

Quest of Augie in Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*

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Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saul_Bellow

Ethnic Diversity in America

The United States of America is uniquely a country of immigrants, a civilization made up of people whose cultural origins are in other societies with their own languages, religious customs and fundamental values. Although in the seventeenth century the new Americans were largely Northern Europeans, by 1900 people from every society on earth had come to the New World. It is this diversity that makes America what it is and at the same time, creates the challenges it faces. New York City had newspaper in over a hundred languages, reflecting the diverse influx of new citizens.

Melting Pot

The term 'melting pot' is a metaphor for a heterogeneous society becoming more homogeneous, the different elements melting together into a harmonious whole with a common culture. It is a metaphor for the idealized process of immigration and colonization by which different nationalities, cultures and race are blend into a new,

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virtuous community. America is called ‘melting pot’ because there are people from all over the world having different cultures, different customs come and assimilate into the American soil.

American Literature

American Literature is the literary work produced in the area of the United States and its preceding colonies. During its early history, America was a series of British colonies on the east of the present day United States. Therefore, its literary tradition begins as linked to the broader tradition of English Literature. American Literature begins with the orally transmitted myths, legends, tales and lyrics of Native American cultures.

American literature takes a new turn in the seventeenth century in a search for the ideal a search lighted and directed by hope and expectations. This search has been persistently a part of the entire history of the literature growing out of the impact of European civilization upon the developing American frontier. The American Literature has never been removed from involvement in the human situations. It has indicated concern and compassion, even in its analysis and its evaluation, Intolerable injustice, social blindness or brutalization conditions have been brought before the bar of public conscience by writers feeling a responsibility to brotherhood and the integrity of the self.

American literature is like a tree which has the branches like African-American Literature, Greek-American Literature and Jewish American Literature. Jewish American Literature often explores the experience of being a Jew in America. It also depicts the struggles of immigrant life. There are many works of literature that depict the life of the Jewish immigrants. The heroes of these works tend to be young men or boys who tried to establish financial viability in the New World.

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Jewish American Writing

According to Leslie Field, a Jewish American is:

“Someone who has Jewish forefathers and whose writing seems to be immersed in something called the Jewish heritage or Judaism or the special burden of Jewish history and who is living and writing in the United States.”(qtd.in Field 103)

The major writers of the post-war era deal with themes like war, brutality, depression, unemployment, the implication of money, class and ideology. And the Jewish American writers writing in 1940's, share this common patrimony of disaster and loss. The American Jew is caught in the tension resulting from conflict between his society and his traditions, his status and his desires. Out of these contradictory conditions of militancy and depression was heard the distinctive voices of writers like Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Tillie Olson, Grace Paley, Cynthia Ozic, Herbert Gold, Joseph Heller, E.L.Doctorow, Stanley Elkin, Hugh Nissensen and Philip Roth. Among these writers Saul Bellow, Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud are called as 'The Big Three'. These novelists mainly deal with the complex fate of being a Jew in the American Soil.

Saul Bellow and His *The Adventures of Augie March*



Saul Bellow (1915-2005) was born in Lachine, Quebec on June 10. His parents were Russian-Jewish immigrants. In 1953 Bellow received critical acclaim, as well as his first National Book Award with the publication of *The Adventures of Augie March*. Bellow's modern picaresque tale grandly illustrates twentieth-century man's restless pursuit of an elusive meaning. Augie March, a young man growing up in Chicago during the Great Depression, doesn't understand success on other people's terms. Fleeing to Mexico in search of something to fill his restless soul and soothe his hunger for adventure, Augie latches on to a wild succession of occupations until his journey brings him full circle. Yet beneath Augie's carefree nature lies a reflective person with a strong sense of responsibility to both himself and others, who in the end achieves a success of his own making. A modern-day Columbus, Augie March is a man searching not for land but for self and soul and ultimately, for his place in the world.

Self-Exploration

The Adventures of Augie March deals with Augie's self-exploration. He comes from a poor family; he does not know the identity of his father; he refuses to be trapped by fine clothing, social position or wealth. Augie has plenty of heroic qualities such as his intelligence, compassion and clear observation. However, despite these advantages,

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Augie does not truly live out the life of a hero. He has no commitments of his own and merely goes along with plans and schemes developed by others. He never truly decides what he wants to do with himself. Everyone around Augie finds a greater measure of success than himself.

The American Dream

The American Dream is a national ethos of the United States in which freedom includes the opportunity for prosperity and success. In the definition of the American Dream by James Truslow Adams in 1931, “life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement regardless of social class or circumstances of birth”. The United States has regarded and promoted itself as an Empire of Liberty and prosperity since 1776. The meaning of the ‘American Dream’ has changed over the course of history. Historically the dream originated in the New World mystique regarding especially the availability of low- cost land farm ownership.

American Adam

The paradox of achieving the ‘American Dream’ was resolved with the creation of a new hero ‘American Adam’. The term ‘American Adam’ refers to the image of an authentic American as a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentials.

Saul Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March* is written in the tradition of the American Adamic Myth. Augie is similar to an early American Adam who seeks to make America an earthly paradise. However, as Augie matures and experiences heartbreak in love, the dissolution of family ties, the stock market crash, labor conflicts between the ALF and the CIO, and World War II, he loses much of his youthful Adamic resilience

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and optimism. In fact, he becomes pessimistic, defeated, and broken, traits anathema to early American Adamism. Augie is in search for a paradise, yet he is still Adamic. Rather than envisioning paradise as the fulfillment of the American dream, Augie envisions paradise as an escape from the modern American dilemmas. Thus, in *The Adventures of Augie March*, Bellow creates a distinctly new and different character – a modern American Adam whose personality has been shaped by twentieth-century horrors.

About the Formation of an Identity

The Adventures of Augie March is about the formation of an identity, of a soul—that of a fatherless and penniless boy growing up in and around Depression-era Chicago. Augie’s mother is “simple-minded,” and so is his younger brother, Georgie, who “Was born an idiot.” Simon his older brother is hardheaded; and Simon is all Augie’s got. The domestic configuration is established early on, with typical pathos and truthfulness. His mother sewed buttonholes at a coat factory in a Wells street loft, and his father was a laundry driver; and Augie is simply “the by-blow of a traveling man.”

First Encounter with Reality

The first picture of Augie is expressed when he says, “I was and have always been ready to venture as far as possible.” As an idealistic youth, Augie is optimistic about his future and approaches all prospective experiences with an unflagging adventurousness. Augie reveals his adventurousness, optimism, and cheerful immunity to traumas when he is constantly challenged by “Reality instructors” who seek to deflate his affability. Bellow calls the cynical characters as Reality instructors because they seek to teach and to punish the protagonist. Augie’s first reality instructor is Grandma Lausch. She is a boarder in Augie’s home. Even though he is not a relation to Augie’s family, she

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exercises a dominant authority over the entire family. Augie describes her as a Machiavelli who enjoys making Augie's family to take a long swig of her mixture of reality. She teaches Augie to tell lies to get a pair of eyeglasses. She decides where the boys to go for work during summer holidays. She sends Augie to pass out theatre handbills and Simon to work in a resort hotel as a bellhop. Grandma Lausch's cynical act is revealed when she wishes to send Augie's younger brother Georgie to boarding school and finally she succeeds. The partition of Georgie affects the whole family. Augie says,

After that we had a diminished family life, as though it were care of Georgie that has been the main basis of household union and now everything was disturbed. (AAM 10)

The Second Encounter: Machiavellian Instructor

Next Augie encounters another Machiavellian instructor William Einhorn, for whom Augie works as a personal assistant. Einhorn is the first superior man he knows. He is an intelligent and capable individual with crippled arms and legs. In spite of his physical deformity, he has absolute confidence in his own strength and abilities. Augie states that if he had truly been Einhorn's disciple instead of an innocent optimist, he would have approached any important decision by asking himself:

What would Ceaser suffer in this case?

What would Machiavelli advice or Ulysses do?

What would Einhorn think? (AAM 65)

Third Encounter – Mrs. Renling

Augie's third reality instructor is Mrs. Renling. She is wealthy and an influential woman who seeks to coach and instruct and constantly pesters Augie. Mrs. Renling is

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Augie's boss wife who takes him under her wings. She dresses him, pays for horse-riding lessons and enrolls him in the evening classes at Northwestern. She tells him that she would make him perfect. When Augie begins dating with a waitress named Willa Steiner, Mrs. Renling asks Augie to take her to Benton Harbor, a resort for the wealthy people in Michigan. Augie agrees to keep her company, quietly enduring her incessant commentary on the guests. Like the previous reality instructors, she seeks to demean Augie's persistence. Augie however manages to ignore her pessimistic instructions and maintains his optimism.

Final Reality

Augie's final reality instructor is Mimi Villars. She too tries to teach him her cynical view point and tries him down into the mire of nihilism. But Augie rejects her cynical instructions. He maintains an optimistic view of life. Despite the instructions of Grandma Lauusch, Einhorn, Mrs. Renlings, and Mimi, all of whom attempts to destroy Augie's youthful and innocent views, Augie continues to illustrate the traits of the early American Adam. He is adventures, optimistic and unbeaten by his experiences. He is self-relient and chooses to approach life with his own attitude rather than be determined by the instructions of his associates. Augie resists being beaten or tormented or made cynical; he chooses to maintain a youthful optimism even in the face of tribulation.

Encounter with Thea

An interesting episode in the novel is Thea's encounter. His fall occurs when he first meets Thea Fenchel, an Eve like temptress. Augie has gone to a resort with Mrs. Renling where he sees and falls in love with Esther Fenchel, Thea's sister. Esther pays little attention to Augie but Thea is attracted to him. One Evening, Augie goes into an

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orchard to brood over Esther in the garden. In this Eden-like setting where Augie has gone to find solace from his defeated love for Esther, Thea intrudes and tries to seduce him. Beneath the orchard leaves, she kneels besides him, seductively touches his feet and ankles with her thighs and says she has fallen in love with him. Augie, an innocent fantasist, is astonished that she would challenge his love for Esther by professing her own love for him. He stands up to leave and tells her that he was in love with Esther. Thea, however, is adamant to pursue him. Recognizing her intentions, Augie had to escape from the swing and get away into the orchard. He retreats further into the garden rather than confront Thea's seduction. In doing so, he exemplifies the type of innocence characteristic of the early American Adam.

Loss of Innocence

Augie recognizes that his initial innocence has been destroyed and he finds that in true life one must go and be exposed outside the small circle of family and friends. However, he tries to stay innocent as long he can, but only in the inside. Bellow proceeds to depict Augie as a modern Adam, who is defeated by life and who seeks to escape the world by envisioning a new Eden in which he can hide. Before, he had retreated into the garden to avoid Thea's seduction so that he could maintain his youthful innocence. Now, Augie has to seek a new Eden in which he can retrieve the innocence he has lost. Ironically, Thea offers him his first vision of escape in Eden. Thea plans to go to Mexico to get a divorce, and she assumes that he would come to Mexico with her. Augie, having been wounded by reality, never seriously thought of refusing her because he thinks that Mexico will allow him to escape from his traumas.

Can One Escape to Reality

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Bellow asserts that it is impossible to escape reality by envisioning paradise and that one must adapt to the world rather than attempt to flee it. To accentuate this assertion, Bellow surrounds Augie's trip to Mexico as a pseudo-paradise which is actually hellish. For instance, even before Augie departs to Mexico, he is made uneasy by his friends' warning not to go. Augie says:

Nobody, then, gave the happy bonvoyage I'd have liked.

Everybody warned me... I argued back to myself that it was just the Rio Grande I had to cross, not the Acheron, but anyway it oppressed me from somewhere. (*AAM* 360)

This portentous atmosphere is furthered when we learn that Thea, the temptress earlier in Augie's life, plans to travel to Mexico with snake-catching equipment. The final portent surrounding Augie's supposedly paradisiacal venture into Mexico is that Thea takes with her an eagle which she plans to train to hunt iguanas. Though the eagle is Thea's idea, the chore of handling it is relegated to Augie. He names it as Caligula. Augie is forced to spend a great deal of time with the eagle and he becomes almost possessed by it. Just as Thea is a snake-like temptress, who corrupts Augie's paradise, Caligula, who glides like a Satan, is a demonic invasion into Eden. The eagle becomes almost a demon reminder to Augie of his mortality. Rather than finding Eden in Mexico, Augie resides with the satanic eagle whose deathly emanations enter and inhabit his thoughts. These incidents which cloud Augie's quest for paradise prove to be portentous when his stay in Mexico becomes disastrous.

Augie as a Day Dreamer

A number of characters in the novel see Augie as a day dreamer who will not adapt to reality. They try to correct him of his excessive idealism. Unlike the reality instructors who try to force their cynicism on Augie, characters like Padilla and Clem Tambow simply try to teach Augie to be more realistic. Padilla recognizes that Augie is unable to adapt to the world. He does not necessarily want to drag Augie to down into the mire as did the reality instructors. He simply wants Augie to get in step with history and at least see the world clearly. Clem Tambow states that Augie's ambitions are too general and that Augie is not concrete enough. Tambow fears that Augie is going to ruin himself by ignoring the reality principle. Despite Augie's experiences, in Mexico, he is unable to overcome his naïve idealism and see the world clearly. Augie is not able to adapt to life. On the contrary, despite his traumatic experiences throughout the book, the novel ends with Augie's 'grin':

I may well be a flop at this line of endeavor. Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chain. Which didn't prove there was no America? (AAM.599)

The End

The novel offers no proper ending. Hassan states that at the end of the novel, Augie is still one of the uninitiated. Augie remains like Huck, uncommitted, suspended, as it were, between native innocence and hard-earned knowledge, poised for the next adventure which, though it may not actually repeat a former escapade, guarantees no final knowledge or response.

The implication of Bellow's ending is that for Augie there is always some unknown land, some distant horizon that is fertile ground for his imagination and for his

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desire for escape in a paradise. At the end of the novel, Augie is searching for peace and happiness. Though he might be a flop like Columbus and at end up in chains, as a modern American Adam he will not discount the possibility of a new Eden. He chooses to ignore reality and live in dreams; he fails to adapt in the world.

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