

THE PREDICAMENT OF MODERN MAN'S PERSONALITY IN *SEIZE THE DAY* BY SAUL BELLOW

M. Selvam¹ & Dr. R. Chandrasekar² & N. Ravikumar³

¹Assistant Professor of English, Ramakrishna Mission Vidyalaya Educational and Research Institute, Faculty Center for Agriculture Education and Research, Coimbatore - 641020, Tamil Nadu, India.

²Associate Professor and Head, Department of English, Sri Ramakrishna Mission Vidyalaya College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore - 641020.

³Ph.D Scholar, Department of English, Sri Ramakrishna Mission Vidyalaya College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore - 641020.

Received: July 17, 2018

Accepted: October 01, 2018

ABSTRACT

Saul Bellow, a prominent writer in American Literature who is frequently concerned with the themes of Jewish culture and alienation and makes his writing the most successful one. In Bellow's novel Seize the Day, Tommy Wilhelm "the maladroit, suffering middle-aged hero of the book, is the pathetic heir in post-war fiction to the failure of the American Dream" (Richmond 15). Tommy abandons his family and endeavours to emulate his father. Bellow depicted the father's character with perfectionism and preference for avoidance of his son lead to the protagonist's physical and psychological alienation. The resemblance of their lifestyles and attitudes clearly indicates that their consciousness, sub-conscious and psychologies proceed in the same path. The novella is the complete entry that captured the attention and respect of critics and scholars and had since gone on to become recognized as one of the essential writers of fiction of the 20th century. The current research paper is to explore its impact and how it dealt with psychoanalytic characteristics.

Keywords: Mind Structure, Personality, Psychoanalysis, Saul Bellow, Seize the Day, Tommy Wilhelm,

Introduction

One of prominent American Jewish authors of the twentieth century, Saul Bellow authored an excellent novel, titled *Seize the Day*, that recounts one day in the life of the protagonist Tommy/Wilhelm Adler's. Cheuse depicts the novel as "the best short novel by an American" (19). In addition, Allen presumes that the novel is "not a financial success, but it, too, garnered impressive critical notice" (84). Suffering from many psychological problems, Wilhelm/Tommy (Tommy hereafter) is portrayed as a beleaguered character whose milieu seems to be a complication for him. Furthermore, his father, Dr. Adler, comes to the fore from amid the other characters because his relationship with his son possesses a great deal of importance.. However, Alhadef purports the novel "deals with the neurotic father-son relationship of the novel as a thematic function of Oedipal concerns" (18). In this sense, the novel can be regarded as bearing the characteristics of psychological and psychoanalytic criticism. What's more, other critics, such as Richmond emphasize the resemblance to other important novelists, such as Kafka, instead of the novel's psychoanalytic characteristics. Richmond makes in his statement that, "It was one of the ultimately flounders who as an ingenious, but too deliberate exercise in slick psycho-criticism fixing on a father-son duel suggestive of much Kafka scholarship" (15). From this perspective, the novel manages to be sufficient for a study. On the other hand, Solotaroff's summary of the novel is concerned with the identity crisis from a psychoanalytic perspective:

There is the same drama of the heart under its burden of baffled love, aspiration, and guilt, the same stern payment for confusions and mistakes, the same brutal suffering that leads to the indication of the hero's true identity for the suffering of Wilhelm's "true soul" and his "heart's ultimate need" is one and the same. (94)

However, even Bellow has adverse thoughts about his protagonist. In one of his interviews, he states that Tommy is a sympathetic but not respected: "I can sympathize with Wilhelm but I can't respect him. He is a sufferer by vocation. I'm a resister by vocation" (Roudané and Bellow 279). After all, when examining the protagonist's attitudes and psychology, many critics disagree whether Tommy is a congenial character or not. Freedman purports that Tommy attracts the reader's attention and sympathy: "Tommy Wilhelm exacts our sympathy not because he was oppressed by an irresistible social force, but because he had been pathetically and farcically outwitted by a figure so indigenous to his environment that he emerged as an image of himself" (51-2). In this way, Bellow gives hints describes and the characteristics of a modern man inundated by issues and obstacles. According to Bouson, Tommy's attempts to be loved and

sympathetic give hints about his personality. "In *Seize the Day* surface illuminates subsurface as Wilhelm's verbal pleas for sympathy shed light on the preverbal depths of his personality" (Bouson 64). However, some critics categorize the protagonist as a victim: "It really is true that Wilhelm belongs to the victim-group" (Kulshrestha 12). This wretched character makes the reader think that he is unable to survive in the current world. This study discusses the reasons for his behaviours and his perception of his milieu.

Discussion

Tommy is a very complicated protagonist whose manner behaviour can be understood by a psychologist. As Leroux states, "peace, serenity, harmony seem dangerous opiates to ... Tommy Wilhelm" (13). Opdahl summarizes the novel as follows: Tommy Wilhelm, an ex-salesman down on his luck with a divorce and a mistress and a failed nerve, has been rejected by two fathers- his real one and a spurious one who cheats him - he stumbles out into the street, an angry and broken man. And there he sees the epitome of the life force that has done him in: in the "gassy air" of upper Broadway. (5)

The novel mostly emphasizes Tommy's anger toward his father. Whenever the protagonist tries to talk to his father, he fails and "in conversation with his father he was apt to lose control of himself" (Bellow 34). Tommy's father becomes the most important factor in shaping his characterization. Despite his obligation to send money to his wife and losing all his money, Dr. Adler remains the main obstacle to overcoming his problems.

However, one must not forget it must not be forgotten that the protagonist thinks, or judges, or compares in terms of his father's point of view. Throughout the novel, Tommy desperately wants to hear his father say, "I am proud of you!" This unspoken sentence, in fact, becomes a silent motto for his alter ego. For example, the fact that Tommy is less educated than the rest of his family makes him even more miserable when he thinks of his father. This was another sore point. His father was ashamed of him" (Bellow 23). In this context, the lack of gratification from his father becomes a big problem for him. More one example can be given of his quest for his father's approval: "It made Wilhelm profoundly bitter that his father should speak to him with such detachment about his welfare" (Bellow 13).

As mentioned, Tommy has his father's disposition to reflection. Regardless of his negative thoughts about his father, Tommy resembled him. Despite his anger and hatred of his father, he behaves as his father behaves toward him. In this respect, it is strange to behave like someone you dislike. For instance, upon being introduced to one of his father's friends, "How d' do,' Wilhelm said. He did not welcome this stranger; he began at once to find fault with him" (Bellow 36). Looking for someone to blame, Tommy corresponds with his father. The only thing he finds out from his father is that he does not appreciate anybody for anything.

Tommy's father's issues, regardless of Tommy himself, are also a distinctive critical element to better understanding the novel. From the son's perspective, it is pathetic that Dr. Adler's recklessness turns into the main problem that leads to his mental distress. Furthermore, Dr. Adler's desire to live his own life is his motto, which the protagonist would also like to adopt: "Dr. Adler liked to appear affable. Affable! When makes it clear, His own son, his one and only son, could not speak his mind clearly or ease his heart to him. Actually I wouldn't turn to Tamkin, he thought, if I could turn to him. In the reality Tamkin sympathizes with me and tries to give me a hand, whereas *Dad doesn't want to be disturbed.*" (Bellow 13)

As mentioned, since the novel deals with psychoanalytic criteria, the issue of the mother is very vague. Unlike Tommy's father, his mother is depicted as positive, sympathetic, and constructive: "From his mother he had gotten sensitive feelings, a soft heart, a brooding nature, a tendency to be confused under pressure" (Bellow 28). Furthermore, his deceased mother is the only person he can trust. His anger toward his father emerges from his father's attitudes to his mother, which Tommy thinks are inappropriate.

However, Dr. Adler is also another important figure in reshaping the protagonist. He Dr. Adler is handsome, sympathetic, and adored among his acquaintances. "The quite handsome old doctor stood well above the other old people in the hotel. He was idolized by everyone" (Bellow 14). Furthermore his hypercriticism is reflected in his description. His expressions, clothes, and attitudes have the manner of aristocracy, as Richmond purports: "What rescues Bellow's characterization from formula is the careful, even leisurely portrait of Dr. Adler: his dress, his gait, his thought, and his speech are presented with an exactness reminiscent of Henry James' insistence on the individuating detail" (16). On the other hand, he is pathetic in his inability it is pathetic that he is unable to be a father in the eyes of Tommy. While the protagonist cannot be regarded as a sane character depicted in the novel, his father's manner and attitudes are also aberrational for a parent.

Sometimes Dr. Adler's perfectionism makes him perceive his son as a totally different person. Dr. Adler endeavours to introduce his son as a perfect person among his milieu: Tommy "had heard the old man bragging to another old man, saying, 'My son is a sales executive. He didn't have the patience to complete the school'" (Bellow 14). The reason why he behaves thus way is because he believes his son must be a distinguished person like himself. This pressure damages the protagonist's personality. On the other hand, Dr. Adler despises his own child. By ignoring him, Dr. Adler dominates Tommy's inner world. Tommy succumbs to his father's hegemony and his desire to be appreciated turns into a vicious circle. Bellow indicates this situation when Dr. Adler thinks about his son with foul-mouthed words:

"Wilhelm's preparations to please Dr. Adler had failed completely, for the old man kept thinking, You'd never guess he had a clean upbringing, and, What a dirty devil this son of mine is. Why can't he try the best to sweeten his appearance a little? Why does he want to drag himself like this? And he makes himself look so idealistic." (Bellow 50)

Dr. Adler's narcissism is another factor that forms his son's character. Dr. Adler is depicted as a narcissist who does not care for either of his children. His father's self-appreciation is so great and he cares about no one else that he shuffles the protagonist back to the obscurity of oscillating in his inner world. As Richmond points out, "Dr. Adler's vampiristic role and the complexity and machinery of New York City are the sources of the failed son's 'congested' emotional condition" (19).

On the one hand, Tommy's perspective feeling turns into repugnance and hatred in the novel. In fact, the reason why he Dr. Adler is not interested in his son's problems is his narcissism and it causes an abysm between them. As Bouson states, "the conflict-ridden father-son confrontation that begins the novel gives the reader direct awareness of their colliding subjectivities and irresolvable differences" (67). This definite discrepancy is clearly observed throughout the novel. Besides, Dr. Adler considers everything his son's fault and his lack of sensitivity creates a divide between him and his son. The critic also describes how Tommy diverges away from his father thanks to his father's egocentrism:

"Wilhelm acts out his desire to appropriate from his father the narcissistic sustenance he feels entitled to. When he, in his openly aggressive demands for sympathy, introduces his well-worn litany of complaints about his wife, Dr. Adler responds that it's Wilhelm's fault, that he doesn't understand his son's problems." (Bouson 69)

Dr. Adler and his wife, Margaret, play an important role in shaping the protagonist's mind. Their recklessness and lack of empathy shuffle drift a deep ill psychology: "Indeed, as we shall see, critics have repeatedly pardoned Wilhelm for his faults and denounced his accusers Dr. Adler and Margaret for their unempathic treatment of him" (Bouson 67). However, as mentioned, Dr. Adler impresses affects his psychology very much. According to his interpretation, Bouson again summarizes the situation and Dr. Adler's relationship with his son:

"In this father-son transaction we find important clues to Wilhelm's self-disorder. As we learn in this exchange, Wilhelm is acutely sensitive to what he perceives as his father's affective absence, his affable non-responsiveness, his self-absorption, his chronic faultfinding, and his covert demand that his son live up to his standards of perfection". (69)

However, Tommy, who is unable to get support from Dr. Adler, is in search of a similar consultant or a mastermind. For example, Venice, a talent scout, thinks that Tommy may as well be a movie star. Knowing his father does not support his desire to act, Tommy considers Venice a galvanizer of acting or an advisor for his histrionic life. In addition, Venice, unlike Dr. Adler, has mutual feelings for Tommy, eager to be an actor: "Venice bragged so nervously and identified himself so scrupulously—the poor guy. He was the obscure failure of an aggressive and powerful clan. As such he had the greatest sympathy from Wilhelm" (Bellow 23).

However, Dr. Tamkin, who deceives Tommy for money, turns into his ideal father. "Snubbed by his father, Wilhelm transfers onto Tamkin his need for support from an idealizable self-object" (Bouson 72). This idealism blinds the protagonist. Not finding what he expected, he seeks a father who never refuses him as a son. Dr. Tamkin is a doctor who knows the commodity markets well and understands how to earn a lot of money. He is also eager to help the protagonist. As the critic states, he is ready to take Dr. Adler's position:

"Having left his wife and children, incapable of ex-acting a divorce in his continued dependence on his wife, incapable therefore of remarrying, Wilhelm has turned to his father for succour. He is adamantly rejected; the way back to childhood is closed. But the substitute father, the spurious "psychologist" Dr. Tamkin, emerges to take the real father's place as other swindlers had done before in Wilhelm's life." (Freedman 56)

Just to clarify, Dr. Tamkin is a defrauder and a charlatan who steals all of Tommy's money. As Richmond describes, "Shamans, then, were prophets, priests, poets, pseudo- or surrogate-father images.... In Bellow's terms, Dr. Tamkin is Tommy's 'elected' father" (22).

Tommy, believing his father "cast me even then for a loser" (Bellow 24), prefers Dr. Tamkin as a father to Dr. Adler. In fact, although he knows that Dr. Tamkin is a charlatan and a swindler, Tommy settles on Dr. Tamkin who Tommy thinks that he is more indulgent and apprehensive. However,

"In desperation, Tommy turns to Dr. Tamkin (their names link their destinies), though his father has warned him, and Tommy well knows, that Tamkin is a charlatan and a fraud. Tamkin offers him a way out of his financial impasse by persuading him to bet his last seven hundred dollars on lard futures in the commodity market, though Tommy knows absolutely nothing about them. When Tommy loses his money, Tamkin suddenly disappears. But Tamkin does represent a powerful life force." (Meyers 165)

Some critics characterize Tommy deal with Tommy's characterization in terms of Freud's definition of mind structure (id, ego, superego). In this sense, while the id represents Tommy, Wilhelm is the superego, which reminds him of his responsibilities and social domination. When the protagonist is criticized or confronted with unexpected conditions, he calls himself Wilky or Velvel, as his grandfather does. Accordingly concordantly, these two personas emerge in terms of the protagonist's prerequisite.

The last episode in the novel involves Tommy being reborn from his ashes; yet, the protagonist is not ready for his transformation. His selected father, Dr. Tamkin, offers two options: to seize the day or to otherwise submerge himself and drown in the water. The choice of life will not be easy for him. His problem is, in fact, related with ego and self: "The individual who would exert his freedom toward such transcendence will need great spiritual capabilities to begin with and then hard discipline" (Klein 223).

But Tommy is incapable of being accountable and responsibility. At the end of the novel, the protagonist interrogates himself. He finds himself in the middle of nothingness. His father's taking no account of him and his wife's regarding him as financing push him to deeper steeps.

At the end of the novel, Tommy understands that he has lost all of his money. He goes to a church and sheds tears for a burial. The discharge brings him relief. It is, in fact, a lesson for the protagonist: "He closed *Seize the Day* also with a 'burial scene'—a strongly promising or optimistic one. He is given to taking leave of his heroes amid nature's invigorating currents" (Siegel and Bellow 162). However, this incidence inclines portrays of Wilhelm's improvement. Tommy is diminished and Wilhelm rises. The protagonist no longer hides behind the name of Tommy and faces his past. As Alhadef states, "the 'true' Wilhelm is discovered with the final emergence of an integrated personality, however impoverished" (17). In this sense, in the novel, which describes a single day in the life of the protagonist, Tommy learns his lesson. Furthermore, that the reader has a positive impression of the protagonist is undisputable. Tommy, the unsympathetic loser, converts to Wilhelm, who indurates in the society. Bouson emphasizes his transformation as follows: "While the closure can be viewed as a reparative gesture derived from Bellow's need to rescue *the troubled self of his anti-hero*, it also can be read as a reaction formation against his covert desire to 'kill off' his hapless character" (80).

Conclusion

Throughout the novel, Tommy is in a process of metamorphosis that turns him back into Wilhelm. He is continually confronted with problems the average person must solve. In this regard, he feels the need to get rid of Tommy, which symbolizes his id. Bancroft associates Tommy's problems with Freudian discourse: "In the post-Freudian world, we take hold of the self and attempt to wrestle it into submission. In Bellow's world, people physically escape to learn of themselves" (78). Similarly, it can be defined as a double personality and this personality cracks and Tommy turns to his own himself. The struggle in his inner world is a kind of stimulus which makes him healthier and more relief from his mental scars. On the other hand, in writing such a novel, Bellow indicates the characteristics a decent person must have. A critic of Bellow's novels, Clements compares *Malamud's Assistant* with *Seize the Day*: "Both novels were useful in broadening the issue of acculturation to that of the moral question of what a good man does in a diverse, urban, and competitive society" (534). In sum, the novel is a distinctive elucidation of the protagonist's complicated psychology and one of the best American novels written by Saul Bellow.

WORKS CITED

1. Bellow, S. *Seize the Day*. London: Penguin Books. 2001. Print.
2. Bouson, J. B. *The Empathic Reader: A Study of the Narcissistic Character and the Drama of the Self*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press. 1989. Print.

3. Freedman, R. Saul Bellow: The Illusion of Environment. *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, 1/1,50-65.1960.
4. Klein, M. A Discipline of Nobility: Saul Bellow's Fiction. *Kenyon Review*, 24/2, 203-26. 1962.
5. Kulshrestha, C. A Conversation with Saul Bellow. *Chicago Review*, 23/ 4, 7-15. 1972.
6. Leroux, J.F. Exhausting Ennui: Bellow, Dostoevsky, and the Literature of Boredom. *College Literature* 35/1, 1-15. 2008.
7. Richmond, L. J. The Maladroit, the Medico, and the Magician: Saul Bellow's Seize the Day. *Twentieth Century Literature*, 19/1, 15-26. 1973.
8. Solotaroff, T. Philip Roth and the Jewish Moralists. *Chicago Review* 13/4, 87-99. 1959.
9. Siegel, B.& Bellow S. Artists and Opportunists in Saul Bellow's 'Humboldt's Gift.' *Contemporary Literature* 19/2. 143-164. 1978.