

# Analyses Of “Zetland: By A Character Witness,” A Short Story Of Saul Bellow In The Perspective Of New Criticism

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*Abstract: This paper focuses on the objectives of New Criticism, insisting on the close study of a literary work without being distracted by enquiries into the origin of works in personal experiences. Any literary theory is challenged by the next generation theories with an improvement either agreeing or disagreeing the points of view. I.A. Richard, a major exponent of New Criticism advocated close reading of the text and periodical critical practice, which was criticized by Rene Wellek, as this practice is the weakness of New Criticism since they lack concern for the society. Russian Formalism focused on literary devices whereas the New Critics insisted close reading of the text like the setting, mood, character, psychological analyses, point of view and tone. This article is the application of New Criticism on Saul Bellow's “Zetland: By a Character Witness.” The time when the story took place, economic depression was in zenith in 1929 insisting the responsibility of the individual to the social, the character analyses focuses on the influence of worldly aspiration of the character ended up only in joining military which proves the political conciliation, the psychological aspects prove the cultural impact and the point of view and tone implicates the social responsibilities. Hence this analyses confirms that New Criticism warrants not only the close study of the work of art like time, mood, character and psychological analyses, points of view and Tone and but also the focus on the impact and influence of social and cultural realities.*

**Keywords:** CS- Collected Stories of Saul Bellow.

## I. INTRODUCTION

**NEW CRITICISM:** I.A. Richards (1893-1979), a major exponent of New criticism exposed the dependence of literary criticism on props such as the biographical details of the author, or the historical background to the literary work, all of which lay outside the text. The American New Critics who reacted to historical criticism were John Crowe Ransom (1888- 1974), Allen Tate (1899-1979), Cleanth Brooks (1906-1994), Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989), Kenneth Burke (1939-2015), R. P. Blackmur (1904-1965), William Empson (1906-1984), I. A. Richards, while advocating close reading of the text, attacked extrinsic criticism, and focused on the close reading of the text. All these critics shared many attitudes, but followed different paths. What brings them together was their opposition to the system of academic and literary scholarship of their time. The New Critics maintained their interpretations entirely based on the context of the language of the text, thus

giving rise to the critical practice called ‘intrinsic criticism’ or criticism within the confines of the text as opposed to extrinsic criticism. Wimsatt (1907-1975) and Beardsley (1915-1985) in their two essays ‘The Intentional Fallacy’ and ‘The Affective Fallacy’ emphatically made a theoretical statement of the New Criticism that Objective Criticism focused on the meaning of the work itself without being distracted by enquiries into the origin of works in personal experiences. However, New Criticism was challenged by Rene Wellek (1903-1995) who pointed out its serious weaknesses. He observed that the esoteric aestheticism of New Critics showed no concern with the social function of literature, and thus they could be termed formalists for this lack of social concern. The New Critics focused on the text and argued that literary language is connotative, and thereafter it led to a search for deep and secondary meaning. Thus, New Criticism encouraged the reader to attempt a close study of texts without, however, insisting on the separation of form and content. Instead,

literary texts were seen as works unified by their *devices, motifs, themes, and patterns*. Furthermore, their emphasis on the text's *internal unity* made them concentrate on individual texts, whereas the Russian Formalists were more interested in general literary devices.

In addition, both schools developed in different times and places and made different assumptions about literature. Russian Formalism originated in Russia before the Bolshevik revolution while New Criticism flourished in USA by the late 1930s, and thereafter extended to England,

New Criticism focused on close reading of a text and analysed a literary work using themes, setting, plot, and structure. According to the New Critics, a book should not be judged by its cover and the author's background but evaluated based only on the text itself. Since it deals with the text a close reading is to be done, which requires taking apart a text and looking at its individual elements, such as theme, setting, plot, and structure.

## II. STORY AT A GLANCE: 'ZETLAND: BY A CHARACTER WITNESS' (1974)

"Zetland: By a Character Witness" is narrated anonymously by a childhood friend of the title character. The story describes Zetland's Russian Jewish family and his precocious reading and intelligence and his growing to manhood in Chicago in the late 1920s. A few other facts of Zetland's life manage to penetrate the narrator's inner feelings for the protagonist. Zetland's marriage to a young woman named Lottie brought in its wake a fellowship to Columbia University and relocation to New York's West Side. There Lottie supported him while Zetland studied symbolic logic. During a recurrence of some childhood illnesses Zetland read 'Moby Dick,' which inspired him to abandon the study of philosophy for the richer emotions of art and poetry. At last, Zetland moves to Greenwich Village in 1940, where they were identified with avant-garde literature and radical politics until the advent of World War II. At this point Zetland sought to enter military service.

### ANALYSES OF THE STORY: SETTING AND MOOD

Zetland: By a Character Witness is Saul Bellow's reminiscence of his student friend with whom he studies at the age of fourteen in Chicago. The time was during the great economic depression of 1929, when people especially learned men like Zetland struggled hard to survive and to set their foot firm in the society.

In one-hundred percent industrial contemporary Chicago, where shadows of loveliness were lacking, a flat wheel of land meeting a flat wheel of fresh water, intelligent boys like Zet, though fond of the world, too, were not long detained by surface phenomena. (CS 244)

The beginning of the story gives the readers a glimpse of El, where Zetland's apartment was situated.

Sitting in the El, Max Zetland wet his finger on his tongue to turn the pages of the thick newspaper. The tracks looked down on small brick houses. The El ran like the bridge of the elect over the damnation of the slums. In those little

bungalows Poles, Swedes, micks, spics, Greeks, and niggers lived out their foolish dramas of drunkenness, gambling, rape, bastardy, syphilis, and roaring death. Max Zetland didn't even have to look; he could read about it in the Trib. (243)

The mood of the story is dark and uneasy, communicated by a wide variety of detailed description of various fields of philosophers and writers of the period. The narration dwells on two personalities, the old Max Zetland and later on his son, Zetland, and his mistress, Lottie. The story narrates their struggle by crossing all barriers both physical and financial, to establish themselves as intellectuals in a society which glorifies learned men and their work.

### CHARACTER AND PSYCHOLOGY

Saul Bellow's story "Zetland: By a Character Witness" portrays the life and times of three major characters exclusively. The first being Zetland the protagonist of the story, next his father Max Zetland and third Lottie the wife of Zetland. Apart from these three recognizable characters there are also other subsidiary characters like Zetland sister who is feeble-minded. The main focus is given on the character of Zetland by Saul Bellow.

### ZETLAND'S CHARACTER

At the beginning of the story, the writer gives an elaborate description about Max Zetland, the father of the protagonist-Zetland, to show the readers the familial lineage over his son who had inherited from his father Zetland's acquisition of the Russian language, dialect, customs and antique ways are influences he had absorbed from his father. Whereas, the development of the main character, Zetland, shows the struggles of the protagonist to survive in the world soon after the economic depression. Unemployment and shelter were serious problems of the period. The intellectual urge of Zetland to develop logical positivism as his life's goal is depicted by the writer through the character of Zetland. Zetland apart from logical positivism, wanted to master semiotics, symbolic logic and mathematical logic. Later, Zet gets a fellowship in Philosophy at Columbia. When Lottie handed over a copy of 'Moby Dick' during his return of his 'invalid childhood' days at South Side in New York, there was a total change in Zet's attitude. A sudden change took place. His pursuit of Logical Positivism ended though, he was sick he took a decisive stand. Zetland's switch over to literature after many years of hard work he 'had been working in philosophy with the resemblance theory of universals' (253). Zet's experience after reading 'Moby Dick' prompts him to say

"Oh Lottie, it's a miracle, that book. It takes you out of this human world,"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it takes you out of the universe of mental projections or insulating fictions of ordinary social practice or psychological habit. It gives you elemental liberty. What really frees you from these insulating social and psychological fictions is the other fiction, of art. There really is no human life without this poetry.

Ah, Lottie, I've been starving on symbolic logic." (254)

Zetland then proclaims that 'these insulating social and psychological fiction is the other fiction, of art' (254).

Character of Lottie: The second main character that takes a dominant place in the story is that of Lottie, a Macedonian girl, Zet's girlfriend and later his wife. Lottie was 'a witty young woman and she loved an amusing man' (247). Zet and Lottie met at his coal bin and he stayed in her room. Later they found an English basement where they had cats, dogs, squirrel and a pet crow. They got married at Michigan City after a long drive. After that Zet got a fellowship at Columbia and both of them lived happily rather 'Zet and Lottie were not simply married by delightfully married (248) though Lottie had earlier affair with an educational psychologist named Hiram and before that with someone else. 'But now she was a wife and overflowed with Wifely love" (248). Lottie's love towards Zet has no bounds. They spent a good time during their stay in Chicago and later when they move to New York. This sickness and health setback had seemed to have given a change in Zet's attitude towards his life's achievement in logical positivism and symbolic logic. He changes his field from philosophy to other fiction or art. The courage and love of Lottie towards Zet is seen when she persuades him to give up the Columbia fellowship and to do things which he really likes. He is proud of her husband as a 'real brain' (254) Lottie is ready to sacrifice her fancy for the welfare of her husband Zet in giving up philosophy and taking a new course of life. She is ready to face challenges and she consoles Zet not to worry about forgiving Columbia fellowship for a fulfilling life.

#### ZETLAND'S FATHER, OLD MR. ZETLAND

The third character of importance in the story is the role of Max Zetland, the father of Zetland, who has a grudge and Lottie tells this to Zet at the end of the story when Zet tells her that if 'Pa' come to know that he had dropped out of Columbia he would be upset. Then Lottie remarks: "So what? I know you love him, but he's such a grudger, you can't please him anyway. Well, screw him too" (CS 254). Old Zetland was an immigrant. He was married thrice. Through his second marriage he had a feebleminded daughter. He started his career in the poultry market dealing with eggs on Fulton street. Then he rose to be an assistant buyer in a big department store. He gave his family 'everything' (242). His character and activities 'had Russian military stoutness of his bearing' (243). He was closely associated with the Jewish community there.

Father Zetland read Russian and Yiddish poetry. He preferred the company of Musical people and artists, bohemian garment workers, Tolstoyans, followers of Emma Goldman and of Isadora Duncan, revolutionists who wore pince-nez, Russian blouses, Lenin or Trotsky beards. He attended lectures, debates, concerts, and readings; the utopians amused him; he respected brains and was sold on high culture. It was obtainable in Chicago, in those days. (244)

Old Zetland wanted his son to become one of the seminal minds of the country. That was the time when philosophy had a firm grounding amongst the learned men. He was delighted when he came to know that his son had got a scholarship at Columbia and would become a professor of philosophy and logical positivism. Zet's marriage with Lottie was not much

preferred one for old Zetland. He is extremely moved when Zet moves to New York. He has a feeling as if 'Temporarily he was losing his son.' (249). As a goodbye remark to his son he says "Do right. Study. Make something of yourself. If you get in trouble, wire for money" (249).

This shows the strong bondage old Zet had towards his son which is a typical feature of Saul Bellow's short fiction as we have seen it in "The Old System" and in "A Silver Dish".

#### THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECT

Saul Bellow creates the character of the protagonist Zetland and the old Max Zetland as psychologically round characters. The characterization of Zet's wife Lottie too falls under this category. These three characters move along with the story in all narrative developments of the plot and they have equal significance at respective scenes. Their contribution to the storyline is also very firm and meaningful. Saul Bellow through his style and point of view in narration gives the prime focus on the protagonist- Zetland, his rise to an intellectual figure in the society.

#### POINT OF VIEW

As some critics like Steven J. Zipperstein points out this story is narrated by Saul Bellow. The story begins with first person narration; later on it embraces conversations between Zetland, Lottie, Max Zetland, the father. The story concludes again with the first person narration. The beginning of the story: "YES, I KNEW THE GUY. We were boys in Chicago. He was wonderful. At fourteen, when we became friends, he had things already worked out and would willingly tell you how everything had come about" (CS 240). The narrative point of view is in the first person. The story is not merely about the author's childhood friend but rather a character sketch about his childhood friend described vividly. The narration delves the exalted intelligence and energy Zetland had and the energy which he exhibited amidst his serious setbacks in health. The first person point of view controls the readers' attention effectively. The sequence follows a chronological pattern of the protagonist's life. For Zetland his expertise in logical positivism and semantics has been his life's fulfillment. The narration aims towards Zetland and how he establishes himself as a self made philosopher working on philosophy and resemblance theory of universals. Zetland had an original approach to the predicate 'resemble.' But his reading of 'Moby Dick' during his few weeks of sickness at New York gave a sudden turn to his pursuit of philosophy. He put an end to it and started concentrating on literature and poetry which prompts him to say: "There really is no human life without this poetry. Ah, Lottie, I've been starving on symbolic logic" (254).

This sudden twist in Zet's attitude at the end of the story is the dramatic irony, where he expects one thing but get another. The narrator, Saul Bellow in this story "Zetland: By a character witness" is a subjective narrator. He recalls the life of his childhood friend, an intellect named Zetland, who was one of the distinguished and precocious boys of his times. The narrator is able to give first handed information about him

with all specific details about Zetland's pursuits and perseverance towards fulfilling his life's goal.

#### TONE

Tone is the writer's attitude towards the story. It is very appreciative and the writer has a high regard for the protagonist and his stubbornness in establishing himself as an 'avant-garde in literature and with radical politics' (254).

#### III. CONCLUSION

This paper aims to bring forth the view that for New Critics, the goal was to separate the literary work from any historical context and to view the work as a world unto itself. The approaches of Formalism and New Criticism lie in stark contrast to several critical approaches that emerged later in the twentieth century, including Marxist criticism, New Historicism, and Cultural Materialism. Unlike Formalism, these later theories and critical schools approach literature with an eye toward the impact and influence of social, political, and historical realities on the text.

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