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### The Antagonist Influence on the Themes of Power and Powerlessness

The novella, "Seize the Day," by Saul Bellow takes place in the 1950's in New York. The book is written in the perspective of the protagonist, Tommy Wilhelm, allowing the readers to examine one day of his life and gain insight on the thoughts that are going on in his head. Wilhelms troubles are mainly focused around money. As written in an article by Andrew Jefchak, "The present and past of this novel are cluttered with money and money problems: financial dependance, financial independence," (Jefchak). In this time frame New York City was a heavily capitalist society. The dependence on money for happiness is very apparent in this novella and plays directly into the themes of power/powerlessness and freedom. The antithetical characters Dr. Alder and Dr. Tamkin are large influences on Wilhelms feelings of lack of freedom and powerlessness, constantly offering him opposing advice. Bellow's method of allowing readers to see things from the protagonist's point of view is crucial in seeing the antagonist's impact on Tommy Wilhelm's life. His thoughts are often overwhelming and begin to spiral into feeling hopeless and stuck. The interactions with Dr. Alder and Dr. Tamkin throughout the novel act as reality checks to the main character (Britannica).

Dr. Alder is Wilhelm's father. He is a well known doctor who is very financially well off but refuses to share any of his money due to his ideals of self sufficiency (Karl). After Tommy's mother passed away, Dr. Alder distanced himself greatly from his children, leaving them to

struggle and fend for themselves. Refusing to, "Carry his children on his back," Tommy is left barely getting by and depressed. As well as not being able to find a well paying job, Tommy's wife is also refusing divorce and demanding money from him that he does not have, worsening his financial situation. Wilhelm ends up resenting his father, but always ending up coming back to him even after the feelings of abandonment and being unable to make his father proud.

Tommy's financial desperation leads to Dr. Tamkins role in the story as somewhat of a financial advisor and therapist. Dr. Tamkin is known throughout the city as an impulsive liar. He claims to be a doctor, poet, the owner of a clinic, the inventor of an indestructible boat, and a widower. Even after all of these questionable claims, Wilhelm still trusts him and takes a liking to him. Tommy signs over the last of his money, \$700, to Dr. Tamkin to invest into the market, which is exactly what his father advised him not to do. Wilhelm is told that they are going into this investment as equals and believes he will have a say in what happens to his money. As his day progresses Dr. Tamkin continues to tell unbelievable stories which leads to Wilhelm questioning his decision and having increased anxiety. Dr. Alder and Dr. Tamkin offer Wilhelm opposing advice throughout the novella, leading to inner conflict on whose advice to trust. He chooses to trust Dr. Tamkin over his own father. In result, Tommy ends up being betrayed and losing everything he has left increasing his feelings of lack of freedom and powerlessness.

The theme of power and powerlessness is very evident in Wilhelms journey with money and mental health throughout this novella. Even without the external factors of Dr. Alder and Dr. tamkin, Tommy has always had a looming feeling of powerlessness. Wilhelm says, "... there's really very little that a man can change at will," (Bellow 21). Wilhelm tried constantly to take power over his own life. He moved away, changed his name, and tried to find careers but nothing

ever worked. He felt like a failure who had no power over his own life. These feelings were also emphasized by his relationship with his father. Tommy's financial situation always leads him back to his father, asking for money in a constant need-refusal cycle. After a fight with his father over lack of support Wilhelm says, "Dad thinks I'm too simple. But I'm not so simple as he thinks. What about his feelings? He doesn't forget death for one single second, and that's what makes him like this. And not only is death on his mind but through money he forces me to think about it, too. It gives him power over me," (Bellow 53). Part of Dr. Alders reasoning in denying support to his son is that he wants his children to be self-sufficient, especially because he is in his old age and nearing death. Dr. Alders' capability to financially support his son but refusing to leaves Wilhelm feeling powerless, especially because no matter what he does or how hard he tries to get his finances on track he always ends up coming back to his father for support. This lack of financial support from his father leads Wilhelm into trusting Dr. Tamkin. Tommy signed away the last of his money to Dr. Tamkin to invest. In a society where money means an individual's power and happiness, this was a great risk. Wilhelm had a realization of how much was really at stake here, the author says, "And Wilhelm realized that he was on Tamkin's back. It made him feel that he had virtually left the ground and was riding upon the other man. He was in the air. It was for Tamkin to take the steps," (Bellow 92). Tommy realized that he had signed away more than just his money but his power as well. Wilhelm took this all-or-nothing risk, hoping that his stocks would blow up and he would end up having enough money to live his life free and out of debt. This led to Wilhelm having no power over the remainder of his money and losing everything he had left. With powerlessness also comes lack of freedom.

Wilhelm has always felt that he lacks freedom in his life. He feels as though he is forever stuck in the position he is in now and that there would be no point to making changes at this point. Wilhelm thinks to himself, "But what shall I do now? More than half my life is over. More than half," (Bellow 50). Tommy thinks that the way he is feeling now is inescapable. Tommy struggled with lack of freedom for most of his life but as he got older other factors began to contribute. One of the main factors is Dr. Alder. After leaving college to pursue an acting career, Wilhelm changed his name. He was originally Wilhelm Alder. When he changed his name his father refused to respect it. Bellow writes, "Dr. Alder would not accept the change. Today he still called his son Wilky... But Wilky was his inescapable self," (Bellow 21). Changing his name represented a clean slate for Wilhelm. He was trying to turn his life around but his father in a way did not allow it. Dr. Alder continuing to call his son Wilky keeps his son feeling stuck in the past by denying Wilhelm of a fresh start. Wilhelm's feeling of lack of freedom are also influenced by Dr. Tamkin. Tamkin offers Tommy advice about his marriage, telling him not to play her game. This led Wilhelm to reflect on his own suffering, he thinks to himself, "Suffering is the only kind of life they are sure they can have, and if they quit suffering they're afraid they will have nothing," (Bellow 94). This realization gives insight on how Wilhelm has become comfortable and almost dependant on his suffering. It has become part of his identity. Tommy feels as though he has no freedom in regards to his feelings and stopping his suffering. In addition to these influences, Wilhelm has become discouraged from all of the failures in his past. The repetition of these failures as well as the influence of Dr. Alder and Dr. Tamkin contribute to Tommy's feeling of lack of freedom in what happens in his life.

Throughout the novella the protagonist, Tommy Wilhelm, experiences inner, and external conflicts due to the lack of power and freedom that he feels. The characters, Dr. Alder and Dr. Tamkin, offer him opposing advice throughout his day about how to relieve his financial suffering and improve his life. Listening to, and ignoring the advice of these influential characters end up in Tommy's betrayal. In the span of only one day, Tommy seeks desperate help from several different individuals in regards of his financial situation and putting his trust in others. At the end of the day, Tommy Wilhelm is the only character who has the power to change his life. To regain his power and freedom Wilhelm would have to free himself of dependency from his father and Tamkin and ignore the two antithetical characters constant advice on ways to live his life. Throughout the novella Wilhelms hardships and betrayal due to other characters is highlighted but Tommy is the one to blame for his own suffering.

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