

A Confession through Epistles in and by Herzog

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Abstract:

Saul Bellow is one of the most celebrated modern American authors who are a keen observer of human nature. His writing mainly focused on intellectual urban people struggling with emotional breakdown seeking inner peace. Most of his protagonists lead an urban life suffering existential crisis. His characters like Joseph, Tommy Wilhelm, and Mr. Sammler are indeed urban people living in Chicago and New York, deal with inner turmoil and chaotic mindset. They all strive for salvation and long for inner peace. His novel *Herzog* too is not an exception where Saul Bellow portrays Herzog as a middle aged man struggling with his life events which are really not in his favor. Written in 1964 *Herzog* showcases a narrative of a middle aged professor collapsed with failed marriages and relationships. Moses E. Herzog is described as a disillusioned, middle-aged man who has been abandoned by his wife Madeleine and alienated from his relatives and friends. Despite being a professor, he is unable to find basic clarity about his own existence. His habit of writing numerous unsent letters clearly reflects his loneliness and psychological isolation. These letters—addressed to friends, family members, philosophers, and even to the dead—reveal his neurotic withdrawal from reality. Herzog's response to the external world is largely passive; he avoids direct human contact and becomes easily disturbed by trivial matters. Quite similar to Joseph of *Dangling Man*, and Tommy Wilhelm of *Seize the Day*, Herzog too suffers mental disturbance and alienation. He feels mentally strayed and lost in his own thoughts. Writing letters creates Catharsis for Herzog providing him clarity about existential questioning, emotional relief and self realization. The present paper throws light on how letters (mostly unsent) help him to release his angst and overcome his apprehension. The novel is replete with philosophical and moral crisis with modern American spectacles. The present paper presents the significance of unsent letters incessantly written by Herzog in the novel *Herzog* by Saul Bellow. The paper also analyses how his letters work as confession notes expressing his angst and frustration.

Key Words: letters, loneliness, guilt, confession, disillusionment

Introduction:

The novel *Herzog* primarily focuses on introspection and self-exploration. The opening statement—“If I am out of my mind, it’s all right with me” (1) perfectly encapsulates Herzog’s acceptance of his own flaws and mistakes. Having nearly lost touch with reality, this marks the beginning of his self-awareness and his first step toward the rediscovery of his true self. Aristotle applied the term Catharsis in the chapter four In Poetics which comes from a Greek word “Kathaireen” referring purge or release of emotion such as fear and pity. Herzog’s letters shows his insecurity and fear of the outer world and direct contact to it. According to Aristotle,

“Tragedy is an imitation in the form of action, not of narrative, through pity and fear affecting the proper Katharsis or purgation of these emotions.”

It also shows his acceptance towards his own wrong doings. The statement itself describes his realization of his earlier behavior where he had done some blunders. He began to write letters while sitting in his kitchen at his big old country house in Ludeyville, Massachusetts. When some new thought gripped his heart he went to the kitchen, his headquarters, to write it down (1)

The kitchen itself symbolizes his dejection towards life and finding peace in a cozy and warm place. The kitchen becomes his confessional booth where he wrote incessantly. All the letters are unsent except one telegram to his lawyer indicates his reluctance to confront people and avoiding direct conversation. But he still writes to satisfy his inner anxiety.

"Hidden in the country, he wrote endlessly, fanatically, to the newspapers, to people in public life, to friends and relatives and at last to the dead, his own obscure dead, and finally the famous dead. (1).

His letters serve as symbols of isolation and emotional refuge. Through them, he releases his angst, guilt, and moral confusion, pouring his feelings onto paper rather than confronting others. The fact that the letters are never sent shows his inability to communicate genuinely; they are not meant for others but for himself, functioning as a form of catharsis. Writing becomes his self-therapy, helping him release suppressed anger, shame, and despair without engaging in real human interaction. His unsent letters provided him a vision and clarity about his own chaotic life. His various letters give the readers an idea of his alienation and disturbed mind. He really wishes to converse with people but finds it formidable. Here letters are the source of his virtual dealing with people.

Mentioning about mental illness and depression experienced by Herzog, J Vanheste wrote, Herzog gives shape to his flight of thought in an endless series of notes and letters.

Herzog is disheartened as his ex wife Madeleine has betrayed him for his best friend Valentine Gersbach, Herzog expresses profound anguish and disappointment. WANG Miaomiao and CHEN Rumeng in their paper wrote about his habit of letter writing,

While wandering around, he kept writing letters to various people to express his anger towards his ex-wife and Valentine, as well as his dissatisfaction with the atmosphere of the society as a whole. (2).

His words reveal the depth of his heartbreak and confusion as he struggles to understand human relationships and moral complexity. The betrayal triggers his emotional collapse, yet also initiates his journey of introspection. Madeleine refers him to a psychiatrist Dr Edwig where he concludes that Herzog is emotionally broken down and suffering from a temporary phase of mental health. Otherwise he does not find mentally deranged. He also feels that Dr Edwig was impressed by the beauty of Madeleine and was more interested to meet her rather than his case. In a letter to Dr Edwig he writes,

Instead, you went for her yourself. You did, it's undeniable, the more you learned from me that she was beautiful, had a brilliant mind, by no means sane and was religious, to boot. And she and Gersbach managed and planned every Step I took. (53).
In other unsent letter remembering Madeleine he writes about her odd habits. Then he feels agitated as she with his best friend had cheated on him. He writes,
And you, Gersbech you're welcome to Madeleine. Enjoy her-rejoice in her. You will not reach me through her, however. I know you sought me in her flesh. But I am no longer there. (318).

In an article James M. Mellard examines his strong inner consciousness which replaces traditional heroic action in the modern world. The paper also explores the themes of Identity, social responsibility and having the traits of a "schlemiel" figure. It also shows how Bellow created dramatic scenes and characters to explore these ideas. He writes,
In the contents of his letters, he undertakes intellectual jousts with just about every major thinker of the recent past. He argues with or alludes to the ideas of perhaps a score of figures who have done much to shape the modern world. Rousseau and Hegel, Emerson and Tocqueville, Joachim of Flora, Pascal, Spinoza, Marx, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Berdyaev and others. (78).

Another unsent letter to Governor Stevenson also indicates the view of Herzog about spiritually void of American people where he feels depressed to see people lacking empathy and compassion for others. He pleads to Governor to inculcate values and human understanding. His letter to his first wife Daisy also pours out catharsis as he repents of being an irresponsible and distracted husband to her.

Dear Daisy, I have a few things to say to you. By my irregularity and turbulence of spirit I brought out the very worst in Daisy. (126)

Herzog accepts his self centered nature was responsible for this divorce to Daisy. He also realizes that Daisy had to take care of her son Marco herself. Daisy was a typical Jewish woman contrasted to Madeleine. Herzog was fascinated to more intellectual and modern Madeleine and then remorse for his failed marriage to Daisy. This letter comes as repentance on what wrongs he had done in the past. In other letter to his demised father J. Herzog he portrays his father a tough, strict and sometimes harsh on him. His father was an immigrant, a fail farmer, junk dealer, jobber etc from Quebec. In his letter to his father Herzog admits his admiration towards his father as he experienced consistent struggles in his life. He also feels guilty of not understanding his constrains and finds himself failure as a good son. He remorse and writes,

As for my late unlucky father, J. Herzog, he was not a big man, one of the small-boned Herzogs, finely made, round-headed, keen, nervous, handsome. In his frequent bursts of Temper he slapped his sons swiftly with both hands. He did everything quickly, neatly, with skilful Eastern European flourishes: (137).

All these letters significantly present his alienation and disassociation with the people once he loved and admired. According to R. Agilandeshwari in an article, Saul Bellow believes that modern man can find communion and beauty in the midst of bleakness and isolation of the modern world. Although Herzog feels alienated and although the bulk of the novel is about his solitary thoughts in the end, he rejects alienation and solitude. He comes to embrace society and finds the importance of sharing his life with others. (24-25) In a letter which began with the reference to Dr Edwig and ends with mentioning Ramona, is a classical example of Herzog's unstable state of mind. In this letter he writes that he acknowledges his own self and admits that neurosis could be measured by how a person deals with his surroundings.

Dear Edwig, he noted quickly. You gave me good value for my money when you explained that nueroses might be graded by the inability to tolerate ambiguous situations. I have just read certain verdict t in Madeleine's eyes, "For cowards, not being!" Her disorder is super clarity. Allow me modestly to claim that I am much better now at ambiguities. (304). In the end of that epistolary confession Herzog expressed his gratitude and thanks her to navigate him in the troublesome life during his lowest moments. His letters are his interior monologues which express his deranged mental status. You want to make us able to live with the void. Not lie ourselves into good - naturedness, trust, ordinary middling human considerations, but to question as has never been questioned before, relentlessly, with iron determination, into evil, through evil, past evil, accepting no abject Comfort. (319).

In these lines he writes a letter to Nietzsche where he feels sorry for not agreeing at some extent what Nietzsche has said. With the reference to the betrayal by Madeleine and Gersbech he challenges Nietzsche's idea of philosophy where Herzog thinks that inhumanity and cruelty leads to destruction. Lack of empathy and compassion can distort humanity.

Conclusion:

The whole novel deals with a number of unsent letters by Herzog which showcases his inability to confront the people around him. He fails to convey his real emotions and most of the time is overwhelmed. He finds himself helpless and decides to begin writing his inner turmoil through epistles. Herzog is dealing with a lot, his recent heart break; break from his academic and professional life and helplessness; all factors make him write and pour his emotions. But through writing letters only he clarifies his ambiguity regarding his present situation. In addition to his visit to his family also gives him a renewed perspective and a more positive attitude toward life. Reconnecting with his past enables him to accept his identity and rediscover meaning in existence. Through continuous reflection and rewriting of letters, Herzog moves gradually from despair to understanding. Herzog's Letters in the novel function as confessions where he acknowledges about his past actions in an honest way.

Cardon Lauren in his work "Herzog as 'Survival literature'" describes that "Bellow establishes a parallel between Herzog's experience of suffering and the condition of the modern world, still traumatized by the Holocaust"(85).

Instead of communicating with others he writes a number of letters to reveal his own self. He admits his mistakes in the past and apologizes to various people for his intellectual arrogance. His letters become a tool of self-acceptance where he reclaims a sense of stability and emotional maturity. Thus most of the unsent letters help him to release his Catharsis and provide him a positive outlook towards further life.

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