

# ‘Materialistic Defeat’ Triumphs in ‘Spiritual Pursuit’: An Introspection to Saul Bellow’s *Seize the Day*

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**Abstract:** *In an extreme materialistic world of the then America, Saul Bellow’s Seize the Day (1956) is dexterous hold of psychology and the study of a character fallen in a contradicted situation where he gets burdened with the piled up mistakes, agonized with chaotic present and rejected by indifferent society for emotional support. The development of the novel Seize the Day can be traced as the progress of a drama which starts with a problem-the problem of what will happen to Tommy Wilhelm’s last investment with so-called Dr. Tamkin; through the development of the plot we come to know about his past mistakes and regret, his being marginalized with shocking materialistic response against his emotional appeal to his father, wife and surrounding people; and the suspense of the story reaches to its climax with the deceit of Dr. Tamkin. Finally, the denouement offers a hope and relief of the troubled soul. The purport of this writing is to introspect on the failures of the protagonist weighed by worldly aspects and to shed light on the fact that how this defeat eventually does not last and the unsympathetic and money mongering attitude of the materialistic society cannot clutch him; rather he slaps it by pursuing and attaining spiritual regeneration and reckons future possibilities.*

**Keywords:** materialism, defeat, triumph, rebirth

The meaning of ‘materialism’ found in the Oxford Dictionary denotes ‘the belief that money, possessions and physical comforts are more important than spiritual values.’ The protagonist of *Seize the Day* Tommy Wilhelm’s existence is burdened with the heaviness of the alluring principles of material success. He is completely unsuccessful middle aged person without productive engagement. He is separated from his wife and children, devoid of love and affection from his successful father, alienated from the social network, unable to marry his mistress, frustrated of being cheated by a man whom he trusts a lot. His being is not molded to adjust with so called indifferent society. The novel talks about the feelings and inner agony of a modern psyche entrapped in a muddle of all persistent loneliness and alienation created by the money loving materialism- the child of American dream. The dream embodies the social, political and economic stability for all and ensures success for every individual. Lois Tyson in his *Critical theory today: A User Friendly Guide* says: “American dream is certainly good for capitalist economics, but it sacrifices the well-being of the many individuals who don’t achieve it.” The essence of American dream is lost for various economic depressions in post-war America and the dream has become an illusion to many individuals. Tommy rushes behind American dream to be successful; but as a man of fancy and imagination he cannot see the present potentialities but waits for colorful future. Tommy finds himself in a world where material success is the ultimate virtue of human life. Saul Bellow has presented him as an unsuccessful as well as neglected individual in material terms and placed him in the middle of many adversities. When the concern is about money, possessions and physical comforts, Tommy is loser and defeated in worldly sense. Through struggling against the odds of materialism, Tommy shows the power to rise above the imposed indignities. This is a silent but very strong victory. The paradox of ‘Materialistic Defeat’ Triumphs in ‘Spiritual Pursuit’ lies in the fact that the

materialistic defeat cannot beat him down rather this defeat elevates him to the salvation and rebirth.

The social, political, and economic condition of America in 1950s show the conservative atmosphere because of the cold war and its associated conflicts, and it was a time of compliance and conformity. It was a dominant society which controls People’s life and philosophy. They were not guided by their conscience rather by the interest of serving materialism. Family relationship falls apart easily. In *Seize the Day*, New York City is depicted as a soulless place in which the genuineness and individuality of people’s lives are biased. To the dwellers of crooked and materialistic society human qualities are uncommon and rare. The way of life and philosophy of being is shaped and regulated by the society. Pretention is crucial in their attitude. Everyone is busy with show. They have no much emotional attachment. The gap between hearts created by the pretentious tendency is visible in Tommy’s conversation with Robin, the newspaper vendor. Though both men know many intimate details of each other’s lives, they talk about trivial matters such as the weather, Tommy’s clothes, the last night’s gin game etc., “None of these could be mentioned, and the great weight of unspoken left them little to talk about.” (Bellow 6)

Tommy is a confused man with superficial discernment, little physical, mental, or intellectual strength to be victorious. He is sometimes childish and longs for pity: “This is 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. He had decided that it would be a bad mistake to go to Hollywood, and then he went. He had made up his mind not to marry his wife, but ran off and got married. He had resolved not to invest money with Tamkin, and then had given him a check.” (23) This indecisive impulsiveness brings chaos in his life. His dream to be a Hollywood star leads him to change his name from Wilky

Adler to Tommy Wilhelm. The dream is ended as he has been disqualified in the screen test. For seven years he continues his unsuccessful journey: "Those seven years of persistence and defeat had unfitted him somehow for trade and business, and then it was too late to go into one of the professions". (7)

At the very first chapter he is shown descending from the elevator: "And the elevator sank and sank. Then the smooth door opened and the great dark-red uneven carpet that covered the lobby billowed toward wilhelm's feet." (3) He is choked and suffocated throughout the whole novel. From the beginning he is regretful for his past mistakes and prays to God: "Let me out of my trouble. Let me out of my thoughts, and let me do something better with myself. For all the time I have wasted I am very sorry. Let me out of this clutch and into a different life. For I am all balled up. Have mercy." (26) In spite of being exhausted with failures resulted from mistakes, he yearns for 'something better' to be done with him. Here we get the dim pulse of hope.

Tommy is surrounded by the buzzing of material success from the people who are related with him, specially his biological father, revengeful wife, and fake Dr. Tamkin. The old father flatly rejects economic and emotional support on the ground of deserving a peaceful mind and life at the old age. Tommy's father is reluctant to hear any emotional appeal of Tommy. Rather he turns down tommy's appeal of paying the bill of hotel blatantly: "And I want nobody on my back. Get off! And I give you the same advice, Wilky. Carry nobody on your back." (55) From the advice of the father it is conceivable that he has been shaped by commercial attitude of soullessness and dryness. Economic gap creates the estrangement between the father and his son. Tommy can realize it with heavy heart, he replies, "Just keep your money.....keep it and enjoy it yourself. That's the ticket!" (55) Tommy finds his father to be terribly unconcerned towards the grief of a son, he miserably pleads "It isn't all a question of money--- there are other things a father can give to a son." (109)

In spite of being humiliated, Tommy is not a cynic. He expresses an attitude of forgiveness even in distraction. At one point we hear Tommy's passionate outcry: "No, but you hate me. And if I had money you wouldn't. By God, you have to admit it. The money makes the difference. Then we would be a fine father and son, if I was a credit to you- so you could boast and brag about me all over the hotel. But I am not the right type of son. I'm too old. I'm too old and too unlucky". (55)

Dr. Adler likes to create an imaginary fabricated successful son whose income is up in the five figures. His ultimate selfish screaming we get: "You want to make yourself into my cross. 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..... go away from me now. It's a torture for me to look at you, you slob!" (110) The emotional support that Tommy wants so dearly turns him to Dr. Tamkin, he says, "I wouldn't turn to Tamkin, if I could turn to him. At least Tamkin sympathizes with me and tries to give me a hand, whereas Dad doesn't want to be disturbed" (10). He hesitantly trusts Tamkin and taking the advice to 'seize the day', invests his

last money on the commodities market. But Tamkin simply escapes when it turns out to be a bad investment, and he loses all his money. Tommy, totally overwhelmed and suffocated, feels being downward in the trouble waters. When the extreme money monger cheats him by taking his last savings of seven hundred dollars, the realization comes: "I was the man beneath; Tamkin was in my back and I thought I was on his. He made me carry him too, besides Margaret. Like this they ride on me with hoofs and claws. Tear me to pieces, stamp on me and break my bones." (105)

Tommy Wilhelm is a failure by the standards set by overwhelming materialism. Though in his middle forties, Tommy is explicitly emotional and childish. The incurable drawbacks in his personality- his dependence and his excess of emotion lead him to his disaster. Paradoxically these drawbacks pave the way for his rebirth as he can realize the true nature of materialism. The lecture about 'real soul' and 'pretender soul' given by Tamkin affects his being: "The interest of the pretender soul is the same as the interest of the social life, the society mechanism. This is the main tragedy of human life." (70) All the philosophical lectures of Tamkin contain some deeper meaning: "One fact should be clear to you by now. Money- making is aggression. That's the whole thing. The functionalistic explanation is the only one. People come to the market to kill." (69) Ironically, this statement falls upon Wilhelm very heavily. Slowly Tamkin works and leads to his rebirth. The role of Tamkin is puzzling in this sense.

From the beginning he thinks the day as the day of reckoning. His reprehensible past, failed careers, womanizing, etc. —flow as the stream of consciousness. At the chaotic present he plans what to do. He will sell the car, pay the rent, divorce his ever demanding wife and go to his true love. He feels he loves his sons truly unlike his own father. After the climactic point of being lost totally, he feels sinking downward and about to be drowned, he finds himself in a funeral procession. When looking down at the dead man's face, he sees himself, and starts to cry to his heart's content where he finally relinquishes his egoistic-self and comes to reconcile with himself. All the unpleasantness passes through like soothing sea waves. Drowned in his cathartic tears, ultimately Tommy reaches the consummation of his heart's desire at a stranger's funeral. After reckoning of past errors, through compromising with present plight and ultimately restoring anguish soul, the day is at last seized.

Through this philanthropic attitude, capacity of love Tommy Wilhelm preserves humanity by rejecting this network and structure. He asserts his non-conformity and heroism. He sustains humanity in the modern wasteland of post-war American society. Tommy, in spite of being a failure, soars up with heroic grandeur. In spite of being adroopy man, he possess openness of a heart, and philanthropic attitude to humanity- that is visible from his tolerance in helping Mr. Rappaport, investing last money with Tamkin, feeling true love to his children and father, mother and Olive. He believes: "He could and would recover the good things, the happy things, the easy tranquil things of life. He had made mistakes, but he could overlook these. He had been a fool,

but that could be forgiven. The time wasted--- must be relinquished..... Recovery was possible”. (78)

Tommy, can defy social structure and network by realizing too much materialistic nature of his biological father, true nature of his false mentor Dr. Tamkin, and money monger Margaret. He compromises not with the insensitive materialism but with his self-realization. He shows aversion for power and material success. Naturally guilt –ridden individual goes through suffering and progresses towards a deeper understanding of reality and rejuvenation.

Tommy does not respond to the non-human financial attitude of the city. His wife Margaret only asks for money and does not feel for him. She is a cold, harsh and unsympathetic woman; she refuses to grant Tommy a divorce and has made settlement difficult. In materialistic society matrimonial tie of love and affection is replaced by covetousness for money, position and success. Tommy feels estrangement from Margaret who only worships money and never feels sympathy for him: “She hates me. I feel that she’s strangling me. I can’t catch my breath. She just has fixed herself on me to kill me.” (48) In an emotional outburst he chides Margaret: “Everything comes from me and nothing back again to me. There’s no law that’ll punish this, but you are committing a crime against me. Before God- and that’s no joke.” (114) Tommy is a man with fancies and imagination and is unable to become a man of tomorrow. Margaret cunningly takes the chance of the fancies of Tommy and imposes her rule to suck the blood in the name of money: “Whenever she can hit me, she hits, and she seems to live for that alone. And she demands more and more, and still more” (47).

The approaches of his self-seeking father, greedy wife and deceitful Dr. Tamkin are structured by the society. They have been integrated with the false values of success and prosperity. Tommy is alienated with his true emotion and other human qualities and finds himself overwhelmed amidst the inhuman materialistic surroundings. The decision of leaving New York and residing in the countryside shows the commencement of Tommy’s new life. When he finds himself totally lost after losing the last means, he tries to detect the next plan to move on: “I ‘ll get a divorce if it’s the last thing I do,.....as for Dad----as for Dad- --I’ll have to sell the car for junk and pay the hotel. ....I’ll try to start again with Olive. In fact, I must. Olive loves me.” (115)

Dr. Tamkin raises his consciousness saying that he is different from others: “You’re trying hard to keep your feelings open, Wilhelm. I can see it.....Those are the only two classes of people there are. Some want to live, but the great majority don’t.” Wilhelm becomes astonished finding the true feelings of his heart discovered by ‘fantastic Tamkin’. He believes, “People are dropping like flies. I am trying to stay alive and work too hard at it. That’s what’s turning my brains. This working hard defeats its own end. At what point should I start over? Let me go back a ways and try once more.” While the cunning approach of Tamkin is apparent through his saying: “Money and Murder both begin with *M. Machinery. Mischief*”, Wilhelm thinks, “What about Mercy? Milk-of-human-kindness?”(69) So, it is clear

that though Tommy is entrapped by overwhelming ‘Materialism’ at the beginning stage, his ‘real soul’ thinks of positive approach to ‘Mercy’ and eventually it triumphs.

In case of Tommy, overwhelming materialism cannot kill the love of a son for his father, mother and family: “When I get desperate- of course I think about money. But I don’t want anything to happen to him. I certainly don’t want him to die” (92 ) In a reply to the question of Dr. Tamkin whether he loves his dad or not he acclaims, “ of course, of course I love him. My father. My mother\_ ” (92)

The ending of the most of Bellow’s novels are ambiguous, but it implies the triumph of humanity. Seemingly throughout the whole *Seize the Day*, Tommy is utterly failure, at the verge of sinking but ultimately we see his purgation. He stands at the vantage with the dead man and feels the metamorphosis- metamorphosis from the utterly distressed failure individual in terms of materialism to emancipated human entity. From the beginning of the novel he anxiously waits for the evening to know about his ultimate lot as he has invested his last capital in the stock market. It seems that he will meet his doom if he loses; but after losing everything he gathers his all humanistic faculties and gets the true realization about life measuring ‘his heart’s ultimate need’.

Tommy is not like Santiago of *The Old Man and the Sea*, who is physically defeated after fighting with large Marlin and getting nothing at the end because of the shark. After long eighty four days when he has got the fish it is also lost; but Santiago does not lose his spirit. Hemingway’s message “Now is no time to think of what you do not have. Think of what you can do with that there is..” is very much applicable in the condition of Tommy. He has things those are absent in other commercial men. In a different context from the fisherman Santiago, Tommy ‘can be destroyed but not defeated’.

Though unknowingly, he marches slowly against the impinging self-centeredness, unsympathetic approach, skepticism and distrust, deceit of the materialistic and dehumanized world. The progress is like roaming overwhelmingly in the physical world and soaring up to the metaphysical world. The materialistic defeat eventually does not last to consume Wilhelm. He is not seized by the day to cause his doom rather he seizes the day very successfully. Materialistically defeated Tommy is found spiritually triumphant.

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