



Tommy Wilhelm: The Untraditional Hero of Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*

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Abstract

Many critics have judged Tommy Wilhelm in terms of his weaknesses only and have considered him a complete failure, far from being a hero. But many of them have failed to see the bright side of Tommy's character. He possesses rare human qualities completely alien to the citizens of a morally corrupt society. The article aims to prove that in spite of possessing various negative and unheroic qualities, Tommy, by defying social structure and network, asserts his non-conformity which, along with his humanity, love and philanthropy, aversion for power and material success and most importantly, his power of overcoming humiliation, secures him the position of a hero although an untraditional one. The narrative structure also plays a significant role behind his being a hero.

Keywords: Materialism, Untraditional hero, Humanity, Non-conformity

1. Introduction

Unlike mythical heroes like Achilles or Hercules, who possesses enormous physical and mental strength and serves the entire nation, there is no joyful homecoming for Tommy Wilhelm, the hero of Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* (1996). The novel is the story of Tommy Wilhelm, a middle aged person who, being a complete failure, jobless, separated from his wife and children, devoid of love and affection, alienated from the social network, unable to marry his mistress, frustrated of being cheated by a man whom he trusts a lot, and burdened with overdue rent, finds himself tormented and on the verge of collapse. Tommy is a dangling man, but he has his strength—the openness of heart, the philanthropic attitude to humanity, and his capacity of love— all of which are rare human qualities completely alien to the citizens of a morally corrupt society; a society which controls, structures and determines its citizens' way of life and philosophy of being. Tommy is placed in a baffling situation of making a choice between humanity and heartlessness where he decides to retain humanity and to admit love. He prefers a life of suffering blessed with humanity to a life of prosperity with non-human structure. Tommy is surrounded by people who are cruel, unsympathetic, and evil, who long for power and material success, and who have their own network. Tommy feels oppressed in front of this social network and system. He can, by no way, identify himself with this evil network and decides to launch a lonely battle against it; by defying social structure and network he asserts his non-conformity and heroism.

Tommy, though a failure, who stumbles and dwindles at every step, soars up with heroic grandeur because he is a human being. Although he has some flaws in his character, he also possesses some strength which are completely alien to the citizens of a corrupt society. "In the novel, Tommy, being caught in an existential crisis, is in quest of identity or meaningful existence" (Obaidullah & Ahmed, 2001, p. 76). He is seriously engaged in struggle for survival where he fails, suffers, is spurned and prostrated; his hope is ever crossed and his mind suffers the stings of torments (p. 77). He crumbles but is not completely crushed. He knows his limit and possesses the heart not to accept his defeats. He, rather than giving himself away to the dark forces of materialism, inwardly vows to continue his struggle, and this attitude gives his personality a heroic dimension. The aim of the paper is to prove that although Tommy cannot be called a hero in the traditional sense, he gradually gains and shows his power of overcoming ignominy, and turns into a profoundly successful human being from a loser which, along with his humanity, love, determination, benevolence, and defiance, secures him the position of a hero albeit an untraditional one.

2. Unheroic Character Traits of Tommy

Bellow's writing puts a lot of emphasis on the themes of the individual versus society, and the individual in self conflict. "In his writing, society is always portrayed as impersonal, mechanical and indifferent to individuals" (Dutton, 1982, p. 1). Bellow's greatness lies in his depiction of individual people in such a society, and it is the misery and suffering of human being which is emphasized throughout his work. "In his world, the society is rendered in an almost naturalistic manner—as an almost unchanging, indifferent, yet powerful background against which his protagonists in all of their sensitive awareness, their vitality, their frustrating absurdities, are seen" (p. 1). In that cruel society the individual, with his dreams, desires, and ideologies, finds a place for himself, asserts his identity, and, most importantly, maintains self-integrity.

Bellow wants to show Tommy as a terribly oppressed individual and the novel begins with the sense of oppression. Human beings with sinister design in their hearts crowd upon the hero and attempt to subjugate him. "He journeys through chaotic situations, through a metropolis of perils, and fights a solitary battle against what is detrimental and

annihilating for mankind” (Obaidullah & Ahmed, 2001, p. 80). He is tempted frequently to accept the extreme forces of materialism, but, in spite of being on the verge of collapse, he resists allurements to secure “the consummation of his heart’s ultimate need” (Bellow, 1996, p. 118).

Tommy is by no means attractive. He is described as, “Fair haired hippopotamus! —that was how he looked to himself. He saw a big round face, a wide, flourishing red mouth, stump teeth” (Bellow, 1996, p. 6-7). He shows symptoms of neurosis and seems to have no control on actions. Tommy is emotional and childish, and the outburst of emotion is a serious drawback in his character. He has no self-confidence and is always dependent on others. Living desolately in the harsh world, he longs for love and affection from his father but is refused. This longing for love and care is responsible for his attachment with Tamkin and eventually of losing the last savings of seven hundred dollars. This love longing makes him vulnerable in front of predator like Tamkin.

Tommy has the usual dilemma of a modern man and the tendency of making mistakes in all decisions. His inability to make right decision in the right time is responsible for his lifelong sufferings and agony. Modern dilemma of ‘to be or not to be’ is very much strong in his character. He transcends this trait by going against a well-judged thought, which is very peculiar about him. He has always chosen the path his intellect and intuition warned against. Bellow (1996) writes, “This was typical of Wilhelm. After much thought and hesitation and debate he invariably took the course he had rejected innumerable times. Ten such decisions made up the history of his life” (p. 23). After being cheated by Tamkin, Tommy comes to his father, who after listening everything scolds him severely. Tommy lacks prudence and farsightedness, and sometimes acts foolishly.

3. Tommy with other Characters in a Morally Corrupt Society

It would be foolish to judge Tommy in terms of only his mistakes and flaws rather some light should be shed on his desire and achievement. Unlike other modern men in the novella, Tommy feels the necessity of human touch and relationship. Living separately from his wife and two children and living without a job he feels miserable. Though he lives in Hotel Gloriana in midst of other people, he suffers from loneliness which other people do not feel. The society has made human being so materialistic, heartless and robot like that they have lost the sense of human bonding. They talk with each other on the subjects which are only important and fruitful for them. The theme of ignominious isolation is found in the first few pages when Tommy stops to get his news paper from Rubin, the man at the newsstand. Although they know many personal events of each other’s life, they talk only about weather, Tommy’s clothes and other mundane affairs which cannot fulfill Tommy’s desire of sharing his pain. “None of these could be mentioned, and the great weight of the unspoken left them little to talk about” (Bellow, 1996, p. 6).

Social structure or network plays an important role behind Tommy’s loneliness as well as his heroism. Looking at the characters surrounding Tommy we find that they are cruel, unsympathetic, and evil. Power and material success are the only important things to them; they have their own network and they share common interest. His father Dr. Adler is a cruel and indifferent person, who is very much rational, and who believes only in power and success; his thoughts and actions are reduced to money. He is a hypocrite as well. He lies to one of his friend Mr. Pearls, who is another money-thirsty, that Tommy needs at least thirty to forty thousand for his style of life. Although Tommy is distressed, he cannot but laugh at the lie and hypocrisy of his father. Tommy is inclined to a person named Dr. Tamkin who is a man of questionable character. He is highly materialistic and a trickster who cheats Tommy by taking his last savings of seven hundred dollars. Tommy’s wife Margaret is a cold, harsh and unsympathetic woman who does not feel for him at all, and only asks for money. She refuses to grant Tommy a divorce and has made settlement difficult. There is also old Mr. Rappaport who cannot see anything clearly and cannot move without other’s help but who is a good investor in commodity market; he symbolizes greed. We should not forget the talent scout Maurice Venice who in Tommy’s college life approached him and managed him to sit for some screen tests as Tommy wanted to be a Hollywood actor. Nothing went properly for him and this man was later revealed to be a pimp. Tommy, on the other hand, is a naturalist and an idealist. He does not understand the financial ways of the city. He feels oppressed in front of this social network and system. Since other people have their common interest, they use the same language of which he does not understand anything. He cannot think the way other people think; he can, by no way, identify him with this evil network, and feels lonely and isolated. But, most importantly, he does not stop there rather goes against this network of materialistic people and decides to launch a lonely battle against it. By defying social structure and network he asserts his non-conformity and heroism.

If we look at the social, political, and economic condition of America in the 1950s, when the book was written, we find that there prevailed conservative atmosphere because of the cold war and its associated conflicts, and it was a time of compliance and conformity. People were not guided by their conscience or intellect rather by a dominant society which controls, dominates, and structures their life and their philosophy. In *Seize the Day*, New York City is depicted as a soulless place in which the authenticity and the individuality of people’s life are distorted in the interest of serving materialism. Tommy could have been saved if he had decided to be controlled and shaped by the society but he refused to do so, and asserted his individuality and non-conformity. Here he can be compared with Augie, the protagonist of Bellow’s one of the most famous novels *The Adventures of Augie March* (1999), who never wants to pursue material success as he refuses to engage in this corrupt world. Although he has plenty of heroic qualities such as intelligence, compassion, and clear observation, he refuses to be trapped by fine clothing, social position and material wealth, and most importantly by social structure. This is typical of Bellow who sets most of his protagonists against the evil of society.

Tommy is presented as lonely and frustrated as he has no job and family. He is to some extent responsible for his own misery but he wants to get rid of it. He meets his father for assistance but gets nothing. He is the victim of such a cruel society where even his father refuses to help him. This is a terrible society which makes people forget family sense and responsibility. Dr. Adler is surely annoyed with Tommy but the way he wants to get rid of him is, undoubtedly, unlike a father. Tommy feels hopeless and frustrated at his father's indifferent attitude towards him.

He behaved towards his son as he had formerly done toward his patients, and it was a great grief to Wilhelm; it was almost too much to bear. Couldn't he see—couldn't he feel? Had he lost his family sense? (Bellow, 1996, p. 11)

Later in the novel when Tommy realizes that he has been deceived by Tamkin, he comes to his father for help and mental peace but his father simply refuses him on the ground that he does not want to take any burden in his old age. Dr. Adler's indifferent attitude to his son's misery confirms the validity of the sense of persecution that emerges as Tommy's dominant feeling in this scene. "This estrangement of son from father as a result of the father's self-centeredness is established dramatically here as a condition of long standing, a major contributing factor to Tommy's present problems" (Porter, 1975, p. 64).

It is true that Mr. Adler is an old man but it is also true that he has enough money and that Tommy is his own son. A true father should be ready to help his son in every possible ways. Again, a true hero should not beg for help repeatedly no matter how much he suffers, and in this sense Tommy's longing for help and assistance makes him an ordinary character far from being a hero. But it is true that, though he has been making mistakes repeatedly and has been suffering, he has never taken any help from anyone before. He has maintained himself and his family and, in fact, he is now asking for help to no one but to his own father. Besides these, he is not begging for money only; he is badly in need of mental support and compassion as he has been going through tough time. If a son, no matter how old he is, finds himself in extreme misery, and thinks that his father can rescue him from the situation, he can beg for paternal affection. This is exactly what Tommy has done, and it has no relation with his being mean and unheroic.

4. Tommy's Redeeming and Heroic Qualities

There is no doubt that *Seize the Day* can be read with accuracy as the state of the individual trapped in the chaos of a selfish and driving society. It is a detached and cold society which refuses the request of the individual for a meaningful and stable relationship, as in the direct rejection of Dr. Adler and in the deceptive promises and confusion of Dr. Tamkin. Yet a wider scope of overall intention is implied in this world wherein outdated and useless religious guidance seems to offer no answer to the demands of man. Besides this, as man worships materialism, he is controlled by it, and in return finds nothing but disillusionment. Tommy finds himself in these ignominious situations and has to reconcile with them.

Tommy is placed in a baffling situation of making a choice between humanity and heartlessness and he decides to retain humanity. He also admits love, and wants to have a place in human community though he knows that he has been under the threat of being overthrown. "He prefers to lead a life of suffering blessed with humanity to a life of prosperity with non-human framework" (Obaidullah & Ahmed, 2001, p. 81). He finds himself on the brink of collapse; he indulges in self-pity but is redeemed by being humane. While walking in an underground corridor, Tommy suddenly feels the unity in love of mankind.

And in the dark tunnel, in the haste, heat, and darkness which disfigure and make freaks and fragments of nose and eyes and teeth, all of a sudden, unsought, a general love for all these imperfect and lurid-looking people burst out in Wilhelm's breast. He loved them. One and all, he passionately loved them. (Bellow, 1996, p. 84)

It is the humanity in an animal like world that secures Tommy the position of a hero.

The isolation of human spirit in modern society is one of the major themes of the novel and Bellow argues that "a loving recognition of natural bond between hearts is the only answer to a society which seems to have lost all social kinship" (Dutton, 1982, p. 77). Tommy recognizes this kinship when he finds himself at a funeral. When he looks at the dead body of a stranger, he recognizes or at least feels the basic relationship between himself and all the men. He finds that in spite of external barriers, mankind is tied by the bond of mortality. He is no longer isolated; he can now completely grasp the full meaning of the line of poetry which he failed to do earlier. This understanding allows him to be free from humiliation, and helps him secure the position of a hero.

So much has been said about Tommy's guilt and flaws that his unusual strength of spirit is overlooked. He has a wonderful ability to feel generously and unselfishly for others, and this quality helps him get rid of his ignominy. According to Pifer (1996),

Wilhelm proves, all the same, to have a special talent, a real gift, for feeling [...] To feel from the heart—to feel not just intensely but generously, humanly, even selflessly—such capacity for feeling is not, as the novel's other characters attest by default, a trifling matter (p.133).

Bellow always urges the novelists to depict man as sub-angelic or as having the power to overcome ignominy, and Tommy is one of the best examples of it. It can be assumed that by overcoming ignominy, Bellow means that any portrayal of man should grant him the power to get rid of the complete subjugation to the unknown, unheard, and unseen. Tommy acquires some positive apprehension of what it means to be a human being. More specifically, he achieves reconciliation, first, with a cruel society that does not care to know of his existence; second, with a world that offers no spiritual guidance; and, third, with a self that seems to be a piece of waste driven by sinister forces of spiteful intention. After having all these reconciliations Tommy has a better understanding of the world and the people, and all these events contribute to his being a real man: a hero.

At the funeral Tommy breaks down in great grief. As he looks down on the corpse of the stranger, “with great stifling sorrow, almost admiration, Wilhelm nodded and nodded” (Bellow, 1996, p. 117). As Wilhelm gazes with new understanding:

The flowers and lights fused ecstatically in Wilhelm’s blind, wet eyes; the heavy sea-like music came up to his ears. It pours into him where he had hidden himself in the center of a crowd by the great and happy oblivion of tears. He heard it and sank deeper than sorrow, through torn sobs, and cries toward the consummation of his heart’s ultimate need. (p. 118)

Tommy is to have such a rebirth. In any case, his tears supply the water for this baptism. His identification with the dead man asserts that the day has not seized him rather he has seized the day. By rejecting the animal world of Tamkin, which is abnormal and disordered, he is finally redeemed.

The narrative structure of *Seize the Day* also contributes to Tommy’s untraditional heroism. We find that the novel is the story of a single and significant day of Tommy’s life, a day of reckoning, a day of reconciliation, a day in which Wilhelm does not get either sympathy or financial aid from his father and is hounded for money by his wife who will not give him a divorce, a day when he loses his investment, and a day in which he gives himself a shake of life. Here, Tommy is the narrator and we find all the comments and thoughts from his perspective. The reader comes to know about his past life, his dream, passion and aspiration, his failure— all from a series of flashbacks. By placing the story in one single day of Tommy’s life and by depicting his hope, Failure, frustration, and his desire to come back through flashbacks, the novel gives the reader an opportunity to understand his sufferings and to identify them with him, and thus glorifies Tommy’s ensuing victory and emphasizes his heroism.

Julius R. Raper (1995), in an essay entitled “Running Contrary Ways: Saul Bellow’s *Seize the Day*”, writes that Bellow’s writing terminated the tradition of “close-mounted straight-forwardness” (p. 73) and substituted it with “a confessional literature that feels no shame in being introspective” (p. 73). Bellow takes his readers inside the head and emotions of the characters. The inward shift of action, in the one hand, helps to achieve a stylistic feature, on the other hand, refers to the complicated state of human being. He creates a world of wavering emotion by depicting the internal life of the protagonist. Being inside the head of Tommy gives the reader an understanding of his problems, his anger, frustration, loneliness, his humanity and his attempt to bounce back. Throughout the novel the reader can identify themselves with Tommy. As they know the ins and outs of his character, they are in a position to understand, acknowledge and appreciate his heroic come back.

5. Conclusion

The ambiguity of Tommy’s drowning, which is both a failure and a triumph, is the central problem of *seize the Day*. The water in which Tommy is immersed represents the vast distortions of his own character, and reflects the conflict in Bellow’s view of human nature. Tommy has his flaws but he is finally redeemed; he is fighting a lonely battle against the encroaching selfishness, cold heartedness, and cynicism of the modern and dehumanized world. Bellow sees human as hard, isolated, and a killer. Tommy denies the loveless world and the existence of the predatory in human, and in doing so exemplifies one of Bellow’s most frequent themes: the destruction of human by his humane ideals. This being humane is the strongest traits of Tommy’s character, which, in spite of all his sufferings and draw backs, earns him the title of a hero but in an untraditional sense.

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