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The Quest Motif in the Novels of Saul Bellow

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Abstract

Saul Bellow, Nobel laureate and three-time National Book Award winner, stands as the most prominent representative of post-World War II American and Jewish-American fiction. This thesis examines the central and recurring theme of the quest motif in his novels - a quest that defines the moral, spiritual, and existential journey of modern man. Tracing the evolution of Jewish-American literature from its Yiddish immigrant origins with Abraham Cahan to its renaissance in the mid-20th century with Bellow, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth, the study situates Bellow within a tradition that moved from ethnic acculturation to a universal examination of the human condition.

The paper argues that Bellow's heroes - from Joseph in Dangling Man (1944) and Asa Leventhal in The Victim (1947), to Augie March, Tommy Wilhelm, Henderson, Herzog, Sammler and Charles Citrine - are all quest figures. Unlike the hard-boiled protagonists of naturalism or the alienated anti-heroes of modernism who resign themselves to isolation, Bellow's protagonists conduct a conscious, speculative quest to understand their personal destiny within the general problem of human destiny.

Their search is not merely for identity, but for purpose, dignity, community, and essential human values in a world characterized by materialism, regimentation and moral chaos. The study is structured around Bellow's three creative phases: 1) The early novels of entrapment, 2) The middle affirmative, picaresque novels of self-affirmation, and 3) The later novels of wholeness and synthesis.

The present paper concludes that for Bellow, the quest is never static or nihilistic. His heroes grieve and suffer but never despair; the success of their quest depends ultimately not on withdrawal from society, but on their understanding of responsibility to others and their belief that man is free to choose and can become better.

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Keywords: Saul Bellow, Quest, Identity, Alienation, Jewish-American Literature, Existentialism, Self-realization

Saul Bellow, one of the most erudite and intellectual writers of the second half of the twentieth century, is among the major representatives of Jewish-American writers. He is one of the most gifted writers ever to present to the reader an examination of the modern human condition. His works have widely influenced American literature after World War II. For his literary contributions, Bellow was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, the Nobel Prize for Literature, and the National Medal of Arts. He is the only writer to win the National Book Award for Fiction three times and he received the Foundation's lifetime Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters in 1990. In the words of the Swedish Nobel Committee, his writing exhibits ... exuberant ideas, flashing irony, hilarious comedy and burning compassion ... the mixture of rich picaresque novel and subtle analysis of our culture, of entertaining adventure, drastic and tragic episodes in quick succession interspersed with philosophic conversation, all developed by a commentator with a witty tongue and penetrating insight into the outer and inner complications that drive us to act, or prevent us from acting, and that can be called the dilemma of our age.[1]

The first Jewish novels written in America were written by immigrants. This was true not because there were no Jews there before the last two decades of the nineteenth century, but because those Jews who had gone there before 1881 were very few, had arrived in the 17th century from Spain and Portugal and in the nineteenth century from Germany and had rapidly assimilated into the majority American culture. However, 1881 marked a major turning point in Jewish history. On 1st March of that year the Russian Czar, Alexander II, was assassinated. When his son Alexander III ascended the Russian throne persecution of the Jews became the policy of the Russian government and led to the prompt immigration of millions of Jews to America. These millions of Jews spoke Yiddish so that it is not at all surprising that the first American Jewish writers included in that migration wrote in that language. Thus, the Jewish writers of that day brought European Jewishness to America.

Thus, despite a long-standing Jewish presence in the New World, the existence of a Jewish-American literature, as such, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Its origins lie in the immigrant culturé of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, a period in which a massive influx of Eastern European Jews settled in America, particularly in the United States. The stigma of foreignness and the desire for cultural acceptance proved to be a prevalent theme in the writings of early Jewish-American novelists who detailed the struggles of Jews as they experienced acculturation and dramatized the clash between

traditional Jewish ethics and American materialism. The most important Yiddish writer of the early twentieth century was Abraham Cahan. Although he spoke Yiddish better than English, Cahan succeeded in publishing. The Chosen People and The Rise of David Levinsky in English in 1917. This book is considered the most important novel written by a Jewish immigrant. In it Levinsky becomes an American millionaire at the cost of his Jewish heritage and upon first becoming a thoroughgoing secularist. Cahan depicts the emptiness of Levinsky's life despite his rise to money and fame.

Other American Jewish writers who wrote in the Yiddish or the English idiom were Sidney Nyburg, Anzela Yezierska, James Oppenheim, Samuel Ornitz, and Ludwig Lewisohn, who was born in the United States to German Jewish immigrants. All these dealt with the fate of the immigrants. All of these rejected religion and sought to show how pragmatism and realism were far superior in solving man's problems to belief in anything supernatural.

During the depression of the 1930s American Jewish writers, now mostly born in the USA, were very much affected by the discontinuity of European Judaism with American Judaism. Except for the 1978 Nobel Prize winner in literature Isaac Bashevis Singer, who was born in Poland in 1904, these writers all wrote in English. Singer, although he wrote in Yiddish, was published in English so that his work is known to almost all Americans in the latter idiom. In reaction to economic misfortune and prevalent anti-Semitism, many writers in the Depression era produced proletarian novels, such as Michael Gold's Jews without Money (1931), as a means of social activism and protest, or toward a more introspective and personal form of the novel, the prototype of which is Henry Roth's Call It Sleep (1934).

It is said that "Post-war Jewish-American writing is generally marked by its concern with the historical, the moral, and the human anxieties of the modern self, and therefore has sometimes been described as displaying a return to realism in the contemporary American Novel."[2]

The years following World War II saw such writers as Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth move to the fore of American literature, heralding a period lasting from the mid-1950s until the 1970s sometimes described as a "Jewish-American Literary Renaissance," which accompanied a growing acceptance of Jews and Jewish culture. Largely responsible for defining the Jew in modern literature, the writings of these three figures typify such Modernist themes as alienation and self-deception, and, coupled with a sensitive and at times humorous concern for the human condition, represent the transition of Jewish-American fiction from an ethnic voice to a significant force in world literature. Still, these

writers, like other mainstream Jewish-American authors -- among them Norman Mailer, J. D. Salinger, and Arthur Miller -- chose to deemphasize their Jewishness. More recently the Modernist outlook that has been shared by many Jewish-American authors has given way to a rediscovery of Jewish tradition and conscious efforts to depict the subtleties of Jewish culture and its long religious heritage in the contemporary novel. At the forefront of this movement are such writers as Cynthia Ozick and Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer, both of whom assert the importance of the Yiddish language and culture as central to maintaining the Jewish tradition. Likewise, recent years have witnessed a growing interest in two World War II-era topics that remained neglected in Jewish-American literature: the Holocaust and the creation and continued existence of the state of Israel. Concern for both subjects has since invigorated contemporary Jewish-American fiction and gained it renewed attention from an international audience.

Norman Podhoretz states: Most serious critics … would probably single out Saul Bellow as the leading American novelist of the post-war period. There are many reasons for this. First of all, Bellow is an intellectual, by which I do not only mean that he is intelligent, but also that his work exhibits a closer involvement with ideas than the work of most other writers in this period…. His books, whatever else we may say of them, mean something: they are charged with the urgency and the passion of a man to whom the issues he writes about are matters of life and death. And finally, Bellow is a stylist of the first order, perhaps the greatest virtuoso of language the novel has seen since Joyce.[3]

Saul Bellow was born Solomon Bellows on 10th June/July 4th 1915 in Lachine, Quebec, two years after his parents, Lescha (née Gordin) and Abraham Bellows, emigrated from Saint Petersburg, Russia. He changed his name in 1936. Bellow grew up in Montreal, where he learned Hebrew, Yiddish, and French as well as English. Abraham Bellow failed in a long series of jobs and financial ventures -- a bakery, a group of shops, and sackmaking for the Canadian government during World War I. The Bellows eventually immigrated to Chicago, when he was nine, during the depression years. These years are recaptured in The Adventures of Augie March.

Bellow's literary career began in Tuley High School in Chicago where he and friends such as Sydney Harris, who became a newspaper columnist, shared their precocious enthusiasm for literature and leftist politics. At seventeen, Bellow and Harris ran away to New York City in an unsuccessful attempt to sell their first novels.

Bellow remained deeply devoted to Chicago. After two years at the University of Chicago, Bellow transferred to North-western University and obtained a Bachelor of Science degree in 1937. After graduating from North-western, Bellow wanted to study literature, but

having been advised that anti-Semitism would limit his chances for a literary career, he accepted a scholarship in anthropology at the University of Wisconsin. After only one semester, he boldly decided to leave graduate school and began 1938 by dedicating himself to writing. During the next decade Bellow held a variety of jobs -- with the WPA Writers Project, the editorial department of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the Pestalozzi-Froebel Teachers College, and the Merchant Marine. Success came slowly. In Mexico during 1940, Bellow wrote the never-published novel Acatla, but in the following year the Partisan Review accepted "Two Morning Monologues," his first published story. More importantly, he published two novels, both with autobiographical overtones. Dangling Man (1944), in the form of a journal, concerns a young Chicagoan waiting to be drafted into military service. Thus before the end of World War II, Bellow had published the first in a series of critically acclaimed novels that have established him as the most consistent and enduring serious American novelist since Faulkner. The Victim (1947), a more ambitious work, describes the frustrations of a New Yorker seeking to discover and preserve his own identity against the background of domestic and religious (Gentile versus Jewish) conflicts. Both novels received mixed reviews.

After World War II Bellow joined the University of Minnesota English Department, spent a year in Paris, France, and Rome, Italy, and taught briefly at New York University, Princeton University, and Bard College. Above all, however, he concentrated on writing fiction.

Bellow's first two published novels, Dangling Man (1944) and The Victim (1947), form the first phase of his literary career, a period in which he was writing in reaction to the "hard-boiled" style and deterministic message of naturalism. In both novels, Bellow creates anti-heroes who struggle against the carceral pressures of the modern world. Although Bellow's careful depiction of the forces that entrap modern man shroud these initial novels with a claustral sense of limitation, his protagonists refuse to resign themselves to alienation and isolation; instead, they struggle to maintain a sense of human dignity and to oppose indifference.

Bellow transformed his own frustrating experiences with the draft board into Dangling Man, a novel presented as a rambling series of journal entries in which Joseph, the protagonist, futilely attempts to withstand the regimentation of the modern world. From the opening paragraphs, Joseph's self-pitying voice attacks the Hemingway model of manly restraint: "the- code. . . . of the tough boy." Joseph uses his confessional style to confront the world of limits, but in the end he must resign himself to the regimentation of army life.[4]

In The Victim, the psychological harassment of the contemporary world is personified in the character of Kirby Allbee, a bigot who accuses Asa Leventhal of ruining his life and asserts that Leventhal is, thereby, indebted to him. Although the tone of the novel is sombre, Leventhal refuses to deny his responsibility for his fellow man. The complex relationship that develops between Jew and anti-Semite bothered some commentators because the two characters seemed psychologically similar, but most reviewers recognized the young author's potential, and Bellow was awarded his first Guggenheim Fellowship in 1948. The fellowship allowed Bellow to give up teaching temporarily and travel to Europe. There he worked on a new novel and published stories that were later collected in Moseby's Memoirs and Other Stories (1968). In 1952 he received the National Institute of Arts and Letters Award.

The publication of The Adventures of Augie March (1953) marked the beginning of the second phase of Bellow's literary career, a period in which he also published Seize the Day (1956), and Henderson the Rain King (1959). In this period, Bellow was more consciously reacting against the apathy and ascetism of modernism. In particular, the picaresque humour of The Adventures of Augie March and Henderson the Rain King, which contrasts with the relative darkness of the earlier books, established Bellow's reputation as a life-affirming author. Seize the Day, which Bellow may have worked on before The Adventures of Augie March, is also an affirmative work, but this concise and sombre masterpiece is often read as the coda to Bellow's first phase.

The protagonist of The Adventures of Augie March is unlike Bellow's previous characters, for Augie March is an intellectual Huck Finn who holds back the oppression of the modern world by refusing to embrace it. This energetic, comic novel describes a world in which surfaces are worth beholding and through its protagonist argues that humans have an intuitive awareness of eternal virtues such as truth, beauty, and love. Although Augie's ability to accept the world is inevitably tempered by experience, the novel won Bellow his first National Book Award and his second Guggenheim Fellowship on the basis of its qualified exuberance.

Seize the Day recounts one climactic day in the life of Tommy Wilhelm, a man who has failed in his attempts to accommodate himself to American society and desperately tries to disguise his deep need for authority and truth. This tightly plotted narrative takes Wilhelm through a painful rejection by his father and a betrayal by the phony psychologist/investment counsellor Dr. Tamkin to a cathartic final scene in which Wilhelm is finally able to experience his deep anguish and his sense of human sympathy at the funeral of a stranger.

After winning a Ford Foundation Grant in 1958, Bellow published Henderson the Rain King (1959), often cited as the work that marks the beginning of Bellow's maturity as a novelist. Despite the unconvincing nature of its conclusion, the novel extends Bellow's consideration of the human condition by seriously exploring the connection between the essential human spirit and the universe. A broadly humorous parody of the primitivism of D. H. Lawrence and Hemingway, the novel also exemplifies Bellow's unpredictability. At a time when the Jewish-Americn novel was becoming popular, Bellow creates his first WASP protagonist, a bullying, violent man who travels to Africa to escape from his pervasive anxiety over death. There he confronts the horror of the naturalistic world symbolized in the brutal, white heat of the barren landscape, and with the guidance of the ironic King Dahfu, learns to accept his existence and to stop his typically American struggle to become something different.

In 1962 Bellow became a professor at the University of Chicago, a post that allowed him to continue writing fiction and plays. The Last Analysis had a brief run on Broadway in 1964. Six short stories, collected in Mosby's Memoirs and Other Stories (1968), and his sixth novel, Mr. Sammler's Planet (1969), elevated Bellow's reputation. Humboldt's Gift (1975) added the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize for Literature to Bellow's list of awards.

After winning the Friends of Literature Fiction Award in 1962, Bellow published Herzog (1964) with the assumption that his intellectual dramatization of an eccentric consciousness moving toward recovery, might sell a few thousand copies; instead, Herzog was named a Literary Guild selection, was on the best-sellers list for six months, and won Bellow his second National Book Award. Herzog marks the beginning of the third phase of Bellow's literary career, a period in which Bellow's novels have been characterized by a new wholeness of vision. These books present Bellow's affirmative belief in essential humanistic values as well as his clear-eyed descriptions of modern America's moral, social, and intellectual depravity.

Moses Herzog's rambling account of his effort to move from the emotionally charged personal life that has caused him so much suffering to a calmer, more rational existence is interspersed with a stunning series of eccentric letters written to a broad range of public figures. The epistolary method permits Bellow to blend the public and the private in a way that enriches the historical relevance of his fiction. In recognition of Herzog, Bellow received the Fomentor Award and the James L. Dow Award.

Following the success of Herzog, Bellow experimented with drama and journalism. The Last Analysis, premiered in 1964, but despite several glowing reviews, this intellectual farce was a financial failure and closed after twenty-eight performances. Three one-act plays

written by Bellow, "A Wen," "Orange Souffle," and "Out From Under," were performed unsuccessfully in Europe and the United States with the title Under the Weather in 1966. In 1967 Bellow turned to journalism, covering the Six-Day War for Newsday. In the following year he was presented with the Jewish Heritage Award by the B'nai B'rith, and the Croix de Chevalier des Arts et Lettres from France. Moseby's Memoirs and Other Stories, which brought together several of his early uncollected stories, kept Bellow's fiction before the public.

As though stubbornly resisting the flow of this youth-oriented period of American history, Bellow created a seventy-two-year-old protagonist named Artur Sammler for his next novel, Mr. Sammler's Planet (1970). Sammler steadfastly pursues duty, dignity, and essential good in the face of a violent and selfish world. His admiration for H. G. Wells underscores his belief in rationality and his desire to believe in literature as a vehicle for creating social harmony. The good he pursues, however, is intellectually abstracted from the physical world, an environment that is consistently portrayed in the novel as cheap and monstrous. Mr. Sammler's Planet, rightly regarded as Bellow's least affirmative novel, won the author an unprecedented third National Book Award.

Humboldt's Gift (1975) was a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection and earned Bellow the Pulitzer Prize for Literature. Its publication immediately preceded Bellow's Nobel Prize in 1976, but critics have not generally considered it his best work. Like many of his works, Humholdt's Gift concentrates on memories. In this case they are the recollections of Charles Citrine, an historian and playwright who reminisces about a deceased poet named von Humboldt Fleischer. Fleischer is the epitome of the self-limiting modernist, but he leaves Citrine with an ironic pair of gifts that help him combat the brutality and confusion of the world. One is a trashy movie scenario which eventually earns Citrine a great deal of money, and the other is a scribbled assertion of the supernatural quality of man.

As though trying to apply the message of his Nobel lecture, Bellow, in recent years, has more openly applied his art to the social problems of his time. This effort is evident in his journalistic account of his travels In Israel, To Jerusalem and Back (1976), in which he combines humous anecdotes with political analysis. In 1979 he covered the signing of the Israeli-Egyptian Peace Treaty for Newsday.

The Dean's December (1982) was a Literary Guild main selection and sold over 100,000 copies in hardback. In it Bellow uses Dean Albert Corde's journey to Bucharest to be with his dying mother-in-law to compare the similar inhumanity of capitalist and communist societies. The isolation and inactivity Corde endures in Bucharest provide him with the necessary distance from which to view the social chaos of Chicago and the lack of

engagement in his own academic life. Like his Nobel lecture, the novel argues that the failure of political specialists warrants the entry of humanists into the social debate.

Although He with His Foot in His Mouth and Other Stories (1984), a collection of five lengthy stories, disappointed some critics who saw it as an indication of Bellow's weariness, Most Die of Heartbreak (1987) reassured readers that Bellow could still produce fresh and challenging fiction. The novel explores the human desire for connection through an ironically meditative and philosophical prose. In this case, the relatively simple story of world-famous botanist Benn Crader's disastrous marriage to the beautiful but avaricious Matilda Layamon is narrated, interpreted and embellished upon by Kenneth Trachtenberg, Crader's nephew. This self-absorbed and self-deprecating narrator, who is playfully named after Bellow scholar Stanley Trachtenberg, conducts an incessant search for hidden meaning. His obsessive obtuseness and self-doubt hint that Bellow may be making gentle fun of his own literary efforts to resurrect the essential in humanity. Although the novel satirizes a sexual revolution that has taught people not to take one another seriously, discloses the pervasive greed of American society, and details the pollution of our biological and social environments, Bellow continued to be optimistic. In an interview regarding More Die of Heartbreak, he affirmed that "our humanity is in so many ways intact . . . ordinary people can still see 'King Lear' and weep."[5]

Bellow's later novels did not receive the same praise. The Dean's December (1982) and More Die of Heartbreak (1987) retained his style, but some disliked the bitter tone that had never shown up in previous Bellow works. After 1987 Bellow released a number of novellas that met with similarly mixed reviews. Despite the recent coolness towards his work, Bellow's place in American literature seems secure, most notably for his ability to combine social commentary with sharply drawn characters. His best fiction has been compared to the Russian masters, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Robert Penn Warren's review of Augie March in The New Republic in 1953 seems to sum up subsequent reaction to his work: "It is, in a way, a tribute, though a backhanded one, to point out the faults of Saul Bellow's novel, for the faults merely make the virtues more impressive."[6] Saul Bellow died on 5th April 2005, at the age of 89.

Bellow was married five times, with all but his last marriage ending in divorce. His son by his second marriage, Adam, published a nonfiction book In Praise of Nepotism in 2003. Bellow's wives were Anita Goshkin, Alexandra (Sondra) Tsachacbasov, Susan Glassman, Alexandra Ionescu Tulcea and Janis Freedman. In 1999, when he was 84, Bellow had a daughter, Rosie, his fourth child, with Freedman. While he read voluminously, Bellow also played the violin and followed sports.

Bellow's early works earned him the reputation as a major novelist of the twentieth century, and by his death he was widely regarded as one of the greatest living novelists. He was the first writer to win three National Book Awards in all award categories. His friend and protégé Philip Roth said of him, "The backbone of 20th century American literature has been provided by two novelists -- William Faulkner and Saul Bellow. Together they are the Melville, Hawthorne, and Twain of the 20th century."[7] James Wood, in a eulogy of Bellow in The New Republic, wrote:

I judged all modern prose by his. Unfair, certainly, because he made even the fleet-footed-the Updikes, the DeLillos, the Roths - seem like monopodes. Yet what else could I do? I discovered Saul Bellow's prose in my late teens, and henceforth, the relationship had the quality of a love affair about which one could not keep silent. Over the last week, much has been said about Bellow's prose, and most of the praise -- perhaps because it has been overwhelmingly by men -- has tended toward the robust: We hear about Bellow's mixing of high and low registers, his Melvillean cadences jostling the jivey Yiddish rhythms, the great teeming democracy of the big novels, the crooks and frauds and intellectuals who loudly people the brilliant sensorium of the fiction. All of this is true enough; John Cheever, in his journals, lamented that, alongside Bellow's fiction, his stories seemed like mere suburban splinters. Ian McEwan wisely suggested last week that British writers and critics may have been attracted to Bellow precisely because he kept alive a Dickensian amplitude now lacking in the English novel. But nobody mentioned the beauty of this writing, its music, its high lyricism, its firm but luxurious pleasure in language itself. In truth, I could not thank him enough when he was alive, and I cannot now.[8]

Bellow's works speak to the disorienting nature of modern civilization, and the countervailing ability of humans to overcome their frailty and achieve greatness (or at least awareness). Bellow saw many flaws in modern civilization, and its ability to foster madness, materialism and misleading knowledge. Principal characters in Bellow's fiction have heroic potential, and many times they stand in contrast to the negative forces of society. Often these characters are Jewish and have a sense of alienation or otherness. Jewish life and identity is a major theme in Bellow's work, although he bristled at being called a "Jewish writer." Bellow's work also shows a great appreciation of America, and a fascination with the uniqueness and vibrancy of the American experience. Bellow's work abounds in references and quotes from the likes of Marcel Proust and Henry James, but he offsets these high-culture references with jokes. Bellow interspersed autobiographical elements into his fiction, and many of his principal characters were said to bear a resemblance to him.

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For Linda Grant:

What Bellow had to tell us in his fiction was that it was worth it, being alive.

His vigour, vitality, humour and passion were always matched by the insistence on thought, not the predigested cliches of the mass media or of those on the left, which had begun to disgust him by the Sixties... It's easy to be a 'writer of conscience' - anyone can do it if they want to; just choose your cause. Bellow was a writer about conscience and consciousness, forever conflicted by the competing demands of the great cities, the individual's urge to survival against all odds and his equal need for love and some kind of penetrating understanding of what there was of significance beyond all the racket and racketeering.[9]

The tradition of the quest is an ancient narrative tradition, perhaps the most profound in western fiction. American literature seems fascinated with the outcast, the person who defies traditions in order to arrive at some knowledge, some personal integrity.

Janis Stout observes:

American fiction (…) in one of its large, vivid strains, opted for the territory ahead; for a verbal world elsewhere; for a perpetual reconstitution of romance within the novel; for pursuit of the true IT… the self in its wholeness. Whatever else the Great American Novel may be, it has been, throughout its history, a fiction zestfully committed to motion and to the free transcendent individual.[10]

Many American writers have always been disposed to different forms of quest in their works as one of their main preoccupations is with the nature and the creation of the Self. Quests recover essential things to human life in encounters between cultures, with alien surroundings, people, animals, nature, or the Other; namely, the waking of individual in the knowledge of himself, knowledge about others, the world, and the meaning of life. American novels of quest lay emphasis on the nature of human freedom as the heroes of quest novels more often than not balance between their fear of being entrapped into some fixed forms of existence and that of having an amorphous identity or no identity at all.

Mark Twain's Huck becomes a self-proclaimed social outlaw, because he finally decides to defy the laws of man and to remain loyal to his Negro friend, Jim. He undergoes a moral testing and development. Urged by affection, he discards the moral code he has always taken for granted and resolves to help Jim in his escape from slavery. The intensity of his inner struggle suggests how deeply he is involved in the society he rejects. William Faulkner's fiction reveals a tragic sense of man's failure to attain his ideals or in some instances, of his failure to cherish any real ideal. The novel The Sound and the Fury traces the decaying values of the Southern society in which it is based. Quentin Compson is the

idealistic thinker, a sensitive introvert. The character's absorption in the past is defined as a loss of self and personality, as the equivalent of death and makes Quentin's suicide appear as a logical development. The First World War changed the outlook of all Americans. It intensified the pessimism and disenchantment with what was peculiarly American and it lead to wide spread expatriation. A typical example is Henry James. In all his writings he was interested in the subjective adventure of the individual, in his attempt at defining himself. In The Portrait of a Lady Isabelle Archer's life is one of lost illusions and cheated confidence. Isabel Archer is a beautiful, intelligent, and headstrong American girl newly endowed with wealth and embarked in Europe on a treacherous journey to self-knowledge. The way from innocence, from naivety to experience is marked by moments of disappointment by a frustrating sense of being cheated. She goes through a painful process of initiation. The question of knowledge and self-knowledge is also present in The Ambassadors, where man is confronted with himself and the others.

Anxiety, discontent, various other versions of alienation are prevalent in contemporary American fiction: Salinger's Holden Caulfield, Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man and S. Bellow's Herzog remain rebels and loners to the end. Their dominant aspect is that of the rebel-victim. Holden's quest is of different kinds: a quest to preserve an innocence that is in peril of vanishing – the innocence of childhood, a quest for an ideal, a quest for relationship, for communication. R. Ellison's Invisible Man has as dominant issue the African American experience. However, what is important is not only the difficulty of being black, but also the experience of being black and essentially without identity in a world where "others refuse to see me." What the narrator discovers and accepts is that a true sense of racial identity for the African American may be impossible. The quest for true identity cannot be satisfied by choosing to become a stereotype or what others expect him to be. Instead, the "invisible man" must accept his invisibility and begin to from that point to define himself by his moral choices.

Saul Bellow is a unique spokesman for humanitarian values and ideals in American literature. In the Nobel lecture delivered in Sweden the writer stressed the role of art saying that it should emphasize the unity of man: "Art attempts to find in the universe, in matter as well as in facts of life, what is fundamental, enduring, and essential."[11]

The thesis focuses on the theme of quest in the novels of Saul Bellow.

As Alfred Kazin observes:

What makes Bellows' work so unusual, and in its very sense of the extreme often so comic, is the fact that his characters are all burdened by a speculative quest, a need to

understand their particular destiny within the general problem of human destiny. This compulsion, even when it is unconscious ... is the motivating energy of his heroes.[12]

Bellow's characters attempt to understand themselves, establish their true identity, and achieve maturity. Bellow's heroes may grieve, complain, lament, but they never despair about the future. They are always on a spiritual quest for meaning in life, their own human essence believing that man is free to choose and that he can become better. In his novels, Bellow deals with the phenomenology of selfhood, emphasizes the plight of man. He considers the vital questions of what it means to be human, what a human being should be like, how to become better and gain a complete fulfilment without alienating from society. Bellow's heroes are never static, they always aspire to something better in flight from their inner chaos and confusion, from the inhuman, superficial, and false. Therefore, a hero in quest is the pivot of Bellow's novels.

Even though the hero of Bellow's novels is a questing figure, as are the heroes of most modern novels, Bellow's conception of this quest is different from that of other novelists. The struggle of his heroes is conducted in the philosophical and social complexities of modern society, but whereas the search for selfhood in most modern novels is usually conducted within the consciousness of "existential" man, the success of the search of Bellow's hero depends upon his understanding of his purpose in the world and of his responsibilities to other people.

Conclusion

The present study has attempted to examine the theme of the quest motif as the central, unifying principle in the novels of Saul Bellow. From Joseph waiting in his room in 'Dangling Man' to 'Moses Herzog' writing his unsent letters, Bellow's fiction presents a consistent gallery of modern heroes engaged in a profound search for selfhood. This study finds that the quest in Bellow is distinct from the quest in his contemporaries. If the quest of Salinger's Holden Caulfield ends in withdrawal, and the quest of Ellison's Invisible Man ends in invisibility, Bellow's quest ends in affirmation. His heroes are not rebels who seek to escape society, but seekers who wish to find their proper place within it.

The Quest evolves from Alienation to Affirmation. In the first phase (Dangling Man, The Victim), the quest is negative a struggle against the carceral pressures, regimentation and victimization of the modern world. In the second phase (The Adventures of Augie March, Seize the Day, Henderson the Rain King), it becomes a comic and picaresque affirmation of life's worth. In the third phase (Herzog, Mr. Sammler's Planet, Humboldt's Gift), it achieves a wholeness of vision, balancing intellectual critique with a humanistic faith in enduring values.

The Quest is Ethical, not merely existential. Unlike the purely interior quest of European existentialism, Bellow's hero cannot find himself in isolation. As Bellow himself stated in his Nobel Lecture, art must emphasize "what is fundamental, enduring, and essential." The success of his heroes depends on recognizing their responsibility to other human beings. Leventhal must accept responsibility for Allbee, Herzog must stop exploiting others through his intellect, and Sammler must find dignity despite the chaos of New York.

The Quest is the Jewish Quest made Universal. Bellow takes the specific experience of the second-generation Jewish immigrant - torn between traditional Jewish ethics and American materialism - and makes it the paradigm of modern man. His protagonists are Jewish in sensibility, burdened by intellect and history, yet their search for meaning, for truth, for a life worth living, is the universal human dilemma of our age.

In the end, what Bellow tells us, in Linda Grant's words, is that "it was worth it, being alive." His heroes may dangle, suffer, fail and complain, but they never succumb to nihilism. They continue to seek. It is this persistent, comic, and compassionate belief in the possibility of human becoming - that man is free to choose and can become better - that secures Saul Bellow's place as the backbone of 20th century American literature alongside Faulkner, and makes his theme of the quest ever relevant.

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