

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Vol. 7, Issue- 4 [August 2016]

The Criterion 

7th Year of Open Access

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

www.the-criterion.com

About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

A Critical Analysis of Social Reader Response Paradigm in Saul Bellow's *The Old System*

**Dr. A. Varghese Joseph
&**

Dr. E. Koperundevi

Asst. Professor

SASTRA University Thanjavur Tamilnadu

The fabric of reader-response theory is woven of so many diverse and controversial threads that warrant few clarifications. The methods chosen in this study will give a vivid sense of reader-response paradigm in general and prepare us to read the short fiction of Saul Bellow from this perspective. This article clearly and meticulously analyses the social reader response paradigm in his famous short story "The Old System." The story is about the integration of the Jews in the American society; it is also about life and death but, above all, it is a story about emotions. The story captures the spirit and feeling of two worlds, one is the upstate New York, Troy- Albany area world; the other is the world of Jewish religious Yiddish speaking immigrants to America. But even more than this what this story portrays are family love and hate, of passion and intensity in human relationships. But in a dramatic reconciliation scene at the close of the story there is an incredible depth of tenderness and resignation and wisdom. The protagonist's self-realization about the futility of amassing wealth is evident at the end of the story where he meets his sister Tina at the hospital with the sum of twenty thousand dollars she demanded for meeting her there. The social milieu and the sufferings they face in spite of the wealth earned, make them realize the real concept of the life. All readers can understand the reality of life from Saul Bellow's "The Old System" in the same perspective.

Social Reader and Fish's Interpretative Community

James Paul Gee (1948-) observes "One always and only learns to interpret texts of a certain type in certain ways through having access to, and ample experience in social settings where texts... are read in those ways" (Beach 104). The reader interprets the text in his own point of view 'in social contexts as a social being through his use of various response or social strategies.' The self, as Raymond Williams (1921-1988) observes, is therefore "the active construction, within distinct physical beings, of the social capacity which is the means of realization of any individual life. Consciousness, in this precise sense, is social being" (104). As Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) argues, learning evolves from social interactions and collaborations, which are then internalized as inner dialogue: "Every function in cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level and later on the individual level; first between people, and then inside... all the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals" (as qtd. in Beach 6).

Stanley Fish's (1938) "interpretative community" express his social perspective. For Fish, the meaning of any reader or text transaction is a function of the interpretive strategies and conventions adopted by readers as members of an interpretive community. In responding as members of an interpretive community readers share certain strategies and conventions valued by the group. Further, Fish asserts that the meaning of a text is a product of one's reading strategies operating in a particular social context. The meaning of the transactions is due to neither the reader nor the text, but on account of the "interpretive communities" that are responsible for the shape of the reader's activities and for the texts those activities, produce (Fish 322).

The proponents of the Social Reader Response Paradigm drew insights from the Sociological Criticism by blending the sociological inputs and subjective experiences of the reader towards a text.

Analysis of the story

Saul Bellow's "The Old System" (1967) explores a favorite theme: the power of memory to alter the character and enrich life. Here Dr. Samuel Braun, a distinguished geneticist who specializes in "the chemistry of heredity," recalls the lifelong quarrel between two of his departed cousins. His recollections prompt him to reflect not only on the ethical and spiritual values of traditional Jewishness, but also of Jewish feelings of love and connection he had rejected in his pursuit of science. Described by Bellow as one of his favourite stories, "The Old System" assesses the costs of the fact of Jewish community's assimilation and tracks the American born narrator as he is revitalized by long suppresses memories of his cantankerous relatives. The story also captures vividly the diminishing Jewish customs among the prevailing Jewish community in the first half of the twentieth century America. Saul Bellow in this story withholds the important practices and principles of the Jewish religion in par with that of Capitalism, Anglo-Saxon and, Protestantism. "The Old System," also highlights the Jewish assimilation during the period. This period witnessed many Jews in America slowly giving up their rigid Jewish cultural norms and leaned towards to Protestant values. This story brings out the development of Saul Bellow as a novelist and his treatment of modern American social history.

Social Reader Response Paradigm: analyses of 'The Old System'

The story is the reminiscences of Dr. Samuel Braun about his two cousins Isaac Braun and his sister Tina who are no more. The story entwines the social life of the Yiddish Jewish community in the social strata of the American life at New York, Mohawk Valley. During childhood Isaac showed great kindness to Dr. Braun. Dr. Braun, doctor of science recollects the family feud between his cousins, Isaac and his sister Tina. Their mother aunt Rose was Dr. Braun's godmother though a primal hard mother was very kind to him. She took care of him during his childhood years. Moreover, Dr. Braun had a special love towards Isaac than Tina personally. Brauns descended from the tribe of Naphtoli (one of the tribes of Israel). This was the time early during 1920s Jews migrated to America from Austria, Germany and Syria. The

migrants laboured hard to establish themselves as respectable members of the American society. Especially in upstate New York, the Mohawk Valley and Schenectady Brauns settled with their hard earned money as communities. During their course of settlement they purchased lands and houses and rented out to the blacks and other weaker sections in the society. This was the time when the Jewish settlers began to believe and practice customs of Anglo-Saxon and Protestants. There was a slow drift from their hereditary Jewish religion and customs.

This was more or less the case. But Braun had not continued the conversation. He did not care much for being first in his field. People were boastful in America. Matthew Arnold, a not entirely appetizing figure himself, had correctly observed this in the U.S. Dr. Braun thought this native American boastfulness had aggravated a certain weakness in Jewish immigrants. But a proportionate reaction of self-effacement was not praiseworthy. Dr. Braun did not want to be interested in this question at all. However, his cousin Isaac's opinions had some value for him. (CS 91)

It all started after the death of Uncle Braun. Aunt Rose his wife collected the rent of the property. They had the income in the form of rent collected in the slums of Albany and Schenectady from their properties. Instead of giving the income to Isaac aunt Rose deposited the money in bank in her own name. Meanwhile, Isaac turned to be a successful manufacturer. He married Sylvia, the daughter of a honest and hardworking farmer. Aunt Rose had contempt towards Sylvia's family considering their poor stature.

He's honest, hard worker on the land," said Isaac. "He recites the Psalms even when He's driving. He keeps them under his wagon seat." I don't believe it. A son of Ham like that. A cattle dealer. He stinks of manure. And she said to the bride in Yiddish. "Be so good as to wash thy father before bringing him to the synagogue. Get a bucket of scalding water, and 20 Mule Team Box and ammonia, and a horse brush. The filth is ingrained. Be sure to scrub his hands. (96)

Aunt Rose had a low regard for Isaac's wife Sylvia's parents while Tina married hired killer, who after his marriage to Tina turned out to be an innocent man in the society. He helped Tina in their family business in the second-hand shop. When aunt Rose died Tina's hatred towards Isaac reached its zenith.

When Aunt Rose lay dead, Tina took from her hand the ring Isaac had given her many years ago. Braun did not remember the entire history of that ring, only that Isaac had loaned money to an immigrant who disappeared, leaving this jewel, which was assumed to be worthless but turned out to be valuable. Braun could not recall whether it was ruby or emerald; nor the setting. But it was the one feminine adornment Aunt Rose wore. And it was supposed to go to Isaac's wife, Sylvia, who wanted it badly. Tina took it from the corpse and put it on her own finger. (97)

Isaac didn't want to pick up a quarrel with his sister with Aunty Rosy's body still there. But Sylvia was upset and enraged. Apart from this there were many other family disputes. The rents were deposited in aunt Rose's savings account now transferred to him. Isaac was already a millionaire. His property was worth a great deal of money. But his life was old fashioned and

he followed the principles of the religion strictly as per the tenants of the old fashioned Jewish paterfamilias. Tina along with her husband Fenster branched into house wares in their second hand shop. Cousin Mutt did the appliance business, cousin Aaron was a CPA. No family member was poor. But Isaac was well off above them all. The family feud between Isaac and Tina started on account of Tina's grudge towards Isaac for not carrying the family into real estate deals. The tax advantages in real estate business were great. Isaac got the maximum profit in his project of the Robbstown Country Club. The city during the postwar boom was growing fast.

And this was only a beginning. Isaac became a millionaire. He filled the Mohawk Valley with housing developments. And he began to speak of "my People," meaning those who lived in the buildings he had raised. He was stingy with land, he built too densely, it was true, but he built with benevolence. At six in the morning, he was out with his crews. He lived very simply. Walked humbly with his God, as the rabbi said. A Madison Avenue rabbi, by this time. The little synagogue was wiped out. It was as dead as the Dutch painters who would have appreciated its dimness and its shaggy old peddlers. Now there was a temple like a World's Fair pavilion. Isaac was president, having beaten out the father of a famous hoodlum, once executioner for the Mob in the Northeast. (101)

Cousin Aaron's rigid behaviour compelled Isaac to go for the Robbstown Country Club deal single handedly. The quarrel between Isaac and Tina went on for years. She accused Isaac of not giving their family an opportunity to become successful, but Isaac denied her allegations. He said the whole family let him down during the bid. Tina spread the news that Mama had given money for Isaac's financial assistance but he refused to pay her back. This news made his relatives to think of him as a crook. Every year before the Day of Atonement, Isaac several futile efforts to mollify Tina's. Dr Braun finally, remembers the deathbed of Tina and her meeting with Isaac holding a brief case containing twenty thousand dollars as an entry amount to meet her as per the instruction she has given to Mutt when he conveyed the message that Isaac wishes to meet her in the deathbed. The sad state of Tine affected by cancer disturbed Isaac. He had come there for reconciliation with his sister at her deathbed.

These Jews crave for wealth and money during their life time. They have less regard for their feelings and relationships, whatever intimate it seems to be. When death curtails their life at the end they repent their unwise behaviour and come forth for reconciliation. It is evident in the life of Isaac and Tina. Dr. Braun imagines the whole story about his cousins after visiting their graveyard. Tears filled his eyes

Oh, these Jews-these Jews! Their feelings their hearts! Dr. Braun often wanted nothing more than to stop all this. For what came of it? One after another you gave over your dying. One by one they went. You went. Childhood, family, friendship, love were stifled in the grave. And these tears! When you wept them from the heart, you felt you justified something, understood something. But what did you understand? Again, nothing! It was only an intimation of understanding. A promise that mankind might-

might, mind you-eventually, through its gift which might-might again!-be a divine gift, comprehend why it lived. Why life, why death. (116)

The social structure of the America during the postwar period placed a dark strain on the Jewish American life. Jews for want of wealth and materialistic needs compromised with their religious tenants as we see in the character of Tina. But in the case of Isaac there is a difference. He is a Jewish hardliner. He follows the tenants of the religion strictly. But he compromises with the American capitalism, which turns him into a millionaire. But money alone could not give him peace in the latter part of his life. His meeting with his dying sister Tina made him to understand it. Though he didn't sideline anybody intentionally in accumulating wealth, it so happened that his sister and cousins moved away from him during his success in business. But at last his love for his dear ones wins over his greed for wealth.

Conclusion

Isaacs' self-realization about the futility of amassing wealth is evident at the end of the story where he meets his sister Tina at the hospital with the sum of twenty thousand dollars she demanded for meeting her there. But Tina's reaction when cousin Mutt handed over the money, saying that Isaac has come to meet here with the sum, she forgives everything of the past and embraces her brother Isaac for the last time. This social stratum of the Jewish family during the postwar period in America is well captured by Saul Bellow in this story "The Old System."

Works Cited:

1. Bach, Gerhard. ed. "Saul Bellow at Seventy Five." *A Collection of Critical Essays*. Germany: Gunter Narr Verlag Tiibingen, 1991. Print.
2. Beach, Richard. *A Teacher's Introduction to Reader Response Theories*. Illinois: U of Minnesota, 1993.
3. Bellow, Saul. Jains Bellow ed. *Saul Bellow Collected Stories*. USA: Penguin Books, 2002.
4. Blanche, Gelfant H. ed. *The Columbian Companion to the Twentieth Century American Short Story*. New York: Columbia UP, 2000.
5. Bleich, David. *Subjective Criticism*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins UP, 1978.
6. Bleich, David. and Varyai, Sandor J. *The Readers Activity and Response*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins UP, 1978.
7. Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1983.
8. Gee, Paul James. *Social Linguistics and Literacies*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
9. Fiedler, Leslie. "The Breakthrough: The American Jewish Novelist and the Fictional Image of the Jew," *Midstream* 4, no. I (Winter 1958): 27.
10. Fish, Stanley E. *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1980.
11. Foucault, M. "What is an author?." *Critical Theory Since 1965*, H. Adams and L. Searle. eds. Gainesville: UP of Florida (1986): 138-148.
12. Fowler, R. *The Languages of Literature*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971.
13. Freund, Elizabeth. *The Return of the Readers*. London: Routledge, 2003.

14. Mailloux, Steven. *Interpretive Conventions - The Reader in the Study of American Fiction*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1982.
15. Mailoux, Steven. "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism." *Review of Subjective Criticism* – David Bleich 38.2 (Winter 1979): 211-213.
16. Miller, Ruth. *Saul Bellow – A Biography of the Imagination*. New York: St. Martin's P, 1991.
17. Williams, Raymond. *Writing in Society*. New York: Verso (1983): 1-10.