Seize the Day Study Guide

Seize the Day by Saul Bellow

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Introduction

Bellow's fourth novel, *Seize the Day* was published as a novella in 1956 in a volume that also included three short stories-"A Father-to-Be," "Looking for Mr. Green," and "The Gonzaga Manuscripts" and a play, *The Wrecker.* Considered by many critics to be Bellow's finest work of fiction, the novella was immediately singled out from among its companion pieces as a major work. The powerful impact of *Seize the Day* comes from its tightly constructed plot; from Bellow's ability to control effectively in a concentrated form such enormous themes as victimization, alienation, and human connection; and from his creation of Tommy Wilhelm, one of his most moving protagonists.

Bellow's work before *Seize the Day* had attracted the attention of readers and critics, but he was particularly praised for his achievement in this fourth novel, which Baker says "demonstrates his attainment of full artistic maturity." *Seize the Day* deals with themes familiar to readers of Bellow's fiction, such as that of the father-son relationship, yet in this novella the concentrated structure enabled Bellow to render this theme more intensely.

At the heart of the action in *Seize the Day,* Tommy Wilhelm's relationship with his father revolves around Tommy's neediness and his father's disapproval of him. Tommy's problems with his father feed yet another theme of the novel and of Bellow's fiction in general: alienation from oneself and from humanity. Tommy feels cut off not only from his father and from the rest of his family-his sister, his dead mother, his estranged wife and their two sons-but he also feels alienated from himself and from everyone he meets. Bellow's ability to treat weighty themes in *Seize the Day,* while making Tommy Wilhelm a pitiable yet sympathetic character, explains the success of this novella: it is capable of seizing both the reader's mind and heart.

Author Biography

Saul Bellow is recognized as one of the most important American writers of the twentieth century. The youngest of four children, Bellow was born in 1915 to Russian immigrant parents in Lachine, Quebec, Canada, a suburb of Montreal. Bellow's father, Abraham, had come to Canada from Russia just two years before his youngest child was born. While living in Montreal, Bellow learned English, Hebrew, Yiddish, and French. He lived with his family in Montreal's Jewish ghetto until the family moved to Chicago when he was nine.

Bellow spent a great deal of time in libraries as a child, as he loved to read. His family struggled with financial difficulties during his youth. His father wanted Bellow to go into a lucrative profession such as law or medicine, and his mother wanted him to become a scholar of Jewish law and tradition. Instead, Bellow chose to study anthropology and sociology-the sciences of man and of society-and to become a writer and a teacher of writing. Bellow's writing came to reflect his chosen educational focus, as his work examines large themes such as the value of existence and the ways that people relate to each other.

While the themes he explores in his fiction are universal, Bellow's fiction is informed by his Russian and Jewish background and by his wide reading in American and European literature, as well as by his familiarity with the modem urban landscape. His heroes-Tommy Wilhelm, for example-are typically thinking men, Jewish urbandwellers who are in search of meaning in the world. Bellow himself, at the time he wrote *Seize the Day,* was interested in Reichianism, a sociological-psychological belief system based on the thought of Wilhelm Reich. According to Eusebio Rodrigues, Bellow's interest in Reichianism helped to shape *Seize the Day.*

Reichianism, says Rodrigues, revolves around the belief that human beings possess "a three-tiered character structure." The first tier consists of "man's natural sociality, his enjoyment of work, and his innate capacity for love"; the second tier consists of "inhibited drives of greed, lust, envy, and sadism"; and the "outer layer is a mask of politeness, self-control, and artificial sociality." Bellow has acknowledged that during the 1950s, when *Seize the Day* was published, he and a friend were involved in Reichianism, and Rodrigues proposes that "The three layers of Tommy Wilhelm are apparent as he lives through his tragic day."

Plot Summary

Chapter 1

Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* is the story of one day in the life of Wilhelm Adler, a.k.a. Tommy Wilhelm, a man in his mid-forties who is going through a mid-life crisis. As the book opens he is standing outside of the dining room in the residential hotel in which he lives, contemplating his troubles and working up the courage to go in to breakfast and face his father, who also lives in the Gloriana Hotel.

Wilhelm reminisces about how he left school twenty-five years ago in order to go to Hollywood to try to become a movie star. He had at first been approached by a talent scout, Maurice Venice, but even after the screen test went badly and the scout tried to discourage him, Wilhelm decided to change his name to Tommy Wilhelm and go to California. Once there he discovered that Maurice Venice was himself a failure and that a recommendation from him was a curse.

He nevertheless stayed in Hollywood for seven years, unwillingly to admit defeat. Now, twenty-five years later, he finds himself unemployed, broke, and in despair. He is separated from his wife, but she refuses to give him a divorce. He has invested his last money in the commodities market, and he fears it is all lost. And he is endlessly quarreling with his father, who refuses to help Wilhelm and who seems to be ashamed of his son.

Chapter 2

Still working up the courage to face his father at breakfast, Wilhelm collects his mail. He has received a number of bills, including some from his wife, who wants him to pay the premiums on some educational insurance plans for their two boys. He finally goes into breakfast, where his father introduces him to an elderly man named Mr. Perls. They have a quarrelsome breakfast, with Dr. Adler feeling ashamed of his unemployed and slovenly son and Wilhelm resenting his father's unwillingness to help him in any way.

Dr. Adler presses his son to tell Mr. Perls about his former job as a salesman, which he lost after quarreling with his employers. Wilhelm is disgusted with how focused on money his father and Mr. Perls are. Dr. Adler and Mr. Perls begin discussing Dr. Tamkin, another resident of the hotel and the man to whom Wilhelm had trusted to invest his last seven hundred dollars in the commodities market. The two older men feel that Tamkin is a fraud and a fool, and as he listens to them, Wilhelm again begins to worry about his money.

Chapter 3

Mr. Perls leaves and Wilhelm and his father continue to argue. Wilhelm reveals how he tried to get a divorce so that he could marry another woman, Olive, but his wife continually refused to give him the divorce. Wilhelm recites many of IDS problems, but his father does not sympathize, feeling that everything is the result of Wilhelm's poor choices and not wanting to be burdened with caring for his adult children in his last few years. His parting advice to Wilhelm is "Carry nobody on your back."

Chapter 4

After leaving the dining room, Wilhelm seeks out Tamkin. They head to the commodities market to see how their stocks have done. Wilhelm spends the conversation trying to figure out whether Tamkin is trustworthy or not. They discuss many philosophical matters, and Wilhelm is attracted to the doctor's ideas, especially his philosophy about living in the present and seizing the day, but he is suspicious of Tamkin nonetheless.

Chapter 5

They arrive at the commodities market and take their place next to some friends of Tamkin. Wilhelm becomes nervous about the money, and when he sees that some of their shares have risen, he wants to sell and recover at least some of their lost money. Tamkin insists that they should leave their shares alone, and he says that Wilhelm needs to learn to trust and to live in the here and now. As Tamkin tries to show him some methods for focusing on the here and now, Wilhelm wonders if the doctor is trying to hypnotize or con him.

Chapter 6

They go to lunch and discuss Wilhelm's problems with his wife and father. Wilhelm realizes that although Tamkin is probably a charlatan, he also believes that Tamkin has managed to survive for a long time, and he hopes that perhaps he can help him to survive as well. He begins to feel that he is "on Tamkin's back," trusting the other man to take the necessary steps for him.

They return to the commodities market, but before they can enter Mr. Rappaport, a very old man who was sitting next to them earlier, greets them. He demands that Wilhelm take him to the cigar store, and when Wilhelm protests that he wants to check on his commodities, Tamkin pushes him to go with Rappaport, insisting that he can learn a lot from the elderly man. When he returns from the cigar store Wilhelm finds that his commodities have dropped so far that he has lost all of his money. Tamkin is nowhere to be found.

Chapter 7

Wilhelm comes to the painful realization that it was he that had been carrying Tamkin on his back. He goes to his father to ask for help, but his father refuses him, yelling at him and telling him that he will not support his grown children. Wilhelm reminds him that there are other things besides money that a father can give a son, but his father refuses to listen. He says that he will see Wilhelm dead before he will allow his son to become a cross for him to bear.

Wilhelm goes in search of Tamkin. He receives an urgent message from his wife. Fearing that something has happened to one of his boys, he calls her. She is angry that he has sent her a postdated check. They quarrel, and she blames him for the separation and for his unemployment. He resolves that he will find Tamkin and at least recover the two hundred dollars that the doctor owed him. He hopes that he will be able to start again with Olive, the woman he wanted to marry.

Searching for Tamkin he comes across a funeral procession, and he thinks that he sees Tamkin in the crowd. As he tries to get closer, he is swept into the church and eventually finds himself looking at the dead man in the casket. He is overwhelmed by grief at the death of the stranger. He sobs uncontrollably, and the other mourners wonder who he is and how he knew the deceased. Wilhelm only continues to sob.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Tommy Wilhelm, the protagonist in this story, believes that he is good at concealing his troubles. He had only been an extra; but even so, he believes he knows what acting is about. His appearance helps him conceal what's going on inside him-that is, when he's smoking a cigar and wearing a hat.

He lives on the 23rd floor of the Gloriana Hotel and has come down to collect his mail before breakfast. His father lives on the 14th floor, and his efforts at appearance are because of him. The people who live here are mostly retirees, Wilhelm Tommy, in his mid-40s, is out of place. We have a physical description of him here: large and blonde, big shoulders, already slightly stooped. He is out of work and his daily routine is to get up, shave, dress, come to the lobby and drink a Coca Cola or two, read the daily papers, and have breakfast with his father.

Today, Rubin, the man at the newsstand, tells him that his father has already gone in to breakfast. Wilhelm has good clothes, but he does not wear them well. However, he is good at charming people. He is out of work because he has had a falling out with his boss. Rubin tells him he looks good, but Wilhelm catches his reflection in a glass and feels that he looks like a hippopotamus.

Wilhelm has tried to distinguish himself but has failed. Because he looked good when he was young, he had been persuaded to go to Hollywood and try to break into movies. After seven years, he gave up. Because he had no education, no training for trade or business; he has struggled to make his way in the world.

He and a Dr. Tamkin have been speculating in the market with Tamkin the instructor and advisor. Tamkin's explanations make Wilhelm believe that he is an expert. Wilhelm would just like a little bit of steady income, not to make a killing. Tamkin encourages him by explaining that the way to win is to be calm and rational, to use "a psychological approach."

Wilhelm's father, Dr. Adler, has warned him about Tamkin, questioning his reliability. This hurts Wilhelm's feelings; he would just like to speak his mind to his father and ease his heart, but Dr. Adler seems too remote. On the other hand, Tamkin listens sympathetically and tries to help.

Dr.Adler has retired from a successful practice and is well-off, but he turns a deaf ear to his son's pleas for help. Wilhelm takes into account that his father is near eighty and that he, himself, is no longer a child; but he is hurt by his father's uncaring attitude. Dr. Adler is admired by everyone because of his distinguished career as a diagnostician and lecturer in internal medicine. Besides, he dresses well and is always immaculate.

Wilhelm is the only member of the family who does not have an education. He lies sometimes and tells people that he is an alumnus of Pennsylvania State. The truth is that he left before completing his sophomore year to go to Hollywood where he was lured by the glamour and the hope of becoming a star because of his good looks.

His father still brags that Wilhelm is a sales executive because he hadn't the patience to finish school, even though he knows that he has lost that job. Wilhelm thinks his father is doing the selling job just to make himself look good in the eyes of his friends. He reflects that his father was never around when he was a child because he was always busy at the hospital or the university. Wilhelm delays his breakfast with his father. He also gives up all pretense of hiding his troubles; he knows they show on his face.

Wilhelm fell for the pitch of a Hollywood talent scout, Maurice Venice, who had arranged a screen test for him. The screen test had not gone well. It was Wilhelm who pressured Vince to agree that he might as well go and try to make it in Hollywood. Wilhelm knows that Venice made no promises. The letter from the talent scout had come at a time when he was quarreling with his parents about what he should do with his life, so he jumped on it. His mother had tried to keep him from going, but he refused to listen. She encouraged him to go into medicine - his father would help him. With Vincent luring him, and without the blessings of his family, Wilhelm goes to Hollywood. When he gets there, he finds that a recommendation from Venice is a kiss of death. In fact, he's a crook. Once in Hollywood, he changes his name from Wilhelm Adler to Tommy Wilhelm, the name he still uses.

Tommy Wilhelm acknowledges that the change of name wounded his father and was merely an attempt at gaining freedom. His father still calls him Wilky. Today he is begging God to let him out of his trouble and his thoughts and to let him do something better with himself.

Chapter 1 Analysis

This story recounts one day in the life of Tommy Wilhelm, Wilhelm Adler, Wilky, or even "Velvel," as his grandfather called him. In this day, Wilhelm is trying to "seize the day," a literary term that Bellow has chosen as the title. It comes from a Latin phrase, *carpe diem*, meaning literally "pluck the day" - coined by Horace to mean that one should enjoy life while one can. It has been used often in the literature of many countries and in some well-known poems such as in Robert Herrick's "To the Virgins to Make Much of Time" (16th Century).

Wilhelm, the protagonist in this story, is trying to grasp anything that has substance because he is going under in almost every way a person can be defeated. He is without a job; his marriage is on the rocks; he sees his sons infrequently, and one of them calls him a "hippopotamus"; His efforts to foster a relationship with his wealthy father are also ineffective., and The picture of Wilhelm on this day is complete when one adds to that his trusting a "blowhard ne'er-do-well" fake psychiatrist to invest the only money he had left.

This dismal story was written in the 1950s - a time of great uncertainty in the United States. The atomic bombing of Japan had raised for the first time the specter of a destructive force with the potential to destroy the earth and all that was in it. In the standoff between the communist countries and the free world, that threat seemed imminent. Bomb shelters were being erected in many back yards. Joseph McCarthy was on a delirious witch-hunt for communists, and no one was safe.

At the same time, the country was watching *Father Knows Best* on television and holding on to the "mother-and-apple-pie" vision that Americans fervently wanted to believe that the real world was like. This story attempts to examine the effects of all of this on an individual. It is an attempt to show what it was like to live in this mid-twentieth century world, and it's not a pretty picture.

Wilhelm had a traditional marriage with a wife at home caring for two sons. He had a good job, provided for them, and came home to them at the end of his busy days as a sales manager. But he couldn't stay, he says, without ever giving a very good reason why. It had been a marriage borne of love between he and his wife, Margaret, but he was the one who left for, at best, vague ambiguous reasons.

This story is set in New York City, perhaps the most brutally impersonal place on the globe. It teems with people in a hurry to get someplace, and establishing any kind of rapport or relationship is difficult. There is none of the camaraderie, for instance, that is seen in shops and marketplaces in smaller towns. Everyone is suspicious and for good reason because the streets are notoriously unsafe. That Wilhelm has lived his life here is significant to the understanding of this story.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

The clerk hands him his mail that includes his room rent. He doesn't have the money for the rent because he has invested what little he has in stocks. His father had said, a few weeks previously, "Well, Wilky, here we are under the same roof again, after all these years." At first, it had heartened him and then he understood that his father was actually questioning why he was here and not at home with his wife and two sons.

He considers himself a good conversationalist, but not with his father. He has a slight stammer, which is exaggerated when he is with him. He tends to lose control of himself; and after any encounter with the doctor, he's dissatisfied with himself. He mourns his mother's death but feels that his father was just glad to get rid of her and would also like to be rid of him and his sister, Catherine. He is unshapely and heavy; his own son calls him "a hummuspotamus." He's frustrated that he's still struggling in his relationship with his own father.

Wilhelm is separated from his wife, Margaret, who will not give him a divorce. He is paying her more than she would get in any divorce settlement, so she is happy the way things are. In the mail today, he receives a complaint because he had given her a postdated check. She also wants him to pay for education insurance policies her mother had taken out on the boys before she died.

He now goes to have breakfast with his father, who is dining with Mr. Perls from the fifteenth floor. He resents the old man's presence and contemplates what there is about his looks that he finds so repulsive, but then he relents and tries to find justification for those things. Dr. Adler always boasts about his children as he does now when he introduces Wilhelm to Mr. Perls.

The three men discuss Wilhelm's previous job and Wilhelm whines about being passed over for promotion, which embarrasses his father. Then they talk about all the money he made, and Wilhelm thinks, "They adore money! Holy money! Beautiful money!" He drinks Coca Cola and takes pills, trying unsuccessfully to hide them from his father who admonishes him about taking them. Now he must endure their talking about the loss of his job and the difficulty of starting over, and Wilhelm blames himself for talking too much. "I am an idiot," he thinks. "I have no reserve."

They discuss Tamkin. Dr. Adler and Mr. Perls think he is a fraud. Wilhelm is sweating and frantic; he has just given Tamkin a power of attorney to invest the last money he has in the world in the commodities market.

Chapter 2 Analysis

This story seems to be about money, but it isn't. It's about the disintegration that living in an unstable world produces within human beings. The desire to get ahead in the world is also as American as apple pie, and was a significant factor in the social fabric during this era. Not until the 1960s was there a backlash, a get-back-to-the land mentality, in the young people who were growing up and going into the workforce. "Getting ahead," means making plenty of money, which Dr. Adler has achieved. We find later, that in doing so, he has failed as a father. Wilhelm complains that he was always at the office or the university when the children were growing up. However, the good doctor doesn't acknowledge any failure, but he's eager to see and point out failure in his children except when he wants to look good in front of his friends - then he creates an image of offspring who are exemplary and successful.

Poor Wilhelm just can't connect. Try as he might, he is not able to develop successful relationships. *Seize the Day* has been called, by some critics, a novel of alienation, and our protagonist is certainly alienated from everyone in his life. Bellow is not concerned with explanations. He leaves ambiguous and fuzzy the reasons for Wilhelm's inability to manage his own life and relationships and to have normal feelings for the people around him. We must interpolate from what we do know and draw conclusions about the whys. Certainly, we can believe that having a successful father like Dr. Adler, whose only interest in his children seems to be to exploit them for his own purposes and who is consumed with his own career without regard to the needs of his family and his responsibilities, is a plausible factor. Lack of direction at a formative juncture in Wilhelm's life(when he was trying to figure out what he wanted to do career-wise),certainly played a role in bringing Wilhelm to this day. However, the unspoken element, the uncertain and fearful world that he was born into, must also be factored in.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Mr. Perls leaves, but father and son stay in the dining room. Wilhelm gobbles all the food on the table, including his father's strawberries, washing it all down with several cups of coffee. The old man doesn't understand Wilhelm's slovenliness and his efforts to seem so idealistic. He suggests that his son should cut down on drugs, but Wilhelm protests that he exaggerates, that he only gives himself a little boost against, and then stops short of saying the word, "misery." His father suggests the steam baths in the hotel, massage, and exercise. Wilhelm answers: "Oh, Father, it's nice of you to give me this medical advice, but steam isn't going to cure what ails me." The doctor thinks he makes too much of his problems.

The doctor feels Wilhelm should stop giving his wife so much money. He tells him that Wilhelm's sister, Catherine, is also asking him for money to rent a gallery for an exhibition. Neither man feels that Catherine is much of an artist.

Dr. Adler feels that Margaret, Wilhelm's wife, is making unreasonable demands on him in order to force him to come back to her, and that he should just settle with her once and for all. Wilhelm is exasperated and reminds him that he wanted to do that when they broke up. He gave her everything, he says. She wouldn't even let him have the dog, which he loved. Both hired lawyers who talk and send him bills. She has him by the throat, he says, and he is strangling.

He accuses his father of not understanding because he, himself, was a success whereas Wilhelm is not. The doctor becomes angry and says that he succeeded because of hard work, and that Wilhelm is self-indulgent. He refuses to help him with money although Wilhelm would even settle for some understanding. The doctor says, "I can't give you any money. There would be no end to it if I started . . . . I want nobody on my back. Get off!" "Just keep your money," says Wilhelm, miserably.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The "point of view" in this story is third person, but it is omniscient as far as the protagonist is concerned. This is important to our understanding what Wilhelm is going through. We feel his exasperation because we are in his mind. We walk through this day with him. That doesn't mean that we understand the choices he makes. We are exasperated with him for giving his money to a charlatan fake psychiatrist. At the same time, we are not sure whether it would make a difference because he was heading for this situation even if he hadn't given his last dollar away. It only comes faster because of Tamkin's theft. What's even more exasperating is that Wilhelm knew that Tamkin was not legitimate, but he went along anyway. The clue here is that Wilhelm was starved for sympathy and understanding, and Tamkin listened and sympathized. He was vulnerable

to anyone who would show him pity and understanding. Tamkin, of course, knew this and used it to get his money.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Wilhelm leaves, wallowing in self-loathing, and goes to meet Tamkin to find out what's happening to his investment in lard. He is trying hard to understand Tamkin, but can't figure him out. He wants to believe he is everything he claims to be and that the gossip is false. The big question is whether or not to trust him. However, it's too late anyway; he has already given him all the money he has left in the world and then some. He gave him a check for $1,000, and Tamkin gave him one for $300, which hasn't cleared the bank yet. It was supposed to be an equal partnership; however, Tamkin couldn't put up all of his part, but promised to make it up in a few days. He had also signed "a power of attorney" that allowed Tamkin to speculate with the money.

Tamkin is always understanding about Wilhelm's problems in contrast to his father. Tamkin represents himself as a psychiatrist, and talks about a patient he has just consulted with over the telephone. There follows a detailed description of the "psychiatrist" in which the narrator questions whether various physical features indicate that he is devious or not honest. He tells Wilhelm the patient's story, which Wilhelm really doesn't want to hear. He wants to hear about what's going on with his money. He wants to go to the market, which will be opening soon, but Tamkin puts him off.

He insists that Wilhelm have a cup of coffee while he eats his breakfast, so they go to the dining room and Tamkin continues to relate the fantastic story about his patient. At last, Wilhelm begins to laugh. "Oh, Tamkin," he says, "You really are a killer-diller." Tamkin insists that he often treats his friends without being paid. Tamkin claims outlandish happenings in his own life such as that he had once been in the crime underworld and had treated an Egyptian princess. He's a boastful braggart who tells fantastic tales. Although Wilhelm does not see through him, he does have doubts. He's aware that Tamkin is searching his face to check on whether or not he's being taken in. Secretly, he hopes Tamkin will transform his life.

Now the narrator reveals why Wilhelm had to leave his job. He had bragged to everyone that he was going to be an officer of the corporation and then had been passed over in favor of a son-in-law.

Tamkin gives him a poem he has written, which doesn't make sense to Wilhelm, but to be polite, he feels he must respond to it; so he asks him how long he has been writing. He answers that he wrote this poem just for him. But Wilhelm is only thinking about his money, which he suspects is lost.

Chapter 4 Analysis

We have the picture of a man who is drowning. The one thing he has succeeded at in his life is his job at Rojax, and it seems to have been a house of cards. Either he had

the prospect of moving into an executive position, or he imagined that he did; we have no way to know. It's the loss of this position that has thrown him into this desperate state, both mentally and financially.

When a job that is important and gives dignity and purpose to life is lost, one's sense of identity is disturbed. "Who am I now?" is a question most people ask at this time in their lives. If a new, reasonably comparable position is obtained, this works itself out quickly; but when, as with Wilhelm, there has been an assault on his dignity and credibility with nothing to replace the thing that had given it in the first place, the search for identity can be painful. It is the parent who gives that identity in the first place, and we already know that Dr. Adler has not done a very good job in this regard; but it's to be expected that his son would come back and try again-and again, the Dr. Adler fails. He is not a reliable source for the kind of support that Wilhelm needs now. The next source would naturally be a spouse, but that doesn't work for Wilhelm either. We feel his pain, misery, and angst very deeply as he flounders around trying to establish some kind of stability and meaning for himself.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Wilhelm is in a state of panic as he and Tamkin go to the market. Tamkin is working the house-he goes all over visiting with people he knows while Wilhelm sits and watches the figures. He sits next to Mr. Rappaport, a very old man who can't see the board and keeps asking Wilhelm to tell him what his stock is doing.

Wilhelm believes his money is in lard, but learns that Tamkin has invested some of it in rye. Tamkin brags about the money he has made in the market and assures Wilhelm that he can make $15,000 a year. Rye is up, so Wilhelm is encouraged. Tamkin and he are equal partners even though Tamkin had only put up $300 to Wilhelm's $700. Wilhelm wants to sell their shares in rye when the prices rise, but Tamkin refuses. He treats Wilhelm like a child or a psychiatric patient, giving him advice about dealing with his uneasiness. He explains that a neurotic character keeps changing its mind.

As Tamkin goes on, Wilhelm tunes him out and instead has a recollection of a time when he was very ill with the flu and Margaret had read poetry to him.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The heroic protagonist was first established by the early Greek dramatists, but they also invented the antihero, a protagonist who does not exhibit heroic qualities. Antihero as protagonist has appeared in the literature of all nations. A good example is Miguel de Cervantes', *Don Quixote*.

In the 1950s, a movement called the "Angry Young Men" rose up in England, and much of their fiction has protagonists that are antiheroes. The "Angry Young Men" were intellectuals who came from non-traditional backgrounds. Rather than coming from the upper-class as in the past, most were from working class or lower middle-class families. They were characterized by their resentment, whether real or imagined, of the hypocrisy and mediocrity of the upper and middle classes.

Saul Bellow was not one of the "Angry Young Men," but his work, along with much of the other literature produced between World War II and the Vietnam War in the United States, certainly reflects the work of those writers. It can be seen in this story in the portrayal of the hypocritical wealthy doctor whose relationship to his children is superficial at best, yet who seeks, in his self-centered way, to exploit them to make himself look good in front of his friends.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Wilhelm and Tamkin go to lunch, and Tamkin eats voraciously, whereas Wilhelm cannot even think about food. Tamkin is in no hurry; Wilhelm wants to get back to the market. Over lunch, Tamkin questions him about a potential inheritance from his father and launches into a plan for what he should do with the money. Wilhelm tells him he doesn't want his father to die, that he loves him. "When he dies, I'll be robbed, like. I'll have no more father," he tells him.

He thinks of his failed love affair with Olive. She is Catholic but is willing to marry him outside the Church if he will get a divorce. Margaret will not divorce him, however. Finally, Olive's father steps in and tells him that his daughter's reputation is being damaged by the affair.

Tamkin asks about his wife, and Wilhelm remembers when he met her. However, Tamkin doesn't listen, but takes off again spinning another tall tale, this time about his own wife. Wilhelm knows he is a liar and should not be trusted, so he determines that today he will face the truth. He solaces himself by thinking that Tamkin has been through tight places before and has come through and that he will carry Wilhelm on his back through this one. At any rate, he knows that he has to go along with him now, considering that he has his $700.

At last, he gets up and says they must go. Tamkin manages to get him to pay the check for the meal, even though he didn't eat. As they walk, Tamkin keeps going on with his absurd psychological analysis of Wilhelm. He ends up his long diatribe in this way: "The love of the dying amounts to one thing; they want you to die with them. It's because they love you. Make no mistake!" Wilhelm is moved by these words.

As they approach the market, Mr. Rappaport asks Wilhelm to take him to the cigar store. Wilhelm wants Tamkin to do it, but he says no he wants you. Besides, he says; when a man asks you for help, don't think of the market-it won't run away. This is another instance of the here-and-now, he says. You must live in this very moment. So Wilhelm guides him to the cigar store, moving so slowly that Wilhelm is very frustrated.

When they finally get back, Wilhelm has lost all his money, and Tamkin is nowhere to be found; he had told someone he was going to Maine for his vacation. Wilhelm maintains his poise even though he wants to break down and sob.

Chapter 6 Analysis

When Bellow has Tamkin make the statement about dying, he is foreshadowing the final scene with Wilhelm collapsing at the funeral.

Just because a father does not carry out his responsibilities to his children, does not mean the children will not love him. We are touched and saddened by Wilhelm's continuing struggle to deal with his feelings for his father even though his father is not going to do what is right and help him out of this crisis.

As said before, this story is about alienation, and all of the characters suffer from this malady, not just the protagonist. Certainly, Dr. Adler, living alone in his old age in a hotel with other old people, is alienated. There is no one in his life that he has a connection with. Tamkin is dangerous in his alienation. He pretends a connection to Wilhelm only for the purpose of getting his hands on his money.

All major religions and even sociologists and psychologists say that the cause of these feelings is self-absorption, turning inward instead of outward, and that the cure is to serve some other human being or cause in some way. To achieve health and well-being, find a cause or a person who needs you, they advise. Only in this way can healing occur. The Christian advice is "seek to serve rather than to be served." John Kennedy said, "Ask not what your country can do for you; rather, ask what you can do for your country."

The characters in this story are so preoccupied with themselves and their own wants, needs, and desires that they are alienated from those who should be bringing them satisfaction and pleasure. Parents care for their children because it satisfies a deep need in the parents themselves. It's not just that Dr. Adler refuses to give Wilhelm money; it's that he feels no concern for his welfare. Wilhelm knows this. He tells him that there are other things than money a father can give. There are two places in this story where Wilhelm feels relieved from his anguish-when he remembers being ill and having Margaret care for him, and when he thinks of his own children. He loves them and has given everything he can to provide for them. When he earned money, most of it went to Margaret to provide for them, and Wilhelm does not resent that. Rather, this is the one place where he finds unadulterated satisfaction.

Wilhelm's determination to find the truth about Tamkin today is a foreshadowing of the end of the story when he does "find the truth," which is that Tamkin is a rogue and has made away with his investment.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Now Wilhelm knows the truth; he was not on Tamkin's back; it was he who was doing the carrying. He looks for Tamkin at the hotel, but he isn't there. He then finds his father in the health club having a massage. He appeals to him to pay his hotel bill, but he refuses because Wilhelm has not acted wisely. Then his father finds that Wilhelm has lost all his money because he trusted Tamkin. He has no mercy on his son; he will not help him. "It isn't all a question of money-there are other things a father can give to a son," Wilhelm tells him. He says that he has never asked him for much, but that he is not a kind man and will not give the little he does ask for. His father becomes very angry, and he leaves.

When he gets to the hotel desk, there is an urgent call from Margaret, and he is afraid something has happened to one of his sons so he calls her immediately, but she only wants to reproach him for sending her a postdated check. He tells her he's doing his best and that tomorrow he's interviewing for jobs. She tells him he's behaving childishly and should go back to Rojak. He tells her that he sent her to school because she said she would go back to work and that she'll have to get a job. She says she absolutely will not because she has children to bring up. She has no mercy because he is the one who left. He is desperate and vows to get a divorce and start over with Olive.

He is walking down the street and thinks he sees Tamkin going into a funeral. He tries to pursue him, but he is caught up in the crowd and ushered into the chapel in the line passing the open coffin that holds a gray-haired man with a thoughtful expression on his dead face. Wilhelm realizes that this man is free from all misery. He steps out of the line and begins to sob, thinking not of the dead man but of his own desperation. The flowers and lights fuse in his mind, becoming a heavy sea-like music. "He heard it and sank deeper than sorrow, through torn sobs and cries toward the consummation of his heart's ultimate need."

Chapter 6 Analysis

In looking for the plot in a story, it's important first to determine who the protagonist is and second what the major conflicts are. Wilhelm is the protagonist in this story, and the major conflicts are between him and a hostile world. We do not feel that this person is equipped to go out into the world and make it on his own. He has constantly made bad choices and has often been taken advantage of as with the talent scout and Tamkin. There is a second important conflict between Wilhelm and his father, but in this case, the father represents the hostile world; unfortunately, Wilhelm was born to an uncaring father who set him up for failure once he was on his own in this hostile world.

A "pattern of action" is the course the conflicts take in the story. Most of the time, it may seem that the protagonist is winning sometimes and losing sometimes. Most stories have what is called "rising action" - that is, the pattern is mostly upward with some temporary diversions along the way; and usually, the protagonist comes out the winner at the point that is called the climax of the action. Most of the time, these are happy-endings stories, but sometimes the protagonist comes out the loser, even in a story where the action can be described as rising.

In *Seize the Day*, we have seen that the conflicts are between Wilhelmand a hostile world represented by his father, his wife, and Tamkin as well as several other minor characters who participate in their own way. However, the action is not rising - it is flat. Wilhelm is miserable, alienated, and tortured at the outset, and at the end nothing has changed. There is no climax in this story. It just grinds to an unhappy close.

Characters

Dr. Adler

Tommy Wilhelm's elderly father, Dr. Adler lives at the Hotel Gloriana in New York but "in an entirely different world from his son." Wilhelm's relationship with his father is at the center of the novel. Dr. Adler is a handsome, orderly, well dressed man who is respected by all who know him. He has retired from his medical practice and is financially secure, but he refuses to lend money to his son, whom he continues to call by his childhood name, "Wilky." Tommy/Wilky disgusts Dr. Adler in his sloppiness, his emotional intensity, and his seeming inability to make a good decision, and Dr. Adler is impatient with his son's apparent lack of initiative.

When he talks about his son to friends and acquaintances, Dr. Adler builds up Wilky's achievements in an attempt to impress his listeners, although in truth he is not proud of his son. Although Tommy/Wilky pleads with his father to care for him-"'I expect *help!'"- Dr.* Adler is unmoved. He tells his son that if he were to help him by giving him money to cover his bills, it would only make Tommy/Wilky dependent on him. He also refuses to help his daughter, who also wants his financial assistance, explaining himself by declaring "'I want nobody on my back. Get off!'"

Catherine

Wilhelm's younger sister, Catherine has taken "a professional name," Philippa. She is a painter and has asked Dr. Adler for money to rent a gallery for an exhibition of her work, but he refuses to support her. Neither Wilhelm nor his father thinks Catherine has talent.

Dad

See Dr. Adler

Father

See Dr. Adler

Margaret

Margaret is Tommy Wilhelm's estranged wife, whom he claims is "killing'" him by constantly demanding money from him. Margaret will not divorce Wilhelm, and because she is raising their two boys, she refuses to get a job Tommy sees Margaret as "unbending, remorselessly unbending."

Olive

Wilhelm's girlfriend in Roxbury, whom he used to see when he was working for the Rojax Corporation. He wanted to marry her, but their marriage was prevented by Margaret's refusal to divorce Wilhelm.

Paul

Tommy Wilhelm's younger son, Paul, is "going to be ten." He calls his father a "'hummuspotamus,'" or hippopotamus.

Mr. Perls

Another elderly resident of the Hotel Gloriana and a friend of Dr. Adler's, Mr. Perls is introduced to Wilhelm as having been a "hosiery wholesaler," but Wilhelm perceives from his appearance that he has had a difficult life. His presence at breakfast annoys Wilhelm: he sees Perls as his father's way of avoiding being alone with him. Wilhelm also despises his father's need to impress Perls by boasting about his children's accomplishments, particularly because neither one has been especially successful. Perls is eager to know the details of Wilhelm's salary and position at the Rojax Corporation, and Wilhelm is disgusted by his intense interest in money.

Philippa

See Catherine

Mr. Rappaport

Rappaport is the blind old retired chicken merchant whom Wilhelm sits near in the brokerage office. Wilhelm envies Rappaport's ability to remain calm about the fluctuating stock market; he does not have as much to lose as Wilhelm does. As Wilhelm returns to the brokerage office after leaving for lunch, Rappaport meets him outside and asks him to take him across the street to the cigar store. Wilhelm reluctantly agrees, as this errand delays his return to the market. When he does return, he learns he is ruined.

Mr. Rowland

Wilhelm sits near Mr. Rowland in the brokerage office as they watch the progress of their stocks. According to Tamkin, Rowland supports himself on his earnings from the stock market. This fact gives Wilhelm hope as he invests his last few hundred dollars.

Rubin

The well-dressed Rubin is "the man at the newsstand" in the Hotel Gloriana where Tommy Wilhelm lives. Wilhelm thinks of Rubin as "the kind of man who knew, and knew and knew."

Dr. Tamkin

The mysterious Dr. Tamkin claims to be a psychologist but turns out to be a con artist: he tricks Tommy Wilhelm into giving him his last seven hundred dollars to invest while assuring Tommy that this investment will make him wealthy. Tamkin, like Wilhelm and Dr. Adler, lives at the Hotel Gloriana, and the men know each other through a nightly card game. Wilhelm's father calls Tamkin "'cunning ... an operator,'" but Wilhelm wants to believe that Tamkin can make him rich, so he makes himself trust this man with "a hypnotic power in his eyes."

Tamkin tells Wilhelm incredible stories about his work with his patients and insists that "'I have to do good wherever I can.'" He presents to Wilhelm his belief that in each human being "'there are two main [souls], the real soul and a pretender soul.'" Essentially, he is speaking about alienation from oneself, a subject that resonates with Wilhelm. In spite of his philosophical revelations, Tamkin remains a mystery to Wilhelm, who never quite comes to trust him fully. When Wilhelm realizes he has been ruined on the stock market and can't find Tamkin, who has slipped away from the brokerage office, Wilhelm is not completely surprised to understand at last that Tamkin is a fake.

Tommy

Tommy is Tommy Wilhelm's l4-year-old son, the older of his two boys.

Maurice Venice

Maurice Venice is the shady talent scout who approached the handsome young Wilhelm Adlernow Tommy Wilhelm-with the idea that he should go out to Hollywood to try to become a star. Wilhelm had a warning sense that Venice "protested too much" about his credentials. Yet he made his "first great mistake" by giving in to Venice's pressure, abandoning college, and going to Hollywood only to find when he got there that "a recommendation from Maurice Venice was the kiss of death."

Tommy Wilhelm

Middle-aged, overweight, slovenly, out of work, estranged from his wife and arguing With his father, Tommy Wilhelm is the protagonist of Bellow's novel. Emotional rather than rational, Wilhelm tends to make bad decisions. On the day portrayed in the novel,

he is feeling as though all of his bad decisions are coming together to choke him; he repeatedly says things like "'I just can't catch my breath'" and that he feels "congested" and "'about to burst.'" In addition to being on the verge of financial ruin, Wilhelm feels alone in the world. He has left his wife and their two sons, although his wife will not give him a divorce and he misses his sons terribly. He is estranged from his mistress, Olive. He does not see his only sister, his mother died years ago, and although he and his father live "'under the same roof" of the Hotel Gloriana, his father does not approve of him.

Wilhelm's conversations with his father center on Wilhelm's need for "'help,'" but while his father, Dr. Adler, interprets his pleas for help as being merely financial, Wilhelm also is asking for his father's approval and some kindness. Wilhelm is, however, down to his last few dollars and is extremely self-conscious about his lack of money. He feels bitterly that the world has "a sort of hugging relish" for money: "Everyone was supposed to have money. They'd be ashamed not to have it." Wilhelm's inner confusion is represented in part by his confusion over which name is his true name: Wilky, his childhood name; Tommy Wilhelm, the name he chooses when he goes to Hollywod; or Velvel, the Yiddish name his old grandfather had called him.

Wilky

See Tommy Wilhelm

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

Tommy Wilhelm's sense of estrangement not only from his own family but also from his acquaintances and the entire city of New York places the themes of alienation and loneliness at the core of the novel. From the novel's opening scene, in which Wilhelm talks briefly with "Rubin, the man at the newsstand," it is clear that these men know many things about each other, and yet "None of these could be mentioned, and the great weight of the unspoken left them little to talk about."

Wilhelm longs to connect on an emotional level with his father, but old Dr. Adler speaks to his son "with such detachment about his welfare" that Wilhelm, Adler's "one and only son, could not speak his mind or ease his heart to him." Wilhelm's sense of alienation from himself is represented by his confusion over his different names: his father calls him "Wilky," his childhood name, but Wilhelm had chosen the name "Tommy Wilhelm," dropping the name Adler, when he went to Hollywood to pursue an acting career.

When Dr. Tamkin talks to Wilhelm about his ideas on the soul, Wilhelm recognizes himself in Tamlin's description of "two main [souls], the real soul and a pretender soul." Wilhelm is "awed" by Tamlin's vision: "In Tommy he saw the pretender.

And even Wilky might not be himself. Might the name of his true soul be the one by which his old grandfather had called him-Velvel?"

Looking outside of himself and his small circle, Wilhelm feels alienated from humanity, as represented by New York City and its inhabitants. He feels that communication with others is as difficult as learning another language: "Every other man spoke a language entirely his own, which he had figured out by private thinking... and this happened over and over and over with everyone you met. You had to translate and translate, explain and explain, back and forth, and it was the punishment of hell itself not to understand or be understood.. .."

Wilhelm has a encompassing sense that the alienation he feels is not unique to him, but that "everybody is outcast," that the experience of loneliness is part of the human condition.

American Dream

The so-called "American Dream" has taken many shapes-streets paved with gold, a chicken in every pot-but the theme is always the same: financial success. Bellow looks at a dark side of this dream-what happens when a believer in the American Dream fails to succeed? Tommy Wilhelm feels the pressure of the American Dream. Money, or the lack of it, is an irritant to Wilhelm. His success as a salesman for the Rojax Corporation is in the past, and "Now he had to rethink the future, because of the money problem."

Wilhelm's "money problem" is that he no longer has any-he has given his last seven hundred dollars to the dubious Tamkin to invest in stocks, but in the meantime he cannot pay this month's rent, nor does he have any money to send to his estranged wife to support her and their two sons. Wilhelm looks around him and sees everywhere the expectation that he should have money: "Holy money! Beautiful money! ... if you didn't have it you were a dummy, a dummy! You had to excuse yourself from the face of the earth."

Wilhelm's lack of income and his anxiety about his precarious position clearly influence his attitude about money and the American Dream. Part of this Dream is that one's children should find more success in the world than one has found, and Wilhelm is highly aware that his father, a respected doctor, amassed more wealth than Wilhelm himself win ever be able to do.

Father and Son

Wilhelm's sense of disconnection from the world seems to start with his relationship with his father. When Wilhelm tells Tamkin about his struggles with his father, Tamkin comments, "'It's the eternal same story... The elemental conflict of parent and child. It won't end, ever.'"

The theme of father and son appears in much of Bellow's fiction, and in *Seize the Day* it drives much of the plot. Wilhelm, or Wilky, as his father calls him, cannot satisfy his father, and his father refuses to help Wilhelm. "'My dad is something of a stranger to me,' " Wilhelm tells Tamkin, although he admits, "of course I love him.' " When Wilhelm asks his father for help, Dr. Adler refuses "'to take on new burdens,'" but Wilhelm replies, "it isn't all a question of money-there are other things a father can give a son.'" He pleads with Dr. Adler, "'I expect *help!'"* but Dr. Adler seems incapable of giving the kind of help his son needs.

Individual vs. Society

A teeming, confusing New York City provides an appropriate setting for Tommy Wilhelm's overwhelming day of alienation and min. Wilhelm sees himself as an outsider in his world. Although he was born and raised in this city, Wilhelm feels like a stranger here: "I don't belong in New York any more."_ New York takes on an apocalyptic quality for Wilhelm when he thinks about the failure of communication in such a place: "New York-the end of the world, with its complexity and machinery' bricks and tubes, wires and stones, holes and heights. And was everybody crazy here?"

Wilhelm's deepest need is for connection, for the sympathetic understanding of another person. He feels completely alone n a city that seems to assault him: "There's too much push for me here. It works me up too much.' " He does have one transcendental moment of connection with humanity -a "blaze of love"-while passing through an underground corridor beneath Times Square: " ... all of a sudden, unsought, a general love for all these imperfect and lurid-looking people burst out in Wilhelm's breast. He

loved them. One and all, he passionately loved them. They were his brothers and sisters.'"

But this romantically sweeping sense of connection does not last and in retrospect seems to Wilhelm to have been an arbitrary event, "only another one of those subway things. Like having a hard-on at random." Finally, in the last moments of the novel, when Wilhelm weeps in a funeral parlor over the corpse of a stranger, he is able to move "toward the consummation of his heart's ultimate need" when he recognizes that mortality is the bond among human beings.

Success and Failure

Tommy Wilhelm has made a series of mistakes and bad decisions in his life, and "through such decisions somehow his life had taken form.'" Motivated by feeling or emotion rather than by rational thought, Wilhelm decided to go to Hollywood to try to become a "screen artist," to leave the Rojax Corporation because his territory was being divided and he was not being promoted, and to give Tamkin the last of his money. All of these decisions, made in hopes of finding some kind of success, have resulted in Wilhelm' s failure. He ponders the fact that in the past "He had been slow to mature, and he had lost ground.'" At the nightly gin game in which he often participates, Wilhelm "had never won. Not once He was tired of losing."

His father, in order to preserve appearances to his friends, emphasizes Wilhelm's past success as a salesman with the Rojax Corporation when he introduces his son, but this emphasis on the past only serves to highlight what a failure Wilhelm is now. Wilhelm's father, Dr. Adler, is considered a success, not only n terms of his financial attainment or his achievements in his field prior to his retirement, but also in terms of his character: "He was idolized by everyone." In contrast to his son, Dr. Adler is controlled and self-contained and is not ruled by his emotions but is instead rational. Wilhelm's failure is connected to his lack of control and "style," while his father's success stems from his restraint and his ability to master appearances.

Style

Point of View

The third-person, limited omniscient point of view in *Seize the Day* provides a balanced view of the actions of the characters while offering some insight into the protagonist's mind. Thus Wilhelm is the central consciousness of the novel without being the narrator. The point of view of the novel recreates Wilhelm's frantic, disorderly state of mind while placing Wilhelm amongst his more orderly father and the rational Tamkin. A first-person narration by Wilhelm would prevent a balanced view of his father and other characters, as the world of the novel would be shaped by Wilhelm's internal turmoil. Yet a third-person narration that also accounts for Wilhelm's thoughts enables a controlled sequence of events while creating for sympathy for the protagonist.

Setting

New York City plays a crucial role as the setting for *Seize the Day.* The city itself, huge and teeming with infinite forms of activity, serves as a backdrop to Wilhelm's confusion and sense of isolation, but it also inhabits Wilhelm's imagination as a force that presses upon his soul and chokes him. The swarming sidewalks of New York help to create Wilhelm's sense that communication with others is impossible: he sees there "the great, great crowd, the inexhaustible current of millions of every race and kind pouring out, pressing round, of every age, of every genius, possessors of every human secret... in every face the refinement of one particular motive or essence." Wilhelm feels out of place in the city and prefers the country, his memories of which soothe his mind.

Wilhelm's home in the city, a rented room at The Hotel Gloriana, reflects his transient status in New York. In addition, "most of the guests at the Hotel... were past the age of retirement," and "a great part of New York's vast population of old men and women" lives in the neighborhood of the hotel. Thus Wilhelm, only forty-four himself, is living like an elderly person, which is indicative of his sense that his life is essentially over.

Images/Imagery

Images of water and drowning permeate *Seize the Day,* reflecting Wilhelm's feeling that he is choking and suffocating. From the opening paragraph, in which Wilhelm rides the elevator that "sank and sank,'" and eventually reaches the lobby where the carpet "billowed toward [his] feet,'" Bellow presents a series of images that suggest water and its potential threat. Wilhelm's father presses his son to stop taking so many pills and to try hydrotherapy-"'Simple water has a calming effect'"-but Wilhelm's response is "'I thought ... that the water cure was for lunatics.'"

Wilhelm connects images of death by water with his sense of personal ruin: "The waters of the earth are going to roll over me." Ominously, Tamkin tells Wilhelm that his wife

drowned, a suspected suicide, and Tamkin insists that for Wilhelm to understand the process of investing he had to take a risk: "'To know how it feels to be a seaweed you have to get in the water' " In the final moments of the novel, as Wilhelm is overwhelmed by emotion at the funeral of a stranger, he hears the "heavy, sea-like music" and "[sinks] deeper than sorrow,'" seemingly about to drown in his own tears.

Anti-hero

While a hero is traditionally a fortunate individual of superhuman power or spirit, an anti-hero is by definition the opposite of a hero and is thus a person who is neither strong nor purposeful. An anti-hero may be portrayed as having little control over events, seeming aimless or confused, or as being out of step with society. Tommy Wilhelm is an anti-hero. He seems to drift through his life, making poor decisions that remove him farther and farther from his family and friends, and he feels like an outsider in the city of his birth. He is down on his luck in *Seize the Day,* but his bad luck is connected to the "great mistakes" he has made throughout his life.

Catharsis

Catharsis is a release of built-up emotion, and the classical definition of catharsis involves a combination of terror and pity in that release. As the images of Wilhelm's growing frustration and desperation mount, the novel creates a sense that something has to give before Wilhelm, in his own words, "bursts" or "chokes." In the final moments of the novel, the realization of his utter financial ruin dawns upon Wilhelm. He sees at the same time that Tamidn, whom he had trusted and had looked up to as a kind of spiritual advisor, has betrayed his trust. Thus two main threads of the novel-Wilhelm's fears about his financial instability and his intense desire for human connection-have simultaneously and devastatingly come to a head.

As Wilhelm goes into the street, blindly searching for Tamidn, he goes into a funeral parlor, where he suddenly finds himself beside the coffin of a stranger. In Wilhelm's thoughts as he gazes upon the corpse's face - "A man-another human creature ... What'll . do? I'm stripped and kicked out Oh. Father, what do . ask of you? What'll do about the kids-Tommy, Paul? My children" all of his fears and feelings of isolation coalesce. He breaks down. "past words, past reason, past coherence . The source of all tears had suddenly sprung open within him." This moment, when Wilhelm sinks "deeper than sorrow" and cries "with all his heart" is the catharsis of the novel.

BOOKRAGS

Historical Context

Middle-Class Family Life and Suburbia in the 1950s

In the wake of World Warn, middle-class life in the 195Os was relatively peaceful, though it was dominated by cultural expectations. Middle-class Americans were marrying younger and in greater numbers than previously, and many of these young married couples were moving out of the cities, building houses in the rapidly-expanding suburbs, and filling their new houses with babies. In most cases, the husband went into the city to work and the wife stayed home and took care of the house and the children.

Levittowns, developer William J. Levitt's huge suburbs on Long Island and in Pennsylvania, offered uniform houses on tiny lots and became enormously popular. Other developers imitated Levitt's mass-production methods in hopes of cashing in on the appeal of such suburbs. This appeal came from the promise of a quiet, safe life outside of the noisy cities, a life where one could belong to a community of others like oneself. Conformity in the suburbs was considered the norm. The suburbs of the 1950s were almost exclusively inhabited by whites. Many suburbs dictated that their residents could not change their yards or the exterior of their houses outside of stated parameters. Rarely did elderly, single, homosexual, or childless couples buy homes in these new suburbs: the young white family dominated the scene. The development of the suburbs also fed the automobile industry, as living in the suburbs necessitated owning a ear, and public transportation became much less popular than it had been.

Away from the movie houses of the cities, families living in the suburbs watched television for entertainment. At the beginning of the decade, television was far from being the ubiquitous presence it quickly became. But television grew immensely popular in the 19508, as more and more middleclass consumers purchased their own TV sets. Popular shows included ". Love Lucy," "Father Knows Best," ""The Untouchables," and "Gunsmoke," which today's audiences can still watch in syndication.

Fear in the 1950s

Fear of communists occupied the American imagination of the 1950s. During this post-World War IT decade, anti-communism grew out of a fear of Soviet aggression and led many Americans to point accusing fingers at one another. One of the most notorious finger pointers was Senator Joseph. McCarthy, whose systematic pursuit of communists in American society seized the country's attention for the first half of the decade.

From early 1950 to late 1954, McCarthy and his movement-dubbed "McCarthyism"-named government officials, authors and journalists, movie actors and directors, and many others, for the stated purpose of rooting out communism in American culture. Being named by McCarthy mined many a career during the 1950s; for instance, actors were blacklisted and could not get work after being accused of communist practices.

McCarthy was extremely popular; to a nation gripped by fear, he was a powerful figure. Although McCarthy did not invent anti-communism and in fact shared the anti-communist watch with many others, he remains a symbol of the hysteria and slander that characterized anti -communism in the 1950s.

Related to the fear of communists and communism was the dread of nuclear warfare in the 1950s. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 had shown the world the destructiveness of nuclear weapons, and this knowledge, combined with widespread fear of the Soviet Union, left Americans in constant fear of being bombed. Many Americans chose to build atomic bomb shelters-underground rooms outfitted with supplies-in case of nuclear attack, and schoolchildren were drilled in what to do if a bomb were dropped on their cities. Such drills included such ineffective strategies as "duck and cover," which required children to hide under their desks and cover their heads at the first warning of a nuclear attack. Living under the constant threat of the bomb created a sense of impending doom, but also a desire to pretend that everything is all right.

BOOKRAGS

Critical Overview

When *Seize the Day* was published in 1956, critics praised the novella and maintained that it followed in a natural progression from Bellow's first three novels, *Dangling Man* (1944), *The Victim* (1947), and *The Adventures of Augie March* (1954). In his 1957 *Chicago Review* assessment of *Seize the Day,* Robert Baker wrote that Bellow in all of his novels "has tried to lasso the universe, to explore the splendid, profligate diversity of human experience, and to seek the ties that bind." Baker found that in *Seize the Day,* Bellow had matured as an artist: "The growth and ripening of Bellow's attitudes have been paralleled by the perfecting of his medium of expression."

Baker alluded in his review to the three short stories that accompany *Seize the Day* in the volume entitled *Seize the Day,* but he claimed that "these stories do not match the brilliance of 'Seize the Day,' and so the less said about them the better." Baker suggested that Bellow's writing does contain flaws, particularly that he fails to "deal convincingly with women" and that "his books don't end, they just stop." However, he called Bellow "perhaps the major talent of the past decade."

Irving Malin joined Baker in his praise of *Seize the Day.* In Malin's 1969 book *Saul Bellow's Fiction,* Malin called *Seize the Day* a "'blest nouvelle,'" or blessed novel. He asserted in his book, a study of Bellow's fiction through *Herzog* (1964), that *Seize the Day* was "Bellow's greatest achievement." Harry T. Moore, in his preface to Malin's book, called *Seize the Day* and *The Victim* "two of the finest novels to come out of America since World War II." Malin's assessment of Bellow in general was that he was "probably the most important living American novelist"; Malin's judgment was based on his belief that Bellow's work was "mature, human, [and] imaginative."

Robert R. Dutton in his book *Saul Bellow* (1971) discussed *Seize the Day* mainly in terms of the theme of the novel's sources, the father-son relationship between Tommy Wilhelm and Dr. Adler, Dr. Tamkin as a "Contemporary Witch-doctor," and the novel's water and drowning imagery. Although Dutton acknowledged that it is difficult for critics to make "definitive judgments" about contemporary American literature, he admitted that "Bellow's novels ,.represent the contemporary American novel at its best," adding that this judgment came not only from literary Critics but also from more popular sources such as newspaper book reviews and weekly news magazines. In attempting to make a distinction between Bellow and his fellow American novelists, Dutton asserted that "In each of [Bellow's] novels he finds the human spirit to be quietly triumphant, quietly able to sustain itself in an alien and unfriendly world."

Superlatives have often been used to describe Bellow's work. Brigitte Scheer-Schazler in her 1972 study of Bellow's fiction, *Saul Bellow,* devoted her introduction in part to discussing Bellow's critical reputation. She describes him as "America's most important living novelist," "a 'contemporary classic,'" and asserts that "no contemporary American novelist equals Bellow in the precision, wit, and elegance of his style." Scheer-Schazler noted that *Seize the Day* "contains elements that are familiar from former works."_ She focused on "the open and closed forms of Bellow's novels and his vacillating between

tight and loose modes of language," placing *Seize the Day* in what she called the "'restrained' category.'" This tension in Bellow's fiction between what Scheer-Schazler called "emotional intensity" and "artistic control" represents "two diverging aspects of his talent."

In his introduction to *Critical Essays on Saul Bellow* (1979), which he edited, Stanley Trachtenberg wrote that in the early part of his career "Bellow reflected the interests of a new generation" that had come of age during the Depression and World War II. Trachtenberg saw Bellow as having "abandoned the ironic mode of alienation adopted by the modernists in favor of a moral judgment that emerged from the attempt to allow ideas a dramatic expression." In other words, Trachtenberg suggested, Bellow examined "the look and feel of things" in order to "establish the importance of action.'"

Eusebio Rodrigues nodded to the philosophical underpinnings of *Seize the Day* in his 1979 article "Reichianism in *Seize the Day."* In this article, Rodrigues discussed Bellow's early interest in the thought of Wilhelm Reich, "who combined the insights of a sociologist with those of a psychologist, [insisting] ... that the vast majority of human beings suffer from... inner tensions generated by the conflict between natural human demands and the brutal pressures exerted by the world." Rodrigues stated that in *Seize the Day,* "Tommy Wilhelm is a dramatic illustration of how human character structure is molded and distorted by a society that is patriarchal, death-dealing, money-oriented and barren."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Woodford is a doctoral candidate at Washington University and has written for a wide variety of academic journals and educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses Wilhelm's struggle to understand his connection with others in Seize the Day.

Seize the Day is the story of one day, or more precisely the daylight hours of one day, in the life of Tommy Wilhelm, formerly Wilhelm Adler. In his mid-forties, unemployed, separated from his wife and children, and at odds with his father, Wilhelm feels alienated and alone in the world. His story is, as critics have often noted, a search for self, but it is also a search for connection with others. Ironically, he will only truly understand himself and feel connected to others when he comes to the full realization of how alone he really is, and how isolated all people truly are.

Throughout the book, Wilhelm is surrounded by the aged and dying, a fact that emphasizes his own feelings of isolation. Though only in his mid-forties, he is living in the Hotel Gloriana where "most of the guests... were past the age of retirement," which makes him feel "out of place."_ At the commodities brokerage he is similarly surrounded by the aged: "Wilhelm sat between Mr. Rowland, who was elderly, and Mr. Rappaport, who was very old."' Moreover his elderly companions are not wise old men who can father him and guide him; they are, rather, desperate, dying men, as helpless and alone as he is. Mr. Perls, the elderly breakfast companion of Wilhelm and his father, is dying of a progressive bone disease, and Mr. Rappaport is "nearly blind," and unable to go to the cigar store or even to see the price of the commodities without Wilhelm's help.

Only at the end of the book will Wilhelm recognize that death is his only true connection to other people. Prior to the last scene he sees it only as one more form of alienation, and he is unable or unwilling to sympathize with the dying all around him. The sight of Mr. Rappaport, who needs and relies on him, stimulates not compassion, but rather impatience and resentment in Wilhelm:

He barely crawls along, thought Wilhelm. His pants are dropping off because he hasn't got enough flesh for them to stick to. He's almost blind, and covered With spots, but this old man still makes money in the market. Is loaded with dough, probably. And I bet he doesn't give his children any. Some of them must be in their fifties. This is what keeps middle-aged men as children. He's master over the dough Think-just think! Who controls everything? Old men of this type. Without needs They don't need therefore they have. I need, therefore I don't have. That would be too easy.

Even when faced with an acute example of another man's need, the pathetic and dependent Mr. Rappaport, Wilhelm is incapable of sympathy. Focused only on his own need for money, he sees the overtly needy Mr. Rappaport as "without needs." He fails to recognize Mr. Rappaport's need for a guide and escort and instead focuses only on the old man's money and perceived power. Significantly, he also projects his anger at his own father onto the elderly man, assuming that all wealthy, dying men are selfish,

ungenerous fathers. He does not recognize, even for a second, that he himself is being ungenerous in his refusal to offer the dying man his sympathy and respect.

It is significant that Wilhelm immediately sees Mr. Rappaport as a father unwilling to share with his children, since Wilhelm's troubled relationship With his own father is at the heart of his feelings of isolation and abandonment. Wilhelm sees his father as cold and distant, and he resents his father's cold and rational way of interacting with him: "He behaved toward his son as he had formerly done toward his patients, and it was a great grief to Wilhelm; it was almost too much to bear. Couldn't he see-couldn't he feel? Had he lost his family sense?"

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.'"

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." 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."

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. 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.

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.

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 IDS face grew distorted and hot, and the tears stung his skin. A man-another human creature, was what first went through his thoughts." 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 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."

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.

Source: Donna Woodford, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Siegel lambasts an article on Seize the Day *written by Cynthia Ozick, accusing her of trying to turn Bellow into a "Jewish wisdom-writer.* "

The New Criterion is the Dow Jones of cultural journals, where "high" art is always gaining, and the touchstone of literary greatness might just as well be Shakespeare's First Portfolio. Yet Cynthia Ozick's essay on Saul Bellow's 1956 *Seize the Day* in a recent issue (September 1995) made me think first not of official culture's sour exhalations but of *Beauty and the Beast.*

The story goes that Greta Garbo once gave a private screening of Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* in her apartment. Beauty passed through her ordeal, she and the newly restored prince fell into each other's arms, the kingdom sprang back into shape. The film stopped rolling. Some seconds passed. Then, rising in a slow, silky pout from the back of the room came Garbo's unmistakable voice: "Give me back my beast."

Give me back my Bellow, Cynthia Ozick. It's bad enough that some multi-cultural commissars collapsed Bellow's lifetime of fiction into one silly attempt at epigram-making Bellow survived his collision with a speeding culture. But will he survive Ozick? She has been stalking him for nigh unto twelve years, aiming to turn him into a Jewish wisdom-writer who fashions Ins fictional worlds out of the unchanging aspects of eternity. "The Eye of God is perhaps what [Bellow's] intellectual fevers have always pointed to," Ozick feverishly wrote in 1984. What she really seems to want is to build some Saul Bellow golem, a golem to vanquish all the enemies of her soul.

Seize the Day's plot is a simple one. Tommy Wilhelm is 44 years old, unemployed, broke and desperate. He is living in the same cavernous Upper West Side residence hotel as his rich elderly father, a tightfisted retired doctor who refuses to throw his son the lenderest financial line. Wilhelm quit his well-paying job as salesman (Ozick mistakenly thinks he was fired) after his boss first reneged on a promise to promote him and then gave half of Wilhelm's territory to a son-in-law. Before that, Wilhelm had dropped out of college to become an actor in Hollywood but never made it. He is separated from his wife, Margaret, and has two sons. Despite his lack of funds, Margaret is pressing him for money; the fact that he can no longer send it is driving him nuts. And he has lost the woman he loves because Margaret, who detests him, won't give him a divorce.

Wilhelm entrusts his last few hundred dollars to a super-seductive and unstable con man named Tamkin, who has promised to invest it in commodities and make Wilhelm solvent again. In truth, Tamkin is as broke as Wilhelm and manipulates his prey into financing his own speculations. But the market disappoints, Wilhelm loses everything and Tamkin vanishes without paying back an additional $200 that Wilhelm had loaned him. At 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." The novel seems to pick you up and drop you, as Rilke once said about music, deep into the unfinished.

Of Ozick' s dazzling tirades-against T.S. Eliot (anti-Semite), Isaac Babel (hung out with anti- Semites)-her meditation on *Seize the Day* has to be the weirdest. She starts out. .. by advancing cautiously on the possibly philistine reader, her slingshot loaded With "higher consciousness," the "human essence," "the importance of one's own depths." These are Bellow's themes, she warns, the themes of all great literature, but nobody cares about literature anymore. When *Seize the Day* first came out, "Ah! How to describe it?" There was "hunger, public hunger... you lived by it, you absorbed it, you took it into your system." Now, nobody reacts to literature like that, nobody writes literature like that, etc., etc.

Then we get the weirdness. "Re-entering the theater of this short novel after more than forty years, you will find the scenery hardly altered." Upper Broadway, Ozick believes, where *Seize the Day* takes place, hasn't changed in four decades. The "human essence" is immutable, you see, even if it can't find a one-bedroom for under $1,200. But most bizarre, for Ozick the fabulously timeless thing about Bellow is that he "has invented a refreshed phrenology... is on to something few moderns would wish to believe in: the human head as characterological map." Show me what you look like and I will tell you who you are. Beauty and the Beauty, in other words.

With friends like Ozick, Bellow doesn't need Zulus. She quoted from *Seize the Day* the description of a minor character-the manager of a brokerage office-to prove that Bellow, this Jewish writer, believes in the moral equivalence of numina and noses. Here is the passage Ozick expropriates, with her ellipses:

"Silvery, cool, level, long-profiled, experienced, indifferent, observant, with unshaven refinement, he scarcely looked at Wilhelm The manager's face, low-colored, long-nostriled, acted as a unit of perception, his eyes merely did their reduced share Here was a man . who knew and knew and knew".

This is quite a flattering picture of a stockbroker for *The New Criterion's* readers-a sort of cross between Guicciardini and Sam Shepard. Ozick comments: "And about whom there is nothing further to know." He is a prince of sang-froid, a duke of high finance, a dependable and capable man. It's all in the face.

You wouldn't know from this characterological map of a human head that the broker is a German, and that he watches the commodities board from the back of the office through a pair of small binoculars. Or that the Jewish Wilhelm is afraid of this very efficient German-the full quote is: "he scarcely looked at Wilhelm, who trembled with fearful awkwardness." We find out later that the broker could have disclosed to Wilhelm the truth about Tamkin's lies, but he didn't (he is a heartbroker). That is because in Saul Bellow's world, to know and know-to be all brain and no heartsucks the oxygen out of reality (see the splenetic Mr. Sammler's Planet's clement last paragraph). Says Wilhelm:

"Everybody seems to know something. Even fellows like Tamkin Many people know what to do, but how many can do it?"

How many can do the felling thing, he means. For Ozick, the con man Tamkin knows and does. Ozick thinks Tamkin is ultimately the savior of Wilhelm's "thwarted expression of the higher consciousness," as she puts it. Through the medium of a universal-of-money, of all the intricate processes and forms of money- Tamkin becomes, for Ozick, "the healer of self-castigation... a doctor to Wilhelm's sorrow, a teacher of limitlessness, a snake oil charlatan whose questionable bottles contain an ancient and legitimate cure for mortality's anxieties: seize the day."

In short, a wisdom tale. The bumbling loser gets taught about life by a shaman of the marketplace, a prophet of what is profitable. A lesson for our time. But just as important for Ozick, the novel's action takes place "the day before Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, comprising the most solemn hours of the Jewish liturgical calendar. Old Mr. Rappoport [misspelled in *The New Criterion!],* half-blind, whom Wilhelm encounters at the broker's, reminds him of his synagogue obligations." It is an ancient Jewish wisdom tale. Tamkin, therefore, is a figure straight out of "traditional Jewish storytelling,"_ a force of "wisdom" or "ontology."

The commissars ignored all the beauty in Bellow; Ozick has banished the beast. She's got everything backward For Ozick, Wilhelm is "hollow flounderer." But Bellow compares him to Buddha and to Christ. For Ozick, Tamkin's elaborate con "catch[es] and catch[es] Wilhelm's heart"; it is "garble and gobbledygook, but with a magnetism that can seduce: love, truth, tragedy, the importance of one's own depths."

Yet Tamkin is the consummate seller, and like demagogues and some sadists, he is a demon of empathy. He "catch[es] Wilhelm's heart,'" not with wisdom, but because he knows how to play on Wilhelm's paralyzing guilt and shame. He is Wilhelm's self-destroying alter ago. Tamkin has a "drooping" lower lip; Wilhelm has a "high upper lip " "Yes, yes, he too,'" says Wilhelm to himself at the novel's climax, when he realizes that Tamkin's own suffering exactly fits Tamkin's description of Wilhelm.

Wilhelm himself is an angel of empathy-he would subscribe to Tikkun if he could. "He would never willingly hurt any man's feelings,'" Bellow tells us. But Wilhelm's hyper-sharp sense of other people's pain keeps him from standing up to those who try to hurt him out of their own hurt. He is on one level the Holy Schlemiel in the American marketplace, a semi-satiric figure in Bellovian extrenus, a wholly good person faced with the inhuman choice between making a killing and being killed.. . . It is the untrammeled business culture that throws down this choice, that deforms kindness into self-inflicted cruelty and offers nothing in between. "People come to the market to kill,'" Tamkin explains to Wilhelm. "They make a killing by fantasy." "I don't understand what you mean," says Wilhelm. "By and by, you'll get the drift,'" Tamkin ominously replies.

A "healer of self-castigation"? An exploiter of self-castigation. Tamkin goes on mesmerizing Wilhelm with the keenest social and psychological truths-Iron truths that he mines from Wilhelm's doubts and fears and wields against him. His advice to "seize

the day" clinches Wilhelm's decision to invest, and it is perverse. For Wilhelm is the only character in the novel who really has seized the day. Bellow pointedly Writes that Wilhelm had "seized the feeling" to jump into a Hollywood career. Wilhelm has always seized the feeling. He dropped out of stifling college to search for a larger life, he left a rotting marriage to try to love again; he quit his job because his dignity had been crushed. What he never learned to deal with was the yellowing brick road of banana peels fate has in store for people who follow their hearts without first calculating the loss or gain in social power.

Tamkin, on the other hand: never seizes the day. What he seizes is Wilhelm, like an object. Tamkin invests, after all, in commodities, in futures. For Bellow to use carpe diem in this novel's world without bitter irony would be like Dante inscribing "Our Customers Come First" over the gates of hell. Even more ironically, Tamkin has Wilhelm investing most of his money in lard. Wilhelm is speculating in a purely animal substance, the very element in human relations that is crippling him because he can't bring himself to bite and scratch like everyone he comes in contact with. Balzac and Simmel knew, rationalizes bestiality into an accountant's headache. Bellow tells us twice that Tamkin has "deadly" brown eyes.

Tamkin in fact recalls old Mr. Rappaport, who has made his fortune in chickens. On the eve of Yom Kippur, these "most solemn hours of the Jewish liturgical calendar," Wilhelm looks at this callous and manipulative character and thinks with disgust of "a man who had grown rich by the murder of millions of animals... the slaughter... the blood filling the Gulf of Mexico... the chicken shit, acid, burning the earth." This is not the image of your average haimish kosher butcher, much less Ozick's ancient Jewish conscience. No more than Tamkin, who has Wilhelm investing in fat of the ritually unclean pig, is Ozick's disguised essence of ancient Jewish wisdom.

Deep down, against the evidence of his daring lunges toward a more meaningful existence, Wilhelm accepts the evidence of the marketplace. He believes that because he cannot "kill" his way through the obstacles arrayed against him, he is an indecisive failure. So "seize the day" strikes his heart like a gong. Tamkin teaches him the "importance of one's own depths"-and how. He literally leads the weak-willed Wilhelm to market like a chicken-if not a lamb-to the slaughter, and drowns him in Wilhelm's own depths of self-doubt. As in another great work of social protest, the business culture in *Seize the Day* exacts the *Death* (in this novel, symbolic) *of a Salesman-a* work that also ends with a funeral-as the price for a human being's efforts to wrestle his humanness beyond cash value.

Not for Ozick. Fetishizing *Seize the Day* as one of the last expressions of the "higher consciousness" and the "human essence" in the Western world, she turns the novel on Its head: Seize Your Bootstraps. She ends up packaging her grand abstractions into neat little concepts the way Tamkin travesties the ancient maxim. That's what happens when the defenders of official culture, as opposed to living, breathing art, do handstands on the ramparts of respectability. (Are you listening, Saul?) Yet when I hear the words status quo, I reach for Bellow's best fiction. And for Ozick's. And for all the "great" and

"high" literature I can get my hands on. Because literature is social protest simply as part of its own intangible motion into the material world.

Source: Lee Siegel, "Ozick Seizes Bellow" in *The Nation,* Feb. 26, Vol. 262, No.8, 1996, pp 33-4.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Cynthia Ozick explores Bellow's Seize the Day *as a link to higher consciousness.*

When *Seize the Day* first appeared, the old system was fully at work. Ah! How to describe it? Hunger, public hunger; and then excitement, argument, and, among writers, the wildly admiring disturbances of envy. A new book by Bellow! You lived by it, you absorbed it, you took it into your system....

There was ... another element in Bellow's prose-in the coloration of his mind-that could not be immediately detected, because it contradicted a taken-for-granted sentiment about human character: that the physical body is simply a shell for the nature hidden within, that what I look like is not what I truly am, that my disposition is masked by the configuration of my features. The American infatuation with youth tends to support this supposition: a very young face *is* a sort of mask, and will generally tell you nothing much, and may, in fact, mislead you. Bellow in a way has invented a refreshed phrenology, or theory of the humors; in any case, by the time *Seize the Day* arrived, it was clear he was on to something few modems would wish to believe in: the human head as characterological map. But such a premise is not a retreat or a regression to an archaic psychology. It is an insight that asks us to trust the condition of art, wherein the higher consciousness can infiltrate portraiture. Disclosure is all. Human flesh has no secrets... Bellow, like every artist, is no dualist-his bodies are not bodies, they are souls. And the soul, too, is disparaged by modems as an obscurantist archaism.

But Bellow's art escapes the judgment of the merely enlightened. The nursery-rhyme proverb may be more to his liking: my face is my fortune. If manners are small morals, as Hobbes said, then bodies and faces may be morals writ large; or what is meant by soul. Here is Dr. Tamkin, a central character of *Seize the Day-who* may not be a doctor at all:

What a creature Tamkin was when he took off his hat! The indirect light showed the many complexities of his bald skull, his gull's nose, his rather handsome eyebrows, his vain mustache, His deceiver's brown eyes. His figure was stocky, rigid, short in the neck, so that the large ball of the occiput touched his collar. His bones were peculiarly fanned, as though twisted twice where the ordinary human bone was turned only once, and his shoulders rose in two pagoda-like points. At mid-body he was thick He stood pigeon-toed, a sign perhaps that he was devious or had much to hide The skin of his hands was aging, and his nails were moonless, concave, claw-like, and they appeared loose. His eyes were as brown as beaver fur and full of strange lines. The two large brown naked balls looked thoughtful-but were they? And honest-but was Dr. Tamkin honest?

And here is a minor character, the manager of a brokerage office, no more than a walk-on:

Silvery, cool, level, long-profiled, experienced, indifferent, observant, with unshaven refinement, he scarcely looked at Wilhelm... The manager's face, low-colored, long-nostriled, acted as a unit of perception, his eyes merely did their reduced share. Here was a man who knew and knew and knew.

And about whom there is nothing further to know. What more would the man's biography provide, how would it illuminate? Bellow's attraction to the idea of soul mayor may not be derived from an old interest in Rudolf Steiner; but no one will doubt that these surpassingly shrewd, arrestingly juxtaposed particulars of physiognomy are inspired grains of what can only be called human essence.

Dr. Tamkin, curiously, is both essence and absence: which is to say he is a con man, crucially available to begin with, and then painfully evaporated. Wilhelm, strangled by his estranged wife's inflated expenses, father of two boys, runaway husband who has lost his job-salesman for a corporation that promised him advancement and then fired him in an act of nepotism-is drawn to Tamkin as a savior. Tamkin takes Wilhelm's last seven hundred dollars, introduces him (bewilderingly) to the commodities market, pledges a killing in lard, and meanwhile spills out advice on how to live: Tamkin is a philosopher and amateur poet. Wilhelm's vain and indifferent father, Dr. Adler, an elderly widower, also supplies advice, but brutally, coldly.

Much of this futile counsel takes place in the Gloriana, a residence hotel within view of the Ansonia, an ornate Stanford White-era edifice which "looks like a baroque palace from Prague or Munich enlarged a hundred times, with towers, domes," a leftover from the socially ambitious Broadway of a former age. Despite its name, the Gloriana's glory days are well behind it; its denizens are chiefly retired old Jews like Wilhelm's fastidious father and the ailing Mr. Perls, who drags "a large built-up shoe." Wilhelm at forty-four may be the youngest tenant, and surely the healthiest" big and fair-haired," "mountainous," with "a big round face, a wide, flourishing red mouth, stump teeth." But he is also the humblest. failed husband, failed actor still carrying a phony Hollywood name, broke, appealing to his father for the rent money, pleading with his wife not to squeeze him so hard.

Though maimed and humiliated, Wilhelm is no cynic; he is a not-so naive believer in search of a rescuer. And because he is hopeful and almost gullible, and definitely reckless, a burnt-out sad sack, he is aware of himself as a hapless comic figure. "Fair-haired hippopotamus!" he addresses his lumbering reflection in the lobby glass. And later, heartlessly: "Ass! Idiot! Wild boar! Dumb mule! Slave!"

Wilhelm may seem even to himself to be a fool, but there are no outright fools in Bellow's varied worlds: all his clowns are idiosyncratic seers. Wilhelm sees that his father is mesmerized by old age as death's vestibule, incapable of compassion beyond these margins: a confined soul, disappointed in his son, Dr. Adler, though affluent enough, refuses him help. "He doesn't forget death for one single second, and that's what makes him like this," Wilhelm thinks. "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." Wilhelm may be a hollow flounderer in all other respects-work, wife, sons, father, lover, past,

future, all lost-but he can *see.* And he sees a glimmering in Tamkin, a market gambler With Wilhelm's money, a fly-by-night speculator, a trickster, a kind of phantom appearing and disappearing at will, an opportunist and exploiter, plainly shady if not an out-and-out crook-he sees that Tamkin is somehow and despite everything a man in whom to put his trust. Pragmatically, this will turn out to be a whopper of a mistake; yet Wilhelm, in a passion of nihilist self-seeing, embracing his blunders, defines himself through misjudgment and miscalculation:

... since there were depths in Wilhelm not unsuspected by himself, he received a suggestion from some remote element in his thoughts that the business of life, the real business-to carry his peculiar burden, to feel shame and impotence, to taste these quelled tears-the only important business, the highest business was being done. Maybe the making of mistakes expressed the very purpose of his life and the essence of his being here. Maybe he was supposed to make them and suffer from them on this earth. And though he had raised himself above Mr. Perls and his father because they adored money, still they were called to act energetically and this was better than to yell and cry, pray and beg, poke and blunder and go by fits and starts and fall upon the thorns of life. And finally sink beneath that watery floor-would that be tough luck, or would it be good riddance?

And still there is hope's dim pulse:

"Oh, God," Wilhelm prayed. "Let me out of my trouble Let me out of my thoughts, and let me do something better with myself. For all the time] have wasted] am very sorry. Let me out of this clutch and into a different life For] am all balled up Have mercy."

Mercy is what Tamkin brings, even if only briefly, fitfully, almost unrecognizably; he sports "a narrow smile, friendly, calming, shrewd, and wizard-like, patronizing, secret, potent." He spins out sensational stories, difficult to credit, speaks of "love," "spiritual compensation," "the here-and-now," brags of reading Aristotle in Greek ("A friend of mine taught me when I was in Cairo"); he declares himself to be "a psychological poet." His topic is the nature of souls:

"In here, the human bosom-mine, yours, everybody's-there isn't just one soul. There's a lot of souls. But there are two main ones, the real soul and a pretender soul. Now! Every man realizes that he has to love something or somebody He feels that he must go outward. 'If thou canst not love, what art thou?' Are you with me?"

"Yes, Doc, I think so," said Wilhelm, listening-a little skeptically, but nonetheless hard.

"... The interest of the pretender soul is the same as the interest of the social life, the society mechanism. This is the main tragedy of human life. Oh, it is terrible! Terrible! You are not free. Your own betrayer is inside of you and sells you out. You have to obey him like a slave. He makes you work like a horse. And for what? For who?"

"Yes, for what?" The doctor's words caught Wilhelm's heart. "I couldn't agree more," he said "When do we get free?"

Tamkin carries on, catching and catching Wilhelm's heart: "The true soul is the one that pays the price. It suffers and gets sick, and it realizes that the pretender can't be loved. Because the pretender is a lie. The true soul loves the truth." Garble and gobbledygook, but with a magnetism that can seduce: love, truth, tragedy, the importance of one's own depths. "As a matter of fact," Tamkin winds up, "you're a profound personality with very profound creative capacities but also disturbances." Wilhelm falls for all this and at the same time doubts. Tamkin soothes, procrastinates, plunges into tangential narratives, distracts, eats, philosophizes, and finally hands Wilhelm four stanzas of semiliterate self-help verse studded with greatness, joy, beauty, ecstasy, glory, power, serenity, eternity. "What kind of mishmash, claptrap is this!" Wilhelm shouts in his thoughts. Yet Tamkin continues to lure him; at the brokerage office, where the doctor, an operator, hurries from stocks to commodities and back again, Wilhelm's breast swarms with speculations about the speculator: "Was he giving advice, gathering information, or giving it, or practicing-whatever mysterious profession he practiced? Hypnotism? Perhaps he could put people in a trance while he talked to them."

In the large and clumsy Wilhelm there is a large and clumsy shard of good will, a privately spoken, half-broken unwillingness to be driven solely by suspicion: Tamkin is right to count two disparate souls-only, for Wilhelm, which is the pretender, which the true? Is hopeful trust the true soul, and suspicious doubt the pretender? Or the other way around? For a time it hardly matters: Tamkin is a doctor to Wilhelm's sorrow, a teacher of limitlessness, a snake-oil charlatan whose questionable bottles turn out to contain an ancient and legitimate cure for mortality's anxieties: seize the day The effectively fatherless Wilhelm finds in Tamkin a fairy godfather-but, as might be expected in the land of wishes, one whose chariot melts to pumpkin at the end of the day. Yet again and again, swept away by one fantastic proposition or another, Wilhelm, moved, is led to respond, "This time the faker knows what he's talking about." Or: "How does he know these things? How can he be such a jerk, and even perhaps an operator, a swindler, and understand so well what gives?"

Wilhelm is absurd; sometimes he is childish, and even then, longing for pity and condemning himself for it, he muses: "It is my childish mind that thinks people are ready to give it just because you need it." In spite of a depth of self-recognition, he will burst out in infantile yells and preposterous gestures. Complaining to his father how his wife's conduct and her attitudes suffocate him, he grabs his own throat and begins to choke himself. A metaphor turns into a boy's antics. And after an argument with his wife on a public telephone-during which she accuses him of thinking "like a youngster"-he attempts to rip the telephone box off its wall. There is something of the Marx Brothers in these shenanigans, and also of low domestic farce. "I won't stand to be howled at," counters his wife, hanging up on him. But a man's howl, of anguish or rage, belongs to the Furies, and is not a joke.

Nor is the timing of these incidents. It is the day before Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, comprising the most solemn hours of the Jewish liturgical calendar. Old Mr. Rappoport, half-blind, whom Wilhelm encounters at the broker's, reminds him of his synagogue obligations. Wilhelm replies that he never goes; but he reflects on his mother's death, and remembers the ruined bench next to her grave. Dr. Adler,

preoccupied with dying as his near destination, has no interest in religion. Wilhelm, though, is fixed on his own destiny, with or without God; and Tamkin is a fixer-a repairer-of destiny and of despair. Yet who is more farcical than Tamkin? Bellow once noted-commenting on the tone of traditional Jewish story-telling-how "laughter and trembling are so curiously intermingled that it is not easy to determine the relations of the two. At times the laughter seems simply to restore the equilibrium of sanity; at times the figures of the story, or parable, appear to invite or encourage trembling with the secret aim of overcoming it by means of laughter."

Seize the Day is such a parable; or, on second thought, perhaps not. The interplay of the comic and the melancholic is certainly there-but a parable, after all, is that manner of fable which means to point a moral, or, at the least, to invoke an instructive purpose. The "secret aim," as Bellow has it, is generally more significant than the telling or the dramatis personae. Bellow's fiction hardly counts as "moral" or instructive (though there are plenty of zealous instructors wandering through). His stories look for something else altogether: call it wisdom, call it ontology, or choose it from what Tamkin in free and streaming flight lets loose: "Creative is nature. Rapid. Lavish. Inspirational. It shapes leaves It rolls the waters of the earth. Man is the chief of this." A tornado of made-up maxims and twisted tales, Tamkin is among the great comic characters (comedy being a corridor to wisdom, though not the only one): that he flaunts his multiple astonishments in the modest compass of a short novel is a Bellovian marvel. And he is, besides, Bellow's sentry in reverse, standing watch over an idea of fiction that refuses borders.

Source: Cynthia Ozick, "Saul Bellow's Broadway" in *The New Criterion,* September, Vol 14, No. I, 1995, pp. 29-36.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, Bawer explains why he finds Seize the Day *superior to other Bellow novels.*

Bellow followed his longest novel with his shortest. *Seize the Day* (1956) is Bellow's most admirable work of fiction-concise, cogent, and finely controlled. Tommy Wilhelm is in his middle forties and is residing at the Hotel Gloriana on New York's Upper West Side, which is mostly occupied by elderly people, his physician father among them. Like Augie March, Tommy Wilhelm has energy-and it's done him nothing but harm. For years he tried to be a movie actor in Hollywood, but then "his ambition or delusion had ended," and he became a salesman, and now-that pursuit having failed as well, along with his marriage-another resident of the hotel, a shady character named Dr. Tamkin, has talked him into speculating in the commodities market. "Seize the Day," Tamkin advises.

The books is unique among Bellow's works. The setting is meticulously described, and several of the characters are memorably developed. Most remarkable of all, though, is Bellow's restraint: with a few exceptions (e.g., the list of books by "Korzybski, Aristotle, Freud, W. H. Sheldon" in Dr. Tamkin's apartment), neither the narrator nor any of the characters feels obliged to drop the names of high-toned books and authors or to generalize about such matters as suffering, death, freedom, and the meaning of America-which are, nonetheless, among the themes of *Seize the Day;* and the book is all the more effective, of course, because of this avoidance of explicit theme-mongering. The novel's conclusion is especially powerful: in quick succession Wilhelm discovers that Dr. Tamkin has swindled him, is rejected by his father ("Go away from me now. It's torture for me to look at you, you slob!"), and has a painful telephone conversation with his estranged wife; he then finds himself in "the great, great crowd" on Broadway,

the inexhaustible current of millions of every race and kind pouring out, pressing round, of every age, of every genius, possessors of every human secret, antique and future, in every face the refinement of one particular motive or *essence-I labor, I spend, I strive, I design, I love, I cling, I uphold, I give way, I envy, cling, I scorn, I die, I hide, I want.*

A moment later he is in a funeral chapel, on a slow line filing past a coffin; the dead man's meditative look strikes him with "horror," then "heartsickness," and then finally "sorrow," but he cannot leave the corpse, and is soon crying over it, his sadness at the death of "another human creature" mixed with his continuing anguish over his own problems. It is an affecting ending, as much a reminder of the ubiquity of death (and of the fact that life continues, in all its equivocality, pettiness, and pathos, in spite of death) as it is an affirmation of human connectedness. One of the special things about *Sezze the Day* in fact, is that it seems more universal-less bound to its particular time and place, less concerned with facile social criticism, more sharply focused upon the eternal verities than Bellow's other novels. Of all Bellow's endings, moreover (which are, as a rule, notorious for their inconclusiveness), the ending of *Seize the Day* is the one that feels most like a coherent, satisfactory, and earned resolutions.

Source: Bruce Bawer, "Talking Heads The Novels of Saul Bellow" in *Diminishing Fictions: Essays on the Modem American Novel and Its Critics,* Graywolf Press, 1988, pp. 194-220.

Topics for Further Study

Research middle-class marriage in the 1950s. What roles were married men and women expected to play, and how successful was this model?

Investigate post-World War IT trends in popular psychology and self-help literature. Based on the popularity of the literature you find, can you speculate as to the kinds of advice and support Americans were looking for? What might these needs tell us about American culture at the time?

During the years of President Eisenhower's terms of office-1952 to 1960-what was the general view of success among the middleclass? What did it mean to be successful in 1950s America?

Compare and Contrast

1950s: In spite of a generally positive attitude toward capitalism, American participation in the stock market was not widespread, with stock owned by just 3.5 percent of working Americans in 1956.

Today: Through Individual Retirement Accounts, mutual funds, and retirement plans, more Americans than ever before have money invested in the stock market.

1950s: America popular culture-television shows, movies, magazines-portrayed marriage as essential to happiness, and within marriage, sex roles were strictly defined, with the husband as breadwinner and the wife as housekeeper and mother. Divorce among middle-class marriages was uncommon and considered a failure.

Today: Middle-class marriage and family life in America depend less upon cultural expectations and more upon what works for the individual family. Many middle-class married women work outside the home, divorce has become more common and accepted, and married couples often share housework, childcare, and other domestic duties

1950s: Because of the military, political, and economic triumphs of the 1940s, the U.S. experienced unprecedented prosperity in the 1950s that led Americans to believe that affluence and middle-class status were a birthright.

Today: Many middle-class American families need more than one income just to make ends meet.

1950s: Norman Vincent Peale published his best-seller *The Power of Positive Thinking* in 1952, promoting a way of thinking that he assured readers would give them "peace of mind, Improved health, and a never-ceasing flow of energy" and would help them "modify or change the Circumstances in which [they] now live, assuming control over them rather than continuing to be directed by them"

Today: Best-selling authors like Stephen Covey *(Seven Habits of Highly Effective People)* and Richard Carlson *(Don't Sweat the Small Stuff* and *Don't Worry, Make Money)* claim to teach readers how to gain more satisfaction from their lives.

What Do I Read Next?

Bellow's first novel, *Dangling Man* (1944), is written as the diary of the 27-year-old protagonist, Joseph, who is left "dangling" as he waits to hear at any moment about his induction into the army. *Dangling Man* is often discussed as a stylistic predecessor of *Seize the Day.*

The Victim (1947), Bellow's second novel, also anticipates *Seize the Day* stylistically; both are controlled, well-constructed narratives. *The Victim* tells the story of Asa Leventhal, a New York magazine editor, and his conflict with Kirby Albee, a troubled former acquaintance who reenters his life for the purpose of settling old scores.

The Adventures of Augie March (1953) represented a change in style and tone for Bellow. Narrator and protagonist Augie March recounts the sprawling story of his life, a series of adventures, during which he shows that he is driven by a hunger for experience but possesses no desire to put down roots.

Bellow's 1959 novel *Henderson the Rain King* portrays the adventures of restless and dissatisfied millionaire Eugene Henderson as he leaves behind his chaotic life in America in quest of spiritual fulfillment in Africa.

In.Herzog, published in 1964, Bellow depicts his protagonist, Moses Herzog, as a man who is both innocent and romantic about the world, but who continually bumps up against the harsh realities of his life.

In *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (1977), authors Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak set out to dispel the popular myths about the 1950s as a decade of universal tranquility and complacency. The authors claim that "the image of that decade conveyed by current nostalgia is badly distorted."

The Lonely Crowd (1950) by David Riesman represents a significant piece of social criticism of the 1950s. In this widely-read book, Riesman presents his theory that the American character had changed from being "inner directed" to "other directed," meaning that Americans no longer were guided by an inner sense of right and wrong but instead found their values outside of themselves and felt compelled to conform to the "crowd."

The Organization Man (1956) by Wilham Hollingsworth Whyte, Jr. looks at the 1950s evolution of the work ethic in America into "a belief in the group as a source of creativity; [and] a belief in 'belongingness' as the ultimate need of the individual." Whyte's book, like Riesman's, traced a move away from traditional American self-reliance toward a reliance on the group and a need to belong.

Further Study

Robert Baker, a review in *Chicago Review,* Vol 11, 1957, pp. 107-10.

Asserts that *Seize the Day* demonstrates that Bellow has attained "full artistic maturity".

Richard Giannone, "Saul Bellow's Idea of Self. A Reading of *Seize the Day,"* in *Renascence: Essays on Value in Literature,* Vol. 27, 1975, pp. 193-205.

Sees Wilhelm, like all of Bellow's protagonists, on a quest to discover what makes him human and gives him dignity.

Andrew Jefchak, "Family Struggles in *Seize the Day,'"* in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 11, 1974, pp. 297-302.

An analysis of the frustrated family relations in the novel and the alienation that results.

M. A. Klug, "Saul Bellow The Hero in the Middle," in *Dalhousie RevIew,* Vol. 56, 1976, pp. 462-78.

Views Bellow's work within the traditIon of American literature and discusses his heroes from Joseph in *Dangling Man* through Sammler in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* Klug believes Bellow "offers the most sustained and penetrating criticism of contemporary American life of any novelist of his generation".

Julius Rowan Raper, "The Limits of Change: Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* and *Henderson the Rain King,* " in *Narcissus from Rubble: Competing Models of Character in Contemporary British and American Fiction,* Louisiana State University Press, 1992, pp. 12-36.

According to Raper, Bellow's novels Illustrate the fact that one can only change one's state and find one's self by discovering and relying on one's inner resources.

Lee J. Richmond, "The Maladroit, the Mechco, and the Magician," in *TwentIeth Century Literature,* Vol. 19, 1973, pp. 15-26.

Richmond perceives Dr. Tamk1O as "the nexus for the novel's artistic truth."

Philip Stevick, "The Rhetoric of Bellow's Short Fiction," in *Critical Essays on Saul Bellow,* edited by Stanley Trachtenberg, G.K Hall & Co., 1979, pp. 73-82.

Examining Bellow's short stories, including the three stories published along with *Seize the Day* in its first edition, Stevick discusses the "uncommon power and integrity" of Bellow's short fiction.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of classic novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members educational professionals helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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