# Humboldt's Gift Study Guide

## Humboldt's Gift by Saul Bellow

BOOKRAGS

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# Plot Summary

*Humboldt's Gift* is a slice-of-life novel with undertones of dark comedy. From the perspective of Charlie Citrine, a poet and essayist of considerable success, it examines life in America from the 1930s through the mid-1970s. Much of the novel consists of Charlie's memories of his childhood in Chicago and his days in Greenwich Village with his mentor, Von Humboldt Fleischer, who has already descended into madness and death at the time of the telling. Charlie is driven throughout the novel by memories and recriminations of Humboldt. Saul Bellow is generally recognized as one of the great 20th Century American writers and won the Nobel Prize for literature for this work.

*Humboldt's Gift* begins with a brief review of Charlie's childhood in Chicago, when he first reads *The Harlequin Ballads* by New York poet Von Humboldt Fleischer. Charlie is so impressed by Humboldt's work that he borrows money from his teenage sweetheart and sets off to Greenwich Village to find and follow his new idol. Humboldt takes the young man under his wing, and they begin a life-long relationship that begins with the excitement of living as Marxists through the first years of the Cold War, decrying the establishment, cursing capitalism, drinking red wine and living the lives of poets and scholars.

Flashing back to the present - that is, Charlie's present in the mid-1970s - the now-middle-aged man awakens in his Chicago apartment to the worst day of his life. His ex-wife is suing him, and the IRS is after him. Also, he has been receiving threatening phone calls from a petty Chicago mobster named Rinaldo Cantabile. When he goes down to street level, he discovers that someone has destroyed his new Mercedes with baseball bats and hammers, and he knows precisely who it is - Rinaldo Cantabile. Rinaldo has been threatening Charlie because he stopped payment on a check written to the mobster to cover a poker debt. Charlie stopped payment when his friend George Swiebel informed him that Rinaldo and his cousin were cheating at the game George hosted. Charlie calls Rinaldo and agrees to settle up, but Rinaldo demands payment in a public forum to satisfy his pride. He takes Charlie through several comedic episodes at various Chicago landmarks, finally accepting payment on a girder of a skyscraper under construction on a windy Chicago night. Rinaldo now declares himself Charlie's friend and haunts him through the next approximately twelve weeks, even following him to Europe.

In the midst of mid-life crisis, Charlie is involved with Renata, a beautiful young woman with a voracious sexual appetite, deep knowledge of sensual delights, a love of expensive things and a longing to become Charlie's wife. Through flashbacks in Charlie's memory, the reader learns that Charlie was married to Denise and fathered two girl children with her. She has already taken much of the wealth he earned with a successful Broadway play that was turned into a movie, but she seems determined to take every thing he owns. After his marriage to Denise, Charlie falls in love with Demmie, who dies with her parents in a plane crash in a South American jungle.

Charlie is obsessed with the nature of death, fully believing that the spirit does not perish when one dies. Throughout *Humboldt's Gift*, Charlie spends many hours contemplating this and other metaphysical questions. By the conclusion of the novel, Charlie has developed the habit of talking with and reading to the dead. Bellow artfully and humorously weaves this particular anomaly of Charlie's into a well-textured tapestry of a neurotic man growing old in America.

Charlie is also dealing with the sexuality of an aging man, and the trauma and rite of passage associated with growing older. Being dumped in Madrid by his young lover devastates Charlie, but he emerges from the experience with a more mature, more settled attitude toward sexuality. Concurrent with these themes is the ever-present issue of struggle of artists to survive in a capitalist culture, which looks askance at serious writers and other artists as entertaining anomalies and cultural ornaments. While Charlie carries the main story line with his internal emotional and intellectual gymnastics, a host of secondary, minor and cameo characters add depth, breadth and countless witty insights into life in America, as defined in Chicago and New York.

# Section 1, Through p. 34

## Section 1, Through p. 34 Summary

*Humboldt's Gift* is a slice-of-life novel with undertones of dark comedy. From the perspective of Charlie Citrine, a poet and essayist of considerable success, it examines life in America from the 1930s through the mid-1970s. Much of the novel consists of Charlie's memories of his childhood in Chicago and his days in Greenwich Village with his mentor, Von Humboldt Fleischer, who has already descended into madness and death at the time of the telling. Charlie is driven throughout the novel by memories and recriminations of Humboldt. Saul Bellow is generally recognized as one of the great 20th Century American writers and won the Nobel Prize for literature for this work.

The first thirty-four pages of *Humboldt's Gift* by Saul Bellow introduce the reader to the two major characters. Charlie is the first-person narrator. The other central individual in the novel is the title character, Von Humboldt Fleischer. Humboldt, son of a Jewish Hungarian immigrant to Manhattan who rode with Teddy Roosevelt at San Juan Hill, emerged as a popular poet in the 1930s, first noted for his comedic verse entitled the *Harlequin Ballads*. Charlie, an undergraduate student in literature at the University of Wisconsin, becomes enamored of Humboldt and his work. Totally immersed in and dedicated to the literary arts, Charlie travels to New York for the express purpose of meeting Humboldt. Humboldt is impressed with the young man's intelligence, talent and commitment to the arts, and he takes him on as a protygy. What ensues is a life-long relationship - sometimes warm, but other times hostile - as Humboldt passes through the vicissitudes of his self-diagnosed manic depression. Humboldt eventually dies a bitter and paranoid old man in a New York flophouse.

That being the beginning and the end of it, the rest of the section is consumed by the middle. Humboldt's popularity began to wane in the late 1940s, just as Charlie's star begins to ascend. After arriving in New York, he settles in with his mentor in Greenwich Village, where surrounded by other artist and intellectuals, they discuss literature, economics, government, politics and myriad other topics in a truly Bohemian existence. Charlie recalls these as heady days, seeing them now them from his perspective as an older man who is following his mentor toward death's door. He's not really all that old, but he's lost his head of black hair, thinks a lot about mortality and relives childish memories. He recalls, for example, growing up in Chicago in the 1920s. Every spring, the boys indulged in a ritual that rivaled Easter or Halloween. As the snow began to melt from where it had accumulated in the gutters during the winter, the boys would run along the streets searching whatever wealth might have been either accidentally or purposely deposited there during the just-concluded cold months. Coins, of course, were always popular finds, but there were also bottle caps, small parts of automobiles and any number of gems and magical inventions to enrich the treasury of a young masculine mind.

As Humboldt begins to deteriorate - and Charlie begins to succeed - the older man develops a strong resentment for his young colleague. A devout Marxist who believes that New York should quit the Union and join the Soviet Bloc, Humboldt speaks out against Charlie commercializing his art. Charlie writes *Von Trenck,* a successful play that runs eight months on Broadway. Humboldt shows up at the theater with a group of protesters he has recruited, carrying a Mercurochrome and cloth banner that reads: *Charlie Citrine* is a traitor. He repeatedly refers to the work in derogatory terms. Charlie wins a Pulitzer Prize for a *Life Magazine* series on the JFK family in Washington, which Humboldt also discredits. When Charles De Gaul awards Charlie the *Chevalier* of the *Legion d' honneur,* Humboldt begins calling him a *shoveler.* The older man even accuses his former protygy of stealing his, that is, Humboldt's, personality to mold the character of the hero in *Von Trenck*. Charlie doesn't necessarily disagree with Humboldt's criticisms. Charlie goes on to get semi-rich off the screen rights to his play.

In spite of Humboldt's mean and seemingly spiteful attitude toward Charlie, the younger man never varies in his deep love and respect for his old mentor. He sums up Humboldt's life as a race with madness. Notwithstanding his Bolshevik leanings, Humboldt flees the happening Village and buys land and a house in the New Jersey countryside, where he becomes semi-recluse. Charlie describes an evening he spends with Humboldt and his wife, Kathleen, at the New Jersey spread, in which Humboldt takes off on an all night monologue about almost everything. The year is 1951, and Humboldt swears that, although Ike is a nice fellow, he desperately wants Adlai Stevenson to be elected president, believing he will restore art to America.

Throughout the section, both Humboldt and Charlie voice a premonition of purpose in Charlie's life and career. They both feel there is some prescribed destiny that he must live out, though they have no specific idea what it might be. Several times in this section, Charlie makes offhand comments about some posthumous thing he has learned from Humboldt since his mentor died seven years earlier.

## Section 1, Through p. 34 Analysis

Students of American literature generally recognize Saul Bellow as one of the truly great authors of the 20th Century. He has a virtuoso's command of the language, and he views the American scene through the wry and clever eyes of the son of an immigrant Jew. He was born in Quebec, educated in Chicago and no stranger to New York. In *Humboldt's Gift*, he uses his razor-honed skill to carve out two fully blown characters, Humboldt and Charlie, with a remarkable economy of words. It is not as if they emerge from the first thirty-four pages as silhouettes or rough drafts, but as full-blown, three-dimensional characters, already loaded down with history and emotional baggage. It is clear the fun has only just begun.

Bellow is as deft with metaphor, simile and foreshadowing as he is with character. This first section foreshadows three major themes. One concerns the influence of money on art, and as a sub-set, the relative roles of art in capitalist and socialist economies. Another has to do with the nature of death, and the third foretells some presumably

magnificent gift awarded to Charlie by a deceased Humboldt. Even from the small sampling of dialogue the reader has so far encountered, it is clear that the development of these themes will not be simple. Bellow will likely lace them with wit throughout, and it is doubtful that his treatment of them will end with any decisiveness, leaving his reader instead to ponder more questions than he or she had dared think of before. After reading this rich beginning of the tale, the reader might be led to suspect that the two characters - Humboldt and Charlie - are really symbiotic portraits of the same brilliant and delightful middle-aged man as he ponders his mortality.

# Section 2, Through p. 63

## Section 2, Through p. 63 Summary

While the previous section ends by foreshadowing the gift Humboldt returns from the grave to offer Charlie, the following section does not immediately fulfill the expectations created. Instead, Charlie moves forward in time to describe one of his more horrible days. After his morning coffee, Charlie descends to street level to discover that, during the night, vandals have attacked his beloved Mercedes 280 SL, apparently with baseball bats and hammers. Every panel is severely dented. The windshield is a mass of spider webs, and the headlamps are smashed. Charlie describes it as a significant moment. He acknowledges that the car, which he bought only at Renata's insistence, has become an extension of himself. Further, he knows exactly who bashed his car. The culprit is a petty gangster named Rinaldo Cantabile, who calls Charlie at odd hours of the night and the early morning to make gangland threats because Charlie stopped payment on a $450 check he wrote to cover poker losses in a game he later learned was rigged. Affluent at the time, Charlie would simply have let it go if it were not for the insistence of his South-Side-of-Chicago mentor, George Swiebel, who insisted that he stop payment on the check and not give in to Rinaldo's threats.

George put the poker game together in the first place and hosted it at his apartment. George intended the poker game as a means of getting Charlie away from his bookish friends to meet some real guys. Cantabile and his cousin Emil, were not invited to the game, but they crashed it and promptly began cheating. The other *real guys* included a Lithuanian who owned a tuxedo-rental business and who was grieving his girlfriend's death. He had had a twenty-year affair with the woman, boinking exactly one day a week on Tuesdays while his tuxedos were soaking in cleaning solution, but he had never learned her last name. There was also a young Polish fellow getting computer training, a plainclothes homicide detective and a Sicilian-American undertaker. All of the other players quickly became aware of the Cantabile cousins cheating, and they dropped out of the game. Charlie, however, being rich, stoned and drunk - and not one of the real guys - remained oblivious to the scam in spite of repeated signals from George.

Emotionally devastated by the assault on his car, Charlie feels a compelling need to consult. Consulting is apparently the way Charlie deals with stress, and George is his most frequent consultant. George is a building contractor, however, and is out on a job, so Charlie leaves a message with Sharon, his secretary. Ticking through his list of other possible consultants, Charlie can find no one else who is both available and appropriate, so he does the next best thing. He goes home and stands on his head. The head-standing business is also one of George's ides. He recommends it for Charlie's neck pain - and it works. This is just one of a number of effective naturopathic remedies George has recommended to Charlie. During this quasi-meditative exercise, Charlie contemplates the world, or at least the interior of his apartment from his inverted

perspective. As his glance scans the books in his bookcase, especially the ones he wrote, Charlie is given to contemplate the demise of his good friend Humboldt.

The last time Charlie saw Humboldt before he read his obituary, his old friend was totally mad, pacing New York's Forty-Sixth Street in something of a stupor, He was gray, underfed, dirty, tattered and oblivious. Charlie was on his way to the Plaza for a banquet and chose to hide behind a parked car rather than approach is old mentor. The break, Charlie reasoned, came when Charlie's fame - and bank account - began to flourish, just as Humboldt's was fading. Charlie muses that, even then, Humboldt was still highly respected in academic circles and had been invited to lecture at a university in Germany. Humboldt demurred, however, claiming his paranoia prevented him from making the trip, for fear of being abducted by the GPU or NKVD. During the earlier days of his demise, Humboldt ardently resented the money that Charlie was making off *Von Trenck*, because Charlie had stolen his personality for the title character. He made up a story that Kathleen was being unfaithful and then tried to kill her imagined lover. He took out his angst by beating up his Buick Special and drawing a check on Charlie's account for more than $6,000 to buy a new Oldsmobile.

This section concludes with Charlie, who has been unable to consult, agreeing to go to the bank, withdraw $450 and rendezvous with Rinaldo at the Russian baths on Division Street. The baths are a well-seasoned landmark harking back to Charlie's childhood and the glory days of Al Capone and Chicago's hoodlum history. Charlie remembers them fondly as a place he visited with his father.

## Section 2, Through p. 63 Analysis

This section flashes forward to the present, from the perspective of the narrator, recording one of the worst days in Charlie's life through a combination of flashbacks and present-tense narration. Though convoluted in its description, the text itself flows seamlessly in the hands of the master, Saul Bellow. Bellow is not about plot. To be sure, there is a plot here, but it is never very clear and would not stand up to a telling around a campfire. Bellow is about characters - iconic characters that define huge chunks of the American psyche - and the incidents that grow from their unlikely interactions. For example, Charlie is a man of letters, an academe who has taught at Princeton and now writes plays and novels that matter to millions. Yet he knows the mean streets of Chicago from his youth, which somehow makes entirely plausible his presence at a poker game in a South-Side apartment with an undertaker and a tuxedo magnate who has been banging the same woman for twenty years without ever learning her name. This is the same Charlie who, in another self, hides behind a parked car on his way to lunch at the Plaza to avoid his old friend Humboldt, who is wandering Forty-Sixth Street in disheveled madness. There is a plot here, and the reader is still yearning to learn of Humboldt's gift from the grave. Still, the journey to that revelation is unhurried and paved with wit and insight.

While a tinge of humor laces almost everything Saul Bellow writes, it sometimes serves mainly to highlight tragedy or pathos. Charlie's behavior when he sees his old friend in

decline, hiding behind a parked car, emerges as a quirk of Charlie's character, but his observation is pure tragedy. Bellows' love of America and Americana is clear, and his insights are profound. However, he articulates them in a wise, subtle and ironic voice, echoing a resignation to tragedy as ancient as his Jewish heritage.

# Section 3, Through p. 106

## Section 3, Through p. 106 Summary

This section deals with Charlie's protracted efforts to pay Rinaldo Cantabile the $450 Rinaldo claims he owes him. Of course, Bellow seldom creates anything simple, so what should be a simple gesture of handing the hoodlum a check becomes a daylong adventure filled with suspense and many delightful diversions. To understand Rinaldo, one must understand something of his lineage. He represents the current generation of what was once a mid-level Chicago crime family that, owing to the folly of a recent ancestor, has fallen into condition of permanent humiliation. Back in the 1940s, Rinaldo's cousin, Ralph "Moochy" Cantabile, who was a Chicago cop, lost his gun to a couple of teenage punks. The kids made him crawl, eat filth off the floor and perform other humiliating acts before a crowd in a gangster bar. Moochy hunted the kids down and killed them, and he is still doing life in Joliet. After that incident, no one in Gangland would take the Cantabile family seriously. Rinaldo appears, at least at first, as a cheap manifestation of that humiliation, desperately trying to redeem some status by making Charlie pay up.

Before meeting Rinaldo at the old Russian Baths as agreed, Charlie pries himself into his battered Mercedes and manages to drive it amid myriad stares to Fritz, the white-coated Prussian mechanic with whom he must make an appointment, at the dealership where he bought the car. On his way, Charlie reminisces about his childhood in Chicago, revealing that he spent the eighth grade in the public wing of a TB sanatorium thinking he was going to die. He recalls the love with which his parents visited him, only one at a time, one day each week, which was all the rules would allow. Etched in his memory is the image of the field of beds he could see from his own bed and how each morning some would be fitted with new white linen after other children had died coughing and hemorrhaging in the night. His parents were originally named Tsistrine and hailed from Kiev. Their name was anglicized to Citrine at Ellis Island. Before going to the dealership, he stops off at his health club, still desperate to consult about Rinaldo before his planned meet at the Russian Baths. He seeks out Vito Langobardi, a gentleman gangster he has befriended, but he chickens out when he finds him, fearful of the taboo about discussing business at the club.

Charlie takes a cab from the dealership to the baths, but since the driver's magnificent Afro hairdo blocks his forward view, Charlie stares out the side windows at the passing cityscape, remembering how it used to be in the 1930s and 1940s. The old Polish neighborhoods are now mainly Puerto Rican, the East Europeans having secured their hold on the American Dream and moved to the suburbs. Old apartment buildings that used to hum with love and life in many languages and accents are now battered and graphitized shells waiting for the bulldozers. He stares through a glassless window into the former room of his grade school heartthrob. In spite of - or perhaps in defiance of - the devastation surrounding them, the Russian Baths remain unchanged from the times Charlie used to go there as a child with his father. The nostalgia for Charlie is visceral.

The commonness of the obese clientele and even the smell of sweat and steamed wood coalesce into powerful visual images in Charlie's head.

After visiting the bath on the off chance that George might be there for a quick consult, Charlie steps outside to wait for Rinaldo. Shortly, Rinaldo screeches to a halt in his new Thunderbird on the opposite side of the street. Posing as the bad-assed hoodlum he is pretending to be, he removes two baseball bats from his car and, during a brief break in the traffic, reveals to Charlie that he is carrying a gun. He asks Charlie if he has anyone backing him up, and he reluctantly accepts Charlie's assurances that he is alone. Charlie talks him into leaving one of the baseball bats behind and, at Rinaldo's insistence, meets him in the middle of the street to try to pay him the $450. That would be too simple, though. Rinaldo must humiliate Charlie publicly to regain his lost face. George commands Charlie to go into the baths and then into the public toilet. Once in the toilet, Rinaldo forces Charlie into one of the stalls with him and proceeds to take a dump, holding his gun between his knees while Charlie is forced to ponder the contractions of Rinaldo's scalp and brow as he struggles to relieve himself of his internal burden. Charlie reasons that enduring the contortions, sounds and stench of Rinaldo's bowel movement is way more humiliation than the debt demands - no matter what Moochy may have endured back when. Charlie thinks it's enough already and wishes Rinaldo would take the money and let him go. Rinaldo Cantabile says that the day is young, and the humiliation has just begun.

After the Russian Baths, Rinaldo takes Charlie on a high-speed madcap ride to, of all places, the Playboy Club. During the ride, inspired by his recent observations, Charlie contemplates the nomenclature of human beings, reasoning that if he hadn't stopped payment on the check, he would never have had the opportunity to observe one in Rinaldo Cantabile's particular phase of evolution. The couple joins a table already in progress amidst the bunny tails and testosterone. Seated at the table is someone named Bill, whom Charlie doesn't know, and Mike Schneiderman, a Chicago gossip columnist. Apparently, Rinaldo persuaded someone among his Gangland friends to call in an IOU from Schneiderman to witness Charlie's humiliation, because the columnist obviously doesn't have great respect for Rinaldo. In fact, it turns out that Charlie is well acquainted with Schneiderman and has shown up in his column and as a guest on his TV show a couple of times as Chicago's unknown famous guy. Charlie further upstages Rinaldo by suddenly remembering in front of witnesses that he owes the hoodlum some money, and he tries to force him to take the $450.

Still unsatisfied, Rinaldo herds Charlie back into the Thunderbird for the third leg of the adventure. This time they end up in the mysterious high-rise apartment of a filthy rich - and probably crooked - diamond broker. On the way there, Rinaldo Cantabile scolds Charlie for being a snob. It seems that Charlie got a little drunker at the poker game than he had thought, and he waxed large about Marxist theory. In the diamond broker's apartment/place-of-business, amidst piles of stones and Rolex watches - probably fenced - Charlie and the elderly jeweler recognize one another as fellow members of the same health club. Once again, as with the gossip columnist, Charlie and the jeweler get into reminiscence, while Rinaldo gets left out of the loop, searching through a pile of jewels for a bracelet for his wife. Once again, Charlie upstages his captor by recalling

that he owes him money. Rinaldo still brushes it off in front of this new staged witness, but Charlie insists and stuffs the crisp fifty-dollar bills in Rinaldo's breast pocket.

Once outside and in the Thunderbird, Rinaldo forces the cash back on Charlie, letting him know that the scene that just transpired just isn't going to cut it in the humiliation department. Their next stop is the skeleton of a skyscraper under construction in the Windy City, just as darkness is rising. They ascend to the umpteenth floor in the caged construction elevator, just as the construction crew is taking off for the day. It is dark, windy and cold as hell as Rinaldo leads Charlie out along an exposed girder about a million feet above the asphalt. Charlie complains to Rinaldo about the slippery leather heels on his shoes, and the hoodlum advises him to walk on his toes. Charlie figures that this is it, that he has pushed his nemesis too far and that he, Charlie, is about to take a fall. Once Charlie is fully exposed, grasping a vertical support beam in the gusty wind, Rinaldo takes the nine crisp fifty-dollar bills from Charlie. While saying that he is demonstrating to Charlie how important the money is to him, Rinaldo proceed to fold the bills into paper airplanes and sail them off into the Chicago wind, all except two. The remaining money, Rinaldo says, he will blow on drinks and dinner for the two of them. Once the charade is over, Rinaldo's personality goes through a metamorphosis, and he becomes more benign and companionable than the gangster role he has been playing all day.

On the way to the restaurant, now rid of his gangster fazade, Rinaldo asks Charlie if he has now seen enough of the Lumps. Lumps refers to the *Lumpenproletariat*, a Marxist term Charlie introduced at the poker game. As the champagne flows and Charlie begins to realize that he apparently made a drunken ass of himself at the poker game, Rinaldo reveals his real motive for running Charlie through the gauntlet all day. It seems that his wife is a Ph.D. candidate in literature at Radcliff, and her thesis topic is Charlie's old mentor, one Von Humboldt Fleischer. Rinaldo is very proud of his wife's academic accomplishments, admitting that he only attended some cow college, and he wants to help her nail her thesis. Since Charlie was very close to Humboldt, he wants Charlie to share deep insights into the man that would not be available to your garden-variety grad student. He has come prepared with a typewritten list of questions for which he wants Charlie to write answers. Charlie responds with indignation and declines the offer. In an expansive mood after all he has put Charlie through on this day, Rinaldo overlooks the inference that his wife is an idiot and orders steaks. The episode ends with the adversaries on speaking terms, but leaving the reader with the feeling that this may not be the last of Rinaldo's wife's Ph.D. thesis. This thread may reappear in the temporal tapestry of *Humboldt's Gift.*

## Section 3, Through p. 106 Analysis

In this work entitled "Humboldt's List," Saul Bellow takes a forty-two-page rabbit trail that appears to have absolutely nothing to do with Humboldt until the last couple of paragraphs when the secondary protagonist reveals that the entire adventure has been about nothing other than Von Humboldt Fleischer. Along the way, Bellow treats the reader to a tour of a devastated but evolving Chicago and a gaggle of characters who

personify the city in all of its permutations from the Roaring Twenties to the Yucky Eighties - from low-life street scum to gentlemen Gangland bosses, to the new *literati*. The author somehow magically transcends temporality, creating a timeless Chicago in which the reader may experience all of its 20th Century history in a single quivering freeze frame - an animated tapestry, moving within itself, but not through time. The reader experiences the violence of the days of Al Capone through the seemingly crude persona of George Swiebel. It's really only smoke and mirrors, though. George Swiebel isn't really the thug he appears to be at first, but a cow-college graduate who worships his wife's academic accomplishments as a Ph.D. candidate at Radcliff. The author treats the reader to a scary last ride up a skeletal skyscraper on a windy Chicago night, but only the scare is real. The dying is left to the reader's and Charlie's imaginations.

Bellow also has a true gift for blending pathos with humor that can bring tears to one's chuckle, and which seems totally natural. Charlie's recollection of his year in the common wing of a TB sanatorium wrenches the reader's heart. What sort of insight could be more sobering than the images of newly made beds at dawn where children had coughed and hemorrhaged to death the night before? Yet, the reader quickly emerges from this pathos into the tenderness of familial love as Charlie recalls his joy at the rigidly regulated weekly visits from his mother or father. Having internalized these stark yet loving images, the reader takes a single step further up the ladder of Bellow's abstraction into the context of Charlie being paraded around this city by George Swiebel in repeatedly aborted attempts to repay a disputed poker debt. The chuckle chases the tears, but the author has now implanted indelible memories in the reader's mind, which serve the powerful theme of Charlie's contemplation of mortality. In these contemplations, Charlie makes numerous associations between death and light. In this section, he associates the rising sun slowly illuminating the empty beds in his ward with the crisp white linen that speaks of the death of children. In an earlier section, while standing on his head - a yoga exercise George taught him - he describes two pellucid rings of light, which always mark the onset of his inverted meditation, and he reflects on their mortal meaning. The repetition of light images may foreshadow the nature of the gift Humboldt gives up from his grave, or they may contribute a critical element to whatever conclusions Charlie comes to regarding the nature of death.

# Section 4, Through p. 146

## Section 4, Through p. 146 Summary

Charlie begins this section contemplating his unusual sense of loyalty to dead people, reflecting that he somehow feels he must carry on for them after they die. As a result, he senses that parts of Humboldt's character are sticking to him. He is beginning to feel overwhelmed by this obligation, which accounts for part of his negative reaction to Cantabile's proposal that he help his wife with her thesis. Charlie admits that he returns to Chicago from New York with the motive of creating a significant work. He intends to chronicle the war between consciousness and sleep, which he now claims is contributing to his current state of lethargy. When Eisenhower beat Stevenson in 1952, Charlie thought that Chicago would be the perfect place to write his essay on the topic of boredom. He reflects that Eisenhower's victory was absolutely devastating for Humboldt, and - along with frequent shock treatments - it may have been what tipped him permanently over the edge into madness. Later, he incorporates Humboldt and that period of their friendship into his daily meditation session.

Charlie decides to take a holiday following the ordeal with Rinaldo and, vicariously, Lucy Cantabile. He opens the drapes in his apartment and surrounds himself with Humboldt memorabilia. Among his souvenirs is the last postcard he ever received from his friend, eight or nine years before, which contains a poem that is seemingly from the pen of a madman.

Reading the postcard from Humboldt makes Charlie feel that he has somehow sinned against his old friend, that there is something he must yet do in the way of penitence. He now sees this communication from Humboldt not as a poem but as a commission. That, he realizes, was Humboldt's message. Charlie recalls seeing Humboldt once in Central Park while in New York doing an in-depth story for *Life Magazine* on John F. Kennedy in Washington. Charlie is sort of living in the president's pocket for a few days, and he is hobnobbing with JFK, Bobby, Senator Javits and other luminaries at a luncheon in Central Park when he sees Humboldt, dirty, disheveled and mad, standing on the curb eating a pretzel stick. Rather than running over to try to help his friend, Charlie is overcome with a compulsive desire to return to Chicago, and he still carries that burden of guilt. He didn't really like the *Life* assignment anyway. It was something Denise - his social-climbing wife who asked Charlie daily at breakfast if he had made out his will - had engineered, but which failed to tickle Charlie's creative fancy.

Charlie recalls reaching Chicago. Denise is waiting for him naked in bed, but he has no erotic inclinations. Instead, he submerges himself in the Chicago-ness of the night. Denise criticizes him for being preoccupied with dead people, and he recognizes that as a legitimate insight into his character. She questions why he still cares so for Humboldt but never visits him. He asks himself that question and ends in a convoluted rationalization that he is afraid of Humboldt because he attacked a secretary once, but he seems to realize that it is really a fear of embarrassment at Humboldt's madness.

Occasionally, Charlie is distracted from his meditative trance by outside intrusions into his thoughts, becoming aware again of the reality of his present-time apartment in Chicago, but he quickly drifts back into his altered state. After one such interlude he recalls the heady days with Humboldt in Greenwich Village, playing the Bohemians, discussing great literary and political issue, drinking cheap wine and sleeping with lots of girls. He speculates on the nature of poets in American society, deciding that they are essentially non-functional creations that can't compete against machines, but they are loved nonetheless for their failure.

Adlai Stevenson's defeat at the hands of the good but boring Eisenhower sets Humboldt off on a tangent of paranoia concerning his financial security. At the time, Charlie recalls, both he and Humboldt are teaching at Princeton. Humboldt is filling in for his friend, Professor Sewell, who is on a one-year sabbatical, and Charlie is fulfilling a one-year teaching contract Sewell has arranged. Humboldt panics and suddenly sees Sewell as a conspirator who is returning to Princeton to turn him and Charlie out into the cold during an Eisenhower administration that will have no need for poets. Humboldt quickly discards the notion of leaving the U.S. because his only offer is from Germany, and he is afraid Nazis will capture him because he is a Jew. Instead, he enlists Charlie's complicity in an elaborate plot - which Charlie recalls as a disaster - to go behind Sewell's back and acquire tenure and a full professorship for Humboldt before Sewell returns from Egypt where he is spending his sabbatical. To seal the conspiracy with a rite of passage, Humboldt signs a blank check and gives it to Charlie, and in return, Humboldt extorts one from Charlie. Although neither of them has more than a few dollars in the bank - only eight in Charlie's case - the idea is that in the future, if in need, the party holding the other's check may cash it for any amount. In fact, Charlie loses the check Humboldt gives him, but Humboldt buys a new Oldsmobile with the one he gets from Charlie.

Charlie comes up for air to note that from this point his meditation will get tougher because of the rotten things his friend Humboldt says and does to him as he continues his downward spiral into psychosis, alcoholism and drug addiction. During this period, Charlie is having problems with *The Ark,* a magazine he is trying to get started. One of his partners has defaulted on a loan he collateralized. In addition, the IRS is threatening to take him to court, and ex-wife Denise is taking him to court to try to get more of his money. Then, Renata calls, telling him his court date with Denise has been moved up by two hours. He figures that by shaving fast and eating a container of yogurt on the fly, he will be able to get in two more hours of meditation.

Charlie's part in the scheme to create tenure for Humboldt is to approach Professor Ricketts with the idea of creating a poetry chair for Princeton. Ricketts endorses the idea wholeheartedly, but he laments the fact that there is no money. Undaunted, Humboldt barges into the office of Wilmore Longstaff, who is the executive manager of the super-wealthy Belisha Foundation. Surprisingly, the reclusive Longstaff invites Humboldt into his sixtieth-floor New York office, drinks martinis with him, discusses poetry and creates the Princeton chair. Everything is cool, and Humboldt is happy until the trustees of the foundation get fed up with Longstaff's high-handed ways and fire him. Humboldt's poetry chair is lopped off in the ensuing budget cuts.

Ricketts promises to find the funds somewhere, but Humboldt refuses to obligate himself to a bureaucrat and just sinks deeper into madness. His pill taking and drinking increase, as does his abuse of Kathleen. He accuses her of having an affair with Rockefeller, claiming she is a nymphomaniac who has sex at the drop of a hat with anyone, and he becomes obsessed with the notion that she is carrying on with a man Humboldt eventually goes after with a gun. Humboldt punches out Kathleen at a party in front of Charlie and Renata, then drags her into the car and speeds away. With Humboldt beating her while driving, Kathleen finds an opportunity to jump out of the car, and Humboldt tries to run her down. The night of the party, Kathleen tells Charlie and Renata that she loves Humboldt but is leaving him. Sometime later, she leaves him sitting at a table in a restaurant to go to the rest room and slips out the back. The event drives Humboldt deeper into madness.

## Section 4, Through p. 146 Analysis

Not much happens as plot development goes in the first part of this section, but it is filled with brilliant and artistic prose. Bellow is a genius at evoking emotion from his readers through visceral descriptions of stimuli entering his fertile mind through all of the human senses. His recollection of the smells that transcend time on a Chicago night is an example. Charlie's guilt at abandoning his friend Humboldt during the last years of his decent into debilitating madness has been floating just beneath the surface of his narration. In this section, it bubbles to the surface during Charlie's meditation. As this section segues into the telling of a tale from the good old days at Princeton - before Humboldt goes wholly around the bend - he talks Charlie into going to Professor Ricketts to promote Humboldt for a chair in poetry. Charlie foreshadows the nature of the episode by his reference to it as a disaster. Another theme, which has been lingering in the wings, emerges here as well - Humboldt's drug use. Charlie mentions in previous chapters that Humboldt becomes pretty messed up on prescription meds, taken more or less at will without regard to the prescribing physician's instructions. In this section, however, he gets closer to the genesis of the problem while the pair is at Princeton.

As Humboldt is waxing enthusiastic in the creative throes of cooking up his professorship scheme, he is also partaking of prescription medication. At this point, the story line begins to move forward against the backdrop Bellow painted in the first part. High in his manic phase, and bolstered with alcohol and pharmaceuticals, Humboldt charges forward in a burst of ferocious energy to secure his position at Princeton, temporarily relieving some of his anxiety about financial insecurity in an Eisenhower administration. All is well until that falls apart, and Humboldt falls apart with it, clearly illustrating the dichotomy of his personality. Suddenly, his friends become enemies, and his loyal and loving wife becomes a slut in his eyes. He turns even more frequently to drugs and alcohol to escape his internal demons. What begins as foreshadowing becomes the central theme of Charlie's reminiscence about his old friend. Clearly, Charlie feels remorse, guilt, shame and obligation for his diseased friend. This speaks loudly of Charlie's character strengths - or weaknesses - for surely no rational mind would see an obligation to this man who has so badly abused him.

# Section 5, Through p. 169

## Section 5, Through p. 169 Summary

Still drifting in and out of his lengthy meditation session, Charlie recalls Humboldt's continuing descent into madness, a death spiral from which he never recovers. After Kathleen leaves him, Humboldt becomes even more obsessed with the notion that she is having an affair with one of her colleagues, a man named Magnasco. Humboldt harasses the innocent man to the point of going after him with a gun, pounding on his door with the butt of the weapon, insisting that he is hiding Humboldt's wife in his apartment. Ultimately, Magnasco calls the police and swears out a peace bond (e.g., a restraining order) against Humboldt. The police put a kicking and screaming Humboldt into a straight jacket and haul him off to Bellevue.

At this point in Charlie's meditation, he begins to fill in his bittersweet memories of his relationship with Demmie Vonghel, his serious, marriage-bound lover of that era. Demmie is the daughter of a fundamentalist pastor, and although she abuses prescription medications right along with Humboldt, parties with alcohol and engages in uninhibited sex with Charlie, Demmie retains her conventional values about marriage - except, perhaps, the no-sex-before part. Not without her hang-ups, Demmie weighed more than 300 pounds as an adolescent and underwent some radical weight-loss therapy, which transformed her. She still carries around some insecurities. Charlie is totally smitten with Demmie, who is mercurial in both appearance and mood. She is ravishing and slightly knock-kneed, a petite deformity that drives Charlie mad when her stockings brush together as she walks.

Rather than allow Humboldt to simply waste away in the public wards of Bellevue, Charlie enlists the aid of some of the old New York literati, who remember the old Bohemian days in Greenwich Village, to create a trust fund for Humboldt and move him to a more prestigious asylum. Humboldt blames Charlie for all his woes, calls him at the theater insisting that Charlie give him all the money he raised and then sends his shifty private detective, Mr. Scaccia, by the theater to demand payment under threat of lawsuit. Mr. Scaccia, of course, is milking Humboldt's paranoia with bills for continuing and unnecessary investigations of Humboldt's phantoms. Charlie explains that the money is not his to control. It is held in escrow specifically for Humboldt's care. Acting on Charlie's instructions, an attorney, Orland Huggins, obtains Humboldt's release, takes the demented poet to Mt. Sinai and pays for a week's care there. After the first night, however, Humboldt checks out, claims the $800 remaining on the one-week advance payment, pays off Scaccia and begins legal action against Kathleen, Magnasco, the Police Department and Bellevue. He doesn't file suit against Charlie, preferring to wait to see if *Von Trenck* is to make any money. The New York society set takes a keen interest in the demise of the famous poet, especially the mid-town attorneys and psychiatrists who never tire of humoring him - a great relief from the drudgery of humoring only garden-variety nutcases.

All of this drama with Humboldt occurs when Charlie's Broadway play is in rehearsal, and he is involved in creative conflicts with Harold Lampton, the director. Demmie Vonghel is also pressing for marriage. Charlie is not averse to marrying Demmie, but he is in no hurry either. He procrastinates in part because of his reluctance to meet her father, who is a fundamentalist Christian, while Charlie is a Jew. Demmie, whom Charlie relies on for advice in such matters, does not believe it would be healthy for him to visit Humboldt in the hospital. Instead, she insists that he go to a psychiatrist. For reasons of her own, which are not immediately clear to either Charlie or the reader, she chooses a Dr. Ellenbogen as Charlie's psychiatrist - a man she does not like, and who holds her in contempt as an emasculating female.

During the sessions, Ellenbogen lies fully extended and shoeless, playing with himself with his hand down his pants while he counsels his patient. Charlie reveals his tender feelings for Demmie, loving both her uninhibited sensuality and her insecurities stemming from being obese as a child. She requires constant reassurance that she is attractive, and yet she does not flaunt her beauty, nor tolerate liberties from other men. Professionals, such as dentists and doctors, are continually copping uninvited feels while they work on her, but she does not generally respond. In one case, however, she punched a physician in the neck when he lost control and began frantically kissing her exposed butt.

This section ends on a tragic note, with Charlie receiving word that both Demmie and her father die in a plane crash on their trip to South America. The jungle consumes the plane, and the wreckage is never found.

## Section 5, Through p. 169 Analysis

Bellow uses Humboldt's meditative state to artfully blend the events of the past with the realities of the present via Charlie's introspective mind. Obligations to the dead - debts that live beyond the grave - pop up here as they do in other sections as a repetitive theme. Charlie seems genuinely ambivalent about his feelings for the deceased in general, and Humboldt in particular. Here, he seems consumed by guilt because he does not do more for his friend as Humboldt is descending into dementia. Yet, in an earlier section he observes cynically that it is not inappropriate to make money off of the dead. Charlie may have delivered that line in parody or sarcasm, but it nonetheless illustrates his inner turmoil surrounding the issue. So far it has appeared that Charlie's guilt about the dead is tied specifically to his loving yet contentious relationship with Humboldt. Now, however, Humboldt begins to emerge not only as a tragic character in the pantheon of Charlie's memory, but in a much more general sense, as an icon of death itself. His recollections of the wild, energetic and intellectual Humboldt, infused with and energized by his chemically induced madness, create an almost comedic backdrop for the loving portrait Charlie paints of Demmie - and a stark contrast for her sudden death. This is a clever and effective tool for the author, who dares to delve into dark comedy. That is, the writer lulls the reader into a comfortable mood about an uncomfortable topic (e.g., death) and then strikes quickly and concisely with an incident or phrase that recalls the stark nature of the subject.

# Section 6, Through p. 187

## Section 6, Through p. 187 Summary

When Charlie attempts to return to his meditative state, he realizes that he is grieving again after his reminiscences of Demmie and Humboldt. That is not what he hopes to accomplish with meditation, so he is relieved when he hears a knock at his door, returning him to full consciousness. His relief is short-lived, however, when Rinaldo Cantabile enters with a lovely female companion. Charlie assumes the woman is the gangster's wife, but he is quickly set right when he politely greets her as such. This is not the wife, but Polly Palomino. She is absolutely beautiful, intelligent and far more sensitive and cultured than her Mafioso escort. She was Rinaldo's wife's roommate as an undergraduate in an exclusive girl's college. Now, Polly comes to warm Rinaldo's bed every morning after her former roommate goes off to school. As the discussion progresses, Rinaldo suggests that he, Polly and Charlie do a *manage-a-trios*, but Charlie rebels in righteous indignation.

Notwithstanding Rinaldo's suggestion to do some multitasking in the bedroom, the conversation between the three unlikely acquaintances focuses mainly on Charlie's legal problems. There are two scenarios in the financial arena - one with the IRS and another with Denise, Charlie's rapacious former wife. Allied with her powerful father and legal connects, Denise is out to strip her ex-husband of every suggestion of worldly wealth. Rinaldo is on a mission. He knows all about making money, hiding it, stealing it and making problems go away. He proposes a litany of schemes to save Charlie's fortune - what's left of it - from escaping to the Grand Caymans to putting a hit out on his ex. At one point, he suggests turning Charlie into a nightclub act, in which he would sit up on stage answering random questions for money, a practical use of Charlie's vast knowledge that is otherwise going to waste. He suggests the commodities market, where he claims to be making a fortune through a Harvard-educated investment guru named Stronson. In a private moment, Polly, who has assumed the responsibility of protecting Charlie from Rinaldo, whispers that her boyfriend is actually losing his shirt on the commodities market. Charlie surmises that if Rinaldo can bring Stronson some raw meat, he'll be able to cut his losses.

Another of Rinaldo's proposals is to take an old movie scenario that Charlie came up with in cooperation with Humboldt while they were at Princeton and turn it into a box office moneymaker. The project is to be greased through Rinaldo's Mafioso friends in the flick biz. The plot of the proposed film involves two historical explorers, Amundsen and Nobile, both in quest of the North Pole during World War II. The actual historical saga ends in death and cannibalism, with the contents of the sole surviving cannibal's stomach on display in Red Square as an example of the ruthlessness of capitalists and fascists. Communists, of course, would never stoop to such barbarity. Charlie's scenario involves the life of the cannibal after the incident. He has become a vegetarian who operates an ice-cream wagon in an Italian village - a kindly, humble member of the community.

When a historian contacts him as an old man for an interview about his cannibalism, he panics, fearing the loss of his good name and the disruption of his daughter's marriage to an upstanding young man of some wealth and note. The cannibal plans to kill the historian by dislodging a boulder as the man's car passes through a mountain pass. At the last moment, however, he rethinks his action and restrains the boulder until the car has passed. In the end, the village holds a public hearing during which the daughter's fiancy persuades everyone to forgive his potential father-in-law with an impassioned Darwinian argument that we owe our existence to animals, which sometimes ate Homo Sapiens. The cannibal, therefore, is actually a misunderstood hero, totally in tune with nature, and should be honored rather than condemned. All present, save Rinaldo, agree this idea is probably not a blockbuster.

Amidst the humor, kink, tragedy and grief of this section, Rinaldo tells Charlie that he was talking about the immortal Holy Spirit during his alcoholic blackout the night of the poker game. Then, without missing a beat - or even changing paragraphs - Rinaldo segues into an outline of a scheme to pretend to kidnap one of Charlie's daughters so that Charlie can pay the ransom, which would then be beyond the reach of the divorce court. As Charlie leaves to go to the dreaded divorce court hearing, Rinaldo reminds Charlie about Lucy's thesis. Charlie mumbles a rejoinder, which he doubts that Rinaldo hears. With that, he picks up his mail, noting that it contains a letter from Humboldt's ex-wife, and stuffs it unread into his briefcase.

## Section 6, Through p. 187 Analysis

This is a short section with a lot of character development and a significant development in the plot. Bellow fleshes out Rinaldo, revealing increasing complexity in what originally appears to be little more than a one-dimensional, comic-book caricature. Apparently, Rinaldo genuinely likes Charlie and is attempting to get close to him through the code he lives by, the only rules of social conduct he knows - the Mafioso code. To say Rinaldo is impressed with Charlie's knowledge and intellect is an understatement. He reveres it and wants to share it vicariously through a close relationship with Charlie. His way of doing that is to try to turn it into money, thus establishing Charlie's loyalty and gratitude through obligation. Polly also surfaces here as a promising character, more than just Rinaldo's plaything, but a thinking, educated woman who, while she understands Rinaldo's quest to turn Charlie's talents to gold, also understands and appreciates the non-monetary joy of knowledge.

This dichotomy is another fugue of the recurring theme of the relationship between art and wealth. The repetitive sexual references to Polly, and Charlie's obvious physical attraction to her, may foreshadow some future hanky panky, not withstanding Charlie's thus-far monogamous commitment to Renata. A warning from Rinaldo that Charlie may have sex with Polly, but only through Rinaldo - never on his own - may also foreshadow some drama around the issue.

# Section 7, Through p. 228

## Section 7, Through p. 228 Summary

Renata picks Charlie up in her old Pontiac to give him a ride to the courthouse, where he is to undergo another confrontation with his former wife, Denise. He tells her about Rinaldo's offer to rub out Denise, and Renata allows that, while he was probably joking, it might not be a bad idea. Denise is represented by a man named Pinkster, who has a reputation for taking no prisoners in divorce actions. Charlie, on the other hand, is represented by two mid-town attorneys whom Rinaldo is convinced are in league with Pinkster and the prevailing judge to do Charlie out of his fortune - or what's left of it. During the ride to the courthouse, Renata, who is an interior designer, picks up one of her kookier clients, apologizing for the Pontiac and explaining that their Mercedes is in the shop. Charlie is relegated to the backseat, where there is a patched hole in the floorboard, worn there from where Renata's ex-salesman-husband carried his samples. Before they pick up Mrs. Szathmar, Renata's client, she needles Charlie about Doris, who she suspects is trying to seduce Charlie. Doris is the daughter of Dr. Scheldt, Charlie's anthroposophist, a student of anthroposophy, a free-thinking, non-doctrinal study of man's spiritual relationship to nature. This sets him to thinking about how he and Renata first get together.

Charlie and Renata meet on jury duty at the same courthouse to which they are now headed. The fact that they are both in the same jury pool is coincidental, but Alec Szathmar, Renata's divorce lawyer, who is also a close boyhood friend of Charlie's and a perennial matchmaker, engineers their meeting. Charlie recalls there is also a curious - though remote - connection between his friend George Swiebel and Renata's former husband, Gaylord Koffritz. It seems old Myron, George's father, met Gaylord in the Russian Baths. Myron is gregarious, while Gaylord is taciturn. After considerable prodding, however, Gaylord finally allows Myron to draw him into a conversation. Being a salesman, once he gets started Gaylord has to play out his whole spiel. Old Myron is well into his eighties, terrified of his own mortality and convinced that he will live forever by sticking to his regimen of heat, vapor, black bread, raw onion, bourbon whiskey, herring, sausage, cards, billiards, racehorses and women. Gaylord, on the other hand, is well steeped in mortality as an enthusiastic peddler of crypts and mausoleums. There is only one exit from the Russian Baths, and Gaylord is between old Myron and the door.

As Charlie recalls Gaylord's sales pitch, including morbid depictions of what it would be like to live after death cramped into a hole in the ground cheek and jowl with other dead of questionable character in a public cemetery, Charlie turns to thoughts of his own mortality. As he muses, he recalls the early days of his relationship with Renata, a young, beautiful though sturdy creature, and how people even still pontificate on the wisdom of December-May relationships between old men and young women. His friend George Swiebel, who worships vitality, thinks it is a wonderful thing that an older man should maintain an active erotic life. Renata's mother, the Senora, whom Charlie

suspects is actually from Hungary even though she teaches Spanish at a secretarial college, enthusiastically approves, no doubt calculating the status of being related to a successful writer. Renata herself, who labels Charlie a Gemini who is completely incapable of pulling himself together, claims that he wants her to become his kama sutra girl. Charlie, who is planning to take Renata to Europe on Friday - their second Continental jaunt of the year - supposes that others in general will see an old troubled lecher taking a gold-digging floozy off to Europe for a good time. Charlie rationalizes, however, that Renata has real reasons for these trips and that the least he can do is offer mature counsel and companionship. He does not reveal in his mental meanderings the precise nature of these problems.

While Renata and her client prattle in the front seat of the Pontiac on the way to drop him off at the courthouse, Charlie resumes his reminiscence of the early days of the relationship. Her sexy beauty smites him the moment he lays eyes on her, but he has some trepidation about approaching such a lovely creature. She saves the embarrassment of first contact by boldly approaching him with the news that Szathmar has already broken the ice by telling her that they ought to get together. Szathmar also arranged an assignation at a seedy subway bar. The idea was that Charlie would buy Renata a drink and, if it looked like he was going to get lucky, he would hail the bartender, whom Szathmar had already bribed. Charlie would offer the bartender a five-dollar bill to retrieve a key to an upstairs room, which the establishment lets out at cheap rates during the daylight hours.

Things do not go perfectly, however, because Szathmar forgets the phony name he is supposed to use, and the bartender announces in sonorous tones Charlie's real name as he is going through his list of those qualified to claim room keys. As luck would have it, Charlie's childhood sweetheart, Naomi Lutz and her father come into the bar just as Charlie is completing the key transaction and is leading a martini-besotted Renata out the door. Charlie has a brief reminiscent but embarrassing conversation with his now-middle-aged puppy love and then proceeds to take Renata upstairs, where she passes out on the bed. Before losing consciousness, however, Renata has another couple of martinis, goes into the bathroom, removes her clothes, puts her plastic raincoat back on and buttons it up to the neck. Back in the bedroom, kindhearted Charlie opens her raincoat with the idea of taking off Renata's wet outer clothing while she is unconscious. When he discovers that she has already disrobed, he ogles a bit longer and a bit lower than necessary before re-buttoning her. He is not such a cad, however, as to consummate their relationship during martini-sleep.

During Charlie's recollections on the way to the courthouse, he also relives some thoughts he on the profound topic of boredom developed while he is waiting for the bailiff to call him from the jury pool. Actually, he is rereading a letter from Pierre Thaxter, his California partner on the yet-to-be launched *Ark* journal they are planning to publish. Actually, the topic of boredom really is profound, and the subject of a long treatise Charlie has been procrastinating about for a long time. Charlie has the notion that boredom is the core of power and that power is defined by people's ability to require that others pay attention to them even when what they say or do is deadly boring. He claims that in the eighteenth century, Europe's intellectual development was controlled by

boring people in power. Later, during the Russian Revolution workers and peasant soldiers, bored with oppression, rose up to champion Marx and Lenin. As examples, he cites the endless dinner parties of Hitler and Stalin, with guests listening to hours of babble and discourse, kept awake in some cases only by the anxiety of wondering if they would survive until the last course or be summarily executed somewhere between the raw oysters and the cherry torte.

Once Charlie actually reaches the courthouse, his present-day divorce jerks him from his reminiscence of the past. After some dialogue with his mid-town lawyers, in which Charlie is cynical and the attorneys condescending, the judge calls Denise into his chambers. Charlie sees this as a change-up, having expected them to be called in together. When Denise comes back out, she is uncharacteristically solicitous, wondering if they should consider reuniting. She says that she recognizes the mistakes they have both made and that the girls miss him terribly.

## Section 7, Through p. 228 Analysis

Saul Bellow gently implants kernels of tragedy, wisdom, complexity and profound insight into his readers' minds, coating them lightly with comedy to germinate and grow into deep-rooted concepts that thrive on future contemplation. Renata emerges as a complex character, troubled and wise at the same time. She is overtly sexual, but not promiscuous. Her love for Charlie runs deep and true, but it is not shrouded romantic myth. Matters concerning his financial welfare share equal footing with his spiritual and physical needs without protocol or Victorian metrics. Charlie needs his young trophy partner - his kama sutra girl - as well as someone to tell him when to let his friend Humboldt go and when to seek the aid of a counselor.

Even Bellow's cameo players carry heavy messages. Gaylord Koffritz, Renata's former husband, wears a hole in the floor of the old Pontiac with masonry models of crypts and mausoleums. This is the same car in which Charlie is riding while contemplating death. When Gaylord encounters George Swiebel's father at the Russian Baths, he traps him with a comedic spiel about how people in cemeteries get no respect. If Charlie were not so wholly consumed by thoughts of mortality, it would be simply funny when Gaylord bombards old Myron with tales of the dead being disposed of in public cemeteries. Driven by the prospect of a sale, Gaylord regales the old man, who is denying the imminence of his own death, with tales of bodies crammed together in the cold ground within earshot of the freeway. He likens the cemeteries to golf courses, with greens keepers mowing over the thin brass markers until they are no longer readable. Then, he claims, the bodies are simply ploughed under - lost to memory for eternity - as soon as some developer covets the land for condos. These stories are high macabre comedy, of course, but they are also stark. When they are filtered through Charlie's preoccupation with death, they become lingering topics for future contemplation in the reader's mind.

Bellow delves more deeply into Renata's character here than he has done before and foreshadows yet more to come when Charlie rationalizes their upcoming fling in Europe with a supposed legitimated purpose rooted somewhere in Renata's personal problems.

Charlie also makes a point of not telling Rinaldo Cantabile and Polly about the European trip. Rinaldo is fully expecting, despite Charlie's refusals, that Charlie will help his wife with her thesis on Humboldt. This too suggests some future complications. What about Denise's turnabout at the court house, her sudden interest in reconciliation? Is it possible that Rinaldo, who has already taken it upon himself to get deeply involved in Charlie's affairs, is working somehow in the background through his Mafioso brethren? There is also the unread letter from Humboldt's ex-wife, which promises further developments on that front.

# Section 8, Through p. 236

## Section 8, Through p. 236 Summary

In this short section, Charlie wraps up this particular encounter with the divorce court. The bailiff ushers Charlie and his two attorneys, Tonchek and Srole, into Judge Urbanovich's chambers. The judge is having fun with this particular case, probably because the assets involved are not real, as in real estate, but are intellectual properties and vaguely potential intellectual properties. The judge opens the *in camera* session by sarcastically labeling Charlie as too sensitive of a person to take the stand, which Charlie interprets as slur on his Chicago-ness. The implication is that real Chicagoans are not sensitive. Judge Urbanovich then notes that Charlie does not like the opposing counsel, Mr. Pinkster, who is anything but sensitive, implying that the opposing lawyer would make things very difficult for him on the stand.

The judge insists that, in spite of Charlie's recent paucity of income, he has made huge amounts of money in the past. Urbanovich even states that the reason Charlie is not making any money is that the divorce proceedings have disrupted and offended his sensitive, creative nature, so that he can no longer produce sensitive, creative products. Thus, if he settles, he will be back on the gravy train. The judge also declares that it is impossible for the future Charlie to make so little money that he would escape the fifty-percent tax bracket. Thus, the proposed $30,000 per year to Denise would really only cost him $15,000 because it would lower his taxes. Charlie argues that, as with the rest of him, his brain is growing older and slower and that it may no longer contain potential works worthy of the $100,000 per year he would have to earn to make the Judge's theory work. The judge counters that - once relieved from the stress of his divorce - a smart fellow like Charlie could always find a way to make money. By example, Judge Urbanovich cites an eastern guru who is all the rage and is making millions with his book that teaches devotees how to turn their tongues back into their mouths to explore their own sinus cavities.

The judge then reveals that Charlie's ex-wife and her legal team have learned of his planned trip to Europe with Renata, and they are demanding that he post a $200,000 bond to assure his return. Charlie's lawyers make the case that Charlie is a life-long Chicagoan, that he has deep roots in the community and that the plaintiff has absolutely no evidence that he is planning to bolt. The judge allows that this would be a valid argument if Charlie owned real property - say a small shop or restaurant in the Windy City - but since all of his potential wealth is in his head, there is less incentive for him to return. He couldn't, after all, leave his head in Chicago as collateral.

## Section 8, Through p. 236 Analysis

This section is an allegory of the struggle between the creatively motivated artist and a grasping, materialist social order. Charlie's great sin - the one that is likely to cost him

his livelihood - is to have turned his talent into cash by commercializing it with a successful Broadway play. By such an act he has demonstrated to a materialistic society that he has worth as defined by monetary metrics, rather than the non-material treasures of beauty, insight, wisdom and the visceral solicitation of emotion through the production of his artifacts. Charlie longs for his lost life as a Bohemian in Greenwich Village, the heady days of cheap wine, quick ladies, art and raw emotions that he shared with Humboldt in the early days. Society is now cutting Charlie off from the possibility of returning to those days, demanding that he morph his talent into moneymaking schemes - such as licking his own sinuses - to meet the financial necessities of an expensive divorce based solely on his few successful years as a Broadway playwright. It is time for Charlie to put away the childish things of joy and satisfaction in favor of what really counts - the making of money. Even the judge's name, *Urban*ovich, speaks to the allegory contrasting the wild, free life of the artist to mundane existence of the responsible urbanite.

# Section 9, Through p. 264

## Section 9, Through p. 264 Summary

Pursued by Srole, the lesser of his two divorce attorneys, Charlie retreats to a stall in the men's room to read the unopened letter from Kathleen, which informs of him of the death of her second husband, Frank Tigler, in a hunting accident. Another character who lived in a shady, not-quite-criminal world - at least most of the time - Frank owned a dude ranch in Nevada, where he begrudgingly tolerated paying guests to finance his quarter-horse breeding operation. His shadiness endeared him to Charlie's heart. Frank had a *laze faire* approach to running the guest ranch, which he left to Kathleen while he sported around the quarter horse racing circuit, peddling horses with phony papers and picking up raced-out mares for brood stock and stallions for sire duty. Frank's death was not entirely an accident. He caught one in a shootout between the local forest ranger and a guest of the dude ranch from Mill Valley, California who was evading a warrant. Frank never fired a shot, but he was the only one hit.

As Charlie reads the letter, he reminisces about the times he spent with Frank. In one incident Frank, a non-swimming cowboy, fell out of the boat into Volcano Lake, and Charlie dove in to save him. They were surrounded by many of the local Indians, but the Indians didn't like Frank or his dude ranch and made no effort to rescue him. Although Charlie saved his life, Frank never outwardly acknowledged it. He had too much pride. On another fishing outing, Frank became furious when Charlie caught the first trout, claiming it was really his because Charlie used one of his lures. Frank was constantly getting into physical altercations with people to whom he owed money. When he left the ranch, he instructed Kathleen to pay absolutely no bills, except to avoid violence. When the utilities company shut off power and water to the ranch, he rationalized that that was just what these city dudes wanted, to rough it. Charlie savors the memories as he sits in the stall, but that is not the main thrust of Kathleen's letter. Rather, she wants Charlie to know that Orlando Huggins, the executor of Frank's will, is trying to get in touch with him because Frank has left him something. What it is, Charlie can't imagine. She also reveals that Huggins has a letter from Humboldt, apparently written in a lucid moment during his latter days.

After Charlie's nostalgic detour, his thoughts turn to the plight he will be in if the judge decides to nail him with a $200,000 bond before allowing him to take his intellectual assets to Europe with Renata. He considers selling his oriental rugs, which are skyrocketing in value because oil-rich Persians aren't content to sit at looms all day anymore. Germans, Japanese and even Arabs are invading the mid-west for the valuable carpets. He considers two articles that his *Ark* co-editor, Thaxter, is sitting on, but since one is entitled "The Great Bores of the Twentieth Century," he doesn't figure they will have enough audience appeal to resolve his financial dilemma. He settles instead into more serious thought about the potential of a beryllium mining scheme in Africa's Olduvai Gorge. Eziliel Kamuttu, George Swiebel's guide when he visited Africa a couple of years previously, owns the property in question. At first, Charlie dismissed

the scheme out of hand as too far-fetched. When he took ore samples to Ben Isvolsky, however, he became more attentive to the idea. Ben is an old college chum - a mineralogist - who, having assayed the samples, quickly lost his superior scientific demeanor and started talking investment.

As Charlie is leaving the courthouse, the bailiff alerts him that Pierre Thaxter will meet him at the Art Institute. On his walk there from the courthouse, Charlie reflects on the relationship. Pierre is generally recognized as an excellent journalist, but in many ways he is a scoundrel. He has been living off Charlie in Palo Alto, California, where he maintains a lavish estate. Pierre is always behind in his bills, is facing foreclosure on the estate and is a constant drain on Charlie's finances. Pierre has yet to produce the first issue of their joint-venture journal, *The Ark*, but Charlie continues to fund the enterprise because of Pierre's deep and genuine love of art. Just as the pair meets up at the Art Institute, Rinaldo and Polly show up in the Thunderbird, parking in heavy traffic with no heed to the jam they are creating. Rinaldo insists that Charlie come with him, saying that he has something to show him, but Charlie resists.

Pierre, on the other hand, is thoroughly enjoying this episode with the unknown mobster, feeling that he is finally and truly experiencing the real Chicago. The traffic continues to build behind the Thunderbird. Charlie continues to resist Rinaldo. Rinaldo continues to insist. Pierre willingly gets in the backseat. Rinaldo finally forces Charlie into the backseat - essentially kidnapping him - as Polly speeds off, negotiating the Chicago streets like a skilled race driver just ahead of a squad car with its flashing lights that is inching its way through the traffic jam caused by the Thunderbird. Charlie threatens to charge Rinaldo with kidnapping, which Rinaldo laughs off, explaining that he just had to get away from the cops. He is, after all, a gangster.

Rinaldo tells Charlie that Charlie's attorney friend, Alec Szathmar, is in trouble with the mob because he got caught in illegitimate coitus with one of Rinaldo's guy's bimbos. If Charlie plays along with Rinaldo, however, Rinaldo can pull some strings to save Alec from gangland retribution. Charlie calls bullshit on Rinaldo, and Rinaldo changes tactics. He shows Charlie the *Tribune,* in which they get a mention in Mike Schneiderman's gossip column about Charlie's attempted payoff of a poker debt at the Playboy Club. Even though only Charlie's name is mentioned, with Rinaldo being identified incidentally, the gangster seems proud to appear in the same article as his new friend Charlie. Polly, Rinaldo and Pierre drift off into a three-way conversation, and Charlie drifts off into his private world. While the irrelevant conversation swirls around him, Charley replays his last visit to his former wife's father, Dr. Scheldt, who is also Charlie's anthroposophistic counselor. During the session, the two learned men discuss death.

## Section 9, Through p. 264 Analysis

As Charlie's adventures progress, death - or at least the contemplation of death - dominates more and more of his intellectual meandering. Every thought, it seems, though often long and sometimes rambling, seems to end in the contemplation of the death. It is significant to the development of this complex character named Charlie that

he is more or less indifferent to his own mortality. He recognizes its inevitability, and yet he tends to look upon the prospect with much curiosity - in fact, some longing - and without fear. He is not possessed of a morbid fear of his own death, but rather is consumed by an unrelenting curiosity about the nature of death itself. He does not view death as a place of terrifying darkness but, to the contrary, associates it with the emergence of light. The earliest evidence of this is when Charlie is a child, confined to the public children's tuberculosis sanatorium. Then, he associates the coming of dawn through the window with the neat empty beds in the ward, which symbolize the children who have died in the night. This connection of death to light continues to re-emerge in Charlie's adult contemplations.

Charlie's encounter with Pierre underscores another persistent dynamic of Charlie's character, his near addictive compulsion to sympathize with and finance born losers, if they are sensitive to and talented in the arts. This is the case with Humboldt, and this is the case with Pierre. His statement is not so much 'Art at any price,' as 'With art, price is irrelevant.' Charlie's relationship with Rinaldo symbolizes Charlie's inability to escape the system and pressure around him, over which he has little control and which are antithetical to art and the creative process. While Charlie is trying to carry on a fulfilling relationship with his artistic friend Pierre, a petty mobster with a Thunderbird in the midst of a Chicago traffic jam is kidnapping him. All the while, his artistic friend is thoroughly enjoying the experience, perceiving it as an act of visceral art during which he is gaining a spiritual insight into the nature of Chicago. Charlie does not hate Rinaldo for kidnapping him, though. He tolerates him in much the same nostalgic way that he tolerates the other slings and arrows his beloved, though crass, Chicago hurls at him as he lives out his sensitive, artistic life.

# Section 10, Through p. 290

## Section 10, Through p. 290 Summary

With Charlie growing more irritated by the moment and Pierre becoming more fascinated with his Chicago Experience, Polly pulls up next to the Rookery, headquarters of the Western Hemisphere Investment Corporation, run by a man named Guido Stronson. As he is exiting the Thunderbird, Polly warns Charlie about Stronson and suggests he read the paper. Charlie wrestles the advance edition of the *Tribune* from Rinaldo and reads that Stronson is under investigation by the Securities and Exchange Commission. Some of the suckers he bilked in his phony role as a Harvard investments guru are heavy hitters in the mob, hence Rinaldo's role as enforcer. It turns out that Stronson didn't go to Harvard Business School at all but is a high-school dropout who worked as a service station attendant until he got the bright idea of scamming the Mafia - not, by Chicago standards, a real bright light. After a series of coded knocks, a receptionist admits the trio into an office meeting room. A porter is vacuuming the carpet, and Charlie has to lift his feet while Rinaldo goes into the inner-office. Pierre and Charlie stay in the anteroom while Rinaldo is talking to Stronson, and Charlie urges his companion to leave with him post haste before they get further involved. Pierre, however, is enjoying the moment far too much and insists they see it through.

While waiting, Charlie tries to engage Pierre in a meaningful discussion of the business aspects of *The Ark* - primarily about shutting the seemingly endless and expensive project down - but Pierre evades the issue, simply refusing to acknowledge the possibility. Charlie reminds his friend how strapped he is for cash, especially now with the potential $200,000 bond staring him in the face, and Pierre counters with a couple of moneymaking ideas, none of which Charlie considers viable. Charlie keeps bringing up reasons to liquidate, and Pierre keeps shooting them down. Charlie tries to chastise Pierre for not implementing cost cuts that he has ordered, but Pierre has an excuse for everything. He couldn't, for example, fire his girl because her husband died and she was too distraught. What about the new wing, which Charlie forbade Pierre to build? No problem, says Pierre, the lumber company can dismantle it and take back their wood so they (and Pierre) won't have to pay for it. Pierre has even drawn up a finely detailed repayment schedule for the significant amount of money he has personally borrowed from Charlie. The schedule is meticulously precise, covering every jot and tittle, and the repayment terms are fair - even generous. Charlie knows, however, that the fine and elaborate plan is as far as it will go. In Pierre's mind, the mere drafting of such a beautiful instrument is tantamount to repaying the debt. That is simply the way of style-conscious Pierre. The exercise allows him to preserve his image of his own nobility and dignity.

Rinaldo interrupts the partners' conversation, coming out from Stronson's office and demanding Charlie's presence. First, he insists that Charlie put on Pierre's swashbuckling, broad-rimed, Italian hat. Rinaldo orders Charlie to just stand in

Stronson's office and keep his mouth shut. Rinaldo will do all of the talking. He then warns Stronson that Charlie is a hit man, and he should watch out for him. Charlie is stunned and outraged. Just as he is starting to protest, the door to the inner office bursts open, and the porter who was vacuuming the carpet in the outer office flies in, waving his ID card and identifying himself as a homicide detective. Charlie protests that he is not really a hit man, and the cop agrees he certainly doesn't seem the type. He has two arrest warrants, however - one for Rinaldo and one for a John Doe hit man - and of course paperwork rules, so he takes them both off to jail. The cop frisks everybody and finds a large-bore handgun stuffed in Rinaldo's belt. When he pulls it out into view, Stronson says it is the same gun with which Rinaldo threatened him earlier. As the cop is hauling him off, Charlie pleads with Pierre to get hold of Renata to bail him out, all the time realizing that whenever he asks Pierre for help it ends up causing more problems than solutions.

Even the ride to the police station provides Charlie with a venue within which to contemplate death. He acknowledges that the cop is right, that he is clearly no killer, but he reflects on his compulsion to continue the work of the dead as a means of mourning, as if they could live on in him. He attributes this to a deep sense of grief when someone he cares for dies. In the squad car, Charlie realizes that he is following in Humboldt's footsteps. At the station house, Charlie inches through the formalities of fingerprints and mug shots. In the meantime, Pierre tries to call Renata, who isn't home, so he goes to a kung fu movie instead. After the movie, he buys a ticket to a Bulls and Celtics basketball game from a scalper. He then grabs a cab to a special deli he knows of to buy a particular gourmet brew to go with the sturgeon sandwiches Charlie gave him as a welcome-to-Chicago gift. He reflects that the beer isn't really chilled properly, but after all, this is Chicago. Pierre then scoots of to the game, convinced that Renata, as a native, is better equipped to handle Charlie's problems than he is as a mere visitor to the Windy City.

Following Charlie's intake processing, a fat, deskbound Chicago policeman is leading him off toward the holding cell when the desk sergeant calls him back. The receptionist from Stronson's office is there with tears in her eyes. She explains that she knows who he is and has admired him all of her young life, but she has never read any of his work. It turns out that the young, empathetic and ravishing young thing is none other than the daughter of Naomi Lutz, Charlie's teenaged sweetheart. The receptionist has grown up on wonderful tales of Charlie, whom her mother never gave up loving. Charlie confesses that he never fell out of love with Naomi either and that he often thought pure happiness would have been to wake up every morning in her loving arms. As the girl is driving him home in her Volkswagen, Charlie's thoughts turn once again to mortality - this time his own, rather than some esoteric, generalized notion of death.

## Section 10, Through p. 290 Analysis

Bellow has a great talent for distorting time. Because much of *Humboldt's Gift* occurs in lengthy thought processes totally within Charlie's head, it is easy to overlook the fact that everything that has occurred in Charlie's fictional real world - all 290 pages of it -

has occurred in less than two days. The seemingly long-ago scene in the toilet at the Russian Baths and the meeting in the Playboy Club with Charlie, Rinaldo and Mike Schneiderman, the gossip columnist, occurred only yesterday. Although it is not blatant, this time warping plays cleverly into the author's central theme of death, which by most definitions is either nothing or forever. By contemplating many years of history and memory, and interlacing it with Charlie's real-time thoughts, the reader may be left with a sense of wandering through time, often delightfully, but sometimes with trepidation, and with only an occasional reality-check back to the present.

The meeting with Naomi's daughter at the police station suggests a developing scenario. Typically in *Humboldt's Gift*, Bellow has first introduced a character in a cameo appearance, with only the minimal attention paid to a bit player. Then, perhaps many pages later, the character blossoms into full flower. There is an excellent example of this technique of character development in this section in the person of Pierre Thaxter. Until now Pierre has remained a shadowy, eccentric figure off spending Charlie's money in Palo Alto. In this section, however, he emerges like a sunrise into a fascinating, colorful, flamboyant and immensely lovable persona in spite of his compulsive self-absorption. Naomi has already been introduced in cameo in the embarrassing (at least for Charlie) meeting in the bar when he is first trying to seduce Renata. Now she is introduced again vicariously through her daughter, and Charlie confirms the strong mutual love between him and her mother. Surely, this must foreshadow something.

# Section 11, Through p. 325

## Section 11, Through p. 325 Summary

After Naomi's daughter rescues Charlie from the stationhouse, he decides to pay a visit to his now frumpy childhood sweetheart. First, however, he spends an expensive hour with Murra, his accountant, who informs him that he has had no luck with the IRS and that they won't be going away, and then Charlie takes his daughters to a Christmas pageant. Of course, Charlie does little without spending protracted periods in thought about deep philosophical issues, generally including death. Then, during an episode of introspection at the pageant, Charlie concludes that America has entered a sort of spiritual coma, not death exactly, but close, lulled there by the Archai, or spirits of personality. In modern times the Archai have taken over from the Exousiai, the spirits of form, which were responsible for the tribal consciousness known in Jewish tradition by another name. The Archai produce autonomous beings that appear animated, giddy and free, but in the final analysis, they are boring and of little relevance. In the midst of these deep thoughts at the intermission of the pageant, his daughter Lish interrupts his meditation by presenting him with a note from her mother, which informs Charlie that someone has threatened her life. Charlie silently curses Rinaldo and speculates the threat will remove any doubt from the judge's mind about tying up $200,000 of Charlie's dollars before he leaves for Europe.

At Naomi's house, Charlie reconfirms his love for her and restates his conviction that he would have been blissfully happy waking up in her arms for the past forty years. She calls bullshit on her old lover, saying that Charlie is romanticizing and is actually lusting after her sexy daughter who is beautiful and adores him. She claims they could never have made a lasting match because she never understood what he was talking about; nobody did. She reminds him that Charlie borrowed her savings to get enough money to leave Chicago and go off in pursuit of his literary god, Humboldt, in Greenwich Village. As the couple conducts a postmortem on their adolescent relationship, Naomi reflects that her father, who never approved of the match, always referred to Charlie's family as greenhorns. To Dr. Scheldt's mind, the Citrines weren't real Chicagoans. Naomi speculates that is because there was too much love in Charlie's family. The two former lovers play out their pasts to one another, the central theme being those who have passed: Humboldt, Demmie and her father. Even Renata's husband, a mortician, surrounded himself by death. Charlie reveals to Naomi how he followed Demmie and her father to South America, searching the jungle for Demmie's plane, hoping that his would crash in route and spending time at the Demmie family's mission amidst a colony of cannibals. Apparently, the cannibals ate the first of Demmie's clan to arrive in the jungle, but all was eventually set right in the spirit of Christian giving.

Charlie and Renata make it to O'Hare, accompanied by the Senora, Renata's mother, who is eternally scheming to get her daughter wed to Charlie. The ostensible reason that Charlie and Renata are going to Europe is to discover who Renata's real father is. The Senora is not sure. As they are taking off, Renata says goodbye to Chicago,

cursing the city as a haven for unappreciative low-lifers who don't deserve her Charlie. In her parting curse, she implores Charlie to criticize Chicago when he writes his article on boredom. The November-May lovebirds are on their way to Europe, but first they have to stop by the Big Apple to find out what Humboldt has left Charlie in his will. Renata is not hot for the idea of chasing after the dead Humboldt, and she tries to dissuade Charlie. She claims that he has a weird relationship with the dead, inventing relationships he never had with them while they were alive. Renata reminds Charlie that he once said that Humboldt's will might be nothing but a posthumous prank, reminding her lover of Humboldt's mental instability. Before leaving Chicago, Charlie turns many of his affairs over to his friend George, in whom he has flawless trust. This is mainly so he can raise the money to meet the bond so that he can leave the country. George sells the bashed Mercedes for $4,000 and peddles Charlie's collection of Persian rugs.

Once in New York, Charlie contacts a man named Huggins, who was one of Humboldt's last friends, and who is the executor of his will. Huggins was a somewhat famous Bohemian dissenter, in the image of John Reed, from the Greenwich Village days. Huggins is not fond of Charlie because of some nasty things he wrote about him once, but Charlie finds himself drawn to the man. Although Huggins is Humboldt's executor, he does not actually possess whatever it is that Humboldt left to Charlie. For that, Charlie must contact Humboldt's old horse-playing uncle who now lives in a nursing home on Coney Island. Huggins also informs Charlie that Kathleen, Humboldt's former wife, is coincidentally in New York at the same time Charlie is, and he tells Charlie where she is staying so that he might look her up. Even Renata's farewell to the Windy City frames Charlie's temporal dilemma. She is young, full of life and fantasies of how she will spend it with a famous husband. She views Chicago as a cow town, a backwoods, the sticks - a pretty standard Manhattan view of its western suburb. Charlie, on the other hand, sees Chicago nostalgically as the seat of family love, friendship and a rough and tumble childhood without the frills, facades and affectations of its neighbor to the east.

## Section 11, Through p. 325 Analysis

Charlie's unrelenting stress keeps building with the IRS's refusal to negotiate and Rinaldo's threat on his former wife's life, which seals the deal with the $200,000 bond. Even with his present life playing out in so many different venues, Charlie's past keeps bubbling up in his awareness, modified and characterized with new iterations in new generations, much, the reader might suspect, as it is in Saul Bellow's life as he approaches the end game. After coming from the school, where he contemplates deep philosophical matters during his daughters' pageant, he goes to visit his childhood sweetheart. He lusts after Naomi's daughter, a luscious young twenty-something fantasy, even as he proclaims his undying love for her mother. The origin of his lust, after all, is that the daughter looks just like the now-frumpy mother when she was of the same age. The message here, perhaps, is that Charlie's true love is neither Naomi, her daughter, Demmie nor Denise - not even the sexy Renata. Charlie, it appears, is in love with the past, something he cannot have, just as he cannot have a full understanding of death without passing through death's door. This dichotomy, played out by Bellow's pen,

provides a delightful, almost frivolous view of life, underscored by a heavy, dirge-like baseline.

# Section 12, Through p. 342

## Section 12, Through p. 342 Summary

Once in Manhattan, Renata wants to play, but Charlie has to play out the drama of pursuing Humboldt's gift. This involves a trip to a retirement home on Coney Island on the subway, a destination and mode of transportation beneath the dignity of one who hopes to become Mrs. Charlie Citrine, and who claims old folks' homes cause her to become hysterical. Once there, however, she plays the good sport with the old codgers she meets. Charlie says he needs her on the trip because Humboldt's uncle is a rascal and a player, and he probably hasn't seen such a sexy woman in a long, long time. Unable to dissuade Charlie from taking her along, Renata uses the trip to lobby for wifehood. She explains to Charlie that he doesn't understand real women.

When Charlie and Renata arrive at the home, a vivacious old man who calls Charlie by name greets the visitors. When Charlie asks if he is Waldemar Wald, Humboldt's uncle, he replies that he is not, but that he is his buddy. Charlie then recognizes the man as Menasha Klinger, who boarded with his family when Charlie was a kid. Menasha became something of a Dutch uncle to Charlie. He wanted to become an opera singer and took Charlie to the school where he took lessons. He was passionate enough for a dramatic tenor, but he lacked the talent to hit the big time. His singing aspirations ended when he got a broken nose in the boxing ring of a Chicago YMCA, and he could never form pure sounds again. After a brief and nostalgic reunion, Menasha takes the couple inside to meet Waldemar.

The other old man is suspicious at first, not wanting to be screwed out of anything valuable that Humboldt may have left behind. He describes the home as having bad food and a cruel staff - all either Caribbean or German - and says that he and Menasha are the only two Americans. Finally, however, Charlie and Renata win the two old boys over with compassion and promises of honesty. The only things Waldemar want are to live in a better place and to exhume Humboldt's body from the pauper's graveyard where it is buried and plant it in a more proper resting place, closer to home. There is a sister, too, who died poor and whom he wants to repot. He is more concerned about getting his (dead) family back together even than moving to a nicer home. Charlie, being Charlie, agrees to foot the bill for the reburials, even if what Humboldt left is of no value. Thus convinced, Waldemar unearths Humboldt's old briefcase and extracts an envelope, which contains a long letter and another envelope.

In the subway on the way back to Manhattan, Charlie reads the letter that Humboldt wrote not long before he died. In it, his old friend reveals that as he grew older the insanity started to recede and he regained his clarity of thought. He gained an ability to look back at his life and observe it - including his madness - from an omniscient perspective. He apologizes for the way he treated Charlie, claiming his anger toward him grew out of Charlie's refusal to visit him in Bellevue. He acknowledges that he learned later that Demmie wouldn't let him. He cashed the blood-brother check, he

says, out of anger and to punish Charlie. The letter continues, tugging sharply at Charlie's heartstrings and reducing him to tears. Renata responds by telling him kindly to dry his eyes. After reading the letter and smelling Renata's hankie, Charlie opens the other envelope Humboldt left him. Finally, Charlie learns the whole of *Humboldt's Gift.* It is a treatment - a scenario - for a screenplay, complete with notations of which stars should play which parts. Ostensibly, the play is based on Charlie's personality - a *quid pro quo* for *Von Trenck*, which Humboldt claimed pirated *his* personality.

## Section 12, Through p. 342 Analysis

Finally, Charlie receives Humboldt's gift - the scenario for a comedic movie that mirrors Charlie's life, at least in the eyes of his momentarily sane friend, Humboldt. That, of course, is the big news in this section, but there are some other things going on here as well. Renata's character reaches full bloom here. Although clearly a rough-talking gold-digger, she reveals her sensitive and compassionate side in the way she overcomes her dread of the old folks' home and relates to the two old curmudgeons, and later in the subway when she comforts Charlie. The more delightful literary device here, though, is the character Waldemar Wald, whom Bellow portrays as an allegory for Chicago. Here is a poor immigrant, come to America with dreams of becoming a famous dramatic tenor. He doesn't quite have the talent for the big time, and his operatic dreams are crushed in a YMCA boxing match with a broken nose. Throughout his novel, Bellow has painted Chicago as a rough-and-tumble blue-collar town, where the fine arts must constantly struggle with schemers, capitalism and petty gangsters. What better icon of this dynamic than an opera singer with a broken nose? Out of that struggle between the fine and the low, however, grow some fascinating characters.

# Section 13, Through p. 345

## Section 13, Through p. 345 Summary

This short section is the scenario Humboldt bequeaths to Charlie, entitled "Treatment" and broken into eight small sections:

Humboldt introduces his central character, Corcoran, who is a successful author who has been suffering through a non-productive slump for several years. Corcoran is married to a strong woman and completely under her thumb. He has tried all sorts of adventurous sports to cure his malaise, but he has been unsuccessful. Humboldt recommends Mastroianni for the part.

Corcoran has an affair with a woman who should be played by Marylyn Monroe - if she were alive - and for the first time in years, Corcoran is happy. The couple sneaks off to a remote paradise, an island, where they have a wonderfully tender and passionate time. Corcoran's wife is busy nursing her ailing father. The natives welcome the couple, opening up their paradise to them, where they have a wonderful, passionate time, and the writer is renewed.

When Corcoran returns, he writes a successful book based on his experiences.

Corcoran cannot publish the book, however. Corcoran, it seems, is so intimidated by his wife, Hepzibah, and so afraid to loose her, that he cannot let her read his *magnus opus* lest she recognize that he has run off with another woman on this romantic interlude.

Corcoran's agent, Zane Bigoulis, a Greek American whom Humboldt says should be played by Zero Mostel, comes up with a scheme by which Corcoran will duplicate the trip he took with his bimbo, but with his wife as his partner this time. Zane will precede him with the appropriate bribes and follow along in the shadows to make sure everything is exactly the same as it was with Corcoran's girlfriend. Then, Corcoran can publish the book, and his wife will think he was writing about their trip.

Zane sets the deal up, paying all of the appropriate bribes and making sure all of the settings are exactly the same as the first time. He arranges to set himself up in a secret hut on site where he monitors all of the action with hidden microphones and cameras.

Corcoran repeats his trip to the island with his wife, but what was once serious, passionate and tender becomes low comedy and parody. Corcoran becomes a clown, according to Humboldt's vision. This, says Humboldt, represents the artist in America, starting out wanting to do something significant for mankind, but ending as a poor joke. While Corcoran and his wife are bathing with the hibiscus, her loving it and him hating it, his agent is scheming about how to turn the island into a theme park for rich tourists and turn all of the natives into waiters, cooks and caddies on the golf course.

When the writer returns to New York, he publishes his book, and it is an immediate success. Happiness, however, eludes him. His wife recognizes immediately that the passionate novel is not about their more mundane trip, and she realizes that he first went there with another woman. She divorces him. Laverne, his lover, also spurns him because he sullied their precious memories by reliving them with his wife. She knows he is married and does not want to get a divorce. She is willing to accept that restraint but cannot forgive him for what she sees as an act of ultimate betrayal.

At the end of the scenario, or treatment, Humboldt adds a few words of advice to Charlie about how to market the screenplay he is to write from it. Humboldt admonishes him to make sure that he gets a box-office percentage and makes a couple of gratuitous comments that suggest Charlie is not a complete loss as a human being.

## Section 13, Through p. 345 Analysis

Bellow has revealed the long-awaited gift from Humboldt's grave, but what will become of it? Will Charlie actually develop the plot into a successful screenplay? Will he, in his relentless introspections, come to recognize himself in the scenario and navigate some middle-aged change of course in what seems to be a pretty unfulfilling life? Is there indeed some commercial value in what Charlie sees as a goofy idea, and how will that affect him as he continues to wrestle with the onset of old age? It could be any or none of the above, but with Bellow the outcome is likely to be both humorous and profound.

# Section 14, Through p. 376

## Section 14, Through p. 376 Summary

Returning from Coney Island, Charlie takes Renata to lunch in the Oak Room, high atop the Ritz Hotel. She complains about missing the opera they intended to see in Europe just to go see a couple of old guys in a nursing home, and he offers to take her to the Met instead. She doesn't like what's playing at the Met, however, and decides they should go see the movie *Deep Throat* instead. Renata chides Charlie for his commitment to the dead Humboldt and derides him about his obsession with all of the intellectual stuff he is always talking about. She knows what's best for him - to marry her and let her take care of him.

The waiter interrupts the lovers' conversation by bringing Charlie a telephone and plugging it in at the table. It is Alec Szathmar, advising Charlie that the judge has imposed a $200,000 bond he must post before he leaves the country. He also informs him that his brother's wife has been calling for him from Texas, where his brother is about to undergo open-heart surgery. A quick change of plans will send Renata off to Europe alone, where Charlie will meet her after he takes care of his family obligations. While Renata is feeding him caviar and boiled egg on Melba Toast, Charlie arranges for the bond to be posted from the proceeds of his Oriental rugs and other valuables. As Charlie considers his brother's upcoming date with near-mortality, of course, he continues to ponder the nature of death. Perhaps, he thinks, one just sort of eases into an oblivious state rather gradually, day by day, as one nears death's door.

After the phone call, Renata pulls Charlie away, back to their room, with the promise of a quickie - promising that they don't have to take off all of their clothes. As they are just beginning, Thaxter calls from the lobby, insisting that Charlie meet him in the Palm Court. Once ensconced in that particular Ritz bar, Thaxter begins regaling Charlie with all sorts of grand ideas for the resurrection of *The Arc* and for grand articles they might collaborate on for other publications. He also tells Charlie that Kathleen, Humboldt's widow, is also at the Ritz and will be joining them shortly at the Palm Court. Alas, poor Renata will have to go to *Deep Throat* all alone. To express her boredom and her disappointment that she will have to go to the skin flick all alone, Renata surreptitiously removes Charlie's loafer under the table and begins stroking his foot. This is not the first time she has done this while Charlie has been going on with all the intellectual talk with friends she doesn't know or like. Gradually, she lifts his foot up under her dress and between her legs, where she proceeds to use it as a sex toy. Feigning an interested expression until the last, she proceeds to satisfy herself. As she achieves climax, Charlie detects a convulsive little shudder - not unlike that of a fish - that is replaced with a satisfied smile. Thaxter is too enamored of himself to notice. Shortly after this little social triumph, Renata excuses herself to go to the movie.

Eventually, Thaxter excuses himself to go make plans for the grand departure party he has planned for Charlie - using money he owes Charlie, of course - aboard the luxury

liner, *Le France*. Thaxter will be sailing leisurely to Europe while Renata flies there and Charlie heads off for Texas. When his guests leave, Charlie searches for his missing loafer only to discover that Renata has walked off with it, partially as a prank and partially to voice her disapproval of Charlie's meeting with Humboldt's widow, another eligible woman.

Sensing that he does not have time to fetch new shoes before Kathleen arrives, Charlie stumbles through a lame excuse to explain the missing loafer. He claims that the busboy must have taken it and excuses himself to go remedy the problem. Kathleen offers to go to his room with him, but Charlie demurs, recalling that Renata's underwear litters the room and that the bed is suspiciously disordered on one corner where the couple was attempting to copulate when Thaxter called.

Once back at the Palm Court, Kathleen and Charlie pay up and leave for a sleazy midtown bar where they both feel more comfortable, and they reminisce a while about Humboldt's peculiarities. They reflect on the moment of sanity he regained just before his death. Kathleen reveals that Humboldt left her a letter too and an exact copy of the same scenario that he gave to Charlie. The difference is that Kathleen, who is now in the film business, sees significant commercial value in her husband's swan song and has already signed a contract with a producer and taken a $30,000 advance against royalties. Charlie is surprised, but he wishes Kathleen well. Kathleen insists that they will split everything between them fifty-fifty. Charlie pretends that he neither needs nor wants the money, but Kathleen calls bullshit, saying she watched him add up the bill at the Palm Court three times before he signed it and that she knows he is being sued and is rapidly going broke. She says she will send him a separate contract on the Humboldt scenario from Europe, one just between the two of them. Charlie insists that they don't need a contract, but Kathleen will have it no other way. She also provides him with her itinerary in Europe, so they can meet if necessary to finalize details.

## Section 14, Through p. 376 Analysis

A couple of things are going on in this chapter as the novel begins to build to a climax, not the least of which is Charlie's situation with the many women in his life. Enamored of Renata's beauty and sexuality, he is by no means resigned to her persistent plans for marriage. There is his ex-wife Denise, who hinted at reconciliation at their last court meeting, and now there is Kathleen, whom Humboldt seems to be trying to join with Charlie in his role of Yenta from the grave. In addition, there is Charlie's high school sweetheart, with whom he claims to still be in love, and her beautiful daughter who is so enamored of Charlie and who looks just like her mother when she was younger.

Of course, the constant thread of death, which has pretty much defined Charlie's thought processes thus far, continues. Bellow underscores death in this section with Charlie's planned visit to Fort Worth to see his brother Julius (a.k.a. Ulick) on the eve of life-threatening surgery. So far the reader has met Charlie's brother only *in abstensia*, but he is likely to emerge as a full-blown and complete character. This would be wholly consistent with Bellow's technique of first introducing a character as a vague specter

playing a remote bit part in the shadows, until for one scene he emerges into the full light of center stage. Although Bellow paints the separation of Charlie and Renata while she jets off to Milan and he trudges to Texas as a coincidental outcome of Charlie's need to visit his brother before surgery, he leaves the reader with the feeling that the split may not be entirely trivial. Renata bases her refusal to accompany Charlie to Texas on the notion that she would appear as a gold-digging bimbo if she went in any role but wife. Charlie, though he may love Renata for reasons more profound than the hot sex, is clearly not ready to make the matrimonial commitment. Earlier in their relationship she left Charlie for the rich Mausoleum salesman, so what is she likely to find on her own for a few days in Milan?

# Section 15, Through p. 401

## Section 15, Through p. 401 Summary

At the airport, Renata makes one last plea to Charlie to abandon his brother in Texas and go with her to Milan. Marriage is the price he would have to pay for her to go with him to Texas. She chastises him, warning him not to get caught up with any Texas women, and he reminds her that she is the one who was unfaithful when she shacked up with the rich mausoleum guy. Failing to talk Charlie out of his plans, Renata tells him how nice it will be to get married in Milan.

Charlie flies to Fort Worth, rents a car and drives out to his brother's million-dollar spread outside of town. Hortense, Julius' wife, answers the door amidst sounds of an elaborate doorbell and barking dogs. At first, Charlie is not too fond of Hortense. She is rough and ready and seems a bit envious of Charlie's relationship with her husband. As he gets to know her better, however, he grows fond of her, recognizing a harsh exterior that covers a loving internal person. Charlie joins his brother in his den. Julius is grossly obese, the cause of his heart ailment, but he is gruff and in denial about the seriousness of his condition. He is the consummate go-fast business tycoon, the most prominent developer in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, and even facing surgery the next day, Julius is caught up in a new moneymaking scheme.

This particular enterprise involves developing a luxury hotel and residential area on a peninsula jutting out into the Gulf of Mexico. Some young, rich playboy Cuban men own the land, having recently inherited it from their father. The old man had never needed the money that might have come from developing it, so he just hung on to it. It now represents a potential billion-dollar landfall for his sons, and Julius is the go-to guy for development in the area. As he is explaining his plan to Charlie, he offers to let his brother in on the deal for $50, 000, which could make him rich. Charlie has invested in numerous of Julius's enterprises in the past and has always doubled his money, so he is enthusiastic. Unfortunately, he doesn't have the cash, because the judge in Chicago has tied it all up in the bond he demanded to allow Charlie to go to Europe with Renata. As a matter of capitalistic principle, Julius will not loan Charlie the money to invest in his enterprise. Charlie decides to follow up on some of Thaxter's ideas for essays in Europe to come up with the seed money.

On the day before surgery, Julius, Charlie and the two Cubans set out in Julius' Cadillac to look at the property they will be developing. Along the way, Julius wants to stop at a special place to pick up some smoked swordfish and shrimp for Hortense, who dotes on them. By the time they reach the peninsula, the swordfish has become one with Julius' obesity. After kicking over a few rocks and talking deal with the Cubans, the foursome heads back to town. Having now devoured the shrimp he bought for Hortense, Julius insists on stopping to pick up some persimmons for her. While Julius sits enraptured under a tree, eating Hortense's persimmons, the Cubans take her golf bag from the trunk and start driving balls out over the surrounding wasteland. They end up locking

the keys in the trunk and denting the new Caddie getting them out. After all of that, Julius insists its time to go get a drink and something to eat.

After Julius consumes a huge Mexican meal, and most of Charlie's, they return to Julius' estate for a serious talk. Standing under a loquat tree in his yard, plucking and devouring one fruit after another, Julius finally gets real about the seriousness of the surgery he is facing the next day. He explains to Charlie that the doctors will actually take out his heart, set it aside and patch some arteries from his leg in to replace the damaged ones leading to and from his heart. He says that Charlie can't come to the hospital before the surgery because Hortense says he will make him too emotional. He wants Charlie to know, however, that he wants him to marry Hortense if he should die on the table, a solution that would make sure his widow had a good man to look after her and that Charlie would never again have to worry about money.

When Charlie asks his brother if he has consulted Hortense about the arrangement, he replies in the negative, but he says he has written it in a letter to her and that she will do what he says. Julius does not die on the table, however, and Charlie visits him the next day in his hospital room. Julius is already wheeling and dealing again, and he commissions Charlie to look around Europe for a beautiful seascape painting for him - no ships, no land, just a beautiful sea on a perfect day. He tells his brother he will pay him five- to eight-thousand dollars for doing this.

## Section 15, Through p. 401 Analysis

This section is turgid with comedy, tragedy and foreboding, which pretty much describes Saul Bellow's overall approach in *Humboldt's Gift.* Julius, or Ulick, as his younger brother Charlie calls him, emerges as a big, brash Chicago-born Texan, totally immersed in the American ideal of a rich, gaudy lifestyle. On the outside, he is a opportunist and financial predator, living for the kill and the joy of the deal. He has more money than he needs and knows it, but he loves playing the game and amassing even more. On the inside, however, Julius is a teddy bear, loving his younger brother, looking out for him and seeing him even as a replacement husband for his wife, should he die on the surgeon's table. In spite of all of his adopted Chicago toughness and Texas braggadocio, Julius at heart is still the son of a warm immigrant Jewish family. There is something ancient - very Old Testament - about Julius' insistence that Charlie take over his familial duties, should he die.

Julius' relationship with food, his eating disorder that compels him to gorge in spite of the fact that the habit is killing him, is reminiscent of Humboldt, who took his painkillers and indulged his madness in spite of the fact that it prohibited him from doing that which he most loved. Whereas Julius is destroying with gluttony his ability to create great, profitable deals, Humboldt's indulgence in drugs and madness prevented him from exploring the mysteries of poetry and art. Julius does not die on the operating table, but Bellow leaves his readers with the feeling that the episode of Julius' health has not quite played itself out. His last request that Charlie find him a painting in Europe of a stark sea with no ships, rocks or land, has something of a foreboding to it, foreshadowing

perhaps some profound development in the story of *Humboldt's Gift*, or it may be merely a red herring.

# Section 16, Through p. 433

## Section 16, Through p. 433 Summary

Before boarding the plane at the Dallas-Fort Worth airport to jet off to Spain to meet Renata, Charlie receives a tearful trans-Atlantic call from his lover, who assures him it would cost far too much for her to explain what is wrong at transoceanic rates. She acknowledges, however, that her sobbing has probably cost a lot too. She does manage to relate, however, that she is convinced the man she went to see, Signor Biferno, is indeed her father, but that he was furious when she introduced herself. Her mother, the Senora, had just filled suit against the man for back child support for all of Renata's life, and the process server had been to his house just before Renata showed up on his doorstep. The Senora had not bothered to inform her daughter of the suit.

During the flight to Europe, Charlie recalls his relationship with Renata and becomes more and more excited the nearer to the continent he gets. He decides amid passionate fantasies that he definitely wants to have another go with Renata - indeed, that he will marry her. When he arrives in Madrid, he takes a cab to the Ritz, grateful that Thaxter's publishing friend, who is dying to convince Charlie to write the European culture guide his *Ark* partner described to him in the New York Ritz, is picking up the bill. The $200,000 bond has left Charlie with only $4,000 walking-around money. He considers going to his room first to shower and dress, but then he decides to go directly to Renata's room and climb into bed for some wild sexual release. When he inquires at the desk, however, the clerk informs him that she has not checked in. Before he goes up to his own room, the concierge hands him a wire from Milan that indicates she will be delayed. Once in his room, Charlie tries to get hold of Thaxter so that he can inform the publisher that he, Charlie, has accepted his offer to stay in Madrid for a month as his guest.

All alone and out of touch, Charlie begins to get that sinking feeling that Renata is ditching him. As he often does in times of stress, he follows the advice of his friend, George Swiebel, his guru in such matters. The regimen for this particular flavor of distress is to stand on his head while a hot bath is filling and take a hot bath followed by some yoga exercises. Then he follows the advice of a self-help author, ostensibly an expert on sleeplessness, who prescribes casting out tension from every finger and toe, one by one. Charlie concludes this is not a good idea as he recalls how Renata uses those appendages during sex. At twenty minutes after eleven, Charlie receives a call from the desk that a woman is on the way up to his room. He bounds from the bed with joy, swinging open the door to find the Senora and Renata's little boy, Roger. All of this is occurring during the Christmas season. The boy was supposed to be in Michigan with grandparents, but family illness forced a change in plans. Renata, without bothering to inform Charlie, instructed her mother to gather up Roger, charge some plane tickets to Charlie's account and trundle the lad over to Madrid where Charlie could look after him. Of course, the Senora can't stay in Charlie's room, so she charges one for herself to his account.

As things progress, Roger gets the flu and Charlie has to care for him. This is not a terrible thing for Charlie, though. He and Roger already have a genuine positive relationship, and caring for the boy helps Charlie forget about Renata - except sometimes, when he reminds him of her. He also experiences some guilt about not spending Christmas with his own daughters. One day when Charlie returns to the Ritz after running an errand, he finds Roger in the care of a chambermaid and discovers that the Senora has checked out, leaving Roger with Charlie. Charlie has been frantically trying to contact Thaxter to confirm his intention to write the European culture book, but he has been unable to locate him at the Paris Ritz, where he was supposed to be staying. He finally contacts Stewart, Thaxter's New York publisher, who informs him that Pierre changed his plans and went to South America to begin interviewing for a new book he is writing on dictators. Stewart has heard of Charlie, of course, being part of the New York publishing scene, but he has heard nothing from Thaxter about a proposed European culture project. More to the point, he knows nothing of the notion that he is hosting Charlie for a month at the Madrid Ritz.

Charlie takes inventory and comes up with a new plan. He reflects that ever since the success of his play, he has always had whatever he wanted. He has developed the habit of wealth. Now he is broke, but the turn of events seems of no great consequence to him. He's been poor before and was happier then than he is now. Compared to the gut wrenching pain he feels at the loss of his sexy young lover, his relative poverty is nothing. He checks out of the Ritz, engineers a fake passport for Roger, buys some proper mourning clothes and creates a fiction that the boy's mother died recently of leukemia. He casts himself in the role of the boy's grandfather and has little trouble playing the mourner as he wrestles with his grief over Renata. Taking the boy in hand, he moves with him into a moderate rooming house peopled by others in similar situations.

When Charlie moves into his new abode, he changes the leukemia story to one about a horrible auto accident, and instead of playing the grandfather as he did while finagling passports at the American Embassy, he claims he is the boy's father. He tells the roomers at his new domicile that his wife died a slow, painful, horrible death in an auto accident, because leukemia is too merciful for Renata. His fellow roomers are suckers for the dead mother story, and they dote on poor little Roger. Rebecca Volsted, a pale, plain secretary for the Danish Embassy, who has a hip ailment and stays at the rooming house, makes a play for Charlie as they are walking - or rather walking and limping - in the park. She unilaterally declares that Americans make too big of a deal out of grief and that it is time for Charlie not only to get on, but to get *it* on as well, and she invites him to her room. Preferring the embrace of misery to that of a horny Dane, he declines the offer.

Charlie truly enjoys his time with Roger and has plenty of help from the other roomers caring for him. He enrolls the lad in school and fits nicely into a routine. Once ensconced in his new routine, Charlie makes an unsuccessful effort to find a shore-less, ship-less ocean picture for Julius. He considers that he might commission one rather cheaply and profit from the proceeds, but he rejects the idea in favor of ethics. Charlie finally receives a letter from Renata, informing him that she has married Flonzaley, the

mausoleum salesman, and that Charlie is to care for Roger while the happy couple is honeymooning in Sicily and North Africa. Renata cites a litany of Charlie's faults, insisting that he had ample opportunity to ask her to wed, but she was tired of being his floozy and unwilling to wait any longer. Charlie, however, concludes she spurned him because he is going broke. She does not say when she will be sending for Roger.

## Section 16, Through p. 433 Analysis

The story that begins with Charlie Citrine receiving threatening phone calls from a petty Chicago mobster who assaulted his silver Mercedes begins to wind to a close in a moderate boardinghouse in Madrid. The silver Mercedes is gone. The hero is broke. He has been abandoned by his lover and saddled with her child; he is being sued by a former wife and is dodging the IRS. Not bad, considering only a few weeks have passed since the ill-fated poker game that got him involved with Rinaldo Cantabile in the first place. While the circumstances seem comical in their entirety, Charlie's particular grief over the loss of his relationship with Renata is real and wrenching. Any reader who has gone through the death-like agony of being spurned by a lover is likely to identify with the emotions evoked by Bellow in this section.

Although Charlie is devastated by the events of his life, he does not cave in. He adapts to his new status, and although the absence of money creates some inconvenience, he quickly modifies his needs and seeks solace in the things he has left that bring him joy. He truly loves the time he spends with Roger, and he spends hours in meditation in his room while the boy is off to school. He delves deeper into his obsessive necro-philosophies, spending hours speaking to the dead in *sotto voice*. In spite of his ill luck, Charlie still has a couple of things going for him. There is the potential movie with Kathleen and the beryllium mine with George Swiebel. These threads will have to be tied up within the few remaining pages of the novel. On the other hand, given Charlie's preoccupation with death, his demise would not be an illogical conclusion and would certainly obviate the author's need to tie up loose ends. Perhaps, in fact, death itself is Humboldt's real gift. On the other hand, such an ending would seem to be something of a cheap shot, unworthy of a writer of Saul Bellows' talent and agile intellect.

# Section 17, Through p. 458,

## Section 17, Through p. 458, Summary

Rebecca Volsted, the pale Danish secretary, continues pursuing Charlie, trying to lure him into her bed. Fresh with memories of lusty and busty Renata, Charlie is in no mood to be wooed by the skinny, translucent Rebecca. Rebecca allows that she is concerned for Charlie's mental health, because he has been heard to mumble for hours while he's locked alone in his room. Of course there is really nothing demented about this; Charlie is merely reading to and conversing with the dead. He is sure, however, that Rebecca would not see the logic in this, so he throws her off stride by asking if she has been listening at his door. In fact, Charlie concludes there are no non-peculiar living humans, and if he is successful in opening up communication with dead souls, he will discover more stable companions.

Charlie and Roger have been at the rooming house now for ten weeks, and the charm of his rustic companions is beginning to wear off. Charlie resolves that he is going to move out of the establishment as soon as Kathleen sends a check. He does hear from Kathleen, who says she might stop by on her way to a shoot, but she does not enclose a check. Apparently, Charlie was not candid enough in the letter he sent to her about his need for money. Charlie is not completely cut off from the rest of the world during his hiatus in Madrid. He does receive some mail. There is the letter from Kathleen, but nothing from Renata. His former lover does send picture postcards from a grand tour of Africa she is taking on an extended honeymoon. She even gives Charlie's address at the Ritz to her former husband, and Charlie makes periodic trips there to pick up correspondence for Roger describing his father's exciting ski vacation in Switzerland.

One of Charlie's more interesting bits of communication is from his friend George Swiebel, describing in some detail how the beryllium deal has gone bust. Naomi, Charlie's adolescent sweetheart and common school chum, invites George to dinner one night and he tells her of his plans to go to Africa to explore the prospect. She begs - and eventually convinces - George to take along her wayward, former drug-addict son. She says that he needs a strong, masculine father figure, and her beer-drinking, hockey-fan of a boyfriend isn't filling the bill. The boy is a pain in the butt from the beginning, but when he gets out in the bush, he becomes intolerable. His sole obsession becomes learning how to say motherfucker in Swahili. For days, he pesters the jovial native guide through mime and a couple of words he has learned to reveal this secret to him. The guide, however, is simply incapable of imagining the act of one having sex with one's mother. When the full concept of what the boy is asking him finally dawns, he takes after the lad with a tire iron, delivering a crippling blow to his shoulder. This ends the Safari, and George takes the boy back to Nairobi where he can fly him back to Chicago. The boy is convinced that the intrusion of the white man into Africa has destroyed the culture because the natives don't remember how to say motherfucker. By this time, George has figured out that they have been traveling in circles in the bush and

that the beryllium samples his friend keeps coming up with are probably stolen. There is no mine, and he has fallen victim to an African con game.

All of these events are interesting, and some are even startling. The real jack-in-the-box, though, is Charlie's hoodlum friend, Rinaldo Cantabile, who shows up unannounced at Charlie's door in Madrid. Rinaldo recently went to a movie in Chicago with his girlfriend, Polly, and they both recognized it as the scenario Charlie described to them., It was the joint Charlie-Humboldt project about the survivor of the Antarctica expedition who is reduced to cannibalism and is living with his secret in a small town in France. Rinaldo then flew to Paris and linked up with Kathleen, who also had a copy of the scenario. They both went to see the movie - a huge box office hit - and agreed that it could not be a coincidence. Even the names of the characters in the scenario were the same. Rinaldo is hot to know if Charlie has proof of authorship. In fact, he does. After he and Humboldt wrote the scenario - a lark intended to make fun of the moving picture industry - Humboldt sent a copy to himself in a sealed envelope. This was once a common practice to protect copyrights without having to register them. The sealed envelope, opened in front of witnesses and the appropriate authorities, will prove proper ownership and entitle Charlie and Humboldt's heirs to a settlement. At first, Charlie resists going to Paris with Rinaldo to see the movie and carry out this plan, but when Rinaldo reminds Charlie of the poor old uncle wasting away in an old folk's home on Coney Island, he acquiesces.

## Section 17, Through p. 458, Analysis

Just as things seem to be winding down, they start to spin up. Just when Charlie seems to be withdrawing from the confusion of too many women - too many prospective mates - in his life, the homely Danish secretary with bubbling hormones enters. She does not seem to be a serious contender, but she may be one bitter reminder of what lies ahead for the aging divorcee who has lost his trophy lover. For his part, Charlie seems to have given in completely to the intellectual and spiritual currents that have been sucking him away from a successful commercial life ever sense he tasted success with *Von Trenck*. Locked away in his room, communing with the dead and pondering other anthroposophistic phenomena, it appears he may finally be dealing with the fact that he has indeed become a middle-aged man. The question now may be whether his mid-life crisis will resolve itself as a natural rite of passage, or if it will continue as a fanciful film loop, as it does with some men, filled with fancy ladies, fast cars and a fat gut.

While the beryllium fiasco seems to indicate that Charlie's bad financial luck is going to continue on forever, Kathleen's letter from Belgrade and the surprise visit from Rinaldo set the stage for Charlie's next adventure. The hit movie that Hollywood has made from the satirical spoof of the film industry that he and Humboldt cobbled together back at Princeton may actually prove to be his salvation. It is high praise to Charlie's fundamentally good character that he refuses any further involvement with his hoodlum friend until Rinaldo reminds him of the welfare of Humboldt's other heir, the old uncle in the Coney Island nursing home. When reminded of the old fellow's condition, however,

Charlie agrees to accompany the gangster to Paris to see the movie and determine if indeed it is based on the script he and Humboldt wrote at Princeton.

# Section 18, Through p. 487

## Section 18, Through p. 487 Summary

In this final segment of *Humboldt's Gift,* Charlie ventures to Paris with his hoodlum friend Rinaldo, discovers some backbone and self-will he has not exhibited before in this relationship, looses Roger to the Senora and more or less crosses the final *t* in Renata. In Paris, Charlie sees the movie and confirms that it is a precise copy of the script scenario Humboldt and he wrote at Princeton. Rinaldo is claiming ten percent of the proceeds of any settlement as a finder's fee. Charlie doesn't begrudge the hood ten percent, but he sets Rinaldo straight when he tries to muscle him for fifteen percent. In spite of Rinaldo's bravado and threats, Charlie holds firm and forcefully tells Rinaldo that this is the end of their dealings. Charlie leaves the matter in the hands of a couple of Paris lawyers and returns to Spain. Waiting for him is a letter from the Senora, demanding that Charlie deliver Roger forthwith to the Ritz in Paris. Charlie complies and ends his babysitting days.

Charlie also learns from his Chicago gangster friend that Pierre Thaxter has been kidnapped by terrorists in Argentina and is being held for ransom. When he learns Thaxter has been appealing in the world press to his good friend Charlie Citrine, the famous writer and historian, to save his life by paying the ransom, he becomes willing to do anything to save his friend. He calls Thaxter's publisher in New York to try to work out a deal whereby the publisher would advance Charlie money against future work to save Pierre. The publisher, however, is unconcerned. When Pierre was unable to rouse Charlie into coming up with the money, he began smuggling out letters to the *New York Times,* soliciting donations to win his release. Charlie concludes - as has Thaxter's publisher - that Thaxter and his so-called captors are running some sort of a scam.

Somewhat depressed at parting with Roger, Charlie gives some serious consideration to going with Kathleen for a month of relaxation in the sun at some Mediterranean paradise where she will be filming her current movie. He declines regretfully, claiming lack of funds, and Kathleen expresses her surprise that he is broke. He even offers to work as an extra in the movie, declaring that he is no longer too proud for such work and that his flirtation with wealth is finished. He is no longer interested in great art, but he is concerned for caring for his daughters - and possibly bailing out Thaxter if it turns out his kidnapping is not a scam. As it turns out, the Paris lawyers settle for $80,000, and the movie company is not the least bit put out. In fact, they realize that Charlie was half of the genius behind the successful script, and they figure that he can write even more blockbusters. Try as they may, however, Charlie is not interested. He even turns down their offer of $2,000 per week to act as a consultant, planning instead to spend a summer in Switzerland at the Swiss Steiner Center (Steiner being the inventor of anthroposophy) with his daughters.

Thus, Charlie chooses a quiet, meditative existence over the excitement of Hollywood, but there is one last kindness he must perform. The final scene in *Humboldt's Gift* takes

place in a Chicago cemetery, at a lonely but important ceremony. During his visit to the old folk's home on Coney Island, Charlie promises to split any proceeds from Humboldt's legacy with the dead poet's ancient uncle, Waldemar Wald. He also promises that, should the money become available, he will help relocate Humboldt's body from its pauper's grave to the more fashionable cemetery where Humboldt's mother is buried. The only people present at the solemn but happy ceremony are Charlie, Uncle Waldemar, Menasha Klinger, the frustrated opera singer and the workmen who run the machinery that lowers the coffin into the grave. As the ceremony concludes, Menasha sings an off-key aria and the once-famous Von Humboldt Fleischer is laid finally to rest.

## Section 18, Through p. 487 Analysis

Much is left unsaid at the conclusion of *Humboldt's Gift*, and the reader is left to guess. Charlie has clearly passed through his mid-life crisis, and in the process he has taken the reader along with him on a profound but humorous journey. There seem to be no real answers in this slice of Saul Bellow's life, but there are many images left to treasure and mysteries to mull. Has this been a novel about middle age, or perhaps the nature of death? Was Julius's ship-less seascape a read herring, or was it something deeply symbolic? Charlie's friendship with Kathleen seems to be maturing. Is it likely to blossom into serene romance? Charlie is off to Switzerland, perhaps, to study anthroposophistry. Will this become an obsession by which he will think himself into dementia and death like Humboldt, or will he discover the meaning of life through his study of the nature of death? It is likely that the sensitive reader will carry some of these deep thoughts into his or her own future, and if Saul Bellow has weaved his spell well, will ponder them with a chuckle.

# Characters

## Charlie Citrine

Charlie is the central character of *Humboldt's Gift*, as well as the narrator. Much of the action in the novel takes place in Charlie's mind in the form of memories, speculations and flashbacks. As a young man in Chicago, Charlie becomes enamored of Von Humboldt Fleischer, a New York poet who authored an anthology of his work entitled *The Harlequin Ballads,* which was immediately successful and skyrocketed Humboldt to temporary fame. Charlie borrows money from his high-school sweetheart, Naomi Scheldt, and runs off to Greenwich Village to follow his new mentor, Humboldt. The older poet takes to the young man, and for a while, they live the idyllic life of bohemian Marxists, carousing, drinking, loving, creating and - above all - thinking and rapping about lofty thoughts with New York's literati.

Eventually, when Humboldt's fame begins to falter, the poet agrees to go to Princeton to take over teaching English for a colleague who is leaving on sabbatical for a year in Europe. Humboldt arranges for a teaching position for Charlie, as well, and the buddies go off to Princeton. While at Princeton, the duo has a good time, continuing in the intellectual vein they established in the Village. At Princeton, Charlie and Humboldt amuse themselves making fun of the American taste for mass art - especially the movies - and write some scenarios and scripts as spoofs that become significant later in the novel. It is at Princeton that Charlie notices the first signs of decline in his friend, first manifested in paranoia. Eisenhower's 1952 victory over Adlai Stevenson devastates Humboldt, and he declares that the election outcome marks the end of art in America. After Princeton, Charlie goes on to achieve a measure of fame in his own right as a trendy essayist, chronicling John F. Kennedy and other notables. Eventually, Charlie pens a Broadway hit, *Von Trenck*, which becomes a successful movie, wins a Pulitzer Prize and is anointed into the lower orders of the French Legion of Honor. Humboldt recoils against Charlie's commercialism and fame, growing increasingly bitter toward him until his (Humboldt's) death. Sometime after his death, the executor of Humboldt's will notifies Charlie that Humboldt has bequeathed him something in his will. What this gift is remains a mystery until near the end of the novel.

Charlie recounts all of this history from middle-aged memory. In real time - the period in which Charlie's recollection and narration occurs - Humboldt has been dead for a couple of years, and Charlie reveals that he died a demented old man in a sleazy flop house near Broadway in New York. By that time, Humboldt has become hopelessly addicted to painkillers and a pharmacopoeia of other mood-altering prescription drugs. The in-between story - from Greenwich Village to flop house - consumes much of the novel. Charlie also reveals from his recollections that he is the son of East European Jewish immigrants to Chicago and that he grew up in a loving home in the rough-and-tumble Windy City during the days of the great depression, prohibition and big-time mobsters. He spent a period of his young childhood in a public tuberculosis sanitarium, where he watched many children die and where he developed a curiosity of, and fascination with,

the nature of death. He repeatedly associates death with light, a phenomenon he attributes to watching the sun come up through the windows in the TB ward in the morning, revealing the bright, white, newly made beds of the children who had died in the night.

## Von Humboldt Fleischer

Humboldt is Charlie's mentor during the Greenwich Village days and maintains a lively intellectual relationship with him for a number of years until he is consumed with dementia. Sometime after the Princeton interlude, Humboldt marries Kathleen and moves to a country home on Long Island. Kathleen is a member of the literati crowd from the Village who is in love with the idea of poets in general and worships Humboldt. She is caring and long-suffering, putting up without complaint as she nurses Humboldt through the earlier phases of his insanity. Charlie is a frequent visitor to the country home of Humboldt and Kathleen, where he spends many hours enraptured by Humboldt's wandering diatribes on almost every subject imaginable. There is no doubt that Humboldt is a huge intellect, a Renaissance man knowledgeable on many subjects and cursed to madness by his perception of beauty in an America he sees as an artistic wasteland.

As Charlie continues to visit his friends in the country, he witnesses the gradual demise of Humboldt's mind. The poet becomes more and more paranoid, even growing jealous of Charlie and Kathleen. Eventually, Humboldt becomes so paranoid that he becomes abusive and violent. After one particularly embarrassing incident at a party, which Charlie and his wife Denise also attend, Humboldt knocks Kathleen down for favoring another man and drags her into the car and speeds off. Later, at a roadhouse over coffee where they are ostensibly making up, Kathleen excuses herself to go to the restroom and slips out the back. Even after the breakup, Humboldt becomes obsessed with the notion that one of Kathleen's male colleagues is not only having an affair with his estranged wife, but that he is holding her captive in his New York apartment. Humboldt mercilessly harasses the man with repeated phone calls, unannounced visits, threats and demands. The victim finally involves the New York Police Department, and the scenario climaxes with Humboldt threatening the imagined seducer with a gun and the police trundling him off blathering to Bellevue.

Alone in the madhouse, Humboldt clamors for Charlie to come see him - perhaps rescue him from this public asylum - but Charlie listens to Demmie, his first serious post-divorce lover, and does not go to visit him. Totally committed to his friend, however, Charlie does take up a collection from the other rich people he knows, and whom he knows admire Humboldt, to move him to a top-notch private mental facility. After checking in, Humboldt quickly checks out, demanding a refund of the money remaining from a one-week advance fee, paid to the institution from the trust fund Charlie and his friends established for Humboldt's welfare. Humboldt spends most of the money on a shady private detective, trying to get evidence on Charlie and the others so he can sue for the balance of the trust fund. Humboldt has already sued Charlie once, claiming that Charlie stole his identity for the play *Von Trenck.* As Charlie paints this portrait of

Humboldt in his memory, his last recollection of his Bohemian friend is of a dirty, disheveled and disoriented old man shuffling along a Manhattan sidewalk mumbling to himself a few weeks before he dies. That memory, and the fact that he does not approach Humboldt and attempt a conversation, haunts Charlie throughout the entirety of the novel.

## George Swiebel

A friend of Charlie's from boyhood, George has become something of a guru to the neurotic essayist and playwright. George is well off and owns a construction company in Chicago. Unlike many of his fellow South Side builders, George is scrupulously honest in both his professional and personal dealings. George frequently diagnoses Charlie's physical and emotional disorders, prescribing holistic remedies that Charlie faithfully follows - and that actually seem to work. Among the gyrations Charlie goes through at George's behest are long periods of standing on his head, hot baths and prolonged periods of meditation. During these meditative periods, which Charlie seems to slip in and out of with ease, and in a variety of situations, he does much of his thinking on the nature of death and other metaphysical concepts he encounters in his study of anthroposophy.

George also serves as a practical financial advisor to Charlie. When Charlie's fortune seriously begins to fade - largely because of a vindictive lawsuit by his former wife - George helps him by finding a good market for his collection of oriental rugs and handles the sale. More significantly, George invites Charlie into an investment opportunity to develop a beryllium mine in Africa. The ore samples are exceptionally high grade, a fact validated by another boyhood chum who is a mineralogist. As it turns out, however, the samples have been stolen by George's African contact, and after George takes a trip to the African Bush, the mine is revealed as a scam.

## Rinaldo Cantabile

Rinaldo is the joker in Charlie's deck, an apt epithet as Charlie meets this low-level crime figure at a poker party orchestrated by George Swiebel. The purpose of the game is to introduce Charlie to a seedier side of Chicago than he encounters in the rarified environment of his artsy and intellectual companions. Charlie comes off a bit arrogant and mouthy after way too much to drink, and he ends up loosing a chunk of money to Rinaldo and his buddy, both of whom crashed the party. Charlie writes Rinaldo a $450 check to cover his losses, but upon learning later from George that Rinaldo and his friend were cheating, he stops payment on the check. Rinaldo reads this as a direct challenge to his pride and status as a gangster, and he begins a campaign of harassment involving early-morning phone call threats to Charlie. When Charlie doesn't pay up - on the advice George Swiebel - Rinaldo and a few of their friends take out their frustration with baseball bats on Charlie's Mercedes.

Finally fed up, Charlie surrenders and agrees to make the check good. Not satisfied with a simple payback, Rinaldo insists that the payoff take place in highly public surroundings, so that all can see that the upper-crust Charlie didn't get over on the gutter-dwelling Rinaldo. Thus ensues a series of comedic adventures orchestrated by a totally inept Rinaldo. In spite of his low-life ineptness, Rinaldo emerges as an entertaining and entirely hilarious character - a good reflective surface for Charlie and all of his deem metaphysical musing.

The essence of the relationship between Rinaldo and Charlie is that Rinaldo has the ability to force Charlie into circumstances he does not want to be in, completely ignoring Charlie's protests. The petty crook shadows Charlie throughout the novel, stumbling from one pratfall to the next. As it turns out, Rinaldo's wife is a Ph.D. candidate in American literature, and she is writing her thesis on the dead poet Humboldt. Rinaldo wants Charlie to critique his wife's Humboldt thesis and perhaps add some personal insight to make her look good, a prospect Charlie resists to the end. Rinaldo views both his educated wife and Charlie as status symbols, helping to lift him from his petty-Mafioso reputation to one of a mobster with class. Charlie finally stands up to this bully tormenter in the final pages of *Humboldt's Gift.*

## Pierre Thaxter

Thaxter is Charlie's partner in an ill-fated plan to publish a sophisticated, art-oriented periodical called the *Ark*, intended to rescue America from the drought of artistic expression that must necessarily come from the victory of Eisenhower over Stevenson. Thaxter is to take care of all of the publishing details and the editing, while Charlie is to contribute funds and essays. Pierre is a gifted journalist with a fine reputation among major publishers. He is also an aristocrat and insists on living in high continental style whether or not funds are available to support his costly habits. Often those funds turn out to be Charlie's. Thaxter lives in high style in Palo Alto, California on the estate he has purchased for the editorial offices of the *Ark.* He and Charlie are supposed to be equal partners, but as it turns out, Pierre owes Charlie for his part of the investment and seldom makes payments on the account. Charlie tolerates this abuse because he dearly loves Pierre and has great respect for his talent.

As Charlie's fortunes decline, and finally crash, Pierre is forced to abandon both his dreams for the *Ark* and the lavish estate in California. He meets Charlie in Chicago for a delightful adventure with Rinaldo Cantabile and his mistress, Polly. The episode ends with Charlie in jail and Pierre eating smoked sturgeon sandwiches at a Chicago Bulls game. When Charlie goes to Spain with Renata, Pierre is supposed to meet him at the Ritz in Madrid, but he decides to go to South America instead, where he is taken hostage by kidnappers. He appeals in the pages of the *New York Times* for Charlie to come up with the money to rescue him, but Charlie is busy licking wounds Renata inflicted when she left him to marry her old boyfriend and is too depressed to read the newspapers. By the time Rinaldo informs him of the situation, Pierre is publishing regularly in the *Times*, accepting donations from anyone to win his freedom. Knowing Pierre, Charlie has his doubts that the kidnap is legitimate.

## Renata

Young, beautiful, lusty, innovative and uninhibited in bed, Renata is a self-confessed gold-digger whose aim is to marry Charlie, thereby elevating her status and financial standing in the eyes of Chicago, New York and the world. Renata is managed by her mother, the Senora, who is unsure exactly who Renata's father is. There are two candidates in Spain, and Renata is driven to repeated, expensive trips to Europe - on Charlie's nickel, of course - to try to locate her mysterious father. When she does, the Senora immediately sues him for the money she claims it took to raise his daughter. Renata always insists on the absolute best of everything, including the Ritz hotels in New York, Madrid and Paris. She essentially bleeds Charlie dry - a process he enjoys immensely - and abandons him when she realizes he is going broke. As a *coup de grace,* she leaves Roger, her young son, with Charlie while she honeymoons around Southern Europe and North Africa with her new husband. Charlie actually enjoys the boy's company, however, and moves to a modest boarding house with him for ten weeks until the Senora reclaims him.

## Kathleen

Kathleen is a devoted wife to Humboldt from the Greenwich Village days until he becomes so jealous and abusive that she leaves him. Just like Charlie, she never stops loving him for his deep, sensitive and artistic soul that lives beneath the madness. Kathleen does remarry, however, although Humboldt never does. Her second husband, Frank Tigler, is almost a complete opposite of Humboldt. Frank owns a dilapidated dude ranch in Nevada, which is always in debt and operates in utter indifference to its guests. Kathleen essentially manages the ranch while Frank makes the circuit of racetracks looking for good deals on raced-out studs and brood mares. He is not above altering a few bloodline records to up the price of the issue of these bargains. Although crude by comparison to Humboldt, Frank shares his irresponsibility, and Kathleen holds the operation together with her own talent, intelligence and sheer force of will. When Frank dies in a hunting accident - which is actually a shootout between one of his shady guests and sheriff's deputies - Kathleen liquidates what she inherits and sets off on her own artistic merits on a career in the movie business. She is not a performer, but in the administrative end of the business. Just as Charlie does, Kathleen receives a letter from Humboldt's executor notifying her that the dying poet left her something in his will.

## Denise

Denise is Charlie's rapacious ex-wife. Born to a notable family in Chicago, Denise marries Charlie at the peak of his success more as a social ornament than as a passionate lover. She intends to increase her already elevated social status, while his heart lingers in the Bohemian pleasures of Greenwich Village. The pair produces two daughters, Lish and Mary, whom Charlie loves but seldom gets to visit. They live with Denise, and she is loath to give any unnecessary comfort to Charlie by making his visits easy. To the contrary, after the divorce, Denise goes after her ex with venom and

vengeance, stripping him of most of his wealth in post-divorce lawsuits. She convinces the judge to tie up his last $200,000 in a cash bond before he will permit Charlie to go to Europe with the luscious Renata.

## Anna Dempster Vonghel (Demmie)

Demmie is perhaps the one true love of Charlie's life - his lover after his divorce but before Renata. Charlie is Jewish, while Demmie is the daughter of a strict, fundamentalist pastor. Her whole family is deeply involved in evangelical Christianity and has operated a mission among a village of former cannibals in South America for several generations. Demmie tries to convince Charlie to accompany her and her parents on a visit to the mission, but Charlie declines, fearful that his Jewishness would cause too many problems. Tragically, Demmie and her parents are lost in a small plane crash in the South American jungles, and Charlie mourns her loss terribly. He travels to the area where the plane went down and retraces their itinerary, but he is unable to find any trace of the plane. Charlie nurses his pain at the loss of this true love for the rest of his life.

## Julius (Ulick)

Julius, or Ulick, as Charlie called his older brother as a child, is nothing like the aspiring young poet *cum* urbane adult who went chasing after Humboldt Fleischer in Greenwich Village. He is a rich developer in the Dallas Fort Worth area, obsessed with the deal, who worships money not for its worth but for the fun of getting it. He projects a rough and unforgiving business-like exterior, but underneath he is something of a teddy bear. Ulick remains a shadow character until near the end of the novel, when he develops a heart problem so severe that he must undergo triple bypass surgery. This family emergency occurs just as Charlie and Renata are preparing to leave for Spain. Renata refuses to accompany Charlie to Fort Worth as his mistress. She will go only as his *bona fide* wife, so she goes on to Europe while he takes care of family business. This separation sets the stage for the breakup of Renata and Charlie, and the last time he sees his lover is when he puts her on the plane from New York to Paris.

## Waldemar Wald

Waldemar is the only family heir named in Humboldt's will. He is an aging uncle who had a special bond with his nephew. Waldemar is an old gambling addict, hooked on the ponies, who is now living out his few remaining years in a cheap old folk's home on Coney Island. While in New York en route to Europe, Charlie and Renata take the subway to Coney Island to visit the old man and pick up the gift that Humboldt willed to Charlie. While there, the couple also meets Menasha Klinger, a figure from Charlie's past. Menasha, a frustrated opera singer, roomed with Charlie's family back in the old days when he was growing up in Chicago. It is a warm reunion because he and Charlie had been continual companions. Waldemar expresses two wishes: He wants to move

out of the sleazy home, and he wants to exhume and relocate Humboldt's body to the family plot. Charlie promises that he will split any revenue he gains from Humboldt's posthumous gift with Waldemar and that he will help the old man and Menasha find more dignified quarters.

## Dr. Scheldt

Dr. Scheldt is Charlie's psychiatrist. He is the one who got Charlie started with the philosophy of anthroposophy, an obscure quasi-religion that examines metaphysical questions and issues from a freethinking perspective. This discipline provides the framework for many of Charlie's internal monologues on the nature of death and dying and the existence and presence of liberated souls and spirits among us. Charlie is anything but dogmatic in his intellectual examinations, trying out first one idea and then another. He is convinced, however, that the dead exist after death and that part of his mission on earth is to both remember and serve them.

# Objects/Places

## Chicago

In a significant way, *Humboldt's Gift* is a travelogue of Chicago. Saul Bellow clearly loves this city he has chosen as Charlie's birthplace and childhood home. There are several Chicago-oriented themes in the book. There are many references to Chicago's little - and culturally challenged - relationship to New York and the rough-and-tumble environment in which the arts must struggle to bud, if not blossom, in the Windy City. Charlie, the central character, recalls many lyrical experiences, characters and incidents that occur in Chicago.

## Chicago TB Sanatorium

As a child, Charlie contracts tuberculosis. Because his parents are not well off, he is confined to the public children's ward in the Chicago Sanatorium. Saul Bellow's rendition of this episode provides some of the most beautiful bittersweet imagery in a book full of beautiful imagery. Charlie's relationship with his parents during this time underscores the deep love of this immigrant family, and his association of dawn light illuminating the empty, newly made beds of children who died in the night shapes his life-long preoccupation with the nature of death.

## New York City

New York is Humboldt's home turf, especially Greenwich Village where he and Charlie live the lives of Bohemians in the early years of their relation. The Belasco Theatre on Broadway is the venue of the play that propels Charlie to fame. Humboldt pickets Charlie's play, claiming his young friend has sold out to the forces of capitalism and has struck a blow against art. He also claims Charlie stole Humboldt's character for the main role in the play. The Ilscombe Hotel, a flophouse where Humboldt finally succumbs to his madness and dies, is near the Broadway district. Renata and Charlie journey to Coney Island to visit Humboldt's uncle and heir in an old folk's home.

## Greenwich Village

The center of art and literature for Marxists and artists, the Village is Charlie's intellectual playground with Humboldt during their first happy days. Here they drink cheap red wine and espresso, seduce women, attract hangers on and expound through the night on all topics intellectual.

## Long Island Countryside

Humboldt buys an old chicken farm in the country outside New York where he lives with his wife, Kathleen. This is where Humboldt's dementia really begins to take hold, and it is from this location that Charlie watches his mentor first succumb to the ravages of alcohol, drug abuse and general madness. Charlie occasionally visits Humboldt and Kathleen, and he sits with Humboldt getting drunk and listening to him rant through the night about art, politics and the state of man and God.

*The Harlequin Ballads*

Humboldt's anthology of comedic poems propelled the poet to fame, where he teetered for a moment before beginning his decline into madness. It is this anthology that initially attracts Charlie to the older poet and shapes Charlie's life from that point on. When he reads Humboldt's ballads in Chicago, Charlie borrows money from his sweetheart, Naomi Lutz, and pulls up stakes for New York. Later, he follows Humboldt to Princeton.

*Von Trenck*

*Von Trenck* is the title of the successful Broadway play that Charlie writes, which propels him to commercial success just as Humboldt begins his inevitable slide into obscurity. Fiercely jealous of his protygy's success, Humboldt pickets *Von Trenck* and publicly criticizes Charlie for his commercialism at every turn. In his more lucid moments, Humboldt still deals with Charlie as a friend.

## Pulitzer Prize

Charlie wins a Pulitzer Prize for his essays on the John F. Kennedy administration, and Humboldt belittles the award in much the same way that he criticizes *Von Trenck,* making a pun about *pullets*, claiming the *Pulit*zer is for the birds. Although Humboldt is wildly popular among the literati of Greenwich Village, he never attains the commercial success he condemns in others. Nonetheless, he often seems to harbor an obsession for financial security.

## Princeton

Humboldt and Charlie are at Princeton when Eisenhower defeats Stevenson in the 1952 presidential election. Humboldt panics, claiming the event spells the end of art in America. Fearful for his financial future, he immediately begins scheming to create a permanent position for himself at the university. It is also at Princeton that the duo concocts some spoofs on Hollywood that come into their own later in the novel.

## Madrid

Much happens to Charlie in this Spanish city. He goes from the promise of renewed riches while living at the Ritz, to rags with his move to a boarding house, to renewed promises of even more riches, which he spurns in favor of going to meditate in Switzerland. An astute reader might ask just how a pauper might manage to live in Switzerland while meditating, but perhaps to the once rich, riches are relative. It is also in Madrid that Charlie starts communing with the dead in an overt fashion, sufficiently vocally to be overheard by nosey boarders outside his locked door. In Madrid, Charlie tortures himself over being dumped by Renata, and he softens to the more practical and sincere friendship of Kathleen.

# Social Concerns And Themes

Humboldt's Gift examines the role of the artist in American society. The United States is an advanced technological society, controlled by business interests, dominated by money. Science achieves remarkable successes. It can perform heart bypass surgery and fly people from coast to coast. What role does art have in such a society? Is it merely the province of a few harmless intellectuals? Why is it that so many American poets have committed suicide?

Von Humboldt Fleisher acts out the agony of the poet in American society.

Nothing in the society sustained his dreams. The temptations and distractions of America were too great for the individual poet. Now, his friend, Charlie Citrine, examines Humboldt's career. Charlie too is an artist who has fallen into difficulties, and the novel is largely about his struggles to avoid the fate of the dead poet.

Charlie Citrine wrestles with the question of death. A follower of Walt Whitman, he believes death is the question of questions, especially for a democracy devoted to pleasure and consumerism. He realizes that the underlying assumption of America's world view is that death is final. That assumption pervades American institutions and conduct. It dominates American thought. Nevertheless, Charlie is seeking a way out, a way to find infinitely more room in the universe. Specifically, he turns to the anthroposophic beliefs of Rudolf Steiner to help him gain a different perspective. Like religion, mysticism has taken seriously the existence of spiritual realities, and Charlie Citrine is a late twentieth-century Don Quixote on a spiritual quest.

# Techniques

Bellow said that he put the best of himself into Humboldt's Gift. It does seem to combine the best features of his earlier fictions. It has the long, episodic plot, the huge cast of characters, and the humor of The Adventures of Augie March (1953). It also features the intellectual protagonist, the subjectivity, and the philosophical seriousness of Herzog (1964). The outer and inner worlds of Bellow are joined in a seamless whole.

Humboldt's Gift is also a roman a clef (a story based on real-life people and events). Various characters in the novel suggest actual people. Most important, Von Humboldt Fleisher seems to be based on Bellow's friend, the poet Delmore Schwartz who died in 1966.

But as Bellow himself has suggested, the creative imagination does not work in terms of a one-to-one correspondence. His characters are more likely to be based on composites that his imagination further refines and synthesizes.

Von Humboldt Fleisher is not simply Delmore Schwartz but also John Berryman and Hart Crane and, ultimately, the American Poet defeated by a hostile world. Too strict an identification limits the character's resonance.

# Themes

## The Nature of Death

Charlie is middle-aged man obsessively aware of his own mortality. Perhaps forty percent of the narrative in *Humboldt's Gift* happens inside of Charlie's head in the form of memories and lengthy flashbacks. He clearly states his belief in the existence of the human spirit and soul after the rite of passage called death. Further, he speculates that we the living have an obligation to carry out the work of the dead and, on more than one occasion, sarcastically quips that we have a right to profit from them. As Bellow's novel winds down, the reader finds Charlie locking himself in his humble room in a boarding house in Madrid, spending hours reading to and talking with the dead. The novel ends with Charlie favoring the idea of retreating to Switzerland to spend time at a Mecca for practitioners of anthroposophy, the esoteric framework for his beliefs on the nature of death.

The pivotal point of Charlie's necromantic speculation is the relatively recent death of his friend and mentor, Humboldt, but this is just one of his many close encounters with the un-living. As each episode in *Humboldt's Gift* unfolds, Charlie is faced either with the memory of someone dead or another character who is tottering on the edge of the grave. In some cases, death emerges as an imminent and personal possibility, such as looking into the muzzle of Rinaldo's gun or walking a slender beam a gazillion stories up off the Chicago streets on a windy night. When Renata, his young, sexy, gold-digging lover, describes her devotion to him while trying to convince him to marry her, she promises to love him still when he is old, wrinkled and waiting for death and when she has to push him around in a wheel chair. Charlie's brother contemplates death as he prepares for bypass surgery, and Kathleen's second husband dies as a bystander in a cop-crook shootout. Death takes many forms in Charlie's recollections of childhood Chicago.

In many respects, Charlie's adventures and obsession with mortality are a caricature of the mid-life crisis of the American male. He sports a trophy mistress, a Mercedes, thousand-dollar suits and Italian shoes, and he takes trips to Europe with lovely Renata on his arm, staying lavishly at the Ritz in three cities. From the pen of Saul Bellow, this humorous exaggeration of the passing of life takes on the nature of profound insight. This ability to deftly blend the essence of tragedy, comedy, irony, pathos, Eros and logos that is likely to haunt and titillate the reader with vivid imagery for a lifetime is truly the mark of one of America's most gifted writers of the 20th Century.

## Money and Art

Throughout *Humboldt's Gift,* Saul Bellow examines the relationship between money and American art. He does this primarily through his two central characters, Charlie and Humboldt, but in many incidents and minor characters as well. The effect of money on

art creates a major conundrum in Charlie's eyes. On the one hand, the capitalist American market determines what art will be produced and disseminated based on what will and won't sell. These decisions are made by a largely unsophisticated, hedonistic population of people unschooled in aesthetics but with the money to buy tickets, books and artifacts. This is contrasted to the historical European system in which a privileged class is expected to further the arts as an obligation to society.

On the other hand, the artist must make a sufficient amount of money to devote his time and talents to practicing his art, without the mundane demands of having to toil at a trade or profession. In America, the artist is a slave to the tastes of the masses, whereas in the old European system he was a slave to his patron. In Europe, however, the patron was at least a member of the class that was supposed to study and understand the progressive nature of aesthetics, someone who would commission fine art, rather than simply buying what looked pretty or fashionable at the moment and could be cheaply mass-produced. Humboldt expresses this conundrum best when Eisenhower defeats Stevenson in the 1952 presidential election. Declaring American art dead because of the election outcome, Humboldt considers expatriating to Germany, but he decides against the move for fear of lingering anti-Semitism in the recently Nazi nation.

Humboldt is an absolute zealot about the purity of art, untainted by capitalist greed - at least in speech, if not in practice - but Charlie is more accepting and sort of goes with the flow. There is no serious disagreement between the two enemy-friends about the distinction between good art and schlock, but Humboldt is more deeply wounded by having to submit to the oppressive effects of capital on art. Ideals aside, however, both men are hard driven by the need to succeed financially as well as artistically. They seem to desire the convenience of wealth, but they resent having to subjugate their creative natures to achieve it. Indeed, this torturous conflict may be at the very core of Humblodt's fatal madness.

## Intellect and Emotion

Charlie, Saul Bellow's central character in *Humboldt's Gift,* is something of an intellectual dilettante. He takes on the same enduring questions time and again, first from this perspective, then from that. While he is meditating - or just remembering - he is fiercely rational, working from whichever premises and assumptions he has chosen for the moment. He analyzes and parses every thought until it is in shreds and then does the same thing all over again, working from new assumptions.

On the other hand, Charlie is deeply emotional. He is moved to tears by tender memories and suffers the agonies of the spurned when his gold-digging lover learns that he is broke and then dumps him in Madrid. He is torn by guilt because he did not do more for Humboldt in the latter days of his old friend's madness. He is also goaded by a cheap crook into filing a distasteful lawsuit when reminded that the proceeds will help Humboldt's old uncle who is trapped in a Coney Island nursing home. Although horribly

abused by his lover, he cares tenderly for her young son while she jets around Europe and North Africa on her honeymoon with his rival.

# Style

## Point of View

Saul Bellow wrote *Humboldt's Gift* in the first person narrative voice of Charlie Citrine, who alternately assumes the perspective of participant and naive observer. Much of the content of the novel occurs inside Charlie's memory and intellect in the form of detailed recollections, flashbacks and lofty speculation about esoteric and metaphysical concepts. This approach creates a highly flexible framework within which the author may easily traverse time, viewing events from whatever perspective he chooses. The effect on the reader is to loose track of time, which is part of the magic the author weaves in his tale. It is also a difficult challenge for the author, because he must remain ever vigilant not to fall into the web he is spinning for his reader.

One needs only look at the structure of the narrative to clearly see the effects of this technique. *Humboldt's Gift* is 487 pages long* and occurs within a time frame of approximately eleven weeks. The first 400 pages, however, consume less than a week. During this period, the reader visits Chicago and New York from the 1930s through the mid-1970s. During this week - in Charlie's real time - he goes on a series of adventures with the mobster Rinaldo, confronts his ex-wife in court, goes to jail, visits a Coney Island rest home, lends his foot as a sex toy to his lover, then gets dumped by her and travels to Europe where he lives first in the Madrid Ritz and then a modest rooming house. During this same week, he goes from riches to rags and back to potential riches - which he rejects in the name of philosophy and art.

## Setting

If a mind can be a setting, Charlie's would be the primary real estate in which the events of *Humboldt's Gift* unfold. From a more down-to-earth perspective, Chicago, New York and Madrid are the key locations. The central character visits these locations, however, in their most glamorous and meanest parts. He moves from the Playboy Penthouse bar in Chicago to a filthy bathroom stall in the old Russian Baths. He visits the top floor of the Ritz in Manhattan and a sleazy old folk's home on Coney Island. He finds himself at yet another of the Ritz chain in Madrid as well as a humble boarding house.

This technique permits Bellow to compress place in much the same way that he compresses time. The obvious effect is that it allows the reader to view a lot of contrasting real estate in the various settings where the author has set *Humboldt's Gift*, but there is a subtler and more significant result as well. A constant theme throughout Bellow's novel is a Marxist debate about wealth and poverty, which is tightly interwoven with the issue of how money affects art in particular and culture in general. By visiting both the Ritz and a Coney Island old folk's home in the same few pages, the reader experiences both the tangible and the visceral contrasts of the Big Apple.

## Language and Meaning

Saul Bellow is not simply a master of the English language; he is also a magician. In a single paragraph he can weave a tear-inducing image of a boy on the verge of death in a Chicago Tuberculosis sanatorium, surround the child with tenderness and love even in this cruelest of settings, and conclude the scene with irony and Jewish wit as the lad contemplates his mortality. All words, it seems, have many meanings to Saul Bellow and he sprinkles his work with subtle puns and *double entrendre*. His humorous use of the language ranges from slapstick to obscure, and he often buries his most profound nuggets in the napve observations of common and seemingly insignificant characters.

Bellow uses even proper names to add texture to his tale. The reader will find no Jones' or Smiths in *Humboldt's Gift.* The text is rich, however with Von Humboldt Fleisher, Swiebel, Cantabile, Waldemar, Scheldt and Menasha Klinger. One of Bellow's sub-themes, closely related to his Marxist musings, is the polyglot nature of American Culture and the influences of the many different immigrant groups that people the country. This backdrop of Jewish, Eastern European and Italian surnames, coupled with a liberal sprinkling of Yiddish and Italian-mobster vernacular, helps to totally immerse the reader in Saul Bellow's world.

## Structure

*Humboldt's Gift* is a work of fiction, a novel of 487 pages* broken into logical sections of a just a few to as many as 30 pages each, without enumerated or titled chapters. This has the effect of moving freely in and out of various eras in the development of American culture from the 1930s until the mid-1970s. Numbered chapters carry an inherent implication of chronology, even though in many works they represent shifts in character or events instead. Likewise, titled chapters serve to corral the reader's thoughts into a specific time, character or event. Either of these approaches would serve to diminish what appears to be the author's intention to capture American life as a sort of teeming, swirling, vaporous nebula, in which all of the smells, textures and social currents intermingle into a unique but indescribable whole.

# Quotes

"We lived like bohemians and graduate students in a mood of fun and games. Maybe America didn't need art and inner miracles. It had so many outer ones. The USA was a big operation, very big. The more *it,* the less *we.*"

"So Humboldt behaved like an eccentric and a comic subject. But occasionally there was a break in his eccentricity when he stopped and thought. He tried to think himself clear away from this American world (I did that, too). I could see that Humboldt was pondering what to do between *then* and *now,* between birth and death, to satisfy certain great questions."

"I wasn't doing so well myself recently when Humboldt acted from the grave, so to speak, and made a basic change in my life. In spite of our big fight and fifteen years of estrangement he left me something in his will. I came into a legacy."

"...the functionati of America said of the literati, 'If I were not such a corrupt, unfeeling bastard, creep thief, and vulture, I couldn't get through this either.' They succumbed, poor loonies. ...find a common ground of poetry and science, to prove that the imagination was just as potent as machinery..."

"He was a great entertainer but going insane. The pathologic element could be missed only by those who were laughing too hard to look."

"Humboldt, that grand erratic handsome person with his wide blond face, that charming fluent deeply worried man to whom I was so attached, passionately lived out the theme of Success. Naturally he died a failure."

"...what he (Humboldt) called his Black Dog moods was a classic case of Manic Depression... 'But think Charlie - if Energy is Delight and if Exuberance is Beauty, the Manic Depressive knows more about Delight and Beauty than anyone else.'"

"Poor Humboldt didn't impose his cycles for very long. He never became the radiant center of his age. Depression fastened on him for good. The periods of mania and poetry ended...Estranged from everybody, he was living in a place called the Ilscombe...Welfare lodged old people there. He died on a rotten hot night."

"I dreamed that we met at Whelan's Drugstore on the comer of Sixth and Eighth in Greenwich Village. He was not the stricken leaden swollen man I had seen on Forty-Sixth Street, but still the stout normal Humboldt of middle life. He was sitting beside me at the soda fountain with a Coke. I burst into tears. I said, 'Where have you been? I thought you were dead.'"

"Mice hide when hawks are high;

Hawks shy from airplanes;

Planes dread the ack-ack-ack;

Each one fears somebody.

Only the heedless lions

Under the Booloo tree

Snooze in each other's arms

After their lunch of blood -

I call that living good"

"I have a hunch that in life you look outward from the ego, your center. In death you are at the periphery looking inward. You see your old pals at Whelan's still struggling with the heavy weight of selfhood, and you hearten them by intimating that when their turn comes to enter eternity they too will begin to comprehend and at last get an idea of what has happened. As none of this is Scientific, we are afraid to think it."

"Every great prison is now a thriving seminar. The tigers of wrath are crossed with the horses of instruction, making a hybrid undreamed of in the Apocalypse."

"Not to labor the matter too much, I had lost most of the money that Humboldt had accused me of making. The dough came between us immediately. He put through a check for thousands of dollars. I didn't contest this. I didn't want to go to law. Humboldt would have been fiercely delighted with a trial. He was very litigious."

"Besides, courts kill me. Judges, lawyers, bailiffs, stenotypists, the benches, the woodwork, the carpets, even the water glasses I hate like death. Moreover, I was actually in South America when he cashed the check. He was then running wild in New York, having been released from Bellevue."

"There was no one to restrain him. Kathleen had gone into hiding. His nutty old mother was in a nursing home. His uncle Waldemar was one of those eternal kid brothers to whom responsibilities are alien. Humboldt was jumping and prancing about New York being mad."

"Perhaps he was aware dimly of the satisfaction he was giving to the cultivated public which gossiped about his crack-up. Frantic desperate doomed crazy writers and suicidal painters are dramatically and socially valuable."

"And at that time he was a fiery failure and I was a newborn success. Success baffled me. It filled me with guilt and shame."

"Cops have their own way of ringing a doorbell. They ring like brutes. Of course, we are entering an entirely new stage in the history of human consciousness. Policemen take psychology courses and have some feeling for the comedy of urban life. The two heavy

men who stood on my Persian carpet carried guns, clubs, cuffs, bullets, walkie-talkies. Such an unusual case - a Mercedes beaten in the street - amused them."

# Topics for Discussion

Is *Humboldt's Gift* a work of what is called *dark* or *black* humor?

Does the backdrop of humor lighten the serious and tragic points the author makes - or does it increase their impact?

Does the seriousness of the topics make the humor seem funnier, or do jokes seem trivial amidst dramatic content?

Does the humor, perhaps, lull the reader into emotional vulnerability, allowing tragic and dramatic events to create a more striking and startling effect than they would have otherwise?

Is the author making a statement about a character in a novel with the dichotomy of intellect and emotion, or is he illustrating the nature of all men?

Discuss the relevance of art in relation to the plot of this text.

Discuss the author's ideas of death and the nature of death in relation to this text.

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# Literary Precedents

As Philip Toynbee has pointed out, Humboldt's Gift is probably America's nearest approach to those great Russian masterpieces, The Idiot (1868) and The Brothers Karamazov (1879-1880) by Dostoevsky. Like Prince Myshkin and Alyosha Karamazov, Charlie Citrine is a comic hero, a holy fool, a soulsearching rascal. All three novels are a spiritual counterattack against the ultimate nullity of a secular society.

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