
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Wandering and Freedom: A Lacanian Reading of Subjectivity in *The Adventures of Augie March*

Wei Tao¹✉, Shihan Zhang², and Pengcheng Zhan³

¹²Science and Technology College of Nanchang Hangkong University, Jiujiang, China

³Jiangxi Tellhow Animation Vocational College, Nanchang, China

Corresponding Author: Wei Tao, **E-mail:** taowei1716@163.com

| ABSTRACT

The Adventures of Augie March, a seminal work by Saul Bellow, describes the protagonist Augie's wandering and self-exploration in mid-20th century American society. Augie is not a traditional hero; instead, he constructs a dynamic and fragmented subjectivity through a series of choices, failures, and existential reflections. This paper applies Jacques Lacan's theory of subjectivity as its analytical framework, tracing four stages in Augie's development: childhood (mirror stage), adolescence (symbolic order), adulthood (split subject), and ongoing future (lack and becoming). It explores how Augie negotiates the question "Who am I?" in the tension between external social discipline and inner desire. The novel, with its open ending and resistance to narrative closure, critiques the traditional American Dream and offers a profound literary reflection on modern identity.

| KEYWORDS

Augie March; Lacanian theory; subjectivity construction; wandering; freedom

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 01 July 2025

PUBLISHED: 07 August 2025

DOI: 10.32996/ijts.2025.5.2.6

1. Introduction

In twentieth-century American literature, the exploration of subjectivity emerges as a central concern, reflecting broader cultural anxieties about identity, freedom, and authenticity. In a pluralistic and rapidly modernizing society, the individual's search for meaning and self-definition became increasingly complex. Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* presents a literary response to these conditions. The novel centers on Augie, a modern adventurer who resists conformity and chooses wandering over assimilation. He constructs his identity not through achievement or stability but through failure, displacement, and the pursuit of inner freedom.

This paper analyzes the protagonist's subjectivity through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Augie's life is marked by a dialectical tension between the symbolic structures of society and the unconscious drives that shape his internal world. His wandering is not simply geographical; it is existential, psychological, and symbolic. Through close textual reading and theoretical application, this paper argues that Augie's trajectory exemplifies the fragmented, dynamic, and incomplete nature of modern subjectivity.

2. Literature review

Regarding Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*, academic research has long focused on narrative style, language characteristics, politics, and themes of growth and so on. In his article "Reading the Picaresque", Pughe (1996) compared *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with *The Adventures of Augie March*, pointing out that Augie, as a "modern clown" character, explored his subject identity in self-wandering and social rupture. Nadina (2007) investigates the challenges of translating Augie's autobiographical tone into Romanian, highlighting the significance of temporal structure in cross-cultural interpretation.

Copyright: © 2025 the Author(s). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Published by Al-Kindi Centre for Research and Development, London, United Kingdom.

Nicholas (2015) suggests that Saul Bellow's novel *The Adventures of Augie March* operates analogously to American public diplomacy of the early Cold War, especially in its reinvention of the Bildungsroman genre. Similar to what Glenday (1990) suggests—that *The Adventures of Augie March* is a radical novel set during the inert decade of Eisenhower's administration—a more compelling interpretation is that it conceals its protagonist's existential despair beneath a rhetoric of affirmation and hopeful gestures. Chavkin and Chavkin (2019), applying family systems theory, analyze how familial relationships, especially with Augie's brother Simon, influence subject formation.

These studies provide valuable insights into the novel's narrative style, cultural context, and psychological depth. However, relatively few have systematically engaged Lacanian theory to explore the psychic structure of Augie's subjectivity—a gap this paper aims to address.

3. Methodology

Jacques Lacan, a French psychoanalyst, is famous for his reinterpretation of Freud's theory, especially for his highly inspiring ideas on the construction of "subjectivity". He believes that human subjectivity is not innate, but is "constructed" in the interweaving of language, unconsciousness and social order. Lacan's subjectivity theory mainly consists of the following four important stages:

3.1 Mirror Stage

Lacan (2014)'s theory suggest that Infants recognize the existence of "I" by looking in the mirror or the reflection of others in their early growth (about 6 to 18 months), and initially form an illusion of self-identity at this stage. This identification is both a unified ideal image and the beginning of division, because the individual realizes that the "I" in reality is always far from the perfect image in the mirror. This "Ideal-I" constitutes the self-prototype that will be constantly pursued in the future but can never be fully achieved.

3.2 Symbolic Order

As the subject enters the symbolic order, it becomes embedded in the structures of language, law, and social norms. This entry requires the repression of instinctual desires and the adoption of roles mediated by the "Other" (l'Autre). Language shapes not only how the subject expresses itself but also what it can imagine and desire. Identity becomes a product of symbolic inscription.

3.3 Split Subject

Lacan(2008) emphasized that the human subject is always in a state of splitting (split subject), with constant tension between "the self I thought I was" and "the self disciplined by language". The subject always acts with "lack" (manque), always pursuing the ideal and complete "I", but can never really achieve it. This lack prompts the subject to desire constantly, and also makes the construction of subjectivity always in a dynamic generation.

3.4 Lack and Becoming

The sense of lack is not pathological but constitutive of subjectivity. It is the engine of "becoming" – a never-ending movement toward an imagined wholeness that can never be achieved. Rather than resolving this lack, the subject perpetually reconstructs itself through new identifications, relationships, and symbolic acts.

4. Different stages of Augie's subjectivity construction

Augie's life journey is a journey of constant "wandering". He pursues himself in the ever-changing geographical space, interpersonal relationships and psychological states. It is in this "flow" that he gradually completes his understanding of freedom and the construction of subjectivity. From childhood dependence, to youth struggle, to adult reflection and choice, Augie's subjectivity has undergone multiple splits and reorganizations. In this process, "freedom" is both his longing goal and the challenge he must face in the process of building himself. The following sections will be developed in chronological order, deeply analyzing Augie's psychological changes and subjectivity construction at different stages, and finally point out that his "wandering" is not only a flow in the sense of space, but also a continuous spiritual exploration and questioning of the subject's reality.

4.1 Childhood: initial emergence of subjective consciousness

During Augie's childhood, his subjectivity was still in its infancy, showing the characteristics of what Lacan called "mirror image identification". He grew up in a slum in Chicago, with a dysfunctional family, an absent father, a blind and stubborn mother, and a precocious and utilitarian brother Simon. In such an environment, Augie lacked a stable identity model and had to "recognize" himself by imitating others. He envied and repelled his brother Simon, wanting to copy his decisiveness and success, but also instinctively resented his calculating lifestyle. This complex psychology embodies the subjective contradiction in Lacan's "mirror stage": individuals construct "self-images" through external images, but cannot truly identify with them. At this stage, Augie

began to realize that "self" is an image that can be selected and imitated, but he did not have enough language and consciousness to construct a stable subjective identity, so he showed a highly dependent, vague and uncertain subject outline. This laid the groundwork for his future attempts to break away from the identification of others and move towards subjective independence.

4.2 Adolescence: roles changes and order conflicts

Entering adolescence, Augie gradually entered the social symbolic order. He began to try to integrate into various roles set by society: he worked as a doorman, poaching assistant, salesman, secretary, and even participated in the Mexican revolutionary activities. These experiences reflect his continuous "entry" into the symbolic order - that is, accepting the discipline and shaping of the self by language, rules, and social structure. However, Augie did not gain a stable sense of identity in it. He always chose to escape or self-disintegrate after a short period of adaptation. This constant attempt and resistance is exactly the manifestation of the subject being disciplined by the "other" but always remaining in a split state in Lacan's theory. He is eager to be accepted by society, but instinctively refuses to be labeled and functionalized. In his relationships with lovers, friends, employers, etc., he also constantly plays the role expected by society, but always falls into conflict and rupture due to his inner obsession with freedom. At this stage, Augie is in the tension between identity and rebellion, marking the key turning point of his subjectivity from dependence to autonomy.

4.3 Adult: self-reconciliation and identity seeking

As he entered adulthood, Augie's life became more and more uncertain, and he began to deeply experience the gap between himself and reality. He attempted to establish a coherent adult identity through career choices and intimate relationships, but failed repeatedly. Whether it was his relationship with Stella, or his role as a secretary, scholar, or revolutionary, he could not maintain it for a long time. These failures did not make him succumb, but instead prompted him to continue to make free choices, even if the result of the choice was wandering and loneliness. At this stage, Augie began to show a strong sense of existentialism: he realized that "who I am" was not given by society, but constructed through a series of choices. As Sartre said, "existence precedes essence." Augie struggled between the cruelty of reality and his inner desire, confirmed the value of free will in failure, and gradually got rid of his dependence on the recognition of others. His subjectivity was broken and reconstructed in this series of "choice-failure-re-choice" dynamics.

4.4 Continuing subjective construction: perpetual wandering and the desire for becoming

The ending of *The Adventures of Augie March* does not put an end to Augie's fate, but shows the openness and incompleteness of subjectivity through his continued wandering. According to Lacan's theory of subjectivity, the subject is always in a state of division, always pursuing the ideal self but difficult to achieve complete unity. Augie accepted this uncertainty. He no longer clings to a fixed identity or final destination, but constantly makes self-selection and reconstruction in his wandering. The open ending symbolizes the continuity of subject construction, indicating that freedom is not the end, but a dynamic process, and a manifestation of continuous exploration and responsibility of the self. It is in this endless "becoming" that Augie shows the essence of modern subjectivity - an existence that is always moving forward in change, contradiction and creation.

5. Conclusion

The Adventures of Augie March is not only a story of personal growth, but also a profound text about how modern people struggle to construct subjectivity between social discipline and inner desire. As the protagonist, Augie has not achieved success in the secular sense, but through constant wandering, failure and reflection, he has maintained his persistence in freedom and individual choice, completing the "construction of subjectivity in division" in the sense of Lacan.

In contemporary society, individuals face increasingly complex identity dilemmas, value anxiety and survival pressure. Augie's wandering journey provides us with a philosophy of survival to think about "who am I" and "what should I become". With his imperfect and loser attitude, he shows us the difficult but glorious path of human subjectivity construction.

Of course, this study also has certain limitations. Due to the limitations of theoretical space and length, it is not possible to further analyze the narrative strategy and language style of the novel, nor to deeply compare the similarities and differences between Augie and other "wanderers" in American literature. Future research can combine feminism, postcolonial theory or cross-cultural perspectives to broaden the interpretation path of *The Adventures of Augie March* and more comprehensively reveal its multiple meanings in modern identity politics.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

Reference

- [1] Chavkin, A., & Chavkin, N. (2019). The Pathological Family System in Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*. *Style* 53(1), 41-58.
- [2] Glenday, M. K. (1990). A fugitive style: *The Adventures of Augie March*, *Seize the Day*, *Henderson the Rain King*. In Saul Bellow and the decline of humanism (pp. 54–91).
- [3] Lacan, J., Sheridan, A., & Bowie, M. (2014). *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience 1* (pp. 97–104). *Routledge*.
- [4] Nadina Vişan. (2007). Translator's Choices in Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*. *Bucharest Working Papers in Linguistics*, IX(2), 104-114.
- [5] Nardini, N. (2015). A Fresh-Start Doctrine: The Marshall Plan, *The Adventures of Augie March*, and the Bildungsroman after Nationalism. *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 71(2), 149-174.
- [6] Pughe, T. (1996). Reading the picaresque: Mark twain's *the adventures of huckleberry Finn*, Saul bellow's *the adventures of Augie march*, and more recent adventures. *English Studies*, 77(1), 59–70.
- [7] Wang, Y. (2008). Agency: The internal split of structure. *Department of Sociology Faculty Scholarship and Creative Works*, (11).