

# SAUL BELLOW'S ACADEMIC CHARACTERS

Çiğdem PALA MULL <sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Academic novels present academic characters in academic contexts in order to comment on and criticize the state of academia. Although academic characters can be found in earlier fiction, the genre dates back to 1950s. This subgenre of Anglo-American modern fiction became a popular part of the literary canon with the novels of Mary McCarthy, Kingsley Amis and David Lodge. American writer Saul Bellow also presents memorable academic characters in his novels. In this study, I will look at Saul Bellow's novels *Herzog* (1964), *The Dean's December* (1982), and his latest novel *Ravelstein* (2000) as academic novels focusing on how Bellow presented his criticism of academia in his construction of these academic characters

**Keywords:** Academic novel, academic characters, modern fiction.

Pala Mull, Çiğdem. "Saul Bellow's Academic Characters". *idil* 5.19 (2016): 17-24.

Pala Mull, Ç. (2016). Saul Bellow's Academic Characters. *idil*, 5 (19), s.17-24.

---

<sup>1</sup> Doç. Dr., Muğla Sıtkı Koçman Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi / Batı Dilleri Ve Edebiyatları Bölümü / İngiliz Dili Ve Edebiyatı Abd, mcigdem(at)mu.edu.tr.

This study is an extended version of the paper presented at 5th International IDEA Conference: Studies in English, 14-16 April 2010 at Atılım University.

# SAUL BELLOW'UN AKADEMİSYEN KARAKTERLERİ

## ÖZET

Akademik romanlar, akademisyen karakterlerin üniversite ortamlarındaki hayatlarını gözler önüne sererken aynı zamanda akademinin durumunu eleştirel bir gözle incelerler. Romanlarda akademisyen karakterlere daha önce de rastlamamıza rağmen, bu türün başlangıcı 1950'li yıllara denk gelir. Anglo Amerikan modern romanın bir alt türü olarak gelişme göstermiştir ancak Mary McCarthy, Kingsley Amis, David Lodge gibi yazarların eserleriyle kanonda yerini almıştır. Amerikan yazar Saul Bellow da romanlarında akademisyen karakterlere sıklıkla yer vermiştir. Bu çalışmada, Saul Bellow'un *Herzog* (1964), *The Dean's December* (1982), ve *Ravelstein* (2000) adlı romanları, akademik roman örnekleri olarak incelenecektir ve bu romanlarda Bellow'un akademiye kurguladığı karakterler yoluyla nasıl eleştirdiği üzerinde durulacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Akademik roman, akademik karakterler, modern kurgu.

John Lyons, in his book *The College Novel in America*, defines the academic novel as “one in which higher education is treated with seriousness and the main characters are students or professors” (Lyons, 1962: xvii). Even though these novels are written for the general readers, academic plots and characters certainly attract the attention of the academics. The subject matters of these novels frequently refer to the challenges, dilemmas and problems of the academic life and offer a humorous and satirical point of view criticizing the state of the academy. Academic novels might present professors in situations that are not expected from men of intellect and reason but as William G. Tierney points out in his essay “Interpreting Academic Identities: Reality and Fiction on Campus” “Academic novels are helpful for academics not merely for the pleasure one may derive in reading fiction, but also for what the text tells us about ourselves; a good novel can be a mirror to our lives” (Tierney, 2002:161).

When we look at the portrayal of scholars in academic novels, we can expect to see certain types in certain situations. John Lyons points out that:

Since the renaissance the literary portrait of the scholar—whether he is a learner or a teacher—shows him as a buffoon to be laughed at or a Faust to be hissed. These roles are related, for one is the comic and the other the tragic handling of the same material. By leading the pit in laughter at the buffoon or putting the damnation of a Faust, the artist courts a public that is essentially cut off from the world of the scholar. Either method congratulates the common man on his common sense and holy innocence. (Lyons, 1962:3)

American writer Saul Bellow presents detailed portrayals of scholars in many of his novels. These displaced, alienated, intellectual characters are victimized by the pressures and distractions of Post-war American city life, the weight of history, culture and mass society. They manage to survive by rejecting these forces and turning back to their intellects and imaginations. Although these characters rely on their depth of knowledge and intellects, they all suffer from their human weaknesses in their longing for love and companionship. Moses Herzog, protagonist of *Herzog*, is an example of a comical academic character. Herzog is an anxious scholar with an overwhelming project. He is trying to write an intellectual history of the modern world, “investigating the social meaning of nothingness” (Bellow, 1964: 5). In his personal life he is a man going through his second divorce and a devastating internal crisis. He remembers the events in his past that made him who he is and tries to understand his own life and the world around him. Almost all of the action takes place inside his head as he goes over the details of his break up and his obsession with his ex-wife who was secretly betraying him with his best friend. He is diagnosed as

“depressive” and “had fallen under a spell and was writing letters to everyone under the sun...Hidden in the country, he wrote endlessly, fanatically, to the newspapers, to people in public life, to friends and relatives and at last to the dead, his own obscure dead, and finally the famous dead” (7). The constant struggle between his intellect and emotion can be observed in these letters.

Herzog’s experiences show that his actions repeatedly led him to chaos. Leading the “perfectly ordinary life of an assistant professor, respected and stable” (13) Herzog gives up his job in favor of part-time night-school teaching. He abandons his first wife Daisy whose strengths were “stability, symmetry, order, containment” (158) for chaotic, unfaithful Madeleine. Herzog diagnoses the problems with his character himself: “What sort of character was it? Well, in the modern vocabulary, it was narcissistic, it was masochistic, it was anachronistic” (10) “To his son and his daughter he was a loving but bad father. To his own parents he had been an ungrateful child. To his brothers and sisters, affectionate but remote. With his friends, an egotist. With love, lazy. With brightness, dull. With power, passive. With his own soul, evasive” (11-12).

Although he suffers a great deal of anxiety, at the end of the novel he seems to find some kind of balance and happiness by accepting his weaknesses. He is released from his obsession with Madeleine and writing letters. At the end of the novel he discovers that he has “no messages for anyone. Nothing. Not a single word” (416). In “An Interview with Saul Bellow,” Bellow comments on the character of Herzog:

Herzog is a comic portrait of the enfeeblement of the educated man, a person of good instincts and decent feelings who, in the crisis of his life, casts about for help from his “education” and finds that this “education” is little more than a joke. Herzog, then, reviews his life; reenacting the roles he has been taught. The learned Herzog is merely foolish. The pussycat husband, winning his wife’s affections through “goodness,” is ludicrous; she simply cuckolds him. As the “romantic hero” he is a goose, and as the betrayed and avenging husband he is what movie billboards used to call ‘a laff-riot!’ (Raudane, 1984: 268-269).

Herzog exemplifies the academic character as a laughable buffoon. His education does not prepare him to deal with the pressures of real life and even though he has the knowledge to diagnose his own problems, this knowledge does not help him in solving them.

In *The Dean's December* (1982), Saul Bellow presents another academic character who goes in between the life of intellect and the world beyond the university but this time without the element of humor. Albert Corde is a journalism professor and dean at a university in Chicago. In the past, he abandoned his active journalism career for the seclusion and security of the academy and at the beginning of the novel, we find him in Bucharest. Most of the novel takes place in Rumania, and the rest is divided between Chicago and California. Albert Corde and his wife, Minna, an astronomer from Rumania arrive in Bucharest to see and spent some time with Minna's dying mother. Corde spends most of his time sitting in Minna's old room in Bucharest and thinking about the moral and economic decay of the both sides of the iron curtain. The totalitarian Communist regime in Rumania is juxtaposed with the demoralized capitalist democracy of America. He painfully observes that the human factor is ignored in both situations. Corde writes some heavily worded articles on the urban decay, racial conflicts, random violence and political corruption in Chicago and he is surprised at the violent response he receives. As a result of this, he has to resign from his post at the university. In the previously mentioned interview, Saul Bellow says: "But Corde's account of Chicago does not find favor either with the Chicago public or with academic colleagues. (Nobody yet has taken the measure of professorial vulgarity)" (Raudane, 1984: 275).

Saul Bellow continues to present his critique of academics and the education system in America with his last novel *Ravelstein* (2000). The main characters of the novel correspond to real people. Bellow's late friend Allan Bloom is the inspiration for the character of Abe Ravelstein, and Chick represents Saul Bellow himself. In the novel, Abe Ravelstein is a political philosophy professor who becomes a millionaire after the popular success of his best-selling book. Allan Bloom wrote *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy, and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (Bloom, 1987) and also achieved a great success with it. This book that deals with the breakdown of the educational system "sold half a million copies in hardcover editions, enough to make the professor rich, and more than enough to generate the charisma of crowd appeal" (Wilshire, 1988: 7). Saul Bellow wrote the foreword for his best friend's book and in it he says, "To me, this is not the book of a professor, but that of a thinker who is willing to take the risks more frequently taken by writers. It is risky in a book of ideas to speak in one's own voice, but it reminds us that the sources of the truest truths are inevitably profoundly personal" (Bloom, 1987:12). He offers his criticism of the academia by differentiating the thinkers who are not afraid of taking risks while using their own voices to speak and the professors in the academy. Bellow quotes from Bloom's book: "The real community of man, in the midst of all the self-contradictory simulacra of community, is the community of those who seek the truth...of all men to the extent they desire to know ...the true friends, as Plato was to Aristotle at the very moment they were

disagreeing about the nature of the good...It is here that the contact people so desperately seek is to be found" (Bloom, 1987: 11).

Bloom believes that most of the professors lost their contact with this community. He criticizes both professors and the students because they abandoned the search of truth and pursued materialistic goals in a capitalist society. As a result the university professors are not different from the people outside the university. Bellow summarizes Bloom's ideas in his foreword:

The heart of Professor Bloom's argument is that the university...was to have been an island of intellectual freedom where all views are investigated without restriction. Liberal democracy in its generosity made this possible, but by consenting to play an active or "positive," a participatory role in society, the university has become inundated and saturated with the backflow of society's "problems"...Increasingly, the people "inside" are identical in their appetites and motives with the people "outside" the university. (Bloom, 1987:18)

Similarly in the novel, Ravelstein, with encouragement from Chick, writes a book about the state of education and offends the academic circles: "He had gone over the heads of the profs and the learned societies to speak directly to the great public. There are, after all, millions of people waiting for a sign. Many of them are university graduates" (Bellow, 2000: 48). Unfortunately being an independent thinker with his own voice, Ravelstein receives a lot of discouragement and criticism from the academy. He demonstrates the attitude of the university towards him when he says: "I'm the only one with rank who doesn't have a named chair. After all I've done for the university—And the only chair the administration offers me is the electric chair." (Bellow, 2000: 36)

On the personal side, Abe Ravelstein is a closeted homosexual who is dying of AIDS so he recruits Chick to write his biography asking him to present him as he actually is. As an academic character, Abe Ravelstein is a highly popular professor with his own eccentricities. He has close relationships with his students, regularly invites them over to his house for pizza parties and watching the Chicago Bulls. His students in higher positions call him to give him insider information about economics, politics, and government business. Most of his students become his devout followers and continue to be in his life even though "Abe took no stock in kindness. When students didn't meet his standards he said, I was wrong about you. This is no place for you. I won't have you around." The feelings of the rejects didn't concern him.

“Better for them if they hate me. It’ll sharpen their minds. There’s too much therapeutic bullshit, altogether” (Bellow, 2000: 42).

The book continues after Ravelstein’s death. Chick struggles to write the memoir that he promised to his friend. He goes through a divorce, a marriage at an older age and an exotic illness that causes him to have a near death experience. Towards the end of the book in his own reflections on the death, soul and afterlife, Chick comments that even the atheist philosopher Abe Ravelstein accepted the afterlife in his death bed. Ravelstein asks Chick about death and Chick answers that it would mean the pictures would stop. Chick reflects on this idea:

No one can give up on the pictures—the pictures might, yes they *might* continue. I wonder if anyone believes that the grave is all there is. No one can give up on the pictures. The pictures must and will continue. If Ravelstein the atheist-materialist had implicitly told me that he would see me sooner or later, he meant that he did not accept the grave to be *the* end. Nobody can and nobody does accept this. We just *talk* tough (Bellow, 2000: 222).

Bellow’s novel is about finding out who Ravelstein is as an academician, as an independent thinker and as a human being with multiple facets.

Saul Bellow is a writer and academic who is positioning himself away from the academia. In his novels, he presents the human qualities and weaknesses of the professors rather than giving them noble, heroic statures. His characters are modern, intellectual human beings struggling with the life in post war America. They repeatedly find out that their education does not offer any solution in their daily struggles. In his portrayal of academic characters he critiques the academicians and the state of education but as Tierney points out “Good academic novels, then, may not portray us as we wish to be seen, but by complicating the picture of academic life, the novels may encourage us to act as we wish to be seen” (Tierney, 2004: 176).

## REFERENCES

- Bellow, Saul. *Herzog*. Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, 1964.
- Bellow, Saul. *The Dean's December*. New York: Penguin Books, (1982) 1998.
- Bellow, Saul. *Ravelstein*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2000.
- Bloom, Allan. *The Closing of American Mind*. Foreword by Saul Bellow. New York: Touchstone Books, 1987.
- Lyons, John O. *The College Novel in America*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962.
- Roudane, Matthew C. and Saul Bellow. "An Interview with Saul Bellow" *Contemporary Literature*. Vol. 25 No.3 (Autumn, 1984): 265-280.
- Tierney, William G. "Academic Freedom and Tenure: Between Fiction and Reality" *The Journal of Higher Education*. Ohio State University Press. Vol. 75. no.2 (Mar-Apr 2004):161-177.
- Tierney, William G. "Interpreting Academic Identities: Reality and Fiction on Campus" *The Journal of Higher Education*. Vol. 73, No.1 (Jan-Feb 2002): 161-172.
- Wilshire, Bruce. "Bloom, Hirsch, Jacoby: What Do Their Books Mean For Higher Education (Particularly in Theatre)?" *Performing Arts Journal*. Vol.11, no. 1 (1988) 7-13.