

“边缘人”研究系列（一）

# Marginal Protagonists' Journey

— A Study on Saul Bellow and Ralph Ellison

索尔·贝娄与拉尔夫·埃里森的“边缘人”研究

Saul Bellow



Ralph Ellison

吴玲英 蒋靖芝 著

Tom Cook 主审

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## Preface

In the past decade's reading and studying, the author has found marginality, whether material, spiritual or cultural, has become a major issue in literature, especially in modern American literature. While lecturing "20th Century American Novels", taking five novels as the object of study, including William Faulkner's *Sound and Fury*, Earnest Hemingway's *the Old Man and Sea*, Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Tony Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, the author of this book is again fascinated that these writers are so concerned about the protagonists' identity. Their "human understanding and subtle analysis of contemporary culture" has been profoundly enriched with complication of the inner life and the crisis of modern society.

"Who are you? Who am I?" Echoing these great literary giants (well, no offense to them), in the past 16 years' teaching and researching, the author has been questioning and searching, experiencing a lot and undergoing a series of dilemma. She is sure this process is identical to every acute, awake, smart and educated person with ideas and values. This is also the motive of writing this book, on the basis of a study on Ralph Ellison and Saul Bellow. At the beginning of the novels chosen, *Dangling Man*, *Invisible Man*, *Henderson the Rain King* and *Herzog*, the protagonists, just like the author, all value education so much as it brings many advantages and rewards. As the stories progress and the characters develop and mature, they begin to feel lost and bewildered as nothing goes in the way it is dreamed of or imagined.

They begin to sense their invisibility as they are unseen to others, with their voice unheard and their ideas unnoticed. Most of the time, others refuse to see them. Yet they still have to survive and they still want to utter their frustrations even though in journals, in the inner voice or in letters. These values as well as their dangling or invisible nature shape these characters' identity, both personal and cultural, as they are struggling in their life.

Although all these are extremely important, the author cannot completely reveal them all. The first to share with these characters is knowledge. Education is a huge part of the treasure, as it plays a large role in determining where the author goes and to what extent she succeeds in life. Yet for a long time, she has been nobody, just like the protagonists. The only proof of her existence has been scores on test papers, prizes of various competitions and orientation of those around; the more she has learnt and got, the more depressed and lost she has become; she couldn't even answer the question which has kept burning in her mind — "Who am I?" Many times she has felt that people refuse to see her as an individual and don't bother to give the recognition she deserves even as a member of a type, just like Dangling Joseph and the invisible man. Yet she still manages to strive. Sometimes she wonders; what if these characters were uneducated numbs rather than witty intellectuals! What if she had not had such abundant source of knowledge or received higher education!

The second to share with the characters is confusion over the past self. In any society, people need to communicate with each other frequently so as to be integrated eventually. But isolation and depression appear everywhere. Holding herself aloof from others and from the world in general, the author can not by any means discover her true self; rather she finds her identity dissolving. Several months

ago, as she was trying to figure out "who am I", she phoned back to the hometown about her birth certificate, her credentials and the like. Imagine her surprise and puzzlement when she was told there had never been any information about her. In the parents' family there are only her two elder sisters and two younger sisters. She became rootless. And she knows she came to the university without any past records. Anything about her past is gone. Waking up, she realizes that there is no past life for her to return to. She knows too that her experience to yes and her plans to rebel or to make a difference all did not matter. She is even more bewildered about "Who am I".

The third to share with the characters is sound health, which is also the turning point of the author's life, the impetus of this book. Undoubtedly, these protagonists are born physically all of a piece. Maybe that is why they stop worrying about their physical condition but stress so much on their spiritual and cultural identity. The author of this book happened to be seriously ill half a year ago just when she was lecturing to English post-graduates the dangling figure of "20th Century American Literature", burning with the question: "Who am I?" The strike was unexpected, unimaginable and introspective! She fought with Death for 9 days, unconscious. Now she can still remember the anxious tear-drops on her husband's face when she fortunately came to for seconds. She can still remember the warm encouragement of her friends' comfort when they came to see her. She can still remember those postgraduates who were massaging her every day when she lied on bed motionlessly (doctors ordered her not to move because of the serious disease of her head). She can still remember the 33 days when the only thing she could read outside the ward was "Xiangya Hotel". She can still remember how she promised herself every morning: "I must live to go out and see Xiangya Hotel

with my own eyes." With all these, thank God! She managed to survive. She can still remember how friends marveled at her recovery 55 days later and her liveliness 3 months later.

Consequently, maturity is difficult to achieve and spiritual tranquility is at last found. And the reading list of "20th Century American Literature" has two more choices: *Henderson the Rain King* which reveals a progressive journey of spiritual pursuit, and *Herzog*, which, the author sincerely hopes, offers some light and illumination for those marginal people in their complexity and darkness. Now she clearly knows who she is, where she wants to go and what she needs to do, just like Henderson the Rain King, and Herzog. Although the future is still a little blurred, she is so fortunate as to have gone through most of the journey, which again, the author sincerely hopes, will render readers a chance to experience the frustration, the loss and the imprisonment of marginal state of these protagonists, to understand marginality as a psychological dilemma, social isolation and cultural melting, to believe or oppose any notion despite its source, to learn to be an independent individual, to be a creative, philosophical person, not merely a living creature, to make herself into what she wants to be, to explore the boundless recesses of the mind, to shrug aside the trivial, to maintain the spiritual identity, not to love R&B just because others do, not to evaluate a person only by his possessions, to go and find the integrated self, to open the eyes, to awaken the senses, to walk on her own feet, to speak her own mind. Then the true identity will be just in front with the answer to the burning issue "Who am I"!

**By Wu Lingying**

# Abbreviations

Bellow

Saul Bellow

*DM*

*Dangling Man*

Ellison

Ralph Ellison

*HRN*

*Henderson the Rain King*

*H*

*Herzog*

*IM*

*Invisible Man*



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## Chapter 1 Introduction



Ralph Ellison



Saul Bellow

**“I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.”**

**“Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?”**

—*Invisible Man*,  
Ralph Ellison

**Well, for instance, what it means to be a man. In a century. In transition. In a mass. Transformed by science. Under organized power. Subject to tremendous controls. In a condition caused by mechanization. After the late failure of radical hopes. In a society that was no community and devalued the person ... On top of that, an injured heart and raw gasoline poured on the nerves.**

—*Herzog*, Saul Bellow

## 1.1 Saul Bellow

Among American novelists of the latter half of the 20th century, Saul Bellow (1915 ~ 2005) stands out as one of the giants. He is often regarded as the only writer who is of as parallel importance as William Faulkner, and the two are called Founders of Contemporary American Literature, widely influencing American literature after World War II and providing "the backbone of 20th-century American literature." He is distinguished for his profound understanding of the complicated spiritual world of modern man and a penetrating insight into the cultural sophistication. His contribution to the world literature lies mainly in, as read in his Nobel Prize citation, "the human understanding and subtle analysis of contemporary culture that are combined in his work".

Saul Bellow was born Solomon Bellows—later he dropped "s" in "Bellows" and changed his first name to "Saul" when he started publishing in the 1940s—in Lachine, Quebec, a suburb of Montreal, on June 10, 1915, the fourth child of Abraham Bellow and Lescha (Liza) Bellow. His original birth certificate was lost when Lachine's city hall burned down in the 1920s, but Bellow customarily celebrated his birth date on June 10. His parents, who are descendants of the Jews, emigrated from Russia to Canada in 1913. Several languages were prevalent in Lachine then, and Bellow consequently grasped English, French, Hebrew and, Yiddish, which influenced his energetic language style. Abraham Bellow, Bellow's father, was a produce importer in St. Petersburg, until he got into trouble with the authorities and left to live with his two sisters in Montreal. Saul Bellow was his family's youngest son, and Lescha Bellow wanted him

to be a Talmudist. Family members report that, by the age of four, he had memorized many passages of the Old Testament and was doing precociously well at Hebrew lessons. In 1923, at the age of only eight years old, he suffered a bout with tuberculosis, during which he spent many months in a hospital ward. Bellow describes himself as becoming something of a dreamer, isolated within his own family and afraid their scorn of the emotional and imaginative world he had built for himself. Unexpected to his parents especially his father, Bellow spent most of his time in reading literary works. At that time, his father regarded him as "idiot" and "dreamer".

Bellow was raised until the age of 9 in an impoverished, polyglot section of Montreal, full of Russians, Poles, Ukrainians, Greeks, and Italians. At the age of 9 his father was beaten—he was also a bootlegger—and the family moved to Chicago where he was brought up as a Jewish-American and it became the environment that would shape so much of his early fiction. Chicago in the 1920's boasted a population of approximately 125,000 Jews. Although Bellow is not considered an autobiographical writer, his Canadian birth is dealt with in his first novel, *Dangling Man* (1944), and his Jewish heritage and his several divorces are shared by many of his marginal characters.

In his youth, he attended Lafayette School, Columbus Elementary School, and Sabin Junior High. However, his rich and interesting neighborhood life suffered a major blow in 1924 with the death of his mother. This event, coupled with an early bout with tuberculosis, left him permanently scarred with a fear of death.

There is little information about these intervening years, but Miller reports that Bellow graduated from Tuley High School on Chicago's North West Side in 1933. A prodigy, Bellow always

wanted to become a writer. "From my earliest days I had a conviction that I was here to write certain things and so from the age of 13, I kept working on that," he told Britain's *Grardian* newspaper in 1997. In the fall of 1933 he entered the University of Chicago. But before long he realized that the campus study could only do him little help to become a writer, therefore he transferred into Northwestern University in 1935, majored in anthropology. In 1937 he received his Bachelor's degree of anthropology and sociology, and then entered the University of Wisconsin with honors to continue the graduate work on anthropology. As friendly advice, the chairman English Department told Bellow to forget his plans to study the language: "No Jew could really grasp the tradition of English literature." The famed Professor Melville J. Herskovits wanted to make a pianist out of him. Bellow insisted that his Jewish heritage be "a gift, a piece of good fortune with which one does not quarrel," but he also insisted that it is not a "Jewish" writer but an American writer who happens to be a Jew. Due to his writing inclination of descriptive language, he was suggested by his supervisor who was greatly disappointed that he was not suitable to do research in this field and would better try another, such as music. Finally Bellow gave up his study there and thus ended his student life during the Christmas vacation in 1937.

During the Christmas vacation Bellow fell in love. At the beginning of the New Year, Bellow married Anita Goshkin who was a sociologist. Bellow abandoned his postgraduate studies at Wisconsin University to become a writer. The young couple moved into his mother-in-law's flat in Ravenswood, where Bellow began to work on the manuscript of *Dangling Man* on a bridge table in the back room. He was more and more interested in literary creation and eagerly

wanted to be a writer. By 1938 he was in Chicago working on the WPA project, while during 1939 he supported himself with teaching, odd jobs, and got a job which earned him 23 dollars a week in Chicago to write biographies of writers. He began to work as an editor for *Encyclopedia Britannica's Great Book of the Western World* series in 1943.

His peaceful life of teaching and writing was interrupted by World War II. Firstly rejected by the army because of a hernia, much like Joseph, the hero of his first novel, he was at last called up for military service in the Merchant Marine of the U. S. at Sheepshead Bay. *Two Morning Monologues* and *The Mexican General* appeared in print in 1942. During this period Bellow also created and published his first novel, *Dangling Man* (1944), a story in the form of diaries depicting a man waiting to be drafted in the wartime. Bellow's anti-hero emancipated from the previous so-called hard-boiled American narrative style, and became a stereotype in his succeeding novels.

After World War II, many people who were as enthusiastic as Bellow went to universities in succession. He himself taught at various schools including the University of Minnesota, Princeton University, New York University, Bard College and the University of Chicago, leaving in 1993 to Boston University. As the reception of royalty on the book increased, teaching was no longer a means of living but an indispensable part in his life. For he had repeatedly announced that classroom was the only place where he could inspect emotions, thoughts and problems. One of his classes was on "Young Men on the Make". His advice was also invaluable to other writers, most notably William Kennedy, whom he helped to get published. "When I first talked about writing with Saul he insisted on the ability to

change, to get a serious grip on what was real in your life," said Kennedy. "He was the 20th century's literary wizard, who fused the intellect and the imagination in glorious and comic language that we'd never heard before."

Bellow's second novel, *The Victim* (1947), was an experimental achievement while he was teaching at the University of Minnesota. This novel, which was as compact and brief as the first one, was a subtle study of the relationship between a Jew and a Gentile, each of whom became the other's victim in the end. It was because of this book that Bellow was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1948. He then spent two years in Paris and traveling in Europe, where he began the creation of *The Adventures of Augie March* which was published in 1953, three years later after his coming back to the United States. In 1949 he published two more short stories, "Dora" and "Sermon By Dr. Pep," while in 1950 "The Trip to Galena" appeared. In 1950 he returned to the USA and lived in New York City and Dutchess County, New York. He taught evening courses at New York University, in Washington Square, reviewed books, wrote articles, and worked on his fiction. In the following year, 1951, he published more short stories—*Looking For Mr. Green*, *By the Rock Wall*, and *Address by Gooley McDowell to the Hasbeen's Club of Chicago*.

Though the publication of *The Adventures of Augie March* brought him wider acclaim as well as critical views, this novel won him the National Book Award for fiction in 1954 and a second Guggenheim Fellowship during 1955 to 1956. It was a picaresque story of the progress of a poor Jewish young person, in which Bellow intentionally avoided perfection of form and employed a kind of loose style for the first time. The succession of awards proved Bellow's gifts in literary



creation. And another two books, *Seize the Day* (1956), and *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), further affirmed his intelligence and resolution in writing.

Before the publication of *Seize the Day*, Bellow divorced with his wife and married another woman called Alexandra Tsachacbasov. Adam, Bellow's second son, was born of this marriage. The second marriage lasted for only four years because his wife deeply disguised the simple and crude house they were living in. Bellow had never mentioned his family privacy; however, many critics considered that he was just the protagonist in *Herzog* (1964), a middle-aged Jewish intellectual, Moses E. Herzog, whose life had come to a standstill was on the brink of suicide, writing long letters to Nietzsche, Heidegger, ex-wife Madeleine, Adlai Stevenson, and God. After pouring all Herzog's thoughts into letters Bellow notes in the last words of the book: "At this time he had no messages for anyone. Nothing. Not a single word." Critics also noted that the creation of the heroine in *Herzog* was inspired by his wife. And the sentence in that book, "two marriages, two children" was a lively account of his personal life at the time.

Bellow married Susan Alexandra Glassman in 1961, and the woman gave birth to a son called Daniel. In the same year he received an Honorary Doctor of Letters from Northwestern University. In 1963 the couple moved back to Chicago from New York and he started to teach at the University of Chicago as a professor. Reputation and prizes fell on him in succession, and his fame as a novelist spread widely. He was awarded the National Book Award for fiction once again, and another award, the International Literary Prize, for *Herzog* (1964) in 1965, becoming the first American to receive the latter