Augie: A Picaro Deviation from the Picaresque Genre in the Adventures of Augie March by Saul Bellow

Literature

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Abstract

The picaresque novel, as it developed in Spain during the sixteenth century, influenced also modern novels, although it may not contain all the elements of the traditional picaresque genre. This study analyzed the use of picaresque form in The Adventures of Augie March by Bellow in an attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of the form in a modern novel.

Judging by the characteristics, The Adventures of Augie March exhibited many of the qualities of the traditional picaresque. Augie is a rogue who moves through a series of adventures, which satirize the society he lives in. However, the difference between this modern picaresque and its prototype lies in the purpose of the novel. Augie, unlike the traditional picaro, is searching for a fate which will include both full realization of self and love. Thus, his adventures are steps in his quest rather than self-contained satirical episodes.

The analysis of the novel supported the idea that picaresque form is a flexible and resourceful vehicle which offers certain definite advantages to the contemporary author in his portrayal of modern life.

1. Introduction

The picaresque novel, as Chandler (1958) points out, was taken into the literary consideration with proper attention after the middle of the nineteenth century. The picaresque genre is claimed to emerge repeatedly when there was milieu of unrest or chaos in a society. In this connection, Hague (1986) asserts that the genre is associated with a profound social transformation. Blackburn (1977) and Bjornson (1979) commonly point out the Spanish picaresque tradition in the sixteenth century as the basis of the modern applications of the genre. Bjornson (1979) defines the essential picaresque situation as the "paradigmatic confusion between an isolated individual and hostile society". As for Blackburn (1967) "picaros are 'marginal men' who lived in a world of tension and instability".

When seen from this angle, Guillen (1971) describes the picaro as "an individual who is involved in a tangle, an economic and social predicament of the most immediate and passing nature". According to him, the genre illustrates a "confrontation between the individual and his environment which is also a conflict between inwardness and experience"(Guillen, 1971). In the older picaresque literature "the picaro is an insular, an isolated being , frequently an orphan who must function in an environment for which he is not prepared" (Guillen, 1971). He soon discovers that there is no refuge from society and that "social role playing is "indispensible". He can neither join nor reject his fellowmen nor function as a "half outsider" (Guilen, 1971 cited in Cevik, 2013).

1.1 Characteristics of the Picaresque Genre

The picaro has neither past nor any trust in the future. His living must be fought for and extorted from a corrupt society. He is obligated to come to terms with an environment that is cruel and unrewarding toward all. Thus, he is equipped with both offensive and defensive weapons (Cevik, 1998). His greatest defensive weapons are his resiliency or capacity for adaptation as well as his good humor. He is eager to learn and make concessions, but in case of failure, he will not whine, but forget and merry.

Guile and wile are offensive methods for the picaro's material survival (Blanch, 1956). Honest effort and sacrifice do not appeal to him very long as he shirks responsibility or permanence and laughs at honor or reputation. He needs two things: comfort and ease; yet, by temperament he is willing to obtain them by deceitful and improvised means only.

The picaresque genre has been identified with a dominant condition of disorder. The idea of confusion has led to the variety and diversity of applications of the genre as they are suited to the purposes of authors (Blanch, 1956). As a result of the enormous popularity and influence of the eighteenth century French and English works, the significance of their Spanish models has been obscured. In this manner, the titles *Gil Blass*, *Moll Flanders* and *Tom Jones* remain for many identical with the term picaresque while the titles of their Spanish models are not remembered (Alter, 1964).

Episodic plot makes one of the recurrent aspects of the picaresque novel. Miller (1967) states that the use of episodic structure is required in order to connect various events (p. 23). These events are critical both for the picaro (male protagonist) and the anti-hero who appears as a help to join the events together

This genre involves the education of the picaro in the ways of the world and has a fundamental will to survive. Alter (1964) points out "the picaresque novel in general is literature of learning" (p. 7). Because his world is chaotic, the picaro must quickly learn to survive. Thus, his protean agility (masking and wit) may be regarded as the picaro's main trait. With agility, flexibility, and pragmatic adaptation, he meets the world's flux.

2. *The Adventures of Augie March* in the Picaresque Tradition

According to many literary critics, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1964) has appeared a modern picaresque; thus, many have compared it to the great picaresque novels of the past. It can be accepted that Saul Bellow's novel *The Adventures of Augie March* can suit into the description of the picaresque genre. However, an overall analysis of the whole novel displays critical deviations from the mainstream genre out of the traditional picaresque style. As it turns out, the differences majorly qualify *The Adventures of Augie March* (in short 'AAM' will be coined to designate the

novel in references) as a variation of picaresque form rather than a modern imitation of the traditional genre.

Augie, the protagonist of the novel, is a "rascal"– rogue in the picaresque sense - who moves through a series of adventures in a similar fashion to the traditional "picaro"; however, his quest is not for his next meal or fortune, but for identity and freedom, self-hood, what he calls "a good enough fate" (AAM, p. 45). Consequently, the series of adventures through which he is forced to move are not designed to display varied levels of society in which members can be satirized for their follies and vices, but rather to examine the structure of modern American society to determine what possibility exists for the individual to retain a strong sense of self and the freedom to function and at the same time to be a responsible part of the society he lives in. Therefore, although satire is used and the tone of the book is comic, the controlling purpose of the novel is not to satirize the society, but to explore the possibility of existence within it. The difference in purpose also creates a change in structure. Although the structure is episodic, the hero moving through a series of more or less unrelated adventures, the adventures move toward a culmination rather than exist only for themselves, and there are more thematic links between them as well as a greater number of reappearing characters than in the traditional picaresque.

Augie March, to some extent, shares the solitude of the traditional picaro, which is a similarity to the genre, but for different reasons. Augie is alone in the world because he insists on his independence, his freedom to choose his own values, and he refuses to adopt anyone else's version of reality. It is Mimi Villars who makes Augie consciously aware of a truth that he has subconsciously known and acted on since childhood. "The thing I began to learn from her, was of the utmost importance; namely, that everyone sees to it his fate is shared or tries to see to it", he says (AAM, p. 211). Augie sees to it or tries to see to it that he shares no one's fate; his purpose in life is to find his own liberty and exerts all his powers to keep himself free to do so. Thus, he cannot become much involved with others, for to do so would endanger his freedom and put out an end to his quest. Contrary to traditional picaro, Augie is consciously and deliberately ready for new experiences precisely because he does not spend himself in any of his adventures. Whereas in the genre, picaro is pulled into a series of events over which he cannot have control, and he just tries to overcome them along with his benefits. However, Augie's commitment is tentative; he wants to explore not to consummate his relationships with others. For instance, it is Sophie Geratis, a Greek girl with whom Augie has a brief affair, who accuses him of "not being hurt enough by the fate of other people" (AAM, p. 440). Augie acknowledges the justice of charge, but still declines to change his ways. "But I didn't wish to marry her. She would have scolded me for my own good too much, I thought. So this one more souls I would fly by, that wanted something from me" (AAM, p. 453). Augie's aloneness stems from his refusal to share another's fate, to accept another's values, or even to decide on his own.

The thing which Augie rebels against is what might be called the multiplicity of life: the pressure of things, people, knowledge, events –all concentrated within a sprawling metropolis like Chicago

to an almost intolerable degree. Basteshaw, the crazed ship's carpenter Augie is shipwrecked with, expresses this idea when he tells Augie about the source of his egomaniacal ambitions. He says:

> The shoving multitude bears down, and you are nothing, a meaningless name, and not just obscure in eternity, but right now. The fate is of the meanest your fate. Death! But no, there must be some distinction. The soul cries out against this namelessness (AAM, p. 503).

However, it is not just the anonymity which dismays Augie; it is the added problem such complexity poses in his search for the true way to live.

Each adventure Augie experiences fills in the picaresque function of teaching him some truth, but there is a difference in the nature of the truth Augie learns and the nature of that which the traditional picaro discovers. Lazarillo in *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554) receives valuable lessons in the way of the world, how to get on, how to take advantage of others without being taken advantage of by others. Augie learns to know himself; each adventure teaches him a new truth about his own nature. Like his prototypes, Augie does not grow or develop in his character, but he does increase self-awareness. When Einhorn tells him that he has opposition in him, Augie thrills in recognition of a truth he had not realized. The opposition had not developed with Einhorn; it had always been present in him, sensed by Augie, but not consciously considered before.

Augie's picaresque qualities, especially his love of life, his resilience which enables him to bounce from defeat and his hope in the presence of failure, his acceptance of himself as he is and the world the way he finds it are exhibited in the ending of his adventures. His apple of life may be wormy, but the flavor is still sweet and the fruit worth eating. In fact, it is only the character of Augie that the novel comes close to the picaresque form. That is to say, his birth and background are those of the typical picaro; he must seek outside his home environment to find not only opportunity but also knowledge. Augie learns something from each adventure which he experiences, either about himself or the nature of his quest for a "good fate". Although each experience brings a greater degree of self-awareness, the character of Augie does not essentially change throughout the novel, a trait which is unlike the genre: his good humor, his zest for life, his hope for the future, the quality in himself which he calls "larky", are all as strongly present at the beginning of the novel as at the end. Near the end of his story, Augie tells Mintouchian that he "will never force the hand of fate to create a better Augie March, nor change the time to an age of gold" (AAM, p. 485). This statement seems a perfect expression of the picaro's acceptance of himself and the world without a desire to reform either, but only the desire to find a way to exist successfully in it. Like the traditional picaro, Augie lives on the fringes of society at times violating the law. His "weak sense of consequences" remains with him through his adventures. At the close of his story, he is in Paris as a business partner of the lawyer;Mintouchian, their business is illicit speculation. Although the conditions of his life are less than local, Augie is "a person of hope", which is a good description of the picaro (Alter, 1964).

Although Augie resembles in some ways a typical picaresque hero, his adventures hardly constitute a modern picaresque novel. The features of the picaresque in *The Adventures of Augie March* have been used for a purpose different from that of the traditional picaresque novel. Augie lives on the edges of society, for Bellow depicts that only on the fringes of society can the individual retain a strong sense of his own identity, only outside the middle-class value system of a dollar-oriented society can a man assert his own individuality. Augie's aim, unlike the traditional picaro, is to strike a balance between a perfect freedom and the limiting world. Thus, his adventures are a series of discoveries in this mainstream. His marriage exhibits love as the answer to the problem of existence. As he believes, love is the only thing worth surrendering self for. The unification of self and sacrifice of self is not achieved in the novel, but his marriage to Stella is the imperfect human's step in that direction. Augie's acceptance of himself and the world is the concrete clue of Bellow's belief that living is worth whatever agonies life may bring. In this connection, we can assert that the role of traditional picaro is to act as an observer of society, and in doing so, his indifference to the outer world is needed for the comic-satiric purpose of the novel. Augie is much more representative of a modern everyman who faces the problem of life in modern society and attempts to find an answer to it.

It is in the structure of the novel that the differences between the Adventures of Augie March and the traditional picaresque novel become evident. Like the traditional picaresque, the modern novel is episodic; the plot moves through a series of independent adventures. In the traditional picaresque, these episodes are self contained, united by the presence of the hero, the tone of the narrative, a small number of characters who reappear occasionally, and sometimes by an underlying theme. Each of the episodes exists for the aim of showing some parts of society that can be put into satire. Thus, seldom is there a plot carried over from one episode to another. However, the episodes in Augie March, unlike those of traditional genre, are inherently integrated; that is to say, they do not exist by themselves entirely, but build toward a climax, whereas in the genre, each episode seems to build its own climax in the plot. Within the single climax and plot structure, Augie's ultimate quest is for his 'good enough fate', and each adventure linked to the subsequent one brings him a little nearer his aim. Two such episodes as his childhood with Grandma Lausch and his stay with the Renlings are actually very closely integrated; the stay with the Renlings is the test of Grandma's theories. In each adventure, Augie assumes a role, tries out a fate, to see if it is what he wants, retreating his commitment until he is certain of his feelings about this way of life. Thus, various episodes are more closely related in Augie's story than they are in the traditional picaresque novel.

Another picaresque tradition which Bellow has used in somewhat different fashion in the novel is that of having the hero tell his own story in a comic tone. Augie's language is distinctive, a way of characterizing himself as well as the world he lives in. His speech reveals his awareness of people. He describes the small details of their appearance, which makes a character interesting study to him. His understanding of Clem is evident in his description of him, but the description also admits many things about Augie. He has a free-style of rhetoric which is an assertion of his personality, unlike the picaro in the genre. His combination of phrase like 'admonitory world' with

the verb 'groan' suggest his breezy way of looking at the world. His judgment of Clem as 'melancholy as dirt' exhibits the independence of mind which makes his speech remarkably free from clichés. His combination of adjectives like 'nitty' and 'supercilious' reflect his ability to be above his milieu and at the same time a part of it. The distinctive quality of Augie's speech is certainly a reflection in the style of the novel of the theme of self-realization.

Another quality of the style which suggests a merging of form and content is Augie's tendency to catalogue, as in the following lines of a trip description in an elevator:

> The cramming of this multitude of detail into one sprawling sentence certainly suggests the pressure of the multiplicity of life which Augie objects to in the modern world. The crush of numbers on the spirit of man is apparent in this sentence which demands the same stretching of attention, the same effort to encompass mentally, which the countless facts, ideas, events which fill his books require of Augie (AAM, p.497)..

This tendency for a multiplicity of words is constant throughout the novel; Augie never uses one adjective when he can use two, never uses a single noun when he can use a list of a dozen or so. The practice contributes to the conversational tone characteristic of the picaresque.

Alter (1964) in his book puts forth that the use of the theme constructs the main difference between the modern novel and its traditional forerunners. In a typical picaresque novel, the underlying theme of foolishness provides a base on which the various adventures of the hero may be built. In *The Adventures of Augie March*, however, the various themes of the novel are much more important: an exploration of the themes becomes the basis of the plot. Thus, whatever conclusions can be drawn about them can be accepted as the substance of the novel.

The theme of Bellow is concerned within *The Adventures of Augie March* which are complex, and any attempt to state them will be even more incomplete since Augie speculates at one time or another on nearly every aspect of human life. However, his main concern, the object of Augie's quest, is to find a love on a personal basis, romantic love. On an impersonal basis, it is brotherhood and community with all men. In the traditional genre, to say that the picaro can not love does not mean that he has no feelings whatsoever for his fellows. Traditional picaro has a capacity for empathy born of his struggles; in this way, he gains the knowledge of the ways of the world. He is capable of limited companionship without strong obligations. It is because he feels he must retain his freedom if he has to win in his fight for survival. On this point McCullough (1968) argues that the picaresque hero should not be scrutinized too closely. He says: "The interest of the author is in the shifts of his hero to maintain himself rather than in the man himself, and more particularly, the assertion is centered upon the world in which the adventurer moves".

Having said this, the conclusion of the novel does not provide any conclusive answers to the problems it raises about the relationship of these things. Bellow is faithful to the character he creates in the examination of the themes through Augie's life within his sense of perception and reality. Bellow does not impose a tidy solution to the problems Augie faces because such an

answer is not possible for his hero to attain. Augie's answer to the question he poses for himself is that he must just observe the virtues, which are truth, love, peace, bounty, usefulness and harmony. These virtues are absolute ideals, incapable of realization in an imperfect world, as arrives as a conclusion in his picaresque mentality. Hence, a final and full attainment of Augie's "good enough fate" seems impossible to attain. The final result of his quest is not happiness, but hope. Therefore, it is another possibility to observe some uses of the conventions of the traditional picaresque novel which also conventionally has no real ending, but merely a slight similarity to the series of adventures of the hero.

3. Conclusion

As a trait of the genre analyzed in this study, picaresque structure provides an advantage for the contemporary novelist. Unresolved conflicts and questions can be handled in the episodes. The possibilities of a form broad enough in scope to be used in *Augie March* would seem to be limited only by skill and inventiveness of the novelist. The use of the episodic structure is fully developed as the incidents and characters are described in great detail and the actions were explained and analyzed. The use of theme also differs in Augie March from the traditional genre. Self, love, reality, money and distractions of modern life are the content of the novel since they are modified into the needs of modern man. No absolute conclusion is reached about them; only tentative answers are offered to the questions directed for Augie. The flexibility of the picaresque allows the modern novelist to utilize some of the most common features of the genre to suit to the purposes of his novel. In a similar manner, Augie has much different attitude toward life. His story records a search for a life which will employ the ideals he calls his axial lines. Even though he suffers defeat, he believes not only the existence of such ideals, but also in the possibility of their realization, which labels Augie as an optimist, unlike the traditional picaro.

It would seem evident that the picaresque is one which is flexible enough to offer a wide range of possibilities and suitable enough to a portrayal of modern life. Bellow's Augie March supports the conclusion that, working within some of the picaresque conventions, a novelist may portray his world in such a way that the character may protest against the modern world by using the genre's features. Although Augie, as it seems, portrays the flux of the character in the modern world, it leaves doubts on the mind as regards the full use of common traits of the genre. As the form is best suited to describe the post-war world, rather than the majority of the picaresque traits, some limited aspects seem to have been employed by Bellow. Thus, the novel can be considered as a 'deviation' from the mainstream of the picaresque form.

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