

UNIT-4

DANGLING MAN

SAUL BELLOW

Saul Bellow, American novelist whose characterizations of modern urban man, disaffected by society but not destroyed in spirit, earned him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976. Brought up in a Jewish household and fluent in Yiddish—which influenced his energetic English style—he was representative of the Jewish American writers whose works became central to American literature after World War II.

An immediate critical success, *Dangling Man* was a first novel that pointed not only to the direction of its author's later work but also to that of American fiction itself. Encapsulating the psychology of the 1940's, it simultaneously looked ahead to the fiction of the 1950's. On the first page of *Dangling Man*, Bellow speaks disparagingly of the "hard-boiled": "They are unpracticed in introspection, and therefore badly equipped to deal with opponents whom they cannot shoot like big game or outdo in daring." This scarcely veiled reference to Ernest Hemingway contains Bellow's rejection of externalization and his intention to create a fiction of the inner life. His Joseph, introspective and flawed, is the model for all the later Bellow heroes who struggle mightily to understand and to find salvation through reason. The many alienated figures whose introspections crowd the pages of contemporary American fiction are Joseph's descendants.

Dangling Man takes the form of a journal kept by the protagonist, Joseph, between December 15, 1942, and April 9, 1943. All the action is retrospective, filtered through the troubled mind of Joseph, and committed to his journal. Introspective and tentative, the entries record Joseph's increasingly desperate quest for self-knowledge.

As the novel opens, seven months have passed since Joseph resigned from his job at the Inter-American Travel Bureau to await army induction. Because of snarled bureaucratic red tape, he dangles between civilian and military life. A sort of scholar manqué, Joseph had imagined that leisure would allow him to devote himself to study, but he finds himself unaccountably unable to read. Supported by his uncomplaining wife, Iva, in a desultory room in which they have lived since giving up their flat, Joseph grows heavy and dispirited.

Continued errands and aimless wanderings signal a paralysis of will that takes the form of obsessive self-absorption. Joseph feels himself changing, becoming suspicious and ill-tempered in his relations with others; he begins to refer to his “older self,” as if he were once a different person. It is this identity crisis underlying Joseph’s journal entries that forms the true subject of *Dangling Man*.

While the device of the journal imposes an overall chronological pattern on the novel, several of the most important entries are devoted to Joseph’s extended accounts of prior events, some of which took place before his writing began. Perhaps the most crucial of these flashbacks, the one that goes furthest toward explaining how the old Joseph became the diarist, concerns the Servatius party of the previous March. At the party, Joseph is shocked by the defects in friends whom he had glorified as a “colony of the spirit.” Their petty cruelties, culminating in the sadistic treatment of the hypnotized Minna Servatius by Morris Abt, disillusion Joseph, who henceforth thinks of his friends as having failed him. The episode marks the onset of Joseph’s growing sense of alienation. Succeeding episodes trace his disaffection from his brother, Amos, whose money he refuses and whose spoiled daughter he spansks when she calls him a beggar; from his in-laws, the Almstadts, whose solicitousness he regards as phony; from his mistress, Kitty Daumler, who “betrays” him with another man after he neglects her; from his wife, Iva, who resents the role he imposes upon her; and, most critically, from himself.

Joseph’s alienation stems from his fatal inability, first revealed to him at the Servatius party, to answer the question, “How should a good man live; what ought he to do?” In the first of the two imagined conversations with an invented Spirit of Alternatives, Joseph thrashes about in a hopeless effort to close the gap between the ideal construction and the real world. Apparently one requires an ideal construction—God, art, money—as proof against chaos. Unfortunately, none of them suffices. Believing in the efficacy of reason yet haunted by a failure of vision, Joseph wallows in a sea of alternatives, obsessed by a seemingly insoluble dilemma. He begins his second conversation with the Spirit of Alternatives by returning to the question of how a man should live, arguing strongly that self-knowledge is a prerequisite for freedom, without which man can never attain the ultimate goal of governing his own destiny. “Then only one question remains,” replies the Spirit of Alternatives, “. . .

whether you have a separate destiny.” Joseph pales, unable to answer the question posed by his alter ego.