

## SAUL BELLOW'S QUEST HERO – HENDERSON THE RAIN KING

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### ABSTRACT

Endless striving for 'human redemption' seems to be the underlying motif of Saul Bellow's novels, and most of his protagonists are in search of enhanced meaning in their life. Critics have called Henderson the Rain King a "quest-romance" that takes the protagonist to Africa, a place that Bellow had not yet visited. This study makes an attempt of how the gigantic, blustering, crazed, and comic Henderson testifies to Bellow's remarkable creative diversity. Henderson itself is a triumph of the imagination, with its marvelous descriptions of a purely fictive Africa, an Africa of the soul. For all the exoticism of the events, the writing is as tough and witty as in the earlier books. Henderson, who tells his own story as Augie did, uses an even more flavourful language. Despite his comic blunderings and bull-headedness, he is an appealing figure. And despite the fantastic setting, the central character is capable of deeper emotional attachment to people and objects than has been true in the preceding books.

**Keywords:** Human Redemption, Search, Quest-romance, Protagonist, Creative Diversity.

## INTRODUCTION:

Saul Bellow is regarded as one of the most celebrated authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and American literature's most resourceful writer for all times. He is one of the most erudite and intellectual writers of the second half of the twentieth century, belongs to the humanist wing, as he is a unique spokesman for humanitarian values and ideals in American literature. Since his appearance on the literary scene in the mid forties, Saul Bellow, recipient of the 1976 Nobel Prize for literature, has left his mark on the international literary world. His writings, which combine prophetic wisdom with human comedy, have always elicited extreme response: reverence or condemnation. He is one the few contemporary authors who has been able to sustain the interest and dominate the field of academic and scholarly inquiry for over four decades. His fiction typically addresses the meaning of human existence in an increasingly impersonal and mechanistic world. Writing in a humorous, anecdotal style, Bellow often depicts introspective individuals sorting out a conflict between Old world and New world values while coping with personal anxieties and aspirations. Saul bellow has been a most persevering chronicler of America's restless search for a definable self, articulating more common needs and ills of American society at large. Each of his novels feels the pulse of its decade, exposing the social and intellectual issues at hand. None of his works allow for easy identification or rejection. As a consequence, none have gone un contended...the controversies they address seem to beckon our response. 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.

The quest in Henderson is magnified into an odyssey. No longer confined to New York or Chicago, it takes place in the jungles of America and Africa. The protagonist descends into the heart of darkness and returns not with an awareness of horror, but with a radiant confidence in man and in human possibility. *Henderson the Rain King* is the first fully realized work of Bellow's maturity. It is Bellow's first novel of which one can say that no other writer could have conceived it, much less written it.

Bellow himself has said his own favourite among his writings is Henderson the Rain King – “the absurd seeker of high qualities” (1964: 38). Endless striving for ‘human redemption’ seems to be the underlying motif of Bellow's novels, and most of his protagonists are in search of enhanced meaning in their life. Critics have called *Henderson the Rain King* a “quest-romance” that takes the protagonist to Africa, a place that Bellow had not yet visited. The gigantic, blustering, crazed, and comic Henderson testifies to Bellow's remarkable creative diversity. *Henderson* itself is a triumph of the imagination, with its marvelous descriptions of a purely fictive Africa, an Africa of the soul. For all the exoticism of the events, the writing is as tough and witty as in the earlier books. Henderson, who tells his own story as Augie did, uses an even more flavourful language. Despite his comic blunderings and bull-headedness, he is an appealing figure. And despite the fantastic setting, the central character is capable of deeper emotional attachment to people and objects than has been true in the preceding books.

Richard Chase says the novel is really a romance; Keith Opdahl goes even further and says that Bellow's novel represents “a waking dream”. It is, in spite of Bellow's warnings to “deep readers” in search of meanings, his most symbolic and “meaningful” book. Essentially, it tells of a quest. David Galloway refers to the book's connection with the “grail tradition”, with the journey through a wasteland, a cleansing with rain, the cyclic death and resurrection of the king. But Henderson's quest is a more personal one than this. He says to Itelo, “Your Highness, I am really on a kind of a quest,”(65) and his quest, as it turns out, is for his double, Dahfu, and what Dahfu can give him, so that the traditional form of the quest is built on to the pattern that Bellow has used in earlier novels, while Henderson is a parody of the earlier heroes.

From the beginning, Henderson is driven by “a voice in my heart that said I want, I want, I want, I oh, I want” (12) a voice which he cannot silence, and which will not explain itself by indicating an object. It is only in his relationship with Dahfu that Henderson begins to understand this voice. But, fully to understand Henderson's relationship with Dahfu, it is necessary to see the pattern of the quest which leads towards him.

*Henderson the Rain King* is regarded by many critics as the most active book of the American Jewish writer. Saul Bellow's distinguished work relates a story of a man suffering from a disconnection with the natural world that consequently leads to a disconnection with other people. This modern American character, Gene Henderson, has achieved economic stability, but has difficulty communicating with people. At age fifty-five, Henderson finds himself questioning the very social and moral rules that have heretofore governed his uncertain interaction with people, animals, and the earth. In spite of his economic success and acceptable relationships with his wife and children, he feels insufficient in moulding himself to societal norms of acceptability. He so badly wants to find the source of his deep suffering and alleviate the anguish it causes, but he has only vague

notions of how he might do this. Although Henderson feels inadequate in his relationships, he maintains a philosophic, soul-searching side that runs far deeper than that of most people. Thus he realizes that "...in an age of madness, to expect to be untouched by madness, is a form of madness. But the pursuit of sanity can be a form of madness, too"\* Henderson has come to recognize this insidious form of madness in urban-industrialized American culture. He struggles in a quest for the meaning and essence of life through his physical and spiritual journey in ancient uncivilized Africa.

*Henderson the Rain King* seems to be a turning point in Bellow's fiction, because in that novel, for the first time Bellow declares the idea that the only way to overcome the feeling of absurdity in modern life is the revival of faith and spirituality. Henderson travels to Bellow's imaginary Africa to get rid of an internal voice that perpetually whispers, 'I want! I want!', and in that mysterious land, he regains the innate divinity that is neglected in his homeland – America. Therefore his journey seems to be a spiritual one, at the end of which he states, "believe me, the world is a mind... there is the noumenal department, and there we create" (157).

Henderson's quest for redemption, for salvation, is similar to Tommy Wilhelm's. Both heroes begin as alienates, both are prepared during the progress of the novel for a partial return to community. Both have to learn to plunge into the here-and-now, to seize reality as it is. But *Henderson the Rain King* is a comic version of the quest, a romance-satire on the America quixotic self who rebels against life's terms and, like Augie, demands a special fate.

Eugene Henderson seems to have sensed that the acceptance of one's own mortality is a prerequisite of self-realization when he gives his opinion of the social and moral background for the quest of modern man: "All the major tasks and the big conquests were done before my time. That left the biggest problem of all, which was to encounter death. We've just got to do something about it" (258). The individual's search for a fulfillment of his life, for a transfer from a life of unreality to one of reality, is thus dependent upon his acceptance of death.

Henderson's quest starts with his dissatisfaction with his life in New York. At fifty-five, rich enough to do as he wishes, he nevertheless leads an empty life. His dissatisfaction is shown in his violence against everything, and in his "ego-emphasis" but he himself is inarticulate about it. But this is the cause of his inner voice, and of his drunken cries that "There is a curse on this land there is something bad going on. Something is wrong. There is a curse on this land!" (38) It is not just the land that is cursed, however.

Henderson seeks answers to the same questions about the significance of human existence and action that had tormented his brother protagonists. But his approach to them is strikingly different. Joseph, Leventhal, and Tommy Wilhelm were timid, passive questers, full of querulous complaint about the human condition. Henderson is a kind of Tommy Wilhelm in reverse, except that Henderson, a graduate of an Ivy League University, has a broader perspective, a core of reference that is beyond Tommy's imagining. Whereas Tommy seeks meaning in the financial markets and then in the urbanized coldness of his father's disapproval, Henderson, already financially secure, seeks meaning in the pastoral and the primitive. Where Tommy seeks relief in futures, Henderson seeks salvation in a kind of past, a land primeval and innocent.

Bellow's heroes' chief preoccupation is how to learn to resist societal norms and moral values and dogmas without alienating from this society: "How can one resist the controls of this vast society without turning into a nihilist, avoiding the absurdity of empty rebellion?" asks Bellow (quoted in Harper 18). The two heroes Eugene Henderson and Augie March are representatives of post-war America with its growing materialism, consumerism, conformity, and mass culture. The English literary critic Malcolm Bradbury claims that these negative phenomena taken together "threaten the liberal self" (1982: 28). The novels represent the dialogue between alienation and accommodation, the battle of determinism and free choice, the coalescence of selflessness and selfhood. The heroes face the problem of how to create a unique self within a mechanical money-oriented mass society which exerts a leveling influence on a individual, and where the individual undergoes his personal effacement and consequent degradation.

Northrop Frye singles out four phases in the hero's quest-romance life journey: conflict, death struggle, (provisional) dismemberment, and recognition of a newborn world (quoted in Hassan 23). These stages can be traced in Henderson's life journey. At the first stage, he is shown in conflict with himself and society. Henderson recounts his life and reflects on the reasons of his going to Africa: "What made me take this trip to Africa? There is no quick explanation. Things got worse and worse and worse and pretty soon they were too complicated" (3). He admits that he is very rich as he has inherited three million dollars from his "old man" but has always behaved like a bum. He was a bad student at University and was not thrown out only because he was his father's son. To please his father he got an M.A. and married a girl of his social class who he "gave a terrible time" and later divorced. Henderson describes himself as "moody, rough, tyrannical, and probably mad" (4). The hero's life in a society of material excess leads to hidden depression, rage, and finally to the

conclusion that he is not fit to live among people. He seems to hate both society as it is and himself for not being able to oppose it by becoming better. Henderson argues unreasonably with his second wife Lily, alienates his son and daughter, refuses his tenants heat during the winter, fires a gun at their cat, raises pigs from which his only pleasure comes from is their annoying presence to family and neighbours, harasses in a dozen other ways his family, friends, acquaintances, and community. All these examples prove him to be a spiritual impotent,—he perceives himself to be a failure, understands that his behaviour is irrational and unacceptable but is unable to put any effort to change it to the better. At this stage of his life, Henderson has no inner strength to resist the negative influence of society upon him, reject its values because he has absorbed its features, and is therefore at war with himself. The hero suffers a “poverty of the soul.” Again and again, he hears an inner voice that spoke there and said, “I want, I want, I want! It happened every afternoon, and when I tried to suppress it it got ever stronger” (24). Later the hero asks himself: “So what do you do with yourself? More than three million bucks” (24). Here Bellow is concerned with the spiritual malaise in an environment of sufficiency in “a life of plenty.” Society Henderson lives in cannot satisfy his spiritual needs. He realizes the corrupt, pestilent nature of society and the world. He feels that “the entire world has set itself against life and is opposed to it” and that he, Henderson, is alive and finds it impossible to go along with it.

The second phase in Henderson’s existence is his direct confrontation with death when because of his fault Miss Lenox, an elderly family maid, succumbs to a heart attack and passes away. The woman’s death caused by him is that momentous event which suddenly illuminates his past, present, and future life. Now Henderson perceives that he is on the verge of his personal degradation, his spiritual downfall. He realizes that he was a destroyer, a wrecker – and if he does not change, “death will annihilate him and nothing will remain, and there will be nothing left but junk” (40). Henderson admits that he just could not continue as he was where he was and that “something could be and had to be done” (188). Thus, it serves as a turning point in his life. It is a characteristic feature of Bellow’s heroes to affirm life over death, the need for life to move in the face of its limits. Therefore, the hero leaves for Africa to find a remedy for his situation, to “burst the spirit’s sleep” (76), to leave certain things behind until all the bad is burned out of him. This is Africa of the mind where values can be reconsidered and reality subjected to new perspectives.

The third stage of Henderson’s life is his account of his experiences with the natives of the Arnewi and the Wariri – his desperate attempt to “become better.” In Africa Henderson returns to the primal bases of life and feeling, in nature, culture, and animal kingdom. The hero has “grun-tu-molani”, his will to live, his belief that truth comes in blows, he journeys into the complex places of consciousness. Henderson is longing to perform a benefit, has a great desire to do a disinterested and pure thing – “to express his belief in something higher” (188), “to work the right stitch into the design of [his] destiny before it was too late” (186), “to complete his own life.” The Arnewi are cattle raisers. When Henderson enters their village, he finds them in tears and sadness, because their water supply has been contaminated by the mysterious appearance of frogs. Henderson couples his desire to live with the necessity to eliminate the frogs from the cistern. He is now eager to start on what he considers his personal project. The remedy is a home-made bomb which he fashions with childish enthusiasm. The hero is overcome with frustration when he fails,—he blows the frogs out of the water, the end of the cistern is also blown out, and all the water escapes into the arid soil. Henderson cannot understand his everlasting failure to achieve something of value. At this point, the hero experiences “dismemberment” : “I wish it [cf. the bomb] had gone off in my hands and blown me to smashes [...] This was how I left in disgrace and humiliation, having demolished both their water and my hopes” (111-12). Robert Dutton (1982) offers a good insight into the reasons of Henderson’s failure saying that technological and scientific achievement persuaded man of his godlike abilities that he does not possess. Man’s misapprehension of his limited potentialities can drive him in spite of good intentions, to destroy the value of life itself. Briefly, Bellow says that man is not God (99-100).

Henderson’s adventures in the land of the Wariri marks the fourth and final stage in his existence when he comes to a Great Awakening and welcomes a newborn world. Here the hero undergoes two tests of his personality and learns lessons of life. First, Henderson succeeds in lifting up Mummah, goddess of rain, and is therefore appointed as the Rain King. The hero gains victory because at this moment he relies on himself and trusts his own strength and power to do it. The success is the first move towards “bursting the spirit’s sleep”: “My spirit was awake and it welcomed life anew [...] Life anew! I was still alive and kicking and I had the old grun-tu-molani” (193). Bellow makes a comparison between Henderson’s failure with the Arnewi and his success with the Wariri. In the case of Mummah, Henderson relies only on his own strength, contrary to his exhibition of technical ingenuity with the frogs. Obviously, Bellow is saying that the bursting of the spirit’s sleep must be accomplished by individual’s own resources.

*Henderson the Rain King* is an epiphany of awakening and hope. It presents a vision of a technological America that can be transfigured by the noble ideals of love, service and brotherhood when they are set in motion. The twin sources of America's strength are vividly presented. Her twentieth-century technological power is symbolized by the lustrous plane with the great, though now still, propellers that brought Henderson to Newfoundland. And the unquenchable and radiant power of the human spirit is now incarnate in Henderson and will lead both him and America to true glory.

The movement from isolation to affirmation of existence in the world is reiterated in *Henderson the Rain King* as "gruntu-molani". Henderson himself is able to carry the principle farther because his energies and ambitions demand to know the form and the goal which existence should adopt. All Bellow heroes begin by trying to throw off responsibility and the chaotic weight of the world, but love for mankind finally brings them back to the business of living in the real world, even when the real seems chaotic and destructive.

#### **In his interview in *Show Bellow* says:**

What Henderson is really seeking is a remedy to the anxiety over death. What he can't endure is this continuing anxiety: the indeterminate and indefinite anxiety, which most of us accept as the condition of life which he is foolhardy enough to resist. He tells the King that he is a "Becomer" and that the King is a "Beer." I believe I meant him to say that human life is intolerable if we just endure endless doubt. That is really what I feel is motivating Henderson. All his efforts are a satire on the attempts people make to answer the enigma by movement and random action or even by conscious effort (1959: 38).

The novel ends with one of those physical epiphanies typical of Bellow's work. Henderson is at an airport in Newfoundland—the place name reflects Henderson's newfound self. He has escaped from the Wariri and from the "past" of Africa, and he has taken under his wing an American child who is flying back to the United States, alone and frightened. He cares for the child, gives it comfort, and embraces it. He has found his meaning: sympathy for the family of humankind.

**NOTES:** All quotations are from Saul Bellow's *Henderson The Rain King*, New York, Viking Press, 1956

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