

Augie's Quest for a Stable Life in Saul Bellow's Novel 'The Adventures of Augie March'

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ABSTRACT

With appearance of his novel *The Adventures of Augie March* in 1953, Saul Bellow revived the old native picaresque technique. The hero of the novel is uprooted, homeless and is out in search of reality of life and personal and individual identity. In this novel Bellow has given a vivid portrayal of the life of an American Man. Augie is portrayed as a quester and his adventurous journey constitutes a very loosely organised pilgrimage and he expects to meet his true fate in the end. He is in search of a peaceful and happy life.

Undoubtedly, *The Adventures of Augie March* is a picaresque tale. The author has shown the hero travelling from one place to another and his journey certainly enriches his experiences. He becomes a sort of quester. He is a picaro, but with a purpose, he is out in the world. He yearns for a settled life, when the novel ends we find that he is married and while his journey is on, he learns to live with the hard and bitter truths of life.

Augie is presented by Bellow, having a violent temperament which puts him into a different category of heroes. He may come into contact with any kind of circumstances, he would never leave hope. In spite of his exposure to wicked social surroundings he is able to maintain his composed personality. Augie refuses to accept life that is wrapped in the hidden motives and actions.

In his quest for reality, Augie is not able to act according to the rules set forth by his instructors or the life style imposed on him by the society. He is being led forward by a strong faith that every adventure leads to vast meanings and hopes. Even when his efforts fetch him little, his progress cannot be obstructed.

Augie goes deep down to show the basic things that get together for the composure of a true and complete man. He stays away from the powers that lure, whether it is money or success.

Introduction

Augie rebels against the dehumanized life that surrounds him. He feels satisfied and comfortable with the essence of life which is to feel. It is due to his oversensitive nature that his mind is full of certain imaginary as well as real fears. Life poses a different meaning for him in which the love for oneself and fellow beings is primary.

Augie is a well-knit example of the innocent and adventurous American, who is excited by the prospects of life. Augie's life is full of adventures, properly arranged but these new experiences leave his life unaltered, Augie remains basically the same. Though people try to impose their personal views but Augie retains his true nature and Augie exists.

Augie is a man of strong will and determination. He is not an ordinary weak man. He leads his life and faces the difficulties with a firm mind and courage. He has a staunch faith in the dignity of man and holiness of feelings. He wins the battle against the selfish modern and money oriented society.

In Bellow's novels the chief protagonist appears as a pilgrim and a quester. The author's mind is more occupied with the higher and more serious questions of life. Augie like other heroes suffers from a minority status. Augie is financially a failure. He seeks unrestrained joy. He strives for higher values of life like feeling of love, sympathy, friendship and brotherhood. His own conscience is his guide that leads him towards happy life. Polonius' advice to Laertes rings through the mind of the Bellow hero:

*"This, above all, to thine own self be true.
And it must follow as the night the day
thou canst not then be false to any man."
(Hamlet Act-I Sc. III, 78-80.)*

Augie always able to overcome the difficulties in his path. He looks for the renewal of human mind. The novel takes a circular form in which change comes across smoothly, to alter the model.

*'.... for such separate person
too, every one beginning with
Eden and passing through the
trammels, pains, distortions and
death into the darkness out of
which it is hinted. We may hope
to enter permanently into the
beginning'. (84).*

For Augie the most significant job is to secure independent future. Augie finds it tough to cope with the demands of love because the love of others always restricts his search for unique self. He remains untouched by the vices of the city. His adventures make him very much humane. He takes others' burden on his own shoulders. But still he is unable to get religious credit as he cannot adjust his uncommon self, though selfless with common desire, he fails to attain his objective as

he is unable to bring his objective as he enable to bring his insight closer to the way of life, Mintouchean one of his Instructors pinpoints his dilemma in the following words:

'... You must take your chance on what you are and you can't sit still. I know this double poser, that if you make a move you may lode but if you sit still you will decay. But what will you? You will not invent better than God or nature or turn yourself into the man who lacks on gift or development.... before you make a move'. (485).

We never find Augie inactive. He understands the fact very well that quest is never finished over. The life goes on. H.W. Longfellow says in the following quatrain:

*'Let us then be up and doing.
With a heart for any fate.
Still aspiring, still pursuing
Learn to labour and to wait.'²
(A Psalm of Life)*

In the world's vast field of struggle for life Augie appears both as a picaro and pilgrim. He tries to find some facts of a perfect life. He never feels frustrated. Augie's freshness and fertility is replica of Saul Bellow's own vast range of feelings. He is able to carry himself very well through tough times of his life. Augie possesses a strong spirit that in the end transforms his life. His adventurous soul and restless mind find it inevitable to ignore the call of unknown things. Even when he faces failure, he never keeps back.

Paper

In *The Adventures of Augie March* Saul Bellow has presented different aspects and a clear picture of the American life. He has satirised 'the American ways of life with Anti-romantic narrations and comic presentation of life.

Augie's vastness and his refusal to lead a hopeless life lead to several adventures, which form the foundation of the novel. His journey effects his future. Augie's character is not simply a thread on which series of events are strung as usually is seen in picaresque novels. Actually it is his character that effects these events. Augie enjoys experience with its boundless variety. He thinks that the principle of life is to act and not merely to think. He observes life around him with keenness. He tries to grasp all opportunities, which are endless.

While writing the novel Saul Bellow drifts away from the usual details of a well written novel. He tries to make out a form based on freely moving hero's mental state and developing mind. He realizes that his earlier style was narrow so he moulded the form to match his state of mind. His unwillingness to lose his freedom is clearly reflected in Augie's behaviour. He revolted against the repressive and restrictive form. He himself remarks that, in *The Adventures of Augie March*,

'I kicked over the traces,

*wrote catch as catch can,
picaresque, I took my chance..
The great pleasures of the book
was that it came easily. All I
had to do was to be there with
buckets to catch it that's why
the form is loose.'³*

It is doubtless that *The Adventures of Augie March* is not a picaresque in the absolute form though it shows resemblance to commonly understood picaresque novel. But when the novel is studied critically and analytically it comes out that it is more akin to the Bildungsroman. Different from 'The Dangling man', 'The victim and Seize the day', which are specifically set in Chicago and New York. *The Adventures of Augie March* does not confine its action to any particular place. Augie is an American. 'Chicago born-Chicago, that somber city – and go at things as I have taught myself, free life style and will make the record in my own way I first to knock, first admitted, sometimes an innocent knock sometimes a not so innocent'. (3) He stresses upon his upbringing in Chicago. But as he grows up he enters into wider circles and surroundings of experience and increases the area of his acquaintances in his own way.

Augie's Adventures take him to New York, Mexico City, Paris and several other places. His character is continuously moulded by the change of scene of action. We find that his personality goes under an apparent change when he goes through Mexico. But in spite of his varied and diverse experiences at several places that he faces, his quest is definitely aimed at his own person.

The change that the hero tries to find out through his experience is not in his surroundings but in his own self. He is looking for sources of firmness in his life and keenly responds to his experiences with the attitude of an adventurer. His adventures are similar to those of a wanderer, who moves about without any specific direction. He moves on and on gaining knowledge through experience.

Augie March finally acknowledges that reality is so complex and intricate that it is not possible to explain it properly or no exact definition exists to explain it. In the beginning of chapter XIII he tells us: 'I was no child now, neither in age nor in protectedness and I was thrown for fair on the free spinning of the world. If you think and some do, that continual intimacy, familiarity and love can result in falsehood, this being thrown on the world may be a very desirable, even if sad thing'. (285) He further acquaints us with his changed general views:

*'You do all you can to humanize
and familiarize the world and
suddenly it becomes more strange
than ever. The livings are not
what they were, the dead die
again and again and at last for
good I see this now. At that
time not.'⁽²⁸⁵⁾*

The opening chapters of *The Adventures of Augie March* present a world which we find is quite similar to Bellow's earlier fiction. It shows that the hero is a self-styled philosopher. Augie resides in a dirty neighbourhood. He is a Jewish character not because of his beliefs but because he is shown so and troubled

asa Jew by gangsters of the area. He is surrounded by hostile people who ill-treat the weak and the unlucky.

He is innocent and is master of a true heart. He appears before us doing variety of jobs at different times. He goes through the novel coming across both good and evil characters. He is portrayed as a petty thief, a tramp, a salesman, a labour, organiser, a ladies man and finally we find him settling as a husband. At the beginning he comes into contact with Jimmy Klein and they both commit several thefts. They remain undetected, when he commits thefts with other men in a departmental store where he is employed. But finally they are caught and the one reports to the Grand Ma. Grand Ma Lausch, Einhorn and Renlings were his instructors. Grand Ma used to teach Augie a lot as to avoid mistakes.

After leaving Jimmy, 'William Rinhorn was the first superior man I knew'. (71) After leaving him he meets Mrs. Renlings who desires to adopt him. Then Augie meets Joe Corman and is caught as he is associated with Poley gang. He also meets Padilla who is good at thieving and he tells Augie to be more realistic and suggests to keep up with the times.

Augie's innocent mind and heart face severe blows when his engagement stands broken with Lucy Magnus, on account of his involvement with Mini Villars, who has loose character Bellow has presented a very painful fact of modern life, where the family relations get worse due to misunderstandings between love and sex. Augie gets involved with number of females, Mimi Villars, Thea, Stella are some of them.

Mimi Villars represents American girl in her conduct and style. She breaks her relations with Hooker Frazeras she refuses to conceive a baby. Augie comes to her rescue. This effects his personal life and he is never pardoned for this. Mrs. Thea also leads an unscrupulous life. She develops relation with Augie while seeking divorce from her husband. Augie leaves for Mexico in her company and he confesses:

...., but now that I was in love with her I understood much better what I myself wanted' (318). But he soon gets tired of her interests and gets interested in Stella and separates from Thea. Augie goes away with Stella and they develop physical relations. There is certainly a common bond between the two. Stella unfolds a truth that has been hanging around Augie. She clearly tells him that he is a person who easily fits into people's schemes. Augie did fit into others schemes. He feels that Stella is the kind of woman who would never try to estimate him. He was tired of being hit by judgments. Towards the end he marries Stella to settle down in Paris. At this moment he becomes a quester in search of peaceful, happy and stable life. The picaro emerges as a pilgrim journeying to achieve some higher values. Augie turns a new leaf in his life. He and Stella are finally tied in the silken chords of love and affection.

The novel ends with Augie's first step towards understanding of self, but the gist of the novel makes it very clear to us that Augie has learnt from his experiences. The incidents that happen in his life make him to think and thus enlightening his soul and consciousness. His hateful attitude towards social obligations is certainly altered by an, insight into its artificiality.

The vastly scattered and purposeless quality of Augie's quest shows to a large extent the free wandering form of the novel. The nature of theme shows the discovery of an organizing principle in a series of carelessly connected

episodes. Augie is a passive character. Goldberg makes a valid remark in this context in one of his essays on Augie:

*"Unlike boat picaresque heroes Augie is basically a passive character. He is a drifter who falls into situation and when they become untenable, he either votes himself out or circumstances conspire to force his withdrawal."*⁴

Conclusion

If Bellow's heroes like Augie start with disgrace and humiliation, they are humble as the novel moves towards a closing. Unlike other picaresque protagonists Augie does some introspection thus enlightening his inner landscape for us. When he looks into the depths of life, he finds that freedom is everything that he yearns for.

Bellow has given clear portrayal of the city people in *The Adventures of Augie March*. Augie's father is not known. He is in search of a father figure and meets Einhorn on the way. He comes across groups of swindlers, cheats, rogues and thieves. The reason of the increasing anti-social crimes in the American society is the expanding materialism.

Augie appears as a picaro exposing his own weaknesses which further reflect the diseased society around him. He is a traveller out on a never ending journey in search of the real meaning of life. Thus revealing the truth about Augie and the kind of society he represents.

The journey that he undertakes is spatial and episodic. Augie is baseless and shuffles from one place to other. Augie, though a weak and an ordinary American, towards the end comes up as a pilgrim, strongly making his way through mysterious world. He learns from the errors he commits and his experiences of life are certainly enriched. During the course of his journey he comes across hard and bitter truths of life. He feels that his quest has not reached its end and he is still questing. He feels that certain facts of ideal life are revealed to him. Augie says that his quest is not over. He looks forward to reach some unknown land or some new land. What he yearns for is revealed to him.

Though, Augie's quest is not very intense one as it is in the case of Bellow's Henderson and Herzog. But Augie certainly is out as a quester and his pilgrimage comprises of numerous episodes. He hopes that finally the truth of life will be revealed to him. He is portrayed as a picaro throughout the novel. He has a character which is prone to vices. He is surrounded by evil and weak characters.

Innumerable he misses to take advantage of the opportunities that life puts forth him. He is without any firm center and moves on to gain experiences that add to his knowledge. Though his quest has not still been able to reach its destination but the truth of life certainly dawns upon him. As he settles down with Stella his quest for peaceful and happy life is fulfilled.

Augie explains his philosophy of life with the help of 'axial line' He feels that, 'Truth, love, peace, bounty, usefulness, harmony can be realized once all exertions' (454). He holds that the perception of axial lines needs no specific training.

".... At any time life can come together again and man be regenerated"(454).

Towards the end of the novel Augie is regenerated. He decides to build an orphanage. He will channelize his energies

and dedicate his capabilities to the less fortunate. He no longer treads the path of idleness. Now he walks erect and dignified. He now begins to think and speak straight.

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