

University of Ottawa

Antagonist Influence on the Theme of Power and Powerlessness

Kaili Munelith Souksanh- 300074447

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Breid McIlkenny

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In the novella , “Seize the Day,” by Saul Bellow the themes of power/powerlessness and freedom are emphasized in being able to read all of Tommy Wilhelms thoughts. Throughout the book it is evident the effect that Tommy’s father and his financial advisor, Dr. Tamkin, have on his feelings of powerlessness and lack of freedom. These feelings and inner conflicts that Tommy experiences throughout the one day are important themes throughout the whole novella.

Dr. Alder and Dr. Tamkin are two antithetical characters that lend advice to Tommy Wilhelm that oftentimes ends up being opposing. Dr. Alder is Wilhelms father. After Tommy's mother passed away his father distanced himself greatly from his son and daughter. He is an extremely well respected doctor who is extremely wealthy. Dr. Alder refuses to, “Carry his children on his back,” and would rather leave Tommy to be depressed and struggling than to lend him a few hundred dollars. Out of desperation for money, due to his wife demanding money he does not have for child support, Tommy ends up trusting Dr. Tamkin with the last of his money to invest into the market. Tommy was advised not to befriend and trust Dr. Tamkin due to the lack of trust for him coming from majority of the community. He claims to be a doctor, a poet, the owner of a clinic, one of the inventors of an indestructible boat, and also a widower. Even after all this, Wilhelm still took a liking to him, leading to betrayal and the loss of everything he had left.

The theme of power and powerlessness is very evident in Wilhelms journey with love, mental health, and money throughout the novella. Even before meeting Dr. Tamkin, Tommy had a looming feeling of powerlessness. This stemmed from things such as his mental health, but mainly his father. When Tommy changed his name, his father refused to accept it causing him to feel stuck in his old ways when he was trying to create a new start. He says, “... there’s really

very little a man can change at will... Wilky was his inescapable self," (Bellow 21). This quotation demonstrates the power his father has over him, causing him to feel powerless; as well as the fact that his father refused to show any love or support to Tommy, but he still cared and loved his father. After his father advised him to avoid Dr. Tamkin, Wilhelm went anyways and gave him the last of his money, \$700, in hopes of its investment blowing up and giving him wealth. Signing away all of this money gave Dr. Tamkin power over him and his assets. Although they went into the investment as equals and convinced he would have a say in where his money went, he ended up with no money and no say. With lack of power comes lack of freedom.

Another important theme in this book is freedom or lack thereof. Tommy had felt his false sense of freedom in college, he leaves and goes to Hollywood hoping for a clean slate. After failing and losing a lot of money, Tommy realizes that he will never be free from his father due to his need for financial support. His father easily has the funds to help him but will not. Tommy always ends up coming back to his father and asking for support which he is always denied. Another false sense of freedom came from believing that Dr. Tamkin was coming into their investment equally.. At this point he did not have the freedom to choose what to do with the last of his money. When their rye stock had raised, Tommy wanted desperately to sell their stocks so that he would make back the money he invested in the first place but Dr. Tamkin refused. Their stocks plummeted and Tommy was left with close to nothing. He then realized the doctor was nowhere to be seen. Tommy was hoping that this money he could've gotten would be a turning point in turning his life around, no longer having to ask his father for help.

Throughout the novella the main character , and protagonist, Tommy Wilhelm feels powerlessness and lack of freedom due to his father and his financial advisor. Although they are large contributors in how he is feeling, at the end of the day it is truly Wilhelm that has the power to turn his life around and the only thing stopping him is himself.

Secondary Literary Academic Sources

Page 21 in Seize the Day by Saul Bellow

Bellow, Saul. *Seize the Day*. Penguin Books, 1979.

The contents of this page represent Tommy Wilhelms feelings of powerlessness and oppression due to his father very well. It also demonstrates well how being able to read out the protagonist's thoughts and see what is going through his head is useful in gaining insight on his emotions.

Encyclopedia Britannica article on Seize the Day

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Seize the Day." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 21 July 2011, www.britannica.com/topic/Seize-the-Day.

This article gave me an idea of the timeline of this novella and how it is only one day. There are a lot of flashbacks throughout the novel and it shows how much goes through Tommy's head in a single day.

Encyclopedia Britannica article of Saul Bellow

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Saul Bellow." *Encyclopædia Britannica*,

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1 Feb. 2019, www.britannica.com/biography/Saul-Bellow.

Reading about the other books Saul Bellow has written gives me insight on the purposes of the finer details in *Seize the Day*. Bellow writes the inner thoughts of his protagonists so we, as readers, can see their perspective on life. The characters around them serve as realists and wake up calls.