



**THE THEME OF VICTIMIZATION IN SAUL BELLOW'S
*SEIZE THE DAY***

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Abstract

Saul Bellow stands unique among American literary figures in the depiction of tragic heroes. He came to literary scenario in the 1940s, the period when writers sifted and resifted the wreckage of traditional beliefs brought into question by the world war. *Seize the Day* clearly depicts the predicament of modern man as a victim of circumstances and incidents. This paper attempts to analyse the theme of victimization in the novel *Seize the Day*.

Key Words: victimization, human predicament

Seize the Day can be regard as a probing exploratory literature in victimization and spiritual survival in a hostile environment. The novel depicts the death throes of a drowning man. Tommy Wilhelm, the protagonist, is a character in turmoil. He is a man in his mid-forties. The novel traverses one very important day in the life of Tommy Wilhelm: his 'day of reckoning'. Tommy Wilhelm is a victim who is able to forsake his 'pretender soul'. He is different from others in his instinctive distaste for the inveterate cynicism of society.

The setting of the novel is 1950s America, within the time frame of one day. A flashback occurs about times from 1930s to 1950s. Tommy Wilhelm is living in the Hotel Gloriana, where he is "out of place" among the old inmates of Hotel Gloriana. He and his father live separately in the hotel. And throughout the novel, Tommy is a figure of isolation amidst crowds. Keith Opdahl observes:

The ambiguity of Wilhelm's drowning, which is both a failure and a triumph, is the central problem of *Seize the Day*. Because the water in which Wilhelm is immersed presents the "cavernous distortions" of his character, it reflects the conflict in Bellow's view of human nature. Bellow sees man as D.H. Lawrence does, as "hard, isolate, and a killer." Wilhelm denies the existence of the predatory in man, and in doing so exemplifies one of Bellow's most frequent themes, the destruction of man by his humanitarian ideals. (97)

As the novel opens, Tommy is descending in the hotel elevator, on his way to meet his father Dr. Adler for breakfast. His victimization begins with the estrangement between him and his father. Dr. Adler refuses to be kind or helpful to his son. He sees his son as a failure in every sense of the word. Tommy's father is a man whose thoughts and actions is reduced to money and to "law and order", even to "hoarding". The reader is viewing him through Tommy's perspective. Adler warns

his son, "You make too much of your problems . . . They ought not to be turned into a career" (*Seize the Day* 24).

Alder does not want to have his son remain "a child" forever. Even Tommy claims that he is often times a "kid." Dr. Adler criticizes everything about him, his appearance, the way he eats, and also the number of pills he takes. Adler believes in the protestant work ethic, whereas his son grew up and lives in a different America. Adler is under the spell of power, success and rationalism. He is a self-made man. Tommy is a naturalist and an idealist. He cares too much about how his father sees him. And he often becomes the "failure" that he believes his father sees in him. He is sensitive and almost, at times, feminine. This femininity is poked at and criticized by his father. Dr. Adler is a retired physician. Tommy Wilhelm resents his father's detached manner towards him. He cannot speak his mind to him. Wilhelm feels that his father is ashamed of him, because he is the only member of the family not to have completed a college education.

The experience of victimization was severe when Tommy was about twenty. He went to Hollywood to become an actor, against the wishes of his parents. Maurice Venice, a talent scout who had seen Wilhelm's picture in the college newspaper, invited him to New York for a screen test. Venice insisted that he knew how to spot talent, and saw Wilhelm cast in the movies as the steady, faithful type who lost the girl to the more rakish type of character. Wilhelm was not keen on this kind of role, but Venice insisted that it would make him famous. Wilhelm quit college and went to California quarrelling with his family. In California, he learned that a recommendation from Venice was the kiss of death. Later Wilhelm came to know that Venice was sent to prison for running a call-girl ring.

It was while he was in California that Wilhelm changed his name to Tommy Wilhelm. His father never accepted the change and still called his son "Wilky." Tommy regrets the name change, because he has never succeeded in becoming Tommy Wilhelm. Wilhelm is a victim of the materialistic society. Dr. Adler, who is always indifferent towards his son, boasts about how much his son has earned as a sales executive in Rojax Corporation and Mr. Perls is impressed, speculating about what tax bracket this puts Wilhelm in. Wilhelm despises them both for the way they worship money: "How they love money! Holy money! Beautiful money! It was getting so that people were feeble-minded about everything except money" (*Seize the Day* 41).

The materialism of society means that the values of the heart are trampled on because everything revolves around money. Wilhelm is unable to establish the deep human connections that he longs for. Tommy Wilhelm victimizes himself by allowing his wife to dominate him and by foolishly expecting perfection from his marriage. Wilhelm feels the pressure of the estrangement between him and Margaret; his wife again becomes "choked and congested." Wilhelm reflects his marriage as another experience of victimization in his life. Margaret refuses to give him a divorce, and he has to support her and the children. He collects the bills she has sent him for the boy's educational insurance policies. His mother-in-law has taken out the policies, but after her death, the premiums become his

responsibilities. He resents his wife, believing that she knows he is in financial difficulty and is trying to get as much as out of him as she can. Thus, Wilhelm confirms that he is somehow “married” to suffering.

Tommy Wilhelm allows himself to be victimized by Dr. Tamkin, who takes the role of a surrogate father for Wilhelm. Wilhelm has no choice but to trust him in the financial venture Tamkin has set out upon. Tommy follows Tamkin’s advice to invest his money in the stock market. Tamkin is a visionary who indulges in sweeping theories and explanations of human life and behaviour. Wilhelm is drawn to Tamkin, because he longs to believe in something. But Tamkin hits the nail on the head as far as Wilhelm’s situation is concerned. Dr. Adler, Wilhelm’s father, warns him not to trust Tamkin because he is a liar. But Wilhelm tries to defend Tamkin. He has given Tamkin power of attorney over his last seven hundred dollars. Tamkin reassures Wilhelm that the price of lard will go up; Wilhelm listens incredulously.

Tamkin talks about the strange and sensational case history of his patients. He insists that “the facts are always sensational but people do not always realize this about their own lives” (*Seize the Day* 69). He goes on to say that he works not for the money but for the spiritual compensation. He likes to bring people into the present rather than allow them to live in the past or future. Wilhelm is impressed. Tamkin explains his theory of two souls within everyone:

There are two main souls, the real soul and a pretender soul. Every man realizes that he has to love something or somebody. He feels that he must go outward. . . . The interest of the pretender soul is the same as the interest of the social life, the society mechanism. This is the main tragedy of human life. . . . the true soul is the one that pays the price. It suffers and gets sick and it realizes that the pretender can’t be loved. (*Seize the Day* 70-71)

Wilhelm is awed by the description of the two souls because he knows he is in the grip of the pretender soul. He is not really himself. He is tormented by these ideas and hopes that Tamkin will give him advice that will help to transform his life. Whenever Wilhelm asks what happens in the market, Tamkin tells him not to worry. The system will not allow him to go into debt. Wilhelm’s feelings toward this magician are ambivalent in his remarks about real soul and pretender soul. Tamkin gives a genuine insight into his situation. He makes Wilhelm believe that his father is jealous of him as he has left his wife, and his wife envies him too because he is free and is now able to see young women.

Finally at the market Wilhelm discovers that lard has dropped twenty points. Rye has fallen too. Wilhelm looks around for Tamkin, but he is nowhere to be seen. Wilhelm is in a panic, since he is wiped out financially. Thus, Tamkin makes it possible for him to go through a symbolic drowning. Although Wilhelm struggles to keep “the waters of the earth” from rolling over him, he looks “like a man about to drown.” He has foolishly quit his job and has no money to meet the demands of his wife, who seeks to punish him for leaving her. His relations with his father, whom he has denied by changing his name, deny his plea for help by

calling him a slob. He finally loses the little money he has left on the commodities market, where he has speculated at the urging of a phony psychologist, Dr Tamkin. When Wilhelm loses everything on the market, “he smelled the salt odour of tears in his nose. His unshed tears rose and rose and he looked like a man about to drown” (*Seize the Day* 104).

Rushing out into the street in total panic, Wilhelm encounters in “the inexhaustible current of millions of every race and kind pouring out, of every age, of every genius” (*Seize the Day* 115). He is swept along by the crowd and pushed into a funeral parlor. At the funeral, Wilhelm feels grief for a dead man he never knows in his life. His own grief then bursts through and he weeps uncontrollably. Wilhelm drowns in the harsh drive of all life for survival. Bellow’s water imagery contains both possibilities that symbolize the rigorous life forces which destroy Wilhelm and a transcendent reality which raises him above the destruction. His drowning is the climax of his day of failure. The water in which he drowns is both the world and the masochistic self which has murdered him.

The water rolls over him when he stumbles and is carried into a funeral home. There, it is “dark and cool” and his troubles end. The quiet chapel has the wavering, dreamlike quality of an ocean grotto. Organ music “stirred and breathed from the pipes” and “men in formal clothes and black homburgs stride softly back and forth on the cork floor, up and down the centre aisle” (*Seize the Day* 116). Wilhelm feels a “splash of heart sickness” as he stands before the corpse of a stranger. When he begins to cry, his drowning is complete:

It poured into him where he had hidden himself in the centre of a crowd by the great and happy oblivion of tears. He heard it and sank deeper than sorrow, through torn sobs, and cries toward the consummation of his heart’s ultimate need. (*Seize the Day* 118)

Tommy Wilhelm is a victim of the society. He lacks the shrewd aggression capitalism demands. Behind the practical motives of those who cheat him, however--his wife’s need for support, his father’s frugality and Tamkin’s need for capital--lies a purer, deeper malice. Wilhelm is also the victim of his society’s peculiar emotional sterility. In that sense, *Seize the Day* is the city dweller’s fulfillment of personal needs of strangers. The feelings that usually involve private commitment are casually exchanged in public. Wilhelm’s father finds fulfillment not in his children, but in the admiration of his hotel associates. He creates his own praise. Wilhelm thinks:

People were primed and did not know it. And what did he need praise for? In a hotel where everyone was busy and contacts were so brief and had such small weight, how could it satisfy him? He could never matter much to them. (*Seize the Day* 12)

The agent Maurice Venice who Wilhelm later learns is a procurer praises the movie industry because it supplies the emotional life of the nation. He tells Wilhelm that people are “miserable, in trouble, downcast, tired.” They need a break; the break is the opportunity to feel in the movie house: as a movie star”. Venice says: “You

become a lover to whole world . . . one fellow smiles, a billion people also smile” (*Seize the Day* 21).

Tamkin, the stranger to whom Wilhelm himself turns, epitomizes this sterility. As a psychologist, Tamkin makes his living supplying the emotional needs of strangers. When Wilhelm questions Tamkin’s claim to have had a consultation before breakfast, he learns that it had been “over the telephone.”

Wilhelm is a victim of himself. His emotion reflects his dependency and his masochism. The people around him are really his weapons for suicide. Bellow uses the philosophy of Tamkin, who is responsible for Wilhelm’s bankruptcy, as an ironic revelation of why Wilhelm destroys himself. Tamkin tells Wilhelm that because man is inherently good, he has only to “seize the day”, or rest content in his own being to be happy. The desire to murder by means of moneymaking is an artificial trait acquired from society. Wilhelm’s belief in Tamkin’s philosophy reflects his own denial of human depravity; his partnership with him reveals the self-deception and destruction that accompanies such a denial.

Tamkin tells him that he must accept his relations to the world, but his problem is that he defines himself almost entirely by how he appears in the eyes of others. As an active man, seeking to rise above the average, Wilhelm is dependent in the world. He adopts a name that is not his in order to be accepted by the movie goers. He needs the essential self. When Tamkin mentions a “true soul” which lies beneath social identity, Wilhelm is intensely interested. He wonders and asks: “What did it look like? Does my soul look like me? Where does the true soul get its strength?” (*Seize the Day* 72). Wilhelm’s change of name from Wilhelm to Tommy Wilhelm also embodies his suicidal desire. The change has been “His bid for liberty, Adler being in his mind the title of the species, Tommy the freedom of the person” (*Seize the Day* 25).

The “species” which Wilhelm seeks to deny is his racial background; he attempts to deny his Jewish heritage. Wilhelm’s denial of his father’s name is a denial of the impersonality and the cruelty of the human species, because he would destroy these elements within himself; it is also a denial of his own identity: “You were set free when Mama died. You wanted to forget her. You’d like to get rid of your daughter Catherine, too, Me, too. You’re not kidding anyone” (*Seize the Day* 29).

Tommy Wilhelm is weak and a victim of masochism. Wilhelm turns his appetite on himself when he remembers that he had quit college to go to Hollywood; he realizes that he was about to make his first mistake: “I was going to pick up a weapon and strike myself a blow with it” (*Seize the Day* 17). Wilhelm’s suffering results from a persistent tension within him. The origin of this masochism is the frustration and defeat of love during his childhood. His inability to attract the attention and love of his father can be cited as an example. Rodrigues argues:

The masochistic adult who has been disappointed in love as a child directs his hostility toward those persons who failed him in childhood. This masochism and its genesis apply to “Wilhelm’s

childhood and adolescence”, apparently, his father failed to love him. (*Seize the Day* 92)

Tommy’s gamble with Tamkin on the commodities market is his second mistake. For having “tasted the peculiar flavour of fatality in Dr. Tamkin, he could no longer keep back the money” (*Seize the Day* 58). Bellow emphasizes Wilhelm’s desire to suffer by the irony of his argument with his father. Wilhelm realizes that “some justice wanted to be left in peace . . . when he began to talk about these things he made himself feel worse, he became congested with them and worked himself into a clutch”(*Seize the Day* 43).

He warns himself to leave his father alone, but immediately starts a bitter argument. Afterwards forgetting the old man’s initial indifference, he accuses him of torture:

Why do you start up with me if your’e not going to help me? He cries. What do you want to know about my problems for, father?”. . . “but why is father a stranger to me now?” he painfully began to ask himself again. “Where is the person that he was? And where is the Wilky that I used to be? May be there was never such a Wilky-never such a father Dr. Adler? Why should trust my memory as a boy. I was mistaken. I think that I used to think I loved him and he loved me? Maybe, if I could remember really, I never used to think. It’s an illusion. (*Seize the Day* 53-59)

Bellow’s division--the rationale and the imaginative--and his yoking of the personal and metaphysical are crucial. Wilhelm is related to the sacred sufferers of mythology and Jewish literature, and he is a salesman of children’s play pens. He suffers not in the ancient world or a Polish village, but on Columbus circle. His problem is that he is part of Broad Way, for all of his complaints: he is the suffering Jew without his faith, a visionary who wants to be a Hollywood star. His humiliating defeat is a triumph, because he is finally forced to let go of the world. He too is a man of will for all his passivity, he is finally strapped of all recourse, thrown back upon his inner self and confronted with the mystery of self-enslavement. Wilhelm embodies peoples’ mixed attitude toward the soft character and religious issues. Keith Opdahl observes:

Seize the day is remarkable among Bellow’s works, in fact, for the completeness, with which it integrates the social and psychological levels of meaning with the protagonist’s religious experience. Tommy Wilhelm’s climatic breakdown is a religious denouement which Bellow clearly foreshadows. (111)

Towards the end of the novel, readers can see Wilhelm’s suffering does enable him to create a “soul” out of the crucible of experience. He probes depths “not unsuspected by himself” (*Seize the Day* 56) and achieves a larger vision than Tamkin or such superficial, money-obsessed characters as Rappaport and Perls will ever be capable of achieving. Wilhelm’s suffering leads him to recognition of his kinship with common humanity, for whom he now feels compassion. The implication of the final scene of the novel, where Wilhelm cries at a funeral of a

stranger, is that he has overcome his excessive self-consciousness and has really become that “visionary sort of animal” (*Seize the Day* 39) superior to the materialistic escapists ubiquitous in the contemporary society of *Seize the Day*.

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