

Tommy Wilhelm: An Alien in Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*

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Abstract

The concept of alienation considerably has attracted attention among philosophers, sociologists, writers, and artists as well as other social scientists for quite a long time. Presumably, this perpetual interest corresponds to an essential experience of individuals residing in modern societies. A sense of separation, detachment, and estrangement from civic responsibilities and cynical pessimism toward institutions appear to be frequent and prevalent in all developed and industrialized countries. Furthermore, alienation leads to severe and grave social problems. The disillusioned person fails to pay his/her attention to his/her social responsibilities or the rules and beliefs of his/her society. As a result, the performances of individuals generally fail to live up to their potential. This article attempts to provide a clear and unequivocal definition to the concept of "alienation" and explore the traces of alienation in Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*. Tommy Wilhelm, the central character in the novel, is an outsider and a character battling with economic and psychological issues. He is overwhelmed by the loss of his job, financial insecurity, the break-up with his wife, and his complicated relationship with his biological father, and many more. He is an alienated man in search of his true self whom the reader carefully observe and follow in the course of a single, but a vitally important day in his life, which he referred to as his "day of reckoning."

Keywords: Alienation, modern man, detachment, society, alienated man

Introduction

Alienation is a confusing term that possesses numerous specters of meaning. With regard to the context, it refers to explain human conduct from particular points of view. The word has been extensively employed in contemporary literature, sociology, and philosophy. Frank Johnson, in *Alienation: Concept, Term, and Meanings*, refers to the complexity of this term and states further that "in its use as a general concept, scientific term, popular expression, and cultural motif, alienation has acquired a semantic richness (and confusion) attained by few words of corresponding significance in contemporary parlance"(Johnson, 1973, p.3). Hardly any concepts have been encountered a long list of affiliations with different fields of disciplines, each, within their scope and sphere, contributes to its stress and connotations.

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Moreover, even though familiarization of technical terminology is conventional, the abundance of contexts in which alienation is referred to on an accessible level appears excessive in comparison with other fashionable terms. F. H. Heinemann, who coined the term Existenzphilosophie (Existential Philosophy), suggested a similar distinction and observed that “The facts to which the word ‘alienation’ refers are, objectively, different kinds of dissociation, break or rupture between human beings and their objects, whether the latter be other persons, or the natural world, or their creations in art, science and society; and subjectively, the corresponding state of disequilibrium, disturbance, strangeness, and anxiety”(Heinemann, 1958, p.9).

This theme of alienation of Modern human being prevails through the literary works and theatrical plays of two continents; it can be seen in the essence as well as the style of modern art; it captivates theologians as well as philosophers, and for some psychologists and sociologists, and alienation is the predominant issue of Modern Age. In a variety of ways, they inform readers that ties, formerly attached Modern human beings to himself or herself and the environment around him or her, have broken. In various languages, they state that human being, residing in modern developed communities, is increasingly getting isolated from nature, from God, from the technology, which has changed his or her surroundings and now tends to put in jeopardy; from his or her work and its produce, and from his or her spare time; from the intricate social organizations that supposedly help, but are probably to dominate him or her; from the society in which human being resides; and, most importantly, from himself or herself, from his or her body and gender, from feelings of love and passion, and art – artistic and prolific capacity.

Saul Bellow (1915 – 2005) was a prolific author who celebrated worldwide recognition and appreciation all through his literary career. Irving Malin, in his book entitled *Saul Bellow's Fiction*, stated that Saul Bellow is “probably the most important living American novelist” (Malin, 1969, p.vii). Likewise, Earl Rovit asserted that “probably the most significant novelist to come to maturity since World War II has been Saul Bellow” (Rovit, 1967, p.5). Even though he was born in Canada and spent a large part of his life in America, his writings cross over the issues of gender, race, and country. His works of fiction aptly reflect the recurrent themes of isolation, spiritual detachment, and the importance of profound human awakening. Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* is regarded to be one of the notable fictional works in the English language. It was published in 1956, and it was Bellow's fourth novel, and the first after the one with which he achieved his fame, *The Adventures of Augie March*. Robert G. Davis, in

his article entitled “The American Individualist Tradition: Bellow and Styron,” comments on the novel, stating that “*Seize the Day* is Bellow’s one exercise in pure naturalism. He takes a character ill-equipped for life, whose mistakes become more and more unredeemable as he grows older, and lets him sink under their weight” (Davis, 1963, pp.126-7). Bellow dexterously and skillfully portrays the theme of alienation in *Seize the Day*. Located in New York, it deals with a one-time movie star, currently out-of-work salesman, Tommy Wilhelm. Saul Bellow, in the novel, mainly treats the stereotyped modern predicament of the individual: severely alienated and estranged in a capitalist community where a conventional system of ethical values is not so significant anymore and where all sorts of relationships between human beings are measured in terms of a financial transaction.

This article attempts to provide working definitions of the term “alienation” and pursue the traces of alienation in Saul Bellow’s *Seize the Day*. Bellow is mainly interested in the tedious modern predicament of the individual, who feels is severely isolated and extremely alienated in a society whose only deity is money. His protagonist, Tommy is utterly alienated and isolated himself from his wife, Margaret, his children, his biological father, Dr. Adler and his proxy father, Tamkin, that he has no place else to stay but to live under the same roof with his father at a hotel called, Gloriana, where he considers himself to be out of place.

Alienation Defined

The alienated human being stands for every man as well as no person, wandering in a world that has little or no meaning for him or her and, on which he or she practices no power, an alien to himself or herself and others. As Erich Fromm asserted, “Alienation, as we find it in modern society, is almost total; it pervades the relationship of man to his work, to the things he consumes, to his fellows, and himself” (Fromm, 1990, p.124). In the same vein, Charles Taylor disclosed that in a mechanical and depersonalized world man has “an indefinable sense of loss; a sense that life ... has become impoverished, that men are somehow 'deracinated and disinherited,' that society and human nature alike have been atomized, and hence mutilated, above all that men have been separated from whatever might give meaning to their work and their lives” (Taylor, 1958, p.11).

To start with, what does alienation mean? The word ‘alienation’ has a very long history, being used in daily conversation, religion, and law. From the linguistic perspective, there is significant use of alienation which dates back to Middle English, and which has its origins in Latin usage. This use of alienation refers to the state of unconsciousness and the loss of one's mental powers. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines the word ‘alienation’ as “a

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withdrawing or separation of a person or a person's affections from an object or position of former attachment: estrangement” (“Alienation,” n.d.). Moreover, the word “alienation,” in *Collins English Dictionary*, is defined as “the state of being an outsider or the feeling of being isolated, as from society” (“Alienation,” n.d.).

However, alienation, in modern sense, has been employed by several scientists from various fields like philosophy, psychology, and sociology to indicate a peculiar array of psycho-social maladies such as “loss of self, anxiety states, anomie, depersonalization, rootlessness, and meaninglessness, isolation, and lack of community” (Murchland, 1971, p. 4). The reason why these maladies originate is owing to alienation, and it is the result of people’s loss of connection with nature, society, organization, their past, and particularly from themselves. Therefore, as Murchland remarked, human beings are alienated from nature, their past, God, society and institutions, work, friends and neighbors, values, emotions, and the environment. For Bernard Murchland, “this condition is obvious in segments of our society—among the poor, blacks, women, students, individuals, works, the mentally ill, and dope addicts, etc.” (Murchland, 1971, p.8).

It is a concept, which many people perceive by the degree of their familiarity with discourses of some renowned sociologists, psychologists, and philosophers whose descriptions of the term are incredibly invaluable. Hegel’s and Marx’s discussions on alienation are of great importance, and they make up the background of plenty of contemporary ideas regarding alienation. Several modern social scientists, who attempted to generalize how the term ‘alienation’ functions, however, what different the contexts it may be employed at, assert that its distinctive uses still possess some standard features. Frank Johnson offered his view on alienation in the following synthesis:

...alienation may refer to objective social conditions or just as readily be employed to describe two rather different subjective states, the first being states of self-alienation inferred to the present by outside observers. Second, by contrast, it may also refer to subjective states of alienation not detectable to outsiders, but felt by the person himself (Johnson, 1973, p. 36).

However, Dr. David Oken observed that “alienation represents a sense of estrangement from other human beings, from society and its values, and from the self that link it to others, and society at large” (Oken, 1973, p. 84). Furthermore, Lewis Feuer posited that “the word ‘alienation’ was used to describe the subjective tone of self-destructive experience” and further

asserted, “alienation is used to convey the emotional tone which accompanies any behavior in which the person is compelled to act self-destructively” (Feuer, 1962, p.132).

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Tommy Wilhelm, the main character of Bellow’s work, is a man in his mid-forties staying in New York. He is a person who has been involved in several old jobs after a failed attempt in acting but finally landed on a secure job as a salesman. However, he has been discharged from his job in sales, has a tense relation with his biological father, has been detached from his wife, fell in love with a woman he cannot unite in marriage with, and has spent the last of his money in a shared investment adventure that is doomed to yield no positive result. Tommy is a troubled character. He is overloaded by the loss of his work, financial instability, the separation of his wife, and his soured relationship with his father. He is a man in pursuit of self whom the reader is permitted to observe and pursue through the course of a single, extraordinary day in his life, a day that is named as his “day of reckoning” in the novel (Bellow, 2003, p. 85). Tommy is a perplexing and multi-layered character who puts on masks and has to strip off his communal shield or disguise in an attempt to understand himself at the end of the novel. The narrative starts, “when it came to concealing his troubles, Tommy Wilhelm, formerly William Adler, was not less capable than the next fellow. So at least he thought...” (p. 3). Disguise or concealment is a significant problem to deal with. Tommy had been an actor, even though an unsuccessful one, as well as a salesperson. He had mastered to put on masks, play roles, and ‘sell’ himself. However, Tommy, during narration, is supposed to get rid of all those fake identities and discover his true identity.

Tommy Wilhelm’s alienation is manifold in nature. His alienation is associated with the members of his family, such as his father, Dr. Adler, and his wife, Margaret, with the people in his immediate circle like Dr. Tamkin and his beloved Olive, and finally, with the mundane social life in the society of New York. Tommy Wilhelm feels out of place in this challenging life of money, selfishness, and manipulation. It is a world that has a non-human and animal-like characteristic, where feelings and emotions are of little importance. Tommy considers

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himself as an outcast in New York. Even though he was born and brought up in this very city, he feels like an alien: "I don't belong in New York anymore" (p. 82). According to him, everything and everybody becomes imbalanced and turns crazy. By the end of the book, Tommy learns to care less about what other people think of him and starts to view the world through his own eyes. After his hysterical fit of anger, Tommy figuratively throws himself out onto the goes and discovers the real face of humanity. Tommy thinks, "I labor, I spend, I strive, I design, I love, I cling, I uphold, I give way, I envy, I long, I scorn, I die, I hid, I want" (p.115). This proves that a sense of identity is necessary for any individual to conquer and over their alienation. In brief, Tommy's experiences with others, particularly his father and his wife, reveals his despair, his need for help, and his isolation.

Tommy's sense of detachment and alienation originates from his relationship with his father, Dr. Adler. Talking about 'Father-Son Relationship' in *Seize the Day*, Bellow, in an interview in *Tri Quarterly*, stated, "In that short book I examined a man who insisted on having a father, who demanded that his father be a father to him" (as cited in Balachandran, 2008, p.131). Dr. Adler is a complex man who submits to the social and moral values of an earlier generation. He is a Jewish American, who has tried quite hard in the course of his life to attaining his status in society as an accomplished and respected doctor as well as a professor. He rejects to "carry" the responsibility of his children on his shoulders because he holds the view that they should struggle to achieve things on their own. He is a reasonable and narrow-minded man; he is generally bitter and stern; and most significantly, he does not exactly comprehend his son as well as the predicament he is trapped in. That is the very reason why they do not possess a close and benign connection as the father and son should do. Dr. Adler never devoted his time to his own kids, included them in his thoughts, or spent time with them playing, but all he did was to work hard and establish a prosperous career. He is an individual whose conviction and judgment are diminished to money and 'law and order,' even to 'hoarding.' Dr. Adler informs his son, "you make too much of your problems...they ought not to be turned into a career" (p. 45). But, however, Tommy understands it as "Wilky, don't start this on me. I have a right to be spared" (p. 45). He refuses to extend his help to his only son, and this act of indifference renders him cruel and unsympathetic in the eyes of readers. Bellow's protagonists are not rebellious sons but, in the words of Maxwell Geismar, "the suffering, the tormented and the conforming son" (Geismar, 1958, p.19).

Dr. Adler alleges that Tommy is lethargic and idiot because he constantly depends on his father's assistance and does not desire to put on some extra efforts in order to have a secure

future. He also has the tendency to leave good choices behind to have a shot at things that are relatively useless. For instance, when Tommy abandoned the medical school at Penn State University and strived to a movie star in Hollywood, his father was genuinely disappointed with his son. As a father, Dr. Adler wishes his son to be a doctor just like himself. Besides, he could easily admit him into a medical school, but Tommy rejects to be a doctor since he cannot stand hospitals and is frightened that he might hurt somebody. Therefore, Tommy, against his parents' wishes and blessings, leaves college and moves to California to chase his so-called fame in the movie industry. As it turns out, Maurice Venice, a talent scout who encourages Tommy to take the screen test, turned out to be a sort of fraud. Maurice was operating an illegal business and using the talent agency as a cover. Dr. Adler feels deeply disappointed when Tommy fails in acting too. Dr. Adler is quite aware that his son does not have the hard-working skills to succeed at medical school and, therefore, he prefers to take the easiest way to achieve success, which is through acting. But, he makes the wrong choice since he does not possess any inherent talent to be an actor. After his failed attempt in acting in Hollywood, Tommy does not return to college but tries to venture into the business world. He tries to be successful in various weird jobs before he secures his position as a salesman. But he did not achieve success in any of them, and he is currently an unemployed man residing in the Hotel Gloriana on the Upper Westside of New York, the hotel which his father and other retired people have taken up as a residence for several years.

Dr. Adler, in fact, does not wish to stay under the same roof with his own son because he apparently feels embarrassed by his son, since Tommy is not an accomplished man like himself or sons of other inhabitants at the hotel. Tommy is unemployed as well as a complete failure in life. He dropped out of college, recently lost his job as a salesman, has two children to support financially, and broke off with his wife not long ago. Wilhelm is a man on the brink of declaring financial bankruptcy. Dr. Adler is quite aware of the troubles Tommy encounters, but he does not sympathize or assist him, although he has accumulated a considerable amount of fortune and could comfortably take his son out of his misery. This unsympathetic attitude of his biological father renders Tommy feel disappointed and admits that his father is pretty egotistical and only thinks about himself. Although Tommy clearly knows his father's behavior, he still likes to get attention from him. Besides, he has nobody else to turn to except his father. Tommy repeatedly speaks of his problems to his father and wishes him to sympathize and release him out of this predicament. But, his father fails to understand and engages into a verbal argument with his son:

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"I don't understand your problems," said the old man. "I never had any like them."

By now Wilhelm had lost his head, and he waved his hands and said over and over, "Oh, Dad, don't give me that stuff, don't give me that. Please don't give me that sort of thing."

"It's true," said his father. "I come from a different world. Your mother and I led an entirely different life."

"Oh, how can you compare Mother," Wilhelm said. "Mother was a help to you. Did she harm you ever?"

"There's no need to carry on like an opera, Wilky," said the doctor. "This is only your side of things."

"What? It's the truth," said Wilhelm (p.49).

Being a self-made and established man, Dr. Adler cannot grasp the seriousness of Tommy's problems, because he has never encountered such problems in his life. His professional life overflows with accomplishments and prosperity. He regards himself to be an affectionate, caring and responsible father and a great husband by providing a respectable career for his children and staying devoted to his wife and meeting with her financial needs. Leslie Fiddler observed that Bellow was concerned with "emotional transactions of males inside the family: brother and brother, son and father – or father-hating son and Machiavellian surrogate father" (Fiddler, 1967, p.7). It is because of this very miscommunication with his father that Tommy turns to another father figure in the novel, his 'Machiavellian father' Dr Tamkin.

This unfair treatment of Dr. Adler widens the gap between Tommy and his father and intensifies the sense of estrangement and alienation Tommy feels towards his father. Even though they both speak the same language, they cannot communicate with each other, and thus they fail to understand each other. Dr. Adler is still disappointed with his son because his son cannot be successful like himself. Tommy is a failure, and therefore, he has no chance to make his father proud. Hana Wirth-Nesher, in her article entitled "'Who's he when he is at home?': Saul Bellow's Translations," stated that:

Dr. Adler takes pride in his rational and calculated approach to life and is depicted as a preening elderly gentleman with fastidious Old World manners. His name, meaning eagle in German, also conveys this air of nobility. It is the German Jew Dr. Adler who

gave his son the overbearing and obtrusive name of a Prussian emperor. In his kindly patronizing moments, he Anglicizes it to ‘Wilky’” (Wirth-Nesher, 1998, p.32).

Tommy leaves his wife and children to live in Hotel Gloriana with his father, and he has no job to support himself financially. Dr. Adler often reminds his son of his failure as a father, a husband, a businessman, and, most significantly, as a man. Tommy failed to accomplish anything. His career as an actor ended before it even began, he quitted his job because he could not handle the competition, he failed as a son because he did not manage to be a son Dr. Adler had always wanted, and, finally, he could not meet with the financial needs of his wife as well as his children.

Another aspect of Wilhelm’s problem is that he is an outsider or rather a victim in the world operating by the money factor. He has failed in everything he has attempted, but the world’s measure of a man’s value is the extent of his financial achievement. Wilhelm’s father, himself an established man, chooses to deceive his friends about his son, Wilhelm’s social status, saying, “His income is up in the five figures somewhere,” (p.36) and later on when he meets with his son in person, he scorns him for not living up to his standards and force him to lie to his friends. Tommy has not ended up being the son he had always wished or longed to have.

Dr. Adler fails to understand or prefers to turn blind eye to the predicament his son has fallen into and refuses to take no part in it. This widens the already-existing gap of alienation between them. He puts the blame on Tommy and passes judgment on him. He is of the opinion that Tommy cannot accomplish anything and is doomed to fail. He is not aware of his obligations as everyman should. Sometimes, Dr. Adler treats his son well, but when they are deep into the conversation, he suddenly begins to talk about Tommy’s failures. For instance, Dr. Adler comments on Tommy’s marriage with Margaret. Conscious of his father’s attempts to mock about his past with Margaret, he begins to confront his father in order to make him realize how bad Tommy feels about being treated as such:

“You really want a divorce?” said the old man.

“For the price, I pay I should be getting something.”

“In that case,” Dr. Adler said, "it seems to me no normal person would stand for such treatment from A woman.”

“Ah, Father, Father!” said Wilhelm. “It’s always the same thing with you. Look how you lead me on. You always start out to help me with my problems, and be sympathetic and so forth. It gets my hopes up, and I begin to be grateful. But before we’re through,

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I'm a hundred times more depressed than before. Why is that? You have no sympathy. You want to shift all the blame on to me. Maybe you're wise to do it." Wilhelm was beginning to lose himself (p.53).

It is clear that although Tommy is aware of the detachment and estrangement between himself and his father, he still turns to his father for sympathy and affinity since he has nobody else but him to depend upon. To his utter disappointment, Dr. Adler pretends that he is not aware of his problems. It is, probably, because Dr. Adler wants his son to solve his problems all by himself. But, Tommy does not realize it and accuse his father of being reluctant to understand and extend his hand to his own son. This verbal argument Tommy exchanges with his father make Tommy feel depressed with his father's indifferent behavior since his father always tried to fill him with insignificant and false hopes. Moreover, whenever his father brings up the topic of Tommy's past, Tommy starts to feel uncomfortable and distressed.

Dr. Adler does not also approve of Tommy's new friend, Dr Tamkin, whose authenticity as a medical doctor Dr. Adler grows suspicious of. He is of the opinion that Dr Tamkin will intensify Tommy's already-existing troubles since he knows that his son is a weak person. Tommy is pretty easy to fall under influences and too foolish to realize that he is being used by his newly-acquired friend, Dr Tamkin. Dr. Adler comes to learn that Tommy and Dr Tamkin are business partners and venture into some kind of investment in the commodity market, but Dr. Adler cannot help but to doubt him and still sticks with his opinion that he is a crook. However, Tommy still keeps on trusting Tamkin and has another verbal argument with his father in order to defend his friend:

"You know, he's a very ingenious fellow," said Dr. Adler.

"I really enjoy hearing him go on. I wonder if he really is a medical doctor."

"Isn't he?" said Perls. "Everybody thinks he is. He talks about his patients. Doesn't he write prescriptions?"

"I don't really know what he does," said Dr. Adler. "He's a cunning man."

"He's a psychologist, I understand," said Wilhelm. "I don't know what sort of a psychologist or psychiatrist he may be," said his father. "He's a little vague..."

"And why wouldn't you?" Wilhelm demanded.

"Because he's probably a liar. Do you believe he invented all the things he claims?"

“He was written up in Fortune,” said Wilhelm. “Yes, in Fortune magazine. He showed me the article. I’ve seen his clippings.”

“That doesn’t make him legitimate,” said Dr. Adler. “It might have been another Tamkin. Make no mistake, he’s an operator. Perhaps even crazy” (pp. 40-41).

Dr. Adler criticizes Tommy’s choice of friends and senses that Dr Tamkin, his colleague, may be a doctor only in title not in practice, and may not be the person he claims to be. But, Tommy is pretty convinced that he is for real and tries to defend his friend even if his father accuses of him being a fraud. Dr. Adler tries to open his son’s eyes to reality by derogatory remarks about Dr Tamkin. But, Tommy is too shallow to realize about Tamkin’s hidden side. Therefore, he does not believe his father and, besides, he gives his last seven-hundred dollar to Tamkin to invest in the stock market.

But once again, Tommy has to find out the harsh truth about Dr Tamkin after losing all his money in the stock market, and to embrace disappointment because what Dr. Adler had said about Tamkin had turned out to be true. He has lost his last savings by investing in the stock market by the directives of Dr Tamkin with the hopes of making easy money. But he does not only make any profit but also he loses the last of his money. And worst of all, he has to stand before his father and listen to his ‘I-told-you-so’ lectures and endure humiliation once more. When he goes to see his father, his father puts all the blame on him again and refuses to help get out of this difficult situation. They started another argument as it had become their tradition:

“...I had no idea you were so low on funds. How did you let it happen? Didn't you lay anything aside?”

“Oh, please, Dad,” said Wilhelm, almost bringing his hands together in a clasp. “I’m sorry,” said the doctor. “I really am. But I have set up a rule. I’ve thought about it, I believe it is a good rule, and I don’t want to change it. You haven’t acted wisely. What’s the matter?” ...

“You took some gamble? You lost it? Was it Tamkin? I told you, Wilky, not to build on that Tamkin. Did you? I suspect –”...

“You’re so right, Father. It’s the same mistakes, and I get burned again and again. I can’t seem to – I’m stupid, Dad, I just can’t breathe. My chest is all up - I feel choked. I just simply can’t catch my breath” (p.109).

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Tommy's failure as a son and his inability to reach his father's expectations is documented once again towards the final pages of the novel. Tommy's gullibility and naivety cost him dearly when he loses the last of his money in the stock market. Dr Tamkin took advantage of this soft side of Tommy. He is desperate and does not have any idea except turning to his father for help even though he knows for sure that his father will keep on lecturing him how he kept on repeating the same mistakes again and again. Tommy is like a lost ship in a vast ocean, disoriented, searching for a harbor to anchor and seek refuge in order to avoid the violent storms. He does expect his father to throw a life-vest at him or extend his hand to pull him out of his troubles. In his desperation and utter agony, he turns to his father for guidance:

What'll I do? I'm stripped and kicked out.... Oh, Father, what do I ask of you? What'll I do about the kids--Tommy, Paul? My children. And Olive? My dear! Why, why, why-- you must protect me against that devil who wants my life. If you want it, then kill me. Take, take it, take it from me (p.117).

He wants to feel his father's affections and achieve comfort under his secure wings. But he does not receive the warmth he hoped from his father. Instead, his father constantly reminded him what a failure he has been. Dr. Adler becomes frustrated with his son because Tommy does not take his warnings seriously and ends up repeating the same mistakes. He fails to realize his mistakes and, perhaps, this is what makes Dr. Adler angrier. Dr. Adler is a man of principles and has acquired the habit of measuring people with their success in the capitalist world. He thought that he could become a role model for his children with his achievements and success. But, however, what he fails to see is that Tommy does not want the future his father had planned for him. He wants to determine the course of his life all by himself. But he fails miserably and disappoints his father due to his trusting and naïve nature. Perhaps, what bothers Dr. Adler more is that people take advantage of this soft and vulnerable side of Tommy, but he fails to realize it. Marcus Klein, in his book *After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century*, made an interesting comparison and stated that Tommy Wilhelm "is, like Asa Leventhal, a suffering fat man, but he is a man this time at an extremity of isolation – a perfect slob, unkempt, unsanitary, a hippopotamus, and emotionally a slob too, full of whining, demanding pity and the world's love, nursing his hurts" (Klein, 1970, p.39). The sense of alienation and detachment father and son experiences can only be overcome when Tommy unconditionally surrenders to his father's authority and allows him to run his life for him. But, since it does not seem likely to happen, there is no chance to bridge this wide gap between them.

Another source of Tommy's sense of alienation is associated with Dr Tamkin. Dr Tamkin is a residence of Hotel Gloriana and a 'friend' of Tommy's. He is a fraudulent and questionable character. He claims to be many things and is constantly providing Tommy psychoanalytical advice. He says he is a psychiatrist, the head of medical clinic in Toledo and has treated the Egyptian princess, a stock market specialist, a member of the Detroit Purple Gang, the co-inventor of an unsinkable ship, a technical consultant in television, a widows, and among other things, he is a master inventor. His statement is brought into question, and although most people seem to distrust him. Tamkin knows Tommy as the son of Dr. Adler, a son who is abandoned by his father and who craves attention from others. Tamkin discovers this soft spot of Tommy even in their first meeting. He realizes Tommy's foolishness and his gullibility and decides to take advantage of him. Daniel Fuchs considers Dr Tamkin to be a villain.

Dr Tamkin entered into Tommy's life when he was in desperate need of connection. His wife, Margaret, was giving him a hard-time, figuratively smothering him, he had lost his job, and he was literally begging for his father's affection and comfort. Dr Tamkin is Tommy's 'Machiavellian surrogate father,' and gives him his ears which his biological father refuses to do so. Tommy fails to see the fraudulent and crooked side of Dr Tamkin. He does not understand that Tamkin is not a good friend; he is just a guy who has a big mouth selling his imaginative and enchanting stories. Even though Tommy listened to Dr Tamkin's stories attentively, deep down, he questioned the credibility of them. He kept asking himself "If true--he could not be free from doubt" and thought that he "must be a real jerk to sit and listen to such impossible stories. I guess I am a sucker for people who talk about the deeper things of life, even the way he does" (p.69). Despite his suspicions, Dr Tamkin's and Tommy's friendship develops; they play gin together almost every night and talk about Tommy's problems. Tommy informs Tamkin that he has lost his job in sales and he is under serious financial problem and that he desperately needs to obtain his father's attention and his financial assistance. Even though Dr. Adler constantly warns him about Dr Tamkin and advises him not to get closer, Tommy kept seeing Tamkin because Tamkin listens to his problems and sympathizes with him, and even gives him a hand, whereas his own biological father does not want to be bothered with details of Tommy's miserable life. Tamkin seemed genuinely concerned about Tommy's problems that originate from his father, his wife and his economy. That is probably the reason Tommy feels comfortable and secure in Tamkin's presence. When Tommy needs a friend to talk to, Tamkin is there to fill in that void. Because

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of Tamkin's seemingly genuine care, and his friendly pieces of advice, Tommy considers him to be his 'substitute father' since his own father does fail to give him that kind of attention. Wilhelm is sick, but his sickness is not physical in nature. It is spiritual and financial. In his illness, Wilhelm seeks to be healed. Both his father, Dr. Adler, and Dr Tamkin hold the cure, but his father, the man who can give him the healing words of love and sympathy, prefers to "remove himself from the danger of contagion," and offers no treatment (p.108). Therefore, Wilhelm is left with no option when his father turns his back on him, but to go to Dr Tamkin, the man who, it seems, can heal him. But, however, Ralph Freedman, in his article entitled "Saul Bellow: The Illusion of Environment," suggests that "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. Emerging from a world of changed circumstance - the deliberate disaffiliation in which Wilhelm had indulged - this phantom father relieves him not of his troubles but of his money" (Freedman, 1960, p.56). Tommy's financial troubles have more than practical implications. He feels that everyone was supposed to have money. Even though he does not have money, he has certain responsibilities as a husband and a father to his children and personal needs to attend to. He has to give money to his wife Margaret for alimony and child support, pay the rent for his room at the hotel and tend to his physical needs. He is in desperate need of making money since he does not bother to look up for a job and earn a steady income; he has to take the short-cut. He takes Dr Tamkin's advice and invests in commodities market upon Tamkin's directives. Dr Tamkin, who uses pseudoscientific jargon as a pretext to steal Tommy Wilhelm's last seven hundred dollars, is a Machiavellian character. He knows his ways very well and handles the situations effectively:

People lose because they are greedy and can't get out when it starts to go up. They gamble, but I do it scientifically. This is not guesswork. You must take a few points and get out. Why, ye gods!" said Dr Tamkin with his bulging eyes, his bald head, and his drooping lips. "Have you stopped to think how much dough people are making in this market? (p.9).

Tommy wants to rid himself of financial worries. Tamkin assures Tommy that it will be 'easy' for him to make much more money in the market than he needs. "And so, from the moment when he tasted the peculiar flavor of fatality in Dr Tamkin, he could no longer keep back the money"(p.58). Just as Tommy believes that he will become the person his name represents one day, and he assumes that his father would accept him if he had more money.

Therefore, he clings to the hope that this so-called easy money awaits him, and he invests his seven hundred dollars in a joint-stock market venture with Dr Tamkin.

Dr Tamkin takes Tommy to the commodities market to observe their joint investment. Tommy starts to worry when he sees that lard is losing a great deal of its value. But, however, he feels relieved to learn that Tamkin also invested in rye, which was on the rise without consenting to Tommy. Tommy wants to get out of it by selling all of his shares, but Tamkin tells him that they should not. Furthermore, Tamkin tells Tommy that he should remain here and now that he should take risk. But Tommy is afraid of taking a risk and therefore he would like to take the rest of his money before he loses all.

“I’d get out while the getting’s good.”

“No, you shouldn’t lose your head like this. It’s obvious to me what the mechanism is, back in the Chicago, market ...

“I’m losing my taste for the gamble,” said Wilhelm. “You can’t feel safe when it goes up so fast. It’s liable to come down just as quick.” ...

“Now listen, Tommy. I have it diagnosed right. If you wish I should sell I can give the sell order. But this is the difference between healthiness and pathology...”

“Damn it, Tamkin!” said Wilhelm roughly. “Cut that out. I don’t like it. Leave my character out of consideration. Don’t pull any more of that stuff on me. I tell you I don’t like it”(p.88).

Being a skilled narrator, Tamkin assures Tommy that his money is safe and convinces him not to back out of this gamble. Tamkin, with his phony affection and embellished words, manages to keep Tommy within his clutches and continues to take advantage of him. Tommy is figuratively blinded and enchanted by Tamkin’s sweet words and fake encouragements. Tommy does not go with his own guts to place the sales order and cut his losses, instead, he allows himself to be emotionally and financially manipulated by the greedy and foxy Tamkin. He willingly falls into the trap set by Dr Tamkin. Tamkin, apparently eager to get rid of him, urges Tommy to help Mr. Rappaport to go to a cigar shop with the intention of keeping him occupied there so that he could buy himself some time in order to put finishing touches to his plan and land a final blow on Tommy. When Tommy returns to the market, he discovers that the commodities he invested in have inordinately dropped and he has lost all his money. At the thought of this, Tommy picks up a fight with Mr Rappaport and discovers that Tamkin disappeared without a trace. According to Sarah Blacher Cohen, “Tamkin is clearly the bird

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on Wilhelm's back who is more of a parasite than a guide" (Cohen, 1974,p.96). He has only been told that Tamkin would take a vacation in Maine. Tommy still holds on to the idea that he would get Tamkin's share that he himself had paid: "Bitterly angry, he said to himself that Tamkin would pay him the two hundred dollars at least, his share of the original deposit. "And before he takes the train to Maine, too. Before he spends a penny on vacation --that liar! We went into this as equal partners" (Bellow, 2003, p.105).

This incident with Tamkin is a final blow on Tommy, and he has no chance to recover. He has lost his last hope and his last money. He painfully realizes that he has been tricked by a friend. Despite his acts of fraudulence, Dr Tamkin, significantly, takes on the role of a surrogate father for Wilhelm, gives him advice and leads him to eventual recognition of self. Ellen Pifer, in her book *Saul Bellow Against the Grain*, stated that "Though a charlatan or impostor, Tamkin proves to be Wilhelm's spiritual guide in one important, though inadvertent, way: he manages to divest Wilhelm not only of his last seven hundred dollars but also of his remaining illusions. With Tamkin's disappearance, Wilhelm must surrender any notion of finding an escape from the 'peculiar burden of his existence'" (Pifer, 1991, p.94). Eventually abandoned by Tamkin as well, Tommy reproaches himself for self-delusion: "I was the man beneath; Tamkin was on my back, and I thought I was on his" (Bellow, 2003, p.105).

Another source of Tommy Wilhelm's alienation has to do with his wife, Margaret. Even though still married, Tommy and Margaret are separated. The only view the readers receive of her is through Tommy. The readers are informed that she is cold, harsh, and unsympathetic. As the mother of Tommy's two boys, she is demanding of Wilhelm, constantly asking for monetary support. She refuses to grant Tommy a divorce and has made settlements difficult. She claims that she will not make it 'easy' for Tommy to leave. She is a character that the reader does not get to be introduced to in-person during the narrative, and the only encounters the reader gets with her is through Tommy's memory, through Dr. Adler's talks of her, and through the phone conversations, she has with her husband.

When Tommy and Margaret break up, Tommy gives her everything he owns: properties, furniture, and their savings as a token of his goodwill and to convince her to give him a divorce. But Tommy realizes that Margaret will never be satisfied. She constantly asks for more and more, and still more. Tommy even has to pay for her college fees when she decides to go back to college and get another degree. Although this might put extra financial pressure on him, he still thinks that it would be wiser in the end if she gets a better job after her

graduation. She does not care that Tommy is having financial problems, and all she is interested at is to obtain more money from him.

After his separation with Margaret, Tommy's affection and love is channelled in the direction of a small, pretty and dark girl named Olive. Tommy deeply cares about her and intends to marry her. Olive, like Sono in Herzog, is submissive and gentle and provides Tommy fresh comfort and genuine affection. Being physically small, dark and religiously Catholic, Olive stands a striking contrast to the energetic and big Margaret. Like Tommy, she is also docile dominated by her authoritative and controlling father and her priest. Olive only consents to marry him provided that Tommy obtains his divorce from his wife. Tommy and Olive love each other not only because they are physically attracted, but also because they share a similar predicament, which finally gives way to mutual affection:

When she would get up late on Sunday morning, she would wake him almost in tears at being late for Mass. He would try to help her... with shaky hands; then he would rush her to church and drive in second gear in his forgetful way, trying to apologize and to calm her. She got out a block from church to avoid gossip (p.94).

Whenever Tommy is in a desperate situation and suffers insults from his wife, he immediately thinks of Olive, eager to throw himself in her arms for consolation. As he is deserted by society and his father and has left his wife, Tommy needs Olive to replace his wife for his troubled heart. The only way to achieve happiness with Olive is to obtain a divorce from his wife, Margaret.

When Tommy loses all his money in the commodities market, Margaret calls only to scold him for mailing a post-dated check and shows no interest in discovering how Tommy has lost all his money. Being turned down by his own father, he turns to Margaret as his last hope of finding the money. He suggests that she can get a job with the recent degree she obtained. But Margaret refuses to work and puts all the blame on Tommy. She even suggests him to beg for his previous job with Rojax Corporation. It is at this point they start their usual argument:

“That’s just some more of your talk, Tommy,” she said.

“You ought to patch things up with Rojax Corporation. They’d take you back. You've got to stop thinking like a youngster.”

“You must realize you're killing me. You can't be as blind as all that...”

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“Margaret, you don’t grasp the situation. You’ll have to get a job. “Absolutely not. I’m not going to have two young children running loose” (pp.112-113).

Margaret’s true nature becomes quite obvious with the above quotations. Even though she realizes that they are no longer together and she enjoys the company of other men, in fact, spending the money she gets from Tommy for child support, she does not allow him to enjoy himself with the woman he loves and let them unite in marriage. It seems she enjoys inflicting pain in her husband. She has no sympathy left for him, and she refuses to learn about the predicament he is in. She enjoys being carried at Tommy’s back and has no intention to get down. There can be one simple explanation for her treatment of her husband: she hates his guts and Tommy is aware of it: “... she hates me. I feel that she’s strangling me. I can’t catch my breath. She has just fixed herself on me to kill me. She can do it long distance. One of these days I’ll be struck down by suffocation or apoplexy because of her. I just can’t catch my breath” (p. 48). Margaret’s indifferent nature and uncaring attitude intensify Tommy’s sense of alienation. He is trapped and cannot see any way out. There is no light at the end of the tunnel for him. He cannot turn to anyone for sympathy and understanding. Here Dr. Adler rejects him again, and then he has a fateful call from Margaret who rejects his plea unequivocally for time and mercy. At the end of his rope, Wilhelm stumbles on a funeral a few blocks away, he finds himself in his “day of reckoning.”

Maurice Venice, the fraudulent talent scout from Tommy’s past, also has his share in Tommy Wilhelm’s alienation and detachment. Maurice Venice had seen his picture on a poster while Tommy was running for office at college. Maurice Venice claims that he sees potential in his looks and asks him to take a screen test. However, when the screen test comes back, Venice refuses to take him on because Tommy proved awkward on film because of varying factors, including a speech impediment that seemed amplified on screen. Nevertheless, Tommy deceives his parents and informs them that Venice has suggested him to give acting a try. Therefore, he drops out of college and moves to California against his parents’ consent. As it turned out, Maurice Venice had been somewhat of a fraud, in any case, and was running a prostitution business behind the front of a talent agency. It’s this betrayal of Maurice Venice that triggers a series of other failures in Tommy’s life, his failure to be an obedient son, a faithful husband, and an efficient employee. Maurice lays the foundation for Tommy’s initial alienation from his family, especially from his father.

Wilhelm feels suffocated and choking in this world, and the entire novel centers around his desperate attempts to save himself. He is not a very affectionate character, but he possesses

heroic qualities, because he is not willing to surrender or give in to the heartless world of capitalist society and, even though he is naïve enough to give his trust readily, he has no intention to take the easy way out of his predicament by committing suicide, and he wishes to fight. He believes in spiritual truth, and love, but he feels too feeble and exhausted to discover this truth, and therefore he has to endure suffering and pain. “And though he had raised himself above Mr Perls and his father because they adored money, still they were called to act energetically, and this was better than to yell and cry, pray and beg, poke and blunder and go by fits and starts and fall upon the thorns of life” (p.56). Here Wilhelm is attempting to define his personal conflict; he possesses a dignified ideal which is beyond money and is likely superior to his father who persistently torments him. However, despite all these, people, like Dr. Adler, can achieve success in this world, but Tommy, overpowered by self-pity and self-abomination, cannot despite his genuine intentions. This is the reason why Dr Tamkin appears to be fascinating to Wilhelm - he seems to unite knowledge of the superior with a perception of the money-world, and the ability to ‘act energetically.’

Saul Bellow’s protagonists are lonely, detached and alienated men incapable of establishing real social interactions. Tony Tanner suggests that Bellowian characters “yearn to commence a proper life, to participate in ordinary existence but, like Herzog, they never quite ‘reach the scene of the struggle.’ We never see them emerge from the boundless and lonely confines of their uninterrupted (and often unintermittible) subjectivism” (Tanner, 1965, p.105). They are not able to get out of their psychotic worlds. Because Bellow shows interest in the estranged human being, he places the consciousness of the hero as the point of view of his works, and seldom gets out of this consciousness even if the hero is not the narrator of the work. Defining Bellow’s heroes, Stephanie Halldorson, in her book entitled *The Hero in Contemporary American Fiction*, observed that “Bellow’s heroes are perpetual “becomers,” caught between childhood and adulthood. They struggle between bouts of nostalgia and expectation; they are prone to both wonder and tears” (Halldorson, 2007, p.19).

Wilhelm’s discovery of a greater resolution has internal as well as external characteristics. While weeping at the funeral of a complete stranger, he manages to achieve a degree of insight not because he has been overwhelmed by a pervasive social force, but because he accepts the demise of his familiar world – the crumbling hotel, the mundane glory of Dr. Adler, and the overpowered suburban aspirations – as the image of death. Having been completely isolated, he elevates from self-sympathy to commonly accepted universal mourning and therefore attains a level of self-supremacy. It is through Dr Tamkin that

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Tommy Wilhelm attains a moment of perception and insight which none of the earlier Bellow heroes has ever known, a perception which, if it cannot change his condition, must change him. He learns more than Joseph, more than Leventhal, and successfully achieves status through as profound as Henderson's.

Norman Podhoretz considered *Seize the Day* as a prosecution of "a civilization on the edge of collapse," but think that the literary strength of the book dwindled because Bellow suppressed the pressure of his "angry resentment and bitterness" against not only the community but the life itself (Podhoretz, 1965, pp. 221-222). Even though the work might certainly be an indictment of society, most of what the reader perceives in *Seize the Day* is Wilhelm's tormented consciousness or insight. The world, for Augie March or Henderson, is not a mercilessly savage and frightening place, and there is absolutely hostility as well as kindness toward Tommy's vision of life.

Seize the Day is, in a sense, a critical moment in Saul Bellow's perspective on life. It symbolizes Bellow's goodbye to the dream of happiness or individual happiness founded on the gratification of longings. Augie March still reserves faith for the future, but this faith, in Tommy's case, is completely destroyed, and it is only through the admission of his loss that Tommy manages to find peace. For Augie, the "struggles or desire," as Henderson labels them, are not yet over, but they have just finished for Wilhelm. The future for Wilhelm may bring less discomfort and distress since it will not involve any struggle or fight, but it will also be gloomy and melancholic. Bellow studies the possibility of a more favorable assertion in the two consecutive books which were published after *Seize the Day*.

The advance of Bellow's reasonable protagonist from alienation to accommodation has come to be an advance of the soul through its liberty and from detachment to assertion of usual life in the world. Joseph had also strived within his 'freedom' and had provisionally discovered a foundation of community in what he thought to be a universal search for genuine liberty, but it is not until Tommy shed tears in front of a stranger's corpse that the powerful sense of preferred existence comes to be the situation for life itself. Tommy seizes the moment or seized by it in the end. His elderly father and his frequent failures compelled him to challenge the question of death. At the funeral of a stranger, Tommy's overfilled heart finally bursts into a flood of emotion and he "sank deeper than sorrow, through torn sobs and cries toward the consummation of his heart's ultimate need" (p.118). He has discovered a sort of freedom, but is it actually a success or defeat? Tommy Wilhelm manages to exact readers' sympathy not because he was tormented by a compelling communal force, but because he had been

pathetically and ridiculously outsmarted by a figure so native to his environment that he appeared as an image of himself.

Conclusion

The novel concludes only with new possibilities and determinations, but no assurances that Tommy will ever get adjusted himself to his society. Tommy has yet to deal with the divorce from his wife and does not intend to refuse the egotistical side of his character. His state of employment is yet to be determined. If any chance he earns enough money, he may be able to participate again in society. If he does not, where will he go? Therefore, his adjustment to his community is only momentary and provisional. Tommy manages to grasp the day as he learns the maxim of reconciliation and an act of love itself in the final reverberating experience of his day. Discovering himself dragged into someone else's death ceremony, and after indications of death all day long, he starts to weep in front of the lifeless corpse of a complete stranger. A heavy and somber music finds its way into his soul, he descends deeper than sorrow, and he treads "toward the consummation of his heart's ultimate need" through broken lamentation. The very need which the entire novel tends to disclose is the need not to die. The lifeless corpse in the coffin is the saintly Tamkin's final appearance, or it is his heir, and it stimulates Tommy to a moment of distress: he, at the point of death, comprehends existence, the 'true self,' the liveliness which all human beings share, and which characterizes them. Tommy's weeping is recognition of the life, and therefore, it is an act of life within the recognition of death. And this recognition provides Tommy with a place in the world.

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