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## EXISTENTIAL CONCERN IN SAUL BELLOW'S HERZOG

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### Abstract:

*This research article explains some existential content in Saul Bellow's "Herzog". It shows that how Herzog's hero suffers from identity crisis and how he recovers himself from this crisis? This article expresses internal complexity of Herzog. It also expresses hero's attitude towards life and humanity.*

### KEYWORDS:

Existential Concern ,Bellow's Herzog , life and humanity.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper is written to throw light on the existential element in Saul Bellow's "Herzog."

"I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed. And then I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed. And what next? I get laid, I take a short holiday, but very soon after I fall upon those same thorns with gratification in pain or suffering in joy- who know what the mixture is! What good, what lasting good is there in me? Is there nothing else between birth & death but what I can get out of his this perversity only a favorable balance of disorderly emotions? No freedom? Only impulses? And what about all the good I have in my heart-does it mean anything? Is it simply a joke? A false hope that makes a man feel the illusion of worth? And he goes on with his struggles. But this good is no phony. I know it isn't I swear it."

Winner of the National Book Award when it was first published in 1964, Herzog tales five days in the life of a failed academic whose wife has recently left him for best friend. Through the device of letter writing, Herzog movingly portrays both the internal life of the eponymous hero and the complexity of modern consciousness.

### EXISTENTIALISM :

Bellow wrote with a belief that we can justify our existence and that the novel should be treated as an instrument for this justification of human existence and human dignity. Existentialism is a philosopher as movement or tendency, emphasizing individual existence, freedom and choice, its roots and affiliations, however reach back to the philosophies of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger. Existentialism is defined in "The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Dictionary" as a philosophy that emphasized the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe regards human existence as unexplainable and stresses freedom of choice that responsibility fir the consequence of one's act." Existentialism proposes that no values exist before existence itself and one's freedom is the only origin of value. The lack of intrinsic values in life is encapsulated in a famous axiom Sartre, "Existence precedes essence." The French philosopher and leading proponent of existentialism claims that because

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there is no inherent meaning to life, no essence, any meaning must be created through life. Existence then consists in establishing identity and becoming what one desires to become in the existentialist view human life is marked by inescapable experiences of alienation feelings of angst. The fear of death, the absurd, nothingness and unauthenticated (Crowell). This echoes modernism, popularized by, among others, Oswald Spengler (*The Decline of the West* 1918), T.S. Eliot (*The Waste Land* 1922), James Joyce; Thomas Mann; Albert Camus, who proclaim the decline of the world, and that values no longer hold (*Walden* 275).

#### EXISTENTIAL CONCERN IN HERZOG :

From the very beginning of his literary career Bellow stated his dislikes of existentialism and modernist philosophy. He did so through the character in his novels and in numerous interviews. In an interview with David G. Galloway he says, "I agree with Walt Whitman that there has never been any more good or evil than now. I think the world has been as absurd before or not as absurd. I don't like these fashions." (Bellow as quoted in Galloway 21). In *Herzog* the central character consistently voices his dissatisfaction with existential philosophy.

"Then it is the old moments more, the monk's skull on the table, brought up to date. And what good is that? It all goes back to those German existentialists who tell you how good dread is for you, how it saves you from distraction and gives you freedom and makes you authentic. God is no more. But death is. That's their story." (271)

Herzog condemns such grim views of humanity. Which to him are "Mere junk from fashionable magazine." And we must get it out of our heads that this is a doomed time, that we are waiting for the end (.....)" (316-17). Herzog repeatedly refers to existential notions as fashion items, products, canned good or junk, he warns against their inauthenticity and rejects them. "I can't accept this. We are talking about the whole life of mankind. The subject is too great, too long for such weakness cowardice." (75) Towards the end of the novel Herzog argues that "Human life is far subtler than any of its models 271). His world has collapsed and he is driven by compulsion to re-examine his whole philosophical position. He despises the world's potato love and yearns for something finer but also knows that the feeble humanity of us can't take for long. Contemplating the wreckage of his life his confusions his failures, he realizes that he has been unworthy of living awarding the "Law of heart," which he has expounded and he rightly identifies his peculiar condition as "heart sore." About the valentine Herzog remarks, "Valentine spoke as a man who had risen from terrible defeat, the suffering few could comprehend. He spoke of death majestically. There was no other word for it. His eyes amazingly spirited large rich, keen or thought Herzog, like the broth of soul, hot and shining." (PP.67-68). What Bellow offers instead is attention to centered on everyday human nature, transcendence, the mystery of death and the meaning of life based on certain permanent virtues. In the scene with Himmelstein, the lawyer's abdication to evil is loathed by Herzog, and Bellow seems to shape the main character's critical reaction in order to express his own belief that "existence quite apart from any of the judgments has value, what existence is worthwhile" (Bellow as quoted in Hamper 72)

Before his ultimate rejection of existentialism in the latter part of the novel, Herzog first tests these ideas against his experience only the comic perspective of the narrator rescues him before complete despair-Bellow often downplays the over-dramatizing language and diction of Herzog with humour. It points towards Herzog's enormous and self-pity, which are dominant discourses in the novel due to the focalization being centered on the main protagonist. Early in the novel Herzog directs the following thought and questions to Shapiro:

"Are all the traditions used up, the beliefs done for, the consciousness of the masses not yet ready for the next development? Is this the full crisis of dissolution? Has the filthy moment come when moral feeling dies conscience disintegrates and respect for liberty, law, public decency, all the rest, collapses in cowardice decadence blood? Old Proud hen's visions of darkness and evil can't be passed over (75)".

This is an explicit articulation of Bellow's aversion to the bleak view of existence offered by the 20th-century existentialist Herzog is more alienated more fragmented and disjointed. "If I am out of my mind, it is all right with me." (P.7). He writes letter after letter to "everyone under the sun." but never mails them. These letters instead of taking him near to the society take him far from it. He writes about human nature in one of his letters to his psychiatrist.

"I've read your stuff about the psychological relation, Calvin. I choose you don't mind my saying that it reveals a lousy, ringing, grudging conception of human nature. This is how I see your protestant Freudianism." (PP. 63-64)

Herzog's sense of alienation to be found in his relationship with other people as well we learn that Moses has two brothers Will & Shaura and one sister, Helen Moses touches briefly upon his Jewish childhood. His father was bootlegger. He felt cut off from his family once he had grown up. It is his sense of separation from his childhood family world that is at the root of his alienation." Bellow has himself

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denied that Herzog is "Victim literature." "I consider Herzog a break from victim literature," he told David Borroff. That's why Gelsmpa believes that Herzog is a "Wailing infant.....complaining that his life has been ruined by a woman or by a series of women or by his false friends, or in short by other people never himself."

He knows that characteristically falls upon the thorns of eye. I bleed and then I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed. And what meant? I get laid I take a short holiday, but very soon after I fall upon those same thorns with gratification in pain or suffering in joy. Who knows what the mixture is? (P.214). As we read this novel upto the end, we note that Herzog is somewhat disenchanted with suffering although he does find his identity in that suffering joker" of the many theories which has been propounded by "Reality instructors." Herzog does not like one is about conventional way of looking at any "single life which the body itself, with its two arms and vertical length, was compared to the cross, on which you knew that agony of consciousness and separate being."(P.99) As the novel makes progress Herzog is more critical of such an ethic of suffering. In his letter to Shapiro in the final chapter, he seems to denounce such a view altogether there he asserts that, "We must get it out of our heads that this is a dammed time, that we are waiting for the end." P. 324.

Herzog rejects the theories of despair and negativism as propounded by modern philosophers. In a very affirmative tone, he says, "But let's stick to what matters. I really believe that brotherhood is what makes a man human. If I owe God a human life, this is where I fall down. 'Man liveth not by self alone but in his brother's face....Each shall behold the eternal Father and love & joy abound'..... The real and essential question in one of our employment by other human beings and their employment by us. Without this true employment you never dread death, you cultivate (P.280). At another point he says.

"Unless one lives in brotherhood a man is not human. We find Herzog trying to move away from selfhood toward brotherhood, to community. Himmelsteins believes that, "You must sacrifice your poor, squaking, niggardly individuality.....to historical necessity."

But Herzog feels that one must not lose "his or her individual identity to historical necessity."..... "no, but lose it by becoming one with his fellowman. Brotherhood is what makes a man human."(P.99)

Herzog learns when one stops his efforts to make sense of life, he finds sense Herzog has to face, "both inner & external reality. The result of his failure to do is emotional, intellectual and spiritual sickness. The cure lies in learning to live without sacrificing heart, without denying spirit." At the end of the novel he asks himself, "But that's just it- not a solitary thing. I am pretty well satisfied to be, to be just as it is willed, and for so long as I may remain in occupancy." P.347

Gradually, Herzog loses his egotism and regains his ordinary self by developing its kenship with other people. He comes closer to his real self when he tells Luke Asphalter who is wasting his life in isolation in pursuit of petty obsession." Man liveth not by self alone but in his brother's face.....Each shall be hold Eternal father & love & joy around." (P.280) Herzog lives a peaceful life at Ludeyville & lives a contented life among animals birds. He comes to embrace society and to see the importance of sharing his life with others. Nirmal Mukherji of the opinion that "Man's measure lies in his refusal to accept passively and with intellectual detachment, the dehumanized and alienated existence which threatened his survival."

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper is to present existentialism in Herzog and show its meaning to and role in the construction of the novel and man's character transformation. The discussion of Herzog's treatment of ordinary life showed that as long as the character is possessed by the need to clarify, justify & synthesise multiply ideas, which finds its expression in his mental letters & notes, he is unable to complete everyday actions & routines. He fails to visit his friends, take care of his friend, take care of his children, bear the fact of social injustice in the courtroom cases, & as a teenager already devouring intellectual works, he disregards his mother's death.

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