

Review Article

Saul Bellow as a Humorist with Special Reference to 'Humboldt's Gift'

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A B S T R A C T

Saul Bellow was the Nobel Prize-winning American novelist. His chief novels include, 'The Adventures of Augie March', 'Herzog', 'Humboldt's Gift' and most recently, 'Ravelstein'. He is known for having captured the vitality of the American street and the hybrid energies of the immigrant-experiences in America; he did so in prose inimitable density and power. His influence on American fiction is nearly as reflective as boisterous as his prose. His novels seem to be posing the question of how you can be an intellectual and still live in this world. If in his Mr. 'Sammler's Planet' there is not a clear answer, in 'Humboldt's Gift', there seems to be : one can survive this world with humour and compassion. I think, there is so much of the martyr in Saul Bellow, due perhaps to his Jewish background, that in order to make his reading more palatable for the average reader, he needed to ameliorate his martyr complex with a lot of humour. His 'Humboldt's Gift' is its fine example.

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Really, of all God's creatures, man is the only animal, who laughs. To the mind of Aristotle, the comic is the result of a discord or contrast between the ugly and the beautiful. He propounds the theory of incongruity in his 'Rhetoric'. Incongruity, he believes, produces a sort of emotional shock; we face something different from what we expect and consequently we laugh or smile.

Kant, another famous philosopher finds the essence of the comic in the contradiction between the base and the elevated. In view of Schopenhauer, the contradiction between the ridiculous and the reasonable is the essence of the comic. He remarks:

*"The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between concept and the real objects—and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity."*¹

Bergson, on the other hand, propounding the theory of

ludicrous points out that in laughter one always finds an avowed intention to humiliate and consequently to correct one's neighbour. R.J. Rees says that the purpose of comedy is to supply us with imaginary objects on which to exercise our cruelty without harming others and without shocking our own moral values. Voltaire propounds the theory "spontaneous laughter" based on the theory of "joy for joy's sake". It arises from a gaiety of disposition absolutely incompatible with contempt and indignation. This can be termed as "a laughter of sympathy and understanding."

Hazlitt is a great champion of humour and laughter. He rightly observes:

*"Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps, for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are and what they ought to be."*²

Meredith, on the other hand, highlights the social function of comedy. He says:

*"Comedy is objective, intellectual and critical but consists of a criticism merely of superficial manners, graces and foibles, not of anything which could shake the self-assurance of the established order of society."*³

A writer uses various methods to create laughter in his works or art. It may be born out of eccentricities, incongruities, absurdity of the thoughts and behaviours, follies and foibles, sentimentalism, intentional understatements, topsy-turvy situations, puns, satires, wrong quotations, cliches, horse-play, buffoonery, etc, which a writer uses in his works. The most important ingredient of the comic is, however, humour. If the laughter is the external body of comedy visible to the eye, humour is the soul of comedy.

According to G. Eliot, humour is "thinking in jest while feeling in earnest". L. Stephen calls it the faculty, which always keeps us in the mind of absurdity, which is the shadow of sublimity. Addison thinks that Truth was the founder of the family and father of Good sense. His son was Wit, who married Mirth and Humour was their child.

To the mind of Carlyle, the essence of humour is sensibility; a warm, tender fellow-feelings with all forms of existence. In this respect, S. Leacock observes:

*"Humour, thus grew to turn on a contrast between the thing as it is or ought to be and the thing smashed out of shape and as it not ought to be."*⁴

Humour consists in a change of standpoints or attitude. Our first perception is from one point of view and second from a different point of view. It is the most universal manifestation of the comic. None of satire, parody, irony, farce, caricature, cartoons and comedy are possible without humour. However, humour is created in several ways and this makes it of several kinds such as verbal humour, situational humour, sentimental humour, farcial humour, humour mixed with satire, pure humour, etc.

Saul Bellow was humorous in nature like Dickens and Mark Twain. He himself explained his method of narration offhandedly. His humour is a sort of camouflage for the serious designs underneath, Alfred Kazin, a literary critic, Bellow's contemporary says to describe his first meeting with Bellow as:

*"Walking the unfamiliar Brooklyn Streets, he seemed to be measuring the hidden strength of all things in the universe, from the grime of Brooklyn to the leading stars of the American novel, from the horror of Hitler to the mass tensions of New York. He was measuring himself as a contender. Although he was friendly, un-pretensions and funny, he was serious in style. I had never before seen in an urban Jewish intellectual : he was going to succeed as an imaginative writer, he was pleased to grapple with unseen powers. He was going to take on more than the rest of us."*⁵

Saul Bellow is a very interesting example of a caricaturist. In his 'Humboldt's Gift', we find very remarkable caricatures. Thaxter is perhaps the best example of these. He has impressive stature, warts, distorted nose and leopard eyes. However, as in the case of Shula, what makes him a real caricature is what he wears: a broad-brimmed hat bought in a shop for black swingers, a blue velvet suit, a cape and canvas boots. This is visual humour. We cannot imagine Thaxter's presence on the screen without it eliciting some kind of laughter from the audience. From the examples shown thus far, we conclude that in visual humour there are two directions: one kinetic or slapstick, and the other static, caricature.

In 'Humboldt's Gift', there is a lot of bathroom humour too, but as it is an essentially funny novel, such humour is only an ingredient added to other humorous resources. Nevertheless, we should analyze this. In the next scene, following George Swivel's advice, Charlie Citrine has not paid his poker debt to Cantabile, who is turn smashes Citrine's Mercedes 280-SL as a warning. Charlie then decides to pay his debt. They meet at the Russian Baths. Cantabile is carrying a menacing fun. However, Cantabile chooses to humiliate his victim with a biological action, as Citrine explains:

*".....he wanted to humiliate me.....he was aware that I was as they would say in Chicago a Brain, a man of culture or intellectual attainments. Was this why I had to listen to his rumbling and sloping, and smell his stink ? Perhaps fantasics of savagery and monstrosity, of beating my brains out, had loosened his bowels."*⁶

Sexual humour connects with scatological humour but requires a higher level of understanding. Children laugh at obscene jokes because a forbidden word has been mentioned, not because they understand it. Through the ages, sexuality has always been a rich source of humour as sexuality can be enjoyed by both performer and spectator. With regard to obscene jokes Freud says:

*"A person who laughs at smut that he hears is laughing as though he were the spectator of an act of sexual agressions."*⁷

In sexual humour, there are different topics. In 'Humboldt's Gift', there are several passages in which men are so convinced of their male magnetism that they exhibit themselves beyond the limits established by a civilized society. In one of them, after his appointment at Princeron, the half naked poet, Humboldt chases a girl. In another, Citrine, witnesses how, after suffering a heart attack, his lawyer, Szathmar exposes himself, as if by accident, every time a nurse enters his room.

The last resource of sexual humour has to do with language. In real life, the use of obscene language has any of the following functions: to show who is in command, to make

somebody angry or to arouse laughter. Foul language can be used to convey realism to a literary work, but sometimes is used as a comic resource. Since Saul Bellow tries to imitate everyday language in his novel [here, 'Humboldt's Gift'], there is a great deal of swearing and the use of obscene words in his dialogues.

A discussion of the comedy of types is the next natural step in the analysis of humour. According to Henri Bergson-*"to depict characters, that is to say, general types, is the object of high class comedy."*⁸

Satirical types are comical. They are different from caricatures as they are more subtle. The satirical type usually involves a pretension. The pretension is what is exhibited, but it is just a cover for the real thing that lies hidden.

Among the types there is one, who usually creates humour: the insane. Through the ages the behaviour of the insane has been a source of humour for the sane. As E. C. Riley says in his work on 'Don Quixote':

*"The degrading treatment of the insane throughout Europe is well known. They were regarded as objects of mirth even by the most humane. But it is hypocritical to go to the other extreme and pretend the deranged behaviour is never funny. The antics of Don Quixote are the prime source of the books comedy."*⁹

In 'Humboldt's Gift', Humboldt, the character, who gives the work its name, becomes insane. He becomes more absurd as he goes crazy, but he was also funny before. His craziness is of the jealous type: he is convinced his wife is having an affair with a Rockefeller. Humboldt's jealousy is comic. However, the other characters do not make fun of him.

There are in 'Humboldt's Gift' some satirical characters, who are typical of the twentieth century American scene. In 'Mr. Sammler's Planet', we hear about Dr. Gruner's mafia connections; in 'Humboldt's Gift', we see the real gangsters in action. One member of Charlie's racket club is Vito Langobardi, "a most important underworld personality, so high in the organization that he had become rarefied into a gentleman and we discussed only shoes and shirts", and, indeed, a gentleman, who does not dare to go to X-rated movies: "What if the show got raided and they arrested me'. How would it look on the papers?"

This transposition of values is comedy. The character Langobardi is new, but the pretension to appear respectable is an element in comedy, similar to Moliere's M. Jourdain's desire to be a gentleman. Then there are the low class gangsters like Rinaldo Cantabile, who is a mocking figure. He is no more than a clown. But, while Langobardi appears only a couple of times and just a few lines are dedicated to him each time, Cantabile is one of the most important characters in the action. Besides being a comic character,

Cantabile also represents a transposition of, perhaps, a transition of values. Rinaldo Cantabile is considered comic even by the other characters. His threats are not taken seriously. George Swiebel considers him a punk, a drop-out, who has "seen the Godfather". At the Playboy Club, nobody shows much respect for him. He gets swindled by Stronson's phony company. A policeman makes fun of Rinaldo and all the Cantabiles. His uncle, who joined the police force, was laughed at and humiliated by two hoodlums. At the end, Charlie can get rid of Cantabile without letting him have more than his share. Since Cantabile realizes that he does not inspire much fear, he is always making threats and this is what makes him such a comic character. He likes to exhibit his Magnum, but apparently he never shoots it. His most comical threat is the one which he directs against Stronson when he presents Citrine as his hit man.

Humour of the next level, intelligent humour, is the most difficult to explain because it lacks physical elements and because it is so subtle that it is not always readily comprehensible and often goes beyond at least part of the audience. Humour of this level is the kind of humour directed at man's highest faculties. It is a kind of elitist humour, and irony is perhaps its most important element. In its highest form this kind of humour is not directed to provoke laughter, but is received instead with a smile. In this kind of humour, there is little or no room for comical elements.

One way to achieve humour of this level is through the intrusions of the narrator. The narrator is the best source of irony and irony, though not restricted to this level, is one of the most important ingredients of it. The humour of the narrator usually belongs to this level, because his is usually the kind of subtle humour, that requires a certain intellectual maturity on the part of the reader in order to be enjoyed. And because of the love the narrator usually feels towards his characters it is very easy to sense his feelings of compassion behind the ridiculous misfortunes of his hero. Nonetheless, keeping humour on this level throughout a whole novel, is not common.

'Humboldt's Gift' is a funny novel because of his narrator, Charlie Citrine is a comic character with a sense of humour exemplified in his vision of the world in which he is immersed. He is comic because he likes to personify the martyr, and the abused husband. Charlie has a sense of humour, but he does not make many jokes; rather he quotes those of his friends, especially George Swiebel. In 'Mr. Sammler's Planet', Sammler also has a sense of humour. He jokes about Angela's miniskirt, but he lacks Charlie's warmth. The different personalities of the narrators [though 'Mr. Sammler's Planet' is written in the third person the narrative is seen through Sammler's eyes] makes a difference in the mood of these two novels. One example

of Charlie's sympathy is his description of Renata's mother:

*"I couldn't argue with the Senora. I had seen her one morning before she was made up, hurrying toward the bathroom, completely featureless, a limp and yellow banana skin, without brows or lashes and virtually without lips. The sorrow of this sight took me by the heart, I never again wanted to win a point from the Senora."*¹⁰

Thus, Saul Bellow's novels are in some measure satirical. In them, Bellow satirizes the United States as representative of twentieth century civilization. 'Humboldt's Gift' is its fine example. It is packed with visual humour, bathroom humour, sexual humour, satirical humour and intelligent humour.

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