

Male-centric Soliloquy in a World of Desire: On Body Writing in *Herzog* from a Perspective of Corporeal Narratology

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Abstract. In *Herzog*, one of Saul Bellow's most renowned works, the theme of the body plays a central and significant role, serving as a powerful symbol throughout the narrative. The text not only offers a detailed portrayal of the protagonist, *Herzog's* physicality, but it also delves into the bodies of various secondary characters, thereby enhancing the novel's complexity. From the standpoint of corporeal narratology, this analysis draws primarily from Peter Brooks's theory of body narrative dynamics to explore the intricate role that the body assumes within the storyline. By examining how the body is woven into the fabric of the narrative, the paper argues that its representation serves to carry profound meanings and implications. Through vivid and often sexualized portrayals of the body, Bellow constructs a phallogentric universe, in which *Herzog's* own physical presence becomes a symbol of the uniformity between sexual desire, cognitive obsession, and voyeuristic tendencies, all of which serve to propel the narrative forward. Meanwhile, Madeleine's body is strategically portrayed as a Medusa-like object of intense desire, symbolizing both *Herzog's* deep yearning and his underlying fear of emasculation, effectively embodying his psychological anxieties.

Keywords: *Herzog*, body writing, corporeal narratology

The novel *Herzog*, a representative work by Nobel Prize-winning Jewish author Saul Bellow, is an epistolary novel employing a stream-of-consciousness technique. It narrates the thoughts and actions of its intellectual protagonist, Moses Herzog, over five days. One of the novel's most prominent features is its body writing. In addition to the frequent depiction of the protagonist's body, the scattered portrayals of secondary characters' bodies throughout the text are equally noteworthy. In *Herzog*, the body emerges as a critical symbol in the narrative. The concept of corporeal narratology was first introduced by Daniel Punday, who emphasized the role of the body in narrative. In his groundbreaking monograph *Narrative Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Narratology*, Punday proposes this approach to narrative studies that challenges the literary tradition of "suspension of corporeality", which views the body as separate from and irrelevant to the intellectual and spiritual act of reading [8]. As a counter-response to traditional literary and narratological studies, "the impact of the body on plot, character development, and setting, as well as its embodiment in narrative, is precisely the central focus of Punday's work." [10]. Another significant contributor to the theory, American scholar Peter Brooks, centers on the desire in body writing, including the exploration of "the body that desires" [7] and "the objects of desire" [1]. Brooks' research adopts a Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic approach. In his work *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, he proposed dynamics of desire animating narrative; and in his later work *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, Brooks elaborate on the objects of desire, regarding them as "obsessive motive of the writing project" [1]. In general, Brooks' research primarily investigates how novels integrate the body into narratives to convey meaning. According to Ouyang, Brooks believes that "in modern novels...the force driving narrative signification is the body; narrative is a process of semiotizing the body" [7]. In conclusion, since the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the significance of the body in narrative has gradually gained widespread recognition within academic circles, sparking extensive discussions. The scholarly consensus on corporeal narratology is that the body serves as both the fundamental source of narrative meaning and a vital tool in constructing the narrative. It plays a crucial role in various aspects of the novel's form and content, encompassing the character development, setting construction, and plot progression. Focusing on corporeal narrative in novels has emerged as a new academic trend. In *Herzog*, Saul Bellow employs the body as a medium to narrate the story. Adopting the perspective of corporeal narratology, this paper analyzes the novel's body writing to reveal how it uses pervasive sexualized depictions of the body to outline a phallogentric world. Furthermore, the bodies of Herzog and Madeleine serve as vehicles for advancing the plot, showcasing Herzog's masculine desires and castration anxiety, with Madeleine simultaneously embodying the object of his desire and the source of his fear.

1. Herzog: The Body that Desires in the Narrative

Brooks emphasizes that the body, particularly one marked by “sexuality, gender, and sexual psychology” [6], plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative. That is to say, the “body that desires” encompasses rather intricate connotations. Within these rich connotations, it is not difficult to discern the influence of Freud: the psychological cognition and imagination occupy a rather significant position in Brooks’s theory. On one hand, the body that desires “perceives itself as a gendered and sexually active being” [6]. On the other hand, it projects onto the object of desire not merely sexual desire, but a complex mechanism encompassing possession, vision, cognition, and imagination, and thereby deriving a sense of “self-identity and existential significance” [6]. Consequently, the body that desires is not only sexually active but also highly active on visual and cognitive levels. Herzog is precisely such a multifacetedly active body. In *Herzog*, it is the protagonist’s own body that most profoundly influences the narrative, embodying the concept of a sexual, gendered, and sexually psychological entity. Herzog firmly identifies himself as male and takes great pride in his past as a man who once exuded substantial masculine charm. His sexual attraction to beautiful women is a central aspect of his identity, and he takes satisfaction in recalling his past sexual achievements. Furthermore, his emotions and imagination are stirred by even the smallest reminders of sexual encounters, such as a strand of hair left by a young couple who engaged in a tryst at his Ludeyville property. Herzog thus exemplifies what Brooks terms as body that desires, fully aware of his gender and sexual nature, and driven by impulses that are both cognitive and sexual.

Herzog’s body can be understood as a body of sexual and sensory experience, as described in Brooks’s theory of narrative dynamics. Within this framework, the body’s desire becomes a critical force in advancing the narrative, and the generation and projection of desire are crucial aspects. This desire manifests firstly as “an erotic longing” [1], which is powerfully exemplified in the relationship between Herzog and Madeleine, where their marriage becomes a focal point for the unfolding of sexual and emotional dynamics. Herzog’s intense desire for Madeleine’s body serves as the starting point of the narrative. Before meeting Madeleine, Herzog led a stable but monotonous life with his then-wife, Daisy, whom he deemed a dull woman. This lack of excitement generated his desire. Subsequently, his desire shifted toward Madeleine. He regards his encounter with Madeleine as “a fresh start in life.” [3]. Upon encountering Madeleine, Herzog’s desire transformed into a longing for her body. Driven by this desire, he won her from the Church, divorced Daisy, purchased the house in Ludeyville to please Madeleine, and eventually married her. Being possessed as the desired body, Madeleine’s body became inscribed with Herzog’s desire, evolving into a symbolic body within the narrative. Her body became a node of meaning, as the plot revolved around the fulfillment or disillusionment brought about by the pursuit of the desired body. Herzog’s sensual and sexual desire for Madeleine’s body propelled the story forward, making her body a central thread in the narrative. Through Herzog’s pursuit, she first became his wife, fulfilling his desires, then the mother of Junie, nurturing Herzog’s offspring. Following their marital breakdown, Madeleine’s body became an object of Herzog’s scorn and curses. Herzog’s possession of Madeleine’s body followed a trajectory of initial success and eventual failure, with the defining moment of this failure marked by Herzog’s premature ejaculation. Herzog claimed that Madeleine ruined his body. No longer possessing her body, his failure to attain the desired body culminated in disillusionment—precisely where the novel begins.

Herzog’s premature ejaculation is naturally a symbol of castration, yet it does not imply that his body ceases to be one of sensual and sexual desire. Freud repeatedly argued for the equivalence between blindness and castration, wherein the male eye is seen as a substitute for the phallus. Despite his sexual frustrations, Herzog’s gaze, as a substitute, becomes even more active, scrutinizing and peering into the world with heightened eroticism. The women in the novel exhibit a pronounced characteristic of to-be-looked-at-ness, existing primarily as visual objects for Herzog’s gaze, which is strongly manifested as a form of sexual perception. The women mentioned in the novel—whether Herzog’s lovers, elderly aunts, mothers, or young daughters—are almost all subjected to Herzog’s male gaze. The depiction of each woman is highly visualized and focuses on her sexual allure. Herzog’s gaze roams across their bodies, indulging in detailed descriptions. In Herzog’s view, these women fall into three categories: age-appropriate women who are the objects of male desire (such as Madeleine and Ramona); older women who were once objects of desire but have now lost their attractiveness and can no longer fulfill that role (such as Aunt Zipporah and Madeleine’s mother, Tennie); or young daughters who are destined to become objects of male desire in the future (such as Junie and Sandor’s daughter). In Herzog’s gaze, women are inextricably allied with and reduced to their bodies; women are equated with their physicality. Thus, Herzog’s active gaze epitomizes what Luce Irigaray describes as phallogocentric gaze (1985), becoming a strong embodiment of his “body that desires”.

One symbolic scene occurs when Herzog drives to Madeleine’s new home and notices her underwear hanging on the clothesline—an object of desire often serves as a metonym for the corresponding body part. Thus, Herzog’s arrival at Madeleine’s yard could be seen as a voyeuristic association with her genitals. Approaching the window, he peered into the kitchen and saw Madeleine inside. The window, a traditional metaphor for vision, signifies an “appropriating gaze directed toward others” from the outside to the inside [1]. Brooks terms this dynamic as one of privacy and its invasion [1]. Herzog’s gaze through the window epitomizes such an invasion. After Herzog’s car accident, when Madeleine arrives at the police office, he observes her body at the very first sight and find her “broader behind”. He immediately associates it with sex again, believing it to be the result of “clutching and rubbing” [3]. Brooks likens the act of gazing to stripping away a woman’s clothing [1]. At this moment, *Herzog’s* gaze embodies voyeurism, invasion, disrobing, and penetration. It is evident that after failing to possess Madeleine’s body, Herzog’s visual faculties, as a substitute for the phallus, became even more active, characterized by an intense voyeurism. Simultaneously, Herzog’s intellectual and cognitive activity also becomes more active after his failure to possess Madeleine’s body. Post-divorce, Herzog develops an obsessive rumination, reflecting an amplified cognitive desire to seek truth. In Western philosophical tradition,

truth is often depicted as “female and naked” [1]. The act of stripping away what conceals truth parallels the visual stripping of the object of desire. Freud’s theories “persuasively links vision, desire, and the epistemophilic urge [1]. Herzog embodies the Western literary tradition’s interconnected impulses of possession (sexual desire), cognition (epistemophilia), and gazing (visual desire). The thwarted sexual desire of Herzog due to his premature ejaculation finds compensation in his intensified visual and cognitive desires. Despite experiencing sexual setbacks, his intertwined yearnings for love, power, and knowledge [1] continue to persist. Although Madeleine ceases to be the object of Herzog’s bodily desire, his desires redirect to another body—Ramona. In yet another cycle of desire and fulfillment, Ramona becomes inscribed with Herzog’s desires, evolving into a symbolic, narrative body. Thus, Herzog’s body and desires continue to propel the development of the narrative.

2. Madeleine: The Medusa-like Object of Desire

“The signing of the body is an allegory of the body become a subject for literary narrative — a body entered into writing.” [1]. Brooks emphasize the semiotization of the body. From the perspective of corporeal narratology, narration is the process of symbolizing the body. It is through the assignment of meaning to the body in fictional narratives that it becomes a literary body, rather than merely a material, fleshly existence. This process underscores how the body, once marked, transcends its physical existence and takes on multiple layers of meaning within the textual world. In the case of *Herzog*, Madeleine, initially the object of Herzog’s desire due to her beauty, becomes a narrated object of text and literary image after being marked. How, then, is Madeleine represented in writing? From Herzog’s perspective, Madeleine is portrayed as an enchantress with dual qualities.

On one hand, Herzog acknowledges her as having “great charm, and beauty of person also, and a brilliant mind.” [3]. Herzog is deeply enchanted by her. At the novel’s outset, Herzog’s recollections of Madeleine’s body are vividly detailed, showcasing her sexual allure: “She wore black stockings, high heels, a lavender dress with Indian brocade from Central America. She had on her opal earrings, her bracelets, and she was perfumed; her hair was combed with a new, clean part and her large eyelids shone with a bluish cosmetic.” [3]. Her clothing, jewelry, fragrance, makeup, and hairstyle are all meticulously described to function as subtle signals of female sexual attraction. The detailed descriptions not only vividly bring to life a tangible image of beauty but also underscore a stylistic approach to portrayal that employs metonymy, where each element stands as a representative or symbol of a broader aspect of her character and appeal. Furthermore, later in the text, Herzog elaborates extensively on each of Madeleine’s facial features, individually describing their characteristics. The repeated depiction of Madeleine’s appearance piles up the details of her body and attire, turning her accessories into objects of fascination. It can be said that the portrayal of Madeleine in the novel is fragmented and dissociated, becoming a composite of various symbols of beauty and sexuality. Madeleine’s body, as perceived through Herzog’s visual field, is always recognized in a partial, metonymical, and fetishistical manner. According to Brooks, it is because that the object of desire “will always in some sense be an imaginary object” [1]. Madeleine is exactly such an imagined object, a projection of Herzog’s desire. Being a superposition of romanticized, imagined, and objectified fragmented symbols, she can never be faithfully represented or fully understood as a complete whole. From Herzog’s soliloquy, readers can only glimpse numerous physical details of Madeleine, making it difficult to imagine how Madeleine exists as a subject with agency. Therefore, it can be said that from Herzog’s perspective, the perception of Madeleine is biased and incomplete. He never presents her full personality. His visual recognition of her is constructed through his fantasies, imbued with signs and codes of eros and desire.

On the other hand, Herzog repeatedly describes Madeleine as malicious, insane, vicious, and cunning, a “plotting bitch” [3]. He acknowledges her charm, but always curses her fiercely while offering compliments. She is sweet, but “sweet as cheap candy, and just as reminiscent of poison as chemical sweet acids.” [3]. He also talks about the harm she caused him frequently, how she made him stiff and paralyzed. He blames all his misfortunes on Madeleine. The duality of Madeleine’s image in Herzog’s eyes is most clearly reflected in his statement that “Madeleine, whose face looks either beautiful or haggy.” [3]. In Herzog’s view, at the age of twelve, Madeleine exhibited a certain arrogance fueled by self-assured charm, knowing that once she matured, she would possess the ability to hurt others. From the various descriptions above, it is evident that the desire for her charm and the fear of her charm always appear together. Madeleine, from Herzog’s perspective, is both beautiful and dangerous—two sides of the same coin—a typical Medusa-like enchantress. The beautiful yet dangerous Medusa entices with an irresistible allure, yet excessive obsession with her is highly likely to lead to self-destruction, becoming a victim turned to stone in her gaze [9]. Herzog, unable to resist Madeleine’s deadly charm, ends up deceived, tricked, and manipulated. His overwhelming obsession with her leads to his utter defeat, making him even more aware of her terrifying allure.

In his sexual relationship with Madeleine, premature ejaculation causes Herzog to lose face. In a rather phallogocentric narrative context, “A man minus the possibility of (re)presenting oneself as a man = a normal woman.” [5]. Herzog is deeply trapped in male anxiety, and can only vaguely claim that it was Madeleine who brought him down. Furthermore, besides the frustrations in their sexual life, Madeleine also effectively strips Herzog of his privileged role as the subject of discourse. When he discusses Madeleine with familiar friends and family, their evaluations (such as those from Aunt Zelda, the Himmelstein family, Geraldine Portnoy, etc.) are largely at odds with his own. His negative assessments and descriptions of Madeleine are hard to accept and believe, and the experiences he claims to have endured at her hands are not fully embraced by others. This in itself indicates a blow to Herzog’s authority as a subject of discourse. There is a long-standing tradition in the Western world of viewing language as male and images as female [9]. Herzog’s male authority of speech is challenged by Madeleine’s feminine allure, which triggers male language’s fear of the female image. In the academic field, he is also challenged by Madeleine. In the previous tradition, women have been driven away violently from the field of writing [4]. The writer’s pen was once regarded as another symbol of the phallus, but now Madeleine takes up the pen of academic writing, threatening to replace Herzog in the academic world and

seize the power of discourse, staying in the academic realm to “gossip” about him. [3]. In Herzog’s imagination, once Madeleine gains the right to speak, she would tell his right and wrongs in the academic world. It clearly illustrates his fear of becoming the object of speech — Because shifting from being the speaker to being the object of speech signifies a loss of power. Herzog himself, however, finds himself impotent in academic production, as both his physical and symbolic phallus falter. Herzog’s once-proud sexual life, academic ability, and his male privilege of speech all crumble before Madeleine, and he becomes engulfed in castration anxiety. The panic causes Herzog to narrate a demonized version of Madeleine, but this demonization is also an imagination of her body based on his castration fear.

In Saul Bellow’s *Herzog*, the narrative is predominantly focalized through Herzog’s perspective, ensuring that the reader is continuously immersed in his subjective experience and inner soliloquy. The novel’s structure positions Herzog as the central voice, allowing his constant, often verbose, ruminations about the past and present to define his character as one of spiritual depth and intellectual engagement. However, the women in *Herzog*—despite both Ramona and Madeleine possessing academic credentials—are largely depicted through Herzog’s desire-driven perception. This portrayal casts them as “non-cultural” figures, reduced to mere objects of his sexual and emotional longing. The novel’s narrative focus relegates Madeleine’s own voice and agency, limiting her to the status of a passive object. Herzog simultaneously admires her physical beauty in a crude and objectifying manner while projecting his own fantasies and interpretations onto her. He uses the power of language to shape Madeleine as a Medusa-like figure—seductively dangerous, yet cunning and manipulative. To fall prey to her allure, Herzog implies, is to risk losing one’s autonomy, particularly in the realm of discourse. As Herzog’s desires “possess” her, Madeleine is transformed into an object within the text, her body becoming imbued with the meanings projected by the desiring subject. Herzog’s descriptions of her physical allure are deeply rooted in his own sexual fascination, while his conceptualization of her as a perilous figure emerges from his anxieties. Consequently, Madeleine exists as a complex amalgamation of various representations and fantasies. Brooks’s theory exposes the falsity and constructed nature of this objectified body. He argues that the body of the objects of desire “is a social and phantasmatic construction of the men who look at her”, [1] meaning that such body writing are embodiments of the power relations between the gazer and the gazed, the represented and the representer. Consequently, under such representations of the body, Madeleine is always shrouded in a fog of discourse power, making it difficult to see her true self through these writings. Behind the descriptions, there is no “reality” of the object of desire. In this sense, Madeleine’s identity and significance are primarily shaped by the desires and projections of the men who encounter her, rather than any intrinsic essence she might possess.

3. Conclusion

In Saul Bellow’s novel *Herzog*, the extensive use of bodily imagery not only constructs a phallogentric narrative framework but also propels the story’s progression. The depiction of Herzog’s body and desires plays a pivotal role in advancing the plot, with Madeline emerging as the focal point of his desires within the narrative. Her physicality is symbolized through the dual imagery of the beautiful yet dangerous Medusa, which serves to reflect both Herzog’s longing and his profound anxiety over castration. This symbolism encapsulates his deep-rooted fear and tension concerning his challenged male authority. As a result, the constant presence of bodily representations in the novel reflects *Herzog*’s inner conflict, particularly his experience of phallogentric desire and the anxiety of emasculation. Ultimately, the narrative can be interpreted as a self-indulgent monologue of a man, overwhelmed by the fears associated with his loss of male authority and his struggle for control within the framework of phallogentrism.

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