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# Black Humor in Saul Bellow's Herzog

Cenxuan Zhang\*

Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou 730070, Gansu, China

\*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

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**Abstract:** Against the backdrop of social upheaval and spiritual crisis in the United States during the 1960s, Saul Bellow's Herzog profoundly reveals the absurd nature of modern society through the spiritual crisis of the intellectual protagonist, Herzog. Employing the theory of black humor, the study explores how the novel uses paradox, irony, and other techniques to present the relationship between rationality and absurdity, the spiritual alienation of intellectuals, and the nihilistic predicament of modern civilization. It finds that Bellow's black humor is mainly manifested in the following three aspects: first, the contrast between Herzog's erudition as a professor and his incompetence in practical life exposes the illusory nature of his rationalism. Besides, his ambivalent attitudes toward marriage, academia, and Jewish identity reveal the identity crisis and spiritual dilemma of modern individuals. Lastly, through exaggerated social satire, the novel allows serious existential anxiety to be dissolved and reconstructed within the absurd. Herzog's unsent letters, chaotic inner monologues, and absurd behavioral logic constitute a unique expression of black humor, which uses laughter to confront alienation, seeking redemption amidst despair. These analysis not only deepen the understanding of Bellow's artistic style but also provide a new interpretive perspective for comprehending the spiritual plight of individuals in postmodern society.

**Keywords:** Saul Bellow; Herzog; black humor.

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## 1. Introduction

American literature of the 1960s occupied a pivotal moment of profound transformation, during which black humor emerged as a significant literary phenomenon. Through its distinct aesthetics of the absurd, it deconstructed the crises of modernity. As noted in the preface to the anthology *Black Humor*, Bruce Jay Friedman (1965) characterized it as "a literary strategy that juxtaposes the absurd with the horrific, using laughter to confront unspeakable pain"<sup>[1]</sup>. By means of absurdist playfulness, black humor deconstructs serious realities, masking deep tragedy beneath a surface of lighthearted comedy and thus generating striking artistic tension. The unique approach skillfully merges serious themes, such as death and violence, with comic elements like satire and exaggeration, compelling readers toward critical social reflection and achieving a powerful effect of critique. Exemplifying the style, Saul Bellow's Herzog employs black humor to portray Moses Herzog, an intellectual and professor tormented by marital collapse, academic stagnation, and identity anxiety. The novel's philosophically rich yet whimsically absurd epistolary form not only breaks from the conventions of traditional realism but also humorously exposes the fragmentation of the modern self. Through artistic insight and stream-of-consciousness technique, Bellow transforms the postwar American intellectual's spiritual crisis into a comprehensive

critique of modern value systems.

Since its publication, Herzog has consistently attracted considerable attention and discussion in both domestic and international academia, generating a substantial body of research. Existing scholarship has largely centered on the novel's existentialist concerns, its character portrayals, and archetypal readings, whereas analysis from the perspective of black humor remains comparatively limited. For instance, in *Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man*, John J. Clayton (1971) situates Bellow within the broader Western humanist tradition, highlighting the author's persistent affirmation of human dignity amid alienation<sup>[2]</sup>. As research evolved, later scholars further expanded on themes of alienation and redemption in Bellow's works. Qi Tao (2002), for example, contends that Bellow exposes the inadequacy of existentialism in fully accounting for modern alienation, tracing its origins instead to the conflict between individual values and social structures<sup>[3]</sup>. He suggests that Bellow's outlook aligns more closely with Western Marxism, advocating a balance between personal integrity and social engagement as the path to clarity and peace. Further exploring the protagonist's struggles, Wang Hanli (2012) observes that Herzog dramatizes the tension between Jewish tradition and American materialism—a conflict intensified by his tumultuous marriage to Madeleine<sup>[4]</sup>. Although Herzog seeks escape through sex, fantasy, and nature, Wang notes that these attempts only deepen his internal turmoil without resolving his existential dilemma. In a related vein, Wang Xiangling (2016) examines the twin Jewish motifs of “quest” and “rebirth” in the novel, aligning Herzog's spiritual journey with the U-shaped narrative of suffering and resurrection<sup>[5]</sup>. She emphasizes that his renewal stems not from divine intervention but from a regained faith in innate human goodness. By transposing ancient myth into a modern context, Wang argues, Bellow challenges declarations of spiritual death and reaffirms humanity's enduring moral resilience.

Given the current research status, the study aims to reinterpret the literary merit and intellectual depth of Herzog through black humor theory. It focuses on three key dimensions: first, the cognitive dissonance and paradox experienced by Jewish intellectuals torn between rationality and lived experience. Additionally, the emotional void and spiritual desolation concealed beneath middle-class moral performances. Lastly, the ways in which black humor, through its narrative strategies, deconstructs the absurdity and ridicule inherent in modernity. In this way, the study not only seeks to advance the understanding of Bellow's artistic craft, but also proposes a potential path for the reconstruction of contemporary humanistic spirit, specifically, how black humor may function as a distinctive form of existential wisdom in a modern society defined by pluralistic values.

## **2. The rational absurd and self-alienation: the dual dilemma of Jewish intellectuals**

In his role as a university professor, Herzog embodies rationality and intellectual authority. Yet the very rationality reveals its profound absurdity when confronted with personal crisis. At the outset of the novel, Herzog is portrayed on the brink of a mental collapse, grappling with severe psychological distress. As his marriage disintegrates, he instinctively turns to the theoretical frameworks of thinkers like Rousseau, Freud, Kant, and Nietzsche, attempting to repair his fractured life with abstract ideas. However, when such theoretical systems collide with concrete reality, rational discourse not only fails to heal real wounds but deepens the individual's existential turmoil. The intellectual's reliance on sophisticated theories thus mirrors the modern intellectual's impotence in the realm of emotional practice. Meanwhile, Herzog's Jewish identity embodies a paradoxical mode of being, which reflects both the modern intellectual's crisis of self and a fertile ground for black humor. As Herzog reflects on himself, he satirizes the dogmatism of Jewish rabbis: “But now, looking at himself in his swimming trunks and straw hat, he felt disgusted. He didn't look like rabbinical material at all. His face was full of sorrow... The intricate network of blue veins winding around his arms and dangling hands...this circulatory system was older and more ancient than the Jews themselves<sup>[6]</sup>.” The self-reflective critique deconstructs traditional authority while also expressing the absurdity of his own identity: “I thank God for giving me a human life, but where is this life... My God! What is this creature? This thing that thinks it's a person. But what is it really? It's not a person...<sup>[7]</sup>” As a Jewish intellectual raised in America, Herzog perpetually torn between cultural identities. While he seeks to reinvent himself through modern individualism, viewing Jewish heritage as a burden to overcome, the collective memory ingrained in

his bloodline persistently intrudes in absurd and inescapable forms. “These characters, helpless under the relentless pressure of their reality, can neither change their circumstances nor escape them. Behind their resistance, mockery, and satire lies an inescapable pessimism<sup>[8]</sup>.” Through Herzog’s absurd discourse and existential predicament, Bellow exposes the powerlessness of the Jewish intellectual in American society, trapped between the authority of reason and the fragmentation of identity. In doing so, he transforms this personal predicament into a broader satire of modern alienation. When reason fails to mend the fractures of cultural belonging, black humor becomes the mind’s final refuge.

### **3. Moral disguise and emotional alienation: the survival paradox of the middle-class individual**

In *Literary Transgressions: The Contemporary American Absurdist Novel*, Charles B. Harris (1971) defines the absurdist view as, “We are trapped in a meaningless universe, in which neither God nor man, neither theology nor philosophy, can make sense of the human condition<sup>[9]</sup>.” In Saul Bellow’s depiction of Chicago’s urban landscape, a city swept up in the tide of consumerism, the surface offers the technology, civilization, pleasure, and comfort brought by metropolitan life, while its core estranges people from nature and leaves their spiritual world barren. In the novel, Bellow not only portrays “the natural ecology of Chicago, a modern industrial city reeking of decay and filth, but more directly reveals the severe socio-ecological crisis in Chicago<sup>[10]</sup>.” After his divorce from Madeleine, Herzog travels to New York, where he witnesses dramatic transformations in urban space and deepening social alienation. Madeleine is a typical materialistic consumer who, through emotional manipulation and economic dependence, marries Herzog merely to leverage his academic status and standing to elevate her own social position. And even after betraying him, she seeks to control his life through financial means, reducing marriage to a power struggle. Herzog’s interpersonal relationships further disintegrate: his friend Gersbach has an affair with Madeleine, conspires to take his home, and gains custody of his daughter, Junie. Repeatedly brought to the brink of collapse, Herzog finds no solace in psychiatry, nor does he receive genuine support from family, even his own father once threatens him with a gun during conflicts over money and inheritance. As a thinker stripped of marital stability, professional purpose, and familial warmth, Herzog loses his sense of belonging and meaning, his inner defenses crumbling<sup>[11]</sup>. Feeling utterly abandoned, he withdraws into isolation, engaging in constant reflection and composing fragmentary letters to acquaintances, strangers, historical figures, and even to God and himself—letters he never sends. Through this epistolary practice, Herzog attempts to reconstruct a coherent intellectual framework, yet the very act reveals the collapse of rational discourse in modern society. These unwritten letters expose both his confused self-awareness and the broader alienation pervading American social and personal relations. Herzog’s writing is itself a paradox of black humor: the more he strives to critique and reconstruct meaning through reason, the more he underscores reason’s impotence against materialist reality. Bellow consistently emphasizes the disproportion between the overpowering force of societal reality and the fragility of the individual who resists it. In a moment of clarity, Herzog acknowledges, “I am simply a human being, more or less<sup>[3]</sup>.” By dissecting marriage, family, and friendship, the novel reflects the distortion of the entire social structure. The failure of intellectual rationalism in the face of lived experience serves as a sharp critique of middle-class moral hypocrisy—a cold irony directed not only at duplicitous human relations but at the absurdity of the social value system itself, where moral frameworks prove fragile upon contact with underlying power dynamics. Herzog ultimately finds no path to redemption, and black humor becomes the intellectual’s sustainable survival strategy in an alienated world: donning the mask of self-ridicule to conceal existential absurdity, while adopting an absurd posture to rebel against absurdity itself. The tragic undertone beneath this self-mockery is precisely Bellow’s profound revelation of the spiritual crisis afflicting both the middle-class intellectual and society at large.

### **4. Narrative art and linguistic strategies: the absurd writing of black humor**

In Saul Bellow’s *Herzog*, stream of consciousness and irony combine to create a narrative structure, fully unleashing

the characteristics of black humor. The narrative strategy deconstructs conventional linear logic through incessant interior monologues and discursive leaps, transforming Herzog's mental processes into a theater of the absurd. Herzog continually interweaves personal experience with literary and historical allusions, reinventing the stream-of-consciousness techniquelinger. As Bellow writes, "As he dressed in the morning... he should have quit playing Don Quixote by then. For he was not a Don Quixote, was he? Don Quixote wished to imitate great men and perform noble deeds. But what was it he imitated?"<sup>[3]</sup> By projecting his own sense of failure onto Quixotic heroic fantasies, Herzog's self-mythologizing accentuates the chasm between reality and ideals, generating profound irony. Through the destabilization of reality's certainty, Bellow releases the absurdist sensibility intrinsic to black humor. The effect is further amplified by Herzog's cultural and social dislocation. While some of his Jewish contemporaries readily abandon traditional Jewish values to embrace America's materialist realism, Herzog, a traditional Jewish intellectual, clings to those values, thereby marginalizing himself from mainstream society. He maintains that "in modern society, moral decay and the degradation of conscience have defiled courage, honor, sincerity, friendship, and responsibility"<sup>[6]</sup>. Bellow employs a narrative strategy in which Herzog persistently interprets his predicament through theoretical frameworks, turning the intellectual's habit of mind into a kind of farcical performance. This not only exposes the identity anxiety and psychic fragmentation of the modern intellectual but also pushes the absurdist quality of black humor to an extreme. The unsent letters in the novel constitute another potent narrative device, mirroring the protagonist's spiritual impasse and the absurdity of modern existence. As John S. Hill observes, Herzog's letter-writing authentically reflects his inner world, allowing readers to grasp the depth of his crisis<sup>[12]</sup>. This very act embodies a paradox: it expresses a yearning for communication while presupposing its impossibility. The letters thus become emblems of black humor—bearing a serious redemptive urge while simultaneously announcing its futility in absurd form. Unable to reach their addressees or alter reality, they entrap the writer in a self-referential cycle. In the end, this compulsion represents black humor's ultimate expression: confronting existential nothingness, one can only mask the dread of being with absurd performance.

## 5. Conclusion

In Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, black humor operates as a philosophical mode deeply woven into the novel's textual fabric. Characterized by surface absurdity and underlying critique, the narrative strategy exposes the profound fissures within modern civilization through the protagonist's existential predicament and spiritual crisis. Herzog continually writes letters addressed to humanity at large, yet fails to establish genuine communication with any specific individual, which is a practice that simultaneously satirizes the dissolution of rationalism and sharply reveals the modern individual's spiritual alienation. The more fervently he clings to rational redemption, the more his efforts lay bare the failure of modern civilization's cognitive framework. On a narrative level, Bellow deconstructs traditional linear progression into a collage of stream-of-consciousness fragments, philosophical meditations, and epistolary forms, rendering the text itself a metaphor for the fragmentation of modern life. As Herzog's letters drift from philosophical inquiry into absurd imaginings, his existential dilemma mirrors the condition of individuals amid value deconstruction and spiritual crisis in contemporary society. Toward the end of the novel, having endured various setbacks and confusions, Herzog returns to his countryside home and lapses into silence—"Now he did not send messages to anyone, no, not a word"<sup>[13]</sup>. When the boundary between memory and reality blurs within the narrative, this uncertainty performs a dual subversion of form and content, exposing the fundamental contradiction between modern civilization's pursuit of certainty and the ineffable nature of existence. In today's society, the plurality of values and the expansion of individualism have intensified the subject's cognitive anxiety toward both self and world. The inner world Herzog constructs through his letter-writing serves as a critique of rationalism's limitations. His self-mocking confrontation with absurdity suggests a possible path for contemporary individuals to address alienation. From another perspective, black humor appears not merely as a literary device or an escape from reality, but as an attitude toward life—one that deconstructs absurdity and dissolves solemnity through self-irony<sup>[14]</sup>. If predicament is an inescapable part of the human condition, Herzog's black humor may offer a form of

enlightenment: in facing life's "darkness," we might achieve reconciliation with ourselves through the lens of "humor." Through Herzog's darkly comic vision, Bellow accomplishes not only a penetrating diagnosis of modern civilizational crisis but also establishes a spiritual fulcrum for individuals navigating between deconstruction and reconstruction. In doing so, he responds to the perennial theme of human spiritual plight, offering a survival strategy for maintaining mental resilience amid cognitive dissonance.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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