

A Vivid and Multifaceted Female Figure in Saul Bellow's *Herzog*

Min Huang¹

¹ College of Foreign Languages, Zhongkai University of Agriculture and Engineering, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

Correspondence: Min Huang, College of Foreign Languages, Zhongkai University of Agriculture and Engineering, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China. E-mail: shirley8662930@163.com

Received: October 30, 2022

Accepted: November 21, 2022

Online Published: November 22, 2022

doi: 10.5539/elt.v15n12p37

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v15n12p37>

Abstract

Saul Bellow, who has written numerous novels in his career, is widely regarded as one of the greatest American novelists of the twentieth century. In his masterpiece *Herzog*, Bellow has been criticized for a strong flavor of “misogyny” view and the portrayal of female figures from the perspective of male angle. Here we take a major female figure, Madeleine, as an example to refute the accusation that Madeleine is biasedly constructed as a devil-type woman and show how Bellow successfully shapes her, with female qualities retained, as a vivid and rebellious woman striving to be the master of her own fate.

Keywords: Saul Bellow, *Herzog*, female, liberal feminism, Madeleine

1. Introduction

As a winner of the National Medal of Arts, the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize for Literature, Saul Bellow is widely regarded as one of the greatest and the most influential American authors of the twentieth century (Singh, 2008). In his whole life, Bellow has written numerous novels since 1944, among which *Dangling Man* (1944), *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), *Herzog* (1964), *Humboldt's Gift* (1975) and *Ravelstein* (2000) are best-known. Bellow, undoubtedly, has made great achievements in human understanding and subtle analysis of contemporary culture. He is known as the literary heir of Hemingway and Faulkner (Kaiser, 2013), partly because their works are all imbued with a strong flavor of “misogyny” concept and describe female characters mostly from the angle of men (Li, 2018). A case in point is the characterization of Madeleine in the novel *Herzog*.

Herzog is one of the books that make Saul Bellow famous and establish him as a major American novelist (Hyland, 1992), though he started to write novel since 1944 when he completed his first novel, *Dangling Man* (1944). The novel is entirely narrated from the perspective of the protagonist Moses E. Herzog, a college professor with a promising future. Now, however, he is experiencing his second divorce, which puts him on the edge of insanity. In *Herzog*, malicious terms are frequently used to describe Madeleine—the second wife of Herzog, such as “the stinky lady, who only knows how to spend money”, “parasites”, “an estrous donkey”, and “they eat green vegetables and drink red human blood” (Li, 2018). Yet, it is an oversimplification to assert that with the protagonist Herzog being the spokesman and the woman overshadowed and silenced, Madeleine is biasedly constructed as a devil-like woman, as contended by Leslie A. Fielder (1966) and Liu Wensong (2004) in their analysis of Bellow's works. This research, through a detailed and subtle analysis of the female character Madeleine, is an attempt to refute the accusation and show how Bellow successfully shapes her as a vivid and multifaceted woman who strives to be the master of her own fate while simultaneously maintaining many shining female qualities, rather than a radical and masculine woman. My research questions are:

- (1) How is Madeleine constructed as a rebellious woman who revolts against patriarchy courageously?
- (2) How is Madeleine constructed as a woman with shining female qualities?
- (3) What feminist ideas of the author are reflected through his portrayal of such a female character?

2. A Critical Review of *Herzog* and Saul Bellow's Female Characters

As one of Saul Bellow's best-known works, *Herzog* has received much critical attention from critics and readers around the world, and has been discussed from various perspectives since its publication. Some critics have focused on the character analysis of Herzog, and the study of the psychological complexity of this protagonist

and other characters such as Madeleine and Ramona.

Saul Bellow: A Collection of Critical Essays (1975), edited by Earl Rovit, provides twelve critical essays concerning Saul Bellow and his works, and four of these essays discuss the novel *Herzog*. One of them, “The Battle of the Sexes in Three Bellow Novels”, contrasts Madeleine with Ramona, who is considered “too kind, too giving and too available”, and who fails to win Herzog’s love. In contrast, Madeleine, beautiful, cunning, unprincipled, undependable, fiercely intellectual, totally unsympathetic, with an ambivalent sexual attitude, is completely fascinating to her husband. The author of the essay concludes that “it’s apparently [Madeleine’s] bitchiness—and she is a classic bitch—and her inviolate egotism that excites [Herzog]”.

Judie Newman’s *Saul Bellow and History* (1966) also touches upon Bellow’s characterization or portrait of Madeleine in *Herzog* and defines Madeleine as “a masculine woman” who is fond of “intellectual conversation”. Malcolm Bradbury (1982), in the fourth chapter of his book *Saul Bellow*, which offers a general survey of Saul Bellow’s works, also mentions Madeleine as an unconventional woman with “extravagant tastes and intellectual ambitions”.

John Jacob Clayton, in his book *Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man* (1979), presents a close, perceptive and highly acclaimed analysis of Saul Bellow’s fictions, focusing on the study of the psychic condition of Bellow’s heroes. In the book, Clayton discusses Herzog’s submissive attitude toward his wife Madeleine. In their world of two, Madeleine “is the strong one”. She “snaps at [Herzog], accuses him, treats him with contempt” (Clayton, 1979). Besides, it is Madeleine that [decides] “when they are to move [house] and finally [shoves Herzog] out of the house” (Clayton, 1979).

Scholastic study of *Herzog* began in China in the 1980s when the novel was first translated into Chinese. And it immediately drew the attention of critics and lovers of American literature. Among the many reviews in China, only a few are devoted to the discussion of the female images in the novel. Wu Lingying and Jiang Jingzhi (2005) set out to investigate the marginality of the protagonists in four American novels, *Dangling Man* (1944), *Invisible Man* (1952), *Henderson the Rain King* (1959) and *Herzog* (1964). The readers are offered a chance to see the frustration, loss and imprisonment of these marginal protagonists, and to understand marginality as a psychological dilemma, social isolation and cultural duality. In the fifth chapter, the authors of the book suggest that Bellow depicts Madeleine as “beautiful, brilliant, cracked, ...with the aim of rising like a phoenix from the ashes of her former husband’s scholarly reputation” (Wu & Jiang, 2005). She is described as “a slut at home...a bitch in bed, a dazzler in conversations with free-floating intellectuals about Soloviev the younger” (Wu & Jiang, 2005).

Wang Hanli discusses Bellow’s “egotism and male chauvinism” in his essay “The Image of the Adapted Other—Bellow’s Male Hegemonic Discourse from the Image of Madeleine” (2006). Another Chinese scholar Liu Wensong (2002) explores three models (competition, domination and equality) and two natures (repressive and productive) of the power relations between male and female intellectuals to foreground “the intellectual qualities and the career routes of women characters” in Bellow’s novels. Ji Lin (2014) explores the evolution of Bellow’s attitude towards women in different periods through an in-depth analysis of *Dangling Man* (1944), *Herzog* (1964) and *The Dean’s December* (1982).

Most of the studies mentioned above just sum up Madeleine’s characteristics: pretty, intelligent, reactive and independent; they do not touch upon the problem of how she is shaped into such a woman who preserves her female qualities in the process of revolting against the patriarchy and what feminist ideas of Bellow are embodied in his creation of such a female character. My research is intended to answer those questions.

3. Madeleine’s Revolt against Patriarchy

Before marrying Herzog, Madeleine admires Herzog’s intelligence and extraordinary talents. Although she loves Herzog, who has been married at that time, she still refuses to be his mistress. In sharp contrast to such conventional voiceless women as Herzog’s mistresses Sono and Ramona, Madeleine, in order to pursue her own happiness, dares to demand Herzog to divorce Daisy and asks for a marriage, or their love will end in nothing. She clearly tells him: “I want to be married” and “don’t expect me to go along in the ordinary loose way—without rules. No! It’ll be these rules or nothing!” (Bellow, 1974) In the male-dominated age in 1960s, Madeleine dares to challenge the tradition that a man should ask a girl to marry him, and not the other way round. In her relationship with Herzog, the striking part is that it’s Madeleine, rather than “he”, that proposes marriage. “What makes you think I intend to have a lifelong affair with you? I want some action” (Bellow, 1974). In addition to this, it also reflects that modern as Madeleine is, she still embraces femininity, significantly different from the masculine women, as proposed by radical feminism. She needs love and marriage and refuses to play around with men to show her free existence. Madeleine isn’t content with bodily pleasure; she wants legal

marriage with husband's promise and friends' blessing. In this respect, she is a woman with love clinging to some traditional values. Just like conventional women, she wants a marriage for her love instead of a loose and casual sexual relationship.

After marriage, Madeleine fulfils her duties as a wife and mother, yet she refuses to be a full docile housewife, who, in patriarchal ideas, should devote all her time and energy to the housework. The protagonist Herzog is a typical male chauvinist who firmly believes that "[the] occupation of a man is in duty, in use, in civility, in politics in the Aristotelian sense" while "[of] course a wife's duty [is] to stand by this puzzling and often disagreeable Herzog" (Bellow, 1974). With this belief in mind, Herzog imposes on Madeleine the identity of a beautiful, smart, diligent wife and loving mother, who should devote all her time and energy to the housework and provide her husband with comfort and pleasure and her child with care and affection. Herzog tries to force Madeleine to be a so-called "angel in the house". He intends to keep Madeleine under his control by constantly nagging to her "how everything ought to go, down to the smallest detail". He insists that Madeleine should take housework and childcare as her most and only meaningful activities, and that she should be capable of understanding and ministering to emotional needs.

However, Madeleine is different from those conventional women who simply accept the identity imposed on them as docile housewives. As a beautiful and brilliant person with a fate of her own, she knows what she wants all the time. It doesn't take her long to realize that she is oppressed by her husband. The best illustration of her awareness of this oppression and the inequality between her husband and her can be seen from her complaint about Herzog, in which she articulates her grievance against the "overbearing, infantile, demanding, sardonic" husband and her suffocating and smothering plight as a daughter and wife in a male-centered world (Bellow, 1974). She eventually realizes that the house makes a prisoner of her, and "how the very condition of being a housewife can create a sense of emptiness, non-existence, nothingness in women" (Friedan, 2001). She speaks up and expresses her dissatisfaction of being patronizingly treated by Herzog, who behaves like a savior. Also, Madeleine's awareness of the inequality between men and women and her revolt is further evidenced by her complaint about how Herzog treats their spousal sex life. To Herzog, feminine eroticism is assumed to cater to male gaze and men's needs while women are deprived of the right to experience sexual fulfillment and sexual pleasure. It's a viewpoint Madeleine hardly agrees with and even resents.

The moment Madeleine realizes the oppression imposed on her, she refuses vehemently to be trapped in the house any longer. She resolves not to be just a mother and wife; instead, she wants to live as an independent human being, and thus starts seeking to construct her professional identity as a scholar outside home through courageously pursuing academic study, rather than be just an object of her husband's desire. She clearly knows what she is looking for and dares to pursue it. She gets to know her husband's friends in order to have academic exchange with them. She reads a lot in order to open her mind; she continues her education and attempts to get a doctoral degree. She does not want to be a docile and obedient housewife. She cannot tolerate her husband's violence and domination. She always makes decisions by herself and refuses to take orders from her husband. Obviously, in *Herzog*, Madeleine is shaped into a woman who has strong minds of her own. She rebels against being a subordinate to her husband Herzog, which is hardly observed in 1960s. She is different from those conventional women.

Intellectual conversation excites Madeleine, bringing the blood to her face. She works hard and excels as a scholar. Her failed marriage with Herzog lets her realize that "marriage and motherhood are an essential part of life, but not the whole of it" (Friedan, 2001). After the divorce from Herzog, she remarries Valentine Gersbach, the man who regards her as his equal. He shows full respect and strong support for Madeleine's pursuit of academic career outside home. She loves him and lives with him because he feels sympathy for her suffering in Herzog's home, and understands her desire for a professional career. Taking herself as men's equal, she courageously strives for her academic dream and pursues her own happiness, struggling to be an agent of her own destiny. When Madeleine is constructed as an extraordinary figure with the courageous pursuit of a professional career, Bellow seemingly conveys the idea that women should walk out of their families, pursue their academic study and seek other identities, because only when they have access to education and have a career of their own can they fully showcase their talents and spirits.

4. Madeleine with Shining Female Qualities

4.1 Madeleine as a Woman Who Maintains Her Physical Charm

Notwithstanding Madeleine's revolt against the patriarchal norms, her such traditional female qualities as beauty and tenderness persist, as evidenced by her delicate dress-up and care for her family. Bellow portrays Madeleine as a charming and attractive woman who possesses striking physical beauty. "Madeleine...has great charm, and

beauty of person” (Bellow, 1974). Throughout the novel, the description of Madeleine’s beauty is everywhere. She knows how to prick up herself and gets dressed up for different occasions. In daily life, she dresses up to look as beautiful and fashionable as possible:

She wore black stockings, high heels, a lavender dress with Indian brocade from Central America. She had on her opal earrings, her bracelets, and she was perfumed; her hair was combed with a new, clean part and her large eyelids shone with a bluish cosmetic. Her eyes were blue but the depth of the color was curiously affected by the variable tinge of the whites. Her nose, which descended in a straight elegant line from her brows, worked slightly when she was peculiarly stirred. (Bellow, 1974)

Madeleine, in Herzog’s recollections, shows unusual competence in “disposing of her body” to her advantage (Poirier, 1975). With beauty as her asset, she has confidence in herself. Whatever she does, she does it “with unhesitating speed and efficiency, headlong, but with the confidence of an expert”. It seems to Herzog that Madeleine has the magic power to make “everyone close to [her and] everyone drawn into the drama of her life...exceptional, deeply gifted, and brilliant” (Bellow, 1974).

Madeleine’s beauty is fascinating to men, who praise and adore her. Her husband Herzog is bewitched by her expression, gesture, tastes and dressing. Although he hates her and sometimes even defames her after being dumped by her, he admits, “Quite objectively, however, she [is] a beauty” (Bellow, 1974). Herzog describes Madeleine,

Her complexion healthy and pink, fine dark hair gathered in a bun behind and a fringe on her forehead, a slender neck, heavy blue eyes and a Byzantine nose which came straight down from the brow. (Bellow, 1974)

His mistress Ramona is attractive and tempting to men by “producing sensual gratification (as cook, florist, lover)” (Galloway, 1995). She confides to Herzog, “Madeleine herself [is] always so dignified”, and she says that Madeleine is “nothing but a package beauty” (Bellow, 1974). The learned scholar Shapiro “[is] impressed with Madeleine” and admits that “she [excites] him”. “He [thinks] her so beautiful” that “[he] couldn’t keep his eyes from the shape of her behind in the tight cotton-knit fabric” (Bellow, 1974). Even when Madeleine is pregnant, she still looks beautiful. “Pregnancy [has] thickened her features but she [is] still beautiful. Such beauty makes men breeders, studs and servants” (Bellow, 1974).

In contrast with traditional women, who put on make-up and make themselves beautiful mainly to please or cater for their husbands, Madeleine can be called an “egoist” with no intention of pleasing her husband. When Madeleine puts on make-up, she takes no notice of her husband Herzog in spite of his open curiosity. She is even “trying in some way to be rid of him as her daytime life [begins]”. Though Herzog intensely, silently and curiously looks at her make-up, she still concentrates on her making up and barely gives him a glance. “She would not let Herzog caress her face downward [because] it was bad for the muscles” (Bellow, 1974). Moreover, Madeleine wants him there at night, yet in the morning she would like him to disappear. Even Herzog himself admits that he has the feeling of “dealing with a new female generation” (Bellow, 1974).

4.2 *Madeleine as a Wife and Mother Who Cares for Her Family*

Madeleine is portrayed by Bellow as a beauty, but not a sleeping beauty in a fairy tale who waits to be kissed and rescued by the prince. Nor is Madeleine shaped into a radical female character who is bent on toppling down the male-dominating patriarchy while forsaking her obligations as a wife and mother. After marrying Herzog, she fulfills her duties as a wife and exhibits tenderness in her care for her family. She does washing and cooking. After the divorce from Herzog, Madeleine lives with Valentine Gersbach. Although at that time she is pursuing her doctor’s degree, she still takes good care of the family. In the kitchen, she “[moves] between the table and the sink, cleaning up after dinner, scraping dishes in her own style” (Bellow, 1974).

Madeleine’s tenderness is also showcased in her role as a mother. Since the novel *Herzog* is the protagonist Herzog’s flashbacks of his past life, there are few direct descriptions of Madeleine’s care for her daughter June. Nevertheless, the readers can still get a glimpse of Madeleine’s tenderness to and care for her daughter June. When Herzog and June have an accident, she hurries to the police station as soon as she receives the phone call from the sergeant. The moment she arrives there, she asks the sergeant anxiously, “Where is my child!”. After she sees June on Herzog’s lap, she crosses the room quickly, asks June to come to her and takes her up in the arms. With her brow twitching, she asks, “Is the child all right?”. The sergeant assures her and says, “She’s fine. If she had even a scratch on her we’d have taken her to Michael Reese”. But Madeleine is still very worried. “Madeleine [examines] June’s arms, her legs, [feels] her with nervous hands” (Bellow, 1974). The episode conveys precisely Madeleine’s affection and care for her child, allowing not even a little injury to her baby. All,

in other words, demonstrates that Madeleine is both a qualified wife and a devoted mother.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, admittedly Madeleine belongs to the rebellious women who dare to say “No” to the image of “angels in the house”—a conventional patriarchal concept of women. Yet, it’s clearly one-sided to conclude that Madeleine is the devil-type woman since, in the midst of all her revolt, Madeleine retains the traditional female qualities and fulfills her roles as a wife and mother. Bellow’s characterization of Madeleine, to be more precisely, corresponds to Betty Friedan’s idea of a new woman. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan suggests that women should not be handicapped by their sex; instead, they should take their education and their abilities seriously, bring them into play, and finally compete equally and fairly with men in society (Friedan, 2001). In this process, women do not need to become masculine and forsake their female qualities. From Bellow’s portrayal of Madeleine, we can see that Saul Bellow shares similar liberal feminist ideas with Betty Friedan and echoes Friedan’s call for a new woman.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Teaching Quality and Teaching Reform Project of Guangdong Province in 2020 under Grant Yue Jiao Gao Letter 2020 No.20, Guangdong Higher Education Association under Grant 20QN05, College English Teaching and Research Office (key project) of Zhongkai University of Agriculture and Engineering in 2021 under Grant Zhong Teaching Document 2021 No. 56.

References

- Bellow, Saul. (1974). *Herzog*. Great Britain: Penguin Books.
- Bradbury, Malcolm. (1982). *Saul Bellow*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1772304>
- Clayton, John Jacob. (1979). *Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Fiedler, Leslie A. (1966). *Love and Death in the American Novel (Revised ed.)*. New York: Stein and Day.
- Friedan, Betty. (2001). *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Galloway, David D.. (1995). Moses-Bloom-Herzog: Bellow's Everyman. In Gerhard Bach (Ed.), *The Critical Response to Saul Bellow* (pp. 130-155). London: Greenwood Press.
- Hyland, Peter.. (1992). *Saul Bellow*. London: Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-22109-7>
- Ji, Lin. (2014). *On the development of Saul Bellow's attitude towards women* (Doctoral dissertation, Shanghai Internatinal Studies University, Shanghai, China). Retrieved from [https://kreader.cnki.net/Kreader/CatalogViewPage.aspx?dbCode=CDFD&filename=1014126419.nh&tablename=CDFD1214&compose=&first=1&uid=WEEvREcwSIJHSldSdmVpa3VEenlwUUxKK3RtMFhXbm80czhoVUIzT3VNYz0=\\$9A4hf_YAuvQ5obgVAqNKPCYcEjKensW4IQMovwHtwkF4VYPoHbKxJw!!](https://kreader.cnki.net/Kreader/CatalogViewPage.aspx?dbCode=CDFD&filename=1014126419.nh&tablename=CDFD1214&compose=&first=1&uid=WEEvREcwSIJHSldSdmVpa3VEenlwUUxKK3RtMFhXbm80czhoVUIzT3VNYz0=$9A4hf_YAuvQ5obgVAqNKPCYcEjKensW4IQMovwHtwkF4VYPoHbKxJw!!)
- Kaiser, Wilson. (2013). The Einhorn Effect in Saul Bellow’s ADVENTURES OF AUGIE MARCH. *The Explicator*, 71(4), 320-324. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2013.842156>
- Li, Tian. (2018). Interpretation of Female Images in Saul Bellow's *Herzog*. *2018 7th International Conference on Social Science, Education and Humanities Research (SSEHR 2018)*, 119-122. <https://doi.org/10.25236/ssehr.2018.024>
- Liu, Wensong. (2002). Models and Natures of the Power Relations between Intellectual Couples in the Novels of Saul Bellow. *JOURNAL OF XIAMEN UNIVERSITY (Arts & Social Sciences)* 5, 5-9. https://kns.cnki.net/kcms/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CJFD&dbname=CJFD2002&filename=XMDS200205015&uniplatform=NZKPT&v=KP8bqnGGc9DTXHmSSZY-r4YkT_ovH_UeW7_qnA2fSk-JfHU_KXvKBz6KE2jkgGwW
- Liu, Wensong. (2004). *Saul Bellow's Fiction: Power Relations and Female Representation*. Xiamen: Xiamen University Press.
- Newman, Judie. (1966). *Saul Bellow and History*. Boston: Twayne.
- Poirier, Richard. (1975). Herzog, or Bellow in Trouble. In Earl Rovit (Ed.), *Saul Bellow: A Collection of critical essays* (pp. 81-89). New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc..
- Singh, Sukhbir. (2008). Saul Bellow and His Editors: The Case of *Herzog*. *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Rews*, 21(3), 51-59. <https://doi.org/10.3200/ANQQ.21.3.51-59>
- Wang, Hanli. (2006). The Image of the Adapted Other—Bellow’s Male Hegemonic Discourse from the Image of

Madeleine. *Journal of Qiqihar University (Philosophy & Social Science Edition)* 7, 1-5.
https://kns.cnki.net/kcms/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CJFD&dbname=CJFD2006&filename=QQHD200604029&uniplatform=NZKPT&v=pg39R73sjtWxJ_F44KXz7Sgk4xqBUgJvRbTISaq7kKQRGw0JDvs3RogakDIPTXyU

Wu, Lingying & Jiang, Jingzhi. (2005). *Marginal Protagonists' Journey—A Study on Saul Bellow and Ralph Ellison*. Changsha: Central South University Press.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).