

## A Study of Saul Bellow's Henderson the Rain King : The Soul Revival in the Cycle of Life

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<https://doi.org/10.15017/16029>

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出版情報 : *Comparatio*. 7, pp.5-15, 2003-04-20. Society of Comparative Cultural Studies, Graduate School of Social and Cultural Studies, Kyushu University

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—The Soul Revival in the Cycle of Life—

*Henderson the Rain King* is a novel by Saul Bellow, which was published in 1959. This is a modern allegorical story which is located in Africa and America. It contains symbols, an allegory and much parody. In this paper, we will first discuss the characters in the novel. After that, we will discuss the profound theme behind the story. That theme is related to Bellow's view of life and death, and it is related to our way of existence.

Chapter 1. The Characters

1. Henderson

The story begins with Henderson's monologue.

What made me take this trip to Africa?

There is no quick explanation. Things got worse and worse and worse and pretty soon they were too complicated. When I think of my condition at the age of fifty-five when I bought the ticket, all is grief. The facts begin to crowd me and soon I get the pressure in the chest.

(Bellow 3)

The talkative protagonist of Henderson shows us in this first part of the story, resemblance to the heroes of other Bellow's stories. Their talkativeness suggests to us their serious confusion and mental anguish. Henderson's talkativeness, however, seems comical and his troubles remind us of the serious matters that lay behind the story.

But as it got her nowhere to discuss it with me she started to cry, and when I saw tears I lost my head and yelled, "I'm going to blow my brains out! I'm shooting myself. I didn't forget to pack the pistol. I've got it on me now."

"Oh, Gene!" she cried, and covered up her face and ran away. (Bellow 7)

Lily's father committed suicide, so the words of Henderson would have caused serious fear in her mind. Furthermore, Henderson said these words when Lily started

to cry in the hot discussion with him. It seems Henderson was so irritated that he cursed her. However, he tried to express his helpless situation in his cursing. That is, Henderson may have wanted to say that if Lily wouldn't help him, Lily would lose her dearest person again. His message was reasonable, however, as Henderson tried to express his helpless feeling in the mental attack towards Lily. From this point of view, he has a selfish personality. But we can discuss his behavior in another way.

This was cruel of me, as I knew what her father had done... Lily told me all about it until her father became so actual to me that I loved and detested the old bastard myself. "Here, you old clog-dancer, you old heart-breaker, you pitiful joker—you cornball!" I said to his ghost. "What do you mean by doing this to your daughter and then leaving her my hands?" (Bellow 17)

This part of the story suggests that Henderson sympathized too much with Lily's father. Behind his suicide warning, we can see Henderson's sensitivity to Lily's father's tragedy. And the suicide of Lily's father may suggest a reflection of the confusion of paternity in modern times. Henderson struggled with this confusion. He went to Africa in order to straighten out this confusion. We can see a clue as to the cause of his confusion in a dialog between Henderson and his son Edward.

"...Next, slavery has never really been abolished. More people are enslaved to different things than you can shake a stick at. But it's no use trying to give you a résumé of my thinking. It's true I'm often confused but at the same time I am a fighter. Oh, I am a fighter. I fight very hard."

"What do you fight for, Dad?" said Edward. (Bellow 124)

In the dialog, Henderson suggests us that we are the slaves of our own lives. What he tried to say about slavery being our burden of life, is similar to the Buddhist word "Gô"(業), and in Christianity, it may be described as original sin. Henderson, however, describes it in a more practical way. When Edward questioned the reason for Henderson's fighting, he replied that he was fighting for truth. But right after that, he said most of the fighting was against himself, as if he doesn't truly know the meaning of his fight. Then he excuses himself.

I understood very well that Edward wanted me to tell him what should live for and this is what was wrong. This was what caused me

pain. For every son expects and every father wishes to provide clear principles. And moreover a man wants to protect his children from the bitterness of things if he can. (Bellow 124)

Denis Jones defines Henderson as “a parent who finds him/herself under siege from a threatening external world and fails to maintain him/herself in his/her adult/parental role” (Jones 28) in the thesis which pointed out the changes in the relationship between parents and their children in the past fifty years as ‘egalitarian family.’ (Jones 28)

Henderson feels pain as a father of an egalitarian family, because he can't show the clear vision. But it is natural that Henderson can't give his son a clear vision, because the equalization brings about the disappearance of subordinate dependency between fathers and their sons. In the past, a father could show his son a clear principle. But now, the vertical power of fathers was weakened. Thus, in these modern times, where we see the equalization progressing, we must find out our principle for life by ourselves. Henderson's confusion is brought about by a situation in present day.

## 2. Queen Willatale

In this chapter, we will discuss one of the influential characters on Henderson in Africa. The Queen of the Arnewi tribe: Willatale.

...I was astonished when she took it and buried it between her breasts...On top of everything else, I mean the radiant heat and the monumental weight which my hand received, there was the calm pulsation of her heart participating in the introduction. This was as regular as the rotation of the earth, and it was a surprise to me; my mouth came open and my eyes grew fixed as if I were touching the secrets of life... (Bellow 71-72)

When Henderson introduced himself to the Queen, he touched the Queen's breast as a greeting. At that moment, Henderson felt the calm pulsation of the Queen's heart, which was 'as regular as the rotation of the earth.' This experience made Henderson aware of a link between humans and the earth. 'The secret of life' means the link between human beings and the Universe. This is a fundamental fact of our existence. However, we are not aware of it in our daily life. But for Henderson who escaped out of his daily life in America, the link between humans and the Universe became a real

experience.

The queen expressed stability in every part of her body. Her head was white and her face broad and solid and she was wrapped in a lion's skin. Had I known then what I know now about lions, this would have told me much about her... it was the skin of a maned lion...(Bellow 72)

The Queen's stability is symbolized by the skin of a maned lion. For the Wariri, the lion acts as the transmigrator of the king's soul. For the Arnewi tribe, who derived from the same origin as the Wariri, the lion must be the symbol of transcendent existence; therefore the Queen who wears the skin of a maned lion has a transcendental existence. This is the reason why the Queen expressed stability. The maned lion's skin, however, expresses something more transcendent.

A Bittah was a person of real substance. You couldn't be any higher or better. A Bittah was not only a woman but a man at the same time... Some of these people in the courtyard were her husbands and others her wives. She had plenty of both. The wives called her husband, and the children called her both father and mother. (Bellow 75)

In English usage, the pronoun "he" is used in order to refer to God. But the image of God is often androgynous. For instance, many people in the West worship the Virgin Mary and male and female gods are worshiped in Buddhism and other religions. Therefore the stability of the Queen shows us her godhood, at the same time, it shows us her maturity. Such maturity was expressed in Jung psychology as follows: Men and women oppress the contrasexual archetypes (Anima, Animus) in order to be appropriate for their cultures and society. However, their contrasexual archetypes become complex in their mind. (Kawai *Complex* 161-162) In the process of one's self-realization, we integrate contrasexual archetypes into our mind. (Kawai *Sekai* 340) Thus this part of the story suggests to us that Queen Willatale is a self-realized person living a god-like transcendental existence.

By the way, when Henderson sank his face into the Queen's belly, he felt the power again.

A second time my face sank in her belly, that great saffron swelling with the knot of lion skin sinking also, and I felt the power emanating again. (Bellow 77)

We can see the belly that functions as having a baby symbolize the primary power of

life. And we can see the same primary power of life in the Wariri tribe's King Dafu. We discuss this character in the next section.

### 3. King Dafu

The meeting with King Dafu begins in odd manner.

"The less motion I expend, and the more I repose myself, the easier it is for me to attend to my duties. All my duties. Including also the prerogatives of these many wives. You may not think so on first glance, but it is a most complex existence requiring that I husband myself. Sir, tell me frankly—" (Bellow 155)

King Dafu apologizes to Henderson for not arising to shake his hand when they exchanged greetings. His explanation for his behavior is funny. That is to say, the King of the Wariri tribe is required to husband himself. This is a dirty joke that suggests the King and his sixty wives' busy nightlife. This joke reminds us of the habits of a Queen bee in a beehive.

In our discussion of Queen Willatale, we discussed the Queen's androgynous character. Here, we can see such androgynous character in King Dafu as well. That similarity of the two shows us the image of transcendental existence.

"While I am in possession of my original youthfulness and strength," he said, "but have you any conception of what will take place when I weaken?"

"What will...?"

"These same ladies, so inordinate of attention, will report me and then the Bunam who is chief priest here, with other priests of the association, will convey me out into the bush and there I will be strangled." (Bellow 157)

What social mechanism does the bee hive-like society that consists of the king and his sixty wives have? It seems the society assigns a certain role to a person and orders self-sacrifice in order to develop a collectivist society, as if the society itself were one creature. King Dafu knows his destiny that he will be involved in the collective power of his tribe, and then he will be killed some day in the future. But he accepts the fact and lives transcendently. Henderson describes the King's situation with impressive phrases.

“But that’s not how I am. King, I am Becomer. Now you see your situation is different. You are a Be-er.” (Bellow 191)

Henderson tries to state King Dafu’s way of life. He named himself as a becomer and the king as a be-er. King Dafu, however, manages to keep his equanimity knowing his cruel fate. He tries to put his mind into the lion in order to get over his fear of death. In this situation, the King begins to show Henderson how the lion is regarded by the Wariris, and he starts to urge Henderson to meet the lion face to face in his den.

“...Granted, grun-tu-molani is much, but it is not alone sufficient. Mr. Henderson, more is required. I can show you something now—something without which you will never understand thoroughly my special aim nor my point of view. Will you come with me?” (Bellow 218)

King Dafu says to Henderson that it is not alone sufficient to recognize “grun-tu-molani” or men want to live. That is the significance of the confrontation between Henderson and the lion. Although King Dafu acknowledges Queen Willatale’s ideas, at the same time, he guides Henderson towards the way to cope with real life. After Queen Willatale showed Henderson her maternal philosophy of life, “grun-tu-molani”. Dafu tries to show Henderson his paternal life philosophy: the lion therapy.

Henderson was perplexed by it. This, so-called lion therapy reminds us of Wilhelm Reich’s orgone therapy. (Niimi 15-16.) However, we won’t discuss this parodic phase of the story in this paper. We will discuss the profound theme that is manifest through the relationship between Henderson and other characters in the story in the next chapter.

## Chapter 2. The Theme in the Depths of the Story

### 1. The Ultimate Need of Our Soul

So Miss Lenox went to the cemetery, and I went to Idlewild and took a plane. (Bellow 40)

The direct trigger for Henderson’s trip to Africa was the death of the old woman who lived across the road and came in to fix Henderson’s breakfast. Her death

and Henderson's departure is described in contrast. This contrast gives us the clue to consider the theme behind this story.

In our actual life, everyone faces unwilling separation of life and death several times. In this sense, Henderson and Miss Lenox took off in different directions. However, if we do not regard one's death and life separately, a different idea would arise in our mind.

In real life, nobody knows of the afterlife. Nobody knows of one's situation before and after our life. Concerning our consciousness, what we can prove scientifically now is that our brain and body creates our consciousness. However, we can find another concept of life and death in Bellow's story.

Bellow often depicts the concept of continuity of our life or transpersonal connection of our spirits in his works. These are important themes for Bellow. We can find Bellow's view of continuity of our life in the transmigration of Wariri King's soul. We can find another view that our existence connects to others, in the upset of Henderson when he faced the death of Miss Lenox.

...Death will annihilate you and nothing will remain, and there will be nothing left but junk. Because nothing will have been and so nothing will be left. While something still is—*now!* For the sake of all, get out.  
(Bellow 40)

Henderson's rage here shows us that he was actually aware of one's death as often happens suddenly when he encountered Miss Lenox's death. He was in deep despair when he saw a lot of things, which Miss Lenox left in her house. He began to feel that he had to do something which would bring dramatic change to his confused daily life. The awareness of human mortality urged him to seek positive meaning in his life. That is the reason why Henderson flew to Africa immediately after Miss Lenox's funeral service. In other words, the confrontation with death became his inner necessity and his inner inevitability. However, a question arises here in our mind. Why didn't Henderson confront death in the USA? Why did he have to go to Africa for his revival?

"...there are guys exactly like me in India and in China and South America...And it's the destiny of my generation of Americans to go out in the world and try to find the wisdom of life. It just is. Why the hell do you think I'm out here, anyway?"



"I don't know, sah."

"I wouldn't agree to the death of my soul."(Bellow 277)

We can find here the reason why Henderson went to Africa. Even in the United States, which is well developed scientifically, we can't avoid our mortality. Many Americans went out into the world seeking places that kept the things that modern America lost, in order to confront their own mortality. Actually, in the 1960's, soul searching trips to third world nations were in fashion. That phenomenon was like the resuscitation of the people who were about to suffocate in modern streamlined society. Henderson was a herald of such a trend.

Another reason for Henderson's African trip was to escape from his chaotic, daily life. Besides, we can find another meaning for his trip. His trip was a journey to the past of human history. This is very obvious if we follow his African trip. At first, Henderson entered an untrodden desert where he felt togetherness between him and nature, as if he were a baby who had just been reborn.

...it was all simplified and splendid, and I was entering the past—the real past, no history or junk like that. The Prehuman past. And I believed that there was something between the stones and me. (Bellow 46)

Henderson was a newborn infant in the Prehuman past where his revival began. Then, he encountered the primitive tribes. One of them, in the Arnewi, he felt like a child who was immersed in maternal love. In the Wariri, another tribe, he was like a child who was brought up in paternal love. That is, he returned to be a baby and grew up again on this African trip. Thus, Africa was a time machine for him. This is the reason why Bellow set this part of the story in Africa. The image of Africa: Mother Nature and primitive tribes connects us to the image of our origin.

In the imagery African continent that Bellow created, Henderson encountered death again. King Dafu was killed by the lion while he tried to catch it. We will discuss this in our conclusion, the impact of Dafu's death on Henderson and the profound theme in the depth of the story.

## 2. Conclusion

Henderson was filled with deep emotion when the King was dying.

I never took another death so hard. As I had tried to stop his

bleeding, there was blood all over me and soon it was dry. I tried to rub it off. Well, I thought, maybe this is a sign that I should continue his existence? (Bellow 314)

When we face the death of a loved one, we are shocked at first. The deep emotion that follows our shock is related to the profound theme of this story. Facing the death of our departed one, we desperately try to catch the meaning of the death. The sign that Henderson acknowledges occurred in such a sense. It is like the impression of a ray of light rising up in the gloomy agony when we faced our close one's death. Paradoxically, the death phenomenon brings us the feeling of our helplessness and the ephemeral nature of our life. At the same time, it can bring us a gleam of hope, because it is unknown for us. Behind the sign of blood that Henderson should continue the King's existence, we can find the essential theme of this story. Bellow showed us the continuity of our life in this story, and we are immortal in such continuity. In other words, it is the feeling that our life is not divided by death and we are living in the cycle of existence. At the same time, there arises the question of how our consciousness would be in such a cycle of life as well. Henderson noticed it when he faced the King's death.

Finally, we will discuss whether Henderson's revival will continue or not. Immediately after he felt a sign telling him he should continue the King's existence, he was upset somewhat comically.

How? To the best of my ability. But what ability have I got? I can't name three things in my whole life that I did right. So I broke my heart over this, too. (Bellow 314)

The Self-tortured Henderson, who has no confidence, remained the same. Actually, right after the King's death, he escaped from the Wariri tribe, because he was frightened that he would have to suffer the same destiny as the King. The ending of the story doesn't describe whether Henderson's revival will continue after he returned to the United State. We can only learn of his feeling of refreshment. However, the baby lion, an American orphan boy and the name of the place "Newfoundland" all suggest to us that Henderson seized the opportunity to change his life. Whether or not Henderson would succeed in the rest of his life, he is living in the cycle of life. That is the profound theme of this story. Bellow showed us in *Henderson the Rain King* that we are the ones who are living in such a cycle of life. We can hear the grand sound and the brilliance of

the cycle of life through this literary work.

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