

An Analysis of the Funeral Scene in *Seize the Day*: An Incomplete Journey of Awakening

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Abstract: This paper reexamines the funeral scene in Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*, challenging the critical reading that it marks Tommy Wilhelm's transformative awakening. Drawing on Kierkegaard's theory of despair in *The Sickness unto Death*, it argues that Wilhelm's breakdown constitutes an incomplete journey toward self-realization. Wilhelm remains entrenched in the second form of despair—not wanting to be himself—regresses to the aesthetic stage when confronted with ethical demands, and fails to achieve a sustained transformation in his way of life. His emotional outburst, though intense, reflects self-rejection rather than a genuine breakthrough. Ultimately, the funeral scene embodies what Kierkegaard calls the “trembling of despair,” leaving Wilhelm trapped in the sickness unto death without attaining authentic awakening.

Keywords: Saul Bellow; *Seize the Day*; Funeral scene

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Published in 1958, *Seize the Day* is a novella by acclaimed American writer Saul Bellow, earning the author the nomination for National Book Award. This short novel examines one day in the unhappy life of the protagonist Tommy Wilhelm, who has fallen from a state of barely acceptable respectability to unemployment caused by impulsiveness, unsatisfactory and stressful marriage, and bankruptcy due to misplaced trust. All these elements drive him to the brink of despair. When Willy discovers he is cheated by Doctor Tamkin and rushes out in search of the liar, he stumbles into a funeral and bursts out into tears. Many critics regard it as the climax of the protagonist's transformation. For example, Zhu Ping mentions that the old Wilhelm has died, and a new Wilhelm of different quality is about to be born. (93) However, in this essay, I will shift the focus to the incompleteness of this transformation by employing Kierkegaard's theory of “despair”.

1. Kierkegaard's Theory of “Despair”

In the book *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard elaborates on the topic of despair, in which the author regards despair as a deadly disease. This kind of disease can also be called a disease “in the process of causing death,” for those who are in despair do not even have the hope of choosing death; they are doomed to be in a state of continuous dying. According to Kierkegaard, it is believed that the issue of despair was significant because it was intimately related to the existential predicament of every living person and was an inescapable issue for everyone. (*Sickness* 52) Whether a person was aware of this state of despair or vehemently denied being in despair, everyone lived in despair to some extent.

There are three forms of despair, including “being unconscious in despair of having a self, not wanting in despair to be oneself, and wanting in despair to be oneself”. (Kierkegaard *Sickness* 43) The first form is the unconsciousness of “despair”. If a person lives without realizing they are in a state of despair, it is suggested that the material world usually holds more weight for them than the spiritual one. In this case, they prefer to exist within the illusory sensory world. In terms of the relationship between the self and despair, despair can take on two basic forms: “not wanting in despair to be oneself”, and “wanting in despair to be oneself”. Firstly, “not wanting in despair to be oneself” will be examined. Suppose a person wants to become someone else, that means they are rejecting their current self. Even if a person achieves their desire to become someone else, this is still a form of despair. If they fail to achieve it, then the greatest despair is their inability to tolerate themselves. Assuming the relationship between the self and despair is controlled by The Other, a different form of despair arises. By their own strength alone, they cannot contend with all the forces that have shaped them. At this point, they have recognized their state of despair and wish to become their true self, but fail to do so. Among the latter two forms of despair, “wanting in despair to be

oneself” takes precedence. It is only in this form of despair that the self becomes conscious of its act of resistance and reaches a better understanding of both despair and self-awareness.

According to Kierkegaard, the stage of life can be divided into three: the Aesthetic, the Ethical, and the Religious. The Aesthetic stage is characterized by the pursuit of immediate pleasure, novelty, and avoidance of boredom, that is life lacks deeper commitment. The Ethical stage involves embracing responsibility, duty, universal moral laws, and committed relationships (like marriage). (*Either/ Or* 193) The highest, the Religious stage, requires a passionate, personal “leap of faith” beyond universal ethics, accepting paradox and a direct relationship with God. More importantly, progression isn’t linear. Facing profound doubt, despair, or the demands of faith, an individual may fall back into the aesthetic stage’s patterns, circling its pleasures without finding true meaning. (Chao 17-22)

Kierkegaard believes that true awakening is not just a cognitive process but also an active one. The individual must shatter the illusions of self-deception and confront their state of despair. This involves a fundamental transformation of self-awareness through a confrontation with death and nihilism. The individual must recognize that true happiness and meaning are not obtained through external success or the approval of others, but through the realization of one’s own spirituality. This process requires continuous practice and effort from the individual. Ultimately, the individual can embody a new mode of existence through action, achieving true self-realization and freedom.

2. The Funeral Scene in *Seize the Day*

In *Seize the Day*, the protagonist Tommy Wilhelm is a man in his mid-thirties, struggling with financial and emotional turmoil. He is separated from his wife and needs to pay a high amount of child support every month for his two children. Meanwhile, he is financially dependent on his father, Dr. Adler. Given such circumstances, Wilhelm is desperate for earning money in a quick way. He naively believed Dr. Tamkin’s words and invested all his money - 700 dollars in futures trading. He believes this investment will solve all his problems and restore his sense of self-worth. However, things did not go as he has hoped. Wilhelm lost all his money in this investment and Dr. Tamkin also disappeared. On the brink of despair, Wilhelm visits his father multiple times, seeking both financial and emotional support. However, his father is cold and dismissive, further exacerbating Wilhelm’s sense of isolation and failure. He also tries to reconnect with his estranged wife, but their interactions are tense and unfulfilling. It is in this state of desperation and emotional exhaustion that Wilhelm wanders into a funeral home.

A faithful depiction of the appearance of the corpse is provided in the novel. It is described with detached detail: “gray-haired” yet “not old,” possessing a “long” face and a “bony nose, slightly, delicately twisted,” with brows raised in the “final thought” of his life. Moreover, mortuary preparation, including the “formal shirt,” “tie and silk lapels,” and “powdered skin”, creates a surface layer of respectability, presenting a figure that looks so proper and decent. However, Wilhelm perceives the disturbing truth beneath this surface: “only a little beneath so - black... so fallen in the eyes.” (Bellow 127-128) This stark contrast, heightened by the overwhelming sensory environment filled with different sorts of flowers and heavy sea-like music, deepens the impression of death in Tommy’s mind and laid the groundwork for his subsequent breakdown.

As to the reaction of surrounding mourners, they indicate detached curiosity and conventional restraint, emphasizing society’s distance from real grief. They move in a line with “veiled looks,” their responses limited to impersonal whispers and speculation about Wilhelm’s identity rather than the deceased. With Wilhelm’s countinous crying, they keep viewing his breakdown with strange eyes and interpret its intensity solely through the lens of presumed social closeness. Their restrained behavior highlights the chasm between socially acceptable mourning and the profound reality of suffering Wilhelm embodies.

When the perspective is shifted to Wilhelm, his reaction can be seen as a devastating physical and psychological eruption, transforming the stranger’s funeral into a mirror for his own dramatic despair. Initially struck by the dead man’s meditative look, his grief rapidly escalates far beyond the occasion. As his crying progresses from

soft to uncontrollable, he regarded this bout of crying as an outlet for his emotions. Apart from the outward act of crying, the cries within his heart are even more significant. His psychological outcry further clarified the reasons for his breakdown, from financial ruin, paternal estrangement with his father to his own paternal guilt with his two children and marital collapse. His raw and isolating cryings make his private agony horrifyingly public, revealing the funeral's true function for him: a brutal confrontation with his own miserable life.

3.The Reasons for Wilhelm's Failure to Achieve a Complete Awakening

(1)*The Continuity of Despair*: Kierkegaard identifies three forms of despair: being unconscious in despair of having a self, not wanting in despair to be oneself, and wanting in despair to be oneself. Wilhelm's behavior in the funeral scene and throughout the whole novel indicates that he is primarily stuck in the second form of despair - not wanting to be himself.

Wilhelm has a deep - seated dissatisfaction with who he is. He once had dreams of becoming an actor, a dream that was filled with the promise of creative fulfillment and public acclaim. But life has led him down a different path, working as a stockbroker. This career shift is not driven by a genuine interest or aptitude for the financial world, but rather by the pressures and expectations of life, which leads him a failure businessman. In the funeral scene, surrounded by the mourners and the atmosphere of loss, Wilhelm's inner turmoil is palpable. He shows a scornful attitude to his current self, who is struggling with financial and personal issues. This kind of self dissatisfaction clearly manifestates that Wilhelm is in the second form of despair.

He denies who he is and aspires to be someone else, someone more successful, decent and respected. The funeral tears, while intense, are not a confrontation with his authentic self but an expression of self-rejection. He weeps not only for the dead stranger but for the accumulated wreckage of his own life. This outburst is the culmination of his "not wanting" to bear the burden of being Wilhelm Adler. However, this rejection does not bring him closer to understanding his true self or finding a way to become the person he longs to be. Instead, it keeps him trapped in a cycle of despair. (Song 38&44) He is unable to reconcile his ideal self with his actual self, and this disconnection prevents him from moving forward and achieving an awakening.

(2)*The Limitations of Self - Cognition*: Kierkegaard's stages of existence - aesthetic, ethical, and religious - provide a framework for understanding Wilhelm's limitations in self - cognition. In this novel, Wilhelm is in the process of transitioning from the aesthetic stage to the ethical stage, but after encountering the accident, he goes back to the aesthetic stage.

In the ethical stage, individuals have the awareness to embrace responsibility, duty, and committed relationships. In the first half of the novel, there are seemingly some moments of potential "Ethical" awareness, primarily driven by external pressure and internal guilt. He feels the weight of his financial obligations to his family and experiences genuine remorse over his failures as a husband and father. Thus, he recognizes abstract principles of duty and responsibility. However, these moments are unsustainable.

When faced with difficulties in reality, Wilhelm seeks refuge in the aesthetic stage rather than engaging with the ethical demands of his situation. For instance, his financial troubles and strained relationships could prompt him to take ethical actions, such as making responsible decisions about his money or working to mend his family bonds. Instead, he becomes overwhelmed by his emotions and the immediate pressures, losing sight of the ethical dimension of his problems.

Wilhelm's tears at the funeral further confirm his regression to the primary stage. The tears acts as a surrender to the immediacy of sorrow and self-pity. It represents not an ethical confrontation with his choices or a commitment to change, but an emotional release that temporarily mitigate the pressure without addressing the underlying causes. He becomes absorbed in the sensation of grief itself, which is highly consistent with the characteristics of the first stage.

This collapse back into the aesthetic demonstrates the profound limitation of Wilhelm's self-knowledge: he

recognizes his suffering and failures, but he lacks the “ethical will” to translate this awareness into consistent action, enduring commitments, and the construction of a stable, responsible self. Consequently, his knowledge remains superficial, tied to fluctuating emotions rather than grounding principles.

(3) *The Lack of Transformation in Way of Life*: From Kierkegaard’s perspective, for an awakening to be genuine, there must be a transformation in the individual’s way of life. Wilhelm, however, remains stuck in a pattern of behavior that does not lead to meaningful change, showing us only a breakdown instead of a breakthrough.

In the funeral scene, Wilhelm’s weeping might seem like a moment of realization. However, this exclamation does not translate into a sustained and purposeful transformation. Wilhelm does not demonstrate in the novel the ability and confidence to break free from his current predicament. His crushing financial debt remains, his estrangement from his wife and children persists and his dependence on figures like his father (or another Tamkin) is inevitable, thereby his core despair remains unaddressed. (T. Devaraja and Dr. G. Manivannan 2844) He remains in a state of spiritual breakdown without finding a way to convert this breakdown into a breakthrough.

In addition, there is no indication that a shift will happen in his attitude or approach to life that would indicate a genuine awakening. Instead, he remains mired in the same chaotic and disorderly existence. Without a coherent and lasting change in his way of life, Wilhelm’s momentary expressions of despair or desire for change do not amount to a genuine awakening. He continues to be trapped in the quagmire of despair, unable to find a way out through meaningful and transformative action.

The funeral tears are not the symbol of a new self but the convulsions of a self still tragically, trapped in the “sickness unto death” - a despair characterized by weakness, self-rejection, and the inability to will oneself into authentic being.

4. Conclusion

The funeral scene in Saul Bellow’s *Seize the Day* is a critical moment that exposes Tommy Wilhelm’s profound despair but does not catalyze a complete awakening. Wilhelm’s intense emotional outburst at the funeral, though genuine, lacks the transformative power needed for true self-realization. He remains in the second stage of despair, far from reaching the third; he attempts to regress to the aesthetic stage to evade the responsibilities of reality; and he lacks the capacity to implement a consistent and enduring transformation in his behavior. Ultimately, Wilhelm’s experience at the funeral is more akin to Kierkegaard’s “trembling of despair,” an instinctive reaction to the ultimate truth of death, rather than a profound alteration of his self-awareness and mode of existence. This trembling, while powerful, does not lead to the core changes necessary for true awakening. Thus, despite the potential for transformation, Wilhelm remains trapped in his despair, unable to achieve the self-realization that could liberate him from his suffering.

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