

# *Jewishness Reflected in Herzog*

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**Abstract:** Saul Bellow, a prominent American Jewish writer, maintains a steadfast commitment to Jewish traditions as a second-generation American Jew. So the study of Bellow's Jewishness constitutes a significant aspect of analyzing his novels. *Herzog* is widely acclaimed as Bellow's masterpiece that intricately delves into the cultural characteristics of the Jewish people, serving as a quintessential manifestation of Bellow's profound Jewish consciousness. This paper systematically analyzes Jewishness embodied in *Herzog* from the two perspectives: Jewish archetype Moses and the Jewish motifs of vagrancy and return in order to explore Bellow's inheritance of Jewish culture.

## 1. Introduction

Saul Bellow is an outstanding representative of modern American Jewish writers. Bellow's novels enjoy a high reputation among readers and literary circles. His novel *Herzog* is recognized as his best work. Published in 1964, the novel truly depicts the depression and bewilderment of the middle-class intellectuals in western society represented by Herzog, and skillfully views the living conditions of modern Jews through the Jewish tradition. This paper will analyze the connection between the protagonist and the Jewish archetype Moses and explore the Jewish motifs of vagrancy and return in the novel, so as to interpret the rich Jewishness contained in the novel. It can be said that Bellow's works have his unique thinking as a Jew. Hidden Jewish characteristics and Jewish culture between the lines show Bellow's deep attachment to Jewish culture.

## 2. Jewishness

As a decentralized yet cohesive ethno-cultural entity, the Jewish nation manifests discernible national characteristics, collectively referred to as "Jewishness". This phenomenon denotes the objectively existing cultural identity of the Jewish people, portraying a distinctive set of traits that have been presented to the global community. Jewishness generally has two meanings: the first one refers to "the unique cultural character and national traits of the Jewish people, which are formed by the Jews through thousands of years of historical evolution, and Jewishness is precipitated from the combination of Biblical allusions, Jewish beliefs, and ethics and morals" [1]. The second level refers to the relationship between Jewish culture and Jewish culture consciously expressed by individual Jewish culture, which is manifested in literature as "the specific processing and utilization of various Jewish elements and resources by the creative subject in the process of creation, thus the Jewish quality is synthesized in his literary works, which is a kind of Jewish cultural character that is different

from that of heterogeneous cultures” [2]. The first meaning of Jewishness constitutes the most basic attribute of individual Jewish consciousness, while the second meaning is the result of individuals projecting their Own Jewish consciousness into their works. It is just the goal of this paper to explore this special Jewish cultural character in the novel *Herzog*.

### 3. Jewish archetype—Herzog and Moses

The archetype functions as a steadfast element within the broader literary spectrum, encompassing imagery, characters, plot conflicts, and narrative structures. It constitutes the collective unconsciousness of a nation, embedded within cultural traditions and human nature. The employment of Jewish archetypes within literary works serves as a representation of the latent elements within Jewish historical culture or classical Jewish literature. In the context of *Herzog*, an examination of the protagonist, Herzog Moses, reveals explicit textual clues and warrants a deeper analysis of the inherent connections. This scrutiny elucidates an inseparable correlation between Herzog Moses and the biblical Moses, underscoring Bellow’s deliberate and thoughtful engagement with Jewish cultural nuances.

#### 3.1 Clues in the Text

The protagonist bears the full name Herzog Elkanah Moses, a nomenclature imbued with profound religious connotations. The inclusion of the middle name “Elkanah”, representing righteousness in biblical contexts, signifies an attribute either crafted or achieved by divine intervention. Furthermore, the overt reference to Moses, a pivotal biblical figure, underscores the protagonist’s religious essence. Bellow’s deliberate choice of such a name suggests a pronounced affinity with Jewish cultural intricacies, unveiling a nuanced exploration of the protagonist’s potential success and historical responsibilities mirroring those of the biblical Moses.

Remarkably, multiple clues within the narrative intricately link Herzog Moses to his biblical counterpart. The initial indicator lies in the allegorical reference to the plague of Egypt when Herzog, perusing a psychiatrist’s compilation of paranoia traits, remarks, “I put the scribbled paper in my wallet and studied it like the plague of Egypt” [3]. Drawing a parallel with biblical narratives, particularly the Exodus account, wherein Moses endeavors to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt, encounters vehement opposition from Pharaoh, and witnesses divine intervention in the form of ten calamitous events, including the referenced plague.

The second discernible clue emerges in *Herzog* through the depiction of external allure and internal quandaries. Herzog, invited to a supper by his paramour Ramona, encounters a scene infused with Egyptian music, reminiscent of Moses’ experiences in the *Bible*. Drawing parallels, Moses, adopted and elevated to princely status by the Egyptians, succumbs to the seduction of wealth and privilege, mirroring Herzog’s susceptibility to the captivating Ramona. In Herzog’s case, the enchanting Ramona becomes an irresistible temptation, leading him to momentarily lose sight of his responsibilities. His assertion to Ramona, “Developing the psychology of a runaway slave” [3], coupled with his request to silence the Egyptian music, signifies an internal conflict akin to Moses’ struggle when faced with the revelation of his true Hebrew identity in the *Bible*. This spiritual turmoil is further manifested in Herzog’s poignant contemplation during his visit to Ramona’s residence. Similar to Moses’ predicament, Herzog grapples with conflicting emotions. On one hand, he acknowledges the affection bestowed upon him by Pharaoh, while on the other, as a descendant of the Hebrews, he grapples with the incongruity of being a prince in an adversarial land. Faced with this dilemma, Herzog, like Moses, refrains from returning to Pharaoh’s palace. The inner conflict experienced by Herzog extends beyond personal strife, reflecting a broader existential anguish. Observing a societal erosion of virtues and the prevalence of cynicism, Herzog despairs at the

perceived lack of warmth and genuine connections among people. His candid declarations highlight a disillusionment with societal values, as he questions the authenticity of democracy and freedom, deeming them illusory. This introspective journey parallels Moses' historical torment, as both figures navigate spiritual tribulations—Moses contemplating the development of his nation, and Herzog endeavoring to devise a solution for the regeneration of a morally degraded human race.

The third pivotal element surfaces in Herzog's concluding journey, marked by the resounding declaration, "Here I am, Hineni!" [3] This phrase holds profound significance in biblical contexts, where individuals called by God unfailingly respond with "Hineni." In the narrative of Moses, the divine encounter occurs through a burning bush, compelling Moses to turn aside and witness the inexplicable sight. God, addressing "Moses!Moses!" from the burning bush, elicits the response, "Here I am," [4] signaling Moses' acceptance of the formidable responsibility of leading the Israelites out of Egypt. Similarly, Herzog, engrossed in introspective contemplation, culminates his arduous journey with the echoing cry of "Hineni." This poignant utterance reflects his profound commitment to a divine calling, reminiscent of Moses' unwavering resolve to heed God's task. Herzog's choice of "Hineni" becomes a symbolic reaffirmation, mirroring Moses' initial reluctance overcome by divine encouragement, ultimately leading him to embark on the monumental journey entrusted to him. In both instances, the resonance of "Hineni" encapsulates a transformative surrender to a higher purpose, exemplifying an unwavering dedication to a divine calling despite initial doubts and tribulations.

In essence, Bellow strategically weaves these narrative elements to establish a profound connection between Herzog Moses and the biblical Moses, portraying thematic parallels that delve into spiritual struggles, external temptations and a resolute commitment to a higher calling.

### 3.2 Inner Connections

The connections between Herzog and Moses within the novel are not only embodied in the above explicit clues, but also reflected in some subtle and concealed dimensions. As an illustrative instance, consider the parallel circumstances of two individuals born to Jewish parentage yet maturing within foreign cultural contexts. The biblical Moses, nurtured amidst the Egyptian aristocracy, finds a contemporary counterpart in Moses Herzog, whose upbringing unfolds within the confines of the American academic sphere. Noteworthy is the shared resistance to assimilation observed in both figures, coupled with an enduring passion for their respective hometowns. This renders Moses Herzog a discernible modern iteration, echoing the archetype of Moses in the *Bible*.

Moses holds a pivotal and decisive role in the historical narrative of the Jewish people, particularly emphasized in the biblical account of Exodus. Exodus in the *Bible* receives unparalleled attention, depicting Moses as the instrumental leader under God's guidance, orchestrating the arduous journey of the Israelites towards the promised land of Canaan over forty years. Notably, Moses assumes a central role in the promulgation of the renowned Ten Commandments, a foundational moment for the establishment of Judaism, often referred to as Moshism during his era. Beyond being a religious progenitor, Moses emerges as a transformative figure, steering the Israelites away from the oppressive rule of the Egyptian Pharaohs. The Exodus led by Moses holds profound significance in Jewish history, representing a critical juncture where the nation's survival hinged on Moses' leadership. In the contextualization of Saul Bellow's work, Moses Herzog is intricately woven into this historical tapestry, serving as a literary extension of the biblical Moses. Bellow, through this parallelism, bestows upon the protagonist a comparable responsibility, aligning him with the historical Moses and emphasizing the recurrent theme of a leader shouldering the weighty task of safeguarding the entire nation during pivotal moments in their collective history.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, America witnessed a surge in material affluence, marking an era of prosperity and improved living standards. The 1960s unfolded as a tumultuous

period, characterized by the Cold War, the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. Within Herzog's letters, a stark portrayal of societal disillusionment emerges, challenging the democratic ideal and highlighting pervasive social issues. Democracy, as depicted by Herzog, becomes a deceptive illusion, contributing to a proliferation of collective misconduct, a widening scope of criminal activities, escalating materialistic demands and a diminishing value of individual worth. Herzog's existential angst, however, is not solely rooted in intellectual concerns but is deeply intertwined with the tenets of his Jewish cultural heritage. The moral code and belief system ingrained in Jewish culture serve as Herzog's implicit criteria for evaluating the external world. Central to Judaism is the notion of a covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people, symbolized by practices such as circumcision and the adherence to the "Ten Commandments." This contractual bond signifies a reciprocal obligation, where God's commitment aligns closely with the responsibilities bestowed upon the chosen people. Echoing the consciousness of the chosen people, Herzog recognizes the sanctity of life, considering it a gift from God that cannot be casually relinquished. This awareness is evident in his acknowledgment of a contractual tie with God, as expressed in his belief in brotherhood: "I really believe that brotherhood is what makes a man human. If I owe God a human life, this is where I fall down. Man lives not by Self alone but in his brother's face.... Each shall behold the Eternal Father and love and joy abound" [3]. In the face of an increasingly disconcerting societal landscape, Herzog grapples with a fundamental question: How should a virtuous individual navigate this tumultuous existence? Confronted by the erosion of humanistic values in a society dominated by material pursuits, Herzog issues a poignant lament. He questions the worthiness of his own existence and bemoans the loss of humanity in the face of materialism. This introspective cry reflects both Herzog's personal turmoil, shaped by the disintegration of his family, and Saul Bellow's broader philosophical perplexities. Bellow, viewing the world through the prism of Jewish moral principles, channels Herzog's existential angst as a fervent cry echoing the moral agitation inherent in Jewish culture.

How should one live? What kind of life is truly worthwhile? How can man truly live freely? The perennial inquiry into the essence of a worthwhile existence and the pursuit of genuine freedom transcends epochs. Millennia ago, Moses, summoned by divine calling, led the Hebrews out of Egypt to Canaan, symbolizing a quest for true freedom. In the contemporary era, Moses Herzog faces a distinct challenge. Amidst the complexities of modern historical circumstances and the tumultuous currents of society, individuals find themselves akin to enslaved Hebrews, deprived of their intrinsic freedom and alienated. The modern Moses, within this impetuous landscape, endeavors tirelessly to ameliorate the collective human condition and grapples with solutions to the predicaments befalling modern humanity. Unlike Moses in the *Bible*, whose quest centered on the pursuit of a physical homeland, the modern Moses assumes the mantle of unraveling the true meaning of life and addressing the perplexities and confusion pervasive in the human experience. Saul Bellow, through this literary parallelism, employs the revered name of Moses to infuse Herzog with a historic mission akin to the legendary figure. The choice of Moses as a namesake for Herzog conveys Bellow's aspiration to ascribe to him a role of contemporary significance—a savior seeking to navigate the complexities of modernity and offering a pathway toward salvation for the perplexed souls of the present era.

#### 4. Jewish Motifs— Vagrancy and Return

Every nation possesses a distinctive cultural motif intricately woven into its national history and behavioral patterns. For the Jewish nation, dating back to the era of Abraham, a nomadic way of life became intrinsic to their identity. Over a millennium of wandering, this vagrancy has evolved into an integral aspect of the Jewish consciousness. "The historical myth of the Jewish nation and the

predicament of descendants of Jews can be traced to the same origin, showing a typical spirit of the Jewish nation: searching or drifting” [5]. Despite enduring prolonged periods of displacement, Jews have steadfastly maintained their ties to their homeland. Many within the Jewish diaspora actively strive to return to Israel, while others nurture spiritual and ideological connections with their ancestral land. In *Herzog*, the motifs of “vagrancy” and “return to homeland” emerge as pivotal elements, offering profound reflections on Jewish history and culture. These motifs serve as direct reflections of the historical predicament faced by the Jewish people. Within the narrative, Herzog, navigating both physical and spiritual wanderings, ultimately discovers solace and rediscovers the value of life through a return to his Jewish traditional culture. Bellow employs these motifs not merely as literary devices but as powerful symbols mirroring the intricate tapestry of Jewish historical experience and the enduring connection to their cultural roots.

#### 4.1 Herzog’s Physical and Spiritual Vagrancy

The motif of vagrancy in the novel undergoes a nuanced analysis through two distinct perspectives: physical wandering and spiritual unrest. In the realm of physical wandering, Herzog grapples with an inability to establish a stable foothold in the real world. Time and place undergo constant change, rendering Herzog incapable of finding a lasting settlement. Simultaneously, spiritual wandering permeates the narrative, depicting Herzog’s mind in a perpetual state of turmoil, resistant to calmness.

The novel adopts a structural mode of vagrancy, encapsulating Herzog’s experiences within a compressed timeframe of five days. His journey spans from Ludeville in Berkshire to New York, then to the Seashore of Woodshole, a return to New York, a subsequent venture to Chicago, and a final return to Ludeville to embark on a new chapter in his life. Herzog, having endured two divorces and the betrayal of his second wife in adulterous union with his best friend Gersbach, finds himself forcibly ejected from his home, mirroring the victimhood and innocence reminiscent of the Jewish nation’s historical displacement. Both Herzog and the Jewish nation, innocent in their circumstances, experience the wrenching loss of home, evoking a shared sense of displacement and insecurity.

In addition to the physical journey, Herzog undergoes a profound spiritual odyssey. Guided by his Jewish convictions, Herzog espouses humanitarian principles and a congenial attitude towards others. The revelation of his wife Madeleine’s adultery with his friend Gersbach precipitates the disintegration of Herzog’s spiritual realm. This revelation prompts Herzog to confront the seismic shifts in human nature within contemporary society, witnessing the stark disintegration of cherished humanitarian ideals in the face of real-world complexities. Herzog, finding himself at odds with the exigencies of actuality, becomes ensnared in multifaceted troubles. His poignant observation, articulated in the novel, encapsulates the challenges he faces: “Charity, as if it did not have trouble in this day and age, will always be suspected of morbidity, sado-masochism, perversity of some sort. All higher or moral tendencies lie under suspicion of being rackets” [3]. This candid acknowledgment signifies Herzog’s recognition of the societal skepticism and cynicism surrounding virtuous endeavors, leading to a profound disjunction between his idealistic beliefs and the pragmatic realities of the world. The collapse of Herzog’s spiritual foundation results in a disordered mental state, plunging him into a realm of confusion. In this absurd world, Herzog grapples with the existential dilemma of navigating a reality where cherished moral principles are viewed with suspicion. The dissolution of his spiritual pillar leaves him adrift, struggling to comprehend how to exist within a world that has seemingly forsaken the very ideals he held dear.

#### 4.2 Herzog’s Return to Spiritual Homeland

“After the arduous exploration of the wandering, almost all the protagonists of Saul Bellow’s works have acquired spiritual return, return to society, return to reality, return to love, which is the



ultimate direction of the wandering consciousness in Bellow's works" [6]. In the novel, Herzog's profound desolation resulting from the betrayal of his wife propels him into a state of melancholy, prompting a deliberate detachment from the tangible world. Seeking solace, he immerses himself in a virtual realm constructed through the medium of letters. Within this intricate tapestry of correspondence, Herzog establishes connections with the real society, utilizing written expression as a conduit for articulating his sentiments of despondency, personal perspectives and critical analyses of the world. Herzog's epistolary engagement takes diverse forms, from discussions with a priest on matters of charity and destitution to letters addressed to the New York Times expressing concerns about the environmental impact of chemical pesticides contaminating groundwater. Additionally, missives directed to Commissioner Wilson delve into the societal landscape, probing the escalating crime rates against a backdrop of diminishing police forces. Amidst the tumultuous exchange of written disputes, Herzog fortifies his commitment to preserving his faith, steadfastly resisting the world's malevolent actions. In the tangible realm, Herzog grapples with confusion and anxiety, yet within the realm of letters, he discovers a renewed sense of belonging and hope. Through his prolific correspondence spanning various facets of life, Herzog undergoes a transformative journey, reclaiming his identity and redefining the meaning of life. The act of writing letters becomes a conduit for self-affirmation, offering Herzog a sanctuary where he can confront and navigate the complexities of his existence.

In the city of Chicago, Herzog ultimately discovers a sanctuary for his soul, marking a poignant return to the genuine essence of love and the true meaning of life guided by his inherent Jewish virtues. In a transformative moment, poised to confront his wife's lover, Gersbach, Herzog witnesses an unexpected scene wherein the perceived antagonist tenderly bathes his beloved daughter. This revelation shatters Herzog's preconceived notions, prompting a realization that even in individuals like Gersbach, deemed malevolent, there exists a latent goodness. In contrast, Herzog, previously considering himself righteous, confronts the potential for moral compromise. Embracing forgiveness, Herzog absolves both Gersbach and himself of their transgressions. The narrative arc underscores the transformative power of love, dismantling Herzog's subjective realm of negativity and negation. Through this cathartic experience, he acknowledges that only love possesses the capacity to heal and reconcile all adversities. Redirecting his path towards the divine, Herzog discovers his spiritual homeland, culminating in his return to the Lutheran village of his home. The culmination of this journey is depicted in Herzog's newfound comfort and joy as he opens the window, allowing sunlight and the refreshing country air to permeate his surroundings. This symbolic act signifies Herzog's emergence from the confines of his melancholic world, wholeheartedly integrating into real life and embracing the happiness derived from human connections. Analogous to the biblical Moses returning to the Holy Land of Canaan, Herzog successfully unearths his spiritual homeland, marking the conclusion of his quest to rediscover his roots.

## 5. Conclusion

Through a meticulous exploration of Jewish archetypes and motifs in *Herzog*, this essay intricately unveils the inherent Jewish essence woven into Bellow's narrative, exposing the author's profound Jewish consciousness. The scrutiny of Jewish motifs illuminates the nuanced connection between Herzog and the biblical Moses, accentuating the thematic elements of vagrancy and the return to homeland as symbolic manifestations of the historical predicament and lived experiences of the Jewish nation. In this intricate tapestry, Bellow effectively communicates the essence and profoundness of Jewish culture. It is imperative to underscore that Jewish ethics have not undergone a depreciation in value amidst societal evolution; conversely, they have adapted synchronously with the evolving times. Against the backdrop of a multicultural milieu, Jewish ethics consistently

integrate novel elements, ensuring their continual evolution and the perpetuation of enduring values. Leveraging his artistic acumen, Bellow employs diverse techniques to underscore the significance of redemption and the enduring relevance of traditional Jewish ethical thought in a world characterized by materialism and decay. Consequently, a comprehensive examination of these themes not only holds academic significance but also practical import in the endeavor to construct a harmonious society.

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