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Performing Jewish Identity and Preserving Power: The Role of Cultural Apostrophe and Narrative Control in Saul Bellow's "The Old System"

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Abstract

This study explores Saul Bellow's "The Old System", examining its treatment of Jewish-American identity, familial duty, and the interplay between heritage and modernity. Through "cultural apostrophe," fragmented storytelling, and performative character interactions, Bellow creates a nuanced narrative where past and present continually reshape identity and agency. The study analyzes three primary character categories—women, men, and the narrator—to examine how power, autonomy, and ethnic heritage manifest in familial structures. Aunt Rose, Tina, and Isaac's wife embody contrasting modes of influence—through financial control, open defiance, or quiet endurance—each negotiating the patriarchal and communal expectations imposed upon them. Similarly, Isaac Braun and Old Braun represent different approaches to masculinity, with Isaac torn between modern individualism and inherited Jewish traditions, while Old Braun symbolizes quiet submission and the weight of historical survival. Dr. Braun's narrative control and use of apostrophe serve as a reflective lens, shaping the reader's perception of familial tensions and collective remembrance. Drawing on Jan Assmann's concept of "cultural memory," Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social capital, and Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity, this study demonstrates how Bellow constructs a multi-layered interrogation of identity, continuity, and resistance. This story ultimately functions as a microcosm of Jewish-American struggles, capturing the paradoxes of legacy, power, and assimilation. By situating the story within Bellow's broader literary concerns, this study highlights its lasting significance in Jewish-American literature and its contribution to the discourse on ethnic survival and self-representation.

Keywords: Saul Bellow, "The Old System," Jewish-American identity, cultural apostrophe, familial power dynamics, masculinity, gender roles.

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Introduction

Saul Bellow's "The Old System" is a compelling meditation on Jewish-American identity, familial duty, and the tensions between tradition and modernity. The story situates its characters within a Jewish family grappling with generational shifts, assimilation, and the competing demands of personal autonomy and inherited obligations. Through its exploration of power, identity, and cultural heritage, the story captures both the weight of legacy and the fragility of relationships shaped by long-standing expectations.

Bellow employs cultural apostrophe, fragmented storytelling, and performative character interactions to construct a nuanced portrayal of familial entanglements, where past and present are continuously reinterpreted. At the heart of the story lies a negotiation between collective memory and individual agency, a theme Bellow underscores through the interplay of tradition and self-determination. Isaac Braun, the eldest and most financially successful sibling, embodies the paradox of material achievement and personal vulnerability. His deep adherence to family duty reflects Jewish religious teachings on loyalty and preservation, yet this same adherence places him at odds with his sister, Tina, whose defiance challenges familial, gender, and cultural hierarchies. Their conflict epitomizes Bellow's broader exploration of

unstable power dynamics, revealing how inherited structures of obligation may both sustain and confine individuals.

Central to "The Old System" is Bellow's deployment of cultural apostrophe, where heritage, traditions, and collective identities take on active, shaping forces in the characters' lives. This technique dramatizes the tension between inherited legacy and individual self-determination. Tina's final act of returning their mother's ring to Isaac exemplifies this dynamic, transforming a familial relic into a contested symbol of obligation. The ring, once an emblem of maternal authority, embodies both continuity and fragility, encapsulating the paradox of ethnic survival. As literary theorists note, apostrophe involves addressing an absent or abstract entity to emphasize its emotional and racial weight (Cuddon, 2013). Bellow extends this device into the realm of cultural negotiation, reinforcing the unseen yet deeply influential forces that shape identity and heritage.

Bellow's use of memory and symbolism further reinforces the intricate relationship between identity and the past. Building on Jan Assmann's framework of "cultural memory," which differentiates between actively circulating memory and archived memory that can be revived (Assmann, 2015, 325–349), "The Old System" positions memory as both a unifying force and a source of discord. The story's material artifacts, such as the mother's ring, act as repositories of familial and cultural legacy, reflecting the broader struggle to maintain identity amidst inevitable transformation. Through this framework, Bellow illustrates how memory functions not merely as a recollection of the past but as an active force shaping present realities.

The performative nature of identity is also fundamental to Bellow's characterization. Isaac and Tina, in particular, assume roles within a familial drama shaped by both internal motivations and external pressures. Their power struggles unfold as performances within a theatrical family dynamic, where every act carries symbolic weight. Even from her deathbed, Tina exerts control over Isaac, illustrating what Erving Goffman defines as the presentation of self—the strategic performance of identity to influence perception (Goffman, 1959, p. 29). Her demand for monetary compensation reframes her vulnerability as a calculated assertion of dominance, demonstrating how authority can be exercised even in apparent weakness. This interplay between performance and authenticity, grief and parody, adds further complexity to Bellow's examination of familial control and self-representation.

For the sake of focus, this study examines "The Old System" through the relationships and power struggles of its central characters, emphasizing how identity, cultural obligation, and personal autonomy interact within a Jewish-American family. To structure the analysis, the narrative's relationships will be categorized into three major groups: Women characters— Aunt Rose, Tina, and Isaac's wife—who act as both preservers and disruptors of cultural and familial power; men characters Isaac Braun and Old Braun—who struggle with the responsibilities of Jewish tradition and integration; and the narrator—Dr. Braun, who serves as a mediator between past and present through memory and apostrophe.

This categorization allows for a more precise examination of Bellow's literary techniques and thematic concerns. The women in "The Old System" —Tina, Aunt Rose, and Isaac's wife—exert influence through defiance, manipulation, or quiet endurance. Tina's rebellion against old-style gender roles, her demand for recognition, and her resistance to familial reconciliation make her a compelling figure of power and defiance. Aunt Rose, in contrast, wields authority through financial control and strategic governance of family customs, illustrating Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Meanwhile, Isaac's wife embodies a more subdued form of power, adhering to old-fashioned roles of stability and caregiving, representing the Jewish concept of *Shalom Bayit* (peace in the home). These women, each in their own way, challenge and reinforce the patriarchal structures that define the family's traditional identity.

Isaac, as the central male figure, encapsulates the tension between Jewish customs and modern American identity. His commitment to familial duty, financial success, and the unresolved conflict with Tina reflect his ongoing struggle to reconcile cultural obligation with personal autonomy. His ritualistic visits to family graves symbolize more than a devotion to conventions; they mark his attempt to bridge the past with the present, positioning himself as a mediator of generational disputes through ethnic and religious sentiment.

Unlike the intellectualized crises of Moses Herzog in *Herzog* or the externalized failures of Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day*, Isaac's struggle is more emotionally charged and deeply personal, making his character more directly involved in the burdens of social legacy.

Dr. Braun, as the narrator and mediator of memory, constructs the story's fragmented structure through cultural apostrophe, invoking the absent and the deceased to shape identity and familial legacy. His selective narration and introspection transform remembrance into an active force, reinforcing themes of Jewish racial survival, historical consciousness, and existential questioning. His role underscores Bellow's broader literary concern with the fluidity of memory and the weight of cultural inheritance, reflecting how narrative structures shape identity and ethnic transmission.

By structuring this analysis around women characters, men characters, and the narrator, the study illustrates how Bellow intricately weaves together themes of power, memory, and survival. "The Old System" emerges as a pivotal text in Bellow's literary canon, illustrating how cultural apostrophe, fragmented storytelling, and generational conflict contribute to a broader exploration of Jewish identity and continuity in a rapidly evolving world.

Women Characters: Guardians, Rebels, and Power Negotiators

Gender roles, as socially constructed norms dictating behaviors and attitudes based on one's sex, have historically confined women to the private sphere, emphasizing their roles as caregivers and preservers. These roles, deeply embedded in ethnic rituals, intersect with societal expectations and vary across contexts, shaping how women navigate identity and agency. While feminist movements have challenged the rigidity of these roles, the emotional and social labor traditionally assigned to women remains a persistent theme, influencing familial dynamics and ensuring cultural continuity (Levesque 2011, p. 422; Lindsey 2015, p. 5; Alters and Schiff 2009, p. 143). In many cultures, women are tasked with maintaining familial conducts and with mediating the tensions between individuality and collective responsibility (Carter et al. 2009, pp. 196–198).

Bellow's works intricately examine these dynamics, presenting women as pivotal figures in preserving culture and negotiating familial identity The women in "The Old System"—Aunt Rose, Tina, and Isaac's wife—serve as both preservers and disruptors of folk and familial power, each representing a distinct mode of influence and resistance within the patriarchal Jewish-American family structure. These women navigate economic, emotional, and symbolic power, demonstrating how gendered expectations shape their roles within the familial hierarchy. Despite her authority, she occupies a paradoxical position: while she wields significant influence, her power remains unrecognized or illegitimate in the eyes of the men around her. Through these characters, Bellow interrogates the complexities of gendered power, exposing the precarious balance between cultural preservation and personal agency.

Aunt Rose is not an anomaly in Saul Bellow's fiction. She shares thematic similarities with characters like Hattie in "Leaving the Yellow House" and Sorella in *The Bellarosa Connection*—women who, in various ways, operate within patriarchal confines while asserting economic agency. She bears the closest resemblance to Indiana in "Leaving the Yellow House", particularly in her possession-based authority and the tensions between gender and ownership. Just as Indiana's ownership of the Yellow House defines Hattie's limitations, Aunt Rose's control over property dictates the dynamics of inheritance and financial dominance within the Braun family. In "Leaving the Yellow House", Hattie sees Indiana as a superior, almost oppressive force—"rich, cultured, and well-traveled"—while Hattie herself is "poor, uneducated, and confined to one place" (Austin 2013, 59–60). A similar power dynamic unfolds in "The Old System", where Aunt Rose's financial control subjugates those around her, shaping their fortunes and restricting their independence.

As the most overtly powerful female figure in the story, Aunt Rose wields authority through financial control, real estate management, and economic decision-making. Even with her influence, her power remains unrecognized and illegitimate in the eyes of the men around her, revealing the paradox of female economic agency within patriarchal structures. Unlike the old Jewish matriarch, whose influence is rooted

in emotional and spiritual guidance, Aunt Rose's dominance is purely transactional—practical, forceful, and unapologetically assertive. This deviation from conventional feminine power only intensifies the resistance she faces, reinforcing her position as a disruptive force rather than an accepted leader.

Her financial control places her in direct opposition to Uncle Braun and the male relatives, who resent her authority but remain dependent on her financial acumen. Her rejection by the family—symbolized by Uncle Braun's deathbed repudiation of her—underscores how women who challenge patriarchal norms, even through economic means, are often excluded rather than respected.

Uncle Braun died angry with Aunt Rose. He turned his face to the wall with his last breath to rebuke her hardness. All the men, his sons, burst out weeping. The tears of the women were different. Later, too, their passion took other forms. They bargained for more property. And Aunt Rose defied Uncle Braun's will. She collected rents in the slums of Albany and Schenectady from properties he had left to his sons. ("The Old System," 51)[1]

Aunt Rose's character encapsulates the gendered divide in power perception in "The Old System." While men in the story express grief sentimentally, women, led by Aunt Rose, channel it into pragmatic action, reinforcing her legacy of economic control. However, her defiance in taking on a customarily male role—collecting rents and overseeing real estate—ensures her power is tolerated but never legitimized.

Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the "myth of the eternal feminine" explains Aunt Rose's predicament. Women who adopt traits of authority and financial control often face rejection, as they disrupt expectations of feminine passivity (Beauvoir 2009, 644–649, 658). Aunt Rose embodies this paradox; despite ensuring her family's financial survival, she remains an outsider in the male-dominated hierarchy. Unlike a patriarch, who would receive unquestioned authority, Aunt Rose's power elicits resentment rather than respect.

Judaism's emphasis on familial preservation adds another layer to her role. Rabbinic teachings elevate the *akeret habayit*, the wife and mother as the spiritual and emotional anchor of the home. *Proverbs* 31:10-12, 25-26 extols a wife's wisdom and dignity, aligning with Aunt Rose's contributions to the family's stability. However, Jewish tradition does not extend economic leadership to women, reinforcing why Aunt Rose's control over finances remains contested. Her economic autonomy disrupts patriarchal structures and her actions—such as collecting rents from impoverished tenants—reveal moral ambiguities, highlighting the tension between survival and ethical responsibility. She remains in a liminal space—both a preserver of folklore and a disruptor of gender norms.

Her rejection culminates in Uncle Braun's final act of defiance, where he turns his face away in death, symbolizing the ultimate patriarchal dismissal of her authority. Though she secures the family's financial survival, she is never fully accepted as a legitimate leader. Instead, she becomes a disruptive force—acknowledged, but never integrated. Her description as "the original dura mater" emphasizes her resilience but also her emotional detachment: "She had a straight sharp nose. To cut mercy like a cotton thread." ("System," 48)

Elaine Showalter's insights into women who reject domesticity illuminate how Aunt Rose, like Indiana and Hattie in "Leaving the Yellow House," is perceived as cold and emotionally deficient (Showalter 1985). If she were nurturing, she would be powerless; if she is assertive, she is rejected. This conflict is reflected in how memory and legacy shape power structures. The mother's absence paradoxically reinforces her influence, particularly through the symbolic weight of the ring. As a unifying force, the ring aligns with Halbwachs' notion of cultural memory, where artifacts transmit generational identity (Halbwachs, 1925).

Despite her rejection, Aunt Rose's authority endures beyond her lifetime, embodied in the ring that passes to Tina. Its transfer raises the question: Will Tina share her mother's fate, or will she redefine female power?

[1]. All in-text citations from "The Old System" will be referenced as "System" in this text for brevity.

This tension highlights how memory is not a static preservation of the past but an evolving negotiation of identity and authority.

Aunt Rose ultimately represents the paradox of female authority in Bellow's fiction. Like Indiana, she exerts control and ownership, but unlike Indiana, her power is never legitimized. Her legacy remains one of financial survival at the cost of social rejection—a woman who mastered the system but was never accepted by it. Her influence extends to Tina, whose assertiveness mirrors her mother's defiance. This dynamic deepens Bellow's exploration of intergenerational female power, showing that while Aunt Rose ensures the family's survival, she also exposes the costs of female empowerment in a patriarchal world.

The Braun family's experience reflects the struggle of Jewish customs adapting to an American context. As a minority community, they must balance cultural preservation with accommodation pressures. Bellow's portrayal of Aunt Rose and Tina underscores the tension between pragmatism and defiance, illustrating the personal and societal costs of female empowerment.

Unlike Aunt Rose, whose authority is rooted in pragmatism and financial control, Tina is an unpredictable force whose rebellion is deeply personal. Her defiance is not merely a rejection of societal norms but also an assertion of individuality shaped in reaction to her domineering mother. Aunt Rose's authoritarian nature fosters Tina's independence, yet also inflicts emotional wounds, making Tina's actions a blend of resistance and inherited behavior. She does not simply reject patriarchal and familial expectations—she rebels against the generational transmission of control itself, a theme central to feminist critiques of power structures within families.

Tina's physicality reinforces her outsider status within the narrative. Like Hattie in "Leaving the Yellow House" and Sorella in *The Bellarosa Connection*, Tina is overtly and comically fat, a physical presence that makes her socially conspicuous. Nonetheless, unlike Hattie and Sorella, Tina is defined by egoism and brute force, rather than by wit or strategy. Hattie, struggling to survive, lacks both the financial and intellectual means to challenge her world, while Sorella commands respect through intellect, determination, and selflessness. Sorella's strength lies not in dominance but in a dignified way of life, never seeking personal gain or control, whereas Tina's actions are driven by self-interest and a need for immediate power.

Tina's dominance manifests in economic and physical control, using aggression and stubbornness rather than persuasion. Unlike Sorella, who navigates complex social and ethical dilemmas with strategy and wisdom, Tina's strength is marked by ruthless pragmatism and impulsivity. She asserts her will through sheer force, demanding submission rather than earning admiration. This distinction highlights how not all women who challenge societal norms do so with the same motivation or effect. Sorella's quiet authority earns her reverence, whereas Tina's aggression isolates her.

Her conflict with Isaac further deepens her defiance, positioning her struggle within the broader framework of gendered authority. Isaac, invoking familial and historical continuity, attempts to reconcile their differences, appealing to tradition: "Isaac, with a voice and gesture that belonged to history…" ("System" 67). Yet Tina's response—"Never! You son of a bitch, never!" ("System" 67)—is a radical rejection of both familial and traditional expectations. She refuses to acknowledge Isaac's authority, marking a complete rupture with customary gender roles in the Jewish familial structure.

This moment reflects feminist literary practices that challenge men as the arbiters of convention and identity. In Jewish literature, men often serve as cultural and religious torchbearers, while women are expected to preserve heritage within the domestic sphere. Tina's rebellion against Isaac is not just a rejection of his plea but a resistance to the patriarchal structures embedded in Jewish folklore. This theme resonates with feminist Jewish literature such as Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*, where the protagonist grapples with historical trauma and patriarchal constraints. Similarly, in Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers*, Sara Smolinsky fights against her father's rigid adherence to tradition, seeking education and independence over arranged marriage. Like Sara, Tina refuses to conform to the expectations dictated by her family and culture.

Tina's character underscores the intersection of feminism and Jewish cultural history, highlighting how women struggle to assert autonomy within deeply ingrained patriarchal habits. Her rejection of Isaac's plea is a refusal to be bound by the past, yet her return of Aunt Rose's ring to Isaac complicates this defiance. It suggests that, while she resists the confines of tradition, she still acknowledges its inescapable influence on her identity.

This paradox reflects Bellow's interrogation of women's agency within familial and cultural constraints. While Tina's actions mark her as a figure of resistance, they also reveal her inability to truly break free from the structures she opposes. Unlike Sorella, who achieves power through intelligence and self-discipline, Tina's rebellion is rooted in rage rather than strategy. She may reject her family's legacy, but her methods fail to construct an alternative path, leaving her defined by negation rather than transformation.

Bellow presents Tina's rebellion as both liberating and self-defeating. She refuses to engage in the compromises necessary for long-term authority, instead choosing total rejection. In doing so, she forfeits the possibility of reshaping the very traditions she defies. This ambiguity is what makes Tina such a compelling figure in Bellow's feminist discourse—she is neither a triumphant revolutionary nor a failed conformist, but rather a woman caught between inherited structures and the struggle for self-definition.

In the end, Bellow does not offer an easy resolution to Tina's defiance. Instead, he presents a nuanced portrayal of female agency, where resistance does not always lead to empowerment, and defiance does not always translate to liberation. Tina, for all her rebellion, remains trapped in the cycle of conflict she seeks to escape, illustrating the complex, often painful negotiation of female power within patriarchal traditions.

And, the role of Sylvia, Isaac's wife, in the family structure can be understood through the feminist frameworks of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Friedan's concept of the *mystique of feminine fulfillment* describes how women were expected to find ultimate satisfaction in domestic life—raising children, supporting their husbands, and maintaining an idealized home (Friedan 1963, 18). Sylvia embodies this ideal, adhering to *Shalom Bayit* (peace in the home) through quiet endurance rather than overt defiance. Nonetheless, like the American housewives Friedan critiques, her adherence to tradition does not grant her power; rather, it confines her to the margins of decision-making. This is particularly evident in her inability to prevent Tina from taking the ring that was promised to her.

Beauvoir's assertion that "while a woman knows how to be as active, effective, and silent as a man, her situation keeps her being useful, preparing food, clothes, and lodging" (Beauvoir 2009, 644) further encapsulates Sylvia's predicament. Despite being intelligent and capable, her value is defined not by personal agency but by domestic contributions. Unlike Tina and Aunt Rose, who assert power through economic control or direct confrontation, Sylvia operates within a structure that limits her influence. Her whispered plea—"Make her!"—when Tina seizes the ring from Aunt Rose's corpse reflects her constrained agency, relying on Isaac to defend her claim rather than confronting Tina herself:

She outfaced him over the body of Aunt Rose. She knew he would not quarrel at the deathbed. Sylvia was enraged. She did what she could. That is, she whispered, "Make her!" But it was no use. He knew he could not recover it. Besides, there were too many other property disputes—rents in Aunt Rose's savings bank. ("System," 54)

Sylvia's passivity mirrors what Adrienne Rich describes as *compulsory heterosexuality*, a system in which women's dependence on male figures reinforces their subjugation, while men continue to privilege other sources of power over them (Rich 1980, 631–660). Isaac's repeated visits to Tina demonstrate this pattern: "So when Isaac Braun told his wife that he had visited the family graves, she knew that he had gone again to see Tina. The thing had been repeated" (67).

Despite adhering to traditional gender roles, Sylvia remains sidelined in the family's power structure, overshadowed by Tina's defiance and Aunt Rose's financial control. Isaac does not prioritize her wishes, reinforcing her role as a stabilizer rather than an influencer. Sylvia embodies the endurance of institution, sustaining cultural continuity through adaptation and quiet resistance. While she lacks economic power,

her survival within patriarchal constraints stresses the limitations imposed on conforming women. Through feminist critiques of Friedan, Beauvoir, and Rich, Sylvia's character gives emphasis to the tension between service and autonomy in Jewish-American family life.

The women of this short story embody three distinct responses to patriarchal power: Aunt Rose asserts economic supremacy; nevertheless, she remains socially unrecognized, Tina rejects tradition entirely, choosing rage over reconciliation, and Isaac's wife represents stability and endurance, though her power is constrained by male authority. Together, they illustrate Bellow's complex portrayal of Jewish femininity, negotiating power in ways that both reinforce and challenge old structures. While Aunt Rose and Tina disrupt conventional gender roles, Isaac's wife preserves familial unity, highlighting how Jewish-American women navigate the balance between custom, survival, and resistance in a constantly shifting landscape.

Men Characters: Duty, Conflict, and Assimilation

Bellow's story presents a nuanced depiction of male characters whose passivity is not merely a personal flaw but a reflection of deeply rooted familial, cultural, and historical forces. Unlike the traditional portrayal of strong patriarchal figures, the men in this story steer a complex web of expectations that often leaves them subdued, conflicted, and emotionally restrained. Instead of exerting dominance, they find themselves shaped by female authority, intergenerational burdens, and the pressures of maintaining conventions in a changing world.

Through an intersectional lens that combines feminist and Jewish perspectives, this analysis examines how patriarchal norms, matriarchal authority, and intergenerational trauma contribute to male passivity. The characters of Isaac Braun, Old Braun, Mutt Braun, the Rebbe from Williamsburg, and Ilkington each reveal different facets of masculinity in crisis, caught between historical legacies and the evolving realities of 20th-century Jewish-American life.

Isaac Braun, as the eldest sibling and family patriarch, embodies the struggle between personal ambition and cultural obligation. His position as head of the family is both a privilege and a burden, requiring him to balance the expectations of Jewish tradition while attempting to assert his own desires. His ritualistic visits to family graves symbolize his commitment to continuity, while also revealing his deep-seated guilt and emotional entrapment. His wife recognizes this burden: "So when Isaac Braun told his wife that he had visited the family graves, she knew that he had gone again to see Tina" ("System," 67).

Isaac's plea for reconciliation with Tina in the name of their ancestors reflects his worldview shaped by Jewish historical consciousness. Within Jewish customs, honoring the dead and maintaining family unity are deeply ingrained values. The Talmud emphasizes the significance of preserving familial ties, as seen in *Pirkei Avot 1:6*: "Appoint for yourself a teacher, acquire for yourself a friend, and judge everyone favorably." Isaac's actions reflect this sense of inherited responsibility, attempting to mediate generational disputes through religious and cultural sentiment.

Nevertheless, Isaac's passivity should not be mistaken for apathy. Instead, it stems from his internalized responsibility, shaped by traditional Jewish masculinity, which often demands sacrifice rather than dominance. As Bell Hooks argues in *The Will to Change*, men who grow up under rigid patriarchal expectations often struggle to articulate their emotions, fearing it will be perceived as weakness (Hooks, 2004, 106). Isaac embodies this struggle—he bears the weight of duty, but unlike the patriarchal ideal of dominance, his leadership is based on negotiation, sacrifice, and submission to familial expectations.

Isaac's attachment to tradition is evident not just in his ritualistic observances but also in the subtle linguistic choices that mark his speech. His use of Anshe ha-ir (community elders) instead of its modern equivalent reflects his commitment to Jewish heritage, demonstrating the traditional role of Jewish patriarchs as cultural stewards (p. 55). This commitment, however, creates tension, as seen in his sister Tina's mockery of his religiosity:

He, too, kept the psalms near. As active worldly Jews for centuries had done. One copy lay in the glove compartment of his Cadillac. To which his great gloomy sister referred with a twist of the face… She said,

‘He reads the Tehillim aloud in his air-conditioned Caddy when there’s a long freight train at the crossing. That crook! He’d pick God’s pocket!’ ("System," 55).

Tina’s sarcasm reveals the conflict between outward religiosity and moral conduct, suggesting that Isaac’s faith is entangled with self-interest. Nevertheless, despite her cynicism, his practice demonstrates a continuous effort to balance cultural preservation and modern integration. Within Jewish history, the relationship between financial success and religious devotion has long been debated, particularly in rabbinic literature, where material and spiritual obligations are closely examined (*Bava Batra 10a*). Isaac’s attempt to maintain tradition while adjusting to modernity reflects this long-standing complexity.

Isaac’s deepest confrontation with Jewish heritage and mortality emerges in his preoccupation with his parents' graves, where his anxieties about faith, family, and death converge: "Down there, how were they? The wet, the cold, above all the worms worried him. In frost, his hearth shrank for Aunt Rose and Uncle Braun, though as a builder he knew they were beneath the frost line” ("System," 66).

Despite his rational understanding that they are safely buried, his emotional response overrides logic, demonstrating the profound effect of Jewish memory and ancestral reverence. This aligns with the concept of *Yizkor*, the Jewish memorial prayer, which strengthens the connection between the living and the dead. Isaac’s architectural expertise does not protect him from generational responsibility, showing that faith and familial bonds endure beyond mortality.

Isaac’s conflict reflects larger Jewish-American struggles with cultural preservation and assimilation. Unlike Moses Herzog in *Herzog*, who intellectualizes his Jewish anxieties, or Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day*, who externalizes his failures, Isaac’s struggle is deeply personal and emotionally charged. His engagement with familial duty and inheritance connects with broader Jewish-American literary discussions on masculinity and responsibility (Howe, 1977). Bellow explores Jewish identity through different male archetypes, contrasting Isaac’s balancing of customs with the characters in *The Bellarosa Connection*, who either embrace or reject familial and cultural obligations. Nonetheless, Isaac remains distinct—his journey is neither full rejection nor blind adherence but rather an effort to find equilibrium between modern realities and inherited traditions.

Isaac’s understanding of Jewish masculinity is complicated by his place within a patriarchal family structure, where power is distributed unequally between men and women. While he is expected to lead, his subdued nature contrasts with Tina’s forceful defiance and Aunt Rose’s economic pragmatism. His masculinity is not based on control but rather on mediation and endurance. His inability to assert dominance positions him in opposition to traditional patriarchal ideals, reinforcing Bellow’s exploration of gender and authority within Jewish familial life.

Ultimately, Isaac Braun is not just a character struggling with personal dilemmas; he is a representation of the Jewish-American man caught between two worlds. He carries the burden of ancestral obligations, the challenge of defining modern identity, and the emotional toll of upholding customs. His silent grief, attempts at reconciliation, and paradoxical status as both leader and outcast make him one of Bellow’s most compelling male protagonists, illustrating the struggles of Jewish cultural inheritance in a rapidly evolving world.

While Isaac actively grapples with the burdens of tradition and modernity, his father, Old Braun, represents a contrasting form of patriarchal presence—one defined not by action, but by silent endurance and historical survival. His presence in "The Old System" is largely mute. Nevertheless, he looms over the family as a symbol of generational trauma. Unlike Isaac, who actively seeks reconciliation, Old Braun embodies passive endurance, a survival mechanism that aligns with what Susan Faludi describes as the “emasculation of survival”—where men who have endured historical oppression retreat into passivity as a form of psychological resilience (Faludi, 1991).

Within the patriarchal structure of Jewish families, the elder patriarch traditionally holds wisdom, authority, and responsibility for cultural continuity. However, Old Braun subverts this role—not by leading, but by remaining a silent relic of past suffering. Unlike the rabbinic patriarch, who passes down stories,

teachings, and moral expectations, Old Braun offers no guidance, no intervention, and no active participation in family affairs: “Old Braun sat with his head lowered, his hands folded in his lap. He listened but said nothing” ("System," 48).

His passivity stands in contrast not only to Isaac’s internal struggle between tradition and modernity but also to Dr. Adler in *Seize the Day*, another father figure in Bellow’s fiction. Yet, while Old Braun’s silence stems from historical trauma, Dr. Adler’s emotional detachment is a conscious rejection of familial obligation in favor of American individualism and self-reliance. Old Braun’s endurance is shaped by past persecution, whereas Dr. Adler’s rejection of Wilhelm reflects a modern, post-religious masculinity that prioritizes success over communal responsibility. Their differing responses illustrate the evolution of Jewish patriarchal authority from the Old World to the New, where survival once depended on non-confrontation, but in America, it depends on self-sufficiency.

From a theoretical perspective, Old Braun represents the diminished role of elderly Jewish patriarchs in modern diasporic families. Traditionally, the Jewish father’s voice carried moral and religious weight, but in Bellow’s fiction, this moral authority erodes, leaving men like Old Braun and Dr. Adler socially marginalized within their own families. In Eastern European Jewish communities, patriarchs dictated economic and social decisions, while in Americanized Jewish families, this authority diminishes, and men either retreat into silence or embrace emotional detachment.

Old Braun’s passivity highlights shifting Jewish masculinity across generations. His survivalist masculinity, forged in persecution, contrasts with Isaac’s attempt to reconcile tradition with modernity and Mutt’s disengagement from familial obligation altogether. If Isaac carries the burden of mediation, and Mutt represents indifference to cultural preservation, then Old Braun is the specter of endurance, embodying a masculinity that no longer fits within the evolving Jewish-American identity.

Bellow uses Old Braun to comment on the transformation of patriarchal roles in Jewish diasporic families. Once an authoritative figure, the Jewish father becomes a silent, fading presence, reflecting the disempowerment of patriarchs in modernity. His silence is not a sign of weakness but a relic of a time when survival depended on endurance rather than confrontation. Yet, in a new cultural landscape, his inability to adapt leaves his descendants to navigate their identities without his guidance.

As opposed to struggling with the weight of heritage like Isaac or embodying passive endurance like Old Braun, Mutt Braun represents a third approach—one of disengagement. Unlike Isaac, who struggles with familial duty, and Old Braun, who represents a fading generation, Mutt avoids engagement altogether, choosing instead a life of detachment, gambling, and indifference. His passivity suggests not just a rejection of tradition but an absence of responsibility, making him a silent player with no real role to play within the family’s power struggles.

His disengagement aligns with Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, where masculinity is shaped by learned behaviors rather than inherent traits (Butler, 1990). Mutt’s refusal to engage in family disputes represents an alternative mode of Jewish masculinity, one that is adaptive but devoid of influence: “Mutt Braun, younger than the others, shrugged off the weight of history. He laughed, he drank, he gambled. Let Isaac and Tina fight it out.” ("System," 60).

Mutt’s passivity challenges the assumption that Jewish men in Bellow’s fiction must bear the weight of ethnic inheritance, offering instead a portrayal of masculinity that is both disconnected and inconsequential.

The men in "The Old System" represent divergent approaches to Jewish masculinity and tradition. Isaac Braun embodies the struggle between cultural obligation and personal ambition, attempting to mediate familial tensions through heritage. Old Braun symbolizes historical endurance and silent resilience, carrying the weight of past suffering without direct confrontation. Mutt Braun, by contrast, reflects a modernized, detached approach, existing on the margins of familial power and choosing indifference over engagement.

However, Bellow expands this exploration through two additional figures—the Rebbe from Williamsburg and Ilkington—who provide further contrasts in expressions of Jewish masculinity. The Rebbe represents religious authority, a figure of unquestioned power rooted in old-world patriarchal structures. Unlike Old Braun, who remains passive, the Rebbe actively enforces religious law, reinforcing Bellow's critique of rigid traditionalism and its inability to accommodate change.

Ilkington, though a minor character, offers a counterpoint to Jewish masculinity, embodying American individualism and secular values. His presence challenges the Braun family's communal obligations, contrasting Jewish male identity, which is shaped by heritage and duty, with non-Jewish masculinity, which prioritizes self-reliance and detachment. His interactions with Isaac subtly highlight the assimilationist pressures facing Jewish-American men in the mid-20th century.

Bellow's narrative presents these tensions not as isolated struggles, but as part of a broader discourse on masculinity, acclimatization, and cultural inheritance. The men in "The Old System" do not simply fail to act—they adapt, endure, and negotiate their places within a family structure that is constantly shifting. The Rebbe clings to religious tradition, Old Braun epitomizes silent survival, Isaac wrestles with duty and modernity, Mutt rejects responsibility, and Ilkington embodies external societal pressures. Their contrasting roles illustrate how Jewish masculinity is shaped by both internal religious forces and the pressures of the surrounding world, reinforcing Bellow's broader theme of survival, adaptation, and transformation in an evolving landscape.

The Narrator: Apostrophe, Cultural Memory, and Narrative Control

Dr. Braun, as the narrator and observer of "The Old System," plays a pivotal role in shaping the reader's perception of the Braun family's struggles with loss, identity, and shifting power dynamics. His role extends beyond mere observation; he interprets, mediates, and reconstructs the past, invoking absent and deceased figures through cultural apostrophe. His disjointed narrative style, fragmented memories, and introspective detachment reflect the ruptured nature of collective remembrance, demonstrating how identity is continuously reshaped through shared stories, recollection, and reinterpretation.

As a character, Braun exists in both proximity and distance—he is deeply tied to the family's history, yet his detached, intellectual stance allows him to analyze its conflicts rather than actively engage in them. His narration reflects Peter Orner's reading of Bellow's fiction as an act of invention rather than mere recollection (Orner, 2010). Instead of presenting a linear sequence of events, Braun's memories emerge organically, triggered by fleeting emotions or subtle sensory details, such as the shifting winter light. This technique transforms his narration into a form of mediated storytelling, where the past is not simply recalled but reconstructed, shaped by grief, irony, and selective memory. This duality recalls Nick Carraway's role in *The Great Gatsby*, where he finds himself 'within and without,' (Fitzgerald, 1950, 42) both immersed in and repelled by the world he observes. Just as Nick navigates his position as a spectator to Gatsby's world, Braun straddles the space between family member and detached narrator, constructing his recollections through the lens of both engagement and distance.

Braun's role as a bridge between past and present is particularly evident in his observations of power and submission within the family hierarchy. While Isaac and Tina enact conflicts over inheritance, duty, and belonging, Braun remains a commentator, shaping how the reader interprets the power struggles of those around him. His detached and introspective nature enables him to capture the persistence of family traditions even as they evolve and fracture in the face of modernity. His narration often moves between irony and resignation, highlighting how the family's values endure despite generational shifts. This is evident in his recounting of Isaac's relationship with Tina and Aunt Rose, where he observes the complex negotiations of power, memory, and identity. His detached voice does not simply describe events; rather, it reconfigures them, lending weight to what is absent as much as what is present.

Sarah Blacher Cohen's theatrical adaptation of "The Old System" further stresses Braun's role as an intermediary between memory and identity (Cohen, 2010, 170–201). Her version transforms Braun's internal monologues into spoken dialogue and staged interactions, externalizing his reflective role. While

Bellow's prose employs stream-of-consciousness narration and fragmented time shifts, Cohen's adaptation relies on direct address and dramatic reenactments to materialize Braun's fragmented recollections. This shift from introspective narration to active storytelling demonstrates how the nature of memory is shaped by the medium through which it is conveyed.

This connection to memory is further reinforced by Bellow's use of social apostrophe, in which Braun directly addresses absent figures or invokes historical traditions to shape identity. Traditionally, apostrophe heightens emotional intensity by speaking to those who cannot respond, but Bellow extends this device beyond personal grief to interrogate Jewish inheritance and collective memory. Braun's introspections often take the form of apostrophic reflections on history and identity, particularly in his lament about the fate of Jewish civilization: "Plato and the Buddha raided by looters. The tombs of Pharaohs broken into by desert rabble." ("System," 42).

Here, Braun equates historical desecration with personal loss, linking the collapse of civilizations to the erosion of family structures. His meditations on Jewish survival correspond to the concept of *Yizkor*, the Jewish memorial prayer, which reinforces the connection between the living and the dead through ritual remembrance. More strikingly, Braun's reflections on the Braun family's collective mourning strongly resemble the *Kaddish*, the Jewish prayer for the dead, which functions as an extended act of cultural apostrophe. In Jewish tradition, *Kaddish* is not simply a prayer for the deceased but an affirmation of continuity, addressed to both God and lost family members as if they are still present. This dual function—mourning the dead while reaffirming communal survival—aligns closely with Braun's meditation on Jewish identity and the pull of ancestral memory:

So the Brauns wept at Tina's death. Isaac held his mother's ring in his hand. Dr. Braun, too, had tears in his eyes. Oh, these Jews—these Jews! Their feelings, their hearts! Dr. Braun often wanted nothing more than to stop all this. For what came of it? ("System," 82).

His apostrophic address—*"Oh, these Jews—these Jews!"*—laments the cyclical nature of Jewish grief, where mourning becomes a ritual of continuity rather than resolution. Like the Kaddish, this moment captures the unresolved nature of Jewish suffering and remembrance, reinforcing Bellow's broader themes of cultural inheritance and existential questioning.

These concerns with memory and continuity are not limited to Braun alone. His narration also frames Tina as both a director and performer in an operatic drama of her own making. Her response to death and loss is a spectacle blending tragedy and parody, where grief is transformed into a dramatic assertion of control and defiance. As Braun observes:

In Dr. Braun's opinion, his Cousin Tina had seized upon the force of death to create a situation of opera. Which at the same time was a situation of parody. As he stated it himself, there was a feedback of mockery. Death the horrid bridegroom, waiting with a consummation life had never offered. Life, accordingly, she devalued, filling up the clear light remaining (which should be reserved for beauty, miracle, nobility) with obese monstrosity, rancor, failure, self-torture ("System," 70).

In place of following structured Jewish mourning customs such as *sitting shiva*, where grief is a communal act of remembrance, Tina transforms her suffering into a spectacle, using exaggerated gestures and defiant language to assert control over her own narrative. Her invocation of "Death the horrid bridegroom" turns mourning into a parody of ritual consummation, suggesting that she reclaims her agency by reshaping death into an act of rebellion rather than submission.

Braun's introspective narration ultimately serves as both an elegy and an interrogation, where memory is not simply preserved but constantly reinterpreted. His role as narrator extends beyond storytelling—he is the architect of memory, shaping the reader's understanding of identity through disjointed recollection, educational apostrophe, and narrative mediation. His introspective style complicates the reliability of memory, demonstrating how history is not purely preserved but constantly rewritten. Through Braun's apostrophic musings, Bellow interrogates the weight of Jewish inheritance, questioning whether tradition offers guidance or just reinforces cycles of suffering. His perspective blurs the line between personal and

collective memory, reinforcing Bellow's broader themes of cultural transmission, loss, and identity negotiation.

In "The Old System," thus, Bellow presents memory not as a fixed archive, but as an evolving performance, shaped by the needs of the present as much as by the weight of the past. Braun's reflections serve as both a meditation on Jewish survival and a critique of the forces that shape remembrance, capturing the paradoxes of familial duty, generational expectation, and the elusive nature of belonging.

Conclusion: Power, Identity, and the Weight of Cultural Memory

Saul Bellow's "The Old System" presents a rich, multi-layered exploration of Jewish identity, familial power, and inheritance, highlighting the complex interplay between tradition and autonomy, duty and resistance. Through his depiction of women, men, and the narrator, Bellow designs a meditation on the forces that shape Jewish-American identity, illustrating how traditional memory is both a burden and a source of continuity.

The female characters—Aunt Rose, Tina, and Isaac's wife—negotiate power through financial control, defiance, and endurance, respectively. Aunt Rose exerts economic governance but remains socially unrecognized; Tina rejects familial obligation outright, while Isaac's wife embodies stability but lacks agency. Their differing approaches emphasize the tension between preservation and disruption within the Jewish-American family structure.

The male characters—Isaac Braun, Old Braun, and Mutt Braun—likewise cope with the expectations of Jewish masculinity and the pressures of assimilation. Isaac's efforts to uphold tradition conflict with modern individualism, Old Braun represents historical endurance and quiet resilience, while Mutt embodies a disengaged approach, rejecting familial burdens altogether. Together, they illustrate the evolving nature of Jewish masculinity and the struggles between duty and self-determination.

Dr. Braun, as the narrator and mediator of memory, constructs the story's split structure through cultural apostrophe, invoking the absent and the deceased to shape identity and familial legacy. His selective narration and introspection transform remembrance into an active force, reinforcing themes of Jewish communal survival, historical consciousness, and existential questioning. His role climaxes Bellow's broader literary concern with the fluidity of memory and the weight of cultural inheritance.

Bellow's engagement with Jewish identity in "The Old System" mirrors his own ambivalence toward being labeled a Jewish writer, a tension that scholars such as Ben Siegel and Cynthia Ozick have explored extensively. Siegel notes that, despite Bellow's efforts to resist ethnic classification, his fiction inevitably engages with Jewish traditional and historical struggles (Siegel, 2013, 29–56). Ozick, in turn, asserts that Bellow's literary sensibility is inescapably shaped by Jewish anxieties, ironies, and historical wounds, making him, whether he accepted it or not, a Jewish writer (Ozick, 1978, 47). This paradox is reflected in "The Old System," where characters attempt to steer their Jewishness in an evolving world, negotiating between ancestral obligations and individual self-definition.

Eventually, Bellow's story challenges simplistic portrayals of assimilation and belonging, presenting identity as an ongoing negotiation between past and present, personal autonomy, and collective heritage. Bellow's exploration of power dynamics, gender roles, and cultural apostrophe establishes the story as a vital study in Jewish-American literature, shedding light on the complexities of preserving heritage in a constantly evolving world.

By interrogating the intersections of familial obligation, cultural survival, and self-definition, Bellow demonstrates that the struggle to reconcile tradition with modernity is not only a Jewish-American dilemma but a universal condition. His storytelling captures the paradoxes of memory and power, ensuring that "The Old System" remains a timeless exploration of identity and belonging in literary discourse.

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