

Defender of Humanism in the Alienated World

—Citrine's Humanistic Journey in *Humboldt's Gift*

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Abstract

The novel *Humboldt's gift* reveals the dilemma of two intelligentsia in the modern society where consumerism and materialism further aggravates the alienation among people and the culture is degraded into a capital form and is commercialized, so the dignity and even the survival of poets are threatened by this material-centered society. The thesis intends to discuss the destructive force of culture commercialization on the life of writers through Humboldt's failure life, and further analyze 3 stages Citrine takes to overcome his life crisis and be a defender of humanism in the absurd world.

Keywords: humanism, culture industry, spiritual quest, humanistic action

1. Introduction

Humboldt's Gift is one of Saul Bellow's greatest novel which won Pulitzer Prize in 1976. The wide themes and complex thought in this novel inspired many critics on it.

Schraepen in "Humboldt's Gift: A New Bellow" (1981) examined how Citrine escape from the distracting world and heralded an expansion of private sphere through transcendental meditation. Kernan in his "Humboldt's Gift" (1982) analyzed the conflicts between the poets' romanticism and the realistic society, and also explained the gift from materialistic and spiritual aspects. Glanday in *Decline of Humanism* (1990) justified one pessimistic argument there is no alternative to tune out, to withdrawal from the intimidating mechanisms of such systems through analysis two poets' suffering in the modern society. Peter in *Saul Bellow* (1992) also explained the real significance of Gift is to help Citrine understand the hypocrisy of success in the material society and in his meditation, he tried to escape from the moronic inferno, but in the end, he returned to the community. The thesis tried to analyze Citrine's defense of humanism in the waste land from the perspective of culture analysis and his own spiritual quest.

2. Destructive Influence of the Culture Industry on Poets

An alienation and spiritual wasteland brought by the post-industry society is manifested in this novel. The term Post-industrial society allegedly first coined by Denial Bell signifies the coming of an age when the pattern of economy growing transited from the production sector to tertiary sector in his work *the coming of post-industrial society*. Two layers of meaning are contained in this definition, first one implies an age of excessive abundant materials and hedonism, and the second means knowledge becomes a valued form of capital and power will be monopolized by knowledge and the impact of the expert will continually expand. Hedonism caused by the mass production and new technology further pushes people's mad pursuit of materials and aggravates the alienation between human beings, and in the wake of knowledge participating in the market, culture is degraded into a form of capital and commercialized by the market, thus impact of economy pattern on intelligentsia's identity and life is profound (Bell, 1986). When culture participated in the profit production, writers or intelligentsia inevitably faced with the necessity to write in the light of the mass's interests and the need of the market. In this way, this consequence is more negative and sometimes even destructive to their art life in the transition of culture function from civilization salvation to the profit making, intelligentsia also needed to change their roles in their creative working to a productive and service one in order to expand or maintain their prestige. Therefore, decline of humanism is aggravated in the post-industrial society, where those intelligentsia become the victims of the culture industry and culture is no longer valued in light of its aesthetic significance. The world

in the Humboldt's Gift is a society corrupted by materials and the culture industry.

This novel is built out of a wide range of themes and preoccupations, and the functions on many levels, but amongst its central concerns is the status of the artist in the modern technocratic-business world (Hyland, 1992). In recollecting Humboldt's life, the narrator Citrine introspected his own life and deeply meditated on "the agony of the individual poet in a mass society, the relationship between art and business, the relationship between spiritual and the material" (Hyland, 1992). Humboldt experienced pains caused by the decline of his art career, while Citrine enjoyed the wealth and honor brought by the success of his drama in the theater. Be it success or failure, both of two writers suffered frustration and bitterness at different degrees in this material centered society, what's worse, Humboldt finally went to madness and death. In retrospect of Humboldt's tragedy, Citrine grew in his ridiculous experiences and turned to be a defender of humanism in this indifferent and absurd society.

Humboldt's life is a tragedy and he is the victim of the culture industry. Humboldt won his fame in 1930s by his work *Harlequin Ballads* and thus became a celebrity in Greenwich which was a place for those cultural elites. But Humboldt's radiance didn't last for a long time with the end of the glamour of poem in the age of 1950s. To a great extent, Humboldt's decline in the culture was attributed to the boom of mass culture in the age of 1950 when various expressive medium appeared, thus film and TV occupied people's life, and the importance of poem or literature faded away. With the wane of Humboldt's fame and his desire to attain a professor post in Princeton University perishing in this society, Humboldt turned to be mad and self-divided. He even imagined his wife had a love affair with another young man called Magnavisco, and Humboldt attacked him in a violent and mad way, which led to a foul situation that he was caught by the policeman. Unable to sustain the failure in his career and the perish of his idealism, Humboldt went to extreme, addicted to alcohol, drugs and finally died because of intensive schizophrenia. As a result, the poet has dwindled into the clownish role created for him by society and manipulated for its own materialistic ends (Kernan, 1986). Another writer Citrine won his success by his one of film-script and writing some of biographers, but his passion to be a poet was also drowned by the commercialized culture and his talent as a writer was materialized to be profitable.

3. Citrine's Journey to be the Defender of Humanism

While Citrine, Humboldt's pious disciple, experienced a spiritual journey to be a defender of humanism though he suffered betrayal and blows after he won fame and wealth through writing one drama called *Von Trenck* which in fact was recomposed a lot by the director. The success of the drama in Bellevue does not just bring wealth but also many thorny problems to him. People around him were like the vivacious sharks, preparing to suck every blood of Citrine. The world around him is further alienated under commercialization of everything, including the culture. Citrine's thinking and writing was taken as a tool to make profits and fame. His ex-wife Denise proposed the lawsuits incessantly to ask for more alimony; A villain Cantibile Citrine get acquainted in gamble destroyed Citrine's lovely luxurious car Mercedes and humiliated him in a violent way. His lawyers were all prayers on his wealth, trying all means to frighten him or seduce him in order to squeeze more money from him. His friend Thaxter, a phonic intelligentsia, founded a magazine *Ark* which was claimed to save the culture and thus borrowed a lot of money from Citrine, but at last Thaxter was broken and *Ark* was just an illusion because of his squander. What is fatal to Citrine was his girl friend Renata left him in Madrid to take care of her own son, while she fled away and married a business man. So these bitter experiences constituted Citrine's tragic life after his success in the culture field. Here Citrine's suffering formed an ironic situation with the prestige he had ever gained. It seemed his happiness went opposite with his gain of success in wealth and fame. While in meditating on the life of Humboldt, Citrine kept a peaceful mind and a sharp eye toward the secular and material world, and compassion toward his friends. The reason why Citrine did not go mad as Humboldt, though he was nearly on the brink of it was that his deep reflection on Humboldt's problem and his humanistic pursuit saved him from mental breakdown. Humboldt underwent 3 stages, from realizing the destructive force on artist to spiritual pursuit to the establishment of a humanistic bond with friend, relatives and child while redeeming what he indebted to Humboldt and fighting against his life crisis.

3.1 Defending Dignity and Seriousness of Culture

First, recollecting Humboldt's failure life encouraged Citrine to reflect on the destructive influence of the modern society on the art and poet's creativity. Being a pure poet is not satisfactory, Humboldt's great ambition is to combine poem with politics together and help those politicians in the Congress with his poetic and philosophical thinking. "Now that America is a world of power, philistinism is finished. Finished and politically dangerous," he said. "If Stevenson is in, literature is in--we are in, Charlie. Stevenson reads my poem." (Bellow, 1986). "In his administration cabinet members would quote Yeats and Joyce. Humboldt would be consulted about each State of the Union message." (Bellow, 1986). But the failure of Stevenson in presidential election

crashed Humboldt's dream and led to Humboldt's spiritual split. Not only addicted to power, Humboldt showed great interest in money and women. "He intended to be a divine artist, a man of visionary states and enchantments ... But his desires were contradictory. He was out also to be rich and famous. And of course, there were girls" (Bellow, 1986). Therefore, besides the external reason, Humboldt's failure in his art life also caused by his inability to overcome many desires inspired by the modern society where consumerism swells in the age of an overproduction and material flourishing. Desire to win power drained the poets of their creativity and also destroy art itself. Humboldt's death helped Citrine recognize the destructive effect of the post-industry society on the art or intelligentsia and the dilemma of intelligentsia's life in the modern America, so Citrine outcried, "The country is proud of its dead poets. It takes terrific satisfaction in the poets' testimony that the USA is too rough, too big, too much, too rugged, that American reality is overpowering. The weakness of the spiritual powers is proved in the childishness, madness, drunkenness, and despair of these martyrs." (Bellow, 1986). Realizing culture is no longer valued as a precious spiritual wealth, but is transformed into a capital form, a symbol of the post-industry society, Citrine showed his firm resolution to fight against any way of involving culture in the commercial business. He refused to collaborate with Cantabile who proposed selling his papers to some colleges or making a film with the script written by him and Humboldt. Moreover, His friend Thaxter invited him to write some European traveling booklet with the lifts of the living places of those poets, artists, psychologists. Citrine said, "You might as well bring over a firing squad and shoot all these poets dead as put such information into the hands of culture-vulture tourists." (Bellow, 1986). Here in order to protect the value of culture and the intelligentsia against the predatory society, he refused Thaxter and became a defender of culture. In the end of the novel when Citrine was broken, the screenplay written by Humboldt fanatically pursued by those film-maker, Babara suggested Citrine write another film script for the film company, "if you want to write the screenplay for the new vehicle i can make you one hell of a deal. Would you do it for two thousand a week?" (Bellow, 1986). "No, thanks, no, I am engaged in a very different kind of activity" (Bellow, 1986). Citrine's refusal indicated his resistance against involving himself in the culture industry with the consequence of writer's being clowned and commercialized by market, and lost their dignity as an intelligentsia.

3.2 *Spiritual Quest in His Life Crisis*

Citrine's defense of humanism is embodied in his spiritual quest in his life crisis. Humboldt's lunatic life shed light on the fate of poets in the commercial society where culture was wrapped in the commercial outerwear with the function as a tool of making money rather than a spiritual console which records the history or provides soul nourishment for human beings. Though Citrine was a beneficiary of the culture commercialization, winning his fame through writing politician's biographer and a drama which won great hit in Broadway, aware of poets' tragedy in this age, he felt ashamed of his success which lacked any real art. When confronted with various tempts of fame or wealth, Citrine showed indifference and shifted his concern to more serious problems of the modern world. The contradiction of material and spiritual life, body and soul occupied his mind and this meditation led him to undergo a spiritual journey. What's more, when he was humiliated and frightened by Cantabile's rude behavior, he responded with calmness and developed his insight into the problem of modern world. "It was true that people felt it gave them moral distinction to be patient with criminals and psychopaths. To understand! We love to understand, to have compassion and there I was" (Bellow, 1986). Apparently, his calmly tolerance of Cantabile was a way to show his sympathy and love toward the mob or lower classes. On the contrary, Citrine realized that this passive response is modern people's attitude toward disorder or violence because of the indolence and numbness brought by the convenience of the material society. Further, Citine's writing turned to some soul problem from popular biographer which meant to win popularity and wealth. In his contemplation of the modern society, boredom is the theme of people's modern life. "In modern times the question(boredom)had been dealt with under the name of anomie or Alienation, as an effect of capitalist conditions of labor, as a result of leveling in Mass society, as a consequence of the dwindling of religious faith or the ... the increase of rationalization in a technological society, or the growth of bureaucracy." (Bellow, 1986). It was because of the materialism or hedonism in the age of abundant material society, that boredom became people's psychological problem which produced another form of pains rooted from the waste of people's energy, talents, and led to depletion of their imagination and creativity and even some social problems like the madness of poet Humboldt, the violence of Cantabile etc. Through a series of deep meditation, Citrine reasoned, "the self-conscious ego is the seat of boredom. This increasing, swelling, domineering, painful self-consciousness is the only rival of political and social powers that run my life (business, technological powers, the state)." (Bellow, 1986). Perceiving that boredom was brought by the technology and system of state, one way suggested by Citrine to escape boredom is to detach yourself from these powers or politics, to be conscious of oneself as an individual rather than a component in the society functioning as a big machine. Thus avoiding the erosion of materialism or any form of powers and pursuing spiritual freedom is a sound way of defending humanism.

Death problem haunted Citrine after Humboldt's death, and aggravated especially after he was abandoned by girl friend Renata. Horrified by the "metaphysical assumptions about death everyone in the world has apparently reached, everyone would snatched, ravished by death, throttled, smothered (Bellow, 1986), Citrine received spiritual guidance from Humboldt by means of a posthumously delivered letter. This posthumously delivered letter can be considered to be the turning point of the novel because it provides the impetus for his eventual decision to repudiate the materialism of "the reality-instructors" and to begin a new spiritual life (Cronin & Goldman, 1989). Abandoned by Renata, Humboldt was left in the abyss of his life, and by means of contacting the death's soul relieved him from spiritual collapse and the danger of committing suicide. "Terror of death ties this energy up but when it is released one can attempt the good without feeling the embarrassment of being unhistorical, illogical, masochistically massive, feeble-minded. Good then is nothing like the martyrdom of certain Americans, illuminated by poetry in high school, and then testifying to the glory of their good by committing suicide-in high style, the only style for poets (Bellow, 1986). By communicating with the death, Citrine discovered if human beings are able to overcome the terror of death, then they will be infused with great energy to do good the world. While to be good to the society does not mean committing suicide, which is regarded as a sole and lofty way for poets. On the contrary, being good means calmly accepting his fate and still be friendly toward the life, so when he was left in Madrid in a desperate state, he did not worry about money.

3.3 Establishing Close Relationship through Humanistic Action

This world turns to be alienated when the relationship between people is also commercialized. Whether in the eyes of Citrine's ex-wife Denise, his friend Thaxter or his girl friend Renata, his significance as a writer is materialized. In dealing with his crisis, he grew in his meditation of the tragedy of the poet and spiritual quest, which led to his positive action to help other people, Citrine established a close relationship with other people and his activity shed light on his will to reconstruct the humanism.

3.3.1 A Love Bond Uniting Citrine, Waldemar, Menasha and Humboldt

In taking manuscripts left by Humboldt, Citrine visited Humboldt's uncle Waldemar in the nursing home where he happened to meet his old friend Menasha. Waldemar, A gambler leading a luxurious, lazy and spoiled life, now lived in such a poor and smelly place. The conspicuous contrast of Waldemar's past and present life elaborated Citrine's study on boredom. But boredom can't destroy our life, for another feelings surpassed it and saved us from the degeneration of modern world. The coincidence brought them together and established a brotherhood and nostalgic relationship among them. Visiting Waldemar and coincidentally meeting Menasha gave Citrine's another experience and console, suddenly he found that in fact love is a magic bond which helps the connection of each other in the expansive world, like the union of him, his old friend Menasha, Uncle Waldemar, and eventually the soul connection between him and the dead Humboldt. When taking papers from Waldemar, Waldemar had only one plead, "Anyhow, if I, the last member of my family, can tell you what's on my mind, my dead are all over the place, one grave here and the other to hell and gone, what I really want is to reunite the family again." Waldemar's concern with the union of his dead family members was a sound manifestation of his humanism when he entered into the old age. Waldemar also worried about Humboldt who was buried in a very bad place, and hoped Citrine could help to transfer his tomb to a good place. Here the graveyard happened to echo with the previous chapter where Renada's ex-husband Gaylord Koffritz, a graveyard seller who persuaded Swiebel's father to buy a cemetery, "Death deserves dignity. Out there the exploitation is terrible. It's one of the biggest real-estate swindles going. They cheat you. They don't give the statutory number of feet. You have to lie cramped forever. The disrespect is ferocious (Bellow, 196). In the post-industry society, death is no longer a sacred and philosophical thing. Dignity of death has to be paid and funeral becomes commercialization. When Humboldt died, he had lost his wealth and honor, so he was buried in a very bad place. At the request of Waldemar, Citrine promised to rebury the family members of Waldemar and transferred Humboldt's tomb to another place no matter whether the manuscript left by Humboldt could brought any money to him, which further revealed Citrine's reconstruction of a close relationship with Humboldt and his sparkling humanism. Establishing a close relationship with other people and giving help to others relieved Citrine's pains in the absurd world.

3.3.2 Visiting His Brother

Citrine's humanism is revealed in his brotherhood with Ulick. When learning Ulick was going to have a heart operation, Citrine chose to visit him instead of accompanying his lovely Renata to Milan. The big contrast between Ulick and Citrine further showed a strong family affection embedded in Citrine's heart and his stick to the humanistic relationship. Ulick, a vicious and bully businessman, a wizard with money who has devoted, indeed subjugated, his life to the idols of materialism (Pifer, 1990). In the service of that faith he has erected

numerous “shopping centers, condominiums, motels” that have transformed the face of the earth in his part of Texas (Bellow, 1986). Committed to the material world for a long time almost drained his ability to show his love toward his family members and blurred his memory of the time spent with his parents and brother.

Though threatened by death, Ulick’s mind still focused on how to expand his business and make big profits. Aware of the impossibility of persuasion of Ulick to shift his attention to health and soul, Citrine had a deep contemplation upon the relationship between inner and external world. “soul and spirit are poured out upon the world which normally we perceive from within-mountains clouds forests seas. This external world we no longer see, for we are it. The outer world is now the inner. From this new circumference you look back to the center, and at the center is your own self. We are not inert but in motion together with these stars. There is a star world within us that can be seen when the spirit takes a new vantage point outside its body. As for the musculature it is a precipitate of spirit and the signature of the cosmos is in it. In life and in death the signature of the cosmos is within us.” (Bellow, 1986). Citrine’s vision of the inner world is affected by Rudolf Steiner who stressed the immanence of spirit and thought in the material world and the active participation, by means of thinking, of the individual in so called objective or external reality” (Pifer, 1990). Outer world is no longer just forms of material, but is identified with our inner world. When we are able to penetrate into our own inner world from the out world, then “your eyes are now two radiant suns, filled with light. Your eyes are identified by this radiance. From the skin comes a glow.” (Bellow, 1986). Citrine’s retreat into this fantastic star world within is in direct reaction against a socially conditioned reality which victimises many (Glenday, 1990). This penetrating investigation into our inner heart is able to help us enter the unconsciousness kingdom “which is bound up with a defense of the self against stifling, destructive forces (Schraepen, 1981).

3.3.3 Taking Care of Renata’s Child

When Citrine left his brother and went to Madrid with great passion to unite with Renata, he found he was cheated by Renata who might be sleeping with her boy friend Flonzaley, leaving him to be desperate and mindless. But here Bellow’s belief in human beings’ kindness and humanism fully manifested in Citrine’s response and state after he learned he was abandoned by Renata. Firstly, in order to have an uninterrupted date with Flonzaley, Renata’s mother Senora took Roger to Madrid. Citrine was deeply hurt, frustrated, even a little mad, but when he saw Roger, he was very soft toward him and took his shoes off and took him to have a good sleep. “Come on, kid,” lie on my bed.” I pulled off his small shoes and led him into the alcove. Moreover, When Senora left for America and left Roger and the expenditure of the boarding to him, he was still very kind to the little boy though he was almost on the brink of mental collapse. He took Roger to the boarding house and took well care of him, playing with him, taking him to the park, even boning fish for him and hiding his indignation from the child. Contrary to Humboldt who was hysteric, jealous, suspicious and violent when he lost his fame and place in the literary field, and at last went to death, Citrine still kept his sensitivity and gentleness in face of the difficulty in finance and the cheating of Renata. His softness and delicate care of Renata’s child Roger cast a glimpse of light of humanism in the spiritual wasteland.

3.3.4 Helping His Friend Thaxter

Citrine was cheated by his close friend Thaxter twice. First under Thaxter’s propaganda to establish a journal “ark” with the intention of revitalize the culture, Citrine invested a lot of money on it which turned to be a failure because of Thaxter’s squander of money. Second, When Citrine waited for his friend Thaxter to pay for his bill of the hotel at Ritz where he was invited to compose a European cultural guide book with Thaxter who promised to provide him at least 50,000 dollars and all the expenditure there, to his great surprise, he found Thaxter had leave for South America without noticing him. It turned out that he was cheated again by his close friend whom he trusted a lot, moreover this meant he had no money to pay for all the bill, and he was broken and desperate in face of the bleak future. But when Citrine learned Thaxter was caught by the terrorists, he felt worried and grieved. Though Thaxter’s cheat left Citrine in great financial difficulty, Citrine still decided to save Thaxter through his effort and ensure Thaxter’s uprightness and kindness. “I understand Pierre has been abducted and that in his appeal for help he has named me. Well, of course, i will give everything i’ve got to save his life. In a way all his own, he is a wonderful man and i do love him.” (Bellow, 1992). Obviously, only Citrine in this book was molded as a strong and kind hearted man who was not destroyed by the vicious society and the increasing decline of human beings consciousness under the overwhelming materialism, his help and love for his friend demonstrated a fundamental view of Bellow in this novel when living in this industrial society: the ultimate victory of sublime humanism.

4. Conclusion

In the novel, Humboldt and Citrine are famous intellectuals in this prevalent materialism, and both of them

experienced the ups and downs in their lives. Though their ending seemed different, Humboldt became mad, while Citrine heralded a new life, both of them got their life enlightenment in the awareness of the ultimate meaning of their life. Aware of his own fault and weakness in his character, Humboldt wrote a letter to Citrine, reminding him of the destructive force of the fame and material, emphasizing the supernatural soul, and in remorse for his bad behavior, he left two important play drafts to Citrine which helped him out of his financial difficulties. Thus, whatever Humboldt had done before, he was still a conscious intellectual and acted as a spiritual guider who gave Citrine a lot of insights toward the life in the greedy world and gave him necessary help. More miserable than Humboldt, Citrine was sued by his ex-wife, exploited by his lawyer, threatened by Canterbury, abandoned by his girl friend Retana, and also cheated by his close friend Thaxter. When he enjoyed the comfortable life provided by his success, he also suffered all sorts of pains brought by his wealth. It is the deep reflection on Humboldt's tragedy, Humboldt's heartfelt words which lead Citrine to contemplate on the contradiction between material and spirit, subject and object, the soul and body and his positive action toward his life that saved him from the painful abyss, and his great humanism shone in his accepting his adversity, the cheat and in his effort to help his friends, Humboldt's Uncle, take care of Roger and save Thaxter at the expense of a lot of money. The last ritual Citrine reburied Humboldt eventually relieved Citrine from his deep remorse of his betrayal toward Humboldt before his death, and his resolute reverence and defending of the dignity of intelligentsia in the materialistic society. However, the world turned to be a waste land in the novel with cheating, betrayal and greed, Bellow is not disappointed at the future of the society, the nobility of humanism is best illustrated in the protagonist Citrine who at last finds a flower which may symbolize a new life in the graveyard in the late autumn.

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