A View of Transcendentalism in Henderson the Rain King

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Abstract. The continuous social competition makes people intend to show their own personalities, but they neglect the unity and love between human beings. On the basis of the textual analysis of Bellow’s novel Henderson the Rain King, this thesis tries to explore the relationship between Saul Bellow and the nineteenth century American Transcendentalism especially its leader Ralph Waldo Emerson’s theories of Transcendentalism, and shows Bellow’s attitude toward the American Transcendentalism: acceptance and surpass. This thesis reflects that losing the ability to love is one of the reasons for mental crisis of modern people, and makes people realize the importance of love and believe that love is the most basic and permanent power of creating happiness.

Introduction

Saul Bellow and Henderson the Rain King

Saul Bellow (1915-2005), famous American novelist, Saul Bellow was born in Lachine, Quebec. He spent his childhood in Montreal. Later his family moved to Chicago, America in 1924. He attended the University of Chicago, received his Bachelor’s degree from Northwestern University in sociology and anthropology in 1937. He wrote nine long novels from 1942 to 1987. His Humboldt’s Gift (1975) was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. In 1976, Bellow was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in October 1976 for his “the human understanding and subtle analysis of contemporary culture that are combined in his works”.

Literature Review

The Use of Folk Myth in Henderson the Rain King, Mark Roydon Winchell says that Bellow takes “an eclectic and utilitarian view of the folk myth” (Winchell 1980). Helge Normann Nilsen’s “Bellow and Transcendentalism: From the Victim to Herzog” also deals with the relationship between Bellow’s novels and the American Transcendentalism. But her conclusion is quite different from that of Porter’s. Like in the novel Henderson the Rain King, Nilsen insists that Henderson fails to undergo a regeneration of the self despite his “transcendental desire” (Nilsen 1984) for a renewal of himself. Indian scholar M. A. Quayum suggests that the protagonist successfully experiences a transcendental change “from the state of ‘becoming’ to the state of ‘being’, from the ‘pig’ state to the ‘lion’ state, from disorder and chaos to order and equilibrium” (Quayum 2004).

The sole purpose of my thesis is to understand the content of the novel from the Transcendentalism perspective, and to reflect the modern people’s mental crisis. People will know the truth and meaning of life.

Emerson’s Theories of Transcendentalism and Its Influence on Bellow

An Overview of American Transcendentalism

It is a form of idealism, or philosophical Romanticism which reached America a generation or two after it developed in Europe. The movement took on special significance in the United States, where it dominated many New England writers such as Emerson and Thoreau. Emerson formed an informal club “Transcendental Club” to discuss matters of interest to life of the nation. In America it is called American Transcendentalism or “New England Transcendentalism” or “American
Renaissance.” It is more of a tendency than a philosophy. It flourished in New England from 1830s
to the civil war. The Transcendentalists spoke for cultural rejuvenation and against the materialism
of American society. They placed emphasis on spirit which is the most important thing in the
universe. They believed in self-reliance and individuality. They offered a fresh perception of nature
as symbol of the Spirit of God.

**Emerson’s Influence on Saul Bellow**

Saul Bellow was born of Russian-Jewish immigrants. Because of his Jewish identity, the Jewish
thoughts in his novels were often analyzed by many critics. However, he was more formally
educated by American writers. Bellow does not confine himself to the Jewish tradition and is
willing to embrace the mainstream tradition of American literature, the nineteenth century American
Transcendentalism. Bellow’s works are in one sense or another related to the tradition of American
transcendentalism. Bellow respected Emerson, the pioneer of nineteenth century American
transcendentalism. In an interview, he admitted his moral and philosophical influences from
Emerson. Emerson’s emphasis on spirit or soul also made a great influence on Saul Bellow. Bellow
himself in an interview worried people’s loss of soul in modern life. Bellow’s transcendental
outlook can be best described in *Henderson the Rain King*. After his exploration in former four
novels, Bellow turned to nineteenth century American transcendentalism and its leader Emerson for
ways to solve the modern man’s spiritual crisis. Bellow also called on people to go back to nature to
find the true wisdom of life.

**The Acceptance of Transcendentalism in Henderson the Rain King**

**Henderson’s Crisis: Estrangement from Nature**

Henderson is very rich and in good health, however, his material inheritance does not bring him
happiness but becomes a burden on his soul. And when he is in his fifties, he finds all aspects of his
life turn into chaos. He can not be on good term with his family members; his body and soul are in
great opposition; and the anxiety over death often haunts around him. According to Emerson, nature
and soul were close related, when people estrange from nature, the soul would lose its peace and
order. Henderson’s chaotic life and mental crisis partly result from the highly industrialized
post-war America where nature has been tamed and people have been estranged from nature. To
seek the remedy for the rest of his life, Henderson escapes from America and flies to the remote
continent of Africa.

**Henderson’s Journey: A journey in Transcendence**

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the leader of American Transcendentalism, once emphasizes the
important influence of nature upon mind: “the first in time and the first in importance of the
influences upon the mind is that of Nature” (Emerson 60). According to Emerson, people need to go
back to nature to restore their reason and faith. Nature is the place where people come to their
senses and repair their trauma in their mind.

As to Henderson, a change of place may offer a cure for his mental crisis and disorderly life. He
first tries to go to Europe, spending a year in France, but the results of European trip are dismal. He
realizes that only Africa is an unindustrialized place that has largely escaped the ravages of
materialism of the twentieth-century America. With untamed nature, Africa has the healing power
of the twentieth-century chaos and people’s feeling of alienation. It is a binary opposition of
America. It is a symbol of nature. Thus it becomes the only ideal place that can relieve the madness
and disorder. Henderson firstly is inspired by the mysterious natural scene. The exposure to natural
scene makes him realize the beauty and grace of nature. The experiences in the two tribes help him
gain the wisdom of life and help him overcome the anxiety over death. Henderson’s realization of
the totality of life symbolizes that he is mature in mind. Thus, his journey in Africa is a journey to
nature and the depth of soul. In other words, Henderson’s journey in Africa is a successful journey
in transcendence.
The Surpass of Transcendentalism in Henderson the Rain King

At the very beginning of the novel, Henderson makes a comparison between his past and present self: Henderson’s travel among the two tribes and especially his encounter with the king brings him into direct confrontation with death and help him overcome the opposition between body and soul. Yet the paradoxical effect of such experience is to awaken him to reality, sustained by the absolute power of love. Henderson is not fond of solitude. Henderson’s return to his family and society not only proves his high value of people’s mutual love and union but also is a proof of Bellow’s surpass of Emerson’s theories of Transcendentalism in the respect of his denial of union.

Henderson’s Return: Value of Love and Union

_Henderson the Rain King_ is Bellow’s successful exploration in his writing. Bellow turns to nineteenth century American transcendentalism which was very affirmative of man’s transcendence. However, in respect to individualism Bellow discards it in his exploration. Although he highly values the individuality, Bellow realizes that individualism is an obstacle keeping people from mutual love. Henderson’s reunion with his community also reflects Bellow’s transcendence over Emerson’s denial of society and union. In addition, Henderson’s realization of importance of love proves Bellow’s belief in human being and his attachment to brotherhood of human being.

Bellow’s Surpass of Emerson

In respect of individualism, however, Bellow does not completely agree to his predecessors. American transcendentalism emphasizes that the individual is the most important element in society. It holds that there was greatness in all human beings and people should depend on themselves for spiritual perfection. Bellow follows American transcendentalism and his literary predecessor Emerson and values individuality as high as Emerson did. He believes literature should place importance on man’s value. However, Henderson’s return to his family, his community and society illustrates Bellow’s some kind of disagreement with his literary predecessors and abandonment of individuality. He keeps faith in mutual love among human being and has confidence in the possibility of union with other people. In this sense, Bellow denied his literary predecessors Emerson who over-emphasized individualism which calls for a total separation and alienation of self from society.

References