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Portrayal of Heroes in the Selected Novels of Saul Bellow

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Many novels of the past few decades have been characterized by themes which special importance human freedom, insurrection, fatalism, mechanical necessity and obsession, because of the tendency of modern hero. The changing eras in the cultural and literary of mankind have seen various figurations of the hero from the divine and super human to the disillusioned and the dying hero. The conventional heroes were numerable men endowed with unusual power, skill and capacity. Their lines were distinguished by their great actions and sacrifices. Their lives were marked by greater troubles and difficulties which they overcome and finally established themselves as heroes. These heroes have now disappeared from the earth. The heroes of modern literature struggle hard to make the best of their crushing situations.

An Ihab Hassan points out,

We see the modern hero as actor and sufferer, rebel and victim rough and saint. We see him in the glass of fiction darkly, paradoxically as man both typical and uncommon, the outsider in the street. (Five Faces of Hero 28)

There seems to have developed a pattern in modern literature ironic and paradoxical, that involves the hero in struggle for identify in a world that almost always is rejected by him as incomprehensible or absurd. Because of the omnivorous nature of the novel as a literary form, both the intellectual theme of defiance and the metaphysical anguish are presented not only in sophisticated, cosmopolitan, intellectual settings, but also in provincial atmospheres, where daily routines, sounds, and smells are very familiar.

The contemporary hero feels no constraint in talking about his terror in facing the world, of his loneliness of the paradoxical nature of his situation, of the absurdity of existence. In fact there seems to be a tendency among writers to present heroes who, instead of trying to determine ways for meaningful existence. Resign themselves to a life of uncertainty absurd existence, or rebellion and spend the greater part of their lines explaining their unexplained life situations with the turgid and what are becoming the too familiar clichés of the isolated, introspective, or rebellious hero.

A literary proverb holds that every writer has but one story to tell. It is more accurate to say that every writer is compelled by a single issue. The novelist's plots and characters, however different, express the same human he continually struggles to solve a problem that haunts him. This problem is personal, of course, but it is also in the novelist who commands our attention a reflection of the larger society.

The hero in Modern American fiction dedicated to the task of affirms the sense of human life. Novelists like Bellow, Mailer, Salinger, Ellison, Baldwin and Updike portray in

their novels, heroes as confused and alienated beings and they are interested in self-analysis and eager to rebel against the established system of society.

Saul Bellow occupies a distinct place of his own in contemporary American fiction. His contribution to American literature has been considerable and the characters he has created have firmly established themselves in American imagination. Bellow depicts the plight of the individual in an impersonal mechanical society. There is the juxtaposition of a static society and the organic individual.

Bellow's heroes find the complexities of their dilemma not only in alienation from society but they are also confronted by a kind of treason within themselves. The heroes are troubled by the strong sense of self. Society is indifferent to them. But its mysteries are not beyond their comprehension they to learn of its nature. Bellow is of the view that the novelists in the past have failed to catch the positive factor in the human equation of the being in itself versus the being for itself.

Bellow opines that any depiction of man should grant him the power to rise above the indignities of complete subjection to unseen and unknown forces. Bellow pleases for a higher and better perspective of man. In almost all his novels Bellow pursues the question of what it is to be fully human in an impersonal world. He represents the wretchedness and the absurdity of man's condition in the modern world and his many failures. He has not been content to dwell upon this wretchedness alone, for no matter how absurd the protagonists may appear, Bellow portrays them as being interesting in themselves. This interest leads the striving heroes of his novels not towards a goal of success but towards an acceptance of the dignity of life. They can never relinquish their faith that the value of life depends of its dignity and not on its success. In spite of the absurdity of the condition the heroes maintain faith in them, and in the dignity of life.

Bellow's heroes share many common qualities. They are caught between the everlasting 'yes' and the eternal 'No'. They live in a state of tension; there is a duality at the heart of the heroes. They realize social reality but fail to achieve any meaningful relationship with it. They have an overdose of consciousness. Their basic humanism operates more through withdrawal than through participation. They cling to the past and they are incompetent to deal with the present reality.

There is a basic pattern in all Bellow's novels. The heroes embody a tension between a man of love and a man of will. The former ones are dependent on the world and willing to suffer whereas the latter ones are adolescent in their self-assertion.

This can be traced to two opposing views of the world as Keith Michael opdahl says

Bellow is torn between his admiration of militant struggle and his insistence upon a less willful and defenseless joy. To control or to give, to master or to revere, to survive or to enjoy, to will or to love lies within this general tension. (The Novels of Saul Bellow 5)

For example the contrast between Wilhelm and his father is that of a man of love who seeks joy within the limits of his nature and a hard-boiled man of will who would impose his desires upon the world. Bellow gives a further dimension to the heroes by making them embody a religious quest. They are in search of a religious transcendence which differentiates them from the protagonists of novelists like Hemmingway, and Lowell. They are unable to break out of themselves as they find it hard to reconcile their vision with the daily world.

Bellow does not define the resolution of man's conflict with fate but concentrates on the very spectacle of man seeking resolution.

The condition of Bellow's victims from *Dangling man* (1944) to *Herzog* (1964) is suffering and the thematic direction of that suffering is towards love, salvation and self-perception. They lack the courage which the heroes of the later novels possess in abundance. These heroes are obsessed by thoughts of persecution death and madness and anxiety for self-preservation insults them, at least initially, from all views of reality other than own. Driven away by ordinary life they invent evasive formulae to confront its imagined terrors and support their own marginal existence. But they are forced to come out of the barricades which they have built around themselves and to accept the fact of belonging to a common world.

The protagonists of the early novels suffer and the thematic direction of that direction of that suffering is towards love, salvation and self-perception. Joseph in *Dangling man* may be misanthropic or Tommy Wilhelm irresponsible but they have not sacrificed an incorrigible idealism at the center of their character. They tremble before the particular choice they must make. They wish to act idealistically and transcend the constrictions of their lives but find themselves crippled by their own frailties.

These victims find it difficult to come out of the barricades which they have built around themselves. Reality outmatches them and they have to confront it. Heroes of Bellow's later fiction emerge at the end of their journey as quasi-triumphant figures who affirm life. They are exceptional men, cool in their courageous in their capacity to suffer. For example as Gross Theodore puts it

Herzog may imprison himself in a shameful and impotent privacy but who eventually acts and enters into social intercourse with the human race (The heroic Ideal in American literature 245)

He may not be the greatest man but he is no anti hero-either in his trial perception of the suffering, or in his comic affirmation.

Joseph aims at freedom. But his freedom from any sort of involvement with the world turns him into a *Dangling Man*. His freedom becomes a void in which he hangs, unable to reach any solid still. He finds that he cannot continue in his old terms without his old routines, without his daily life of friends, jobs, community and interests. The new Joseph understands that the ideal construction, a structure external to the particular man-the social, political, or religious cause to which the particular man may attach himself deliberately in order to find a way to live, is no more effective than the reutilized role playing way of the common man.

Joseph finds no answer for his question, as to how a man can live as a free man in the world? He is alienated from society. He does not find any self fulfilling way to use his freedom. Finally he is sick of self and consents to escape from freedom. He symbolically kills the self which has become a burden. He writes an urgent note to his draft board, begging to be called and confesses that he had not done well alone. As Helen Weinberg opines

The spirit has triumphed, so it might as well be relinquished to the authorities ready to receive it, its killers, the forces of regimentation. (The New Novel in America 58)

But Joseph's free choice does not lead him to an altogether purposely suffering. He has learnt, as he says, the need of trying to preserve oneself and one's mind, of preserving the

self by learning to govern it. Although he is relieved, he understands that he is no longer to be held accountable for himself, his relief is only physical. Bellow claims that whatever suffering may fill a man's life, his choice must be for the preservation of human dignity. Joseph is a passive rather than an active man who knows the significance of choice but he himself cannot choose in a meaningful manner.

Ihab H. Hassan says

...in his failure we discern the greater failure of his milieu – a world brutalized by war, a society riddled by contradictions. And in the grim irony of his fate, through the comic contortions of skull-like laughter, we glimpse the imperatives of human freedom straining to discover its time limits. Ignominious defeat, carried to a certain intensity of awareness, invokes a dignity, we are apt to ignore. (Five Faces of a Hero 30)

Asa Leventhal is a victimized and self-victimizing hero, caught in an imprisoning situation that disrupts his routine life and forces him to re-examine his motives and goals. Joseph knows the guilt of the past, his sins of the present, and the possibilities of other men's futures. He has self-awareness. Asa lacks all these Joseph attains an ironic knowledge of his own weakness and Asa Leventhal pushes ironic knowledge of guilt to the threshold of love. Allbee accuses Leventhal of various sins and gradually takes over Asa's life and haunts his sleep. Allbee knows Asa's weakness. Therefore he goes on making appeals for fairness and sympathy. Allbee persists in his pursuits of Leventhal and gradually comes to acknowledge some responsibility, some relationship. The climax comes when Allbee – a relationship between man and man. He discovers his own identity in error and relinquishes that identity again to the common soul of human kind. This knowledge is akin to love.

Wilhelm in *Seize the Day* transforms the knowledge of defeat into a vision of acceptance. He is not the victim of the world's absurdity, not a man conscious of being arrested and forced to seek ways to clear him. He is overemotional, he suffers for it. Bellow is concerned with the well-worn dilemma of the individual desperately isolated in a simply happen to him because of his innocence. He is caught in a world devoid of heart. Even his father refuses to become involved in his son's desperate loneliness. There are other characters with which Tommy finds no comforting solace.

The irony of the novel is that the only person to whom Wilhelm can turn in the great city is Dr. Tamkin who teaches Tommy that the real universe is to be found in present moment. His counsel is founded on materialistic achievement, on making one's way in an envious, belligerent world. At the end Tommy discovers another meaning of the phrase, and the one Bellow intends, love that well which thou must leave ere long. Tommy's confrontation with death in the culminating funeral scene suggests that Tommy may do the only thing he can to leap out in his marginality – *Seize the Day* and live at the centre of his life rather than living on its margins in the innumerable social roles at which he has failed.

The possibilities of religious life are also dimly visualized by the heroes of Bellow's victim novels. But they are left unexplored due to the lack of clear insight into their situation. As far as Joseph is concerned the acceptance of God appears to be a miserable surrender "born out of disheartenment and chaos, and out of fear". (Dangling Man, p.68). At the end of the novel Leventhal gropes for an idea of "who runs things" (The Victim, p.294). In *Seize the Day* Wilhelm prays to God for a release from his miserable life.

Bellow adopts the Socratic Method to deal with the crisis of his protagonists. Will Durant brings out the scope of this method in his second volume of *The Story of Civilization* entitled *The life of Greece*.

His method was simple he called for the definition of a large idea; he examined the definition, usually to reveal its incompleteness, its contradiction or its absurdity. (The Problem of Affirmation in the novels of Saul Bellow 57)

This method operates on several levels in Bellow's novels, Bellow's hero begins or the presentation to the reader of a perspective, high –lighting the continuance of the hero in error. The heroes are not satisfied with their situations. They struggle with the problem of bridging the gap between themselves and reality. They consider it necessary to invent ideal constructions or confront the ideal constructions of their reality instructors, in order to come to terms with reality. For example *Dangling Man* contains the ideal constructions. Joseph thinks that we are anxious creatures who establish a form by which we live the form in usually insane, because we find no proper, flexible patterns around us. The ideal construction is restrictive other people must enter into it. Joseph shapes his idea into a universal principle. He says that he could name hundreds of ideal constructions each with its assertions and symbols each finding in conduct, in God, in art, in money – its particular answer and each proclaiming “This is the only way, possible way to meet chose” (*Dangling Man*, p. 140). But reality outmatches their lives entirely on theoretical conceptions. They accept humanity and their acceptance affirms the existence of others in its full complexity and mystery.

There is a progress in the victim novels which is evident in the stages the heroes mark. Joseph cries, in the sweet bitterness of surrender, long live regimentation. Asa discusses the deviousness of human guilt. He realizes that man is weak and yet finally accountable. Tommy rises above the finality of death in a vision of universal compassion. The progression is from defeat to acceptance.

According to R. Dutton

...in all of Bellow's novels, he shows his protagonists to be responsible for their conditions, their dilemmas and conflicts but they are also regarded as capable of altering those conditions whether or not they are aware of these responsibilities and powers. (Saul Bellow 192)

Asa and Joseph fail to recognize their human possibilities. They are not able to see themselves as decision makers; they assume that they are in the grip of unknown and perhaps deterministic forces.

Tommy and Augie become aware of the dignity of their human conditions. Wilhelm understands that a definition of self depends on day by day living of that life. *Henderson the Rain King* and *Herzog* are successful stories for their heroes end in a clear self-awareness, an illumination of their human possibilities, at ease, or at least reconciled with their humaneness in all its limitations. Joseph, Leventhal and Wilhelm find their earthbound conditions sufficient unto the day. But with old Sammler and Citrine one is not sure, since neither Sammler nor Citrine achieves such contentment within the terrestrial. Mr. Sammler is a quasi-religious figure, and at the end of *Humboldt's Gift* Citrine lights out for a mystical territory that can be approached only through imagination.

Bellow's heroes who are seem to be victims in their own circumstances of limited understanding who fear to face reality in their life. Having failed to realize and admit their

weakness they prefer to cling on to their closeness which gives them a false sense of security. Bellow does not allow them to continue to enjoy the bliss of loneliness. When they are forced to come out of the sheltering walls into the world of reality they are in conflict with the society and the inevitable result is suffering. But such a suffering becomes a mode of knowledge even as it enables them to know themselves.

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