

DANGLING MAN-Saul Bellow

TEXT LINE

Dangling Man is a short novel in the form of a journal. The journal keeper is a young Chicagoan—Joseph—an unemployed history graduate, supported by his working wife. He uses his journal to explore how he became what he is, and in particular to understand why, about a year ago, he abandoned the philosophical essays he was writing and began to “dangle.”

So wide does the gap seem between himself as he is now and this earnest, innocent past self that he thinks of himself as the earlier Joseph’s double, wearing his cast-off clothes.

Though the earlier Joseph self-had been able to function in society, to strike a balance between his work in a travel agency and his scholarly inquiries, he was troubled by a sense of alienation from the world. From his window he would survey the urban prospect—chimneys, warehouses, billboards, parked cars. Does such an environment not deform the soul? “Where was there a particle of what, elsewhere, or in the past, had spoken in man’s favor? ... What would Goethe say to the view from this window?”

It may seem comical that in the Chicago of 1941 someone should have been occupied in such grandiose musings, says Joseph the journal keeper, but in each of us there is an element of the comic or fantastic. Yet he recognizes that by mocking the earlier Joseph’s philosophizing he is denying his better self.

Though in the abstract the early Joseph is prepared to accept that man is aggressive by nature, he can detect in his own heart nothing but gentleness. One of his remoter ambitions is to found a utopian colony where spite and cruelty would be forbidden.

Therefore he is dismayed to find himself being overtaken by fits of unpredictable violence. He loses his temper with his adolescent niece and spans her, shocking her parents. He manhandles his landlord. He shouts at a bank employee. He seems to be “a sort of human grenade whose pin has been withdrawn.” What is happening to him?

An artist friend tells him that the monstrous city around them is not the real world: the real world is the world of art and thought. Joseph respects this position: through sharing with others the products of his imagination, the artist allows an aggregate of lonely individuals to become some kind of community.

He, Joseph, is unfortunately not an artist. His sole talent is for being a good man. But what is the point of being good by oneself? “Goodness is achieved not in a vacuum, but in the company of other men, attended by love.” Whereas “I, in this room, separate, alienated, distrustful, find in my purpose not an open world, but a closed, hopeless jail.”

In a powerful passage, Joseph the journal keeper links his violent outbursts to the unbearable contradictions of modern life. Brainwashed into believing that each of us is an individual of inestimable value with an individual destiny, that there is no limit to what we can attain, we set off in quest of our own individual greatness. Failing to find it, we begin to “hate immoderately and

punish ourselves and one another immoderately. The fear of lagging [behind] pursues and maddens us ... It makes an inner climate of darkness. And occasionally there is a storm of hate and wounding rain out of us.”

In other words, by enthroning Man at the center of the universe, the Enlightenment, particularly in its Romantic phase, imposed impossible psychic demands on us, demands that work themselves out not just in petty fits of violence such as his own, or in such moral aberrations as the pursuit of greatness through crime (vide Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov), but also perhaps in the war that is consuming the world. That is why, in a paradoxical move, Joseph the journal writer finally lays down his pen and enlists. The isolation imposed by the ideology of individualism, he concludes, redoubled by the isolation of self-scrutiny, has brought him to the brink of insanity. Perhaps war will teach him what he has been unable to learn from philosophy. So he ends his journal with the cry:

Hurray for regular hours!

And for the supervision of the spirit!

Long live regimentation!

Joseph draws a fine between the mere self-obsessed individual wrestling with his thoughts and the artist, who through the demiurgic faculty of the imagination turns his petty personal troubles into universal concerns. But the pretence that Joseph’s private wrestlings are mere journal entries meant for his eyes alone is barely maintained. For among the entries are pages—renderings of city scenes for the most part, or sketches of people Joseph

meets— whose heightened diction and metaphoric inventiveness betray them as productions of the poetic imagination that not only cry out for a reader but reach out to and create a reader. Joseph may pretend he wishes us to think of him as a failed scholar, but we know, as he must suspect, that he is a born writer.

*Dangling Man is long on reflection, short on action. It occupies the uneasy ground between the novella proper and the personal essay or confession. Various personages come onstage and exchange words with the protagonist, but beyond Joseph in his two sketchy manifestations there are no characters, properly speaking. Behind the figure of Joseph can be discerned the lonely, humiliated clerks of Gogol and Dostoevsky, brooding upon revenge; the Roquentin of Sartre's *Nausea*, the scholar who undergoes a strange metaphysical experience that estranges him from the world; and the lonely young poet of Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. In this slim first book Bellow has not yet developed a vehicle adequate to the kind of novel he is feeling his way towards, one that will offer the customary novelistic satisfactions, including involvement in what feels like real-life conflict in a real-life world, and yet leave the author free to deploy his reading in European literature and thought in order to explore problems in contemporary life. For that step in Bellow's evolution we will have to wait for *Herzog* (1964).*

J.M. Coetzee

OUTLINE SUMMARY

Expecting to be inducted into the army, Joseph, the protagonist, gives up his job with the Inter American Travel Bureau. A series of mix - ups delays his induction and leaves him dangling. He finds himself facing a year of idleness. 'Dangling Man' is his journal, his diary in which he makes entries regularly from December, 15, 1942 to April 9, 1943. The journal gives a wonderful account of his restless wanderings through Chicago's streets, his musings on the past, his psychological reaction to his inactivity while war rages around him and his uneasy insights into the nature of freedom and choice. The diary ends with his entrance into the army during World War II.

DETAILED SUMMARY

Joseph, a graduate of the University of Wincousin, married for five years, has to give up his job at the Inter American Travel Bureau because of his pending induction in the army. Since Joseph was born in Canada, the induction is being held up by extensive and repetitive bureaucratic maneuvers and Joseph is kept waiting, dangling between a functioning civilian and an official soldier. He whiles away months either lying in bed, reading newspapers and magazines or wandering in the streets without any particular purpose. After seven months of such indolence, he decides to write a journal. The state of demoralization urges

him to write. He maintains a diary in which he makes entries regularly from December 15, 1942 to April 9, 1943, his last civilian day.

Because, his call into the army is expected to be received any day, he cannot go out in search of a suitable job. He has to live on his wife, Iva's earnings. In order to save money they have moved from an apartment to a rooming house that makes them meet with many unpleasant noises, smells, little thefts, pettiness, spite, sickness and death. They are also exposed to the accidental glimpses of the trivial as well as the momentous in lives which they do not relate.

Joseph struggles between the past that has been shattered and a future that has not yet taken shape. He is placed in such a situation that compels him to have a look into the values he has tenable and cannot protect him from the chaos that threatens to overwhelm him

His wife Iva, who works in a library is not at all reluctant to be the provider. She wants Joseph to enjoy his freedom and to do all the delightful things. But Joseph finds nothing to fall back upon and protect himself. The corner stone in the neighborhood behind which he used to take shelter sometime during wind and rain has also fallen off. Left in this situation he sees himself as a man dangling between

two worlds, one dying, and the other refusing to come into existence. He is totally demoralized and confused.

He is introspective and self - conscious and then becomes critical of his friends and family and finally gets angry at everything and everybody, full of the rage of despair. He knows that he behaves in a strange manner showing wild bursts of temper which he cannot control. He experiences a strange kind of darkness within himself.

It is in one such moment that he makes a sensible move and starts writing his diary, thinking that it may dispel his darkness and help him to understand his condition. This method may perhaps help him to arrest his wild fit of temper and enter into a conversation with his inner self. It will also provide a means of releasing his suppressed feelings.

When the pressures around and within him become over bearing and seem to threaten his sanity and when his patience is exhausted, Joseph writes to the draft board requesting his immediate induction. Finally he gets the call and joins the Army.

CHARACTERSKETCHES

JOSEPH

Introduction

Joseph, the protagonist, is a 27 year old young man. He lives with his wife, Iva, in Chicago rooming house. He is waiting to be called up for service in World War II. He is basically a Canadian citizen who has been living in America for the past eighteen years. Having received an induction notice from the United States Army, he quits his job with Inter -American Travel Bureau, passes his physical and is accepted for military service. At this point, his status as a friendly alien results in a bureaucratic tangle that delays his official induction.

Dangling Man

The delay in his induction leaves him dangling. He could neither be a functioning civilian nor an official soldier. He oscillates between the world of daily life and the world of the spirit, between the materialistic world and the spiritual world, between the world of thought and the world Of action. He dangles between these worlds.

Starting a journal

He whiles away months either lying in bed, reading newspapers and magazines or wandering in the streets

without any particular purpose. After seven months of such indolence, he decides to put an end to his dangle and to start acting and see for himself what is his destiny. So, he begins to write a journal and maintains a diary in which he makes entries regularly from December 15, 1942 to April 9, 1943.

Relationship with his wife

After he loses his job at the Inter-American, he becomes a dependent on his wife, Iva. Though she is his bread winner, he does not want to be dominated by her. He is guided by his patriarchal attitude. He likes to be served by his wife but he would not like to feel low before her. There is little intimation of any love between the couple.

His weakness

Joseph has some fascination for Kitty Daimler and develops some weakness for her. But soon he checks himself lest he should destroy his wife's trust in him. He does not allow that weakness to spoil his marital relationship with his wife, Iva.

Humanness

Joseph is certainly more human. He takes to join the Army in order to fight in the war and not to carve out a heroic career for himself. His decision to participate in the war is a

matter of principle, not of profit or career making. To him, participating in the war for any kind of profit is a degrading act.

Man of principles

Joseph supports war on principle. He is ready to join the war even if he may be killed there. He prefers to die than to live a life of uncertain principles or convictions. He is neither money minded nor a careerist. He would rather be a victim of war than a beneficiary.

Mouthpiece

Saul Bellow makes Joseph, his mouthpiece to preach the doctrine of humanism, expounding how one might attain the wholeness that man should possess.

Conclusion

Joseph is not able to answer with clarity such questions as what man is and what is the purpose of existence, questions that had arisen in his mind earlier. The freedom had been looking for is ultimately not achieved because himself up into the hands of the army.

IVA

Iva, the wife of Joseph, works in a library. She is not at all reluctant to be the provider of her husband when he quits

his job. She wants Joseph to enjoy his freedom to do all the delightful things. She is a devoted wife. She has always been anxious about him because of his joblessness. At the end she hopes that his army job might make his existence useful. She packs up his boxes and prepares him for his departure. As for herself she would leave the rented apartment to stay with her parents.