his heroes from the disenchantment, the disgust, and the despair which have provided modern man with a self-image of alienation and absurdity. Most remarkable about Bellow is his faith in man. He has faith in man’s ability to defy what seems to be absurd, faith in his ability to adjust to what seems paradoxical, faith in his ability to find the still point, the equilibrium, or the balance between those forces which would make him more or less than human. And he has faith in man’s ability to assert and to establish those values which would make his life more meaningful. In expressing such faith in his novels, Saul Bellow, in his own way, justifies man’s existence and bears witness to his life



Novel is the powerful form of literary expression. It co-relates in our society to the epic primitive stages of some races. It is a mixed genre and its origin lies in a various form like Long Essay, Romance, Biography, Comic and so on. The novel projects a set of attitudes regarding society, history, biography, and the culture. But it has suffered from the convictional inferior form. Most of the practitioners of this form have showed the impression of their art form. The novel can contain large developed and consistent images of people. But the novel has

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Achieved more popularity over other art forms. Saul Bellow is the most important writer to have emerged in the Post World War II America. This era has seen Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Philip Roth, and Bernard Malamud are the most celebrated writers of contemporary period. They have produced imaginative literature, fiction, poetry, and drama. Novel was the one expression of the political and cultural ferment in progress among the Eastern European Jews during the period of 1881-1924. It highlights on men and society and their complex relationships. However, the novel searches the record life with minute details. It again projects life in all its aspects and in variety.

Saul Bellow's position as the major American post-war writers has already been solidly established. Indeed, as the recipient of the Pulitzer Prize, three-time winner of the National Book Award, and, most recently, Nobel laureate, Bellow is America's most richly decorated and most famous living author. His books are widely read, widely taught, widely discussed. It is clear, then, that he possesses the qualities to attract and sustain a large and appreciative audience.

In trying to identify these qualities, one notes that behind Bellow's alternatively realistic, romantic, Jewish, and universal literature lay qualities that clearly label him a postmodernist and post-apocalyptic writer. He insists on the dignity of selfhood, on the human capacity to create a meaningful mode of existence, and on the transcendental qualities of experience. He veers away from the strong modernist proclivity for artistic expression per se or its separation of art from moral values. His vision opposes the fashionable Wasteland view of contemporary society. He refuses to join any movement, whether literary or political, that results from a cynical or nihilistic outlook on life.

In many ways Bellow is a traditional novelist. Though erudite himself, he believes that the best literature is born when a writer is inspired. Then only will a book bear genuine artistic as well as social, moral, and political value, as is the case of Tolstoy's War and Peace. To him the best protest an artist can make is to remain faithful to a specific mode of art and to excel in it, not to become an "activist" artist. Bellow shuns protest literature and any involvement with political activism even if he is sympathetic toward the cause itself. Thus, he attended the



1965 White House Festival of Arts given by President Johnson despite Robert Lowell's personal request to boycott in protest of the Vietnam War. Nor did he sign a telegram of protest sent by artists. Yet later Bellow sent a letter of his own to the New York Times denouncing America's involvement in Vietnam.

Among Bellow's biographical and literary emphases, there are several traits to be pointed out. His realistic accounts of immigrant Jews and their new-world descendants doubtlessly are derived from his own background as a son of Russian Jewish parents. His parents immigrated to Canada from St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1913, two years before his birth in Lachine, in the Province of Quebec. In 1924 the family moved to Chicago where Bellow grew up and observed the multi-ethnic, lively Midwestern city before and after the Depression.

Later Bellow's life in New York as an aspiring writer also gave him the opportunity to be acquainted with literary circles, and especially with writers around the Partisan Review. His experiences in Chicago and New York gave his works the marvellous quality of a chronicle of life in the big cities - their streets and suburbs, people young and old, rich, and poor, colourful personalities, hoodlums and mobsters, doctors, lawyers, students, business tycoons, venturesome and original men, and women. Most readers can identify with his characters, settings, and plot, since his mode of fiction does not depart drastically from the familiar literary conventions of the realistic novel.

There is another side to Bellow that places him in the American romantic and transcendental traditions of literature. He puts his trust in the possibility of human development, insists on the value of a future for humankind, stresses the importance of imagination and dreams, recognizes the primacy of the self, celebrates personal intuition amidst the whirlwind of mass culture. He is rightly called by Keith Opdahl a descendant of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. M. Gilbert Porter also gives Bellow the title "neo-transcendentalist" because he remains optimistic about the possibilities of democracy and civilization while lamenting the failure of Americans to realize all their possibilities.

As Tony Tanner points out, Bellow shows a typical tension within American literature, namely, a dream of unlimited freedom and the dread of restriction imposed by social, cultural, or even literary forces. This tension, as Tanner sees it, takes the form of opposing pulls between fixity and fluidity in literary form and language. Here emerges one of Bellow's dilemmas - how to reconcile his realistic and romantic traits, especially since he is aware of the danger of too overt a dependence on the fictional. Such dependence may lead to a departure from reality, the reality that ordinary people understand and experience. This balance between reality and romance helps to account for Bellow's attempt to write different kinds of literature: the picaresque romance, the diary, epistolary fiction, plays, short stories, and standard realistic novels.



The Jewish quality of Bellow's fiction is one more aspect one cannot ignore. While many critics have remarked that his is a notably Jewish mind, Bellow has continually resisted the label of a "Jewish writer." Writing out of his Jewish heritage and from his own inner growth experiences, Bellow affirms existence. His hopeful acceptance of life and of its meaning is apparent in the sometimes convoluted but persevering progress of his protagonists toward the goal of self-realization. Bellow believes that man possesses the potential for wholeness and for the vital integration of experience, intention, and action.

Through the struggles of his protagonists for inner truth and balance, Bellow incisively transcends the solely physical and reveals the spirit in man. In one of his more recent novels, his protagonist tells us that the spirit knows that its growth is the real aim of existence. This dissertation traces the growth in spirit and consequent self-realization in his protagonists. Because there is a steady development of psychological and spiritual consciousness in his novels, they are admirably well suited to a psychoanalytic interpretation. Such an analysis, attempted by this dissertation, will demonstrate the underlying unity and development within his fiction.

An Indian scholar, Chirantan Kulshrestha, has had an interesting and penetrating conversation with Bellow on this topic. Intrigued by Bellow's vehement rejection of the Jewish tag and the presence of an undeniable Jewish nuance in his works, Kulshrestha remarked on the way his own Hindu religion and folklore affect his life, even though he is a secularized Hindu. From this rich resource come the "Jewish" characteristics of his work - its religiosity, sentimentalism, and pathos; its prominent element of story-telling; its marked family orientation, humour, and transcendentalism. The comical element alone has attracted lengthy research into his Jewish sources, as exemplified by Sarah Blacher Cohen's refreshing and thorough analysis of an ever-deepening complexity of Bellow's genius. Yet if his talents were limited to the fiction of realistic, romantic, and Jewish values, he might not have attracted the attention of so large and so constant an audience.

Bellow has succeeded articulating many of the questions and problems that afflict the contemporary public, which feels them but cannot express them exactly: a sense of anxiety, the devaluation of the self, a mental and emotional restlessness, the lack of any sense of direction, too many uncertainties and moral ambiguities, the general search for meaning in life, the question about the future of civilization. The self and the mystery surrounding it have ever been objects of interest and fascination for Western man and have appeared consistently in his literature and art. Bellow, who occupies an eminent place among contemporary American writers, is also concerned with the self and specifically with its anguished, often erratic, development in his protagonists' lives. Throughout his novels an ever increasingly intense pattern of self-realization emerges in an almost sequential order. Each novel reveals a



new level of awareness as its protagonist wrestles with the meaning of his humanity and struggles to find the unified centre of his being through which he can reach wholeness

This ability to locate and express serious public concerns has led Bellow to deal squarely with some of the gloomier aspects of the modern condition. Some critics have pointed out an apparent contradiction in the author, noting a mixture of depressing awareness concerning the plight of humanity and an unquenchable hope that seems never to flicker. John J. Clayton, for example, sees Bellow, despite his opposition to nihilistic thinking, as a depressive and his characters as expatriates. In Clayton's estimation Bellow is not insensitive to despair, alienation, and the anonymity of the self, but he remains desperately attached to the saving power of imagination which defines the greatness of man.

Hence, Bellow's affirmation lies not in the present situation of individuals and society but in their possibilities. Likewise, Robert R. Dutton tries to discuss Bellow within the Humanist tradition despite his handling of some existential themes that seem to deprive humanity of further hope. To see man as "sub-angelic" solves some of the tensions arising from Bellow's double consciousness concerning conflicting elements today. Through the complex fusion of visions both hopeful and dreadful, what always surges up in his fiction is the sense of affirmation of the moral value, a positive view of life, and an appreciation of the concrete here and now.

Another distinguishing characteristic of Bellow's work concerns the talkative nature of the characters he creates. Almost all of them are extremely verbal and articulate, the chief exceptions being Romilayu, the guide in Henderson the Rain King, who speaks very hesitantly, and the black pickpocket in Mr. Sampler's Planet, who keeps total silence throughout the novel. The others are all talkers, either publicly or privately. They discuss matters among themselves, turn over ideas in their minds, write down their ideas in letters and diaries, mutter to themselves in solitude, speak to the dead, and interpret things mentally. The purpose of creating such characters, in fact a galaxy of them, is for Bellow to open a legitimate channel for his ideas within a fictional context.

Bellow has always maintained a metaphysical concern in ideas in fiction. In some of his essays he makes explicit his concern and takes his stand against the current literary trend of polymorphous sexuality and vehement declarations of alienation. Whether Bellow is demonstrating the necessity of serious thought or the dangers of over-intellectualization, there always remains in his work an underlying quality of searching. Bellow's inquiry seems to affect the gradual shift of roles he assigns to metaphysical in his fiction. Based on this development, his work seems to pass through various stages.



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