

*Urban Gothic and the Sphinx Factor:  
Saul Bellow's Mr. Sammler's Planet*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** Saul Bellow, as a cerebral, analytical, and philosophical writer, unflinchingly describes the world and gives the readers tremendous thoughts about life and society. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1976 for his human understanding and subtle analysis of contemporary culture. In *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, Bellow shows the readers a death-burdened, rotting, spoiled, sullied, exasperating, sinful earth. This insane world is full of droll mortality and morbid entertainments. The coexistence of rationality and bestiality in man is vividly displayed in this novel. In his *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*, Professor Nie Zhenzhao formulated the theory of the Sphinx factor as composed of the human factor and the animal factor, and the combination of the two makes an integrated man. The animal factor in the novel is fully demonstrated in the black pickpocket's bestiality, Mr. Sammler's voyeurism, the Holocaust, killings and thefts. However, the human factor is not so salient as the animal factor in this novel. I argue that the tension between the two factors not only intensifies the conflicts but shows how the author perceives the world. Bellow shows a strong contempt for the world. A pessimistic and critical outlook is conveyed in Bellow's understanding of cities, represented by Chicago and New York. Robbery, cheating, speculation, beauty, money and lust construct a corrupted panorama of industrial cities. This is one of the reasons why Bellow highlights the animal factor more than the human factor. He seeks to criticize the American city from different perspectives of city culture, including the corruption of the bureaucracy, vices in public transport, changes in the urban landscape, competition between the pursuit of art and the pursuit of money.

**Keywords:** Sphinx factor; animal factor; human factor; urban gothic; Saul Bellow; *Mr. Sammler's Planet*

The Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976 was awarded to Saul Bellow “for the human understanding and subtle analysis of contemporary culture that are combined in his work” (Kazin 1971: 10). The issue of morality and responsibility in human race is a great concern in Bellow's writing. Bellow mentioned the

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<sup>1</sup> This research was supported by the National Social Science Fund of China (15FWW11).

dilemma faced by writers: “It apparently makes no difference what the artist should decide about his commitment, whether he considers himself a moralist or a purely objective artist. The writer in any case finds that he bears the burdens of priest or teacher. Sometimes he looks like the most grotesque of priests, the most eccentric of teachers, but I believe the moral function cannot be divorced from art.” (Bellow 2015: 163–164) Bellow emphasized the importance of truth and the power to absorb the readers. He also argues that: “the writer, however, is bound by tradition to live under a different standard. Even if he is an avowed immoralist, even if he calls himself an anti-artist, a rebel, a hater of life, a desperate enemy of society, he is invariably motivated by a desire for truth.” (Bellow 2015: 159) His understanding of the essence of literature as the revelation of history and reality is similar to Prof. Nie Zhenzhao’s idea about ethical literary criticism. In an interview carried out by Prof. Charles Ross with Prof. Nie, he argues that “ethical literary criticism represents a particularly strong call for objectivity and historicism.” (Ross and Nie 2015: 10)

In the history of the novel, readers are more attracted to fascinating pieces of writing with a lot commitments and turbulences. Writers of genius have shown us the instability of the experiencing self in common life, in instinct and even in dream. The protagonists whose fortunes, passions and moral problems have filled the pages of fiction are always the ones who exemplify the complicated nature of human existence, most notably, the ethical dilemmas in which they are trapped. Human experience and existence are inevitably the basis of all fictional writings. Bellow discusses human understanding in his novels. His main characters follow almost the same existential pattern. According to Philippe Codde, “The protagonist is leading a regular life of automatism (which the existentialists identify as the primary means to ward off existential angst), until the bottom suddenly drops out by some unexpected event and he is thrown into complete uncertainty – as a true manifestation of the Camusian absurd.” (Codde 2007: 126) This existential pattern brings about many existential dilemmas, the uncertainty, the unexpectedness, the fury, and the beauty. In addition, it reflects to some extent the author’s concept of the world and of the human situation.

In his monograph *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*, Professor Nie Zhenzhao puts forward two terms: natural selection and ethical selection. Nie explains in detail that natural selection “is a biological selection that differentiates human beings from other animals in their physical forms; while ethical selection helps human beings to be fundamentally different from other animals in the sense that they have acquitted ethical consciousness” (Ross & Nie 2015: 7–14). By borrowing from the ancient Greek story of the Sphinx, Nie coins the term ‘the Sphinx factor’ when he claims that “The unique coexistence of rationality and bestiality in man is determined by the Sphinx factor, which

has in itself two components, the human factor and the animal factor.” (Nie 2014: 38) Every human being is, in himself, a combination of human features and animal features.

In *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1975), Bellow shows the readers a conflicting world filled with rationality and bestiality by presenting a death-burdened, spoiled, exasperating and sinful earth. This insane world is full of droll mortality and morbid entertainments. Mr. Sammler, a Holocaust survivor, intellectual, and occasional lecturer at Columbia University in the 1960s, is an aged, one-eyed Polish Jew living in New York with his daughter Shula. He is also a registrar of madness, a refined and well-educated being caught among people who are obsessed with the promises of the future, like moon landings, and things like that. With his Cyclopean eye he peers through the telescope of history, exploring the cultural landscape of a planet which has just sent a man to the moon yet in which prevail social and political corruption, degradation and a spiritual emptiness. Having escaped death in a concentration camp during the Second World War, Mr. Sammler is disillusioned, even horrified by the violence around him. The novel presents a dreary, disgusting, and hellish picture of New York in the late 1960s. Surrounded by pickpockets and hollow intellectuals, Mr. Sammler is convinced that the world has gone mad, that the human race has deteriorated into barbarism. The world he is in now is not an ideal place for living. Hence, in this essay, I will discuss the tension between the rationality and bestiality, which exemplifies the urban gothic on the one hand, and speaks for the author in terms of how Bellow perceives the world and human nature in his writing on the other.

The human factor, in Nie's words, is a superior factor which is in charge of the animal factor. The dominance of the human factor over the animal factor makes it possible for man to be rational and well equipped with the consciousness of ethics. And vice versa. The prevailing animal factor in man makes him a half-human, half-animal being, which was valued especially in the Middle Ages, or those of double individualities, or of hermaphrodites, as in Foucault's term "the human monster".<sup>2</sup> (Foucault 1994: 5) We cannot deny the existence of such metaphorically brutal human "monsters" in the modern world, especially after witnessing the atrocities of two world wars.

As for the existence of the modern man in the modern city, Franco Moretti argues that "the city dweller's life is dominated by a nightmare – a trifling one, to be sure, – unknown to other human beings; the terror of 'missing something.'" (Moretti 1983: 119) Missing rationality, missing humanity, missing genuine

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<sup>2</sup> In this essay, Foucault mentioned three elements which form the group of abnormal people: the human monster, the individual to be corrected, and the onanist.

emotions are all terrible things for the entire human race. The coexistence of rationality and bestiality in man is vividly shown in the novel. The conflicts between the human factor and the animal factor are given in depth so as to convey Bellow's idea of the world in the 1960s and the 1970s. The animal factor is fully demonstrated in the black pickpocket's boldness, bestiality and cruelty. In addition, the brutal and inhumane killings in the Holocaust and the irrational behaviour of people also deepens the bestiality among human beings.

The pickpocket is a black guy and in many episodes he is described like an animal. When Mr. Sammler sees him on the bus, the pickpocket is cornering an old and weak man with poor eyes watering with terror. Bellow describes the strength and baldness of the thief: "The thief tugged his clothes like a doctor with a clinic patient. Pushing aside tie and scarf, he took out the wallet. His own homburg he then eased back (an animal movement, simply) slightly from his forehead, furrowed but not with anxiety." (*MSP* 37) When Mr. Sammler saw the whole process of the open robbery and he was spotted by the pickpocket, Mr. Sammler felt his tachycardia intensifying. "Like an escaping creature racing away from him (the thief)" (*ibid.*). Mr. Sammler tried not to be seen by the thief again, but he had not shaken off the pickpocket. When Mr. Sammler entered the lobby of his building, the black thief came up behind him very quickly, pressing him bodily, belly to back. The situation was like a beast chasing a weaker creature. The thief even took out his genital, "a large tan-and purple uncircumcised thing—a tube, a snake" (*MSP* 39) and showed it to Mr. Sammler.

Another notable feature of the animal factor is the irrational behaviour of the people in the novel. Everyone seems to be enjoying the insanity of the world, the degradation of the society and the irrationality of the individual. No one cares about others, and no one is concerned about the future of the world. They are participating in a carnival and living a blind life. The place they live in is a great fun fair, a place in which to play death games with one another. According to Lehan, Dionysus embodies the disruptive force in the city; his spirit is later embodied by the carnival, still later by the mysterious stranger and the man in the crowd, and by Freud's theory of the uncanny as the return of the repressed. (Lehan 1998: 6) Bellow introduces to the reader such a crazy world, a world of paralysis, paranoia and moral blindness:

They all had such fun! Wallace, Feffer, Eisen, Bruch, too, and Angela. They laughed so much. Dear brethren, let us all be human together. Let us all be in the great fun fair, and do this droll mortality with one another. Be entertainers of your near and dear. Treasure hunts, flying circuses, comical thefts, medals, wigs and saris, beards. Charity, all of it, sheer charity, when you consider

the state of things, the blindness of the living. It is fearful! Not to be borne!  
Intolerable! Let us divert each other while we live! (MSP 244)

The issue of the Holocaust is also addressed in the novel. The inhumane and ferocious mass killings during the Second World War shocked the whole world. The bestiality of the human being was fully displayed. According to the Holocaust scholar Friedlander, the Holocaust has been “the most radical form of genocide encountered in history: the willful, systematic, industrially organized, largely successful attempt totally to exterminate an entire human group within twentieth-century Western society.” (Friedlander 1992: 3) Jürgen Habermas once commented on Auschwitz in these terms:

... on another level Auschwitz has become the signature of an entire epoch and it concerns all of us. Something happened there that no one could previously have thought even possible. It touched a deep layer of solidarity among all who have a human face. Until then in spite of all the quasi-natural brutalities of world history we had simply taken the integrity of this deep layer for granted. ... Auschwitz altered the conditions for the continuation of historical life contexts and not only in Germany. (Habermas 1989: 251–252)

In the novel, the atrocity of the Holocaust is presented through displaying the animal factor of human beings. Taking a life can be a joyful thing for people in this bloodthirsty world. As a survivor of the Holocaust, Mr. Sammler cannot remain innocent and stationary when his life is in peril. He once shot a disarmed man at very close range, even after the man pleaded for his life:

He made him fling away his carbine. To the side. A good five feet into snow. It landed flat and sank. Sammler ordered the man to take off his coat. Then the tunic. The sweater, the boots. After this, he said to Sammler in a low voice, “Nicht schießen.” He asked for his life. Red-headed, a big chin bronze-stubbed, he was scarcely breathing. He was white. Violet under the eyes. Sammler saw the soil already sprinkled on his face. He saw the grave on his skin. The grime of the lip, the large creases of skin descending from his nose already lined with dirt—that man to Sammler was already underground. He was no longer dressed for life. He was marked, lost. Had to go. Was gone. “Don’t kill me. Take the things.” Sammler did not answer, but stood out of reach. “I have children.” Sammler pulled the trigger. The body then lay in the snow. A second shot went through the head and shattered it. Bone burst. Matter flew out. (MSP 113–114)

After killing the man, Mr. Sammler's heart felt "lined with brilliant, rapturous satin...Then he himself knew how it felt to take a life. Found it could be an ecstasy." (MSP 115) Violence could be contagious. The psychology of killing for a temporary joy and ecstasy is all alike in this bloodthirsty world. Bellow also satirizes the argument that the reasons for the Holocaust are the "agitated spirits", "the project of a deeper reason", and "the noble achievement" in order to obtain the separation of species and even distinction of species. (MSP 120–121)

The city's duality of wealth juxtaposed with poverty makes it a potent symbol for the dual human "self" in reality and also in the fictitious world. Aside from the bestiality of human beings, Bellow also shows us the rationality of people, although not so prominently. The human factor, as opposed to the animal factor, emphasizes the consciousness of ethics among human beings. Nie elaborates on the human factor:

Human factor is the force to initiate man to make ethical choices during his whole life of ethical selection. It can differentiate himself from animal by the realization of human nature determined by human factor in Sphinx. It is human factor that differentiates man from animal, which means that man and animal are differentiated not by form but by human factor which becomes human nature in ethical selection. (Ross & Nie 2015: 9)

The sense of guilt is one way to show man's rationality because it conveys a note of self-reflection and self-monitoring. A Holocaust survivor is a Jew who was in hiding, or was sent to a concentration camp, or the ghetto, but managed to survive the atrocity. He suffered from a wide range of emotional wounds. The American Psychological Association defines survivor guilt as "remorse or guilt for having survived a catastrophic situation when others did not or for not suffering the ills that others had to endure." (VandenBos 2007: 913) Mr. Sammler's wife perished during the notorious war crime and he survived the Holocaust. Mr. Sammler's survivor guilt, indeterminate and obsessive, haunts him constantly, forcing him to assume responsibility for the sins not his own. Separation from his beloved wife and torture from the deaths in his family put him into an irreversible situation of feeling guilty. The death of his wife left him in a melancholy sadness and solitude:

"By coming back, by preoccupation with the subject, the dying, the mystery of dying, the state of death. Also, by having been inside death. By having been given the shovel and told to dig. By digging beside his digging wife. When she faltered he tried to help her. By this digging, not speaking, he tried to convey something to her and fortify her. But as it had turned out, he had prepared her

for death without sharing it. She was killed, not he. She had passed the course, and he had not." (MSP 226)

The human factor embodied in this kind of rationality is self-evident from the perspective of survivor guilt. However, the human factor is not that salient and dominant as the animal factor in Bellow's writing. Lee Siegel states that "Bellow's characters, Jewish or not, are Americans who are in the process of becoming persons." (Siegel 2001: 79) Ezra Cappell claims that "Bellow's fiction intertwines the process of Americanization with the process of mentchification or of becoming more fully human." (Cappell 2006: 56) This process of becoming fully human is intertwined with the inevitable and incompatible conflicts between bestiality and rationality, and the ethical dilemma in making decisions.

The tension between the animal factor and the human factor not only intensifies the conflicts, but it also speaks about how the author perceives the world. Bellow's shows a strong contempt for the world. A pessimistic and critical outlook is conveyed in Bellow's urban dystopia, represented by Chicago and New York. Through the cyclopean eye of Mr. Sammler, the flaneur in New York, Bellow is arguing that robbery, cheating, speculation, beauty, money and lust are constructing a corrupted panorama of industrial cities. This is one of the reasons why Bellow highlights the animal factor more than the human factor. He depicts a world in which people are uncontrollable due to the lack of the human factor. Their free will and animal will go far beyond their rational will. Bellow seeks to show an urban gothic and to criticize the American cities from different perspectives of city culture, including the corruption of the bureaucracy, vices in public transport, changes in the urban landscape, competition between the pursuit of art and the pursuit of money.

According to Fain, "Urban Gothicism is a literary genre that is dominated by African American authors yet is not exclusive to one ethnicity. Urban decay and moral dilapidation is the essence of the inner city. These characters are struggling with issues of poverty, broken families, drug abuse, and crime, yet their plight is aggravated or enlightened by the issues of the supernatural." (Fain 2014: 178) In the novel, Bellow presents man's cruelty as well as how they deal with it. Life in a gothic city is a life of confronting vice, violence, deprivation and depravity. Mr. Sammler also wants to flee the metropolitan city and he imagines life in Mars as a better choice.

There are two traditional tropes of Gothic: the struggle to escape a confining space and the effort to decode mysterious signs (Wasson 2010: 26). Mr. Sammler's imprisonment is just a case in point. He was trapped in the concentration camp, and is now in New York. He was in hiding during the Second World War and he is still hiding, hiding from the SS men and

hiding from the Black pickpocket. Mr. Sammler is also trying to decipher the mysterious signs around him. He is curious about the method of stealing of the black pickpocket, he even enjoys watching this again and again until he is found out and traced by the black guy. The sign of stealing is a significant symbol for him. Observing the act of stealing is an ecstasy for him because it offers him a perspective into the world. In addition to that, Mr. Sammler is a flaneur who is always willing to decode spectacles, as well as a stroller savouring urban spectacles.

Charles Baudelaire was the first to introduce the image of a flaneur in literature. Although Baudelaire himself does not use the term flaneur, his collection *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857) and *Le Spleen de Paris* (1869) catalogue the various urban spectators that have come to define the category: the passionate artist, the wistful poet, the exhibitionist dandy, the detective, the journalist, the criminal and the “rag-picker” or harvester of trash (Wasson 2010: 29). According to Wasson, four qualities of the watchful walker have acquired the label of flaner through decades of critical commentary: the flaneur has a fraught relationship with capitalism, he craves to be amidst crowds but feels solitary within them and does imaginative work on what he sees on the streets. (Wasson 2010: 29)

Mr. Sammler is such a flaneur. He is a correspondent, a scholar, a city walker, a victim of the Holocaust, a detective. This multi-faceted Mr. Sammler is showing the readers the menacing labyrinth of the city. In his writing Bellow tends to make a problem of distinguishing appearance from reality, of affixing moral responsibility for particular wrongs, which seems all but prohibitively complex. There is never a pure and simple answer, but only an ambiguous approximation to the final truth. Lewis Mumford, the prolific urban historian of the twentieth century, articulated in *The Culture of Cities* (1938): “The city is the form and symbol of an integrated social relationship: it is the seat of the temple, the market, the hall of justice, the academy of learning. Here is where human experience is transformed into viable signs, symbols, patterns of conduct, systems of order.” (Mumford 1986: 104) Mr. Sammler’s personal experience in the city symbolizes the systems of order and the patterns of conduct. He bears witness to the vice, violence and vanity in the metropolitan city.

Quite a coincidence is Bellow’s mentioning of H. G. Wells. Mr. Sammler is an expert scholar in H. G. Wells, who is also a key figure in bridging fin-de-siècle Gothic and that of the Second World War. In his novel *The Fate of Homo Sapiens* published in 1939, Wells admits that he has no hope in humanity’s ability to forestall disaster: “There will have been a great burning and smashing up of human habitations which no one will have had energy to replace, and such a destruction of beautiful buildings, works of art, and irreplaceable seem mere



boyish mischief.” (Wells 1939: 290) And he goes on saying that, in the damaged post-war world, cities will become places of cruelty and peril: “More and more will the world be for the tough, for the secretive, the treacherous and ruthless. Cities will be dangerous labyrinths.” (Wells 1939: 308)

Similarly to Wells’ comment, Mr. Sammler is criticizing the corrupt and desperate situation in cities like Chicago and New York. Dark streets and the crumbled transport infrastructure, the telephone system give the readers an image of a nightmarish city. He describes Chicago as follows:

What did – what could – Chicago have to do with the mind and art? Chicago was a complex of industrial neighborhoods, a string of immigrant communities, Germans, Irish, Italians, Lithuanians, Swedes, German Jews on the South Side, Russian Jews on the West, blacks from Mississippi and Alabama in gloomy vast slums; even more vast were the respectable endless bungalow-filled middle-class neighborhoods. What else was there? There was the central business district where adventurous architects had pioneered the skyscraper. And we were known to the world for our towers, stockyards, railroads, steel miles, our gangsters and boosters. Oscar Wilde had come here and tried to be nice, Rudyard Kipling had looked us over and written a nasty report. Mr. Yerks had made millions out of car lines and el trains and Mr. Insull out of the utilities. Jane Addams had worked in the slums, and Harriet Monroe had worked in poetry. But the slums got bigger, while the poets left for New York, London, and Rapallo. If you looked here for the sort of natural beauty described by Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Yeats, you would never find it. (Bellow 1994a: 120)

There is a greater chance for a dreadful world to come in the future that Mr. Sammler can envision. He says: “New York makes one think about the collapse of civilization, about Sodom and Gomorrah, the end of the world. The end wouldn’t come as surprise here. Many people already bank on it.” (MSP 252) Bellow also satirizes the demonic world of New York in his essay “New York: World-Famous Impossibility” (1970):

Off Times Square, a blind man has been assaulted, his Seeing Eye dog stolen, he is bleeding and weeping. A cop mutters, “This could only happen in New York.” Impulses can be released here that in calmer environments are restrained. On every street, people are taught “what life is like.... New York is stirring, insupportable, agitated, ungovernable, demonic. No single individual can judge it adequately. (Bellow 1994b: 217)

Additionally, in his "Foreword" to a notable book *The Closing of American Mind* (1987) written by Bellow's best friend Alan Bloom, Bellow claims:

In the view of advanced European thinkers, the cultural expectations of a young man from Chicago, that center of brutal materialism, were bound to be disappointed. Put together the slaughterhouses, the still mills, the freight yards, the primitive bungalows of the industrial villages that comprised the city, the gloom of the financial district, the ballparks and prizefights, the machine politicians, the prohibition gang wars, and you had a solid cover of 'Social Darwinist' darkness, impenetrable by the rays of culture. (Bellow 1987: 14)

Finally, in Bellow's 1975 essay "A Matter of the Soul", he wrote: "Crudity, disappointment, sickness, heartbreak, money, power, happiness, and love in rudimentary forms – this was what we were aware of. This was a place where matter ruled, a place where stone was value and value stone." (Bellow 1994c: 74)

*Mr. Sammler's Planet* is permeated by the fading and corruption of civilization. Robbery, cheating, speculation, money and lust construct a corrupted panorama of industrial cities. Bellow intentionally highlights this scenario and he does not want to balance the human factor and the animal factor, but rather, the animal factor in this novel is more salient and prevalent than the human factor. In such an unbalanced narrative, Bellow is trying to depict an urban dystopia rather than an urban utopia. Bellow pities the cities in which people are living.

From the above it follows that the conflicts between bestiality and rationality are tense. However, under the guise of urban gothic, Bellow is willing to accept that bestiality in the novel is more prominent than rationality because of the degradation of civilization and the brutality of human nature. The very end of the story shows Mr. Sammler being shocked at the money-grabbing self-centeredness of people. Bellow wants to emphasize that the dirty human hearts are the source of the decay of the cities and the reason for the atrocities in history. The "hidden" self is more dangerous, especially the return of the repressed and the threatening aspects of the self, which should be transcended.

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