

Projection of Self-Perception and Embodied Cognition in Augie March

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Abstract

The Adventures of Augie March progresses as a perceptive individual through various experiences and situations. It delineates how Augie learns and transforms by his encounters with situations, conflicts, people in his life and challenges thrown at him. The three things that govern Augie March are alienation, relation and adaptation which recur in cycles. Love and kindness are natural traits in Augie. He continually evolves by exhibiting an openness to experience and taking an affirmative, celebratory stance towards life.

KEYWORDS: learning, self-perception, adaptation, cognition, bildungsroman

INTRODUCTION

The Adventures of Augie March, Saul Bellow's third novel, published in 1953 is a coming of age novel. Along with Humboldt's Gift and Herzog, it marks a high point in a famous career capped by the Nobel Prize for literature in 1976. Besides the Nobel, Saul Bellow has to his credit a Pulitzer Prize, and (three times) the National Book Award. Augie March, the protagonist of the novel, is a first generation Jewish-American picaresque and the novel is about Augie journeying through a depression-era Chicago. The novel is fashioned in the picaresque style. In it Bellow found his uniquely Chicagoan voice and the anti modernist philosophical approach. This novel is categorized as a Bildungsroman novel where Bellow graphically portrays the development in Augie. Dilthey's definition of Bildungsroman is relevant to understanding Augie's journey through life.

all [Bildungsroman] portray a young man of their time: how he enters state of naiveté seeking kindred souls, finds friendship and love, how he comes into conflict with the hard realities of the world, how he grows to maturity through diverse life-experiences, finds himself, and attains certainty about his purpose in the world. (qtd. in Swales 98)

The protagonist Augie satisfies all the required qualities listed in the quotation.

Augie is not an orphan and he is not totally away from his family. He is left alone at an early age and he spends most of his time trying to find a better life. Delmore Schwartz has praised that quality of Augie which other reviewers discredit – his unwillingness to be committed. Schwartz's review of The Adventures of Augie March opens with a simple declaration that "Saul Bellow's new novel is a new kind of book." He compares it favourably with the grandest works of Mark Twain and John Dos Passos.

Daina Miniotaite suggests that "Bellow's heroes' chief preoccupation is how to learn to resist societal norms and moral values and dogmas without alienating from the society" (113). The realization of selfhood is one of the major concepts dealt with in this novel. Throughout the novel Augie never hesitates to express what he wants – "I want" is one of the common expressions that Augie uses frequently in the novel. As long as he is not certain of his need, he does not get what he wants.

The three things that govern Augie March are alienation, relation and adaptation which recur in cycles. Augie alienates himself from family and then relates himself to quite a few people he meets in his journey. But he is estranged from them too. But as his journey progresses through more such experiences he learns to adjust to people and situations. The opening lines of the novel show the mind and nature of Augie.

I am an American, Chicago born--Chicago, that somber city--and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent. But a man's character is his fate, says Heraclitus, and in the end there isn't any way to disguise the nature of the knocks by acoustical work on the door or gloving the knuckles. (5)

Theories in psychology explain that an individual's development is dependent on his understanding of the external world. This idea can be explained through the words of Kant, the philosopher: "inner perception is impossible without outer perception, that the world, as a collection of connected phenomena, is anticipated in the consciousness of my unity, and is the means whereby I come into being as a consciousness" (qtd. in Merleau-Ponty XVI). A close study of the novel reveals that Augie desires experience. He plays different roles – doing odd jobs, working as a junior factotum, assisting in a sports goods shop, smuggling, stealing books, running a coal business, managing labour organization, hunting iguanas, serving in merchant marine, black marketing and so on. We see him adapting to situations. In all these situations, he tries to find his self identity. Undaunted by failed expectations, he moves to the next experience with hope. As Chester Eisinger describes him, he is "an uncommitted wanderer upon the face of the earth, savouring experience for its infinite variety and cherishing his independence to seek it out where he may" (qtd. in Opdahl 72). Augie expresses himself as a man of love open to all experiences.

Love plays a significant role in Augie's life. Love appears to be both a disabling and enabling factor in the development of Augie. His initial love affair with Hilda Novinson does not impact any development in Augie. The appearance of Thea Fenchel brings about a great change in Augie's life. After his failure to live with Thea, he learns more about life and its difficulties. Augie begins to have serious thoughts about life only after he experiences an emotional detachment. In Psychology emotion is seen as a conscious factor.

There is no question of making human existence walk 'on its head'. There is no doubt at all that we must recognize in modesty, desire and love in general a metaphysical significance, which means that they are incomprehensible if man is treated as a machine governed by natural laws, or even as 'a bundle of instincts', and that they are relevant to man as a consciousness and as a freedom.

(Merleau-Ponty 193)

It is metaphysical significance that Augie looks for as he tries to bond with people he loves. In Augie emotions are accepted and not shunned as barriers to rationality. This acknowledging of emotions in one's experiential progression makes Augie a person with organic sensibility as well as what can be called inclusive rationality. The quality enables Augie to glimpse into metaphysical dimensions of life.

Augie's childhood is not one of fulfilment. It was not without discontentment and humiliation. He tells us that his mother is "simple-minded" (5) and his elder brother Simon honest and intelligent but his younger brother George an idiot. The first "Machiavellian" character he encounters in his life is his grandmother Lausch. Generally, the term Machiavellian refers to a heartless person who is totally unconcerned about the means but here the term represents one often using methods to gain power and control but within tensions to help. Grandma Lausch wishes to have control over the family. Augie loves his family and admires his elder brother Simon. Though at times Simon hurts him, Augie chooses to be kind. Grandma Lausch's training to prepare him for a noble destiny often takes the shape of a burlesque. She advises Augie to read the novels of Tolstoy. A closer look reveals that Grandma Lausch is trying to prescribe her principles for others. It is Grandma Lausch who initiates the reading habit in Augie and we will see later in the novel Augie becoming obsessed with books. Her basic tenets include: "Nobody asks you to love the whole world, only to be honest, Ehrlich. Don't have a loud mouth. The more you love people the more they'll mix you up. A child loves, a person respects. Respect is better than love" (11). Grandma is not moved by love and that is why she fails to perceive the affection of George. Love is a key emotion that is responsible for bonding in the world. Augie realizes this fact in the latter part of the novel. From his home, Augie escapes into the free world to find out the meaning of life. Once he is out of his house he takes up many roles. But Augie does not lose his sense of humanity under any circumstance and this quality alone makes him a noble picaro in spite of his shortcomings and misadventures. Though well intentioned, Grandma's doctrines, except for the advice on reading do not make any impression on Augie who is more concerned about finding his destiny through his experiences.

Love and kindness are natural traits in Augie. Augie along with Jimmy works in a toy department. Both steal money and are sent out. This act by Augie earns Grandma's castigation. But Augie continues to be sympathetic to her. His humanity emerges when he readily goes to help her when she suffers a fall. Though perceiving her negatively Augie allows his humanity to take over. It was under Grandma Lausch's order that George was put in an institution. Though Augie and his mother did not like the idea they obeyed her. In the absence of George, everything seemed to be disturbed at home. They felt the change in the house. George always has been responsible for their bonding. The house appeared "dinkier, darker, smaller; once shiny and venerated things losing their attraction and richness and importance" (63). Now Augie realizes that it is only affection that makes the attachment stronger among his family members. But Grandma's philosophy of life is against this. To her, intellectual and rational development is the prime reason for existence. Augie's realization of the importance of affection makes him become aware of the limitations of Grandma Lausch's view.

Augie, though not totally detached from family, moves away in search of money and better life. He tries to formulate his own values and meets different kinds of people in whose perspectives he refuses to be caught in. This drift away from society offers him important lessons in life. Throughout the novel Augie meets people of different classes with whom he is entangled for some time. Augie's powers of perception, unclouded by the absence of pretensions or defence mechanisms, make him see the hollowness of their worldviews which explains Augie not sticking to any one person or place. Augie's perception of people and experiences is what propels him into seeking out life and its

meaning which makes it a quest. Quest is an essential aspect of human existence prompting one to peer deep into one's self. The search and introspection finally result in one being a better person with enhanced powers of understanding. Quest is what gives meaning to one's life. From a psychological point of view self-development is interconnected with one's awareness of one's mind. R.S. Dowine's observation in this regard is relevant here.

Independence of mind and individuality of mind will both therefore find their ultimate justification in self-development (or personal and professional development), but in different ways: independence of mind leads to the development of our distinctive human endowment, the generic aspects of the self, whereas individuality of mind leads to the development of our personal uniqueness, our individuality, the idiosyncratic aspects of the self. The two aspects of development are necessary and sufficient for total self-development. (22)

Augie is naturally endowed with independence and individuality of mind which do not allow him to be satisfied in comforting fictions constructed by society and tradition. He is very particular to achieve selfhood by and through himself. The character of Augie implies that the true selfhood should be the positive accretions of a genuine experiential journey.

In the fourth chapter of the novel Augie declares: "ALL THE INFLUENCES (sic) were lined up waiting for me. I was born, and there they were to form me, which is why I tell you more of them than of myself (46). What Augie says here significantly pertains to his development as an individual. He is well aware of the environment's role in making him what he is. This awareness of Augie makes him an ideal candidate for embodied cognition. Researchers in the field of cognition agree almost unanimously that "individual cognition is grounded in the constant interaction of the individual with its (sic) environment as well as with other individuals" (Bockler 234).

When Augie meets Einhorn he admires him for his intellectuality, sense of direction and philosophical capacity. Augie admits that he is the first superior man he has met. Augie is willing to do errands for Einhorn. He does all kinds of job for Einhorn like dressing him up, accompanying him to all places, reading him newspapers and so on. Augie sees some similarity between Einhorn and Grandma Lausch. Their thinking appears to be quite related in some aspects.

Einhorn had a teaching turn similar to Grandma Lausch's, both believing they could show what could be done with the world, where it gave or resisted, where you could be confident and run or where you could only feel your way and were forced to blunder. (71)

Augie underlines the similarity by showing Einhorn's decision to make a false insurance claim in order to purchase new living room furniture. This dishonesty resembles Grandma Lausch's plan to get eyeglasses from the free dispensary by telling lies, as well as Simon's manipulation of change money while working concessions. Dishonesty, in other words, is an intrinsic aspect of the real world. Augie learns this from Einhorn. He sees Einhorn to be selfish though he admires him for his achievement in spite of his physical disability. His perception of Einhorn changes as the novel progresses. Augie comes to know that falseness, dishonesty and selfishness are part of the real world in spite of the presence of virtuous things. Einhorn often tells Augie that he (Augie) is not

one among his family: “he and Mrs. Einhorn made so sure I knew my place” (76). Lipman explains critical thinking as being “sensitive to context” and “self correcting” (25). Both these qualities manifest themselves in Augie. While Augie admires Einhorn, he does not fail to use his critical eye to see the vices in him and in the world. Sensitivity and intellectual honesty are the hallmarks of Augie’s character which ensure his development towards maturity.

CONCLUSION

Einhorn identifies the streak of inflexibility in Augie which for the latter sparks a moment of recognition. Cognitive alertness is a trait observed in most Bildungsroman protagonists and in Augie it is very vibrant helping him to “cognize” rather rapidly the thoughts, motives and intensions of people he encounters. What is laudable in Augie is that he does not exempt himself from his keen perception. His perception of others leads to Augie’s enhanced self-perception.

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