

## **Herzog as a Dialogic Protagonist in Saul Bellow's *Herzog***

Dr. Kamna Singh

*Assistant Professor of English at Panjab Engineering College, Chandigarh*

---

### **Abstract**

Herzog (1964) is a novel by the American-Jewish author Saul Bellow. It is a modern stream-of-consciousness classic in the epistolary tradition. Herzog concerns the mid-life crises of an eccentric professor Moses Herzog set against the backdrop of post World War II America. The narrative of this novel is a pastiche of polyphonic voices, letters, flashbacks, quotations, contradicting points of view, motifs such as sex and symbols such as flowers, a grand clock etc., all of which are united by the protagonist's consciousness.

The concept of 'Dialogic', given by M. M. Bakhtin, refers to a work that answers, corrects, addresses the silences within, or extends a previous work. A dialogic work thus continually informs and in turn, is continually informed by previous works. All thought is dialogical in the sense that anything anyone ever thinks invariably exists in response to or in anticipation of other things. All language is dialogical too as it is the precipitation of thoughts.

This paper aims to illustrate this concept of 'Dialogic' through the consciousness of the protagonist Herzog and through the narrative structure in the novel *Herzog*. It shows how the use of this technique allows Herzog to emerge not as a madman but rather a 'Schlemiel' (a traditional hard-luck character of Yiddish folklore who embodies the Promethean spirit) and even an 'Ilui' (Jewish term for 'genius').

**Keywords:** American-Jewish fiction, Bakhtin, Bellow, Dialogic, *Herzog*.

## **Herzog as a dialogic protagonist in Saul Bellow's *Herzog***

Myself is thus and so, and will continue thus and so. And why fight it? My balance comes from instability. (Herzog, *Herzog*, 1964.)

*Herzog* (1964) is a novel by the American-Jewish author Saul Bellow. It is considered a modern classic in the epistolary tradition repeatedly likened to Joyce's stream-of-consciousness classic *Ulysses* which blurs distinctions between genres, literary and nonliterary, fact and fiction. It concerns the mid-life crises of an eccentric, self-justifying, cuckolded, and humiliated professor Moses Herzog set against the backdrop of post World War II America. Precipitated into thoughtfulness by the failure of his second marriage, Herzog explains that he has been "overcome by the need to explain, to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to clarify, to make amends."

The concept of 'Dialogic', given by M. M. Bakhtin, refers to a work that answers, corrects, addresses the silences

within, or extends a previous work. A dialogic work thus continually informs and in turn, is continually informed by previous works. All thought is dialogical in the sense that anything anyone ever thinks invariably exists in response to or in anticipation of other things. All language is dialogical too as it is the precipitation of thoughts. This paper aims to illustrate this concept of 'Dialogic' through the consciousness of the protagonist Herzog and through the narrative structure in the novel *Herzog*. It shows how the use of this technique allows Herzog to emerge not as a madman but rather schlemiel (a traditional hard-luck character of Yiddish folklore embodies the Promethean spirit) and even a genius.

The narrative within this novel is a pastiche of polyphonic voices, letters, flashbacks, quotations, contradicting points of view, motifs such as sex and symbols such as flowers, a grand clock etc.- all united by the protagonist's consciousness. Herzog fails in his personal and professional life, and instinctively produces dozens of letters, some actual but mostly imaginary to God, intimates and famous strangers, the dead and the living. The level of intertextuality within the novel is mind-boggling, and rivals that of T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland*.

Herzog is considered as a man losing his sanity by many characters within the novel and he is appalled at what he calls the Protestant-Freudian assessment of himself provided by his analyst Edvig who has labeled Herzog's love for his unfaithful second wife Madelaine "hysterical dependency" and Herzog's personality type as narcissistic, masochistic, and anachronistic. In self-defense, Herzog condemns thinkers like Shapiro and Banowitch who accept psychoanalytical premises and always work on the premise that "madness always rules the world". He complains that Hobbes and Freud have not been our benefactors. Thinkers like Dewey,

Nietzsche, and Whitehead are accused by Herzog of concluding that we cannot find happiness within ourselves because we distrust our own natures and take recourse in religion or philosophy. Nietzsche is indicted for unleashing the Dionysiac spirit and calling modern cultural history a fall from classical greatness.

Nietzsche's ideas are no freer from perversion, nor closer to enlightenment than those with whom he quarrels, Herzog concludes. He blames Heidegger for the idea that we have all fallen into the "quotidian". Spengler's anti-semantic historicism in *The Decline of the West* infuriates him. Modern physics, with its theory of entropy also comes under attack, as do genetics, demography, sociology, statistics, and all the other disciplines which the author of this novel, Bellow believes to have contributed to the destructive idea of biological or genetic predestination of the Self through the logical application of the Darwinian theory of the survival of the fittest. Herzog goes from there to a condemnation of Rousseau. "We must get it out of our heads that this is a doomed time that we are waiting for the end, and the rest of it, mere junk from fashionable magazines. Things are grim enough without these shivery games." The clarification taking place is stylistically mirrored in the progressively linear organization of the narrative. He concludes that "the light of truth is never far away, and no human being is too negligible or corrupt to come into it."

Herzog also does some quasi-heroic actions; like Hamlet he wants to take revenge, but when the scene is ready, he withdraws into meditation. His genius remains confined to his mind and unlike the American-Jewish author Malamud's schlemiel character Asher Lev (who is able to channelize his trauma into creating great works of art), Herzog is unable to direct it productively into lasting works. James M. Mellard calls him "a hero of consciousness" (90) and asserts:

*. . . in contrast to the popular heroes -- the cowboy, the detective, the spy, the adventurer, even the lover -- Herzog plays out his role not in the realm of action (although he does act eventually) but in the realm of consciousness." (Mellard, 1979: 90)*

Perhaps it would be suggestive to add that Herzog is the genius of maintaining a multiple of irresolvable dialogues in the realm of consciousness. Mellard is aware of this fact, but looking at the novel from another perspective, he comes to a different conclusion. Earlier in his article he reads Herzog as a relativist:

*There is a certain irresolvable equivocation in Herzog's position, for, all the while he studies the patterns and meanings of history, and he believes that any answer he arrives at shall necessarily be partial, incomplete. Consequently, his critiques of the historical philosophers really appear only in obiter dicta in the course of his many letters. He offers no systematic arguments, nor can one do here in his stead." (Mellard, 1979: 87)*

Mellard argues that Herzog certainly is not a traditional historicist, but arriving at "a kind of existential historicism," Herzog is "a historian of the contemporary mode" (86). From another perspective, narrative or historical reason can be contrasted with instrumental reason, the rationality that views others as instruments in the way of one's own improvement. However, dialogic rationality, equally different from instrumental rationality, is the term that can describe the mentality of Herzog better. The historical reason of Ortega Y Gasset and the

narrative reason of Mellard can describe the changes that happen to a consciousness through time, but, even if it does not fail to recognize the role of the other in the changes, it ultimately fails to see the other consciousnesses and voices as valid and a true subject for communication. Dialogic reason on the other hand, sees all the other voices and ideas as existing in the present moment of novel, constructing the novel through the process of dialogue.

The actions of Herzog are dialogic actions and he is a genius of dialogue. His doctoral thesis, *The State of Nature in 17th and 18th century English and French Political Philosophy* (10) and his book, *Romanticism and Christianity* (10) are attempts to make a dialogue between the past and the present:

*His thesis had been influential and was translated into French and German. His early book, not much noticed when it was published, was now on many reading lists, and the younger generations of historians accepted it as a model of the new sort of history, 'history that interests us' -- personal, engagée -- and looks at the past with an intense need for the contemporary relevance."(Herzog, 1964:11-12)*

Mellard's analysis of Herzog's letters is a "historical" reading of the novel, yet they are suggestive for a dialogic reading. Mellard finds Rousseau "the political philosopher whose historical theory draws Herzog's greatest ire" (87). On the other hand, Mellard rightly believes that Herzog "cares perhaps even less" for the twentieth century

opponents of Rousseau, the Wasteland theorists such as Pierre Joseph Proudhon, T. E. Hulme, and of course, T. S. Eliot (87-90). Nevertheless, Herzog does not totally reject the Waste Landers, or any other ideology. His genius lies in the fact that he assimilates the strong points of each group and like an architect, builds his vision of the world using the other's most efficient building blocks of worldview. Perhaps the metaphor of architectonics could not represent the dialogicality of Herzog's consciousness, but it is a fair metaphor in showing the mind of Herzog as a hybrid construction; "he is to be found at the center of organization where all levels intersect" (*Dialogic Imagination* 49).

Sandor Himmelstein, is one of those "reality instructors" that is situated diametrically in an opposed point to Herzog. He is the embodiment of the Wasteland outlook among the characters of the novel. He believes, "Facts *are* nasty" (*Herzog* 92). Herzog describes him as a "fierce dwarf with protruding teeth and deep lines in his face" (92), Herzog is momentarily angry with himself for asking help from this hunchback lawyer. At the same time, he imagines Himmelstein as a man who could "be attractive, too, generous, convivial, even witty" (92). This is nothing but the ability to juxtapose contrapuntally the character traits of one person (Bakhtin, 1984:40), to make a dialogue between the different layers of one specific consciousness. Here the reader is not confronted with a subjective psychologism like the works of Joyce or Proust (Bakhtin, 1984:37), but with an intersubjective and dialogic

psychologism. Herzog is not an isolated consciousness, but a mind in relation to others, a related and, of course, "*relating animal*" who is sometimes "*sentenced*" to relationships (*Herzog* 268). What distinguishes him from many other characters of the genre is his unique awareness of this fact. "I really believe that brotherhood is what makes a man human," he says to Asphalter, his friend who endangered his life to save a monkey. "When preachers of dread tell you that others only distract you from metaphysical freedom then you must turn away from them" (*Herzog*, 280).

And Herzog is a genius of dialogue because he maintains a dialogue even with the preachers of dread, as well as with all the other monologic constituents of the Western culture.

The consciousness of Herzog is located at the point of contact between many worldviews that are sometimes contradictory. This, as showed, makes Herzog a dialogic genius. But what are the dialogues that he maintains? The very first sentence of Herzog shows how much the other's ideas are active in his mind: "If I am out of my mind, it's all right with me, thought Moses Herzog" (*Herzog*, 7). The discourse of the others is present in the 'if' clause of the conditional sentence in its living and active totality. This idea, that he is out of his mind, is the subject of Herzog's mental dialogue. Without repressing the discourse of the others about himself, he fully articulates them and then juxtaposes his own discourse as a contrapuntal point: "it's



all right with me." Even this first sentence of the novel is a free location for a contact between two ideas. Interestingly, the next utterance of the novel shows that the different ideas belong to different consciousnesses: "Some people thought he was cracked and for some time he himself had doubted that he was all there. But now, though he still behaved oddly, he felt confident, clairvoyant and strong" (*Herzog*, 7). The idea of the others about Herzog and his temporal assimilation of that idea do not negate the necessity of dialogue. He only affirms the thought of the others about himself. His identity, so to speak, is formed through his relationship with the other people; and as the rest of the text shows, he is dependent upon the others for his realization of the self.

What is more important is that Herzog's dialogicality lets the other people enter his territory. This acceptance of the others (or dialogic rejection of them) is something that is with him from the very beginning. He feels "confident, clairvoyant and strong" (*Herzog*, 7) because he is able to maintain a dialogue with the others, those who are at times opposed to him and the cause of his "sufferings." Such a dialogue is also maintained between different layers of his consciousness, which is formed as a result of his contact and communication with the other people of the city, and is as multiple and plural as the world around himself. The dialogues of Herzog with others are not just about his personal affairs. At the same time they are concerned with larger cultural and intellectual issues; it is the obsessed and relating mind of Herzog that finds a

close relationship between the two. Bellow's adoption of the epistolary tradition is indeed a stroke of genius; it is also a genuine technique for addressing the ideas that are not instantly present on the contemporary intellectual scene. He makes a dialogue between the Romanticism of Rousseau and the Wasteland outlook of the twentieth century, juxtaposing their ideas with each other. One of the other best examples that can be provided here is the old opposition between Nietzsche (and his followers) and Christianity. This opposition has been the cause of many intellectual tensions of the twentieth century. What is important is that these ideas and this kind of treatment of ideas are present in the novel. The text of the novel is not simply plural; it is a dynamic plurality. The ideas are not just there in an inert, neutral, and passive way, they are in conflict with each other. The conflict of ideas in the novel is strategic. Carnivalization of ideas was a strategy for maintaining a free dialogue between the ideas and Herzog's ability to do this despite; or rather because of his personal crises is a sure indication of his genius.

As the narrative moves towards conclusion, the reader gains a fairly lucid understanding of the factors that have shaped Herzog's identity which in turn, has determined his reactions to the world around him. As the reader pieces together, like a puzzle, Herzog's consciousness and his story, he/ she comes to realize that many of these factors are shared by others such as the reader himself. It causes the reader to question his/ her understanding of the world around him/ her and his/ her responses to it.

As the reader thus gains empathy for Herzog as a well-educated man puzzled and confounded by the events that swept away the life he had

so painstakingly pieced together for himself; Herzog begins to emerge as a schlemiel, a traditional hard-luck character of Yiddish folklore “who is repeatedly knocked down by fortune, but who always struggles to his feet to try his luck again, hoping for the best... constantly aware of the absurdity of his situation...” (Hershinow). He seems to embody the Promethean or Faustian spirit of the postmodern individual who struggles to establish and assert his identity even as he stands pitted against great odds. Through his conversations with himself, he seems to have had a profound education in the realities of life through death, and rediscovered the value of the healing power of nature on his Ludeyville estate. At the end, irrespective of what the other characters think of him, Herzog seems to have regained his sense of Jewish identity, purged himself of violent anger, and repented of his dandyism and promiscuity.

## Works Cited

1. Bakhtin, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Texas: University of Texas Press, 1983.
2. Bakhtin, M. M. *The Problem of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
3. Bellow, Saul. *Herzog*. New York: Viking Press, 1964.
4. Hershinow, Sheldon J. *Bernard Malamud*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980.
5. Mellard, James. Consciousness Fills the Void: Herzog, History and the Hero in the Modern World. *JSTOR*, 25(1), 75-91. Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.

---

**Dr. Kamna Singh** is a Ph.D. from the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh. She is UGC NET qualified and a gold medalist in M.Phil. from the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh.

---

## **Get Your Book Reviewed**

If you have a book review on a book, send it to us. We will publish it free. We don't charge any fee for publishing. The quality of your article will decide whether your article will be published.

If you want us to review your book, we charge for this. We have a good number of review writers with us. We have different review writers for books of different genres. Our reviews are gaining recognition among the publishers, journals and academia for fair and high quality reviews.

Write to: [clrijournal\(at\)gmail.com](mailto:clrijournal@gmail.com)

[Contemporary Literary Review India](#)