

Quest Motif in Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*

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ABSTRACT:

Seize the Day (1956) is considered to be Bellow's masterpiece owing to its classical neatness in plot construction, in-depth study of character and deft handling of human situation leading to a meaningful resolution. As Saul Bellow considers that Seize the Day is victim literature; very much like The Victim itself. I was a little shocked at this myself after having written The Adventures of Augie March-at the slovenliness of it". Thus Seize the Day can very well be grouped with the victim group of novels, though thematically it marks a progression in the transcendence of the victim - state by its protagonist. In spite of Wilhelm's feeling of revulsion at his father's innate selfishness, his own deep rooted humanity helps him to forgive the old man for much of his selflessness. Even in desperation, he does not condemn his father but expresses an attitude of forgiveness. Bellow's attitude towards Wilhelm is not that harsh; he also jocularly accepts Wilhelm's traits as schlemiel...an awkward bungling fellow. Tommy's quest for love and emotional sustenance that he pleads to pour his misery into the deaf ears of his father but in vain, for he finds him to be terribly unconcerned towards the grief of a no-man like him. While discussing Tommy's quest for identity in this quagmire of

existence, we find an incessant urge in him to seek freedom from his self, knowing full well that choice is limited. He is aware that the past is irrevocable and the human nature cannot be changed according to one's own sweet will. Naturally he is guilt -ridden, aware of the burden of the piled up mistakes. Of course from suffering he progresses towards a deeper understanding of reality, a rejuvenation and liberation from suffering-a sort of reconciliation with reality. In nutshell we can say that Seize the Day ceases to be mere victim literature and it so happens that Wilhelm transcends his victimhood by overcoming his death-in- life phase to experience a sort of rebirth.

Seize the Day (1956) is considered to be Bellow's masterpiece owing to its classical neatness in plot construction, in-depth study of character and deft handling of human situation leading to a meaningful resolution. It is no wonder that Frank D. McConnel observes on its excellence quite appropriately.

The strangest, starkest, most classically economical and despairing of Bellow's novels is *Seize the Day*...

After the picaresque mode of *The Adventures of Augie March* with its ebullience and the sprightliness of its innumerable episodes, the compact neatness of *Seize the Day* with the return to the earlier depressive themes of the lonely man

entrapped in the impersonal, mechanized metropolis appears an anomaly from the technical point of view. It is however, typical of Bellow that he repeats the theme of the predicament of people like Joseph or Leventhal either dangling or besieged by guilt and depression, amidst the vast swarming mass of mankind in Chicago or New York. As Saul Bellow himself comments: "*Seize the Day*" is victim literature; very much like *The Victim* itself. I was a little shocked at this myself after having written *The Adventures of Augie March*-at the slovenliness of it". Thus *Seize the Day* can very well be grouped with the victim group of novels, though thematically it marks a progression in the transcendence of the victim - state by its protagonist.

In *Seize the Day*, we find Tommy Wilhelm' quest for identity, his progression from the narrowing question of money plaguing the Americans of the 30's to many a metaphysical question apparently unanswered- the progress in the novel being from a social to a metaphysical stance. In this quest for values he proceeds from a standpoint of total humiliation to the realization of self and of love in the final scene which is assuredly illustrative of a redemptive vision.

In fact, the novel portrays a single day in the life of Tommy Wilhelm when he is on the verge of breaking apart- being enable to overcome the crisis. Tommy represents the predicament of the victimized anti-hero. Tommy's life is unique in this sense that he had never won. All his decisions have ended in a sort of fiasco:

He had decided that it would be a bad mistake to go to Hollywood and then he went. He had made up his mind not to marry his wife, but ran off and got married.
(p.21)

As a Youngman, he opted for a life of quick success by becoming a film star and left his studies halfway in school to the vehement disapproval of his parents. However, the film test flopped and, instead of entering the world of Hollywood, he had to choose menial jobs for his upkeep. On the whole, his life consists of series of blunders- blunders which could have been avoided.

He is found in a terribly shaky situation, trying desperately to reminisce the

past, when the future appears totally bleak and the present a terrible burden for which he himself alone is accountable.

Tommy Wilhelm calls himself a hippopotamus and the narrator comments that he more nearly resembled a bear, even in some agonized moment of guilt and vehement rage aimed against his own follies he calls himself “Wild bear: Dumb mule”. Compared with Tommy’s misery and loneliness, his materially successful father who is still vain about his money, dress and appearance and who boasts about his son being a sales executive-which in fact, Tommy was sometimes ago-appears ridiculous. Howard M. Harper Jr’s comment on Tommy in this regard is worth mentioning-“Beneath his bizarre actions and mannerisms, there is a basic integrity which is

constantly at odds with the dishonesty around him.”¹

On the surface, he keeps up the pretence of a successful man, the son of the famous Dr. Adler (In fact having lost his identity he is recognized simply as Dr. Adler's son) but underneath there is an immense urgency to communicate, to seek somebody's love and guidance.

In spite of Wilhelm's feeling of revulsion at his father's innate selfishness, his own deep rooted humanity helps him to forgive the old man for much of his selflessness: It is difficult to agree with Daniel Weiss's observation: "Tommy Wilhelm is the moral masochist, the victim for whom suffering is a *modus vivendi*, a means of self-justification". Even in desperation, he does not condemn his father but expresses an attitude of forgiveness-

You had to forgive, first, to forgive yourself and then general forgiveness.
(p.23)

Even he is afraid of cynicism which has become the way of the world and like Herzog he extols the value of the developed heart as opposed to mere materialism of a society adoring Mannon only. As Max F. Shulz expresses the idea:

Herzog and Wilhelm each accepts the fundamental prerogative of his heart, even though recognizing its obsolescence in a materialistic society.²

Such is Tommy's quest for love and emotional sustenance that he pleads

to pour his misery into the deaf ears of his father but in vain, for he finds him to be terribly unconcerned towards the grief of a no-man like him. In this context S.B. Cohen's statement about Wilhelm's traits as a schlemiel appears appropriate:

Bellow' attitude towards Wilhelm is not that harsh; he also jocularly accepts Wilhelm's traits as schlemiel...an awkward bungling fellow.³

An adult, prostrated with despair, crushed by the misery of his burden, and "smelling the salt odour of tears", is really an awful sight.

His reliance on Tamkin and his pragmatism can be justified by his yearning for sympathy and fellow feeling.

Though the realization of a deeper sense of love and belonging will emerge later, when he is at the Zenith of suffering, yet the Jewish sense of being rooted in the past tradition is so very innate that he cannot accept the unconventional and the eccentric. He reminisces with nostalgia his grand mother dressing him in a sailor suit-

And danced him
on her knee, blew
in the porridge
for him, and said,
'Admiral you
must eat. (p.84)

While discussing Tommy's quest for identity in this quagmire of existence, we find an incessant urge in him to seek freedom from his self, knowing fully well that choice is limited. He is aware that the past is irrevocable and the human nature cannot be changed according to one's own

sweet will. Naturally he is guilt -ridden, aware of the burden of the piled up mistakes. With an overwhelming urge for freedom, he had changed his name to Tommy Wilhelm by completely erasing Wilky on order to escape from the shadow of the past as soon as his film career was aborted, knowing full well that

Wilky was his
inescapable self
(p.29) and it was
impossible to
escape.

This genuine urge of the man to renew his life an avowed determination to make amends and make it meaningful, is obviously a positive sign. Thus, the line that he recites,

...sunk though he
be – beneath the
watery floor
(p.12)

But he does not speak of his masoonistic obsession with death, because this line from *Lycidas* refers to the immortality of soul which is certainly present in Tommy's mind instead of a bleak vision of death.

There is a definite progression in the protagonist's quest as he moves from an overwhelming need for money to a search for the meaning of life. Daniel Hoffman quite succinctly traces the origin and development of this issue:

To pre-war Jewish writer life was harsh but its meaning always clear: money. After the war as circumstances grow less existent, the meaning of life

grows more obscure.⁴

The Bellow protagonist in his overwhelming urge for an anchor in life has often been besieged by the need for money. Tommy's desperate bid to survive without money in a world where money is all that matters, is a terrible crisis which is something quite unparalleled in Bellow's fictional world. Of course, Augie March and later Charles Citrine in *Humboldt's Gift* are tortured by this need for money, though hardly ever do they give in to the money crazy western man's obsession. Because of this nagging money problem, and his genuine, need to see to the welfare of his children, with the instinct of an impoverished Jew, he feels mentally and morally tortured.

However, in an America where the Heratio Alger Success Myth is very much a reality, Tommy Wilhelm's desperation makes him a veritable buffoon. While trying to explore into the cause of his misery, he rebels against his inertness and feels inferior to other which makes J.J. Clayton infer that

Tommy luxuriates in his suffering. He sees himself as a sacrificial victim.⁵

Of course from suffering he progresses towards a deeper understanding of reality, a rejuvenation and liberation from suffering-a sort of reconciliation with reality.

Tommy's repeated reference to his feeling of congestion creates an atmosphere of claustrophobia, as he expresses his fear of death though

Suffocation or apoplexy (p.44)

Because of the crisis, which he cannot possibly overcome. Thus, the world's business seems to strangle him and he finds to his utter bewilderment that the world is too much with him. Still there is an intuitive recognition of the fact that

...business of life' is different from the world's business and that the 'business of life', the real business-to carry his peculiar burden, to feel shame and importance, to taste these quelled tears-the only important business, the highest business

was being
done.(p.61)

His encounter with Tamkin, the Machiavellian, is considerably meaningful. When his communication with his father fails there is no other alternative for him but to come under the Machiavellian spell of Tamkin, the fast talker and pseudo-psychologist.

In spite of his misgivings, what appeals to Tommy most is Tamkin's apparently genuine concern for a fellow human being in the grip of desperation and agony. He craves for kindness and mercy but resent Tamkin meddling in his affairs. Still the hypnotic spell of such observations has a tremendous effect on Wilhelm's present loneliness as he, too is searching in vain for some foothold while dandling miserably.

It is quite true that Tamkin's words like the following will affect any impressionable person:

I understand what it is when the lonely person begins to feel like an animal. When the night comes, and he feels like howling from his window like a wolf. (p.61)

Like other Bellow heroes Joseph, Leventhal and Augie before him, he distrusts the idea of superimposition by others—"to meddle without being asked" and is convinced of the fact that people like Mr. Perls and Tamking are not superior to him even though he is a flop in world's business.

Seize the Day, like other Bellow novels presents Tommy Wilhelm, the central

character undergoing the crucible of an awesome reality. On a single day of crisis which finds Tommy alone and rudderless, without family or friends to carry his burden, he learns the lesson of his life- to reconcile with the hard truth. There is definitely As Irving Howe comments

...Turning points in his experience- Often a point where he must discover what he really is as a human being.¹⁰

Tamkin's theory of here and now does not ring as false, but rather as S.B. Cohen comments, "seem to be a parody of exercises in gestalt perception which Frederick Perls, Ralph Hefferline and Paul Goodman have described in their book *Gestalt Therapy*".⁷ Tommy is

completely taken in by the sheer authenticity of this observation; "The past is no good to us.

The future is full of anxiety, only the present is real-the here and now. *Seize the Day* and despite the fact that Tamkin's later performance is so deceitful when compared with his statements, where he likens "money with murder", his words have a definite ring of sincerity which stimulates Tommy to survive and live in expectation. Thus, through his dialogue with Tamkin, he learns facts about 'the Real Soul' and 'the Pretender Soul' and about the theory of 'here-and-now' which he accepts.

Tommy's abysmal state of suffering leading to a deeper perception of truth and the reality causes him to find comfort in the poetry of Milton and Shelley, though Tommy's maturity is

possible through his dialogues with Dr. Tamkin and Dr. Adler, still Tommy transcends the knowledge implanted in him through these interviews. He outgrows mere consideration of money and affluence, viewing them as akin to greed and selfishness and instead seeks out his allegiance to the larger body as already mentioned. In this context David, D. Galloway's statement appears quite pertinent: "His quest amounts simply to an effort to reaffirm man's humanity to restore an idea of dignity to the human race.

Thus in *Seize the Day*, Wilhelm encounters death through the corpse of a strange in whom he visualizes his own death as an individual as well as a universal factor, thereby establishing his kinship with the world at large-" the larger body"

Thus there is a definite progression in Tommy Wilhelm's quest for identity. Through suffering he moves towards a consummation of his heart's desire. *Seize the Day* ceases to be mere victim literature and it so happens that Wilhelm transcends his victim-hood by overcoming his death-in-life phase to experience a sort of rebirth. Like all other Bellow novels the end is never made explicitly clear; rather it remains enigmatic as Bellow views human life to be mysterious which cannot be simply explained away-" The subject of the novelist is not knowable in any such way. The mystery increases, it does not grow less as types of literature wear out. It is however symbolism or Realism or Sensibility wearing out and not the mystery of mankind."⁸

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