



THE JOURNEY TOWARD IDENTITY: SELF-DISCOVERY IN SAUL BELLOW'S THE ADVENTURES OF AUGIE MARCH

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ABSTRACT

Saul Bellow's (1915-2005) novel, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), is a classic of modern American literature and a work about exploration of personal freedom, identity and self-discovery. The novel is based on the life of Depression era American Augie March, a young man who opposes the societal norms that attempt to define him and who looks for meaning and self-definition throughout his life. Rather than fitting into a well-defined role assigned him by his family, by society, by the economy, Augie is open to the many possibilities that life offers and has a variety of jobs, loves and experiences that help him develop his sense of self. This study is concerned with the theme of 'self-discovery' as it has been evolved by Augie's psychological, social and philosophical growth. Using the concept of identity formation and existential thought as the lens to look through, this paper will explore the impact of Augie's various mentors, friends and lovers on his sense of self and how they reject the notions of success and belonging of others. The study also considers the influence of class, culture, immigration and the American Dream on Augie's personal identity, and how these factors may complicate his personal identity. The study suggests that Bellow's notion of identity is not fixed and determined but dynamic and continuous process of development, choice and introspection. Augie's resistance to giving up his independence is a modern individual's defense of authenticity in a quickly changing society. His is a story of finding himself by defying the norms of society and the expectations of success, defying by failing, failing by trying again, trying again by failing again, the process of trial and error. *The Adventures of Augie March* ultimately is about human ability to regenerate, and it is about identity always being in process due to experience, relationship, and agency. Throughout the novel, Saul Bellow has worked on Augie's attempt to insight him, and he has left a fine commentary on the details of life in the contemporary world and the attempt at self-revelation. This paper aims to shed light on Bellow's humanistic approach to this novel and its relevance to the discussion of identity, freedom and the construction of self in the contemporary times.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout all of modern literature, identity has been one of the biggest issues, and the individual's ongoing journey to comprehend the self in the intricacies of society, culture and history. In particular, 20th century American fiction discusses the problems of self-definition in a rapidly changing world of industrialisation, urbanisation, immigration and changing social values. Saul Bellow is one of those great American novelists that has been probing such questions, the human spirit, individuality and the search for meaning, in great depth. His novels depict characters caught in existential dilemmas and endeavour to find true identities in the face of the pressures of modern life. One of Saul Bellow's most acclaimed novels and a classic in American literature, *Augie March* was published in 1953. The novel is set predominantly during the Great Depression, and is the story of Augie March, a young man from a poor, Jewish immigrant family in Chicago, who are living life and discovering what it means to be. Augie does not go through any pre-determined experiences, but travels through a series of personal, social and professional experiences, encountering a variety of humanity, culture and philosophies. His road trip is a journey of universal human aspirations for self-determination, a journey of breaking free from the limitations of class, convention and society.

Many times the novel has been referred to as a Bildungsroman, a novel that follows the intellectual, emotional and moral growth of Augie as an adult. The common coming of age story ends with a person's assimilation into society, which is significant and antithetical to Bellow's writing. In Bellow, identity is an ever-changing reality - not static but evolving and subject to new interpretations. By not following the roles he is made evident as being a believer in personal freedom and the concept of personal autonomy or independence. He is coming into contact with mentors, friends, lovers and employers, and he is beginning to understand human nature and the intricacies of human motivation. Bellow's exploration of identity is not just at the personal level, but also includes more cultural and philosophical topics. Augie is a "mixed-race" child of Jewish parents, who grows up in a multi-cultural society and grapples with the problems of ethnicity, social mobility and belonging in American society. His experiences are a reflection of the aspirations and fear of the American dream and even speak to its lack. Identity also relates to the historical context, culture, economy and social interactions in the novel.

The theme of self-discovery is explored in this study, through psychological, social and existential viewpoints, as Augie's character evolves in order to discover himself. It takes into account the idea of a "true" self that he attained through his experiences and Bellow's humanistic notion of man's freedom and his growth. But the paper challenges Bellow's idea of identity as a life-long process instead of a conclusion, and it is suggested that it can be found only in openness to experience, to introspection and to uncertainty. From this vantage point, the *Adventures of Augie March* is a book of import, meant to instruct the Modern quest for meaning in life, and to give meaning to life in this world.

SAUL BELLOW: LIFE, WORKS, AND LITERARY VISION

Saul Bellow (1915-2005) was an American novelist and writer, one of the most influential novelists of the 20th century and a study into the themes of identity and human consciousness, as well as modern life and its various aspects. Bellow was born to Russian Jewish immigrants and was raised in Lachine, Quebec and Chicago, where his multicultural upbringing and experiences had a profound influence. His major works include *Dangling Man* (1944), *The Victim* (1947), *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), *Seize the Day* (1956), *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), *Herzog* (1964), *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), and *Humboldt's Gift* (1975). He has been honored

with many awards for his exceptional achievements in literature such as the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1976. The humanistic theme permeates Bellow's writing and centers on the quest for identity, freedom and meaning in a complex and alienating world for the individual. His protagonists have to contend with existential choice and moral questions as they seek to maintain their authenticity and moral sense amidst cultural and social challenges. Instead of the identity being static and already decided, Bellow suggests the process of identity formation as one of personal experiences and relationships and conscious choices. The Adventures of Augie March is an example of Bellow's philosophy that an individual is not static, but constantly changing, of the strength of character and courage to get through life's turbulence, and, of the necessity to face the uncertainties of living.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON IDENTITY FORMATION

The identity is how the person refers to himself or herself; it includes beliefs, values, culture, roles in society and life experiences. It does not exist as a static but as a dynamic quality which continually interacts with society and environment. Self-discovery, which is tightly linked with identity, is all of the process of seeking one's way of life, hopes, powers and intentions. Identification may be witnessed in literature if a character struggles with himself/herself, strangers, or with his/her life and develops a deeper sense of identity. The theme of identity and self-discovery is the main theme of Saul Bellow's The Adventures of Augie March. While Augie takes the path of social roles, his interactions with others, experiences and choices shape his identity, he does not accept and embrace the norms of social roles and instead explores the road of self-definition. His tale is one of the discovery of self, and not for the purpose of material wealth, or the acceptance of a social role, but for self-reflection, self-sufficiency, and a willingness to take risks. Bellow's theme, then, is identity as a process of growth and development, and of self-determination and authenticity as part of the search for a meaningful life.

The psychological, sociological and philosophical theories have been applied to describe how people develop their sense of self (their identity). Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of development sees the development of identity as a key developmental area for individuals to engage in the negotiation of personal values, social expectations and life goals in order to arrive at a coherent sense of identity. The same applies to James Marcia's identity status theory, which adds an element of exploration and commitment to the identity concept. From a sociological perspective, people's identities are formed by cultural norms, family, social institutions and interpersonal relationships, while existential thinkers, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Søren Kierkegaard have claimed that identity is constructed through free choice, freedom, and responsibility rather than through a predetermined social role. These are theoretical perspectives that help to understand Saul Bellow's The Adventures of Augie March. The process of Augie's self-development is an ongoing process that is linked to existential issues in freedom and self. He rejects the identities that society, family and the economy assign to him and each time he makes a decision or has an experience, he redefines himself. In these scenes, Bellow highlights the importance of personal agency, resilience and authenticity when defining a sense of self, as it is an ongoing process of self-discovery.

AUGIE MARCH'S QUEST FOR SELF-IDENTITY

Augie March's quest for self-identity is the central theme of Saul Bellow's The Adventures of Augie March. As a kid in an impoverished Jewish immigrant family in Chicago, Augie comes across hardship, expectations, and various influences all vying for his future. But he isn't willing

to stick to certain roles or definitions of success. Rather, he goes on a series of personal and professional journeys that self-learns from and keep him independent and individual. He has interacted with mentors, bosses, friends and partners, all of which helped shape his self-knowledge, but none of them has taken the place of him. Throughout the novel Augie's progress shows that self-identity is never gained by conforming to society or by obtaining material success, but by constant exploration, reflection and choice. He is open to uncertainty and willing to take risks in learning from both success and failure, which is in keeping with Bellow's understanding of identity as a lifelong journey of growth. As Augie challenges the norm and embraces new experiences, he slowly finds a sense of belonging to himself. In his character, Bellow says that the search for identity isn't a journey toward an end point, but a constant process of self-formation via freedom, resilience, and life.

INDIVIDUALISM AND THE SEARCH FOR FREEDOM

The Adventures of Augie March is a novel based on the idea of freedom and individualism. In the book, all along, Augie defies the expectations of his family, his society and his leaders that try to tell him what to do. He prefers to defy conventional career paths to success, rather than taking what's offered. He has shared his desire to try new jobs, relationships, and life experiences that demonstrate his desire to build an identity on his own terms, not along the social lines. Bellow speaks of freedom as key to self discovery: "True individuality" takes courage, responsibility and openness to change. Augie's adventures are a testament to the fact that personal freedom isn't just the lack of external obstacles, it's the choice of what values and purpose you want to set for yourself. His decision making process may result in uncertainty and failures, but ultimately he grows in his personal development and self-awareness. In Augie's adventures Bellow confirms that freedom is a quest for identity as well.

THE INFLUENCE OF FAMILY, SOCIETY, AND CULTURE ON IDENTITY

Family, society and culture play significant roles in the development of Augie's identity in The Adventures of Augie March. Growing up in a poor immigrant Jewish family in Chicago, Augie suffers economic difficulties, family pressure, and a variety of social pressures. He does not accept a given identity however, and embraces a range of experiences, relationships and opportunities. His Jewish cultural identity and American social context gives him a multiplicity of social identities, and his interactions with diverse peoples and social classes would help him to develop all of them. In these experiences, Augie comes to understand the ways in which he must balance cultural inheritance with personal freedom. Bellow thus defines identity as a process, a phenomenon that is constructed through family, society, and culture, but ultimately determined by personal decisions and self-discovery.

EXISTENTIAL DIMENSIONS OF SELF-DISCOVERY

The search for meaning, freedom and authenticity in life is an existential element of self-discovery in The Adventures of Augie March. His resistance to family, society and conventional identities has led him to make his own choices. His experiences, uncertainties, relationships, and failures challenge his life's purpose and direction. The existential concept that people can make meaning through their choices and actions is captured in Augie's openness to uncertainty. Bellow thus suggests that self-discovery is an ongoing journey of freedom, responsibility, and personal development in which Augie increasingly comes to understand himself.

THE AMERICAN DREAM AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

In Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* the American dream is significant in the formation of personal identity. Augie's life is shaped by a poor Jewish immigrant family and a pervasive sense that the economic success and social mobility will lead to a better life. But he does not wholeheartedly embrace the definition of success that is standard in his society: that success is measured in terms of wealth, status, and social recognition. His experiences with different people and occupations allow him to question these expectations and develop his own understanding of achievement. So the American dream is an opportunity and a challenge in Augie's quest for identity.

Augie's story is an example of how personal identity is not one that can be acquired through material success or social standards. He is looking for chances to move on, but he values independence, freedom and experiences. He does not follow fixed paths, and he wants to build up an identity according to individual choice. In Bellow, the American Dream is a multifaceted phenomenon with a greater emphasis on personal freedom than on achieving the normal standards of success. Ultimately Augie's self-discovery seems to imply that one's identity is shaped by experience, choices and having the courage to follow a personal path.

RELATIONSHIPS AND THE FORMATION OF THE SELF

Relationships in Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* are important factors that help to form Augie's sense of self. He meets a variety of values, expectations, and lifestyles while interacting with members of his family, mentors, friends, coworkers, and lovers. Instead of this, Augie learns through the relationships, but remains independent. Each encounter is a step to deepening his knowledge of humanity and his decision-making. His encounters with others are thus meaningful experiences that he considers in terms of his desires, values and belongingness. In these diverse relationships, Augie slowly comes to understand that identity is a process of ongoing interaction with others and of self-reflection. There are certain relationships that have a positive effect on him, and others that show the restrictions of social expectations and dependence. As he takes in experience, he doesn't give up his own identity and that increases his sense of autonomy. Bellow, therefore, does not offer relationships as forces which merely specify the subject matter, but as experiences that prompt questioning, growth, and recollection of the subject, and continual reconfiguration of it.

PSYCHOLOGICAL GROWTH AND PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

The psychological development of Augie is at the heart of Saul Bellow's novel, *The Adventures of Augie March*. His life of poverty, uncertainty, relationships and social pressures slowly forge his emotional and intellectual development. Augie doesn't take identities that are thrust upon him; he is a man of reflection and learning from his successes and failures. Every new experience reinforces his sense of the values, wants and his own distinct personality. This transformation of Augie is a progressive one, not an instant one. By having a willingness to try out something different he is able to grow more independent, resilient and self aware. As Bellow's experience, reflection and choice change him, he implies that personal identity is constantly transformed. Ultimately, Augie shows that psychological development is achieved by the person's willingness to face uncertainty and his/her own responsibility to build an authentic and meaningful life.

BELLOW'S HUMANISTIC VISION OF IDENTITY

The Adventures of Augie March is a work that is fundamentally devoted to humanistic visions of identity. Bellow depicts the person as a complicated human being who can make a choice, change and grow. Here, Augie's life shows that identity is not preordained by family lineage, financial situation, society's expectations or culture. Rather, it is formed in the lived events,

relations, reflection and individual decisions. In Bellow's humanistic perspective, the individual's worth and dignity are stressed in the landscape of modern society.

Bellow also explores the relationship of identity to individual freedom and personal responsibility. Augie doesn't want to follow a predetermined course set by others and is always looking at alternate paths he could take in life. He meets with mentors, friends, employers, and lovers, who help him understand himself, but none of them really defines him. These experiences help him learn to make his own choices and to deal with the uncertainty that comes with freedom. Bellow, therefore, argues that one becomes authentic when he or she plays an active role in creating his or her own life, rather than merely living it out to the extent that it has been predigested and packaged into a social role.

Resilience and self-renewal are also hallmarks of Bellow's humanistic perspective. Augie finds himself struggling, failing and feeling uncertain but this is a catalyst for his psychology and personal development. The lessons he learned on this trip demonstrate that human beings are able to change their plans and create a new course. Identity is not seen as a completed state, but rather as a process. This is Bellow's belief that people have the capacity to change themselves, once again if they learn from experience and take charge.

Moreover, Bellow casts doubt on the concept of a meaningful identity in material success. While Augie experiences values based around the American Dream, he does not live his life solely in terms of social standing or wealth. Personal freedom, positive experiences and personal identity take precedence over accepted goals of success. Bellow's presentation of the humanistic view on life, through Augie, is that individuals are worth more than following the social norm.

Finally, Bellow's humanistic vision depicts identity as a process that is ongoing, individual and dynamic. Augie's experiences show that people are influenced by their families, society, culture, relationships and history, but also have the freedom to make choices about how they adapt to such influences. The Adventures of Augie March thus honors the individual's power to discover meaning, to transcend his or her constraints, and to constantly reinvent him or herself. Bellow's character Augie is an example of the importance of freedom, experience, resilience, and constant search for self-understanding for the creation of true identity.

CONCLUSION

In Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*, the search for identity, freedom and meaning is an ongoing process that is a quest for the self-discovery of a person. Through Augie's experiences, it is learned that identity is not an ingrained or fixed trait of any family, society, culture, class or economic condition. Rather, it is cultivated through personal decisions, relationships, problems and experiences. He doesn't accept a definition of success and so he considers other options and starts to learn what he would like to value and aspire to. It is shown that the psychological, social, cultural and existential aspects of a person's life are interrelated in the process of shaping Augie's identity. His ties to the family, his mentors, friends and lovers offer significant experiences for his personal development, and his cultural heritage and the American Dream pose other challenges in his quest for belonging and individuality. He is not afraid of uncertainty and this is an indication of his personal freedom and authenticity. Bellow's humanistic perspective comes down to the individual's ability to grow, to be tough and to renew. Augie doesn't achieve a solid identity, but rather he is constantly redefining himself by experience and choice. His journey, then, is a story of self-discovery, defying expectations and norms of society, and finding success in one's own way. In this way *The Adventures of Augie March* is still very much an important study of identity and the search for life's value and personal authenticity of today's adult.

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