

## Tommy Wilhelm's Psychological Rebirth in Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*: a Study from Jungian Perspective

Kamol Karmakar

Lecturer, Department of English, University of Science and Technology Chittagong (USTC)  
Zakir Hossain Road, Foy's Lake, Khulshi, Chattogram 4202

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**Abstract:** This paper attempts to investigate how Tommy Wilhelm, the protagonist of Saul Bellow's masterpiece *Seize the Day* (1956), had a psychological rebirth in the middle of a totally disorganized and confused life. Here, the term 'rebirth' does not mean Tommy had this immortality mantra, the mantra for rejuvenating himself from any kind of disease or any kind of wound or injury, but is metaphorically used to express the self-actualization which is very surprisingly created in his mind. This paper tries to reach its goal by using the lens of Jungian point of view, showing how Tommy ultimately realizes that striving after perfection is like chasing after wind. Many researchers showed that Tommy, having a truckload of troubles, could not literally learn anything from his numerous mistakes. But, the result of this research disagrees with the previous researchers showing that, despite being surrounded by too many money-oriented people in a money-adoring society, and having done so many mistakes in his life, Tommy learned a whole lot of things, and ultimately realized how he should utilize his time to live his life. Needless to say, he had a shift of his mindset to a whole new level, and that is, going from the state of being so pessimistic to optimistic. The paper concludes that his distress leads to his psychological rebirth.

**Keywords:** Rebirth, Tommy Wilhelm, Jungian perspective, Anti-Semitism, Self-actualization.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Tommy Wilhelm's money worries are revealed on the very first few pages of the book *Seize the Day*. Being a grown-up man in his mid-forties, he willy-nilly decided to live with his father, Dr. Adler at the Hotel Gloriana, which basically was tagged as a hotel of the people who were past the age of retirement. Tommy was living in the post-war world, which was America's most uniquely cruel society. It was exactly the kind of society where a duplex house could clearly be valued over father-son relationship. In a materialistic society like this, people tend to forget their moral values and become unethical.

Tommy made a whole lot of mistakes throughout his life. That was very typical of him. He seemed to be hopelessly trapped in the conflict between desire and limitation, aspiration and ability. He had to experience a conflict between head and heart. He thought it's going to be a big mistake to go to Hollywood to be a movie star, but he went. He was a very determined man not to marry Margaret, but he did. He didn't think of investing his last money with Tamkin in the commodity market, and then he just did. He was lonesome, miserable, cut off not only from society but also from friends and family. He was an orphan, metaphorically speaking. In his case, he needed to be loved, but his narcissistic father was incapable of giving love to him and his sister Catherine as well. Kalay asserts that, "Dr. Adler is depicted as a narcissist who does not care for either of his children" (3).

Tommy every time wanted two things from his father; (a) a small push to be financially well-off, and (b) a pat of appreciation on the back. Dr. Adler did not show him the least sympathy; forget about giving him anything in the first place. Tommy was in such an unhealthy marital relationship with Margaret that he could neither live peacefully with her nor end the marriage in divorce. She did not even get a job because she thought she was doing a lot raising their two boys.

Tommy found fatherly love in Dr. Tamkin, who claimed to be many things at the same time, including a commodity market analyst. Playing a confidence game, Tamkin very cleverly managed to flee with the last means of Tommy. Losing everything he had, with a very forgetful mind, Tommy ended up joining a funeral procession of a man who he never met before. The very sight of the dead man brought Tommy to tears. As soon as he saw the dead body, he came to a realization about the ultimate destination of a human being. He thought it's of no use to regret over the past. He understood the significance of seizing the day and celebrating the present. Thus, the theme of psychological rebirth is symbolized through Tommy's self-realization.

### **Rebirth in *Seize the Day*: An Analysis**

Saul Bellow, 1976 Nobel Prize winner in Literature, reveals in *Seize the Day*, a twenty-four-hour story, how an ill-fated Tommy Wilhelm feels inextricably isolated in a city like New York which had nearly eight million people even in the 1950s. Tommy was living in a highly materialistic society which made his life miserable because the so-called 'materialism' is the result of a vision the Americans are after. That is the vision of America or the American dream. This paper tries to find out how materialism and other related forces led to Tommy's rebirth.

### **The Concept of Rebirth**

Asian religions, namely, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism hold a belief in rebirth. 'Rebirth' occurs when something or someone becomes alive again after dying (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2008-2009, p.1367). Here, 'Rebirth' does not necessarily mean the process of being born again or the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. It never means Tommy had to be born again. We must not mix this up with genuine rebirth. "The concept of rebirth is not always used in the same sense" (Jung 117). We may see a person dramatically change too many times within a single life, but we still can recognize them as the same person. Tommy wasted the most valuable time of his youth without doing anything noteworthy. But, at the funeral procession of a man, he reinvented himself as one, who still can do a lot just living in the present and it sure is a thing to be proud of. Tommy entered his senses again.

According to Hindu traditions, the body dies but the soul does not because the Hindus think the soul is imperishable. The Srimad Bhagavad Gita says about rebirth. "Like a man who has cast off his old clothes puts on others that are new, thus the embodied self casts off old bodies and moves on to others that are new" (Bhagavad-Gita 2.22).

Tommy, like worn-out clothes, threw out his past self and put on new garbs of possibility and optimism.

### **A Look at Tommy's Predicament through Jungian Prism**

The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, best known for his theory of collective unconscious, is one of the most influential psychiatrists of all time too. He is the founder of Analytical Psychology, a theory of human personality and thought. In *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, "Carl Jung distinguished between five different forms of rebirth: metempsychosis (transmigration of souls), reincarnation (in a human body), resurrection, psychological rebirth (individuation) and indirect change that comes about through participation in the process of transformation. Psychological rebirth was Jung's particular focus" (Sharp 68).

Psychological rebirth enlarges personality. It means from inner sources we become conscious about who we are and who we wish or choose to be. "Rebirth may be a renewal without any change of being, inasmuch as the personality which is renewed is not changed in its essential nature, but only its functions, or parts of the personality, are subjected to healing, strengthening, or improvement" (Jung 118).

Taking small steps, human beings naturally and gradually change themselves. They try to reach the destination of the personality they always desire to have. In most cases, they proceed maybe at a snail's pace, but surely develop gradual changes over time so they are better able to be the one they wish. In a gradualist manner, they can reach this destination just by overlooking their awful habits and exercising good ones. If life is so convoluted in every way, however, this gradualist manner may not work at all in producing notable results. At this point, what life truly requires is a deep-rooted change, not just a few haphazard changes, but a change that will lead life to a reverse direction, to a psychological rebirth. This radical change of personality does not happen with everybody, especially not with those who are at ease and having an enjoyable life. This happens with people who find no way out of their troubles. This happens with people like Tommy Wilhelm, who, in the meantime, has experienced the most difficult version of his hardship.

Tommy has been feeling a lot of anxiety about his conjugal life, kids, his being jobless, and what not. The novella, from start to finish, is so filled with the emblematic words of his anxiety and misery. The story of the novella starts off with Tommy being inside an elevator that "sank and sank", pulling him under and threatening to drown him (3). The ultimate state of Tommy's anxiety or helplessness is expressed when he loses all his money in the commodity market. He decides he won't cry or break down in front of the crowd but "his unshed tears rose and rose and he looked like a man about to drown" (104). His present state of sufferings, misery, and isolation were the most perfect basement from which he had a noticeable transformation of his personality and ultimately had a psychological rebirth. Quick change in personality is possible, though this change in most cases goes unnoticed. "Rebirth is not a process that we can in any way observe. We can neither measure nor weigh nor photograph it. It is entirely beyond sense perception. ... One speaks of rebirth; one professes rebirth; one is filled with rebirth. ... We have to be content with its psychic reality" (Jung 120).

### **Cynicism**

"Wilhelm was especially horrified by the cynicism of successful people" around him because they always thought the worst and had a hard time seeing the good in anyone (16). His father was ashamed of introducing him to his friends because he (Tommy) had never been prosperous and his father did not see anything good in him. Even though everyone wanted to see Tommy as a successful man, he could never prioritize his financial needs over emotional, physical, psychological, and social needs. Instead of helping him fulfill his needs, everyone got just so busy in finding his faults. Tommy fought "a lonely battle against the encroaching selfishness, cold heartedness, and cynicism of the modern and dehumanized world" (Abdullah 4).

### **Ambivalence in Relationships**

Tommy had to go through a lot of stress. It is mostly because of the tension in his relationship with Margaret. It was a toxic relationship. They used to just explode every now and then. Things got pretty intense between them. Yelling in each other's faces in front of the boys, having big arguments, and throwing out things at God-knows-what direction were some of the pretty common things in this relationship. And, all these easily predicted their relation would end in divorce. Margaret wanted to do everything at Tommy's expense, for example, going for some higher studies to hiring a lawyer to resolve the ongoing fights with him. He did not have peace of mind for one single second of his entire conjugal life because of the ambivalence in their relationship. Margaret, materialism, money, mischief, murder all begin with an M. Wearing the mask of benevolence, Margaret, in fact, wanted to destroy Tommy. She was unrelenting and cold towards him.

Dr. Adler, too, was hostile to him. He had a very negative outlook on Tommy's life. Dr. Adler, if he wanted, could so easily give Tommy a little financial support. "It is not so difficult to suggest that money and father have some relation in common because Wilhelm feels an ambivalent sentiment to both of them" (Kumari 52). Instead of figuring his problems and helping him out, Dr. Adler used to add insult to Tommy's injury. Suspecting whether there is a scandal involving a woman or otherwise, he inquires about Margaret, "Did you have bed trouble with her?" (51). This is not a fatherly inquiry of one's own son's unhappiness from a real father. On the one hand, Tommy loved his father whole-heartedly. He says about him, "But I don't want anything to happen to him. I certainly don't want him to die" (92). Dr. Adler, on the other hand, doesn't think of his son the same way. He says to Tommy, "But I am not going to pick up a cross. I'll see you dead, Wilky, by Christ, before I let you do that to me" (110). He thinks it is torturous for him to look at his son's face. Relationships like these cannot stand and do not lead anyone to a healthy state of mind.

### **American Dream**

The term "American Dream" was coined by James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book *Epic of America*. This idea, however, has much deeper roots. A touch of this idea can be found in the United States Declaration of Independence. The quotation "all men are created equal" is part of the Declaration, which Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States, penned in 1776 during the beginning of the American Revolution. The Declaration goes "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (US 1776).

Regardless of parental citizenship, class, caste, religion, or gender, anyone can succeed in America through hard work, and sacrifice. This belief is what we basically call the American Dream. It is a belief that brave deeds help one gain what they want. But, this whole American Dream thing could be the other way around. In the name of equality, the concept creates a false impression of equality. When the total prosperity of a nation is somehow concentrated in the authority of a few moneyed-men, and where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, it is unclear how in fact this idea deals with equality. Tommy says "They don't need therefore they have. I need, therefore I don't have" (102). Tommy was losing himself in every way because he could not keep pace with others having the same kind of dream.

### **Nepotism**

Tommy worked for ten long years at Roxbury, a sales corporation which basically sold kids' furniture. He worked under the supervision of Mr. Rojax, who, he never thought, would do such mean things to him. For his ten years' service, Tommy thought he was cool enough to get the Vice President's post of the corporation. When it came to his promotion in the workplace, what he saw was a son-in-law to Mr. Rojax entering the picture to take Tommy's place. Tommy says, "I was in the line for it, but instead this son-in-law got in, and —" (35). Tommy was disgusted at this flagrant nepotism and left the place. Once he left the corporation, he faced severe financial crisis that forced him into a life full of struggle. He had to go through a lot of hardship to fulfill his wife's demand and other pays as well.

### **Anti-Semitism**

Many people with the surname 'Adler' are of Jewish origin. Wilhelm Adler is Tommy's real name. His father lovingly calls him Wilky, and Velvel is the name given to him by his grandfather. Courtesy of his striking looks, Tommy was inspired to be an actor in Hollywood. Dr. Adler says about Tommy, "He could charm a bird out of a tree" (6). Before moving to Hollywood, he had to change his family name. By changing the name in Los Angeles, Wilhelm broke with his father's family line. He later regretted the name change. "Yes, it had been a stupid thing to do" (25). Changing his name was probably the simplest way to shrug off his former self. "It was, he knew it was, his bid for liberty, Adler being in his mind the title of the species, Tommy the freedom of the person. But Wilky was his inescapable self" (25).

It is puzzling why Wilhelm changed his name in a country like America where no matter what your religion is you still can shine by dint of sheer hard work. He most probably changed his name because he didn't want to live in fear of anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism existed throughout American culture. Bess Levin, in the *Vanity Fair*, says about the 45<sup>th</sup> and current president of the United States, "I am the least anti-Semitic person that you've ever seen in your entire life." That statement, like the ones he's previously made about being "the least racist person there is anywhere in the world," was, and is, obviously not true at all (Bess).

Between 1881 to 1920, say the statisticians, nearly 3 million Jews migrated to America fleeing pogroms and other economic difficulties. Anti-Semitism is still on the rise in the United States. The Jewish people face discrimination in the States in nearly every sector. Tamkin says, "A lot of them don't like Jews, either, I suppose?" (81). Wilhelm changed his name and adopted a neutral screen name which was more acceptable and suitable for the audience at that time. This indicates the frailty of American Dream and also indicates that this dream is found only in books, not in reality. Dr. Adler never thought Wilhelm's name change was a good move.

We see similar scenarios in Indian movies too in the 1950s. Muhammed Yusuf Khan, the tragedy king, and the first Khan of Bollywood, mostly known as Dilip Kumar, debuted as an actor in the film *Jwar Bhata* (1944). When he entered Bollywood, most of the popular actors of his time were Hindus. He had to take a name from Hindu community so that the common audience accept him as one who belongs to their community. He did not risk his career. He thought people could not at that time digest the idea of a non-Hindu ruling the roost. Though he had talent in acting, he thought being a Muslim he could not find any movie playing the solo male lead. Those were unlucky times when people's names were given preference over quality. In Tommy's case, changing name was as good as having no strategy at all because he was not a quality actor.

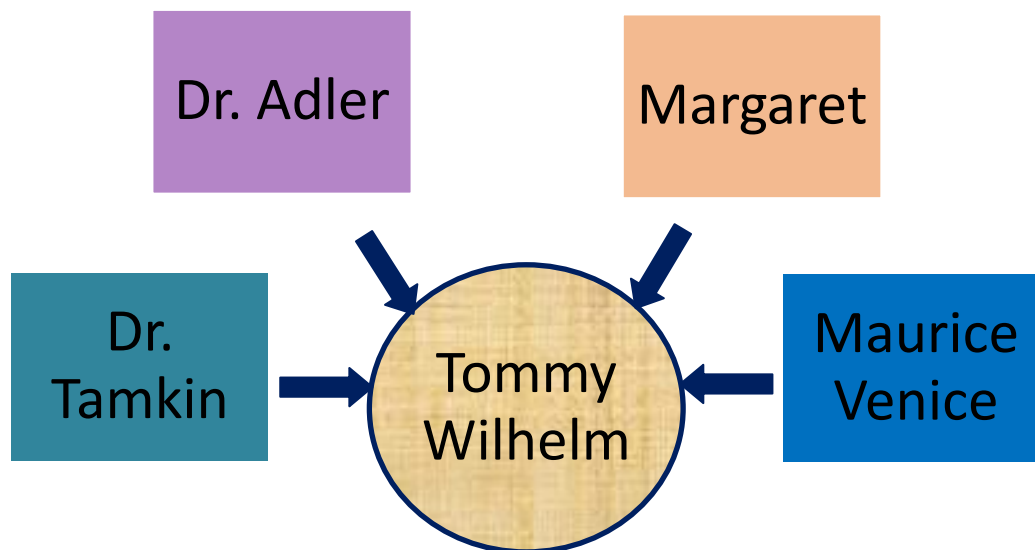
Saul Bellow himself had the fear of being a target as anti-Semitism rose in the USA. Having been afraid and warned that many universities would not hire Jewish professors to teach the subject, he did not study English even if he had wanted.

### **Materialism Leads to Murder**

Tommy miserably failed to keep up with the society he was living in. He was, in a sense, abused by the people he was living with. Psycho-social values – emotional attachment, fellow feelings, friendship – had no place in that society. Maurice Venice, once when introducing a so-called 'actress' to Tommy, says, "I saw a beautiful thing in the paper" (18). Human beings were somehow treated like lifeless objects. This was the kind of society where no one even bothered anymore about the people they lost in the past. When Tommy asked his father whether he remembers or not when his mother died, Dr. Adler replies, "Wasn't it nineteen-thirty-one?" (27). This reply not only proved that his answer was wrong or he was a bit forgetful because of his years but proved that he did not care a fig for his wife. He had money and that's what was really important to him. People with a lot of money got priority everywhere. Tommy says, "How they love money. They adore money! Holy money! Beautiful money!" (36). Those people thought material possessions were way more important than emotions, feelings, or morality. Alam thinks, "the society where Tommy Wilhelm is living is based on the extreme forces of materialism with utmost disregard for humans, even for family" (2). Catherine, Tommy's sister, cherished a desire to be a painter all her life. All she needed was a little financial back-up from her father to achieve what she dreamt of for so long. Dr. Adler was not the kind of father to provide a helping hand towards her. He thought she was being delusional.

Tommy had a feeling that Dr. Tamkin had got his back. To his utmost surprise, he found out that the matter was quite opposite. He says, "I was the man beneath; Tamkin was on my back, and I thought I was on his. He made me carry him, too, besides Margaret" (105).

Here is the diagram of the materialistic people who did the greatest harm to Tommy in killing him symbolically.



### **Tommy's murder**

The materialistic society Tommy lived in was killing him. Or, maybe he knew he would die soon anyway. He says, "I guess so. But I think I inherit more from my mother's side, and she died in her fifties" (62). The so-called 'American Dream' he was after was killing him. Living in a society full of unemotional and cold people, he could not still be like everyone else. He could not accept his biological father's advice because of his father's materialistic behaviour. He did not know how he could do without a job in a society like that. He gradually started to realize the fact that it was such a society where you get valued only when you have money, position, and fame. He was murdered by the people around him. "Here, the word 'murder' doesn't mean "the unlawful killing of one human by other, especially with premeditated malice;" rather it is symbolically used to express the slaying of human sense, belief, love and passion, in a word humanity" (Dev 59). Wu states that "the stranger's funeral can be taken as Wilhelm's. The corpse lies in the coffin is his past, or his self, the presentation soul, the imposter soul, the pretender soul as being put by Tamkin" (440).

### **Tommy's Rebirth**

The word 'rebirth' "has a special flavour; its whole atmosphere suggests the idea of renovatio, renewal, or even of improvement brought about by magical means" (Jung 118). Tommy was a living dead. A person being living dead has many reasons to be so. Maybe, psychologically s/he is taking too much to bear and is pulverized on the inside. To get revived from such a miserable state of agony where one's condition only gets worsened, one needs to have a psychological rebirth. Usually, the word "rebirth" means a second or new birth ("Rebirth"). However, here, rebirth is "a process experienced as a renewal or transformation of the personality" (Sharp 68).

Living a life full of mistakes, Tommy never seemed to correct himself or even be bothered about repeating the same mistakes over and over again. But, losing everything he had and reaching the state where he had nothing else left to lose, he started to have a different kind of self-actualization. Psychologically, he started to dig deeper and deeper within himself. He regretted, "I should have done hard labor all my life" (7). He realized that he should have listened to his father when he warned him about Tamkin. He also realized that he should have listened to his mother Florence Adler, who tried to stop him many times when he was making all those mistakes. He now thought he must get a divorce from Margaret in his last-ditch effort to get united with Olive. He decided to sell off his car to pay the hotel. He thought he would have to go on his knees asking Olive to be with him. He now came out of his confused life and clearly had a plan how to start things over. He thought, "I'll try to start again with Olive. In fact, I must" (115). His self-realization led him to his spiritual rebirth. "This spiritual rebirth is apparent in the tears pouring down at the end of the novel, when Wilhelm accidentally gets swept into a funeral ceremony" (Novianti 237). The pretender soul of Tommy died thus and the real soul of Tommy was born through his self-actualization. "Saul Bellow symbolically adopts death as a means for Wilhelm to find out the truth of existence-to live in here-and-now, which is implied in the title *Seize the Day* and which is didactically and hypnotically instilled by Tamkin" (Wu 440). If *Seize the Day* had a sequel, we would see a new Tommy Wilhelm having a life completely different from the previous one.

### **Tommy's Baptism**

Tommy was even baptized after his rebirth. When he willy-nilly entered the funeral procession, he very carefully noticed the man lying dead. He never felt more connected with anyone in his entire lifetime. As to human life, he came to a realization that we all need to leave this earth once our time is up. Pondering over the corpse for just a very little amount of time, he started to cry like a little brat. "Black, deep, and hot, tears pouring out and convulse his body" (Kumari 53). He realized the fact that perhaps he was not living the life he was meant to. Only dough is not what he should run after. Only a luxury lifestyle is not what he should cherish throughout his life. In baptizing a child, what we need is a tubful of water which would have the father-from-the-Church's touch. Abdullah points out that "Tommy is to have such a rebirth. In any case, his tears supply the water for this baptism" (4). From the day of his baptism he would start things anew. Hopefully, this time he would not mess things up. He would hardly care about what others want from him. He would do whatever he loves to do and be more responsible for his duties towards the people around him.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

Tommy wasted his life doing nothing significant but he wasn't a lazy fellow. Whatever he was into, he tried to bring something good out of it. For being in the line of numerous mistakes, however, he couldn't show up as a so-called 'role model' in the society. His life was so dysfunctional, so out of place in the backdrop of the complex materialistic society where he was living with a shattered American Dream. He, however, tried his heart out and worked with as much energy as possible to see the end of his sufferings. His blunt indecisiveness and his lack of financial and mental support, in most of his critical moments, were two of the many reasons why he had to suffer miserably throughout his life. All the problems in the world engulfed his life but he didn't, even for a second, think of quitting. The shift of Tommy's mindset to a whole new level has been analyzed in light of Jungian perspective. Though a gradualist approach of change did not work for him, it ultimately resulted in an epiphany leading to his radical change at the end of the story. This raises the crucial question: Whether or not this change led to a psychological rebirth he needed so badly. The answer is found in Tommy's behaviour towards the finishing line of the story. He started to see things more transparently than ever before realizing how he would move on from here without fail. He finally was able to do away with his former self and born again.

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