

## CHARACTER DESIGN IN RELATION TO LANDSCAPE AND TIME DIMENSIONS IN *HENDERSON THE RAIN KING* BY SAUL BELLOW

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**Abstract**

*This article analyses aspects of character design in Saul Bellow's novel Henderson the Rain King. It focuses on the association of space and specific moments in time and highlights the use of landscape structures in important moments of the book, aiming to explore the evolution of the central character. The overall discussion of the relationship between character development and landscape patterns uses Bakhtin's idea of chronotope and identifies several significant moments in the economy of the book that are relevant to the construction of the main character. On the whole, this article was inspired by Saul Bellow's recurrent and energetic attempts to rescue, throughout his writing activity, that part of the traditional novel which is centered around a problematic hero.*

**Keywords:** chronotope, character design, meanings of landscape, cultural motifs, irony

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### ***1. Introduction and methodological approach***

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In 1976 the Nobel Committee for literature prizes singled out Saul Bellow for “the human understanding and the subtle analysis of contemporary culture that are combined in his work” ([www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1976/summary](http://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1976/summary)). An acclaimed voice of American fiction for some decades at the time, Bellow delivered a lecture that was centered on the writer's need for remaining loyal to expressing the individual's struggle with “dehumanization for the possession of his soul” (Nobel Lecture, 1976). The talk was an explicit reply to Allain Robbe-Grillet's claim that the novel of characters belongs entirely in the past, that the age of the classical character is gone, on account of the disappearance of the historical circumstances that generated traditional art forms.

Although Bellow seems to be in agreement with some of the views expressed by the French novelist in his 1957 essay *On Several Obsolete Notions*, his irony is directed to a passage in this chapter stating that “Fifty years of disease, the death notice signed many times over by the most serious essayists, yet nothing has yet managed to knock it off the pedestal on which the nineteenth century had placed it. It is a mummy now ...” (Robbe-Grillet, 1957: 27). Bellow's genuine discontent with the new theories attempting to evict classical literature forms from the horizon of modern literature is

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formulated as follows: “The fact that the death notice of the character has been signed by the most serious essayists means only that another group of mummies, the most respectable leaders of the intellectual community, has laid down the law. It amuses me that these serious essayists should be allowed to sign the death notices of literary forms. Should art follow culture? Something has gone wrong” (Bellow, 1976, Nobel Prize Lecture). The rest of the lecture emphasizes the writer’s difficult task of preserving what is fundamental, enduring, essential in art (in the words of Joseph Conrad) as he is presented with the challenge of defining the current condition of the human being and has to cope with designing characters which can only belong to a background of disorders, to visions of ruin. Nevertheless, in spite of the extensive destruction brought upon the world by authoritarian systems and ideologies in recent times, the writer has to seek for the inner individuality, and the novel remains a “hovel in which the spirit takes shelter” (Bellow, 1976, Nobel Prize Lecture).

This article aims to analyse specific techniques of dealing with character design in Bellow’s novel *Henderson the Rain King*. The motivation of the paper lies mostly in the ideas on literary craft expressed by Bellow in his Nobel lecture that I believe has the value of a confessional art document. I am approaching the novel from the perspective of designing the main character in relation to the dimensions of space and time as relevant technical dimensions in the understanding of the main character and the structure of the book in general. Space will be viewed both as landscape in general, during important moments in the narrative development, and as objects, colours, atmosphere associated with the hero’s disposition or state of mind. The paper occasionally explores cultural references that help significantly to build the identity and the history of the main character. Landscape features often have a painting-like quality, as the colour of natural elements is rendered as a constant presence. Flowers, trees, mountains, clouds, as well as artefacts, exhibit a force which is almost psychic and the radiance of both animate and inanimate elements suggests the use of light in the manner of Impressionist painting (Clark, 1977: 290). Colour and tone symbolism, texture descriptions occur in significant situations throughout the novel, when Henderson feels the burden of events piling up in his tormented life. The hero’s memories and sensations are often stimulated by the brightness of visual elements which contribute to the reader’s perception of an “intense consciousness of being” (Clark, 1977: 291). Space, time, insertions of cultural symbols as well as the entire plot are surveyed against Bakhtin’s ideas on the *chronotope*. Bakhtin saw this concept as the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (Bakhtin, 1981: 84). I found the chronotope extremely useful in the analysis of the book as it helps to relate various elements (geographical backgrounds, exotic places and animals, objects, structures and sites) to the ultimate purpose of the novel; it can also identify, across the expanse of the novel, distinctions such as adventure-time, biographical time, historical time, mythological time (Bakhtin, 1981: 99). At the core of Bellow’s work lies an urge to travel to a remote place, an exotic African land that is supposed

to bring answers to the character's obsessive questions in his mid-life crisis. This land is also the place of an extraordinary meeting with an African king as well as many revelations about one's purpose in life, relationships, about fury and peace of mind, about life and its meaning, and death.

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## ***2. Brief background to the novel***

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*Henderson the Rain King* came out in 1959, following the publication of *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), a novel that brought Saul Bellow the National Book Award for fiction a year later. Recent research still recognizes *Augie March* as an act of birth in the history of American Literature as "American-Jewish writing entered and took center stage" (Goodheart, 2008: 93). However, it was not until 1964 when *Herzog* was published that Bellow started to acquire the status of a major American writer "for it marked him out as an author who was no longer the possession of a small, cultivated elite" (Hyland, 1992: 1). *Henderson the Rain King* was written in between *The Adventures of Augie March* and *Herzog* and did not receive immediate recognition. On the contrary, it was met with skepticism and was regarded as "an unsuccessful experiment, noble in purpose but dismal in result" (Prescott, 1959, NY Times online article). The whole concept of unfolding the story and conveying the lesson of the book was seen as unfortunate, particularly because of the *melodramatic adventure* in a non-realistic Africa. More recent critical reviewers think they can find a discriminatory approach that affects the African story on account of the degraded variety of English spoken by the African characters or the prejudiced treatment of women (Prose, 2015).

Another possible reason for the novel's reticent reception is that some of the main elements in character design as well as in the overall structure of the novel seem too obvious. There are many contradicting views on this novel that has been approached from lots of angles and perspectives, such as the use of animals in the book or the numerous Biblical allusions (e.g., Stout, 1980), but I believe the abundant academic research, old and new, serves to increase the complexity of the interpretations that the book has continued to generate.

I believe that one of the most important achievements of *Henderson the Rain King* is the way Bellow places the hero status of his character under deep scrutiny. Generally speaking, established critics on American literature classified different writers according to the type of hero their books brought out and one such view lists Bellow's hero as Quixotic (Grass, 1971). Equally interesting are studies that explore the ways in which the novel finds the means to rescue a hero (who might at times be interpreted as a non-hero) from inevitable fall and invest him with dignity and the power to move on (Bradbury, 2010). The novel can thus step out of the borders of the fifties into a more modern literary pattern.

Other writers on Bellow have found a streak of irony in the design of the character, in contrast to the American traditional characters (Hyland, 1992: 130) or have emphasized the detachment of the Bellow hero in general from Hemingway's code heroes who "no longer seemed to reflect the American experience" (Halldorson, 2007: 31). From this point of view, *Herzog* seems to refine the writer's notion of *character* and actually brings it to the sophisticated shape that has become the intellectual landmark of Bellow's prose from the 60s onward. Eugene Henderson's character stands on its own as a literary achievement, but the hero is also a launch pad for characters to come in Bellow's literary endeavours. Irony lies at the heart of Bellow's technique of questioning the heroic status of many characters in traditional American literature and supports a critical perspective that has encouraged academic discussions of the mechanism of "transformation of suffering into laughter" (Naughton and Naughton, 2019: 2).

In an article published in the New York Times in 1959, as if attempting to greet the new novel into the world of artistic achievement, Saul Bellow cautioned *serious readers* against the temptation to dig too deep for symbols and meanings in a literary work. The tone of the article is stern and the irony that defines his style seems as vivid as ever: "A true symbol is substantial, not accidental". The writer's ultimate advice was that readers should avoid "culture-idolatry, sophistication and snobbery." [...] "Perhaps the deepest readers are those who are least sure of themselves. An even more disturbing suspicion is that they prefer meaning to feeling" (Bellow, 1959, NY Times online article). *Henderson the Rain King* was published in 1959, therefore the New York Times article couldn't have been accidental. Perhaps warning off readers from adopting a treasure-hunt attitude towards literature, and therefore, a shallow perspective of his own novel was the writer's way of saying that the book's value lies deeper, in the entire structure of a narrative that displays a new anticlimactic type of character. In his interviews and essays, Bellow insisted that the book was as much about American life as Bellow's previous achievements in this area.

It is worth mentioning here that the New York Times article shows the same concern with *feeling* in the structure of the character that Bellow expressed in his Nobel Prize Lecture and it is one of the purposes of this article to highlight the use of landscape and time sequences in the novel as a projection of the character's feelings. In the next section an exploratory approach is adopted to identify the most significant technical elements of the chronotope, following Bellow's own division of the narrative in two main spheres: the character's life before embarking on the voyage and the African journey itself.

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### 3. Character complexity highlighted by the use of time and space

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#### 3.1 Life before Africa

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Although it is difficult to operate a clear-cut segmentation of the two large stretches of the novel (as Henderson's memories keep coming back and connect the two parts of the book at significant moments) it is clear that the author intended to separate the main character's previous life from his African experience. The article, therefore, will adopt this approach as well, but connections will be made between various parts of the novel to indicate the importance of certain moments in the character's evolution.

As I said in the introduction section, Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope is useful in revealing the central character's development in *Henderson the Rain King*. The way time and space relate in the novel to create the circumstances of a personal saga is actually the energetic centre of this first-person account. The novel is formulated as a "memoir in which the hero retells his narrative to give order to past experience" (Halldorson, 2007: 128). The very first page announces the interplay of temporal frameworks as the reader is offered a quick explanation of the trip to Africa; this is followed by a sentence of Biblical resonance that suggests the story's ending on a note of tranquility: "However, the world which I thought so mighty an oppressor has removed its wrath from me" (Bellow, 1966: 7). Henderson will find his peace of mind in the last pages of the book which bring his troubles and long suffering to a standstill.

The first part of the book is a frantic account of Henderson's life before he embarks on his trip to Africa. A cohort of events and characters, characteristic of Bellow's writing in general, introduces the reader to a world of chaos. Past moments intertwined with very recent intervals are brought to surface: wives, children, a divorce, parents, transient characters, places in America and in Europe. Encounters with animals are presented on an interesting ascending scale of suggestions of psychic proximity: the pig farm at home in America, Atti, the fierce lioness in the Wariri village in Africa and finally, Smolak, the old circus bear in a fairground in Ontario, where young Henderson worked with the bear for a while. The bear turns up like a memory flash from Henderson's youth in the last pages, in a fragment that seems to bring together the tormented beginning and the peaceful end, offering significant weight to the understanding of the central character: "So before pigs ever came on my horizon, I received a deep impression from a bear." [...] and if Smolak and I were outcasts together, two humorists before the crowd, but brothers in our souls – I enbeared by him, and he probably humanized by me – I didn't come to the pigs as a tabula rasa. It only stands to reason" (Bellow, 1966: 316). This biographical flare, written on an obviously ironic note at the end of the story, clears the way to a better understanding of the character's often-hidden noble nature. In many ways, it

is an auctorial statement of the (often questionable) hero status in the book, tipping the balance in favour of a more dignified perspective of the central character.

The backward and forward approach to time is maintained throughout the novel but is mainly characteristic of the pre-African account. Each time we are presented with a past moment, a recollection or a move backwards, the main character gains relevance and authenticity. In this personal history, space, imagined in the form of various locations or landscape descriptions, defines significant moments of crisis. Very often, in the first part of the novel, the setting is urban and pictured in closed, confined, sometimes suffocating locations. The imagery related to these spaces (the basements, the den in his home) is central to the understanding of the main character, as it usually signals moments of introspection.

Henderson's relationship with his father is captured in his attempt to reach the old man in spirit, by playing the violin in the basement of the old house. "Down in the basement of the house, I worked very hard as I do at everything. I had felt I was pursuing my father's spirit, whispering, 'Oh, Father, Pa. Do you recognize the sounds? This is me, Gene, on your violin, trying to reach you'" (Bellow, 1966: 32). The relationship with his father had been tense and unhappy, in spite of the fact that Henderson was the only child left in the family after the death of his elder brother. Huge suffering is a dominant theme of the entire story and is intensified here by musical cultural references such as *Humoresque*, *Meditation* from Thaïs, arias from Mozart's *Così fan Tutte* ("Rispondi! Anima Bella!"), and the fragment from Handel's *Messiah* based on Isaiah (53): "He was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Bellow, 1966: 32). The crescendo in the character's inner turmoil is obvious, as the dilettante violinist moves from lighter pieces to the intense suffering evoked by the prophecy of Isaiah. However, in retrospect (as this is an event surging from his memory), an ironic approach can be sensed, which is generated by the association of powerful content with Henderson's often-childish and prosaic understanding of anguish: "And after all, I am a commando, you know. And with these hands I've pushed around the pigs;" [...] "So now these same fingers are courting the music of the violin and gripping its neck and toiling up and down on the Sevcik. The noise is like smashing egg crates" (Bellow, 1966: 32).

Intense suffering surfaces in at least three chronologically-ordered instances which describe Henderson's meetings with his second wife, Lily, before his divorce from his first wife. At the beginning of their relationship, they met in Danburry and Lily asked for a lift to her house. The atmosphere was "sultry", with definite signs of rain approaching while she was giving him directions to the house. "The air had grown so dark that the mesh of the fence looked white". [...] "Finally, we got there, a small house filled with the odour of closed rooms in hot weather, just as the storm was beginning" (Bellow, 1966: 13). The whole scene receives an anticlimactic end with Lily's mother waiting for the lovers to come out of their room and Henderson

showing mixed feelings of tension, shamelessness and the awareness of being used (“We didn’t part friends exactly” Bellow, 1966: 15). The relationship with Lily throughout the novel can definitely be described as stormy, but there is more to that than just a convenient parallelism between mental disposition and the surrounding atmosphere. Rain plays an important role as the story unfolds, reaching a tensional peak when Henderson takes on the role of a rain king in the Wariri village. Generally speaking, all elements of nature play a significant part in highlighting the character’s state of mind. Although briefly mentioned in this encounter, the “burst of rain” that “filled and blinded” everything around predicts some of the tension that is to be further infused in the story.

The second time Henderson meets Lily is in New York, in her new flat, when Henderson was “seething with trouble” and the ceaseless inner voice saying *I want, I want, I want* - was already haunting him. The place is even more desolate than her previous house: “The building had hall toilets; the chain pulls had turned green and there were panes of plum-coloured glass in the doors” (Bellow, 1966: 15). As in a memory-within-memory pattern, this derelict place where Lily actually suggests leaving his wife and marrying her, calls up a recollection of his first wife, Frances, laughing at him as Henderson brings up the subject of entering medical school. Throughout the book, medical school is an obsession that takes on more substance when Henderson learns, during his African adventure, that king Dahfu, Henderson’s ultimate revelation in terms of human nature, had been a medical student himself. This obsession concentrates into a decision towards the end of his journey in Africa, when the hero feels a genuine urge to take up a medical career and writes about it in a letter to Lily. As in other fragments in the book, the tension generated by filthy places (“How can you live in this stinking joint?” (Bellow, 1966: 15) and noble ideals contributes both to character and story authenticity.

His life still a mess, Henderson moves on to meet Lily for a third time, in France. This encounter, which is actually plotted by Lily, ends even worse than the previous ones, as it is in Chartres cathedral that Henderson threatens Lily with suicide. This time, a significant exchange of replies is placed in beautiful outdoor surroundings of the cathedral in Vézelay. Landscape design looks very much like Impressionist painting, with colours communicating strong feelings and certain scenes revealing an almost unbearable sensitivity (Clark, 1977: 290). Madness seems to hide in the trees, the flowers and the light of the sun. This is practically the first instance in the book where landscape and space in general acquires an element of psychic and even physical pain:

*Yellow dust was dropping from the lime trees, and wild roses grew on the trunks of the apple trees. Pale red, gorged red, fiery, aching, harsh as anger, sweet as drugs. [...] Annoyed, I said to her, ‘How do you know what I want?’ And then more gently, because of the roses on all the tree trunks, piercing and twining and flaming, I said, ‘can’t you just enjoy this beautiful churchyard?’*

*'It isn't a churchyard, it's an orchard,' she said.* (Bellow, 1966: 21).

This is one of many scenes in the book during which death is brought up and spatial background is definitely symbolic of the central character's mood and feelings. Similar landscape description, touched by premonition and contaminated by a distorted view of things is used during the African journey, particularly in moments when Henderson is aware of his high fever. Space and the objects contained in it seem inflated, deformed and have a significant impact on the way the reader perceives the character's disposition. As it will be shown in the next section, this literary technique is used primarily to create an unbearable intensity of feeling which characterizes Henderson as a physically and mentally oversized person.

There are other outdoor scenes in the first part of the book which reflect a recurrent technique, a combination of elements typical of character design in *Henderson the Rain King*. One of them in particular anticipates the hero's half-comical, half-tragical status during his African experience. During the war, he caught the crabs and was shaved by four medics at the crossroads, in the open; as they left him naked and exposed to the laughing of the whole coast (GIs, fishermen, paisans, kids and women), Henderson notices the beauty of the sky and "the Mediterranean, which is the cradle of mankind; the towering softness of the air; the sinking softness of the water, where Ulysses got lost, where he, too, was naked as the sirens sang" (Bellow, 1966: 25). This powerful visual scene which abounds in cultural symbols enhances the character's ability to detach himself from a painful situation and to move smoothly from grotesque to a graceful condition. It is also charged with an irony that is present throughout the novel in key situations, and results from the unexpected association between a humorous, trite situation and a solemn background.

Indoor spaces continue to witness Henderson's suffering as his decision to leave home is rooted in an accident with moral consequences. During a fight with his wife one winter morning over re-modelling a building on their property, Miss Lenox, the old lady they had hired to fix breakfast, dies unseen in their kitchen, out of fear during one of Henderson's fits of rage. The circumstances of her death are dull and dreary, just as her life had been, but the shock they produce in Henderson's mind is significant: "So, this is it, the end – farewell?". The imagery accompanying the old woman's death is powerful and suggestive, in spite of the ironic detachment with which he writes *do not disturb* on a piece of paper and pins it to her skirt: "And all this while, these days and weeks, the wintry garden had been speaking to me of this fact and no other; and till this moment I had not understood what this grey and white and brown, the bark, the snow, the twigs, had been telling me" (Bellow, 1966: 40). There are many similar moments in the book where the use of irony facilitates an awareness of both the immediate context and Henderson's feelings on significant facts in his life. With its recognizable mechanism of pointing to the gap between the readers' general expectations and the unexpected gestures which characterize the hero's attitude towards death, irony delivers an understanding of contradictory



attitudes, contributing to a better definition of the character. In this fragment, facing a humble, and at the same time, solemn death is accompanied by a delicate and almost noncommittal gesture from a hero who is aware of the devastating effects of his rage.

The kitchen where Miss Lenox dies is just as nondescript a place as is her cottage: dirty, full of leftovers and junk (lamps and old butter dishes, shopping bags full of rags, bushel baskets filled with buttons and china door knobs). These murky places stir Henderson's feelings to despair and urge him to take the radical decision of leaving his family and try to find meaning in a travel to an unknown world. Therefore, it is not just his miserable life that drives the main character out of his ordinary path, but death as well approaching, silent and indistinctive.

It is interesting to note here that the other significant death in the novel, King Dahfu's death, is pictured in very different terms and reveals a sharp contrast to Miss Lenox's humble disappearance. Temperature (heat and freezing cold) plays its part in animating each story: the heart of winter in the death of the old lady and heavy, stressful heat in the death of the king who dies torn by a lion's claws. The change of landscape is definitely distinctive as a technical element, but equally important are temperature, colours, noises and overall motion as will be shown in more detail in the next section.

All in all, recollections appear frequently throughout the novel as pieces of a puzzle put together in a meaningful way, useful in spelling out different sides of Henderson's personality, and they represent highly significant moments in the string of events.

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### 3.2 *The journey to Africa*

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Viewed from Bakhtin's perspective of the chronotope, the African travel is, on the whole, a purifying time, a hiatus that the character needed in order to make sense of his life. A few ideas that Bakhtin applies to classical novels but can also be adopted to understand complex, modern novels are particularly relevant. First, he states that "the choice of a real itinerary equals the choice of *a path of life*" (1981: 120). Then, there is the character's movement through space, which "becomes more concrete and saturated with a time that is more substantial; space is filled with real, living meaning and forms a crucial relationship with the hero and his fate" (Bakhtin, 1981: 120). Finally, the string of events in the individual's life looks like a pilgrimage at the end of which the character reaches a new phase in his life.

In modern writing things definitely look more complex than that, but the journey into the heart of Africa is really a turning point in Henderson's life. It is introduced as the major theme in the first sentence of the novel and is announced repeatedly in the introductory part. The pilgrimage motif has several ingredients that substantiate

the idea of an unusual enterprise: time and space have a concrete design and are populated with unique characters; in addition, the hero experiences lots of events in which fear and suffering play an important part and leave indelible traces in his existence. There is also a push towards taking action and changing what had been a dull life, which is evident in the last pages of the novel.

To begin with, the meeting with Romilayu, the African guide, is a memorable one. "He was in his late thirties, he told me, but he looked much older because of premature wrinkles" (Bellow, 1966: 45). He is the personification of the classical guide, present, helpful, the voice of wisdom and restraint in heated moments. Despite the fact that they are mentally worlds apart, the companion often seems to be a hidden, calmer ego of Henderson's turbulent personality. Romilayu's "Me tak you far, far" looked like the best promise of reaching unknown lands, especially when he implied that the places were so remote that they could only be reached on foot. At this point, the real geographical dimension is lost and the journey starts acquiring a mythical tone: "So for days and days he led me through villages, over mountain trails, and into deserts, far, far out" (Bellow, 1966: 45). Henderson acknowledges that he lost count of the days "since his object in coming here was to leave certain things behind" (Bellow, 1966: 45). Mythical time seems to be setting in.

While the first part of the book, prior to the African journey, is dominated by urban, enclosed and often drab places, the trip into unknown Africa covers vast stretches of land, signifying freedom and liberation from mental chaos and, in fact, from any objectified human interference. The next passage, describing the travel to the first village, Arnewi, seems to take the hero, as the author suggests in such obvious, unobscured language, into *the prehuman past, the real past, no history or junk like that*. It is the first instance of almost fantastic landscape, a territory where anything might happen, as close to being explored as the hero's own self throughout his adventures. Entering this uncharted land marks the character's plunge into his own history, and the function of space combined with a timeless perception has an anticipatory function. The landscape is clear and purified and the amount of detail in itself is meant to guide us to an interpretation of the discovery of the self:

*It was hot, clear and arid and after several days we saw no human footprints. Nor were there many plants; [...]; it was all simplified and splendid, and I felt I was entering the past – the real past, no history or junk like that. The prehuman past. And I believe that there was something between the stones and me. The mountains were naked, and almost snakelike in their forms, without trees, and you could see the clouds being born on the slopes. [...]. Anyway, I was in tremendous shape those first long days, hot as they were. At night, after Romilayu had prayed, and we lay on the ground, the face of the air breathed back on us, breath for breath. And then there were the calm stars, turning around and singing, and the birds of the night with heavy bodies, fanning by. [...]. And this was how Romilayu travelled, and I lost*

*count of the days. As, probably, the world was glad to lose track of me too for a while* (Bellow, 1966: 46).

This dateless, primeval space sometimes brings forth the experience of silence and sometimes that of prehuman noises, the land and the sky forming a protective shelter for the character's attempt to recover the meaning of life. Heat is also mentioned for the first time, a heat that accompanies the hero throughout his extreme experience in Africa: "The place was certainly at baking heat" (Bellow, 1966: 47). Natural elements pulse with primordial life, as in a Van-Gogh painting, as both time and space lose their ordinary meaning and contour (snakelike mountains, stars turning around, birds with heavy bodies, zebras flying).

The Arnewi village itself generates similar comments from Henderson: "[...] it looks like the original place. It must be older than the city of Ur" (Bellow, 1966: 47). The beginning of the Arnewi experience is surprising but pleasant. Henderson's victory over the local prince, Itelo, in the first of the many physical and spiritual tests that the hero is subjected to from now on, his meeting with the matriarch queen of the tribe, Willatale, the realization of truth in her characterization (*Grun-tu-molani, you want to live*) resonating with his obsessive inner voice saying *I want, I want*, are accompanied by flashes of memory interacting with external events. Time seems to move forward and backward as past moments erupt in an attempt to answer fundamental questions: "Who – who was I? A millionaire wanderer and wayfarer. A brutal man driven into the world". [...]. That I had ruined the original goods issued to me and was trying to find a remedy? [...]. "And I had to confess I didn't know where to begin" (Bellow, 1966: 75). This fragment is very similar to the beginning of the book and signals once again the hero's persistent chaos when dealing with identity questions. Two additional obsessions (which are constant motifs in the voyage, in fact) surge again during his struggle to answer the queen's question: his desire to study medicine, which will be taken up later in the meeting with the Wariri king and his singing from Handel's *Messiah*, reminding the reader of the days Henderson tried to reach his father's spirit by playing the violin and singing at the same time "He was despised and rejected, a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief" (Bellow, 1966: 81). His singing in front of the queen does, in fact, prompt her understanding of his behaviour, the *grun-tu-molani* that he carries with him along his African travel.

The visit to the Arnewi ends abruptly when Henderson attempts to rid the village of the frogs that polluted the water and blows up the cistern feeding the water into the village. The disaster brings about his decision to keep travelling in the hope of finding some form of good he is capable of. As Romilayu will not leave him alone and somewhat reluctantly suggests the Wariri, ruled by Itelo's friend, they set out for another human settlement in search of the truth that would burst the sleep of the spirit. While the same feeling of timelessness accompanies them, the landscape takes on different shapes: on a difficult journey upwards, mesas, hot granites, towers and

acropolises turn up. Forms acquire an architectural touch that suggests the landscape has become sacred and even sepulchral. When it comes to living creatures, they take on hallucinating, dream-like sizes and huge shapes, in the same pictorial manner as in the debut of the novel and the air seems to vibrate: "Giant spiders we saw, and nets set up like radar stations among the cactuses. There were ants in these parts whose bodies were shaped like diabolos and their nests made large grey humps on the landscape". An ostrich took off with "a hot wind in his feathers, a rusty white foam behind" (Bellow, 1966: 108). As they approach the heart of Africa and prepare to meet the *children of darkness*, as Romilayu calls the Wariri, landscape design changes significantly towards a somewhat tomblike quality: white rocks similar to domes, crumpled into huge heaps, mountains with prehistoric spines, rock domes as white as chinaware, all against a reddening sun. As the reader is to find out later during a decisive lion hunt, in the king's words, "white is not the best omen" (Bellow, 1966: 272). An unexpected meeting foreshadows the grim events that are to follow, in the shape of a dangerously-looking Wariri herdsman "in a leather apron, holding a twisted stick", looking leathery all over and instantly calling forth in Henderson's mind an association with the biblical event in which Joseph was shown the way to Dotan before being caught and thrown into a pit by his brothers (Bellow, 1966: 109). As for the time framework, this is another instance when, at crucial moments in the story, mythical time irrupts into the present, giving significance to a time sequence in progress.

The prisoner of an unknown and seemingly violent people, Henderson begins an interior voyage into the depths of the self, guided by the Wariri king, Dahfu. Most of the book is devoted to their dialogues on the constitution of the self, on changing oneself, *the noble*, the significance of power and life. Perhaps one of the most striking fragments in the novel involving a significant space design is the descent into the lion's den under the palace. The Wariri king, himself an extraordinary person, learned, refined, trained in medicine in Syria, intends to carry out a training programme meant to change Henderson's *avoider* personality into a noble and fearless character (or in Henderson's words to stop *BECOMING* and move towards *BE-ing*). Therefore, the hero has to get acquainted with the king's lioness, Atti, and experience her presence daily.

The labyrinth is a place where powerful inner emotions as well as a flow of memories emerge to help the character cast aside his cowardice and his fear. This initiation practice starts painfully and brings about a feeling of loneliness. The landscape elements show how straightforward reality seems to dissolve into darkness and indistinctness. As the king leads the way down the stairs, Henderson senses that there is no turning back, as Dahfu's guardian slams the iron-like door behind them. In the beginning, the stairs are broad and even, but then, as the light disappears as well, they become narrower, broken, with *grass springing* and *soil leaking out through the cracks* (Bellow, 1966: 206). Things become rugged and irregular and the warm air suggests an archetypal belly, the blurred centre of life. As in other moments in

the novel, light changes the atmosphere completely and fills up the stony place *like a grey and yellow fluid*, while the atmosphere is “distributed as evenly as water” (Bellow, 1966: 206). There are no distinct shapes except for the stone walls which are yellowish. Shades of yellow and gold abound in various descriptions (even the dust is sulphur-coloured) and seem to be associated with fear and death as will be shown in the following section.

It is in this indistinct and murky place that the king attempts to forge Henderson as a new, nobler person in spite of *the old self resisting* (Bellow, 1966: 257). The question of identity is discussed in more detail than with the Arnewi queen. An irrepressible flow of memories starts assaulting Henderson and becomes even more articulate as the king puts him through the ordeal of confronting Atti in order to dissipate his fears, regrets for his past sins, unfinished things. Writing letters to his wife Lily also comes up during the days Henderson talks to the king in the dark and amber den. It is as if the time spent in the dark labyrinth below the palace triggers a lot of recollections of the people he loves most. This writing flow makes room for analysis and introspection, revealing the way the hero wishes to connect to a life in which he has finally begun to see meaning. His desire to go to medical school is communicated to his wife with enthusiasm and resolution. The den-labyrinth therefore brings about changes in the story’s tempo, and swift recollections alternate with present resolutions and even revelations. It is also an echo of the basement in Henderson’s own house in America, a place of intense suffering.

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### *3.3 The use of natural elements, colours and shapes in climactic moments*

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Throughout the African travel the physical setting matches the intensity of events. From the very beginning there are shapes, objects, colours, noises associated with meaningful moments and meetings. In the intricate plot of the novel, they frequently carry out the role of joining together the past and the present, recollections, as well as current events. This type of association offers remarkable coherence to many important moments in the book.

Size itself is an important, concrete element. Size of figure seems to have haunted the character all his life. His wife Lily is a sizeable woman as well. Arnewi prince Itelo is a huge man and their fight may be an indication that for Henderson every significant meeting or moment in life has to start with a fight. King Dahfu’s size is also impressive. The wooden statues he has to lift in the rain king ceremony are huge and the woman idol of mammoth size is even called Mummah. In America as well as in Africa, Henderson walks about in his old military self, inseparable from his helmet and soldier boots, a reminder of his days as a war veteran, but also of his general condition in life which he perceives as a constant battle. There are moments when his suffering is described in terms of size and physical weight, as he tells the king: “As if I were carrying an eight-hundred-pound load – like a Galápagos turtle. On my back.” (Bellow, 1966: 257). I believe that the ironic interplay between the

physical size of the character and the slightness of his feelings and achievements prior to the African trip is an element of definite interest in the novel.

Colours, light and forms in particular are often used as signals for what is to come; the arrival in the village occurs under the red light of the setting sun, “between sunset and blackness”, night had already covered one side of the road, while emotions and apprehension are projected on celestial bodies, as “the evening star had begun to spin and throb” (Bellow, 1966: 112). The flowers in front of the palace, placed in rocks “the size of Pacific man-eating clams” are *fierce*, of a deep red. Mention of the same flowers appears several times, in moments of distress and suffering when their tautness hurt and hit the soul like blows. As Henderson is gradually exposed to Atti, the king’s lioness, the colour of the flowers “fell on my soul, clamouring”, “noisy as hell” (Bellow, 1966: 255). These perceptions are very similar to the way he pictures the red roses at the Vézelay Cathedral in a moment of extreme anguish in the first part of the book. Colours change into noises, as light itself shows a dense quality, a concentration that makes it almost tangible.

On the day king Dahfu had to hunt a male lion (supposed to be the incarnation of his father’s soul) in an event meant to consecrate him as the holder of power in the eyes of his people, “the sun shone with power and covered the mountains and the stones close at hand with shimmering layers. Near to the ground it was about to materialize into gold leaf” (Bellow, 1966: 272). A culminating point in the evolution of the novel, the hunt is also associated with intensity of feelings, increasing fever and fear. The author translates Henderson’s perception of the importance of this event into a sensorial vision of the natural elements. As his fear grows, while waiting for the king to catch the lion, the character feels the almost physical weight of surrounding nature. Everything around him, including light, becomes heavy and painful, anticipating the king’s death: “The sunlight deformed my face with strain, for I was exposed to it as I hung over the end of the hopo like a gargoyle” (Bellow, 1966: 285). His own body is often seen as grotesque throughout the novel, partly because of the unusual large size, but here the comparison discloses horror at the thought of what will happen to the king.

Colours, noises, landscape elements accumulate and become aggressive to Henderson as the king approaches his final moments. “The light was enough then to leave bruises. And still, in spite of the blasts of the beaters, the cicadas were drilling away, sending up those spirals of theirs. [...]. The small blossoms of the cactus in the ravine, if they were blossoms and not berries, foamed red, and the spines pierced me” (Bellow, 1966: 285). Colours and atmosphere have a premonitory function across the entire hunting scene: above the king’s head, Henderson sees a delicate halo: “the blue of the atmosphere seemed to condense, as when you light a few sticks in the woods and about these black sticks the blue begins to wrinkle” (Bellow, 1966: 285). A few moments later, the king finds his death in the claws of the lion.

Natural elements abound in this novel dedicated to an inner journey, but set against a genuine outer background. Water is an element that comes up frequently in moments of significance and has a particular meaning at the end of the African travel. Water appears in at least two significant moments: the rain following Henderson's immense effort to move the wooden statues, a test that will confirm his status as the Wariri rain king, and the Atlantic waters that soothe his spirit and help him reclaim his intimacy with heaven. After the hero summons his huge physical power and manages to lift the god of the mountain and the goddess of clouds in the rain king contest, water pours down from the skies and invades the village. Rain is preceded by fearful representations of clouds, "pressed together like organ pipes or like the ocean ammonites of Paleozoic times" (Bellow, 1966: 187). This first test of strength is followed by a deluge, the ground begins to foam, while "gouts of water like hand grenades burst all about" (Bellow, 1966: 189). The heavy rain, like all the other elements of nature, is perceived by the reader as a symbol of the character's tormented spiritual disposition. It brings a certain relief to the character's condition, but it is by no means an end to his agony. Things come to some sort of balance after the rain has started, but the final picture has an ironic touch which is relevant to Henderson's ambiguous condition: "I was left standing in my coat of earth, like a giant turnip" (Bellow, 1966: 190).

In the final pages of the novel, during his flight to Canada, the Atlantic Ocean imagery reveals a different effect that water has on Henderson's troubled mind. *The heart of the water* makes him calm and the association with the upside-down *sierras of the clouds* calls up a picture of the *eternal courts*. Water purges Henderson's mind of fear from the haunting past, from the continuous frustration he has experienced; in his quest for his identity, the hero needs to experience the death of king Dahfu, whose tragedy helps him to come to terms with his own suffering. After the king's death he confesses that earlier in life suffering had *a certain spice* but now he "was tired of being such a monster of grief" (Bellow, 1966: 292).

His entire experience in Africa has been accompanied by fever, extreme heat and growing pain. In contrast, water has an alleviating effect that purifies the past and transforms ugly memories into luminous hopes. Air travel is also an opportunity for recollections to emerge, as there is a sudden memory flash of the Niagara Falls which he visited as a young man just after his brother died. His father's pain along with Henderson's inability to comfort the old man prompted him to run from home and stare at the water; this moment is captured in words that seem to put down the conflict between a troubled past and a more peaceful present: "I was entranced by the crash of the water. Water can be very healing" (Bellow, 1966: 315).

The places, as well as the natural elements brought up at the end of the story when he is finally out of danger from the Wariri, but still struggling with fever, have a substantial cathartic effect. Towards the end, Henderson's inner state seems to be purged of distress and suffering, while the chaos and misery in the first part of the book seem to have dissipated. While waiting for the plane to be fueled, cold seems

to clear and regenerate Henderson's mind, he breathes deep with the orphan child in his arms, a powerful symbol of life. The Arctic cold may also be an indication of relief and peace of mind. In the final pages, burdens associated with past sins and evil seem to be moving away and a genuine feeling of reconciliation with the self acquires substance.

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#### 4. Conclusions

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The article has attempted to shed light on the character's evolution in *Henderson the Rain King*. Space and temporal frameworks have been analysed as technical, structural elements that highlight the hero's internal turmoil in an apparently meaningless life. Visual and sensorial elements have been identified as a resourceful support in the progressive understanding of the main character. I believe it can be said that landscape is *participatory*, and at relevant times in the story, it is the character's inner landscape that is projected into the outer world. There is a dynamic tension between the inner and the outer worlds which is made manifest by the use of space and time throughout the book.

In addition, the evolution of the character and the authenticity of the story are highlighted by the contrast between the extreme African heat (anticipated by the suffocating atmosphere of houses in America) and the Arctic cold. High temperatures and freezing cold contribute significantly to the way the hero's different states and dispositions are suggested. At times, the novel seems to rest entirely on the powerful play of natural elements as they point to the hero's feelings.

The correlation between landscape description and the movements of character development throughout the novel is designed a such a way as to reveal the passage from a lethargic, frozen existence to a moving, reactive pattern, in an often-premonitory chain of events. The overall structure of the book signals frequent changes in temporal rhythm associated with a relevant use of space – the arrival in the African villages uses elaborate, lengthy descriptions, crafted on different patterns of time and space. In the Wariri section, memories often stream back, stretching the time and emphasizing the hero's resolution to change and free himself from the bonds of a meaningless life. By contrast, the run from the Wariri, the exit from the fantastic world is quick, rushed, as that was a time for action and fast decisions. The way back to the known African territory is not elaborate and descriptions are scarce.

An important achievement stands out from joining together suffering and irony in this novel. The heroic desire is still present, even if in many instances in the book it is played down or laughed at. With Bellow, character design in general uses an ironic approach, but I believe this perspective defines *Henderson the Rain King* in particular. Irony is a comprehensive technique that may help to explain unexpected features and actions in character design and plot in general, while making contrasts compatible.



Throughout the story, landscape, time and ironic references are interrelated. The article has also shown that this connection operates as a complex and powerful mechanism, effective in displaying the character's moods, feelings and sensations. At times, the technical elements used in the book seem too obvious and give the book a writing-textbook quality, which may explain why the publication of the novel was received with reluctance by critics. However, in spite of their sometimes-self-explanatory nature, the space patterns and the elements carrying meaning illustrate the powerful vision and the sensitivity behind a beautiful story that will remain a favourite with the general public. The intricate design of an intensely vibrating landscape is part of the elaborate character creation in *Henderson the Rain King* and accompanies the hero's quest for the self.

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