

An Analysis of Dangling Urbanites from the Plights of “Modern Job” in *Seize the Day*

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Saul Bellow’s novel *Seize the Day* combines the psychological narrative of Jewish immigrants in the “Happy Age” of the United States and the daily life narrative of modern New York urbanites, revealing the living state of modern urbanites—powerless to the outside world, nowhere to live in the material and spiritual world. They have an unresolved personal pursuit and a “dangling” destiny, which alludes to the problems plaguing modern urban people and the decay of American society. By comparing the characteristics and fate of the protagonist Wilhelm with the character Job in the Bible, this article helps to deepen the understanding of the plights of the protagonist as “Modern Job”, and realize the influence of the American urban society on Jewishness and personal survival in that period.

Keywords: modern Job, plights, New York City, dangling

Introduction

Saul Bellow is an American Jewish writer in the 20th century who has won the Nobel Prize for Literature. His novel *Seize the Day* is regarded as “arguably Bellow’s tightest, most perfectly executed fiction” (Pinsker, 1995, p. 90). This novel combines the psychological narrative of Jewish immigrants in the “Happy Age” of the United States and the daily life narrative of modern New York urbanites, revealing the characteristics of modern American society and the living state of most modern urbanites—powerless to the outside world, nowhere to live in the material and spiritual world. They have an unresolved personal pursuit and a “dangling” destiny, which alludes to the problems plaguing modern urban people and the decay of American society. By comparing the characteristics and fate of the protagonist Wilhelm with the character Job in the Bible, this paper helps to deepen the understanding of the plights and tragedy of the protagonist as “Modern Job” (Guo, 2007, p. 109). Having a glimpse into the influence of the American urban society on Jewishness and personal survival in the “Happy Age”, we can proceed with the explorations on the existential problems of the dangling people (Zhuang, 2009, p. 11). It is expected to arouse people’s reflection on the change of Americans’ values brought about by urban development, the concern for the fate of the Jewish nation, and the reflection on the self-realization of modern urban people.

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“Modern Job” in *Seize the Day*

The story of *Seize the Day* happens on the eve of Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, and the beginning of the New Year, implying Wilhelm’s “rebirth”. Originally trained to be a Talmudic scholar, Bellow deftly fused this firm Jewish spirit into a common man’s struggling with the hardships and for the truth of life. “Bellow’s work reaffirms the sanctity of life and strives to rebuild the foundations of society by asserting the world’s need for morality in order to return to Jewish humanism” (Goldman, 1992, p. 10).

The Jewish character Wilhelm in the novel has many similarities with Job in the Bible. They are both loyal and righteous, faithful to God, and they achieve the same life philosophy. Unfortunately, under various influences, Wilhelm lost himself in the pursuit of ideals after encountering various trials. Ultimately, there was no happy ending.

In a manner of speaking, he is given as many miseries and troubles as Job has faced, whether those trials are passive or what he is voluntarily seeking. He eventually sobers up, “This rediscovery and reorientation of Tommy’s life expresses the very traditional paradox that finding the self means relinquishing primary concern for the self in favor of concern for all” (Stout, 1987, p. 373); but unlike Job in the Bible, he doesn’t achieve the life he wants and obtain compassion from others. He gets lost in this grand and gilded New York City.

From what is demonstrated above, we can find that Job in the *Bible* and Wilhelm in *Seize the Day* have so many common grounds but with different endings, Job being rewarded, while Wilhelm being lost and dangling. If the name Job can remind us of a figure who is faithful, suffering, and eager for a better self, then we can give a nickname “Modern Job” to Tommy Wilhelm. They are similar in their own stories and achieve the same life philosophy: only through the baptism of death, can they declare a dignified dedication to a new form of life. Stripped of every hope of worldly success, Wilhelm nevertheless achieves, in the novel’s closing line, “the consummation of his heart’s ultimate need”, which has been made clear from the outset, when Wilhelm prays for forgiveness and release from the “clutch” of his troubles “into a different life” (Frank, 1995, p. 79). For this reason, *Seize the Day* is precisely such a modern book of Job, and the promise of salvation is matched by “the ability to herald a new phase in the formation of a new advantage, or to begin to refine a new essence” (Guo, 2007, p. 99). And furthermore, perhaps some of our modern citizens are like “Modern Job”. So, figuring out what are “Modern Job”’s plights and the reasons can benefit our adolescents in the long run.

Analysis of “Modern Job”’s Plights

Hunting Through the U.S. Under Strain—Plights in Physical Space

Wilhelm’s plights dwell especially on the urban space—New York City and Hollywood in California. In Hollywood, California, he has been cheated by a pimp Maurice and lost his Hollywood dream. It nearly costs 20 years for him to struggle in California and fix his wrong decision. Then, after the experience of broken dream in Hollywood, he comes back to New York City. In New York, there are many things which make him more and more anxious and frustrated. In the Gloriana Hotel, he is on his another distress stage—being forced to live apart from his wife and children, unemployed, no stable income, no support and love from his family, even the disappointment from being turned down by his father in a gloomy massage room in New York. And in the closed telephone booth, with sweat on the forehead, it comes to a family dilemma from his wife Margaret, which forces him to pay attention to his son while he is “stolen” without a penny by his friend Dr. Tamkin in the hustle and

bustle of stock market. The stock market is full of people, but the brilliance of humanity is absent. “The room was always crowded. Everyone talked. Only at the front could you hear the flutter of the wheels within the board” (Bellow, 2003, p. 75).

Wilhelm grew up in New York, but he doesn’t have any sense of belonging there at all. Wilhelm once says that he is not used to New York City anymore, which is always related to painful and troubled experiences. He tells his father that he misses the country life. In contrast, in fast-paced New York City, there are not only the harsh conditions Wilhelm observed—even the foul smell of the tidal River rose so high that it smelled like mopping water.

Wilhelm has always piously and diligently tried to adapt to American society, uttering cries and even changing his name. Perhaps, the question of “how to be a somebody in cities?” also strains him. Unfortunately, his dreams still ended in failure.

Frail Self-seeking Loser—Plights in Social Space

Wilhelm, frail but still in constant search of his true soul and self-actualization, has relatively tense relationships with a variety of people in New York society—a strained and awkward father-son relationship, an apathetic husband-wife relationship, a balked relationship with his son, and his deceptive relationship with Dr. Tamkin. Wilhelm’s goal is mainly to be a good and satisfying role to others. However, the people he trusts and values highly are usually those who poison his dreams, ruining his self-respect and self-confidence. Despite being favored and respected, he is ostracized by those around him. At the same time, he is abandoned and despised.

In the last chapter of the novel, when Wilhelm is cornered and he has been ripped off by Tamkin, he obtains nothing even any concerns and sympathy from his father. On the contrary, his father pours a bowl of cold water to him. His dad thinks that Wilhelm is lazy and plans to inherit his asset after his death. “Look out, Wilky, you’re tiring my patience very much. I’ll see you dead, Wilky. Go away from me now. It’s torture for me to look at you, you slob!” cried Dr Adler” (Bellow, 2003, p. 106). Before that, Wilhelm has been tricked by a pimp called Maurice Venice, a man who is trusted by Wilhelm and makes Wilhelm lose his Hollywood gamble for 15 years eventually. “Wilhelm found out that Venice had indeed been employed by Kaskaskia Films but that he had evidently made use of the connection to organize a ring of call girls” (Bellow, 2003, p. 20).

Anxiety and Masochism Under Unfed Needs—Plights in Spiritual Space

Wilhelm is an anxious masochist whose needs have dried up with ascending mental illness. Above all, there are some clues which show that he is getting stuck in his own miserable thoughts and he becomes diffident, suffocated, restless, and anxious. When getting together with Rubin, Wilhelm covers his real feelings with a quick shift from gloomy attention to the panting laugh which entirely changed his face. Wilhelm even doesn’t realize his depression until he intends to pick up a weapon and gives himself a shot. Wilhelm’s conduct is a model of the passive-aggressive personality. Usually he cannot express his feelings, even though he is often overwrought (Hattenhauer, 1995, p. 265).

Next, what cannot be ignored is that Wilhelm has 100% real mental illness as a psychological masochist. His illness is still spreading and developing because of the increase of his annoyance and frustration. Because he has been taking drugs for a long time, and the drugs were varied and complex more and more often. “You take too

many pills of every kind—first stimulants and then depressants, anodynes followed by analeptics, until the poor organism doesn’t know what’s happened. Then the luminal won’t put people to sleep, and the Pervitin or Benzedrine won’t wake them. God knows! These things get to be as serious as poisons, and yet everyone puts all their faith in them” (Bellow, 2003, p. 29).

In the end, he is not only a middle-aged man with severe mental illness, but also a man who is ransacked by his friends and even the whole society corporeally. Even he cannot keep a penny in his pocket that can make him feel safe and satiated. Those points about his spiritual plights also show the dangling features which we will demonstrate in next part.

Characteristics of Dangling Urbanites in New York City

Tommy Wilhelm can be aptly described by the title of another novel from Bellow, *Dangling Man*. Many of Bellow’s long novels are marked by the theme of “dangling”, in other words, searching but being stranded. Actually, continuous searching for a suitable place to live has become a lifelong career for Jews in history (Zhuang, 2009, p. 26). The encounter of Wilhelm with the modern society in *Seize the Day* is a “Modern Job” story, which Bellow develops by describing the external behaviors of his characters while placing greater emphasis on characterization and the exploration of their inner spiritual anguish (Liu, 2005, pp. 5-7). Wilhelm lived in the 1950s’ New York City, from his story and living situation we can realize that he is forced to be dangling in New York City no matter how hard he tries to avoid such a state.

Bellow’s works reflect “the mutating, often torturous cultural, and intellectual character of his times” (Aarons, 2017, p. 1). Wilhelm is just one of the representatives of dangling urbanites in the 1950s. After the Great Depression, the United States has become a world of money and materialism—a world where people want to make money in the stock market and expect to be famous in Hollywood society and exhaust their energies in an orgy of material pleasure and materialism. Thus, a lot of Americans became lost in their fantasies or blindness, being in wandering and uncertain state. Actually, Bellow used to obscurely express the dangling state of Jews and New York citizens with his critical insight. Therefore, what keywords can we find about the dangling urbanites from this novel, the character Wilhelm, and the reality?

From the plights of Tommy Wilhelm, we can see dangling has the metaphors of searching and wandering. In the Oxford dictionary, dangling is explained with two kinds of meanings: one is about people’s uncertain psychological state, the other is about the illiberal physical state that people are restrained by a rope at one end. To summarize, the urbanites dangling in New York have mainly four features: first, searching and wandering consistently; second, psychologically uncertain; third, physically handicapped as restrained by a rope; and fourth, it can be related to the survival crisis and spiritual crisis at a specific spot such as super-big city New York or Beijing.

Conclusion

From the comparison between the character Job in the Bible and the character Wilhelm in *Seize the Day*, we can see the similarities between them in their sincerity, sufferings, pursuit and loss. Wilhelm is an upright and honest Jewish American citizen who pursues his personal value constantly in the bottom of his heart. Unfortunately, under various influences, Wilhelm encounters various trials and losses in the pursuit of the ideal

road, but does not achieve a happy ending like Job in the Bible. By tapping into this subject, it comes to a conclusion that the temptation of the supremacy of money makes affection disappear, the sense of history and Jewish nation’s virtues disappear, and the search for personal value and dignity mostly ends in failure and pain. Although there is no practical solution to the dilemmas of dangling urbanites like Wilhelm, his sense of community and surge of the feeling of concern seem to reveal Saul Bellow’s ideas toward how to get out of the dangling situation.

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