

“saul bellow’s *henderson, the  
rain king* — a coming to terms  
with his self and with the world  
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"Saul Bellow's Henderson, The Rain King - a Coming to Terms With His Self And With The World Around."

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As the plot focuses on Henderson, our starting point will be a presentation of his most important characteristics, so we can better understand the developing of the action.

Henderson, at the age of fifty-five, is not a happy man. Although he has a nice wife and kids, plenty of money and time to enjoy life and its pleasures, he thinks he has made a mess of his life.

Physically, he describes himself as "six feet four inches tall. Two hundred and thirty pounds - An enormous head, rugged, with hair like Persian lamb's fur. Suspicious eyes, usually narrowed. Blustering ways. A great nose" (p.8). His appearance is, to say the least, remarkable. And he made it still more remarkable by the kind of clothes he liked to wear. He is a person who requires "large and real emotions" (p. 25) and that is why he was happy when he was in the war; the civilian life bored him. Although he is always quarreling and many times "behaved like a bum", he wants to belong, to be accepted. On p. 256, when he's telling about one of his experiences with king Dahfu, what kind of words came instinctively from his mouth? "and certain words crept into my roars, like "God", "Help", "Lord Have Mercy"... plus snatches from the Messiah (he was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows, etcetera". He feels there is a similarity between the Messiah and himself.

Another aspect of his contradictory personality is the combination of sensitivity and a taste for hard manual work. The same hands that have "thrown down boars and pinned them and gelded them" (p. 32) also played the violin.

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The same person that on a resort "sat on the beach shooting stones at bottles and put bourbon in the morning coffee, could also respond to the beauty of an autumn day: "Let's say it's one of those velvety days of early autumn, when the sun is shining on the pines and the air has a spice of cold and stings your lungs with pleasure. I see a large pine tree on my property and in the green darkness underneath, which somehow the pigs never got into, red tuberous begonias grow and a broken stone inscription put in by my mother says "goe happy rose..." (pp. 30-31).

Henderson is an educated man, but all the knowledge he's acquired hasn't helped him come to terms with the world or with himself. "...while I got an M.A. to please my father I always behaved like an ignorant man and a bum" (p. 25).

He feels "very little affection for the iron age of technology" (p. 111) and has a sense that although man has developed in so many ways, he still has to discover how to cope with the essentials.

As he says on p. 258, "All the major tasks and the big conquests were done before my time. That left the biggest problem of all, which was to encounter death".

If Henderson had lived some hundred years ago, he should have found many grandiose causes to engage himself in, but he is only aware of the feeling that his spirit is sleeping and of a voice within that repeats "I want, I want!" "Now I have already mentioned that there was a disturbance in my heart, a voice that spoke there and said I want, I want, I want'." (p. 26).

It is because of this feeling that something is missing, that something should be done, that Henderson decides to buy a ticket to Africa. This trip can be considered as the turning point in his life.

His first impressions of the African landscape are a clue to what he is searching.

As he describes it "it was all simplified and splendid and I felt I was entering the past - the real past, no history or junk like that" (p. 46) The landscape is reduced to the essentials the mountains were naked without trees and you could see "the clouds being born on the slopes". What Henderson pursues, is also to be reduced to the essentials - he wants a fresh start, without the "baggage" of the past.

By baggage he means all his prejudices, all the conditionings imposed on him throughout his life.

His stay in Africa can be considered as a process of learning and several steps can be distinguished during the process.

Even before landing, Africa looked to him like "the ancient bed of mankind".

He had an impression it could be a new start for him - "I felt I might have a chance here" (p. 43) He feels he's entering "The prehuman past" (p. 46). This "prehuman past" can in a way be understood as his unconscious - so we can infer that what he is really seeking is self-knowledge. To attain this self-knowledge, Henderson feels that he has to deprive himself of many things, so he compares himself to a hermit that goes to the desert. "Let me throw away my gun and my helmet and the lighter and all this stuff and maybe I can get rid of my fierceness too and live out there on worms. On locusts until all the bad is burned out of me" (p. 49).

When he has his first meeting with the Arnewi, Henderson is deeply aware of the physical discrepancies in him: "My face is like some sort of terminal, it's like Grand Central

I mean - the big horse nose and the wide mouth that opens into the nostrils and eyes like tunnels" (p. 51).

His wrestling with Itelo was an important step in his process of learning.

He perceived that for the Arnewi, emotional experiences are inseparably associated with physical experiences: the wrestling itself was a communication - before communicating orally, the Arnewi communicated with their bodies - and this was real, primitive communication, that he was unable to get in the civilized world.

"But I have to tell you that it wasn't the defeat alone that made him (Itelo) cry like this. He was in the midst of a great and mingled emotional experience. I tried to get my foot off the top of his head, but he held it there persistently, saying, Oh, Mistah Henderson! Henderson, I know you now. Oh, sir I know you now! (p. 67).

Itelo's gesture, wrapping his arms around Henderson and laying his head on Henderson's shoulder, to indicate friendliness, would be unacceptable by civilized standards, but it had a tremendous effect on Henderson: "This hit me where I lived, right in the vital centres both with suffering and with gratification" (p. 68). The Arnewi gave Henderson an impression of physical and mental harmony: they were dignified, happy, good natured and showed real warmth. When he gets to know queen Willa-tale, Henderson felt "the calm pulsation of her heart participating in the introduction" (p. 69).

This was a contrast with the civilized world he had left, where no real, intimate communication existed. Among the Arnewi Henderson feels that he isn't rejected and this is a new experience to him. As Itelo tells him, both Itelo's aunts admire the way Henderson looks and consider him "Very good. Primo. Class A" (p. 72). Henderson doesn't

feel uneasy about his appearance:

"Boy, am I glad my physical strength is good for something instead of being a burden as it mostly has been throughout life" (p. 72).

We get to know that Henderson is searching for identity - he's unable to answer the question "who are you?" posed to him by the queen. He tries to define himself, to describe how he is and what he wants, but doesn't know "where to begin".

Nevertheless, he is aware that the way of bursting the spirit's sleep is suffering or by love. "It's too bad, but suffering is about the only reliable burster of the spirit's sleep. There is a rumour of long standing that love also does it" (p. 75).

Little by little Henderson gets closer to an answer for the question that bothers him: "who are you?". The description he gives of himself on p. 81 is very significant: "I have never been at home in life. All my decay has taken place upon a child". What he has to learn is how to come to terms with himself and with life.

He has an intuition that the queen may give him some of the answers he's looking for, because women's love and the great principles of life are connected. "I have observed a connection between women's love and the great principles of life" (p. 91). Obscurely he feels that the queen is a representation of the ancient wisdom - he identifies her with the great mother earth.

One of the steps in his process to self-awareness is to feel a new apprehension of reality. One morning when he wakes up, he sees the colours of sunrise on the wall of his hut and becomes aware that the loveliness of it affected him in a new way. "At once I recognized the

importance of this, as throughout my life I had known these moments when the dumb begins to speak, when I hear the voices of objects and colours; then the physical universe starts to wrinkle and change and heave and rise and smooth, so it seems that even the dogs have to lean against a tree, shivering" (p. 95).

This experience of a new perception of reality is the same Aldous Huxley tells about, in his book "The Doors of Perception". It is the same experience we have with drugs, when our perceptions are not blocked. It is the way a child sees the world, with the eyes of innocence. Henderson was aware that his spirit was not sleeping then. "My spirit was not sleeping then. I can tell you, but was saying. Oh, ho, ho, ho, ho, ho, ho!" (p. 97). He has gone through a vital experience and this was just the opposite of the one he had in the aquarium, looking at the octopus. The octopus had been death for him, but that experience had been life - he had felt "at the fringe of the Nirvana" (p. 97). The next experience Henderson had was disastrous - trying to help the Arnewi get rid of the frogs, he destroyed their water - supply. In a way, he becomes aware that what he did was to use violence to solve problems, as he had done so many times in his life and violence was useless.

After that, he leaves the Arnewi's land goes to another tribe, the Wariri, which represents one more step in his search for self-knowledge.

Henderson is aware that each one has his own kind of reality - not the physical one, but mental reality: "The world of facts is real, all right, and not to be altered. The physical is all there, and it belongs to science. But then there is the noumenal department, and there we create, and create, and create". (p. 157). As for his body, Henderson recognizes that he never accepted himself like



he was. He and his body never got together like friends and the same can be said for his mind. The impression of dignity and beauty and happiness - harmony - that struck him as he saw the Arnewi was due to their being friendly to, accepting their own bodies. They were on good terms with themselves.

"Oh, my body, my body! Why have we never really got together as friends? I have loaded it with my vices, like a raft, like a barge. Oh, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (p. 171). So, for Henderson, finding himself would mean learning to accept himself, to come to terms with himself, and as a consequence of this, to come to terms with the world.

He knows that it is "the memory of last defeats" that prevents him from doing so.

His meeting with king Dahfu is important - he is going to learn more about himself. Queen Willatale had recognized as Henderson's most important trait his "Grun-tu-molani" - desire of living. Now Dahfu tells him that this desire of living "is much, but it is not alone sufficient. Mr. Henderson, more is required" (p. 209). According to Dahfu, what characterizes Henderson is a "desire of salvation". Henderson is seeking answers to the question "What will become of me"? (p. 204).

The king has a theory that the mind can shape the form of the body - the process of change can begin from the core (the mind) to the rind (the body) or vice-versa. It is a dynamic process: "And what he was engrossed by was a belief in the transformation of human material, that you could work either way, either from the rind to the core or from the core to the rind; the flesh influencing the mind, the mind influencing the flesh, back again to the mind, back

once more to the flesh. The process as he saw it was utterly dynamic" (p. 220).

This theory makes Henderson realize that the discomfort he felt about his appearance was due to his having absorbed characteristics of the pigs he used to breed in his farm (p. 251).

During his stay among the Wariri, Henderson recognizes that what is most important in his life is the love he feels for Lily and his children: he wants to come back to them. He also recognizes that he has often evaded reality and this was one of the main causes of his suffering - so he prays "Heavenly Father, open up my dumb heart and for Christ's sake, preserve me from unreal things" (p. 236).

King Dahfu wants to prove his theory so he takes Henderson to his lioness, Atti, which was kept in a den under the royal palace. He expected that Henderson would absorb the qualities of the lion, which he considered possessed remarkable strength, harmony and nobility.

Although the king's theory cannot be taken seriously, some of the techniques he uses with Henderson are sound and are used in modern therapy. What he was really trying to do was to make Henderson achieve a new awareness of his own body - he wanted Henderson to move his limbs freely, without the rigidity which is commonly found in persons who are repressed: "Your structure is far from ordinary... But I offer you sincerest congratulations on laying aside the former attitude of fixity. Now, Sir, will you assume a little more limberness? You appear cast in one piece. The midriff dominates. Can you move the different portions? Minus yourself of some of your heavy reluctance of attitude. Why so sad and earthen?" (p. 248). By requiring Henderson to roar and snarl like a lion, the king

encourages him to give physical expression to all his repressed feelings getting rid of them; that's why what the king describes as 'pathos' on that performance, for Henderson meant "a cry which summarized my entire course, on this earth, from birth to Africa; and certain words crept into my roars, like 'god', 'Help', 'Lord have mercy'. Only they came out 'Hoooolp!' 'Mooooorcy!'. It's funny what words sprang forth" (256). Although Henderson is not really sure of what king Dahfu is trying to do, he's aware he must be changed somehow.

One thing is certain: he's got in the habit of reflection.

Henderson realizes that the mess he had made of his life was due to the fact that he's always been a man of action without thought: "...this is the payoff of a lifetime of action without thought. If I had to shoot at that cat, if I had to blow frogs, if I had to pick up Mummah without realizing what I was getting myself into, it was not out of line to crouch on all fours and roar and act like a lion" (p. 269). He became aware that he could overcome his old self - though not through Dahfu's experiments. He is also conscious that only in infancy you are a part of the natural world.

At the end of the book, after Dahfu dies, Henderson decides to escape from the Wariri and go back to America, to his family.

Dahfu's death made him understand that he had been trying to escape reality all his life. "The snarling of this animal was indeed the voice of death. And I thought how I had boasted to my dear Lily how I loved reality. I love it more than you do, I had said. But oh, unreality!. Unreality, unreality! That has been my scheme for a

troubled but eternal life. But now I was blasted away from this fact by the throat of the lion. His voice was like a blow at the back of my head" (p. 287).

After his escaping from the Wariri in the company of Romilayu, Henderson has time for reflection and he evaluates his feelings for Lily and comes to the conclusion he had always loved her: "I therefore might as well be at home where my wife loves me. And even if she only seemed to love me that too was better than nothing. Either way I had tender feelings toward her" (p. 307).

His own problems had been caused by his inadaptability to reality and not by his relationship with his wife.

Henderson also evaluates his feelings toward the universe and feels that he has to try to live in harmony with it - as a result he will be in harmony with himself too: "Oh, you can't get away from rhythm, Romilayu. You just can't get away from it. The left hand shakes with the right hand, the inhale follows the exhale, the systole talks back to the diastole, the hands play patty cake and the feet dance with each other. And the seasons. And the stars and all of that. And the tides, and all that junk. You've got to live at peace with it because if it's going to worry you, you'll lose. You can't win against it. It keeps on, and on, and on" (p. 307). Thinking about his past, Henderson tries to understand his father. It's important for him to do so, because the main source of his feeling of rejection and his consequent hostility to the world lies in the fact that he sensed that his father was angered at him when his brother Dick died and he didn't forgive Henderson for not having died in place of his brother.

After all that's happened to him, Henderson is now able to realize that the anger his father expressed was not directed at him, but at life in general: "An old man,

disappointed, of failing strength may try to reinvigorate himself by means of anger. Now I understand it. But I couldn't see it at sixteen, when I had a falling out" (p. 314).

The book ends with a note of hope and with symbols of life, implying that Henderson may have a fresh start.

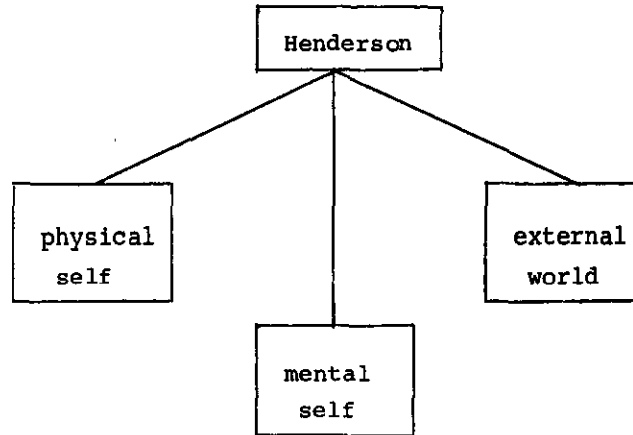
The orphan he meets at the plane is a symbol of life to him. He perceives that the child's eyes "had that new lustre. With it they had ancient power, too. You could never convince me that this was for the first time" (p. 317). He sees in the child a manifestation of the eternal cycle of life - he (the child) is a living part of the natural world.

When Henderson gets off the plane in Newfoundland the "frozen ground of almost eternal winter" and the pure fresh air are also a symbol of life. Henderson feels that the boy and the air act on him as a remedy, giving him new hope and confidence (last page).

He seems to be more at home with himself and with his surroundings.

We come to the conclusion that Henderson's process of learning consisted of finding a new relationship with his body and his mind and a new relationship with the world.

It can be summarized in a diagram:



This relationship consisted of a new awareness of his self and of the natural world around him.