

The Death of the Poet and Its Causes in Humboldt's Gift

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Keywords: *Humboldt's Gift*; Saul Bellow; death; poet

Abstract: Contemporary American writer Saul Bellow (1915-2005) is widely recognized as one of the most representative American novelists after Faulkner and Hemingway. *Humboldt's Gift*, Saul Bellow's masterpiece, focuses on the story of Humboldt, the famous American poet of the 1930s, who, in his old age, was left with nothing and scorned by the world, and left a play as a gift to his student, Citrin, on his deathbed. The novel centers around the death of Humboldt and reveals the bitterness and uncertainty of American intellectuals after the Second World War. Grounded in the context of the American era from the 1930s to the 1970s, combined with the crises of career, love, and friendship that the poet Humboldt encounters in American society in the novel, it can better help researchers to re-examine the causes of the death of the poet Humboldt in *Humboldt's Gift*, and reveal Saul Bellow's concerns and reflections on the destinies of American literature and poets.

1. Introduction

American Jewish writer Saul Bellow's 1975 "autobiographical" novel "Humboldt's Gift" has become an outstanding classic of American literature with its rigorous structure, rich imagination and mature ideas, and has won many awards, such as the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize for Literature. Based on his own experiences, author Saul Bellow tells the story of American poet Von Humboldt Fleischer and young writer Charlie Citrin in his novel. "Bellow never shied away from death in his novels" [1]. "Bellow considered Humboldt's Gift to be a book of death, and its real theme is death." [2] In the novel Bellow describes in detail how Humboldt, a talented and gifted American poet, is abandoned by American society and suffers betrayal from his wife and cold stares from his best friends, and finally dies in his dilapidated flat. Since the publication of the Chinese translation of *Humboldt's Gift* in China, many scholars in China have analysed the theme and the image of women in *Humboldt's Gift* in depth, but the analysis of the reasons for the death of the poet Humboldt is often skimmed over, and fails to explore in depth the author's concern about the fate and the future of the poet after the Second World War as manifested in the novel. In view of this, the analysis of the causes of the poet Humboldt's death in *Humboldt's Gift* can better reveal Saul Bellow's concerns and thoughts about American literature and the fate of poets by basing on the American era from the 1930s to the 1970s and combining with the crises of the poet Humboldt's career, love, and friendship encountered by the poet in the American society in the novel.

2. Humboldt's Career Crisis

Prior to the 1940s, the talented and knowledgeable American poet Humboldt had a hugely

successful poetic career, and the publication of his work *Funny Ballads* in the 1930s caused a huge sensation, a reputation that lasted for a decade. "Conrad Aiken praised him; his poems won the admiration of T. S. Eliot; even W. Winters could not help but applaud him." [3] Not only that, but the words he first coined were all the rage in society. Humboldt once said, "Let life either rot or burn.[3]" After the 1940s, when pragmatism was once prevalent in the United States and mass culture was gradually replacing elite culture, Humboldt suffered an unprecedented career crisis, with his poems being cut and his plays unseen, and he fell from the literary scene. He fell from the literary scene. However, he still had a passion to try to change the prevailing pragmatism in the United States with literature and revive the culture in Washington. When he was abandoned by the American poetic establishment and eventually fell into disrepute, he fought frantically against it, and eventually suffered great psychological trauma, ending his life in a decaying Irskine flat. From fair and dashing and tall to fat, bloated, and old; from being appreciated by the great writers to being discarded by the world to the point of worthlessness, the poet Humboldt's fall from grace in the American literary world was astonishingly rapid.

At the beginning of the novel, there is a strong contrast between Humboldt's splendour during the period of his fame and his downfall, and the transcription of Humboldt's fate undoubtedly triggers the readers' thoughts. Dickens believed that 19th century England was "the best of times and the worst of times" [4], which is also suitable for describing the state of American society from the 1940s to the 1970s. World War II swept across the world, and most countries were devastated. After World War II, the United States invested a great deal of human, material, and financial resources in military research and endeavoured to enhance its economic strength and military power. However, the frantic pursuit of hegemony and material wealth has led to the expansion of human selfishness, the disappearance of emotions and spiritual numbness. Being in such times, Saul Bellow was alert to the uncertainty and loss of security that pervaded the era. "Perhaps America is no longer in need of art and inner wonders, for he has enough outer wonders." At this point, elite culture could no longer satisfy the cultural needs of Americans, and was destined to produce "victims" in the process of America's transition from elite culture to mass culture. The contradiction between the material civilisation and the spiritual civilisation in the United States is inevitable, and Humboldt is the poet who is deeply involved in it. Humboldt tried to fight against the filthy social environment, and what he earnestly sought was to do something noble, to use Plato's concept to build a utopia in the human world, and to change the American society, where materialism is the most important and pragmatism prevails. He desperately hoped that Stevenson, who had the spirit of humanism, could run for the presidency successfully, "If Stevenson won, it would mean the victory of literature - that is to say, our victory", but in the end, Stevenson's presidential campaign ended in defeat, Humboldt's expectations for an American literary renaissance were dashed.

3. Humboldt's Love Crisis

American sociologist R.W. Connell classified different types of masculinity into four types: dominant, complicit, subordinate and marginal. According to Connell's description, dominant masculinity essentially refers to male hegemonic masculinity, which dominates and rules in these four types of masculinity classified by Connell[5]. The United States of America, with its rapid development of material life, is a society constructed with male needs and standards, where men are undoubtedly the centre of society and women are seen as the second sex. "Men have always dominated women." [6]

Bellow describes Humboldt's idea of male hegemony to a tee in *Humboldt's Gift*. Humboldt's dominant masculinity can be felt in any scene where Humboldt engages in dialogue with others. Gender identity essentially belongs to a socio-cultural construct, "Men are not born, they are

moulded." [7] Under the influence of American elite culture in the early twentieth century, Humboldt formed a high degree of self-awareness of himself, and Humboldt's sense of male hegemony is rooted in this. Humboldt's rise to fame in the American literary scene of the 1930s, the praise and clamouring of the world's literary greats, the loyal following of Citrin, and the adoration and companionship of his wife, Kathleen, combined to reinforce Humboldt's hegemonic masculinity. "How important it is for the Stevenson government to have a cultural adviser like myself who is well versed in the world's various secular changes!" Humboldt undoubtedly believed in his own importance in American society and had fond hopes for the development of American poetry. Humboldt was naturally inspirational, fervent and astute. Any topic becomes creative when it comes from Humboldt's mouth. In Humboldt's eyes, the diverse and opulent human world must be led and managed by an extraordinary figure, and he saw himself as such an extraordinary figure, capable of leading the United States to a new utopia. It was not inevitable that such a gifted poet with a high degree of identification with himself and a pronounced sense of male hegemony would bring such traits of his into his own family.

Humboldt's hegemonic masculinity is more directly evident when dealing with his wife, Catherine. As Humboldt's wife, Catherine admired him greatly. To be able to communicate with Humboldt, Catherine reads books, from James to Edith Wharton, from Karl Marx to Freud, and she devotes most of her day to reading. When Humboldt was at home, Catherine played rugby with him and entertained guests, making her the traditional "perfect" wife. Not only that, but Humboldt had to keep a watchful eye on Catherine at all times, not letting her out of his sight. "He rarely let Catherine drive herself to the supermarket without him. He hid the keys to his car, and Catherine was kept in deep isolation by him." Humboldt is intensely possessive and he punches, kicks & beats Catherine, becoming a thug who wants to put Catherine to death. "Humboldt is pounding Catherine in the stomach with his fists. He bent over in pain, then he pulled her into the Buick by her hair." Humboldt's control and "objectification" of his wife Catherine is not only physical, but also intellectual. "She was a hundred per cent submissive. She is like a little dove, you see, and does nothing but what that vile old fellow tells her to do; if he says east, she dares not go west." While such a tyrant would have been a raging dictatorship even if he had been intimate, the submissive and obedient Catherine was undoubtedly the best person Humboldt could have manipulated. At this time, Catherine, in Humboldt's concept is no longer an independent individual, but completely and utterly reduced to Humboldt's appendages and victims, completely lost as a person's individuality and subjectivity, the loss of freedom and dreams, which makes her feel immense pain. One day, Catherine disappeared from a restaurant on Thompson Street, left New York and filed for divorce, finally realising her liberation, she no longer unconditionally meets Humboldt's needs and obeys him as before. The awakened Catherine endeavours to break free from the control of the male hegemony, from her initial submissiveness and defiance to her gradual liberation from Humboldt's control and reclaiming of her own subjectivity. After Humboldt is released from Bollywood, he discovers that his wife Catherine has disappeared and that his mentally ill mother is in a private sanatorium. Humboldt's sense of hegemonic masculinity has built an inescapable cage for both himself and Catherine. Catherine's disappearance is a silent revolt against Humboldt's male tyranny, a manifestation of her struggle to break free from the control of the patriarchal world and the shackles of love. When Catherine finally achieves independence and freedom, Humboldt becomes not only an outcast in the American literary world, but also an outcast to Humboldt's entire family.

4. Humboldt's Crisis of Friendship

Citrin, as the protagonist and narrator of *Humboldt's Gift*, witnessed Humboldt's struggle on the line of death. Humboldt appreciated Citrin's talent when he became famous, and advised him

everywhere on his literary path. He introduced Citrin to his literary friends and taught him his own life lessons, becoming Citrin's guide on his literary journey. They also shared a common interest and had countless interesting conversations, discussing on many occasions how poets were keen to make language more expressive and musical, exploring Joyce's view of language, lamenting the fact that true beauty was drowned like a fall into the snowy abyss of the South Pole... However, but Citrin, seeing the once spirited and talented Humboldt now reduced to an old, pale, dying man, did not go up to greet the man who had lifted him up and guided him along the literary path. "I have known for a long time that Humboldt was going to die, for two months ago, I saw him in the street, and he was already dead." "Humboldt withered like a moth-eaten shrub." "Deadened," while Citrin was "poised"; Humboldt was "dull and bloated," while Citrin had "a flat stomach and kept his form." Humboldt had pretzels for lunch, while Citrin had to go to a political lunch; all these things made the gap between Humboldt and Citrin insurmountable, and Citrin hid in the back of the car and watched the downtrodden Humboldt wandering alone in the street. Wrapped up in American pragmatism and consumerism, Citrin believes that the two men are currently too far apart, even if the man is his best friend and teacher. "How could I strike up a conversation with Humboldt? Wouldn't that be too demeaning?" Despite the fact that he even blushes and burns at the thought of being negative to Humboldt, the Citrin who once adored Humboldt is gone, and the Citrin who has become famous at this point chooses to run away.

Citrin pondered the meaning of existence before he met Humboldt. "I wasn't keen on money; I was bent on doing good. I wanted to do good things wanted to do them to death. This emotion of doing good can be traced back to my early and unique feelings about the meaning of existence - it was as if I was trapped in the depths of a transparent life, agitatedly, desperately groping for the meaning of existence" [3] Why did the later Citrin shun his former mentor? The career of the famous Citrin of the 1950s seemed to have been at the forefront of the American scene, and he was rewarded with status, fame, money, and women. At this time Citrin's success contrasted with Humboldt's failure as they chose completely different paths. Citrin bowed to the pragmatism that was so prevalent in the United States and produced *Von Tronck*, a work that he considered to be kitschy, devoid of artistic merit, and a piece of claptrap. When Humboldt, during his lifetime, accused Citrin of being a traitor at the Belasco Theatre, Citrin did not come to his senses. Sitterling's works, though attracting public attention in American society, had no educational significance and brought him nothing but fame and fortune. Humboldt, on the other hand, despite his loss, still chose to try to find the light in the materialistic cracks, and insisted on the humanistic line of creation. Citrin fell into endless remorse after Humboldt's death, "My waking character is far from blameless. I shall never be awarded the Medal of Character; these things must have been clear to the dead." Thereafter, Humboldt's gift to Citrin caused Citrin to find a new self and reflect on the past. Citrin realised the corrosion of the spirit by money, and realised that a true artist should not fall deep into the trap of materialism and pragmatism, or else he or she cannot create a truly valuable literary work. After burying Humboldt, Citrin rethinks the meaning of existence, and is determined to complete the unfinished literary career of Humboldt Fleischer. Such a "gift", which came to Citrin at a time when he was at his wit's end, was like a beacon of light to Citrin in his confusion, reviving his imagination and his former romantic inspiration. "What did Tolstoy mean when he called upon mankind to stop this false and unnecessary comedy of history and replace it with a life of simplicity. In the midst of Humboldt's scribbling and madness, my experience of that meaning has become clearer and clearer. Every stage of that process he performed." Citrin's awakening, however, came at the cost of Humboldt's death.

For Humboldt, being abandoned by his close friends and students was the final straw that broke Humboldt's back. Citrin, as a poet who once had a humanitarian spirit and literary ideals, lost himself in the materialistic American society, chose a diametrically opposite literary path to

Humboldt, and indifferently confronted the dying Humboldt, and what he did also led to Humboldt's death to a certain extent.

5. Conclusion

Through the elaboration of Humboldt's fate, Bellow depicts a panorama of American capitalism and deeply exposes the hypocrisy and indifference of the contemporary American society. Bellow's description of Humboldt's death also deeply criticises the pragmatism, materialism and male hegemony prevalent in the United States after the Second World War, exposing the crisis of the contemporary American spiritual civilization. *Humboldt's Gift*, while criticising materialism, also reflects philosophically on the themes of friendship and love. It is not only that the American society, where material supremacy and pragmatism prevailed, could not tolerate such an idealistic poet as Humboldt, but also that the crisis of love caused by Humboldt's own dominant masculinity and Citrin's indifference together caused Humboldt's death. By depicting Humboldt's fall from grace in the American literary world, Bellow expresses in the novel his worries and thoughts about the fate of American literature and poets in the post-war period.

Acknowledgement

Funding: Stage Results of the Philosophy and Social Science Planning Project in Henan Province (Project No. 2022BWX003)

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