Bellow’s *The Dean's December*, deals with a heightened focus on political and social issues. It also deals with many of the themes that distinguish all his works: The clash of cultures, science versus humanism, the university as villain, the lunacy of the urban American, the search for self-knowledge in a foreign land and coming to terms with death. Such issues have largely not been touched by the novelists of the twentieth century. It is Bellow who daringly enters the territory with its myriad and complex issues and imparts a newness to his novel. Regarding the novel, Melvyn Bragg comments, “*The Dean's December*, might not be vintage Bellow but then he probably grew bored with vintage Bellow. It is new ground, seeking to retrieve, most boldly, the territory of social description and prescription so largely abandoned by novelists during this century” (Quoted in Sting 84). Bellow leaves no stone unturned for the projection of his themes by excellent prose in the novel. Referring Bellow’s forceful use of power for projecting his themes, Melvyn Bragg adds, “As an intellectual round-up *The Dean's December* has all Bellow’s force – made even more forceful by the comparative plainness of the prose he chooses to employ in his case…” (84). Bellow offers a view that shows a creative affirmation of life. Goldman feels that, “Bellow brought with him a world view that was life sustaining, predicted on a belief in the inherent goodness of man and the basic significance of existence” (8). Gilbert Porter Calls Bellow a “new transcendentalist” (195). As regards to Bellow’s area of inquiry, Nathan A. Scot’s observation is that his “principal area of enquiry is the phenomenology of selfhood” (105).

From the very beginning of his career as a novelist, Bellow has been showing his profound concern for human values. Human values have a valuable place not only in the life of an individual but also in society. These values of life have been eternal since the creation of the world and shall remain the same till doom's day. It is also a hard reality that if anybody has not taken care of these, his
life has never been a success but a failure. Credit goes to Bellow who comes forth to highlight these values of life as well as to defend them. As Neelakantan rightly remarks, "The Dean's December is of a piece with his earlier works where he consistently defends the deathless human values" (54).

Although America is a great and developed country, despite its prosperity and self-sufficiency the Americans are undergoing formidable problems. Bellow's fiction goes deep in observing the problematic life of the people on different levels. Gerhard Bach's observation is that "The Dean's December, although it does provide for conclusive insights into the American dilemma, first and foremost concentrates on the mental, sensual, and spiritual processes instrumental in procuring such insights" (106). Glorifying Saul Bellow's deep insight Ellen Pifer also remarks, "The Dean's December also exposes, to an unprecedented degree, the "clairvoyant" quality of Bellow's insight and his increasingly radical perception of reality" (165). The novel covers a vast range of life. It deals with philosophical ideas, haphazard violence, corruption of language, deceptive appearance and even death. As regards the vital range of the novel, Susan Roland comments:

The novel ranges from philosophical speculations to probings of apparently random violence and depictions of the intimacy of family life. Corde's quest for reality and transcendence traverses through contemporary corruption of language, appearances, death. His consciousness delicately poised, Corde is seen as the novel's connection between warring boundaries (19).

In The Dean's December, Bellow demonstrates the role of the individual self in a mass politicized society. When Dean Corde argues that the Hegelian spirit of the times is in us by nature, he makes an important point. It is that Corde, the
individual, belongs like others to the collective life of the country. But what happens with most others is that they simply accept the prevailing chaotic conditions, refusing to view them with detached objectivity. Corde tries to bring some kind of a perspective on the problem from which he will be able to learn a lesson or two about the essential human condition. So individuality with him means being responsible and sensitive to the course of history and he is not sympathetic to those who demand absolute extinction of individuality. Corde makes his point in the following observation, “To belong fully to the life of the country gave one strength, but why should these others, in their strength, demand that one’s own sense of existence … be dismissed with contempt” (DD 261).

Bellow presents his paradigmatic hero as a highly intellectual and articulate person. He excels in portraying the intellectual life of his protagonists. According to Allan Guttman, “No American novelist since Melville has dared more successfully than Bellow to dramatize the intellectual life” (127). Bellow presents his protagonist in an excellent manner. The reader instantly catches his thought. Nathan A. Scot, Jr., also praises Saul Bellow for presenting his heroes so brilliantly that we “feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose” (148). Bellow’s heroes move in the realm of thought and introspection. Albert Corde, Bellow’s protagonist in The Dean’s December, a former journalist and professor of journalism, is now the Dean of students at a Chicago College.

Corde’s effort is to improve the quality of life by restoring love and human concern. He tries to establish order, discipline and stability in a nihilistic society. He is disillusioned by the city culture of Chicago where crime is increasing, emotional quotients deteriorating, and love and concern for one another vanishing in this materialistic society. Eventually in his “self-absorbed internal world, the external world that he inhabits begins to lose its distinction” (Wilson 31).

Corde observes that the political and social problems are too complex for a quantitative approach and emphasises the need for a more sophisticated approach
for tackling these problems. Bellow points out that even intellectuals like social
scientists, journalists, and psychologists are evading details of the underlying
reality through “false descriptions”. Expressing his views in an interview Matthew
Roundane, Bellow believes that:

\[ \ldots \text{there is correspondence between outer and inner, between the brutalized city and psyche of its citizens. Given their human resources, I don’t see how people today can experience life at all.}
\]

Politicians, public figures, professors address “Modern Problems” solely in terms of employment. They assume that unemployment causes incoherence, sexual disorders, the abandonment of children, robbery, rape and murder. Plainly, they have no imagination of these evils. And in *The Dean’s December* what I did was to say, “look!” The first step is to display the facts. But the facts, unless the imagination perceives them, are not facts. Perhaps I shouldn’t say “perceives” – I should say “passionately takes hold”. As an artist does. Mr. Corde, The Dean, passionately hold of Chicago and writes his articles like an artist rather than a journalist.

(273).

It is the external factor that obstructs the expression of inner desire or the desire to communicate with others through love. The yearning of the self is to absorb the city culture and to promote truly what one feels. Bellow tells the interviewer.

I wanted to write a book about Chicago, and I went out to look at the town again. This new
injection didn’t inspire humor. The facts were dreadful. What were my thematic concerns, you ask? one of my themes is the American denial of real reality, our devices for evading it, our refusal to face what is all too obvious and palpable. The book is filled with protest against this evasion, against the techniques of illusion and the submission to taboos by means of which this is accomplished. Corde thinks that we are becoming wraiths, spooks. It seems to him that we have lost all capacity for dealing with experience — no capacity to think about it, no language for it, no real words (Roundane 270).

Corde’s desire is to be honest to the truth, an essential quality of love, but social expectations and conformity render him helpless. Though he is in possession of the essentials of love, that is, responsibility, knowledge, care, respect, welfare yet he feels helpless in showing all these essentials in a materialistic society in Chicago or Bucharest. Bellow further explains this:

The Dean is more important because it’s closer to the actual truth as that truth is experienced by intelligent human beings. Corde recognizes the necessity of ennobling recokening. He comes to understand that we carry about, within, an iceberg which has to be melted. Intellect, itself a source of coldness, must become involved in the melting project. To have intellect devoid of feeling is to be crippled. To recover the power of walk in feeling we begin by calling on the will.
The return of love begins with the study of love, with discipline. If you wish Eros to return you must prepare a suitable place for him (Roundane 270-71).

The underlying message that Bellow wants to give in *The Dean's December*, is that it is a love culture that alone can help human beings to survive among the growing materialism in contemporary society. Stanley Trachtenburg puts forward this observation about Bellow’s protagonists:

Environment has functioned less as an influence on events and characters than as a projection of their inner conflict, a symbol as well as an agent of inhuman darkness. Bellow’s protagonists are thus placed in a social environment but oppressed by personal natural forces that obscure the resulting tensions by developing them in oblique relation to their framing situations (8).

This very principle applies to Corde too who is promoting the idea of the correlation between inner desires and city culture.

As we meet Albert Corde, he is in Romania. He has accompanied his wife, Minna – a world renowned astronomer – to visit her dying mother, a doctor who has fallen out of grace with the Communist Party. Corde’s situation in Romania is claustrophobic. He rarely leaves the room. He meets and speaks with very few of the local inhabitants. He had come with his wife to lend support to her mother, Valeria:

But there was little he could do for Minna. Language was a problem. People spoke little French, less English. So Corde, The Dean, spent his days in
Minna’s old room sipping strong plum brandy, leafing through old books, staring out of the windows at earthquake-damaged buildings, winter skies, gray pigeons, pollarded trees, squalid orange-rusty trams hissing under trolley cables (DD 7).

Staying at the house of his mother-in-law, Corde experiences isolation. Life seems to him irregular in all spheres. About his predicament, Ellen Pifer remarks, “In Bucharest, the American Corde finds himself physically, socially, professionally and linguistically cut off from his regular life in Chicago” (165).

If we go back to Saul Bellow’s first novel Dangling Man, we shall at once note the similarity of the Dean’s situation to Joseph’s. Joseph’s alienation is self-imposed. His sense of his own powerlessness makes him seek a conscious isolation from others that leaves him alone in his room with his own increasingly distorted thoughts. Albert Corde’s situation is not of his own choosing, but he is largely isolated from those who visit Valeria’s apartment by his inability to speak the language, and aware of his impotence in a society in which he is literally ‘alien’. As Peter Hyland writes:

He consequently spends much of his time as Joseph did, brooding alone in dingy room looking out on to a depressing cityscape. The Dean too is ‘dangling man’, suspended between two worlds as he seeks a meaning for human history, and putting a misplaced faith in the certainty of his own understanding (92).

 Albert Corde’s mother-in-law has suffered from a heart attack and she is in the hospital. Only the party hospital has the machines to treat her but there were rigid rules. She is in the intensive care unit. Visitors are forbidden to go there. All are intimidated by the secret police. As a defector to the West – shielded by an
American passport and husband – Minna is hardly in favour with the authorities.
Most troublesome of all is a Colonel in the secret police:

Corde and Minna had flown a day and a night to be with her but in five days had seen her twice – the first time by special dispensation, the second without official permission. The hospital superintendent, a Colonel in the secret police, was greatly offended because his rules had been broken. He was a tough bureaucrat. The staff lived in terror of him (DD 7).

Minna and Corde manage to have a sensible talk with the colonel. The colonel lets them speak but “he darkly, dryly listened, mouth compressed” (DD 8). There has been an indecency. The administration cannot tolerate all that under any circumstances. Minna is outraged and is silent. Both Corde and Minna feel it:

Here only the colonel had the right to be outraged. His high feeling – and he allowed it to go very high – was moderated in expression only by the depth of his voice. How sharp could a basso sound? Corde himself had a deep voice, deeper than the Colonel’s, vibrating more. Where the Colonel was tight, Corde was inclined to loose (DD 8).

Thus a cruel and unforgiving bureaucracy, represented by a ‘whiplash Colonel’ of the secret police, is using its power to prevent Minna from visiting her mother in the hospital. Her visiting privileges are severely restricted. The energies of Corde and Minna are mainly expended on a struggle with this bureaucracy, as they try first to arrange to see Valeria in the hospital and then, after her death, to give her a dignified funeral. During this time Corde lives in Valeria’s decaying
apartment. He is visited by relatives and well-wishers. He observes the bleak existence of the inmates of what he calls a 'penitentiary society', grubbing for even the most basic material necessities, and silenced by fear of wiretapers and informers. His distaste for this grim place is aggravated by his anxieties about Minna, who he fears may still be subject to Romanian law. Roger Matuz writes, “In *The Dean’s December*, Bellow more directly attacks negative social forces that challenge human dignity” (26).

On his earlier visit to the crematorium, when Corde first accompanied Minna there to make arrangements for her mother’s funeral, he was astonished to find himself walking past a row of corpses. They were “neatly laid out in their best clothes” (*DD* 173). Clasping his briefcase to his chest, he prays: “Lord, I am ignorant and a stranger to my fellow men. I had thought that I understood things pretty well. Not so” (*DD* 173). What is most remarkable about Corde’s direct confrontation with the material fact of death, however, is the way that it undermines rather than reinforces rational orthodoxy. Standing there he acknowledges that the earth and its creatures contain within them the material fact of connection. Finding that his perceptions are becoming much more clear and much more singular as he contemplates the fact of his mother-in-law’s death, Corde reflects:

Valeria was certainly dead. She had died and she was dead, and last arrangements were being made. But he couldn’t say that she was dead to him. It wouldn’t have been an accurate statement. One might call this a comforting illusion, … but in fact there was nothing at all comforting about it, he could take no comfort in it. Nor was it anything resembling an illusion. It was more like an internal fact of which he became conscious. He hadn’t been looking for it. And he was not prompted to find a ‘rational’ cause for this. Rationality of this sort left
him cold. He owed it nothing. It was particularity that interested him... (DD 175-76).

Corde is convinced that this “internal fact” is his transcendent connection to Valeria, despite her physical obliteration. The only possible language for articulating the “internal fact” of Valeria’s unextinguishable life is the range of attachment. Corde knows that he loves Valeria even though he cannot empirically locate the seat of love’s power. From time immemorial human beings have, as a matter of convention and convenience, located the source of love in that muscular organ, the human heart. Corde understands, however, that his love for Valeria is really a mystery emanating from an invisible source – that “something” to which we assign names but we cannot objectively locate.

Corde feels his abiding connection to Valeria. When, shortly before her death, he along with his wife visits her in the hospital, he has an inkling of this connection – of the mystery of love and the source of emanation. In the intensive care ward, hooked up to various machines measuring her heartbeat and her rate of breathing, Valeria appears all but dead. Unable to open her eyes or to move her lips, she reacts with violent intensity, nonetheless, when her son-in-law delivers his emotional message in deep voice saying, “I also love you, Valeria” (DD 129). This has a violent effect on her. “One of her knees came up, her eyes, very full under the skin of the lids, moved back and forth. She made an effort to force them to open. Her face was taken by a spasm. The monitors jumped simultaneously. All the numbers began to tumble and whirl” (DD 129).

Once sitting over drinks, Corde narrowly observed his old friend Dewey Spangler who had reacted to his articles. Now Corde begins, in his mind, to caricature him as an inspiring man. Brooding over the burning of Valeria’s body, he sees his friend with awakened eyes. It is a direct manifestation of Corde’s developing powers of attachment:

Then for some reason, with no feeling of abruptness, he became curiously absorbed in
Dewey: blue eyes, puffy lids ... the whole human Spangler was delivered to Corde in the glass warmed-winter light with clairvoyant effect. He saw now that Spangler was downslanted in spirit... Seeing him so actual, vanities were dissipated, you were in no position to judge, and there was no need for judging... May be on this death day Corde was receiving secret guidance in seeing life. Perhaps at this very moment the flames were finishing Valeria, and therefore it was especially important to think what a human being really was (DD 242).

Corde, thus, discovers the power and freedom of attached observation. In such a vivid form of attachment, he comes to know that his soul has a lifelong freehold. He understands that there is no freedom, no reality without connection. “What you didn’t pass through your soul didn’t even exist... Reality didn’t exist out there. It began to be real only when the soul found its underlying truth. In generalities there was no coherence — none,” (DD 262). The highest responsibility for man then is to realize the world by connecting with its particulars. Ellen Pifer remarks, “Corde affirms, more directly than any previous Bellow protagonist, the soul’s connection to creation” (176).

Corde’s Romanian ordeal culminates in Valeria’s cremation. In a memorable scene that marks the emotional centre of the novel, Corde is asked to descend into the fiery crypt to identify the body and sign the death certificate before Valeria is committed to the furnace. Feeling himself crawling between heaven and earth, Corde performs this, his last service, for Valeria:

It was like a stokehold. It went into the tissues, drove all your moisture to the surface. Corde,
who had come down shivering, now felt the hot weight of the fedora, his sweatband soaking... There were other bodies preceding Valeria’s. Corde could only think of her as the dead, waiting to be burned. As between frost and flames, weren’t flames better? (DD 211).

After the cremation, he comes up to join the funeral party once again:

So, again the freezing dome and the crowd surrounding Minna. Better this cold than that heat. Corde’s breast as narrow as a ladder was crowded with emotions – fire, death, suffocation, put into an icy hole or, instead, crackling in a furnace. Your last options. They still appeared equally terrible... How to choose between them (DD 212).

By employing images and symbols like “fire”, “icy hole”, “stokehold” and the “freezing dome”, Bellow speaks to both our fear of termination and our hope of transcendence. Jeanne Braham remarks, “The Dean’s December attempts to decode the message of death and from it extract a new purpose for living” (117).

After Valeria’s funeral Corde challenges, in conversation with Vlada Voynich, Professor Beech’s assumption that “Liberal humanist culture is weak because it lacks scientific knowledge” (DD 220). He tells Vlada that a misplaced faith in scientific knowledge may constitute the real source of current social and cultural distress. Although Corde is convinced that Professor Beech is a man of feeling and even a visionary yet Corde finds the scientist’s language highly dangerous. Corde says, “where Beech sees poison lead, I see poison thought or
poison theory. The view we hold of the material world may put us into a case as heavy as lead...” (DD225).

As Corde shifts between immediate events in Romania and troubling developments at home, Bellow juxtaposes the worlds of Bucharest and Chicago, past and present, East and West. He draws the comparisons. The comparisons drawn between these far-flung cities begin with the weather: “No more sun, that was gone, only linty clouds and a low cold horizon. At daybreak there had been frost over the pavements; patches of it remained. It was like the Chicago winter, which shrank your face and tightened your sphincters” (DD 206). Even when Corde allows for the geographical, historical and political differences between the communist and capitalist cities, he is drawn to imagine a closer similarity: “If the cold reminded you of Chicago, the faces were from the ancient world. But then in Chicago, you had something like a vast international refugee camp, and faces from all over” (DD 207).

Similarly the “air-sadness” of the atmosphere in Romania is not simply a climatic condition. “Everywhere in Bucharest, the light was inadequate”; and every day, in “the final stage of dusk”, the fall of night brings “a livid death moment” (DD1). Like the Chicago winter it constantly recalls, December in Bucharest heralds more than the end of a year. More than the old social order is dying. At both ends of the world, Bellow suggests, the values by which humankind has aligned itself with creation are being obliterated. Moral principles, the distinction between good and evil, have been abandoned. Mechanistic concepts and data are the only approved signposts of reality. To Corde, contemporary society is a monstrous superstructure precariously erected. Daniel Fuchs remarks:

*The Dean's December* is a tale of two dismal cities. Bucharest is a disaster, an instance of “the penitentiary state”. The people who once embraced the Russians and built post-war Romania are now grovelling under the iron,
bureaucratic boot. Yet the “hard nihilism” of the Soviet bloc makes civilized gesture that much more touching. The small female band of intimates in Bucharest are like delicate flowers growing out of stone, the most minimal strumming yet of the axial lines. But from the dramatic point of view they are not worth all the description. Bellow lavishes, on them. Gigi, for example, is too dull for so much attention. She is not as interesting as the sad communist city itself. In the rendering of the urban place, Bellow is as superb as ever (306).

In view of dialectical anxieties, Susan Rowland says, “The Dean’s December absorbs dialectical anxieties into its narrative structure: the novel’s two cities, Bucharest and Chicago, are examples of diametrically opposed ruling systems. Both are examined through the shifts of consciousness of the protagonist, Dean Corde, to reveal significant resemblances” (19). As Corde says:

When we’ve worn ourselves out with our soft nihilism, the Russians would like to arrive with their hard nihilism. They feel humanly superior. Even the Russian dissidents, especially the right wing, take the high tone with us. They say, “we haven’t got justice or personal freedom but we do have warmth, humanity, brotherhood, and our afflictions have given us some character. All you offer us is supermarkets” (DD 273).

These immediate concerns are not Corde’s only worries. Once he was a successful journalist. His career as a journalist began in a spectacular manner. As
a young soldier in Europe near the end of the war he had, through personal contacts, been able to see at first hand the great Western leaders, Churchill, Stalin and Truman. He wrote a brilliant account of the Potsdam Conference for *The New Yorker*. Upon this foundation he had built a successful career as a journalist based in Paris. He was fully convinced, however, that the kinds of truth that the journalist must deal in are superficial and at their best no more than ‘high-grade intellectual plush’. He also saw a lack of poetry in this profession. He gave it up and entered the academic world. He wanted to get back to the reading and ideas that had inspired him in his youth. He is now professor of Journalism and Dean at a Chicago College. As both journalist and Dean, however, he brings to himself unwelcome and controversial attention by writing some articles about Chicago for *Harper’s* magazine.

He perceives the slums of Chicago as the inner city of the soul. As Corde puts it, “It was not so much the inner city slum that threatens us as the slum of innermost being, of which the inner city was perhaps a material representation” (*DD* 199). In his *Harper’s* articles Corde relentlessly criticizes the basic deficiencies of modern society: the courts of justice, where there is no justice, the overcrowded and inhumane jails, which only punish and do not correct; inadequate mental hospitals; poor ghetto schools; devastated housing projects; and the increasingly miserable and helpless maladjusted hordes falling farther and farther behind the rest of society and locked into a culture of despair and crime. Corde asks himself how cities, culture and humanity can be saved from disappearing. The sense of apocalyptic danger is overwhelming. It is characterised by a pandemic breakdown of cultural values when blatant crimes of the worst kind, rapes, murder and atrocious muggings become a banality. Corde is worried, harassed, meditative, disappointed, caught in a major existential crisis. Feeling responsibility, he precipitates the crisis and acts in an engaged manner. He is outspoken and courageous in criticizing contemporary society’s extremes and its dangerous decline. The novel is full of symbols of this degeneration. People
Corde jeopardizes his academic career by irritating his superiors. He now faces a choice. He can either desist his engaged and responsible attitude and rise in his career, or he can choose to continue his lonely efforts as a reformer and suffer academic sanctions. He eventually decides in favour of responsibility. He resigns as academic dean and takes up his former post as journalist. A major event that precipitates this decision is his outrage when a rapist keeps his innocent victim, a young mother, locked in the trunk of his car between the rapes and finally brutally murders her. Many people witness the crime, yet no one tries to stop him. The sentence pronounced is so light, Corde cannot understand how a court of justice can disregard its responsibility and act so unjustly. Bellow criticizes social institutions that routinely shift blame from the criminal to parents, education and surroundings. This irresponsible brand of pseudo-freudianism glorifies the psychological traumas of childhood and mistakenly regards them as excuses for even the most abominable crimes. Corde sees this phenomenon as spawning a growing adulation of violence and crime. He is ready to pay a high price for his moral courage, showing in his abandonment of an academic career, the extremely high value he places on engagement and responsibility. In *The Dean's December*, Bellow, true to his conception of engaged and responsible fiction, questions the historical progress of human civilization. The questions he implicitly poses are deeply disturbing: He questions if people wanted crime, violence, war and the jungle-like conditions in New York and Chicago. Ada Aharoni remarks, “Bellow’s novels remain, first of all, excellent works of art. It is precisely because of their brilliant literary and artistic value that they are such effective messages of engagement and human responsibility, both in literature and in life” (47).
As if that were not enough Corde also became involved in another set of events with racial overtones. A student at his college, Rick Lester, was killed in a fall. “Rick Lester’s face had the substracted look of the just dead. He had crashed through the window of his own third floor apartment, and his skull was broken on the cement. His longish hair was damp (with blood?) and hung backwards. His slender feet were dirty” (DD 32). What had happened? As yet the cops had little to say. The Dean listened to whatever they could tell about Rick Lester’s visit to a bar and going back to his home:

The cops rumbled on, doing their heavy minimum for this dean. It wasn’t so much that they were cynical, but their big-city-homicide look was summed up in the thickness of their cheeks and bodies more than their words. The words were only a kind of stuffing. May be this boy had hot pants, or drank more than he could hold, or was freaked out on Quaaludes. Blood tests, would tell. He may have known the party or parties who pushed him from the window. But although they sounded knowledgeable, the professional work of the cops wasn’t too good. They moved slowly, indifferent. The mobile crime lab didn’t do its job. And then it turned out that the coroner’s report was incomplete. It became all worse, not better, as summer ended. The undertaker did not do what he was supposed to do” (DD 34).

Regarding Corde’s critical position, Peter Hyland remarks, “through the imperatives of his own moral fervour he has found himself in a peculiarly ironic position where, having accused Chicago of racism, he is himself the “target of the
same accusation" (1). Corde tells the Provost that he has a list of funds from which money can be taken. To quote Peter Hyland again, "Corde’s activities have deeply embarrassed his college, and its Provost, Alec Witt, is clearly waiting for an opportunity to get rid of him" (91).

As soon as the reward is announced, witnesses come forward. And within twenty four hours, two suspects are arrested on their evidence. One is Lucas Ebry and the other a prostitute with a long criminal record. While Lucas Ebry is Mason’s friend, Mason himself is the son of Corde’s widowed sister, Elfrida. For a while he has taken special courses in computer science and is still connected with the college. Immediately, he organizes a resistance movement, a defense campaign. The radical student line is that the college wages a secret war against the blacks and that “the Dean was scheming with the prosecution, using the college’s clout to nail the black man” (DD 35). Resolutions are passed and published in the student daily which takes up the case in a big way.

Albert Corde’s problem is that he is unable to find the right tone for dealing with the world. His sister’s view about him is that he has a minimum of common ground with the people around him. He is an essentially impractical man who believes he has grasp on some higher truth, some mystical essence beyond the surface of things. He has the brown gaze of an intricate mind of an absent, probably dreamy tendency and let the sharpies clean him out. The sharpies are certainly after Corde. His cousin Detillion has already cleaned him out. The tough men, realists like his late brother-in-law Zaehner and the Provost, Alec Witt, have nothing but contempt for what Zaehner calls Corde ‘dud dean’. Even Dewey Spangler sees in Corde an apparent need to self-destruction. But as with so many of Bellow’s heroes, what makes Corde valuable is also what causes his problems – his uncompromising opposition to these reality instructors or pragmatists, his refusal to be limited by what they see as truth. For what Corde wants to say, insists on saying, is that there is evil in the world.
Judie Newman says that Bellow “dramatizes ideas in the events of the Chicago plot” (441). A secondary figure in the plot of The Dean’s December, is Maxie Detillion, Mason’s lawyer and Corde’s cousin. Persistently erotic, Maxie has previously guided Corde around the sex joints of Chicago. Now cross-examining Rick Lester’s widow, he is seductive in manner. “He did not know that he oppressed her by wooing her” (DD 95). Maxie characterizes himself as Eros:

He was anything but a screwer of girls. No, he was the agent or personification of Eros, all aflame, all gold, crimson, radiant, experiencing divine tumescence, bringing life. The power to bless womankind was swelling in his pants (DD 98).

In the past, Corde had colluded with Maxie in his self-deception, lending an intellectual glass to Maxie’s activities, in return for “access to the Playboy Mansion, and broads easy to get” (DD 98). In addition he had allowed his cousin to obtain powers of attorney from him and had in consequence lost a considerable sum of money. Only the intervention of Mason Zaehner, senior, had finally brought the swindle to light. At one point Mason reproaches Corde, arguing that he must have known the extent of Maxie’s chicanery: “Corde did have an idea, certainly, but he kept it shrouded. It belonged to group of shrouded objects which he promised himself one day to examine” (DD 97).

As a result of Zaehner’s persistence, Corde is finally forced to take action against Maxie, who “was exposed, was unshrouded” (DD 99). In this plot sequence, the light shines upon Eros revealing him for what he is — a monster. Corde describes Maxie as “suffering from erotic collapse,” something akin to one of “Balzac’s sex monsters” (DD 72). Maxie has no firm sense of himself. His greed for sex and money is a part of his need to create a personality for himself. Corde argues that, had Maxie been rich, he might have been able to conceal his
peculiarity He says:

You become an impregnable monster if you had money, so that if to begin with you felt yourself to be monstrous you could build impregnability by making a fortune. Because then you were a force of nature, although a psychopath. Or, if you were without any persona, then, you bought a persona (DD 103).

From his encounter with Maxie, Corde learns of the necessity of confronting his own Eros, without any masking intellectual cover. He still has much to learn, however. As the agent of exposure, Zaehner acts from a low, cynical vision of humanity, and Corde decides that “Zaehner was no great archetype” (DD 99).

In The Dean’s December, Bellow presents his angriest and most horrified version of a modern world on the edge of apocalypse. America as represented here by Chicago is an urban hell, a derelict society about to sink into the vast sewer. Corde thinks of it as a moronic inferno. The Chicago slums are inhabited by a chaotic army, blacks, Koreans, East Indians, Chippewas, Thais and Hillbillies, squad cars, ambulances, firefighters, thrift shops, drug hustlers, lousy bars, alley filth. The threat of violence is everywhere, bursting out of represented lives, as rape and robbery escalate into murder. The helplessness of this infernal Chicago and the quality of Corde’s response to it are brilliantly caught in an account of his visit to a detoxification centre:

The one remaining landmark was the abandoned Englewood Station – huge blocks of sandstone set deep, deep in the street, a kind of mortuary isolation, no travelers now, no passenger trains. A dirty snow brocade over the empty lots, and black men keeping warm at oil-drum bonfires. All
this – low sky, wind, weed skeletons, ruin – went to Corde’s nerves, his ‘Chicago wiring system’ with peculiar effect. ... he parked and got out of the car feeling the lack of almost everything you needed, humanly. Christ, the human curve had sunk down to base level, had gone beneath it. If there was another world, this was the time for it to show itself. The visible one didn’t bear looking at (DD 187).

The contemplative Dean attends to his surroundings “as if he had been sent down to mind the outer world, on a mission of observation and notation” (DD 208). Corde’s task is “to recover the world that is buried under the debris of false description or non-experience” (DD 240).

These passages illustrate beautifully the relationship between landscape and vision in the novel. What Corde sees is a measure for evaluating the world. The barrenness of this landscape of poverty is matched by the spiritual barrenness of the city’s rich and powerful, the Chicago insiders. Corde thinks of Chicago as the contempt centre of the U.S.A. and as such its best representative is his late brother-in-law Zaehner. Zaehner’s contempt is for what he sees as Corde’s ivory-tower escapism, his failure to understand the real Chicago, but Zaehner’s own realism is actually an arrogant pragmatism that Corde describes as brutal. The Provost of Corde’s College, Alec Witt, is described in similar terms to Zaehner’s. Even Dewey Spangler, a figure of international sophistication, owes his success to a predator’s view of the world. He manipulates the cultural capital of his early intellectual education into a career and it is his predatory instinct that finally makes him destroy the career of his old friend and rival, Corde. In the words of Peter Hyland, “This Chicago contempt attitude is to do with the loss of a sense of what is properly to be valued (94).
The novel deals with the loss of morality prevalent in wealthy society. It is haunted by a line from Shelley's sonnet 'England in 1819', about the loss of moral authority of the dying King George III. The significance of Shelley's poem for Bellow is clear with its rendering of a divided society with rulers who can neither see nor feel nor know. The moral blindness of those who neither see nor feel nor know is presented in the scene, at once comic and appalling, in which Corde attends a party that he discovers is for a dog. This scene is symbolic. In a luxurious apartment high above the starved and stabbed in the wrecked Chicago streets, a group of wealthy socialities give presents and sing 'Happy Birthday' to a Great Dane that becomes for Corde, the Great Beast of the Apocalypse, a final sign of the catastrophe awaiting a derelict civilization.

The novel hints at America's failure to maintain its historical position of moral leadership. Corde in his articles, seeks to prevent it from being pounded into dust altogether. In struggling to define it, he keeps coming back to the word 'decency'. His interest in the murder of Rick Lester arises from his conviction that the young man was essentially good and trying to live a "decently organised life". Lester's widow is a good young woman, with "decent instincts". In his investigation of the Chicago underclass, Corde's opinion about Rufus Ridpath is that, "He seems to me a decent, intelligent public servant" (DD 52). The word "decency" seems to imply a degree of altruism, of self-control and a sense that there are some things that are absolutely wrong. Once Corde comes across the U.S. Ambassador in Bucharest. In his discussion with him, Corde talks about the way in which a scale of "evil" has developed. He says, "... everybody now follows a scale: A is bad, but B is worse and C worse still. When you reach N, unspeakable evil, A becomes trivial" (DD 68). He is talking about the repressive Romanian regime, but the relativism he is defining is what has undermined the American idea. Corde wants to insist on a recognition that A's badness is not made trivial by the fact that other things are worse. He thinks that men have a responsibility to do right. It is due to this belief that Corde is reluctant to accept
Sam Beech’s theory that bad poisoning is the cause of the decline of civilization. Corde’s view is that human responsibility cannot be denied on purely material causes of evil.

Bellow shows Chicago as male-dominated. Chicago brutality is so distinctly masculine that even the prostitute Riggie Hines, involved in the killing of Rick Lester, is described as being man-like. In Bucharest, the oppressors are men but all that is positive and healing comes from women. In this world of women, Corde’s own testing takes place. He has to prove his worth to Valeria for getting married to her daughter, Minna. Corde has a reputation as a swinger. But he insists on having decency, maturity, intelligence, responsibility and marital standards.

Albert Corde is a Protestant. All Bellow’s protagonists of Saul Bellow, except Eugene Henderson, are Jewish. They are burdened with problems and many of them are related to their Jewishness. Corde too has several problems. They are not monumental problems interfering with life but rather the disturbances of everyday living. These problems call for an inner strength that comes with security of place, self-acceptance and social acceptance. Corde does not have the problem of proving himself. He does not wrestle with angels or alter egos. Unlike his Jewish fictional forebears, he discharges self-assurance. About the individuality of Corde, L.H. Goldman opines, “He is essentially a strong individual with a moral mission to right the wrongs of the world or at least to disseminate information concerning troubled mankind” (239). Whenever Corde gets an opportunity, he discourses upon “Western humanism, civilized morality, nihilism East and West” (DD 68). Albert Corde shows this strength of character during all phases of his life: Although he changes careers, yet he does not have any mid-life crises. He easily takes decisions. When Minna is in a fix and wants to know what to do, he never wavers. He has answers. He has suggestions. When he has his confrontation with Alec Witt over Spangler’s article, he knows what he
has to do. He tenders his resignation. His life doesn’t fall apart even at that point. He is ready to go back to journalism. Thus he is high-minded and a man of principle.

Near the end of *The Dean’s December*, Corde is back in Chicago. There is a crucial passage in the novel, which gives a profound insight in Bellow’s attitude toward the decline of the great Western cities. This passage clarifies Bellow’s view that a fictional work can accurately delineate the contemporary crisis:

Cities (this had been impressed on Corde when he pored over Blake – Spangler had not stopped him by kidding him about it) – cities were moods, emotional states, for the most part collective distortions, where human beings thrived and suffered, where they invested their souls in pains and pleasures, taking these pleasures and pains as proofs, or reality. Thus ‘Cain’s city built with murder’, and other cities built with Mystery, or Pride, all of them emotional conditions and great centers of delusion and bondage, death. It seemed to Corde that he had made an effort to find out what Chicago, U.S.A., was built with. His motive – to follow this through – came out of what was eternal in man. What mood was this city? The experience, puzzle, torment of a lifetime demanded interpretation (*DD* 281).

Allan Chavkin remarks, “Corde’s meditation upon the city is actually a meditation upon the spiritual malady of modern civilization and an exploration of the soul. It is Corde’s attempt to define the self and determine ‘What was eternal
in man' " (22). Bellow openly goes against the negative social forces, working against human dignity. He asserts that human dignity must be defended. Daniel G. Marowski and Jean C. Stine remark:

In *The Dean's December*, Bellow undertakes a more direct attack against the negative social forces that challenge human dignity. Set in depressed areas of Chicago and Bucharest, Romania, this novel focuses on Albert Corde, a respected Journalist who has recently returned to academic life in order to revive his love of high culture. In the course of the novel, Corde admonishes, those who have failed to maintain humanistic values, including politicians, liberal intellectuals, journalists and bureaucrats, in both democratic and communist nations (65).

The novel *The Dean's December*, ends with a clear picture of connection with society. This vision is not the product of mere sentiments. Saul Bellow firmly suggests that the soul and the world are together so constituted that the one is drawn to other. They are intimately and intersubjectively related. This internal fact constitutes Corde's ultimate revelation of his bond with all people:

You were drawn to feel and to penetrate further, as if you were being informed that what was spread over you had to do with your existence, down to the very blood and the crystal forms inside your bones. Rocks, trees, animals, men and women, these also drew you to penetrate further, under the distortions (Comparable to the atmosheric ones, shadows within shadows), to
find their real being with your own (*DD 306*).

From this deep experience of attachment, Albert Corde receives, paradoxically, a heady sense of freedom. The claustrophobia of modern consciousness is here transcended.
WORK CITED

Bellow, Saul. *The Dean’s December*. New York: Penguin Books, 1982. Subsequent references will be incorporated into the text with the abbreviation DD.


Scott. 105.

