

The isolated planet of artur sammler



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* explores the world as seen through the lens of the title character, a world of isolation and disinterestedness. All of the characters in the novel have disengaged from society and humanity on some level or another, either voluntarily like Mr. Sammler himself, kicking and screaming like the black pickpocket, or gracefully like Elya Gruner as she resigns herself to the inevitable. This powerful sense of detachment from that which makes us human is the driving theme of the novel. We see each of the characters attempt to overcome this sense of loss through the archaic eye of Artur Sammler, a relic of times past who, as Govinda Lal would say, is an example of humanity: "At best, a clumsy thing, with dawning awareness of the finesse of internal organization employed in crudities." (186) Mr. Sammler, the most outcast of the characters, acts more as an observer of the events around him than a force on the outside world. His unique position as advisor and confidant to the other characters encountered in the novel allows us insight into both their own personal problems and the overarching pattern of societal problems that have caused Mr. Sammler to detach himself from the world. Nearly the entire plot focuses on the conflicts created by the characters in their efforts to combat the isolation they feel on a conscious or unconscious level. Mr. Sammler's repeated encounters with the black pickpocket, the theft of Govinda Lal's manuscript, Wallace and Feffer's business schemes, Angela's sexual escapades, and Elya's dying days are all either the effects or causes of this unseen burden of isolation. The moon, a persistent symbol throughout the novel, also ties into and reflects this feeling of disinterestedness that permeates Mr. Sammler's thinking and the novel's theme. As Mr. Sammler is the filter through which we observe the other characters in the novel it is necessary to examine him and the unique

set of experiences through which he has lived before we can understand how his viewpoint projects onto the people around him. Mr. Sammler was raised in Cracow but became disinterested with his life in Poland from an early age: “ Sammler as a schoolboy in Cracow before World War I fell in love with England.” (3) Mr. Sammler left his homeland for London and re-invented himself as a British Oxford type, separating himself from his old life. After living through the Holocaust Mr. Sammler arrives in New York, once again casting off his past. “ To the moon? But I don’t even want to go to Europe,” Sammler tells Wallace. (151) This pattern of abandoning what Sammler views to be past lives is firmly established throughout the novel. Even his profession as a journalist requires him to separate himself from that which he observes. Years of reporting have left Sammler trained to act as a spectator rather than a participant in life. If the detachment that Sammler felt as a child in Poland or as a reporter in London had not already left a deep impact on Sammler then the Holocaust certainly did. Mr. Sammler survived several brushes with death, first digging his own grave with his wife and other Jews, then in the winter forest, and later hiding in a tomb from the Poles. He viewed each of these experiences as the end of separate lives, and everything that occurred after them became detached from the person who lived through them. Mr. Sammler realizes that these events have changed him, turned him into something different. He tells Lal: “ And I now know that humankind marks certain people for death. Against them there shuts a door. Shula and I have been in this written-off category. If you chance nevertheless to live, having been out leaves you with idiosyncrasies.” (190) In fact, Lal is the only character besides Elya to whom Mr. Sammler feels a genuine connection. Sammler realizes this during the conversation in Gruner’s

kitchen. “ A strange thing happened. He felt that he was about to speak his full mind. Aloud!” Sammler thinks. (186) Lal has a similar set of experiences and a similar scholastic perspective of the world, which awakens in Mr. Sammler the old feelings of educated discussion among intellectuals he once had in London. In this way something beneficial comes of Shula’s actions with Govinda’s manuscript. Though Shula stole the manuscript with the intent to both spur on her father’s book and catch the eye of the Doctor himself she has instead discovered a man to whom her father can relate. The attempt to solve her own isolation fails, but she inadvertently helps Margotte and Sammler find a tether to the outside world. This is not lost on Sammler, who rejoices at finding a new friend, especially with the impending loss of Elya looming over him. The other and stranger connection that Mr. Sammler makes in the novel is with the unnamed Negro pickpocket. He is fascinated by the man and feels an odd connection to him: “ It was a powerful event, and illicitly-that is, against his own stable principles-he craved a repetition.” (7) Though Sammler disapproves of what the pickpocket does and even tries to inform the police about him he feels a certain illumination of the senses when he witnesses the crime being committed. He is fascinated by the pickpocket, his powerful figure, his delicate technique, his well dressed manner. His thoughts drift back to the man, and even the threat made in the lobby of Sammler’s building can not dissuade his fascination with the man. He mulls over the meaning of the act and the significance of its method of delivery long afterwards. In a way the pickpocket represents the dark side of human nature, the compulsion to steal or otherwise do wrong. Sammler himself professed to take pleasure in the killing of a soldier in the forest during the war: “ To kill the man he ambushed in the snow had given him

pleasure. Was it only pleasure? It was more. It was joy.” (115) This fascination with the pickpocket makes Sammler feel alive and pulls him from his disinterestedness back into the outside world. Mr. Sammler felt a similar closeness to life after he shot the soldier: “ When he fired the gun, Sammler, himself nearly a corpse, burst into life.” (115) Even to a man like Mr. Sammler the world feels fresh and young when viewed from the extremes. Observing the pickpocket allows Sammler a glimpse into this extremity of action that he once felt in the forest. Eventually Sammler even begins to sympathize with the pickpocket. When Eisen assaults him with the bag of medallions Sammler is horrified. He tries to parse out his feelings in his mind and thinks, “ The black man? The black man was a megalomaniac. But there was a certain-a certain princeliness...He was probably a mad spirit. But mad with an idea of noblesse.” (243) Mr. Sammler sees the man for what he is, a madman and a criminal, yet he also finds respect in the form that the pickpocket's madness takes. Shula and Eisen are also mad, but neither has adopted this stately manner of expressing their madness. For this Sammler respects the pickpocket. When relating his experience hiding in the tomb at the end of the war Sammler gratefully recalls that one man, Mr. Cieslakiewicz, was the only person who had not written him off. Sammler realizes that without this man he would have died. As Mr. Sammler begins to realize that Elya Gruner is dying he reflects on the fact that without Gruner he may not be alive either: “ Well, Elya was gone. He was deprived of one more thing, stripped of one more creature. One more reason to live trickled out.” (259) Elya Gruner was one of the few people left to whom Mr. Sammler still felt connected, and his passing leaves Sammler feeling even more disinterested and isolated from the world than before. Even the simple fact that Mr. Sammler is an old

man becomes another reason for his sense of detachment from modern society. If you live long enough everyone you know dies. Dr. Elya Gruner experiences the most permanent kind of detachment from humanity in the novel, death. By a stroke of luck Elya's aneurysm does not kill him immediately and so Gruner has a chance to come to grips with his imminent exit from the world. " With Elya there has been a delay, which gives an opportunity...A chance to resolve some things. And it has made your father realistic-facing up to facts that were obscure," Sammler tells Angela. (253) Gruner takes advantage of this opportunity to reach out to his children, who he has supported without really taking an active role. Wallace and Angela feel very little connection with him besides his money, and both are infuriated not so much because their father is dying but because he is holding out on them. Facing death Gruner is finally able to see the people that his children have become, a " high-IQ moron" and a girl with " fucked-out eyes." (146) Gruner realizes that he must do something now to reconnect with them or they will be lost forever. His plausible sense of death brings the circumstances of his life into fuller focus, like with Sammler and the pickpocket. Gruner is able to sense more fully the isolation that plagues him and his offspring. Dr. Elya Gruner led a masked existence even in the prime of his life – he did not only become detached from the world just before death. On one hand was the loving Elya always taking care of everyone and on the other was a man who made his living on abortions and secret mafia operations. The disconnect between the two halves of the man isolated him from the world by necessity. How can a man be connected to the world if he never offers it his true face? In the very end Elya purposefully removes himself from those he loves in order to die alone. Elya's two

children have issues of isolation from the world as well, so much so that they are not able to support Elya as he dies. Angela is a victim of what Mr. Sammler describes as the monstrous results of newly acquired leisure and liberty. Her brother Wallace states it more bluntly: “ What does she know about tender feelings? Just some guy between her legs-Everyman is her lover. No, Anyman.” (153) She is unable to separate the sexual freedom that the new society affords her from her life with Wharton Horricker. As a result she ruins her relationship with him over a tryst in Mexico. The inability to disconnect her sexual identity and her identity as a person isolates her from her family and friends. Angela is unable to connect with Elya in his final days because of the conflict between her and Wharton. When Mr. Sammler attempts to show her this she only distances herself from him as well. Sammler realizes this: “ Well, it hadn’t worked. What she threw at him was what the young man at Columbia had also cried out. He was out of it. A tall, dry, not agreeable old man, censorious, giving himself airs.” (255) By cutting off her one confidant she further removes the possibility of recovering from her problems. Wallace has issues as well. He is a man of considerable intelligence who has totally failed to contribute anything useful to society. He is like Feffer, a type of rich boy con man. He equates his father’s money with his father’s love. While Elya is on his deathbed Wallace asks for an expression of his father’s trust in him, in the form of a large sum of money to buy a plane. Later, in the Rolls with Mr. Sammler, Wallace reveals himself to be scatter-brained and prone to histrionics with a rant that changes topics as often as he changes careers. Wallace is just as swept up in the ways of the new generation as his sister. Angela dallies about with lovers; Wallace flits from profession to profession. Neither have any grounding force in their

lives. They both float about through the world without any real attachments except to themselves. They typify the type of behavior that makes Sammler feel the need to remove himself from the confines of the new society. The moon is iconic in the novel, a symbol of both isolation and hope for the future. Sammler's views about the moon are a combination of both interpretations. For Sammler the hope of humanity lies in isolation and the removal of human life from Earth strikes him as a cure for the illness that he sees around him. Govinda Lal's manuscript awakens these thoughts in Sammler. He begins to see the earth in a new perspective, "considering the earth itself not as a stone cast but as something to cast oneself from-to be divested of." (41) Mr. Sammler views the moon as a chance to start over and cast off the troubles of earth. Life on the moon would be simpler, with less confusion and clutter. "One could see the advantage of getting away from here, building plastic igloos in the vacuum, dwelling in quiet colonies, necessarily austere, drinking the fossil waters, considering basic questions only," Sammler thinks. (43) Govinda's view of the colonization of the moon is more urgent than Sammler's. To not go would be to stifle the human spirit, to cheapen it somehow. Lal sees the moon as the first step into the universe from earth. To stay confined to our one planet would be the ultimate isolation, cutting humanity off from the infinite reaches. "We must recognize the extremism and fanaticism of human nature...Not to accept the opportunity would make this earth seem more and more a prison," Govinda says in his conversation with Sammler. (181) Sammler recognizes that the people around him are looking for answers to the isolation they all feel. "The feeling for new beginnings was nevertheless very strong. Marriage for Margotte, America for Eisen, business for Wallace, love for Govinda. And

away from this death-burdened, rotting, spoiled, sullied, exasperating, sinful earth but already looking toward the moon and Mars with plans for founding cities.” (230) The moon becomes a representation of that which they are seeking to save them from their isolation. For it is the pervasive sense of isolation and loneliness that drives them to act the way they do, to detach themselves and withdraw from real connections to the world and those around them. Yet at the same time they withdraw, they are also discontented with the prospect of living forever in a state of disinterestedness – and so they look to their own personal moons for answers.