**Intro**

Humboldt’s Gift by Saul Bellow is a beautiful mess of a book. To begin our discussion, I think it would be helpful to tell you all a bit about the novel’s background.

**Background**

Humboldt’s Gift was published in 1975 and was met with immediate praise, winning the 1976 Pulitzer Prize. The book is what’s called a *roman a’ clef*, which means a novel deeply rooted in real events; that is, a novel whose fictional veil is ever so slim. In fact, one can trace the theme of Bellow’s life seeping into his “fiction” throughout the Novel Prize winner’s oeuvre, leading to some notable critics to question the ethicalness of his work.

In any case, the real life background for Humboldt’s gift is Bellow’s friendship with the late Delmore Schwartz, a poet, short story writer and eminent “conversationalist.” This is a theme we’ll explore in greater deal once we get to the novel. Like Humboldt, Schwartz was a respected writer for a time, until his literary career lost steam, and he relegated himself to a life cut tragically, yet predictably short through years of poor health, drinking, and itinerancy.

**What’s Going On**

At the beginning, the book was, at least for me, quite jarring. And so to just set the stage a little as to what’s going on, here’s the briefest of summaries: The opening of the novel acquaints us with the two main characters, Charlie Citrine, a middle-aged, successful novelist and playwright, and Von Humboldt Fleischer, a fading poet who has steadily waned since experiencing a taste of importance years ago.

One interesting motif that characterizes the novel and is especially present in the opening is the juxtaposition of extremely simple sentences with extremely esoteric references. The name of every significant intellectual of the Western Canon is thrown around in only the first thirty pages of the novel. These references mainly come in the context of Citrine’s lively conversations with Humboldt, revealing an enduring theme of the novel: the contours of a relationship between two artists.

Running concurrent to Bellow’s meditations on artistry and its place in an increasingly commercial nation is a simpler story of Citrine’s run-in with Rinaldo Cantabile, a descendent of a once infamous organized crime family. After being invited to a poker game by his friend, George Swiebel, (with the aim of acquainting Citrine with ‘common folk’) Citrine—through some shady poker dealings—appears to owe Rinaldo $450. Rinaldo uses a bat or two to wreck Citrine’s fancy car, a Mercedes, and proceeds to take him on a daylong adventure that sees the two go from the toilet of a day spa, to a bar, to the top of a skyscraper, and finally to a restaurant. All the while, it becomes clear that Rinaldo doesn’t care so much about the $450.

**Narrative Structure, Themes, And Discussion Question**

One aspect of the novel I think we should discuss is its narrative structure—a mishmash of memories, flashbacks, interior monologue, and vivid descriptions of action. How does this structure support some of the main themes of the novel: Mortality, the interplay between creativity and commerce, and friendship between artists and between artists and “regular” people?

**Specific Questions Important Quotes To Consider**

*This question breaks down into some more specific ones: How is the theme of mortality expressed in the novel? Why is it so important to Citrine?*

“Naturally he died a Failure. What else can result from the capitalization of such nouns? Myself, I’ve always held the number of sacred words down. In my opinion Humboldt had too long a list of them—Poetry, Beauty, Love, Waste Land, Alienation, Politics, History, the Unconscious. And, of course, Manic and Depressive, always capitalized” (8).

“From Bellevue he phoned me at the Belasco Theatre. I heard his voice shaking, raging but rapid. He yelled, “Charlie, you know where I am, don’t you? All right, Charlie, this isn’t literature. This is life” (109).

“Boredom is an instrument of social control. Power is the power to impose boredom, to command stasis, to combine this stasis with anguish. The real tedium, deep tedium, is seasoned with terror and with death” (129).

*How is the notion of the interplay between creativity and commerce represented? What’s Humboldt like? Do we like him? Are we supposed to like him? Feel sorry for him? And what of Citrine, someone who is really not much less pretentious—how do we feel about him?*

“The noble idea of being an American poet certainly made Humboldt feel at times like a card, a boy, a comic, a fool. 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.” (7).

“He consumed his cigarettes to the last spark and freckled his tie and his jacket with burns” (11)

“He wore the look of a balanced thinker when he began, but he was not the picture of sanity. I myself loved to talk and kept up with him as long as I could. For a while it was a double concerto, but presently I was fiddled and trumpeted off the stage. Reasoning, formulating, debating, making discoveries” (22).

“I knew everything I was supposed to know and nothing I really needed to know. I had bungled the whole money thing. It was highly educational, of course, and education has become the great and universal American recompense. It has even replaced punishment in the federal penitentiaries. Every great prison is now a thriving seminar” (35).

*A slightly tangential, but equally important question: How are women treated in this novel? What roles do they play?*

“When she saw the Dodge compact I was driving when we met she said, “What kind of car is this for a famous man? There’s some kind of mistake.” I tried to explain to her that I was too susceptible to the influence of things and people to drive an eighteen-thousand-dollar automobile. You had to live up to such a grand machine, and consequently you were not yourself at the wheel. But Renata dismissed this. She said that I didn’t know how to spend money, that I neglected myself, and that I shirked the potentialities of my success and was afraid of it” (27).

“For Denise continually spoke to me about myself. She would say, “I just can’t believe the way you are. The man who’s had all those wonderful insights, the author of all these books, respected by scholars and intellectuals all over the world. I sometimes have to ask myself, ‘Is that my husband? The man I know?’ You’ve lectured at the great Eastern universities and had grants and fellowships and honors. De Gaulle made you a knight of the Legion of Honor and Kennedy invited us to the White House. You had a successful play on Broadway. Now what the hell do you think you’re doing? Chicago! You hang around with your old Chicago school chums, with freaks. It’s a kind of mental suicide, death wish. You’ll have nothing to do with really interesting people, with architects or psychiatrists or university professors” (29).

*Finally: What is the role of Chicago // New York in this novel? How are the two cities differentiated, linked? How do these representations of the two cities fall in line with other Chicago / New York stories we’ve read?*