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*Theme of victimization and alienation in saul-bellow's  
'Seize the Day'*

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**Abstract:**

Bellow's work displays a deep Jewish humanism—a concern to affirm mankind, to explore moral and metaphysical questions, to conform the characteristic Jewish themes of victimization and alienation, and to gain in a material world for transcendental perceptions. The main conflicts in *Seize the Day* are mainly between father/son, man/society, and husband/wife. He has seized the day in that he has finally learned the lesson of that day: to recognize his connection to others and to sympathize with them in their shared suffering and mortality.

**Keywords:**

Humanism, Jewish themes, Victimization, Alienation, American myth of success.

The award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Saul Bellow in 1976 honoured both his humanism and his literary achievement in the field of contemporary American fiction. Rich in political and philosophical ideas, and touched with the heritage of modernism, Bellow's work displays a deep Jewish humanism—a concern to affirm mankind, to explore moral and metaphysical questions, to conform the characteristic Jewish themes of victimization and alienation, and to gain in a material world for transcendental perceptions.

Bellow's heroes are concerned to defend their inner claim to self against a modernizing world where man seems to have lost his place, and where beyond the individual is the massive, determining transforming city, the world of human diminution; they are often driven by mental and emotional desire to reforge their place with others, with the human condition, with the universe in all its scale (Bradbury 169-170).

*Seize the Day* (1956), the author's fourth novel, has often been acclaimed his most "perfect" piece of fiction. It is yet another parable about the quest for the human. Like his earlier fellow protagonists, Tommy Wilhelm, the protagonist of this novella, is driven to the craters of the spirit to discover his fate. Bellow presents him as "a visionary sort of animal, who has to believe that he can know why he exists, though he has never seriously tried to find out why."\* *The novella enacts the process by which Tommy Wilhelm arrives at the true meaning of his existence.*

*Seize the Day* recounts one climactic day in the life of Tommy Wilhelm, a man who has failed in his attempts to accommodate himself to American society and desperately tries to disguise his deep need for authority and truth. The *Novella* takes Wilhelm through a painful rejection by his father and a betrayal by the phony psychologist/investment counselor Dr. Tamkin to a cathartic final scene in which Wilhelm is finally able to experience his deep anguish and his sense of human sympathy at the funeral of a stranger.

The opening paragraph, deceptively simple in its use of casual detail, begins:

When it came to concealing his troubles, Tommy Wilhelm was not less capable than the next fellow. So at least he thought, and there was a certain moment of evidence to back him up. He had once been an actor – no, not quite, an extra – and he knew what acting should be. Also, he was smoking a cigar, and when a man is smoking a cigar, wearing a hat, he has an advantage; it is harder to find out how he feels. [3]

Tommy Wilhelm, though down on his luck, tries to maintain his dignity and the crisis of a failing marriage and career and the embittered disappointment of a domineering, unloving

father. In desperation, he gives his small saving to Dr. Tamkin who is a dubious character, half charlatan, and half seer. Tamkin loses money on commodities and disappears. Wilhelm goes out in the hot New York streets to search for him. Instead of finding Tamkin, he gets jostled into a funeral parlour by a crowd of mourners, and walking by the dead man's casket, he sees his own symbolic death.

Tommy, like all Bellow protagonists, has trouble determining how to cope with the modern world. One of the symbols of Tommy's problems and those of modern society generally, is his relationship with his father. Tommy's father lives in the same hotel and is disgusted with his son's weakness. He refuses to give the one thing Tommy wants most--sympathy. Tommy makes one last grasp for success by investing in the commodities market under the dubious influence of Dr. Tamkin. His money quickly evaporates and with it his hopes. At this lowest point, however, Tommy has an epiphany.

Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day* is both inspired and burdened by the American myth of success. At the age of twenty, he changes his name from Wilky Adler to Tommy Wilhelm, a name signifying the person he dreams of becoming. He thereby recalls James Gatz, who by calling himself Jay Gatsby thinks he can conjure up the man Daisy Buchanan will find irresistible. Unlike Gatsby, however, Wilhelm has not fled his past; he confronts it daily through his father, who still calls him "Wilky". Wilhelm has "never succeeded in feeling like Tommy, and in his soul had always remained Wilky (25). But he remains optimistic, though the distance between the man he is and the man he aspires to be is an endless source of despair.

Having quit his longtime job, left his wife and children, Wilhelm seems intent on unburdening himself of the attachments and responsibilities that limit his freedom. He shares with Huck Finn the belief that personal autonomy somehow leads to personal fulfillment. But is far from content when the story begins, sensing that "a huge trouble long presaged but till now formless was due" (4). Wilhelm is bewildered by the fact that he has gone to such lengths to set himself free yet still feels trapped. Tamkin's assertion that we are all slaves to our "pretender souls" only further confuses the issue for Wilhelm. Is freedom a state of mind, rather than a description of external conditions? He cannot be sure. Just as he can never be sure if Tamkin's pronouncements are revelation or simply a means by which Tamkin gets what he wants.

The main conflicts in *Seize the Day* are mainly between father/son, man/society, and husband/wife. Tommy Wilhelm "was not really so slovenly" as his father takes him to be, for in some aspects, "he even had a certain delicacy," and he still has faith in himself (47). He naively thinks that his father should and would help him with real money after his persistent

pleading as a miserable son and a victim without luck, but Dr. Adler apparently thinks otherwise.

Dr. Adler, of course is cold and distant. He prides himself on being independent and on refusing to let anyone depend on him, and he advises his son to do likewise: “I want nobody on my back. Get off! And I give you the same advice, Wilky, carry nobody on your back.” Even when his son comes to him desperate for help, he refuses to budge from his rule of not lending money to his children. Wilhelm’s plaintive suggestion that “it isn’t all a question of money—there are other things a father can give to a son” only annoys his father more. Dr. Adler resists any suggestion that he should support his son, financially or emotionally, and when Wilhelm suggests that this means his father is “not a kind man,” Dr. Adler explodes in rage: “You want to make yourself into my cross. But I am not going to pick up a cross. I’ll see you dead, Wilky, by Christ, before I let you do that to me” (68).

But while Dr. Adler is far from an ideal and loving father, the failed relationship is not entirely his fault. If Dr. Adler is an ungenerous father, Wilhelm is a self-centered son. He mourns his father’s impending death not for his father’s sake, but for his own: “When he dies, I’ll be robbed, like. I’ll have no more father” (57-58). Just as he saw only his own needs and not Mr. Rappaport’s, so he sees his father’s death as a loss for himself and not for his father. He notes that he will be robbed of a father, but he does not consider that his father will be robbed of life. Wilhelm is, with his father as with others, unable or unwilling to sympathize. He thinks only of how their lives and deaths impact him.

His frustration with and isolation from his father lead Wilhelm to search for another father in Tamkin. He admits this substitution to himself when he thinks, “I wouldn’t turn to Tamkin ... if I could turn to him. At least Tamkin sympathizes with me and tries to give a hand, whereas Dad doesn’t want to be disturbed” (7).

Once again, however, Wilhelm’s mistake is in focusing too much on himself and his own needs. So wrapped up is he in his own need for advice, sympathy, and support, that he readily accepts Tamkin’s apparent attempts to help him, assuming them to be trustworthy and sincere. Focused, as usual, on his own needs he fails to consider that Tamkin might have needs of his own which he is using the desperate Wilhelm to achieve. He is so anxious to make some money in the commodities market, and, at the same time, so hungry for connection with another human, that he accepts Tamkin’s offers of help at face value. He does not question the fact that Tamkin puts less money into the investment, while maintaining all of the control of their joint venture. Nor does he realize that Tamkin continually tricks him into paying the bill for their meals.

Tamkin is a mix of the comic and the villainous. He cheats Tommy not only out of his money but also out of his beliefs in the possibility of honesty. Even when he finally admits to himself that Tamkin is a charlatan, he continues to trust him:

Tamkin was a charlatan, and furthermore he was desperate. And furthermore, Wilhelm had always known this about him. But he appeared to have worked it out at the back of his mind that Tamkin for thirty or forty years had gotten through many a tight place that he would get through this crisis too and bring him, Wilhelm, to safety also. 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 (60).

So great is his desire to depend on someone else that he continues to trust Tamkin even when he knows him to be a con-artist, and so complete is his self-centered need that he cannot believe that an equally needy man will not help him. Though Wilhelm himself is seldom able to recognize other's needs, he assumes that his own needs will be as important to others as their own. His inability to recognize or sympathize with the needs of others leads him to trust Tamkin, and after they lose their money in the market, Wilhelm realizes to his horror that it was he who was carrying Tamkin, and not the other way around.

At the novel's end, Wilhelm is sinking toward a breakdown, sped on by a sudden, brutal eruption from his father. Bereft of money, love, friends and hope, Wilhelm wanders into a stranger's funeral where "the heavy sea-like music came up to his ears," stops before the open coffin and begins weeping uncontrollably, "deeper than sorrow, through torn sobs and cries toward the consummation of his heart's ultimate need" (73). Tommy weeps for the man, for himself, and for the human condition. He is transported beyond his own particular problems to a cathartic suffering for all mankind. Bellow sees the problems of the modern world as essentially matters of the spirit. In a high-pressure, pluralistic, threatening, materialistic world, people must find a way to live and to remain human. Tommy does this by recognizing that human beings, for all their weaknesses--or perhaps because of them--must accept and share one another's burdens. Bellow offers this important response to the modern condition in a comic tale that is a contemporary classic, one which later helped win for him the Nobel Prize.

Only in the final scene of the novel is Wilhelm finally able to sympathize with another human being, and then it is with a corpse: "He sobbed loudly and his face grew distorted and hot, and the tears stung his skin. A man--another human creature, was what first went through his thoughts" (73). His thoughts then drift to other people, and to his own problems, but the focus is different now. He is not focused on his own needs to the exclusion of others. He thinks of

his children, his mistress, his father, and when his thoughts turn to himself, he is pondering over not only what he himself needs, but also what he can do for them. “Oh, Father, what do I ask of you: What’ll I do about the kids—Tommy, Paul? My children” (73).

The recognition of the needs of others comes after he has been able to look at “a man—another human being” and see not his own needs, but rather his connection to the corpse. He, like the dead man in front of him, will die. That is what connects him not only to the man in the coffin, but also to his father, his sons, and all others. They all share the burden of mortality. For the first time in the book Wilhelm is able to truly think of others, and of his connection to them, rather than of how they can help him. He realizes at last that “his heart’s ultimate need” is to feel connected to others, and it is finally in his mourning for a fellow human, that he is able to achieve the consummation of that need. He has seized the day in that he has finally learned the lesson of that day: to recognize his connection to others and to sympathize with them in their shared suffering and mortality.

*Seize the Day*, which looks both backward and forward, occupies a unique place in Bellow’s career, it is also a powerful commentary on distinctly American ideals. Robert R. Dutton rightly puts it, “*Seize the Day* is a clear example of what Bellows means when he urged the novelist to “depict man as subangelic, or as having the power to overcome ignominy”, for the protagonist Tommy Wilhelm has such an ability to arise “to some positive apprehension of what it means to be a human being”.

A parable of hope for modern urban man, *Seize the Day*, ends at the moment when the doors of the perception fling open, and Wilhelm realizes his hearts ultimate need, a feeling of brotherhood and a love for all mankind.

The novel ends with the realization by Wilhem that there is something more than himself to weep for. Through Tommy Wilhelm, Bellow makes his case that a sharp mind and pure ideals are of no value if they are not coupled with active pursuit and a clear understanding of one’s relationship with others.

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