CHAPTER FIVE

EXISTENTIAL SUFFERERS

To be human is to make decisions and to act in a world full of misery and heartbreak. Maturity comes about only as a result of experience, and experience always involves suffering. . . . [Allan Chavkin, "The Problem of Suffering in American Fiction", *Comparative Literature Studies*, xxi, (Summer 1984), 162].

The characters of Bellow, Malamud, and Roth are the suffering and struggling individuals. They pass through anxieties and tension - - *Angst* - - and experience stresses and strains - - *Sturm-und-Drang* and confront several hardships. Their life gets reduced to one of endless suffering. They experience continual struggle against forces of which in the case of some they are ignorant of their cause and effect factors, and in the case of others they are helplessly tossed about. They suffer from fear psychosis as to their present and their future.

The environment, over which they have absolutely no control, controls them. As such to better appreciate the suffering selves in the *Oeuvres* of Bellow, Malamud, and Roth it is imperative to have knowledge of what existentialism stands for, and what is meant by naturalism.

To begin with existentialism is a philosophy and a cultural impulse, with roots in Biblical thought and ancient Socratic concept. Existentialism embraces a variety of styles and convictions. However, its one constant characteristic, as indicated by the origin of the word, is concern for human existence, especially for the affirmation of
freedom and the refusal to subordinate personal awareness to abstract concepts or dehumanizing social structures. It represents rebellion against established ideas and institutions that inhibit personal freedom and negate responsibility. The equivalent term for existentialism is found in German *Existenzialismus*, and in French *L'existentialisme*.

Soren Kierkegaard, a nineteenth century Danish philosopher and theologian, was the founder of modern existentialism. It is true that he had a host of forerunners and that the entire romantic movement of his century shared in the protest against the dominant rationalism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

It was Kierkegaard who established the concepts and vocabulary that influenced subsequent existentialists. He criticized reigning philosophies for their abstract speculations and their pretensions to answer grand questions without even asking the immediate questions of self-understanding.

Truth is subjectivity is the argument of Kierkegaard. He means that truth is meaningful only as it applies to a personal subject. In his understanding of existence, Kierkegaard emphasized the dizziness of freedom as man decides his destiny and the anxiety of the contingent being who can find no meaning in the universe except as he makes a Leap of Faith. It is interesting to record that the Leap of Faith is the solid basis of Jewish affirmation.

At this juncture it is necessary to examine the distinguishing properties of the concept of existentialism. The theist existentialist headed by Soren Kierkegaard and the atheist existentialists headed by Jean-Paul Sartre are of the view that mans first
existentialist condition is his singleness and aloneness of life. Man is alone in the Universe. He has the will to choose. He chooses and regrets the choices made.

Man suffers from Angst - anxieties and tensions. He dreads death. But he appreciates the fact that death is inevitable. He is unable to find answers to the mysteries, doubts, irresolvable, unanswerable, indeterminacies, and uncertainties. He is naturally filled with nausea.

In sheer struggle he finds the meaning and substance of existence. He realizes that he cannot jump any situation. He becomes aware of the fact that suicide is no answer to the problems, plights and predicaments faced by humanity. And the atheist existentialists hold on to the view that life begins in void and ends in void. This idea is dramatically projected by Samuel Becket who persuasively opens his archetypal play of the Theatre of the Absurd, Waiting for Godot, with the loaded term, Nothing, and ends the play with same loaded term, Nothing, to demonstrate the validity of Jean-Paul Sartre's thesis in his classic work, Being and Nothingness. Sartre presents his argument thus [Being and Nothingness, 1966, pp. 57-58]:

The Being by which Nothingness arrives in the world must nihilate Nothingness in its Being, and even so it still runs the risk of still establishing Nothingness as a transcendent in the very heart of immanence unless it nihilates Nothingness in its being in connection with its own being. The Being by which Nothingness arrives in the world is a being such that in its Being, the Nothingness of its Being is in question. The Being by which Nothingness comes to the world must be its own Nothingness [Italics as in the Original]. . .
If the atheist existentialists maintain that existence originates and culminates in *Nothingness* and that life is marked by negativities and negations, the theist existentialists believe that existence begins in *Essence* and finally merges with that *Essence*. They find, therefore, meaning, substance, significance, relevance, and consequence in living by a leap of faith, and valuing inter-subjectivity, and practising, in letter and spirit, the Christian concept of love.

Again, existentialism is concerned with human existence in its concrete reality. Existentialism as a literary movement and philosophy places the entire emphasis on the existence of the individual, an existence that postulates man as free from any natural or human standard in terms of which he must act.

The existentialist creates his world of experience through a choice of alternatives, a choice, which makes him free from all other men, but a choice, which enslaves him to his own doubts, and uncertainties, and to the consequences of his own choices. He has a consciousness, which considers what his choice has done to others.

And the crisis of modern man is unique in its intensity through which one comes into contact with reality. Crisis is the way of life for the existentialists. And crisis comes with each experience, for there is always that moment when the decision either to make a choice or not to make a choice brings agony, *Angst*, and despair.

For Kierkegaard to think in existence is to recognize that one is faced with personal choices. One finds oneself constantly in an existential situation. For this reason, one’s thinking ought to deal with the problems of alternate choices. Subjectivity is what makes up each person’s unique existence.
In fine, the philosophy of existentialism is concerned with human existence. Webster’s definition of existentialism is worth recoding in this context [*Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1983, p. 435]:

[Existentialism is] chiefly a twentieth century philosophic movement embracing diverse doctrines but centring an analysis of individual existence in an unfathomable universe and the plight of the individual who may assume ultimate responsibility for his acts of free will without any certain knowledge of what is right or wrong or good or bad. . . .

On the literary side, Existentialism as a philosophic movement was considered to be the principal expression by a group of writers who wrote during and after the last Global War, as Celine, Malrux, and Camus in France, Moraria, Rensi, and Vittorini in Italy, Kafka, Jaspers, Heidegger and Jung in Germany, Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck in America.

Apart from these writers, many religious thinkers like Paul Tillich, Soren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, Rudolff Buttmann, Helmut Thielicke, Stephen Neil, and Martin Buber acknowledged the impact of existentialism and convinced themselves thus [*The Encyclopaedia Americana*, x, p. 763]:

. . . that neither authority nor rational argument can take the place of commitment or ultimate concern [Paul Tillich’s phrase] as a condition for religious understanding. . . .

These existential philosophers insist that one must understand one’s self. In this regard Paul Roubiczek offers a pertinent remark, which is worth quoting here [*Existentialism For and Against*, 1964, p. 6]:
I/o

we may believe that everything is meaningless - - nevertheless the
quest for meaning remains an essential part of our apparently
meaningless life. . .

In this connection, Kierkegaard insists that one should have knowledge of one's
self by directing one's mind inward and by analyzing the situations in which one exists.
Again, Gabriel Marcel discusses the relationship between the external and internal life
thus [Homo Viator, 1962, P. 78]:

. . . the more one strives to understand the meaning of existence, the more
surely one is led to the conclusion that the outward is also the inward,
or rather to the realization that this distinction has no meaning where the
actual growth of a being is involved. . .

It is of interest to read this statement of Gabriel Marcel in conjunction with that
of Stephen Neil, which runs thus [Christian Faith and Other Faiths, 1966, p. 786]:

The man who has chosen authentic existence is related to his own self in
a new way. . . .

According to Heidegger man is confronted with two possibilities of existence,
which are characterized as authentic and unauthentic. The man who lives an unauthentic
existence does not make any deliberate decision for his life, and he goes on living with
the crowd in an oblivious state of himself.

Most of the Christian existentialists condemn this kind of unauthentic existence.
Stephen Neil makes a pointed observation, which is worth recording here [Christian
Faith and Other Faiths, 1966, p. 184]:
The reality of existence is to be found only in choice, in decision, in the deliberate acceptance of the authentic and rejection of the unauthentic existence.

According to Kierkegaard, eternal happiness is not a static conception. It is not a goal attained once and for all. Moreover, the human being is endowed with freedom. So the human being is responsible for his or her actions whether they are good or bad.

And every individual is emotionally impelled to act. He is pushed to act, and he wills to act. After choosing everything according to his desires, he regrets. Life then becomes a series of regrets. And the intellectual understands that in his existential situation, the freedom that he enjoys is never compatible with comfort.

Suffering and struggle is part and parcel of the life of the human being in his or her existence. In fact, in struggle is existence. And the human being is filled with nausea when he or she is not able to probe beyond the mysteries. The human being is afflicted by fear of destiny, and is filled with anxiety at the dreadful possibilities of life and the dread of death. It consists in living in the now and her. A miniature imagistic masterpiece of Edward Estlin Cummings makes the point quite clear. The poem makes interesting reading and it runs as follows [Complete Poems: 1913-1962, 1972, p. 781]:

now is a ship

which captain am

sails out of sleep

steering for dream. . .
Moreover, man is endowed with freedom. So he is responsible for his actions whether they are good or bad. And every individual is emotionally impelled to act. He is pushed to act, and he wills to act. After choosing everything according to his desires, he regrets. Life then becomes a series of regrets. And the intellectual understands that in his existential situation, the freedom that he enjoys is never compatible with comfort. Suffering and struggle form part and parcel of the life of a man in his existence. In fact, in struggle is existence. And man is filled with nausea when he is not able to probe beyond the mysteries as it happens to Bartleby, the Scrivener the protagonist of Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener*.

Man is afflicted by fear of destiny, and is filled with anxiety at the dreadful possibilities of life and the dread of death. When the characters of Bellow, Malamud and Roth are judged against the parameters of existentialism they get identified as the classic sufferers, whose freedom is not compatible with comfort, and they experience the fear psychosis.

In fact, it is the environment that has an iron grip over him and controls and determines the life of the characters of Bellow, Malamud and Roth. To appreciate this aspect of the life of Bellow, Malamud and Roth it becomes imperative to have the theoretical knowledge concerning Naturalism, at this juncture.

Naturalism, in philosophy, is a belief that nature represents all that can be known of reality and that the scientific method is the only means of determining the truth. Rather than being a rigid philosophical system, naturalism has been described as a particular way or method of approaching philosophical problems and as certain set of
conclusions arrived at as answers to these problems and as a certain set of conclusions arrived at as answers to these problems.

Naturalism denies the existence of the supernatural anywhere in the universe and holds that if any non-natural entities exist they may be known only by their observable influence on natural objects. Many naturalists describe their beliefs not as a theory of the nature of reality but as specific temper of mind - - namely, a confidence in the empirical, experimental, or scientific method as the man and the world. The naturalists reject faith, revelation, authority, tradition, deductive reasoning, and intuition as sources of truth and guidance.

All meaning originates in experience, and all beliefs must be tested by experience in accordance with the general canons of scientific method. In general, naturalism is opposed to the characteristic doctrines of religion, supernaturalism, and idealism. The main tenets that are ascribed to naturalism are the following:

1. Every taste of the world or event in it can be explained causally or mechanically by reference to previous states or events or else in the result of chance.
2. No god or other supernatural being is necessary to explain the world. The natural world of objects and events in space and time is all that is real.
3. There are no absolute values or transcendental norms, known in non-empirical ways. All values and norms are in some sense a function of human attitudes, needs and satisfactions.
4. Man is wholly a part of this natural world, and he is only an incidental product of the world process.
Parallels are drawn between naturalism and other systems such as empiricism, materialism, determinism, and pragmatism. All share to some extent a belief in the natural order and in experimental science.

Naturalism differs from the others in its disavowal of traditional philosophy, believing that human problems can be solved through critical intelligence. Naturalism is traced back to British empiricism, and other European doctrines, but it came to flower in the United in the 1930s and 1940s following the pioneering efforts of George Santayana and John Dewey and Dewey’s disciples.

The characters of Bellow, Malamud and Roth favour rich comparison with Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*. Sister Carrie and the characters of Bellow, Malamud and Roth wallow in mud and mire and suffer the excruciating circumstances of ignorance and poverty and suffer tragedy because of their environment. They are not able to create a second environment as recommended by Bellow.

It ought to be stressed that the suffering of the Jew becomes acute and painful because of his Jewry. In fact, the intellectuals maintain that the Jew is the type of the universal sufferer.

Incidentally, whether the Jew stays in Berlin, Calcutta or Bombay, or New York, the place of his residence is like the Egdon Heath of Clym Yeobright described by Thomas Hardy in his tragic fiction, *The Return of the Native*. Just as Egdon Heath proves to be a naturalistic environment that deterministically controls the life of Clym Yeobright and Eustasia Wye, Berlin, Calcutta, and Bombay, and New York control the characters of Bellow, Malamud and Roth.
Moreover, suffering gives rise to a genuine sense of self and promotes self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-discovery. The pity of it is that the Jew by his Jewry remains outside the social compact of the society where he lives, but ironically is existentially right in the middle of the social drama.

The Jewish intellectuals advise the Jews to appreciate the truth that self-discovery comes from suffering. There is no meaning in accepting failure and defeat and harbouring a sense of doom and annihilation. The Jews must rise above suffering and build a self-identity. This is what the characters of Bellow, Malamud and Roth try to achieve but they are ignorant of the ways and means as well as ignorant why they suffer and where they suffer.

The suffering Jew does not surrender to despair. He does not allow himself to be crushed by suffering, which is an existential inevitability. He uses this experience of suffering to gain nobility of character and turn humanistic.

All Jews are Jobs and all Jobs are good men, and Baumgartner is no exception. The Jews realize that suffering is the human lot. To escape suffering is impossible. But to turn into a good man through suffering all kinds of pains and miseries is not impossible.

In fact, one learns to be a compassionating soul embracing humanistic concerns of love, kindness, goodness and mercy. This is what Baumgartner turns out to be notwithstanding his sufferings. The point that is made here is that suffering promotes humanism in the sufferer. After all what is against the credit of the individual is how he gives credit to the other as a human being.
The characters of Bellow, Malamud and Roth are locked within the prison of their own suffering. Strangely, they proclaim the efficacy of suffering. It teaches them to desire for right things. They project themselves as the existential heroes of patience and endurance. They are painfully; even pride fully aware of the tragic undercurrents of human existence.

The characters of Bellow, Malamud and Roth demonstrate that suffering is the expression of true goodness. He proves true the religious definition of existential suffering. James Hastings argues to the point and it is worth recording here [Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, xii, 1970, p. 22]:

Suffering, it will be urged, is a splendid moral discipline. God is present in all pain. He suffers in all suffering. He is the chief sufferer in the world.

According to Heidegger the human being is confronted with two possibilities of existence, which are characterized as authentic and unauthentic. The human being who lives an unauthentic existence does not make any deliberate decision for his or her life, and he or she goes on living with the crowd in an oblivious state of himself or herself.

Most of the Christian existentialists condemn this kind of unauthentic existence. Stephen Neil makes a pointed observation, which is worth recording here [Christian Faith and Other Faiths, 1966, p. 184]:

The reality of existence is to be found only in choice, in decision, in the deliberate acceptance of the authentic and rejection of the unauthentic existence. . . .
It is against such a background study of the existentialism and the absurd that one appreciates the fictions of Saul Bellow. And Bellow projects the Jews as symbols of suffering. They represent the existential loners in the modern world experiencing Angst, anguish, the Sturm-und-Drang.

Joseph of Dangling Man finds his existence one of struggle and suffering. Because he is a Canadian born Jew his draft call is delayed. It causes him harassment and mental agony. He feels that the world is a closed, hopeless prison. He stores bitterness, and spite, and mentally suffers.

Joseph struggles against the harsh actualities of life. He decides to give himself up not that he has finally pitched upon the right path but that it is the inevitable one. He experiences a release from the sure cyclical distress of certain thoughts.

Joseph tentatively speculates about the future thus [Dangling Man, 1944, p. 158]:

... perhaps the war could teach me, by violence, what I had been unable to learn during those months in the room. Perhaps I could sound certain other means. Perhaps the next move was the world’s...

Joseph, then, with the realism open to morality of flesh makes a conscious decision to remain a man keenly intent on knowing what is existentially happening to him.

Asa Leventhal’s existential predicaments revolve around his nausea over his past actions that trouble him and his sense of threat, the pressures exercised on him by Elena and Albee, and the spectre of insanity that draws nearer.
Human affinities contingent upon love and guilt focus for Asa Leventhal the uncertainties of his circumstances. He struggles to free himself from his uneasiness, without disavowing those affinities. This defines his existential struggle. Asa Leventhal’s existential predicament surfaces in the form of the cognitive dilemma that he confronts in his life. Moreover, life for Asa Leventhal has always been a push, a violent struggle to get and then to maintain a precarious position. His existential suffering and predicaments lie in his suffering and struggling to push his way forward against other people and against all the obstacles, and in his struggling against the society and the Establishment that rebound on him for deviating from their prescriptions, rules, and regulations.

Asa Leventhal struggles against the officials who push him from pillar to post, and finally out of the crowded room. The dream that he epitomizes his existential predicaments [The Victim, 1947, pp. 168-169]:

He [Asa Leventhal] was in a railroad station, carrying a heavy suitcase, forcing his way with it through a crowd. . . . There was recoil of the crowd - - the guards must have been pushing it back - - and he found himself in a corridor, which was freshly paved and plastered. It seemed to lead down to the tracks. “Maybe they’ve just opened this and I am the first to find it,” he thought. He began to run and suddenly came to a barrier, a moveable frame, resembling a saw-horse. Holding the suitcase before him, he pushed it aside. Two men stopped him. “You can’t go through; I’ve got people working here.” One of them said. He wore a business suit and fedora and he looked like a contractor. . . . Leventhal turned and a push on the shoulder sent him into an alley. His face was
covered with tears. A few people noticed this, but he did not care about them [My Emphasis].

The dream suggestively implies to Asa Levnthal that life is one of cutthroat competition, and a crowded race where one has to struggle and suffer. The existential predicament revolves around one of suffering, being pushed about, and the same person struggling to push others out of the races; it turns out to pushing one or being pushed by the other.

Augie March’s existential predicament primarily lies in his existence totally lacking a centre. He struggles and suffers to seek a fixed centre of stillness. But he experiences distances and existential perils. He is a travelling man, travelling by himself, and going everywhere sounding fake notes of euphoria.

Daniel E. Martin’s observation throws further light on the point that is made, and it is worth quoting here [“Saul Bellow,” in Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. II, 1978, p. 43]:

Augie remains in the bondage of strangeness for a time still trapped in the paradoxical notion of getting to be still. His declaration of freedom becomes the revelation of his bondage. And his final self-irony defines rather than resolves his dilemma.

As stated earlier Augie March believes that there are two ways of approaching life. One can accept the reality of everyday occurrences, and thus submit to drudgery and commonplace. Or one can rise above normalcy, and seek a more triumphant life.
Notwithstanding his attempts to remain innocent, optimistic, adventurous, and unbeaten, Augie March encounters a number of devastating occurrences, which finally shatter his idealism. He experiences pressures from all quarters in the form of Minnie Villars, and an incompetent Doctor, and his friend, and Lady Magnus, and Simon. After these traumas Augie March loses much of his innocence and he bemoans thus [The Adventures of Augie March, 1953, p. 318]:

... [He] was no child now, neither in age nor in protectedness, and [he] was thrown for air on the free spinning of the world. ... 

Augie March fully comprehends that his initial innocence is lost. He feels that he has to seek a new Eden in which he can retrieve the innocence that he has lost. That is precisely why he travels to Mexico. He states thus [The Adventures of Augie March, 1953, p. 318]:

That in any true life you must go and be exposed outside the small circle that encompasses two or three heads in the same history of love. Try and stay, though inside. See how long you can. ... 

At Mexico everything turns out to be frustrating, disappointing, and depressive. Not only does he suffer an accident in which his skull is cracked, but also Thea and he drift apart, fight and end their relationship. Instead of having lost his innocence retrieved, he sinks deeper into states of despair and frustration. He is not able to escape from his existential predicaments, loneness, suffering, Angst, anguish, and the dread of death.

Augie March discloses his mind thus [The Adventures of Augie March, 1953, p. 447]:
suddenly my [Augie March's] heartfelt ugly. I was sick of myself. I thought that my aim of being simple was just a fraud, that I wasn't a bit good hearted or affectionate, and I began to wish that Mexico from beyond the walls would come in and kill one and that I would be thrown in the bone dust and twisted spiky crosses of the cemetery, for the insects and lizards.

Bellow, therefore, presents Augie not as a reliable interpreter of events, but instead uses his travels as a method of bringing Augie into contact with significant elements of the post war era. A prominent example of this method is Bellow's ironic use of existentialism. Though from the perspective of the late 1980s it was forcing, as perhaps no other philosophy since Darwin, a revision of the values presupposed by the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Bellow does not miss the irony of Jean-Paul Sartre's opportunistic timing. He realizes that Sartre's seminal "Existentialism is Humanism" lecture delivered immediately after the Nazis had been militarily defeated in Europe and less than three months after Hiroshima, defined a philosophy that was as much German in origin as French.

Bellow does not accuse French existentialism of being a continuation of Nazi racialism that had captivated the then devastated Europe; but certainly the German connections of the movement presented intriguing possibilities for satire. Hardly by accident Bellow does reverse stereotype and give his Jewish hero the comic strip handsomeness and dominant size of the Aryan warrior and conclude his narrative with
Augie living in Paris and wandering confused through the fields of Normandy after his French car malfunctions.

The paradox of the Jewish victim in the guise of the Nazi storm trooper and the failure of the Citreon, which literally makes Augie pedestrian again, which symbolize the fickleness of popular machines (mechanical and mental and encapsulate the intellectual, moral confusion Augie experiences throughout a novel, which has from the day of publication has been certified as existential. Patrick W. Shaw observes ["History and the picaresque Tradition in Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*," *CLIO*, 16, no. 3 (Spring 1987), 211]:

The meaning of existentialism assumes significantly different values, however, when viewed through the lens of Bellow's picaresque irony and satire. With devices such as brother Simon's blond Aryan looks, the Citreon, and the darkness that lies between Augie and a new beginning in Bruges. Bellow satirizes the irresolvable debates articulated - - but not created - - by Sartre and existentialism. He realizes Sartre introduced no new philosophy but merely inserted himself as the new chancellor of popular thought and convinced a repetitive (even gullible) world - - just as Augie is convinced - - - that reality had been redefined by a philosophy still warmed by the ashes of Teutonic arrogance. . . . As he [Bellow] noted in his Library of Congress Address, he would like to ask Sartre: "After nakedness, what? After absurdity, what?" The argument, then, is not that Augie is something other than existential. . .
Tommy Wilhelm’s existential predicaments are due to his masochism. He expresses anguish mainly because he marries suffering and luxuriates in suffering. Tommy Wilhelm, the protagonist of *Seize the Day* allows burden upon burden to be placed on him. He allows Margaret a huge alimony, which no court on earth would have granted. And in the process, he experiences anguish and financial stresses and strains -- *Sturm-und-Drang*.

Tommy Wilhelm chooses to live with a cold carping father in a hotel for retired people. He quits his job, and does not look for another job. He constantly provokes his father into punishing him. He causes disgust and anguish to the old by swallowing phenaphen and indulging in sloppy habits. He tires his father’s patience. Tommy Wilhelm captures himself to believe that his fate is to suffer and that is his true occupation.

The textual passage makes interesting reading and it is worth quoting here [*Seize the Day*, 1957, p. 56]:

He [Tommy Wilhelm] received a suggestion from some remote elements in his thoughts that the business of life -- the real business -- to carry his peculiar burden, to feel shame and impotence, to taste these quelled tears -- the only important business the highest business was being done. Maybe the making of mistakes expressed the very purpose of his life and the essence of his being here. . . .

Tommy Wilhelm understands that the relentless pursuit of money and materiality, attended by the stultifying absence of genuine concern for others causes dehumanization.
It is in such a dehumanizing state in which Tamkin observes thus [Seize the Day, 1957, p. 204]:

... the lonely person feels like an animal. When the night comes ... he feels like howling from his window like a wolf ...

At this juncture, it is of immediate interest to record the pointed observation of Gilead Morahg ["The Art of Dr. Tamkin: Matter and Manner in Seize the Day," M F S, XXV, 1 (Spring 1979), 113]:

We must get it out of our hands that this is a doomed time that we are waiting for the end, and the rest of it, mere junk from fashionable magazines. Things are grim enough without these shivery games. People frightening one another - - a poor sort of moral exercise. But to get to the point, the advocacy and praise of suffering take us in the wrong direction and those of us who remain loyal to civilization must not go for it. You have the power to employ pain, to repent, to be illuminated; you must have the opportunity and even the time. . . .

Saul Bellow maintains that existential suffering is redemptive in character. Saul Bellow like Dr. Tamkin of Seize the Day, presents himself in Herzog, through his alter ego, Herzog, as a healer whose mission is to release men from the guilt-ridden burdens of their past mistakes, relieve the pressures of anxiety stemming from the terrifying knowledge of their inevitable demise in the future, and restore their capacity for love, affirmation, and fulfilment.

Saul Bellow makes Herzog recognize the monstrosity of human suffering, but at the same time to positive value of redeeming the sufferer. In fact, Herzog continually meditates upon his great schooling in a Montreal ghetto and his later suffering at the
hands of the vicious hordes of Reality Instructors. He desperately seeks for some redeeming truth that will justify a life full of anguish.

Herzog experiences existential predicaments. He is a loner. He suffers from Angst, anguish, and nausea. He finds life to be a continual struggle. He is obsessed with death. He suffers both in body and mind. He is conscious of the inevitability of death. Notwithstanding these existential predicaments he reads affirmation. But then he is fully aware of the monstrosity of life. He recognizes human suffering in all the monstrous dimensions. He is conscious of the persecution of the innocent children. He is pained to note that Madeline had been sexually abused as a child, and his own self being sodomized by a pederast.

It ought to be noted that Herzog pursues truth as a secular humanist. He comes close to madness because of the intensity of his own psychological suffering. He identifies very strongly in a Whitmanesque manner with the sufferings of others. His obsession is with suffering, which borders occasionally on self-punishing masochism.

Herzog understands that suffering breaks people and crushes them. But he believes that suffering is illuminating. That is why Herzog in his important letter to Professor Mermelstein expresses his vehement repudiation of the nihilistic consequences of the Wasteland outlook. In that letter he argues for a more realistic attitude thus [Herzog, 1964, p. 317]:

Why not say rather that people of powerful imagination, given to dreaming deeply and to rising up marvellous and self-sufficient fictions, turn to suffering sometimes to cut into bliss, as people pinch themselves to full awake. I know that my suffering, if I may speak of it, has often
been like that, a mere extended form of life, a striving for true wakefulness and an antidote to illusion, and therefore I can take no moral credit for it . . .

Thus, Saul Bellow offers his perspectives on existentialism. Furthermore, Saul Bellow introduces his protagonists as absurd heroes.

Joseph, the hero of Dangling Man, finds his routine life disturbed and destroyed by the draft notice. He finds his life devoid of all significant meaning. In the face of this meaninglessness Joseph develops the intention to open a life out of his own spirit, having the opportunity to do this as he dangles between a regular job and introduction into the army. And the final test of the absurd hero, however, rests in his ability to live the conflict between intention and reality.

At the most intense point of his rebellion Joseph is as close to Camus’s concept of the absurd man as is any other character in American fiction. Everywhere he turns Joseph finds treasons and betrayals, which constantly hammer at the life he is struggling to define. At a cocktail party he finds them revealed to him in the personified form of his friend who tortures a hypnotized woman whose body is incapable of registering the indignities to which she is subjected. David Galowy offers a pertinent comment, which is worth quoting here [The Absurd Hero in American Fiction, 1981, p. 131]:

The state of hypnosis itself is perhaps the most successful single representation of that spiritual drowsiness and emotional lethargy, which Camus described in The Myth of Sisyphus as the most universal condition of modern man. . . .
Joseph's pompous money-minded brother causes Joseph's sense of frustration. His wife and his niece contribute to the several disappointments that he meets with in his life. He finds that he has to struggle alone like the absurd hero. He finds no meaning in the social life and therefore rejects it.

Being the absurd man without meaning and without negating the external he does nothing for the external. But Joseph prefers his courage and his reasoning. The first guides him to live without appeal, and within the narrow circumscribed limits. Joseph's revelation comes while he is listening to a Haydn divertimento for the cello. The sober opening movement of Piatigorsky's performance convinces him that he is yet an apprentice in suffering and humiliation, and that he is foolish to imagine avoiding further indignities: it was not among human privileges to be exempt from them. The relevant passage in *Dangling Man* quoted *in extenso* runs thus [*Dangling Man*, 1944, pp. 67-68]:

What I should with them, how to meet them was answered in the second declaration: with grace, without manners. And though I could not as yet apply that answer to myself, I recognized its rightness and was vehemently moved by it. Not until; I was a whole man could it be my answer, too. And was I to become this whole man alone, without aid? . . . I was not so full of pride that I could not accept the existence of something greater [God] than myself, something, perhaps of which, I was an idea, or merely a fraction of an idea. That was not it. But I did not want to catch at any contrivance in panic. . . . But was there no way to attain that answer except to sacrifice the mind that ought to be satisfied? From the antidote itself another disease would spring. . . . But not with
such a desperate emotion or such a critical need for an answer. Or such a feeling of loneliness. Out of my own strength it was necessary for me to return the verdict for reason, in its partial inadequacy, and against the advantages of its surrender.

In his preparedness to confront the mechanistic universe he projects himself as the absurd hero. He argues his shifted stance thus [Dangling Man, 1944, p. 191]:

\[\ldots\] the war could teach me, by violence, what I had been unable to learn during these months in the room. Perhaps I could sound creation through other means. Perhaps. But things were now out of my hands. The next move was the world's. \ldots

Through his acceptance of the draft notice Joseph determines to set right his social and political universe.

Similarly, Asa Leventhal, the middle-class magazine editor, of The Victim, becomes aware of the fundamental disharmony in his universe as he grows to face more and more of harsh actualities. His concerns are an illness in the family, a vacationing wife, and a dirty apartment.

Asa Leventhal soon learns that what he is and what he is for, to know his purpose and to seek grace. Moreover, he learns to live without appeal either to the neat patterns with which he had once regulated his life. He does not want to perpetuate his former evasions. He realizes that innocence can be maliciously destructive.
Therefore, he moves towards consciousness as urged by Kerby Albee. The relevant textual passage makes interesting reading, and it is worth quoting here [The Victim, 1947, p. 264]:

Wake up! What’s life? Metabolism? That’s what it is for the bugs. Jesus Christ, no! What’s life? Consciousness, that’s what it is. That’s what you are short on. For God’s sake, give yourself a push and a shake. It’s dangerous stuff, Asa, this stuff.

Asa Leventhal learns that everyone is responsible for his actions. It is because he is accountable for their consequences. He now knows the meaning of responsibility, but he also knows its limitations. After a symbolic reunion with his wife, Asa Leventhal extends his consciousness to include the whole of humanity. And in such a stance he displays the sensitivity, and the spirit of the absurd hero. But Asa Leventhal has his own doubts growing at the back of his mind. The relevant textual passage reads thus [The Victim, 1947, p. 286]:

For why should tickets, mere tickets, be promised if promises were being made - - tickets to be desirable and undesirable places? There were some important things to be promised. Possibly there was a promise, since so many felt it. He himself was almost ready to affirm that there was. But it was misunderstood.

In the case of Augie March, Saul Bellow offers a positivist’s point of view. Augie March refuses to reconcile himself to an adverse reality. He rejects the idea of death as a solution to his dilemma.
The dialogue that ensues between Clem and Augie March throws light on this point [The Adventures of Augie March, 1953, pp. 435-436]:

Clem: “[You suffer from] a nobility syndrome. You can’t adjust to the reality situation. I can see it all over you. You want there should be Man, with capital M, with great stature. Tell me, pal, am I getting warm or not?”

Augie March: “You are, yes you are. . . . I’ll put it to you as I see it. It can never be right to offer to die, and if that is what the data of experience tell you, then you must get along without them.” . . .

In this way Augie March asserts his position as the absurd hero. Augie March defines a life lived without appeal, a life in which other truths being denied, pain and disappointment not only become something to live for; they may even be a source of joy.

In the painful struggle against reality Augie March comes into harmony with the axial lines of life. He presents his thesis thus [The Adventures of Augie March, 1953, pp. 454-455]:

At any time life can come together again and man be regenerated, and doesn’t have to be a god or public servant like Osiers who gets torn apart annually for the sake of the common prosperity, but the man himself, finite taped as he is, can still come where the axial lines are. He will be brought into focus. He will live with true joy. Even his pains will be joy if they are true, even his helplessness will not take him away from
himself, even the ridiculous, even disappointment after disappointment need not take his love. Death will not be terrible to him if life is not. . . .

In *Seize the Day*, Tommy Wilhelm confronts the same oppression and dehumanization, which Joseph, Asa Leventhal, and Augie March face in their lives. Tommy Wilhelm, the pathetic failure, wanders up almost every dead end, which the world has to offer. His early career as a Screen Star was a hopeless joke. His marriage ends in a torturous separation. His rejuvenating love affair simply fades away. He resigns, out of pride, his lucrative and well-established sales position with a large Eastern manufacturing company.

Like Saul Bellow's Joseph, Tommy Wilhelm is a dangling man, suspended between jobs and loves. Like Asa Leventhal, he is a strange kind of victim-victimizer. Under such circumstances beaten and exhausted, he finds his social life meaningless. He reads the universe as barren, insensitive and one that offers no sense. He realizes that his deepening convictions seem increasingly absurd. But like every other Bellowean hero, Tommy Wilhelm projects himself as an absurd hero by moving from isolation to affirmation of existence.

From the pig-raising, law-breaking, violin playing scion of an ancient and distinguished American family, Henderson steps out and journeys into the heart of the symbolic Africa to find answers to the frustrations and enigmas of modern America. He journeys to Africa to end the chaotic conditions of his life, which he defines thus [*Henderson the Rain King*, 1959, p. 3]:

> When I [Henderson] think of my condition at the age of fifty-five when I bought the ticket, all is grief. The facts begin to crowd me and soon I get
a pressure in the chest. A disorderly rush begins - - my parents, my wives, my girls, my children, my farm, my animals, my habits, my prejudices, my brutality, my teeth, my face, my soul! I have to cry, "No, no, get back, curse you, let me alone!" But how can they let me alone? They belong to me. They are mine. And they pile into me from all sides. It turns into chaos.

Like a defeatist and an absurd fool, Henderson decides to commit suicide to escape from the pains of his life. But he rejects suicide as he understands suicide to be a denial of one of the essential terms of the absurd confrontation. Therefore, Henderson confronts reality, which reveals itself to him as suffering loneliness, madness, with the intention that human life can be made meaningful, that the spirit can be satisfied. It is with a conscious effort to confront the harsh actualities of life with the single aim of redefining his life that he gets identified as the absurd her.

More than as an absurd hero, Saul Bellow's Herzog defines himself as a classic neurotic case history. But the one cannot deny his acute awareness of the insensible and the absurd and the meaninglessness of existence. Incidentally, Herzog projects himself as the victim given to moroseness, self-pity, and paranoia. His life totters on the brink of nihilities, and alienation. But he clings to a transcendent view of man's fate. His life turns out to be one of Angst, the Sturm-und-Drang, anguish, despair, and pains. But he musters courage to confront these in his life with a view to redefining his life, and in that positive approach he relives Sisyphus. Herzog describes the microcosm of the absurd world in which modern men and women are compelled to function. The relevant textual passage runs thus [Herzog, 1964, p. 201]:
Well, for instance, what it means to be a man. In a city. In a century. In transition. In a mass. Transformed by science. Under organized power. Subject to tremendous controls. In a condition caused by mechanization. After the late failure of radical hopes. In a society that was no community and devalued the person. Owing to multiplied power of numbers, which made the self-negligible. Which spent military billions against foreign enemies but would not pay for order at home. Which permitted savagery and barbarism in its own great cities. . . . On top of that, and injured heart, and raw gasoline poured on the nerves. . . .

It is hard to find a more adequate description of the harshness and impersonality of external reality. And Herzog confronts the absurd world at the emotional and intellectual levels. David Gallowy cryptically argues to the point thus [The Absurd Hero in American Fiction, 1981, p. 169]:

I am pretty well satisfied to be, to be just as it is willed, and for so long as I may remain in occupancy. . . .

And David Gallowy conclusively argues thus [The Absurd Hero in American Fiction, 1981, p. 169]:

Herzog's restoration to life [is] a proof that he is now truly "confident, cheerful, clairvoyant, and strong." Perhaps Herzog's victory is only temporary, but we leave him in the conclusion of the novel a wiser man than any of Bellow's earlier heroes, one who has affirmed and legitimized the absurd struggle on all levels of experience -- emotional, spiritual, and intellectual. . . .
Despite his desire to be affirmative, Saul Bellow's depressive tendencies get projected in his *Oeuvres*. Understandably, then Saul Bellow's characters are psychic case studies. They are literally psychological cripples.

Once again, in this context, the pointed observation of John Jacob Clayton sums up the point that is made; [*Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man, 1979, p. 53*]:

One would expect in a writer who wishes to affirm human life and to defend the individual to find characters with strength, grace, even nobility. But Saul Bellow's characters are lonely, despairing, cut off not only from society, but from friends and wives. Moreover, they are pathological social masochists, filled with guilt an self-hatred, needing to suffer and to fail. . . .

The classic examples, who fall under this category, are Rogni of the short fiction entitled, "A Father-to-Be," and Tommy Wilhelm of *Seize the Day*, Henderson of *Henderson the Rain King*, Joseph of *Dangling Man*, Asa Leventhal of *The Victim*, and Herzog of *Herzog*. These characters suffer masochistically at the hands of others. External forces and pressures weigh them down. They carry their burdens without casting them away. The others extract heavy prices from them. These characters feel that they alone have to carry the burden of the whole world on them, and that they were born to be taken advantage of and sacrificed. All these had psychic effects on them and as stated earlier reduced them to the state of psychological cripples.

The masochism of these characters makes it impossible for them to affirm the potentialities of their humanity. They define themselves as classic isolates, and
depressives. On analyzing psychoanalytically the individual characters mentioned above, one detects Joseph as a psychological case history. Joseph, the intelligent monologist, can talk only to himself. In this context, the pointed observation of John Jacob Clayton makes a pointed observation [*Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man*, 1979, p. 57]:

He [Joseph] has to invent a Spirit of Alternatives to talk to so that his ideas can have a sounding board—his friends he affronts, his family, he rejects. There is no organized plot, no dramatic interaction among characters working towards a resolution; the problems and their resolution remain internal. . . .

Joseph takes pride in his depressive mania. In an acidly self-analytical manner he writes down every detail of his paralysis, of his disgusting traits, of his frustrations that he faces. He is filled with self-hatred, which reveals itself in his imagining or enlarging offences against him.

Joseph's attitude towards life is that of a guilty thief. As a moral masochist, anything Joseph takes feels like theft in him. In this regard, Tonny Tanner makes a pointed observation [*Saul Bellow*, 1978, p. 19]:

. . . his [Joseph's] freedom from any sort of involvement rapprochement with the world has turned him into a dangling man, devoid of all positive impulses and constructive initiative. His freedom is a void in which he hangs, unable to reach any solid reality. His journal is not a mere hobby but a strategy to retain his sanity. The insensitiveness can satisfy themselves with physical action. Joseph because of his candour and habit of introspection has only one last recourse—"to talk to myself." . . .
Joseph is fenced in by his ego. And his ego hides a great deal of self-hatred, though ego and self-hatred appear incongruous. Like Jean-Paul Sartre’s man, Joseph runs into a safe ego, and ensoi. Joseph finds that the Kafkaan Wasteland World is a squalid jungle marked by rapacity, selfishness, and spite.

Therefore, Joseph withdraws to preserve the integrity of the self. Thus, he finds himself in a self-imposed prison. This condition damages his sense of reality, and fills him with delusions, and turns him into a paranoid. And his life gets devalued through stagnation. And in the end he summarily abandons the values with which he has tussled all along.

Joseph expresses his sense of defeat thus [Dangling Man, 1944, p. 191]:

I [Joseph] am no longer to be held accountable for myself; I am grateful for that. I am in other hands, relieved of self-determination, freedom cancelled. Hurray for regular hours! And for the supervision of the spirits! Long live regimentation! . . .

Like every Bellow hero, Tommy Wilhelm of the novella, Seize the Day, lives in a world of Machiavellians who exert a real and sinister power over him, and reduce him to the position of a psychological cripple.

Tommy Wilhelm suffers, unable to cope with the terrible and ubiquitous power of money. He understands that in this world the dominant values are money values. The profit motive is uppermost. Money has become ultimately involved with man’s destructive instincts, Tommy Wilhelm is a complete victim, and the money conscious world has driven him to the wall, and he finds no way of fleeing from it. He is helpless.
to remove himself from this money world, and he finds everywhere, suspicion, cynicism, and exploitation dominating the lives of people.

Tommy Wilhelm learns some of the harsh facts of freedom, which he expresses thus [Seize the Day, 1959, p. 67]:

Don’t talk to me about being free. A rich man may be free on an income of a million net. A poor man may be free because nobody cares what he does. But a fellow in my [Tommy Wilhelm’s] position has to sweat it out until he drops dead. . . .

It is the image of the dead man that offers a revelation to Tommy Wilhelm. He appreciates the fact that the dead man is beyond the distractions of modern life. The relevant textual passage makes interesting reading [Seize the Day, 1959, pp. 159-160]:

Soon he [Tommy Wilhelm] was past words, past reason, past coherence. He could not stop. The source of all tears had suddenly sprung open within him black, deep, and hot, and they were pouring out and convulsed. . . . The great knot of ill and grief in his throat swelled upward and he gave in utterly and held his face and wept. He cried with all his heart. . . .

On this deeply emotional ending of the novella, Seize the Day, Tonny Tanner offers a pertinent observation [Saul Bellow, 1978, p. 67]:

The dead man is a reminder of the inevitable death of the self, at the same time he is a very specific omen to Tommy, helpless and friendless
on this day of reckoning; Tommy’s tears are both for humanity and for himself. Yet they also reveal an awareness of the supreme value of life, sheer life itself, existence beyond the assessment of financial success or failure. . . .

The life of Tommy Wilhelm, from the psychic angle, is that of a self-persecuted individual. At one level he is a moral masochist. At another level he is a social masochist.

Weiss argues to the point which is worth quoting here [Quoted in John Jacob Clayton. Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man, 1979, p. 71]:

Wilhelm has the masochistic necessity to fail, to be destroyed at the hands of the punishing father, in order, under the terms of the moral masochistic commitment, to retain his love, and, in less obvious ways, to memorialize certain events in the past. . . .

But this explanation that the masochist makes demands for love in the form of provocation and spite does not cancel Freud’s idea, which is so very applicable to Tommy Wilhelm. Freud maintains that masochistic behaviour is self-punishment to remove guilt especially Oedipal.

Like Joseph of Dangling Man, Tommy Wilhelm of Seize the Day runs into a safe ego, an ensō, to escape reality, though Dr. Tamkin advises him thus [Seize the Day, 1959, p. 66]:

The spiritual compensation is what I look for. Bringing the people into the here-and-now, the real universe. That’s the present moment.
past is no good to us. The future is full of anxiety. Only the present is real -- the here-and-now. Seize the Day.

Since Tommy Wilhelm hides his guilt within a masochistic construct to live in the here-and-now, and to seize the day, is to live outside a masochistic construct. Unlike Tommy Wilhelm, Herzog has other ruses as a masochist. He is able to verbalize his neuroses. It not only turns Herzog intriguing but also safe. He is a sexual as well as a moral masochist.

Herzog is excited by female arrogance. He is submissive to Madeline. He allows Madeline to beat him. The dangerous underside of the masochist is to be found in Moses Herzog in the form of repressed sadism.

Guilt is at the root of Herzog's masochism. His sin is essentially sexual. There is the origin of his guilt in an Oedipal relationship. That is why he permits Madeline to be the Father Figure and punish him. She is his judge, and beater, and she wants him dead. John Jacob Clayton makes an observation [Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man, 1979, p. 198):

His [Herzog's] sexual feelings for his mother are clear. It is his guilt over these feelings, which leads him to masculine women, to women who will punish him like a father. Only under such conditions of punishment, only with a woman who threatens him symbolically with the castration and death he fears from his father can he expect his pleasure.

The traits of paranoia, such as pride, anger, excessive rationality, homosexual inclinations, competitiveness, mistrust of emotion, inability to bear criticism,
hostile projections, and delusions, which Herzog attributes to Madeline belong actually to Moses Herzog.

Herzog wildly attacks Gersbach in front of Samkin, his lawyer, projecting his debauchery, disorder, and betrayal of his father’s ways on Gerbach thus [Herzog, 1964, p. 215]:

When I [Herzog] think of Valentine [Gersbach] . . . I think of the books I devoured as a boy, on the French and Russian revolutions. And silent movies like Mme Sans Gene - - Gloria Swanson or Emil Jannings as a Czarist general. Any way I see the mobs breaking into the palaces and churches and sacking Versailles, wallowing in cream desserts or pouring wine over their dicks and dressing in purple velvet, snatching crowns and mitres and crosses. . . .

Herzog employs this remembered description to serve as a metaphor to connect depraved sexuality with revolution that causes the tearing down of tradition. Herzog is afraid to own depraved sexuality, anger, pride, homosexuality, hostile projections, and excessive rationality in himself. Therefore, he exemplifies them in Gersbach, the Father in him, who always demands order. The textual passage makes interesting reading, and it is worth quoting here [Herzog, 1964, p. 11]:

There is someone inside me; I am in his grip. When I speak of him I feel him in my head pounding for order. . . .

Paradoxically, Herzog is a defender of his father’s faith, and at the same time he is a backslider from his father’s image. In fact, Herzog feels that he has to defend tradition precisely because he has none himself.
In this context he gets identified as the culture hero. Herzog is the sum total of all Western civilization since the Renaissance. The relevant textual passage runs thus [Herzog, 1964, p. 11]:

His [Moses Herzog's life was, as the phrase goes, ruined. Hut since it had not been much to begin with; there was not much to grieve about. Thinking on the malodorous sofa, of the centuries, the nineteenth, sixteenth, the eighteenth, he turned up, from the last, a saying that he liked. . . .

John Jacob Clayton argues to the point [Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man, 1979, p. 206]:

Herzog, a marginal figure - - a Jew, Canadian - - born of Russian immigrant parents, a neurotic, whose problems derive not from a modern American family situation but from an unstable, rigid, Victorian-Jewish family situation - - is equated by Bellow with the culture. . . .

All the same, Herzog is a representative modern man suffering from paranoia, and neuroses, and fighting for survival.

Asa Leventhal's emotional difficulties arise out of an imbalance between his stolid, impassive exterior, inherited from his harsh, and cold father, and his seething interior, which is a legacy from his mad mother. Moreover, Asa Leventhal turns out to be a victim of his volatile personality. He is a classic instance of mania-depressive. In Asa Leventhal's case, provocation carries the double sense of aggression and sexual temptation. His psychic feeling makes him accept Albee as his father figure, and Mary
as his mother figure. Since he lost his real mother early in his life he suffers from Oedipal Complex.

In this context, Andrew Gordon's pointed observation is worth quoting here ["Pushy Jew: Leventhal in The Victim," MFS, XXIII, 1 (Spring 1979), 134]:

According to psychoanalytic theory, the death of a parent, a crisis for offspring of any age creates particular anxiety in a child not yet out of the womb. The youth feels betrayed and abandoned, but he also feels intense guilt, as though his evil wishes (sexual or aggressive) had caused the death. Leventhal shows both the insecurity about abandonment and the excessive guilt, displayed now to free floating anxiety about his career, and his relationships with other people. . . .

In this context, it is of immediate interest to note how Oedipal Complex surfaces in Leventhal. In fact, Jonathan Baumbaxh notes the psychological undertones in the novel's climactic scene thus [The Landscape of Nightmare: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel, 1970, p. 43]:

In finding Albee in his bed with a woman who resembles the landlady Mrs. Munez, whom Leventhal has covertly desired, Leventhal is momentarily horrified, as if Albee has in some way cuckolded him. The Oedipal tensions of this primal scene - - finding another man in your bed with the landlady you secretly covet - - seem unmistakable. . . .

Leventhal's actions are with his lack of awareness of his own motives for those actions. Yet, they are traceable to his emotional and sexual repression.
Mark Shechner argues to the point thus ["Down in the Mouth with Saul Bellow,"
*American Review*, XXIII (October 1975), 44]:

I [Mark Shechner] would go further and claim that Leventhal confuses angry with erotic impulses (we all tend to do this when we speak of sex and violence). He mixes up hate with love, and he can control neither, but only discharge the feelings with the blind aggression of a push. Thus, he is at the mercy of the brute uncontrolled force of his rage and libido. He fears the moral and psychical consequences of an aggression he can neither understand nor restrain.

Thus, Saul Bellow projects his protagonists in his fictions, as existential sufferers and as psychic cases suffering from paranoia and mania-depression, and facing difficulties to them by their absurd conditions.

Malamud’s *The Assistant* can be neglected no longer. He comes to grips with his vision of inner reality of American life. He returns in *The Assistant* to the milieu with which he has concerned himself almost exclusively in his short stories; the depression slum; and to the central figure; the small Jewish storekeeper, Morris Bober.

Morris Bober owns a flyblown grocery in a rundown goyish neighbourhood; he keeps it open sixteen hours a day. Behind the store he has a partition in which he can heat coffee and wait with the Forward for the Poilisheh who comes for her three-cent roll at 6 A. M., for his Italian tenant who comes for sandwich meat at seven o’clock, and thereafter for his regulars.
Above the store he has rooms, just enough space for himself, his nagging wife Ida, his disappointed daughter Helen, and the tender memory of his dead son Ephraim. Ida bulks hardly larger in her husband's life than their dead son, except when her nagging ambition punctures the thin and vulnerable envelope of his pride.

It is Helen who embodies not only the female principle, but the striving of the Bobers not merely for a better life than the grocery store trap, but for the very best that life has to offer; Helen, who at twenty-three has quixotically turned down Nat Pearl because she dreams of something better than the middle-class security he can offer, who has missed her chance for day-school college, but still hopes to get her degree at night while she works for a Manhattan undergarment firm by day. It is not the least of Malamud's achievements that he breathes life into Helen Bober, who, with her yearning for culture and refinement, has been an easy figure of fun for so many Jewish highbrow writers (and commercial writers too), as a woman endowed with dignity and noble aspirations, worthy of our compassion and even our admiration.

This Bobber family, no single member of which is actually in communication with any other - - they live in poverty-stricken physical proximity but otherwise as separated from one another as utter strangers - - moves from crisis to crisis with the sickening predictability of a roller coaster ride or a man going to pot from drink. Morris gets sick, he is robbed and beaten by holdupniks; his already dwindling business is slashed past the point of bankruptcy with the opening of a modern delicatessen around the corner.

But then a stranger enters the scene, a mysterious young Italian. With the entrance of this man, the one for whom the book has so rightly been titled as The
Assistant, one moves with Malamud into a new dimension, and one is lifted into a new realm of vision from which the lives of the Bobers take on a vaster and more complex symbolic shape. The Assistant is a tale of alienation and frustration, of man’s yearning for brotherhood and his fear of communion.

Morris Bobber suffers because of his poverty-stricken condition and because of his nagging wife. He suffers from sickness. He is attacked and robbed which only attenuate his sufferings. His nagging wife adds to his sufferings. Though living under one roof Morris Bobber, Ida his wife and Helen his daughter live as strangers and suffer. The young Italian proves to be a cheat. But then he repents and embraces the Jewish religion as a penance.

Confession, repentance and penance are the three-way path to salvation. But this three-way path entails suffering and Frank Alpine undergoes suffering. As such all the four characters struggle and suffer and thereby confront the twin existential perils of struggle and suffering.

Frank Alpine (ne' Alpino) is not a Lochinvar out of the West, a homeless orphan who carries about with him only some remembered tales of the gentleness of St. Francis of Assisi and some recollections of Jewish kindness. These do not prevent him from stealing bread and milk from the grocer’s doorstep when he is jobless and hungry, nor from short changing and rifling the till when later on Morris Bobber allows him to sleep in the cellar, nor from peering through the dumbwaiter shaft at Helen naked in her bath.

When he repents his sinful acts his sufferings begin. It is not that easy to change religion, and he converts to Judaism to appease Helen and seek redemption from his sins. All these cause sufferings to him.
Thus, Morris Bobber, his wife Ida, his daughter Helen, and Frank Alpine are existential sufferers.

Roth creates characters who are dead against the genteel ways of the American society. To be a nonconformist bad boy calls for gumption, but it entails a great deal of suffering to be courted by the nonconformist bad boy.

Roth’s Alexander Portnoy [Portnoy’s Complaint], furious at his mother’s imperturbable sense of her own goodness, accuses her of trying to make him an obedient little gentleman, a fruitcake exactly what the training program was designed to produce. Portnoy remarks thus [Portnoy’s Complaint, 1969, p. 57]:

I [Portnoy] hate to say it about myself, but I’m too good. The mystery is that I’m not like all the nice young men I see strolling hand in hand in Bloomingdale’s on Sunday mornings. . . . I’m against the anti-humanity that calls itself nice. . . . The real struggle is to be bad and enjoy it. . . .


I [Nathan Zuckerman] don’t care if [my kid] grows up wearing pantyhose as long as he doesn’t turn out nice . . . another frightened and tamed by inhibition. . . .

The point that is made here is that to lead a life of a bad character and be a nonconformist means a life of struggle and suffering and this is what Portnoy passes through in his life. The undying existential struggle of the nice Jewish boy - - marked like a road map with shame and inhibition and fear is to be a bad man. That he
conducts this existential struggle with bravura, imaginative energy, rage, and wit is no surprise. More improbable is the resonance he achieves. At the end of Portnoy’s Complaint the protagonist, Alexander Portnoy, has no more words left and like an angry child concludes his monologue to his psychiatrist with a pure howl, a sputtering “aaaaahhhhh!!!!!!” which requires four lines of “a” to join it with “h” . . . . To the primal scream, his psychiatrist responds that now at last they can begin.

In this context, Ross Posnock is worth recording here in extenso [“Purity and Danger: On Philip Roth,” Raritan 21, no. 2 (Fall 2001), 87]:

For he [Roth] turns what seems a merely adolescent commitment to badness into his own version of a Melvillean No, in thunder, a moral vision and an epistemology, which, in novel after novel, find their raison d’etre in exposing the fantasy of purity as the appalling incitement for moral, aesthetic, and political violence. . . . He flattens human experience to an idyllic scenario redemption through the recovery of a sanitized, confusion less life. . . . The antithesis to pastoral is universalized and anthologized as the human stain in The Human Stain. It [the human stain] is in everyone. Indwelling, inherent and defining. The stain that is there before its mark. . . . The stain so intrinsic it does not require a mark. It precedes disobedience . . . . and perplexes all explanation and understanding. It’s why all cleansing is a joke. . . . Because purity is petrifaction. Because purity is a lie. Emerson also speaks of the perpetual error, which is not disobedience but human existence itself. . . . The proximity of Roth and Emerson should suggest that the moral and epistemological dimensions of Roth’s revulsion from the nice and the
It ought to be stressed that evil cannot be justified. And to be bad is to be bad. The nonconformist bad character has the self-volatility and propensity to waywardness and breaks the shackles of a bounded entity. But then to persist in badness and to be a nonconformist entails a great deal of existential suffering and it is courted and self-imposed and that is what the bad characters of Roth do.

Roth’s two most powerful fictions, The Human Stain and Sabbath’s Theater, explore the temptation of irresponsibility and abjection that mocks the proprietary logic of American individualism. Both fictions, The Human Stain and Sabbath’s Theater, dwell with relentless avidity on the badness of their bad boys.

In Sabbath’s Theater, Mickey Sabbath is a low rent noble savage, a pot-bellied American rebel and a failure at most everything, who by the nineties is deemed a fifties antique, a man whose waywardness constituted his existence’s only authority. Feeling
uncontrollable tenderness for his own shit-filled life, Sabbath takes pleasure in knowing that he would never had to please.

But leading such a life of badness and nonconformist means that it is going to be life of existential struggle and existential suffering and that is what Mickey Sabbath experiences in his life.

Coleman Silk of *The Human Stain*, Dean of Athena College, is an African American who has spent his adult life passing as a Jew. In the wake of a campus scandal that has left him a pariah, he risks further contempt now that he has immersed in a passionate affair with an illiterate woman less than half his age. Coleman Silk’s late blooming abandonment of control reverses the conviction that has hitherto ruled him -- the self is a disciplinary project that summarizes freedom by tabooing impulse. Roth discerns a fatal purism in the very assumption that the self is a project, yet he also finds admirable Coleman’s commitment to the *raw I* and its passionate struggle for singularity.

Once again, it needs to be stressed that evil cannot be justified. And to be bad is to be bad. The nonconformist bad character has the self-volatility and propensity to waywardness and breaks the shackles of a bounded entity. But then to persist in badness and to be a nonconformist entails a great deal of existential suffering and it is courted and self-imposed and that is what the bad characters of Roth do.

Thus, Bellow, Malamud, and Roth examine the theme of existential suffering in their fictions.