

## Bellow's New Departure in *A Theft*

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Saul Bellow has been acknowledged as one of the best writers in modern American literature, and this is endorsed by the number of the awards he won, the most of all the living American writers, including the 1976 Nobel Prize for Literature. Yet, the critical response to some of his works has been divided, and it seems especially conspicuous about the works he wrote after he received Nobel Prize.

There seem to be three main reasons for the difference in the evaluation of his works. First his works are not always so easy to be fully understood, with unique artistic elements as well as his extensive knowledge and profound thoughts and ideas reflected in the stories, which allows or rather induces various interpretations from the reader. Secondly the further the writer has advanced in his literary achievement, the more the reader has come to expect from him, bringing about a sort of mismatch between the reader's expectation and what is given to him, and thus causing sometimes some natural disappointment or dissatisfaction on the part of the reader and the critics. Thirdly critical methods and isms, ideological stances, thoughts and ideas about literature or linguistic expression itself and so forth, all these have been greatly diversified nowadays, accordingly putting forth so diversified interpretations and evaluations about a literary work, and causing complicated, sometimes contradictory and interlacing critical situations, because, for example, a piece of fact in expression is considered merit in some critical stance and demerit in another, each having its plausibility and persuasiveness on its own.

*A Theft*, written in 1989, may be one of Bellow's most disputed works. Many different critical responses to this novella, including the highest praise and the most unfavorable criticism, have constituted a somewhat chaotic situation, so to speak, a critical labyrinth. In the case of the novella, too, the difference in the critical stance makes the matter more complicated. For example, the way the writer describes Laura Wong, a very important character in developing the story, may be considered to be a failure, because she can be criticized for being vague in character and too passive. On the other hand, in Jungian thought, such a characteristic is advisable and natural, and

Laura is thought to be the heroine Clara's unconscious or Clara's shadow.

At any rate, the labyrinth is to be explored in order that some of the passages may be clearly discerned and that the way out may be found out, the way out fit for Bellow's new departure, as he said, 'I do see *A Theft* as a departure. I suppose I am asking a reader to feel his way into regions never before visited'.<sup>1</sup> In exploring the bewildering critical labyrinth, much care will have to be taken lest we should go for wool and come home shorn.

## I Ring Symbolizing True Love

The heroine of the story, Clara Velde, is a wealthy matron living in New York. She once formed her own high fashion company, but then she sold it to an international publishing group and now she is one of its executives, a conspicuous figure referred to as "the czarina of fashion writing."

She married and divorced three men, and now she lives in a nice apartment in Park Avenue with her fourth husband, Wilder Velde, three daughters, whose father is Wilder, and Miss Gina Wegmen, au pair girl, daughter of a rich Austrian banker. Clara has never really been satisfied with these four men as her husbands, and she has been on intimate terms for some twenty years with Ithiel Regler, a kind of political fixer working in Washington. She has loved him dearly and wishes she had married him. Although he refused, their relation has been maintained as before.

Meanwhile, one day Gina invited her friends, including her Haitian boy friend Frederic, to a party in the apartment while Clara was out. When Clara came home from her office, she was much surprised to find her cherished ring missing. It was given to her by Ithiel as an engagement ring many years ago. She had valued it as a symbol of their love and kept it in the drawer of the dresser in her bedroom. Mrs. Peralta, a woman hired as a cleaning servant, said she had found Gina and Frederic stretched out on the living room sofa petting, the young man with the silk pillows under his combat boots. Clara supposed that Frederic had stolen the ring. She called Gina and demanded that she recover the ring from him. Gina accepted it, feeling responsible for the matter.

Then Gina left the apartment to live in Harlem, a rather dangerous place for a girl, where Frederic lived. Finally she managed to get the ring back from him and returned it to Clara. The whole story is revealed as Clara tells Ms. Laura Wong, the Chinese-American dress designer who is her confidante.

Critical opinions are divided about the value of this work:

In his review in *Saul Bellow Journal*, Allan Chavkin calls *A Theft* “ a marvelous short work that reveals Bellow’s genius has lost nothing with age.... Bellow is now at the height of his creative power.” I beg to differ with him and with other reviewers who have either lavished praise on *A Theft* or hedged and waffled about the novella’s flaws for fear of desecrating a national monument. *A Theft* left me cold; I could neither believe in the central character, Clara Velde, nor care much about the theft of her beloved ring. We read Bellow because he makes us smile, he makes us feel, and he makes us think. But *A Theft* is neither as funny, as moving, nor as wise as the best of Bellow, and judged against his finest novella, *Seize the Day*, it is a minor work and a major disappointment. *A Theft* is weak fiction because it lacks dramatic tension, relies too much on telling rather than showing, and suffers from bland or unrealized characters and stilted, unbelievable dialogue.<sup>2</sup> (Gordon 314)

Gordon admits only a few positive qualities. One of them is the depiction of Ithiel Regler, who “deserves a place in Bellow’s rogue’s gallery of memorable tough guys, eloquent wheeler-dealers, and vulnerable men of the world.”(Gordon 314) Another is that “there are the barbed one-liners and pungent passages we have come to expect from Bellow.”(Gordon 314) One of the examples he cites is on psychiatry: “If a millipede came into the office, he’d leave with an infinitesimal crutch for each leg.”(42–43)

However, Gordon concludes for several reasons that the work is a failure. First, “the story nevertheless falls flat because there is not enough at stake, insufficient dramatic tension.”(Gordon 315) Compared with Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day*, “sinking even deeper into a sea of troubles,” Clara’s crisis “comes late in the action and is quickly resolved.... Clara’s troubles seem small potatoes.”(Gordon 315)

The crisis in *A Theft* would be more aptly compared with the theft of Dr. Lal’s manuscript in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*. However, even there the description of the return of the manuscript is more complicated and comical than that of the ring, so the final meeting of Sammler and Lal is much more satisfactory and impressive than the brief reunion of Clara and Gina. (Gordon 315)

Bellow’s depiction of Clara’s relation with her confidante Laura Wong also lacks dramatic tension. Though Ms. Wong lets Clara talk at great length in a similar way to Dr. Tamkin drawing out Tommy Wilhelm, too much of the story is told to Laura without being shown to the reader. In contrast to Wilhelm’s dialogues with Tamkin,

which are charged with the tension of the unspoken, no tension is felt in Clara's monologues with Ms. Wong. (Gordon 315)

More seriously, Clara's relationship with Gina Wegman is also unsatisfactory and leaves a large hollow at the center of the story. Gina is supposed to be the alter ego for Clara: both have reckless affairs, Clara with 'dirty French - speaking men.' Why Bellow consistently links sex with theft is one of the enigmas, inviting further study. Gina is reported on at some distance, rarely seen acting, so she is not so realistic and convincing. Gina seems rather mysterious to Clara, but she is quite obscure and vague to the reader. (Gordon 316) Thus, Gordon concludes:

In sum, Bellow has done much better elsewhere. He is not working at the top of his form in *A Theft* because there is not enough at stake : not enough interest and not enough emotion. Perhaps Clara's life is too remote from Bellow's; he becomes clumsy and starts making false moves. This "ring cycle" just doesn't ring true. (Gordon 317)

The ring seems, so to speak, the necessary word to understand the implications of the novella. The story implies that the ring is the symbol of the true love between Clara and Ithiel. Clara has had four husbands and she has not been faithful as a wife to any of them, while she has had an extramarital intimate relation with Ithiel, who has also been unfaithful to her, having frivolous relations with several mistresses. How pure love can exist emotionally and mentally between the two in such an extraordinary situation does not seem to be described well enough to convince the reader of the truthfulness of their love.

Clara's character is explained in detail from her upbringing in the sticks of the middle part of the United States through her school life to her present situation. On the other hand, Ithiel Regler's career and character can not be said to make a trustworthy man who convinces the reader of his true love for Clara. Rather he seems to be a dubious wheeler-dealer engaging in dark, questionable behind-the-scene political activities. Thus, the story lacks the details which would consolidate the reader's conviction of their love and make the symbolism of the ring clear to the reader.

Miss Gina Wegman, the Austrian au pair girl, is depicted as a very important character, because only she understands the true character of Lucy, Clara's eldest daughter, a mutely resistant and troublesome girl. Gina also helps Clara to recover her true identity at the end of the story by managing to get back the the ring despite difficulties and returning it to Clara. However, Gina is also too obscure in many

respects to satisfy the reader because, for example, it is not clear how her desirable character leads her in the first place to a frivolous, intimate relationship and at the same time to her marriage to her Austrian fiancé.

## II Love and Existence

*A Theft* deals as a main story with an extramarital relation between Clara and Ithiel. This theme has been repeatedly taken up in Bellow's previous works, as Gloria L. Cronin notes:

Smaller in scale, more muted in tone, and done in reversed gender, *A Theft* deals with some very old Bellow themes related to the failures of heterosexual love. There is the Hawthornian theft of the human heart; the lure of the intellect; the classic evasions of the male lover; the overweening romantic aspirations of just one partner (this time a female); the social chaos of "Gogmagogsville"; seeming impossibility of higher synthesis; the human comedy of sexual desire; the failure of psychiatry; the decreasing significance of the personal factor; the quest for the essential, unified self; power politics; the loss of human qualities; the issues of boredom, stewardship, and the human contract; the increasing absence of civilized spaces; the proliferation of ethnic others as confusing and lower types of the human; the diminished status of the individual; and the problematic relation of love to being. The clues to Clara and Ithiel's particular failure to form the human pair can also be in this typically Bellovian thematic matrix. (Cronin 319–320)

In a way, the main point of the story is an aftermath or sequel to Bellow's major work, *Herzog*, though with the main characters in reversed gender; in *Herzog* the protagonist is made a cuckold, while in *A Theft* the heroine's love is unrequited.

In *Herzog*, the author shows us the heroine as a complete winner in her adulterous love. Beautiful Madeleine aspires to win the hand of her husband's close friend Gersbach with fame, power and intelligence, and has her own way to gain his love, deserting her husband Herzog, seemingly unpromising scholar, just as she would throw away her old hat. Her attitude and behavior are depicted rather as a new type of wicked woman, a fighter against the conventional morals, from the viewpoint of a deserted poor cuckold. She behaves bravely as she likes to fulfil adulterous love

without feeling guilty at all. Such a way of writing is characteristic of this novel, and constitutes the merit and value of the work in that it has reversed the value of male-dominated society, insinuatingly reflecting advancing feminism in the time of this novel, which is written in 1964. In short, in his unique ironical way, Bellow depicts a sensual, adulterous woman as a hero of feminism who defies and challenges the traditional value and moral.

In sharp contrast with Madeleine, brilliant victor of love, Clara is depicted eventually as a miserable failure of love, though she is socially a success as “the czarina of fashion writing” and as attractive, intelligent and adulterous as Madeleine. In *A Theft*, Bellow describes the reality of love in modern society or the fate of the relation between man and woman more fully than in *Herzog*.

Even though they have had seven marriages altogether, four in the case of Clara and three in the case of Ithiel, with additional intimate affairs in both sides, neither Clara nor Ithiel can satisfy their thirst for love. Ithiel as a man prefers an alternative realm of general or collective relation, that is, politics, in order to heal his frustration in being resulting from denying love.

Clara as a woman is more miserable. She must persist in her personal and emotional level of love without any alternative way to satiate her aspiration for love. When Clara recovers the stolen ring through the help of her faithful au pair girl, Miss Wegman, and her beloved daughter, she sheds tears, realizing that the ring is not the symbol of the true love between her and Ithiel, but a mere memento of an illusion whose name is love, just as Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day* sheds tears at the fate of human beings who must lead a hard life and eventually die.

God has created man, and yet He has preposterously made him mortal. e each other, and yet, absurdly He has made their love eventually unrequited. Bellow describes such a rueful reality of human love and existence in familiar comical and humorous style.

Three years after Clara had an intimate relation with Ithiel, she “had actually pressured him into buying an engagement ring ”(16), and she succeeded in it. She would say that “he had dragged me around so long as his girl, his lady, that at last I got this capitulation from him ”(16). She seemed to feel that she captured his love. However, he would not go further. He would not marry her.

Clara felt the ring of green emerald was an ice like diamond. She thought “In it Ithiel’s pledge was frozen. Or else it represented the permanent form of the passion she had had for this man ”(43). However, the fact that she lost it and that the insurance company paid her fifteen thousand dollars implies that her conviction that in it Ithiel’s pledge was frozen was only an illusion. However high material value it had, it did not

have any spiritual meaning at all.

Clara interprets the significance of her love for Ithiel as follows;

You couldn't separate love from being. You could Be, even though you were alone. But in that case, you loved only yourself. If so, everything else was a phantom, and then world politics was a shadow play. Therefore she, Clara, was the only key to politics that Ithiel was likely to find. Otherwise he might as well stop bothering his head about his grotesque game theories, ideology, treaties, and the rest of it. Why bother to line up so many phantoms? (31)

Thus, "she concluded that he was in a dangerous moral state and that it was up to her to rescue him from it"(30)

The stolen ring is recovered in the situation where the relation between Clara and Ithiel becomes cold and the intimate relation between Ithiel and Ms. Wong is suspected. The ring does not seem to be the symbol of the love between Clara and Ithiel, but the cold ice implying the their cold relation. At the end of the story, in spite of getting back the ring, Clara feels deserted by Ithiel, betrayed by her close friend Ms. Wong and parts with Gina Wegman, whom she has valued and trusted.

She found a handkerchief and held it to her face in her ringed hand, striding in an awkward hurry. She might have been treading water in New York harbor – it felt that way, more a sea than a pavement, and for all the effort and the motions she made, she wasn't anywhere, she was still in the same place. (109)

She realizes, "I do seem to have an idea who it is that's at the middle of me. There may not be more than one in a xillion, more's the pity, that do have" (109). What is it at the middle of Clara and in one in a xillion? It might be a lonely self wandering alone on the ice field of modern civilization – human existence like a phantom.

Who is the major thief in *A Theft*? Clara presses Ithiel to buy a ring as a token of his love for her, and succeeds in making him pay 1,200 dollars for an excellent emerald ring. This behavior of hers might be called a kind of theft in a broader sense. When she first thought that the ring had been stolen, it turned out to be her misunderstanding. In reality, she only misplaced it. However, she got the exorbitant sum of 15,000 dollars as compensation for the lost ring from the insurance company, and she would not return the money even after she found it herself a year later. This is no doubt a theft, a

swindle. Thus, Clara herself is conspicuous as the major thief in the work compared with the petty Caribbean thief Frederic. In spite of her strong desire, much effort and various maneuvers, she cannot get Ithiel's love. He is not really interested in personal affairs at all, like love, to which Clara tenaciously clings, but his interest is entirely in collective affairs, or grotesque political power games, in which he seems to feel more reality than in love, which may be a kind of illusion to him.

In *A Theft*, there are no ordinary, successful heterosexual relations with love. It holds true of Clara and Ithiel, whose relations with several persons of the opposite sex are all material, practical and pragmatic. The relation between Gina and Frederic turns out to be frivolous, and also she does not seem to love her fiance, an Austrian banker.

When Clara has recovered the ring at last, ironically it decisively shows up that she has lost love. Thus, the work vividly describes landscapes in the desert of modern civilization, where material value is completely overshadowing the spiritual value.

With her attempt to commit suicide as a turning point, Clara tends to her new life, denying the traditional ways of living among Indiana farmers and Illinois businessmen and morals on the Bible, on which she was brought up: "prayers at breakfast, grace at every meal, psalms learned by heart, the Gospels, chapter and verse"(1). These she abandons as "old-time religion." "She feared hellfire but she did it just the same"(22).

Thus, she plays the role of a free-spirited new type of woman, having had four utility husbands, enjoying extramarital love affairs, succeeding in business as "the czarina of fashion writing." Yet, her character Bellow depicts is quite different from what modern feminism expects her to be, as Gloria L. Cronin says:

Bellow's premises for female development clearly run counter to those of many contemporary women readers and writers who expect to see women at least problematize the myth of heterosexual romance and the human pair as neither essential to, nor as the only point of, the female quest. Bellow seems to believe that faith in the human pair is the most important drive toward human love, bonding, and devotion, because on these characteristics, developed within the emotional economy of this pair, hinge the development and survival of crucial human qualities.(Cronin 324)

On the other hand, her lover Teddy Regler, preoccupied by the collective value of geopolitics, would not accept her love and become a pair as she wishes, denying this as a meaningless personal affair. In a sense, Ithiel has stolen Clara's heart, her true love. Bellow may intend him to be the major thief in the story. Cronin concludes:

For Bellow, the failure of the human pair equates with the loss of an important key to higher consciousness, albeit one his protagonists have never found. Clara's is a triumphant soul in his accounting precisely because she preserves this romantic *ethos* almost whole *despite* her failures and her Bible-belt origins. "Gogmagogsville" has not made her cynical about the type of love she has for Ithiel. Despite suicide attempts, a childhood among Indiana farmers, and "old-time" protestant American religion, not to mention the business world and four utility marriages, she is more whole in this respect than her rather pathetic male counterpart. Teddy Regler, who has recognized these profound qualities in Clara but cannot summon sufficient energy for this romantic expression of the "individual factor" because he is lured by Washington geopolitics and consulting with great men on secret document. His, according to Bellow, is probably the worse theft because it is the theft of a potentially remarkable human heart and of the potentially remarkable "human pair." (Cronin 324–325)

### III Against Gogmagogsville

*A Theft* was published in 1989 in a little unusual way as Peter Hyland explains:

*A Theft* was published under rather odd circumstances. Bellow initially offered it for magazine publication, but the editors required that extensive cuts be made. Bellow was unwilling to agree to this, and instead had the book published in paperback form – a very unusual move for a writer of Bellow's stature. Although it is natural to sympathize with Bellow's insistence that his aesthetic judgment in the case was superior to that of the editors, it is not difficult to see why the editors wanted the cuts. The 'theft' of the novella's title does not actually take place until more than mid-way through, and the plot built around it is not very substantial and not always coherent. Presumably the magazine editors saw it as an over-extended short story, but it reads more like the skeleton of a much larger work. (Hyland 107–108)

However, it is very usual that the critical response to Bellow's work is divided. The novella is 'a mildly pleasant read for admirers of Bellow, but it serves as a reminder of how much more we have come to expect of this writer'.<sup>3</sup> The reader may also have

expected that Bellow challenged the novela with a woman protagonist. (Hyland 108)

Some of Bellow's short stories, like 'What Kind of Day Did You Have?', have women as protagonists, but his refusal to make *A Theft* a short story shows that he believed it to be very significant. He has said of this work, 'I do see *A Theft* as a departure. I suppose I am asking a reader to feel his way into regions never before visited.' (Hyland 108)

Bellow has often been criticized for the difficulty he had in creating women. The women in his early works are shadowy and often kept on the margins. Thea Fenchel in *The Adventures of Augie March* can be seen the prototype of the woman Bellow creates: voluptuous, powerful, sexually liberated, educated, with expensive, sophisticated tastes and making great demands of a man. Ramona, Angela, Renata, Madeleine and Denise share these characteristics. In Bellow's previous novels, however, these figures are always seen from the male perspective, distorted by a man who feels himself victimized. In contrast *A Theft*, Bellow's new departure, made a woman 'the controlling consciousness of the narrative.' (Hyland 108–109)

The ring signifies not only the love that she shares with Ithiel, but love on a more general scale. The effect of the loss on her is vital and profound. The loss also breaks her relationship with Gina, for whom she has a maternal affection. She sees Gina as an innocent girl to be protected from the destroying energies of New York, to which she often refers as 'Gogmagogsville' implying its Satanic effects have made it close to Armageddon. The trust between them is violated by the theft of the ring by Gina's Haitian boyfriend, and the fact of it being stolen from her bedroom, her sanctuary, adds to her sense of having been violated. Thus, the theft implies the terrible predatory forces of Gogmagogsville, which deny love and all things human. So, Gina's effort to retrieve the ring means a sign of hope to Clara. (Hyland 111–112)

At the end of the novella, Clara parts with Gina Wegman, and hurries, "crying, down Madison Avenue, not like a person who belonged there but like one of the homeless, doing grotesque things in public, one of those street people turned loose from an institution" (109). The flood of Clara's tears make the New York sidewalk appear surging up, "more a sea than a pavement." Recalling the closing passage of *Seize the Day*, symbolically her tears dissolve visual appearances, resolving the social, material screens to separate her from the less fortunate. As Tommy Wilhelm weeps for a dead stranger, she is absorbed into the community of human suffering. Thus, she realizes herself not as "the czarina of fashion writing" and highly paid executive, but as one of the "homeless", wandering in solitude. (Pifer 182–183)

With tear shedding from "the main source", blurring her vision, Clara finds that

“she wasn't getting anywhere, she was still in the same place”(109). Like Tommy Wilhelm, Clara seems to realize her essential “homelessness” as if “turned loose” from society. Symbolically she is divested, in Trilling's phrase, of all those “cultural superstructures”

that are instrumental to locate her in the “material and social establishment.” And yet, in stead of being frightened by this sense of displacement, she rejoices to know, as she tells herself, “who it is that's at the middle of me”(109). Realizing and honoring this true self, prior to its alteration by culture and civilization, Clara takes her place among her male precursors in Bellow's previous works, who, “turned loose” from the establishment of modern civilization and confirmed their independent relation with creation.(Pifer 183)

Clara tries to commit suicide twice, and her attempts symbolize her spiritual transformation. The first one means turning loose from her upbringing in the religious backcountry, her way of living on the Bible and entering the establishment of modern civilization. On the contrary, the second one implies her returning home to spirituality, to her realization of true love and to her true self: the very emerald ring is the symbol of all these.

When the missing ring turns up, it is described as follows:

She held the ring to her face, felt actually as if she were inhaling the green essence of this ice.... In it Ithiel's pledge was frozen. Or else it represented the permanent form of the passion she had had for this man. The hot form would have been red, like a node inside the body, in the sexual parts. The cool form was this concentrate of clear green. This was not one of her fancies; it was as real as the green of the ocean, as the mountains in whose innards such gems are mined. She thought these locations (the Atlantic, the Andes) as she thought the inside of her own body. In her summer fashion, she said, “Maybe what it comes to is that I am an infant mine.” She had three small girls to prove it. (43)

The color of the ring is not red. Red ruby might properly represent sexual passion and gaudy modern civilization. The emerald ring reminds the reader of the quiet mountains and the peaceful oceans and creation itself. Clara's retrieving the ring symbolizes her returning to her true self directly connected to creation, stripped off all her fashionable vain ornamentations of modern civilization.

#### IV Ideal Marriage

Met with unfavorable criticism aroused from various sources, Bellow seemed to believe in the value of the work and his new idea in it he strongly wished to share with the reader. This accounts for his publishing it first in paper back form, flatly rejecting the editors' request to make extensive cuts.

Marianne Friedrich confirms Bellow's ardor and self-confidence by another example :

In his defense Bellow has repeatedly expressed his strong belief in the value of his new novella. In a telephone interview with Edwin McDowell Bellow commented: "We'll have to see what, if anything, happens with it, because it's very hard to take the modern world by surprise .... I hope it will open a new path for many fiction writers."(Friedrich 141)

She also cites Marcel Reich-Ranicki's comment of *A Theft* praising the novella's masterful brevity :

Many [authors] get more negligent over the years,... others, however, get wiser and more sovereign. Bellow's diction ... has never been more succinct and terse, never more palpable and concrete. Therefore, free from any occasional talkativeness, his prose requires — more than ever before — the reader's collaboration. (Friedrich 141)

Thus, we had better cooperate with the author by supplementing his unusual brevity with our imagination and exploring his new path by every possible means.

In the story Clara feels a chasm between love and marriage too deep to be compatible. Her marriages, especially fourth and last one, seem tragically illustrate Th. H. Van de Velde's famous and popular work, *Ideal Marriage*. The book, authored by the well-known Dutch gynecologist, suggests that we should make our marriage life ideal with a most favorable sex life. It is an exclusively physical approach to the satisfaction and happiness in marriage life, suggesting 'a modernist annihilation of Eros.' It is rather ironical that Clara clearly shows her dissatisfaction, protest and objection to the modern reductionism which her own name and her marriage with Velde may imply. Even in an ideal or physically perfect marriage, she complains of suffering a great deal from a lack of "gratification of mental life"(5). (Friedrich 143)

Clara's dissatisfaction with her marriage a la Van de Velde makes her convince that love and marriage are irreconcilable. Feeling she can have only one of the two, Clara tells Ithiel: "you continued to love me because we did not marry "(80). Thus, Clara behaves as a modern woman and as a woman "from the Middle Ages "(55) as well. (Friedrich 143)

Seven marriages are experienced by the two; four by Clara and three by Ithiel. Especially Clara's fourth marriage with Wilder Velde is ideal from the viewpoint of *Ideal Marriage* by Van de Velde as Clara herself confesses:

He's the overweening overlord, and for no other reason than sexual performance. It's stud power that makes him so confident. He's not the type to think it out. I have to do that. A sexy woman may delude herself about the gratification of a mental life. But what really settles everything, according to him, is masculine bulk. As close as he comes to spelling it out, his view is that I wasted time on Jaguar nonstarters. Lucky for me I came across a genuine Rolls-Royce. (5)

These marriages testify that Clara has never been fully satisfied however often they are renewed by a new husband and however physically ideal he may be, contrary to what Van de Velde had expected.

*Ideal Marriage* was published in 1926, translated into many languages and widely appreciated as a good book of sex science. It must have contributed a great deal not only to gynecology but also to enlightening the general public on how important the concrete, physical aspects are in marriage life. It was really significant in those days, when it was regarded as vulgar or tabooed to take up sexual matters openly.

At the beginning of *Ideal Marriage*, Van de Velde describes her motive and significance to write the book to the following effect. It is very surprising to know how many couples who started their marriage life with great hope are suffering like hell. If we cannot solve the problem by denying marriage, it is urgently up to us to find out how to maintain everlasting happiness in marriage life. What brings the greatest danger to marriage life is boredom. It is even worse and more unbearable to a wife than her husband's violence and tyrannies. Boredom inevitably changes attraction between husband and wife to sexual dislike, hatred and enmity. In a sense, marriage is a battle field where a fierce fight is fought between sexual impulse and instinctive sexual dislike. In order to reconcile the two and maintain marriage, it is most important always to try to intensify each other's sexual attracting power. In short, conjugal harmony is attained by the completion of the techniques to bring about

mutual sexual satisfaction. (Van de Velde 1–8)

Nowadays Van de Velde's thoughts and ideas are taken for granted, or rather superficially in material-oriented society, ignoring the important, spiritual aspects of marriage life. Thus, what Bellow suggests by his novella, *A Theft*, with Clara Velde as the heroine, may be an antithesis to the approach a la Van de Velde.

## V Conflict between Eros and Its Institutionalization

This novella is written intentionally based on the realms of romance fairy tale and myth. Two different Western mythical traditions are underlying the novella. One is the medieval love myth of Tristan and the troubadours. It is derived from Plato's concept of Eros, and denies institutionalization through marriage. The other is the Hera myth. By contrast, it initiated a Western mythic tradition of marriage, which institutionalized love. Clara goes on from a chaotic, partial concept of the self and love to an integrated concept of "wholeness" through a "process of individuation" as C. G. Jung puts it. In this way the two myths amalgamate in the character of Clara. Thus, three disparate aspects are considered to be composing an integral part of Clara's character. The first is the Tristan/troubadour myth, the second is the Hera myth and the third is C. G. Jung's concept of "individuation" to amalgamate the first and the second. By tracing the process, Bellow's new approach to narration, composed of the two elements of detective story and fairy tale, will be clearly discerned. (Friedrich 141–142)

In the character of Clara, the love/marriage conflict is very conspicuous. In this context, the repeated references to the Middle Ages are considered as referring specifically to Tristan and the troubadours. According to *Love in the Western World* authored by Denis de Rougemont, "the invention of passionate love" in the Tristan myth first brought about the notion of a love/marriage opposition in the twelfth century and has caused the modern dilemma (5). The concept of "amour" or "minne" was conceived in a protest against marriage (376). Therefore, "minnendiep", a theft of "minne", had a double meaning in the Middle Ages. It meant not only a secret lover but also one who deprived "minne" of its ultimately spiritual goal. (Friedrich 144)

In view of the historical context, as described by Rougemont, the character conception of Clara Velde is based on the original medieval opposition between two rival moral systems, the Church and Love. "Clara was barought up on the Bible: prayers at breakfast, grace at every meal, psalms learned by heart, the Gospels, chapter and verse — old-time religion"(1). Then she rejects the church and its moral

and establishes her life on love. Thus, Clara's later marriage/love opposition originates from the historical church/love opposition. The tension and confusion in Clara are caused by these two conflicting value systems which turn her to different directions, the hedonism of "Gogmagogsville" versus her fundamentalist Christian upbringing. (Friedrich 144)

Twenty years earlier, Clara tried to commit suicide by taking sleeping pills after quarreling with Ithiel about his mistress:

The phone rang — it was a mean sound, a thin rattle — and Etta said, "Clara has swallowed a bottle of sleeping pills. She called me and I sent the ambulance. You'd better go to Bellevue; you may be needed. Are you alone there?" He went immediately to the hospital, hurrying through gray corridors, stopping to ask directions until he found himself in the waiting space for relatives and friends, by a narrow horizontal window. He saw bodies on stretchers, no one resembling Clara. A young man in a dog collar presently joined him. He said he was Clara's minister. (33–34)

In this critical moment, her lover Ithiel encounters her minister. This scene eloquently illustrates "her confused inner life" (48) split between her pious biblicism and her passionate love for Ithiel, for which she is "ready to die" (41) and which "stretched over into death" (79).

Clara Velde, a girl brought up in the backcountry has the mystical sacredness and the romantic feelings of earlier centuries. Yet, as an emancipated modern woman of the 1980s, she tries to enjoy freedom modern society gives her, the freedoms of the sexual revolution of our age. (Friedrich 145)

Sadly enough, however, Clara's split self cannot find contentment in the freedom modern civilization offers her. His biography may represent a kind of pathetic modern female paradigm, for she cannot help regarding her own life as a disaster:

"We [Clara and Ithiel] have this total, delicious connection, which is also a disaster. But even to a woman raised on the Bible, which in the city of New York in this day and age is a pretty remote influence, you couldn't call my attachment an evil that rates punishment after death. It's not the sex offenses that will trip you up, because by now nobody can draw the line between natural and unnatural in sex. Anyway, it couldn't be a woman's hysteria that would send her to hell. It would be something else...."

"What else?" Laura asked. But Clara was silent, and Laura wondered whether

it wasn't Teddy Regler who should be asked what Clara considered a mortal sin. He had known Clara so well, over so many years, that perhaps he could explain what she meant. (9)

When Clara meets Ithiel at a quiet corner of the bar to consult him about the stolen ring, she defines the relation "permanent suspense":

But we'll never be man and wife. Oh, you didn't have to say anything. You love me, but the rest is counter - indicated. It's one of those damn paradoxes that have to be waited out. There may even be parallel to it in your field, in politics. We have the power to destroy ourselves, and we keep our ourselves in permanent suspense — waiting. Isn't that wild, too? You could tell me. You're the expert. You're going to write the book of books about it. (79)

Bellow has often described human existence as dangling between life and death since his first novel *Dangling Man*. In the same way he seems to assume the relation between man and woman to be in pathetic permanent suspense — waiting — dangling.

As evident in her past life, Clara's attitude toward the institution of marriage is mocking and anarchic. Both the lovers may be described as stretched between two opposite poles of anarchy and true love. "There was anarchy on both sides"(42). The two lovers keep themselves "waiting "in a state of "permanent suspense"between the "power to destroy"themselves and a potential salvation through true love (79). A moral conflict accounts for the"permanent suspense"of the two. Their love is against morality in the same way as in the Tristan myth. The first retrieval of the ring symbolizes the violation of morality. In order to feel her love alive, she breaks a moral law by both keeping the ring and taking the compensation for the loss from the insurance company. The whole story revolves around the suspension between anarchic lust and love as salvation. (Friedrich 145—146)

Twenty years ago Clara forcefully persuaded Ithiel into buying the valuable emerald ring for her in her desperate attempt to capture his love and attain an ultimate marriage. She materially succeeds but spiritually fails after all. The ring only means a material compensation for her lost love. "Its very permanency would exclude the possibility for it expand into a deeper and true form of love. "(Friedrich 146)

Clara says, "Twice losing and recovering this ring is a sign, a message. It forces me to interpret "(89). The ring parable also forces the reader to interpret: In the same way as the possession of passionate love cannot be secured by the possession of the ring, its

continuation cannot be insured by institutionalization of marriage. Love and marriage are irreconcilable. Essentially Plato's definition of Eros is felt to be contained in this ring parable: Man shall not possess Eros but shall constantly chase it; Eros never comes to be without passing away as the ring is repeatedly found and repeatedly disappears. In short, Eros, felt as lack, induces "theft" which implies a vain desperate attempt to get to the ultimate goal of Eros.<sup>4</sup> (Friedrich 146–147)

In Plato's idea, all loves except the highest take various forms; illusions, shadows, "thefts", which deprive the soul from reaching its final goal. The troubadours regarded marriage as a violation of love. In this sense, Clara's significance lies in longing with her "soul"(33) for the "mystical sacredness"(35) of her union with Ithiel, whose name spells "God with me." In this light the ring may also stand for her unconscious archetypal desire for a higher form of marriage equivalent to Plato's Eros concept of creation on the levels of the Platonic ladder. (Friedrich 147)

The interpretation of Bellow's ring parable as partially representing Plato's concept of Eros eventually leads to a reading based on medieval legends, because the medieval notion of "minne" was derived from Plato's notion of Eros. With regard to the troubadours, "minne" implied the ritual of the "donnoi". The lover received a golden ring from the lady, and in turn he had to swear eternal love to her (Triatan). This ritual bound the lovers to the rules of loyalty, courtesy, love, courage and temperance.<sup>5</sup> (Friedrich 147)

Clara's character established in part as medieval suggests frequent references to the medieval precept as the parable of the ring advances. Bellow's new strategy of narration constantly projects the moral and educational implications against the medieval background. The reader may feel free to attach more layers of meaning and implication about the ring; the ring as a Grail, a symbol of Eros, a symbol of Ithiel's anima as Jung denotes it, a symbol of an archetypal form of marriage, the archetypal symbol of Jung's mandala and a symbol of crystalization process of love. (Friedrich 147–148)

It is very conspicuous that three women in different generations engage in retrieving the ring, Clara, Gina and Lucy. Gina, of course, plays the most important role in recovering it from the robber Frederic. However, most surprisingly to Clara, Lucy, her troublesome eldest daughter, plays a mysterious part according to Gina's scenario as she explains:

The only thing I have to tell you is how the got to your bedside. I went to Lucy's school and gave it to her.... I made sure to arrive before her new sitter came for

her, and I explained to Lucy what had to be done: Here's your mother's ring, it has to be put on her night table, and here's a nice Madeira handkerchief to put it on.... There wasn't much else that needed saying. She knew the ring was lost. Well, it was found now. I folded the handkerchief around the ring and put it in her schoolbag.... I told her to come down to the street again and report to me afterward.... I walked behind them from school — Lucy and the new girl, who doesn't know me. And in about fifteen minutes Lucy came to me at the corner and said she had put it where I told her. (106)

In addition to Tristan legend, Clara's character is based on the Latin, Greek and Prehellenistic Hera mythology. The Roman Juno or the Greek Hera is the goddess of marriage and protects women, marriage rites and a matriarchal culture. This matriarchy consists of three life stages; first, Antheia (flowering youth), second, Nympeumene (seeking a mate) and Teleia (perfect one). In the novella, these life stages are illustrated by Clara's daughter Lucy, the Austrian girl Gina Wegman and Clara herself. Clara, as the "czarina" in the modern world, stands for the modern Hera, presiding over the feminine household and witnessing that the symbol of utopian love is retrieved by the concerted effort of the three women. (Friedrich 149–150)

The Hera connection of Clara is apparent in the story by the repeated reference to Clara's large eyes, to the cow symbolism of the Hera mythos (47), to an "openmouthed goddess" (14) and to its Roman connection. Clara's jealousy, as a modern version of Hera's, suggests her unconscious desire to protect the institution of marriage. Besides, Clara's 'matchmaking pitch' to connect Ithiel and Gina into a human pair calls to mind similar accounts of Hera's ambition to select the right match for Thetis, goddess of the sea. In the striking parallel to the myth, Clara tries to see to it that Gina should meet Ithiel in Washington and fall in love. (Friedrich 150)

Perceiving her intention, Ithiel confirms:

And you want us to meet. And she'll come under my influence. She'll fall in love with me. So you and I will increase our number. She'll enlist with us. And she and I will cherish each other, and you will have the comfort of seeing me in safe hands, and this will be your blessing poured over the two of us. (94–95)

This is the last desperate measure taken by Clara, modern Hera, under the pressure of necessity to maintain the human relationship between Ithiel and herself.

The three female characters in the novella signify stages of womanhood in the Hera

cult. Gina's intimate relation with Frederic before her wedding can be regarded as a modern version of the Prehellenistic prenuptial rite of the ancient Hera cult. This rite required the bride to sleep with a young man the night before her wedding. Clara - Hera gradually accepts Gina's relation with Frederic as a natural prerequisite, in accordance with the ancient Hera cult, for her higher stage, as Clara says to Ithiel, "My hunch is that the Haitian episode is over and she's ready for some higher education"(93). As the story develops, both the Hera myth and the Tristan myth amalgamate in Clara's version of love. In her new vision of love, the two myths are integrated; the spiritual Tristan myth opposing marriage and the Hera myth protecting marriage. Thus, as the two myths amalgamate, there emerges an androgynous vision of love, a sort of ideal stage where the Platonic theme of Eros is supplemented by that of Phila.(Friedrich 150-151)

## VI Jungian Individuation

As the story of the novella develops, Jungian thoughts and ideas are felt permeating deeply, significantly and symbolically through it. In addition to the amalgamation of the myths, Hera and Tristan, Jungian idea of individuation or self-realization process in Clara's mind is rather conspicuous. In a sense, the fusion of the two myths can be considered to be symbolizing Clara's individuation as Marianne Friedrich points out:

The gradual narrative interlacing of the two myths in the story's plot development corresponds closely to Clara's "individuation process" by which the fusion of both myths is generated. According to C. G. Jung, archetypal remnants of ancient myths are retained in the substratum of the "collective unconscious" and become assimilated in the process of individuation (*Man and Symbols* 98). The ring as a symbol of love (parable) is also a symbol of the soul (Plato), which cannot be at peace until it finds its complement (romance, myth). Clara's gradual awakening to true love, represented by the parable of the ring, is simultaneous to her psychic growth. (Friedrich 153)

Jung thinks that the self consists of the conscious and the unconscious. He also calls the conscious the ego and the unconscious the shadow. To be brief, individuation can be said to be the integration of the ego and the shadow.

In the plot development of the novella, Laura Wong, the Chinese-American dress

designer who was Clara's confidante, plays a very significant role, because the story develops in the anamnesis Clara tells Laura. Andrew Gordon takes up the very point in a negative way, criticizing the novella:

There is also an absence of dramatic tension in Clara's relationship with her confidante Laura Wong. Ms. Wong allows Clara to talk at great length, just as Dr. Tamkin draws out Tommy Wilhelm. But far too much of this novel is told to Laura Wong, not shown to the reader. And Wilhelm's dialogues with Tamkin are constantly charged with the tension of the unspoken: how far can be trust this questionable Doctor? In contrast, there's no tension in Clara's monologue with Ms. Wong; Wong is patently a narrative convenience, never characterized as much more than a stereotyped "inscrutable Oriental". When Clara at the end comes to the paranoid conclusion that Wong craves Ithiel for herself, I wondered how Clara could possibly be jealous of a cipher. (Gordon 315)

However, the existence and role of Laura Wong in the novella can and should be taken up differently and positively, and then the work should assume new, significant, profound and symbolical aspects.

Jung divided the unconscious into two strata; the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. The collective unconscious is thought to be made up of many archetypes. Of these archetypes, one that is closely related to an individual mental contents is called the shadow. The conscious has its own value system and it tends to repress under it those which are irreconcilable or threatening of its value system. Those repressed are the shadow. The shadow contains collective elements like social evil and individual elements which vary from person to person according to his or her different value system.

Thus viewed, Laura Wong may be regarded as Clara's unconscious, repressed half or shadow. That is why Clara can expose to Laura without hesitation everything she has in mind, including her secret sexual life with Wilder Velde and other men. It is no wonder that Laura is rather passive, not so specifically characterized and somewhat shadowy, because she is really a shadow, originally as unconscious existence. Yet, she plays a very important role in the narrative development in many ways, including the as a mirror on which all the naked facts and truth of Clara's outer and inner life are clearly reflected. Thus, the dialogue between Clara and Laura should be considered to be a kind of monologue or confession.

One day at the end of the story, after talking with Laura, Clara was walking on

Madison Avenue talking to herself:

She [Laura] wanted me to say that Ithiel and I were finished, so that she could put her own moves on him. Everybody feels free to picture what they like, and I talked Ithiel up until he became too desirable for her to resist, and how long has the little bitch been dreaming of having him for herself! No way! Clara was angry, but she was also laughing about this. (91–92)

This is the first time that the reader is informed that Laura also loves Ithiel, and it is all of a sudden and a bolt from the blue. The reader must be surprised or wonder at first as Andrew Gordon naturally thought that it was Clara's "paranoid conclusion". However, the clue to resolve the question lies in the Jungian idea of individuation in Clara's mind. It is that Clara's conscious, her ego, has loved Ithiel for twenty years and at this stage even Laura Wong, Clara's unconscious or shadow, has come to crave him. Thus, Clara's conscious and unconscious are being integrated into her wholeness, her true self. This coincides with and equivalent to Clara's saying to Ithiel, "I love you with my soul"(33), as Marianne Friedrich concludes:

Clara's anamnesis has finally brought about an integration, a bridging of the split in her personality between the conscious and unconscious, a "completion"(108). Teddy Regler, the "regulator", has played an important regulating part in this process: "She had been centered, oriented..." by him (94). With the second retrieval of the ring Clara has finally regained as ever-present "archetype of wholeness"(Jung) which may easily "get lost" from the purview of consciousness (108). Clara, whose name in Latin indicates a "clearness of mind", concludes the story thinking: "I do seem to have an idea who it is that's at the middle of me" (109). (Friedrich 153)

Clara's last words truly signify the completion of Jungian individuation in Clara's personality.

While Jung was treating his psychopathic patients, he began to notice that their dreams and fantasies were very analogous to myths and old legends. This led to his earnest study in myths in all ages and all places. He was very much interested in Orient, especially China and India. This accounts for the significance of mandala in Jungian psychology as the figure symbolizing strenuous efforts of individuation, self-realization or integration of self. In this light it is meaningful that Laura Wong,

Clara's apparent confidante and her unconscious shadow, is an Oriental, a Chinese-American. She is not a "stereotyped Oriental" as Andrew Gordon describes her.

Toward the end of the story, in accordance with Clara's self-integrating process, significant figures appear: "She passed through the four-quartered door into the lobby..." (99), and "she had sped into a complex intersection, a cloverleaf without a single sign" (103). Such figures as "the four-quartered door" and "a complex intersection, a cloverleaf" suggest mandala, symbolizing Clara's mental situation, as Marianne Friedrich confirms from different angles:

A Jungian reading is also supported by the use of metaphors. Towards the end of the story, as the narrative flow accelerates, the narrator suddenly interrupts the recording of Clara's train of thoughts and comments: "Here Clara stopped herself. Without warning she had sped into a complex intersection, a cloverleaf without a single sign...in a silence of many levels..." (103). The metaphor of the spiraling movement of traffic through a multi-level cloverleaf intersection pulls together several concepts which constitute Jung's theory of "individuation": the archetypal mandala symbol in combination with the symbol of quaternarity (wholeness), the notion of psychic life as an energy in constant motion towards completion, and the "meandering pattern" generated by the unconscious. (Friedrich 153-154)

According to Jung, the opposite sex image appearing in the dream, a female image in a man and a male image in a woman, has a very significant psychological meaning to him or her. Jung named this opposite sex image anima or animus; aniamia in a man and animus in a woman.

When a person adapts to the outer situation, he or she assumes their outer character. It is called persona in Jungian psychology. On the other hand, in adapting to the inner situation, their inner character is called anima or animus. In the story of the novella, Laura Wong is Clara's shadow, and Ithiel Regler is Clara's animus.

As the story develops, Clara's ego and her shadow are integrated and so are her persona and her animus, like mandala symbolized by the cloverleaf, into Clara's self, her true identity, in the ultimate goal of her individuation, self-realization, recognizing herself in a state of permanent suspense between life and death, and between anarchy and ideal love. The retrieved ring seems to symbolize Clara's regained self, her true identity.

## Notes

- 1 In a letter to Peter Hyland, 25 Oct. 1989, which is quoted at p.108 of Hyland, Peter. *Saul Bellow*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992.
- 2 This article first appeared in *Bellow Journal* 9.1, 1990.
- 3 Robert Towers, *New York Review of Books*, 7 April 1989, p. 50.
- 4 See Cambell, Joseph, *The Power of Myth*. Plato's idea of Eros is specifically explained further.
- 5 The legend of Tristan is further described in *Love in the Western World* by Denis de Rougemont.

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