

The use of motif to represent isolation



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In *Seize the Day*, Bellow is concerned with the well-worn dilemma of the individual desperately isolated and profoundly alone, caused by aggression of society and the shortcomings of his own character, as the story opens, Tommy finds himself in debt to his wife and the Hotel. Forty-three years old, huge, bearlike, over-emotional, and heavily dependent, he is caught in a world devoid of heart. In this world, there is no caring and no real communication among men. People talk to each other, do businesses, pass the time of day, but somehow do so only superficially; the human heart is never reached; masks and deceptions are the rule. There is no compassion, no understanding, and no love. Tommy is nakedly and miserably alone since he has lost his job and has no sense of belonging to the community of man. Tommy Wilhelm, the protagonist of *Seize the Day*, is a character in turmoil. He is burdened by the loss of his job, financial instability, the separation of his wife, and his relationship with his father, among other things. He is a man in search of self who the reader is allowed to watch and follow through the course of a single, significant day in his life, a day that is called his “day of reckoning.” The book begins, “when it came to concealing his troubles, Tommy Wilhelm was not less capable than the next fellow. So at least he thought...” Concealment is an issue at hand. Significantly, Tommy had been an actor, albeit a failed one, as well as a salesman. He had learned to wear masks, play roles, and “sell” himself. However, on the day that the narrative takes place, Tommy must rid himself of all of this and find out who he really is.

Through the use of money as a motif, Bellow shows Wilhelm’s isolation through his unconventional opinions. “How they love money...They adore

money! Holy money! Beautiful money!... If you didn't have it you were a dummy...if only he could find a way out of it." (Bellow, 36). Wilhelm directly states that he does not want to be apart of this money obsessed. These are Tommy's thoughts in Chapter II, in response to his father's bragging about how Tommy had made up to " five figures." The quote indicates Tommy's contempt of money and it also points to the level of importance that money is given in the society in which Tommy lives. The quote suggests a negative attitude toward the " they" in the quote, those that love money. The " they" refers to his father, Dr. Adler, his " friend" Mr. Perls. Although he criticizes those that can only think about money, Tommy himself spends much of the later chapters of the book worrying himself into a state of severe nervousness about the money he has invested in the market. Moreover, money seems to be something he cannot get away from, or break away from rather, within the consumer society in which he lives. Furthermore, as the book progresses, Tommy will have to shed himself of various roles and ideas to become his true self and allow that true self to surface. He will have to be abandoned by his father and surrogate father, Dr. Tamkin, for example, for him to stop seeing himself solely as a " son in the eyes of a father." In this case, he will also have to lose all of his money so he can be freed from it and its grip. " I cant take city life any more, and I miss the country. There's too much push here for me." (44). The city serves to create the background of crowds and technology in Tommy's world. It serves to illustrate his disconnect with the outside/external world, the world that surrounds him. The city is mentioned at many points throughout the novel: Tommy is constantly claiming his hatred toward it. He would much rather live in the country, as he is unaccustomed to it. However, there are moments when he

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finds himself at one with the crowds of the city. Thus, this urban landscape can both serve as the dark backdrop of Tommy's life, the very symbol of what he is trying to escape, or it can be a force that allows him to feel solidarity with his fellow man. Tommy, it is evident, plays many roles. He plays the role of Adler's son, a role that is difficult for him to escape. He cares too much how his father sees him. And, he often becomes the "failure" that he believes his father sees in him. He has been an actor, a hospital orderly, a ditch-digger, a seller of toys, a seller of self, and a public relations man for a hotel in Cuba. He has, therefore, been many characters and never his true self. Beneath his masks, as the reader is privileged to discover through interior monologues, he is truly an introvert trapped in the body of a man who has been forced to be extroverted, he is also sensitive and almost, at times feminine. This femininity is poked at and criticized, however, by his father when he accuses him of having had a relationship with a man from his office.

By using Wilhelm's father's fixation on trivial aspects of Wilhelm's life as a motif, Bellow demonstrates isolation. "Go away from me now. It's torture for me to look at you, you slob!" cried Dr. Adler." (110)-how his father responds when he makes a bad decision with money. Even Tommy's father, Dr. Adler, refuses to become involved in his son's desperate loneliness. Tommy needs money which he assumes his father could easily supply, but Adler, is greatly pained, even shies away, when the subject is mentioned. Again and again, he appeals to his father for compassion, for money. But his appeal is always futile, for his father's response are ever a cold, detached, yet bitter and angry analytical denunciation of Tommy's past failures and present

ignominy. Indeed, his father is ashamed of his son. “ It made Tommy profoundly bitter that his father should speak to him with such attachment about his welfare” (10). Tommy even wonders if his father has lost his family sense. His relation with his father is chiefly one of getting money from him, and the money is always wasted by him. He accuses his father of thinking only in terms of money because he won't give it to him to waste, to gamble in the market. He feels he is not getting enough, so he keeps his relation with his father though it is not comfortable. The most difficult challenge in coming to an understanding of Dr. Adler, Tommy's father is that one must realize, first, that we view Dr. Adler through Tommy's eyes. It is difficult to trust a character's view that is constantly in flux. For instance, his son often vilifies Adler, however, we must bring the villainy into question to truly comprehend the character of Adler. Furthermore, it is Tommy who often vilifies what his father tells him and, at times, seems even to misunderstand. This is not to say that Adler is not, at times, cruel, it is simply to say that his villainy and seeming tyrannical behavior is to be brought into question considering point of view.

By showing the motif of Wilhelm's confusion with society's infatuation with money and the way that money is treated, Bellow portrays isolation. “ You may plug along fifty years before you get anywheres. This way, in one jump, the world knows who you are.” (22). Tommy's estranged wife, Margaret, reinforces his feeling of alienation. she is presented to the reader through the mind of her husband, Tommy. Bellow describes Margaret as a bitch and castrating sadist. She is cruel, cold and disagreeable. Speaking of his wife, Tommy says to his father: “ Whenever she can hit me, she hit, and she

seems to live for that alone. ... She can do it at long distance” (47-8). As maintained by Tommy, Margaret is a vampire figure, motivated to remove air from his breath, and drink up his blood. She belongs to the sort of woman who “ eat green salad and drink human blood” (H, 56). Margaret would tell him he did not really want a divorce; he was afraid of it. He cried “ Take everything I’ve got, Margaret. Let me go to Reno. Don’t you want to marry again?” No. She went out with other men, but took his money. She lived in order to punish him. (94). Time and time again, the protagonist attempts to convince the reader of his innocence and justification and at the same time of his wife’s evil and wickedness. In his eyes, Margaret is no better than a dog. It is she who deprives him of everything: home, children and even the pet he adores; and “ she demands more and more, and still more” (47). He has to support her and the children beyond his financial ability. Tommy is obsessed with a feeling that she, like a ghost, is haunting him all the time. Like authoritarian Madeleine, Margaret orders him to neither send any postdated checks nor to skip any payments. This financial burden leads him to the verge of a crack-up. Again, one of the major themes of *Seize the Day*, is the isolation of human spirit in modern society. Tommy’s “ inner” world, his feelings and his human needs, are in constant battle with the external world of money and business. Tommy is an idealist surrounded by the pressures of the outside world. The urban landscape is the symbol that furthers his isolation, for he is always “ alone in a crowd.” Bellow wants the reader to understand this isolation and thus has almost the entire novel take place within Wilhelm’s head. We experience the back and forth of uncertainty, the wavering of watery thoughts, the sadness and frustration of being that person that is “ alone in the crowd.”

By using the above techniques in order to demonstrate Wilhelm's isolation in the modern world (rather than simply state) portray to the reader the many various ways in which Wilhelm is isolated in the novel. "I am at my most efficient when I don't need the fee. When I only love. Without a financial reward. I remove myself from the social influence. Especially money. The spiritual compensation is what I look for. Brining people into the here-and-now. The real universe. That's the present moment. The past is no good to us. The future is full of anxiety. Only the present is real-the here and now." (66). The functionalistic explanation is the only one. People come to the market to kill. They say, 'I'm going to make a killing.' It's not accidental. Only they haven't got the genuine courage to kill, and they erect a symbol of it. The money. They make a killing by fantasy." (69). Again, one of the major themes of *Seize the Day*, is the isolation of human spirit in modern society. Tommy's "inner" world, his feelings and his human needs, are in constant battle with the external world of money and business. Tommy is an idealist surrounded by the pressures of the outside world. The urban landscape is the symbol that furthers his isolation, for he is always "alone in a crowd." Bellow wants the reader to understand this isolation and thus has almost the entire novel take place within Wilhelm's head. We experience the back and forth of uncertainty, the wavering of watery thoughts, the sadness and frustration of being that person that is "alone in the crowd."