



Existential Crisis and the Failure of the American Dream in Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*

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ABSTRACT

Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* (1956) is regarded as one of the most significant American novellas of the twentieth century. Through the life of Tommy Wilhelm, Bellow presents a profound exploration of existential anxiety, alienation, identity crisis, and the collapse of the American Dream. The novel portrays an ordinary man struggling with personal failures, financial insecurity, emotional isolation, and the absence of meaningful human relationships. Tommy's inability to meet society's expectations reflects the predicament of modern individuals caught between material ambitions and emotional needs. The father-son relationship between Tommy Wilhelm and Dr. Adler symbolizes the emotional distance that characterizes modern urban life, while the manipulative figure of Dr. Tamkin represents the exploitation of vulnerable individuals in a capitalist society. Bellow employs psychological realism, symbolism, and existential philosophy to depict the complexities of modern existence. This paper examines the novel from existential and socio-psychological perspectives, emphasizing themes of alienation, identity crisis, materialism, and the failure of the American Dream. It argues that *Seize the Day* remains relevant because it addresses universal human concerns such as loneliness, insecurity, the

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search for identity, and the desire for compassion. The study also highlights Bellow's narrative technique and philosophical vision, demonstrating how the novel transcends its historical setting to become a timeless reflection on the human condition.

Introduction

American literature after the Second World War witnessed remarkable changes in its representation of human experience. The devastation caused by the war, the rapid growth of industrial capitalism, urbanization, and technological progress transformed social values and personal relationships. Writers increasingly focused on the psychological struggles of individuals living in a modern society where economic success often replaced emotional fulfillment. Saul Bellow emerged as one of the foremost literary voices of this period, portraying characters who confront loneliness, uncertainty, and the search for meaning amidst the pressures of modern civilization.

Published in 1956, *Seize the Day* occupies a prominent place in American literature because of its realistic depiction of an individual's emotional and existential struggles. Unlike traditional success stories that celebrate the American Dream, the novel presents the tragic experiences of Tommy Wilhelm, a middle-aged man whose failures expose the limitations of material success as the ultimate measure of human worth. Throughout a single day in New York City, Wilhelm confronts financial ruin, emotional abandonment, and spiritual despair, making the novel a powerful psychological study of modern existence.

Tommy Wilhelm is portrayed as an ordinary individual rather than a heroic figure. He has failed in his acting career, experienced the collapse of his marriage, lost stable employment, and remains financially dependent on others. His inability to achieve conventional success makes him an outsider in a society obsessed with wealth and social prestige. Despite these failures, Wilhelm remains emotionally sensitive and compassionate, qualities that distinguish him from the selfish and materialistic characters surrounding him.

One of the central conflicts in the novel is the strained relationship between Tommy and his father, Dr. Adler. As a successful retired physician, Dr. Adler represents rationality, discipline, and social respectability. However, he consistently refuses to provide emotional or financial support to his son. Their relationship symbolizes the decline of familial bonds in modern urban society, where personal achievement often becomes more important than compassion. Wilhelm's longing for his father's acceptance reflects a deeper human need for love, understanding, and emotional security.



The novel also introduces Dr. Tamkin, an enigmatic psychologist and self-proclaimed philosopher who persuades Wilhelm to invest his remaining savings in the commodities market. Tamkin appears sympathetic and intellectually sophisticated, yet his deceptive nature ultimately contributes to Wilhelm's financial disaster. Through Tamkin, Bellow criticizes individuals who exploit emotional vulnerability for personal gain. Tamkin's philosophical discussions concerning the "real soul" and the "pretender soul" introduce existential questions regarding authenticity, identity, and human responsibility.

Another important theme in *Seize the Day* is the failure of the American Dream. Traditionally, the American Dream promises prosperity, social mobility, and personal fulfillment through hard work and determination. However, Tommy's experiences reveal the limitations of this ideal. Despite his efforts to improve his life, he repeatedly encounters disappointment and failure. His economic struggles demonstrate that success is influenced not only by individual effort but also by social circumstances, emotional stability, and personal relationships.

Bellow's narrative technique significantly enhances the psychological depth of the novel. Although the events occur within a single day, frequent flashbacks reveal Tommy's past experiences, allowing readers to understand the emotional causes of his present condition. The third-person limited narration closely follows Wilhelm's thoughts and emotions, creating intimacy between the reader and the protagonist. This psychological realism enables Bellow to portray complex emotional states with remarkable sensitivity.

Existential philosophy also forms an important foundation for the novel. Thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus emphasized that human beings must create meaning in an indifferent universe. Tommy Wilhelm embodies this existential struggle. He seeks purpose, acceptance, and dignity despite repeated disappointments. His emotional suffering illustrates the universal human condition of searching for identity and belonging in an uncertain world.

Furthermore, the urban setting of New York City contributes significantly to the novel's atmosphere. Although surrounded by countless people, Wilhelm experiences profound loneliness. The crowded streets, hotels, offices, and financial institutions become symbols of emotional isolation and impersonal social relationships. Bellow portrays modern cities as places where individuals may achieve economic success while simultaneously losing emotional connection and personal identity.

The novel reaches its emotional climax during a stranger's funeral, where Wilhelm unexpectedly breaks down in tears. This powerful scene symbolizes emotional release, spiritual awakening, and the recognition of shared human suffering. Wilhelm's tears represent not only his personal grief but also the universal pain



experienced by individuals confronting failure, loneliness, and mortality. The conclusion suggests that genuine humanity lies not in financial achievement but in compassion, emotional honesty, and the acceptance of human vulnerability.

From a literary perspective, *Seize the Day* combines realism, symbolism, existential philosophy, and psychological analysis into a unified artistic vision. Bellow transforms the ordinary experiences of an unsuccessful businessman into a profound meditation on the meaning of life. His exploration of alienation, identity crisis, family relationships, and materialism continues to resonate with contemporary readers because these issues remain central to modern society.

Seize the Day from psychological, existential, and socio-cultural perspectives. Irving Malin argues that Tommy Wilhelm represents the modern individual whose emotional sensitivity becomes a source of suffering within a materialistic society. Malcolm Bradbury observes that Bellow's fiction combines intellectual inquiry with deep human sympathy, making Tommy one of the most psychologically complex protagonists in post-war American literature.

Tony Tanner emphasizes that Bellow critiques modern capitalism by demonstrating how economic ambition often destroys genuine human relationships. Daniel Fuchs highlights the symbolic significance of Dr. Tamkin, suggesting that he represents both illusion and the desperate human search for hope. Leslie Fiedler interprets Tommy's emotional breakdown as a moment of spiritual rebirth rather than complete defeat.

These critical perspectives indicate that *Seize the Day* is far more than a story of financial failure. It is a philosophical examination of human identity, compassion, and survival in a society dominated by material values. The present study builds upon these interpretations while emphasizing the continuing relevance of Bellow's insights into modern life.

Existential Crisis and Identity in *Seize the Day*

One of the most significant themes in *Seize the Day* is the existential crisis experienced by Tommy Wilhelm. Existentialism, a philosophical movement associated with thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, emphasizes that individuals must create meaning in an uncertain and often indifferent world. Tommy Wilhelm embodies this struggle. Throughout the novel, he questions his identity, purpose, and place in society. His repeated failures in career, marriage, and financial life leave him emotionally exhausted and uncertain about his future.



Tommy's decision to abandon college and pursue an acting career demonstrates his desire to establish an independent identity. However, this ambition ends in disappointment, forcing him to confront the gap between dreams and reality. His inability to secure lasting employment further intensifies his feelings of worthlessness. Bellow portrays Tommy as a man trapped between social expectations and personal aspirations, illustrating the existential tension between individual freedom and responsibility.

The protagonist's internal conflict is reflected in his constant self-examination. He recognizes his weaknesses but struggles to overcome them. Rather than presenting Tommy as a flawless hero, Bellow depicts him as an ordinary human being whose imperfections make him relatable. His vulnerability allows readers to understand the psychological burden carried by individuals living in a competitive and materialistic society.

Alienation and Loneliness

Alienation is another dominant theme in *Seize the Day*. Despite living in the crowded city of New York, Tommy experiences profound emotional isolation. His relationships with family members, friends, and colleagues are characterized by misunderstanding, distance, and disappointment. This loneliness reflects the condition of many modern individuals who find themselves surrounded by people yet deprived of genuine emotional connections.

Tommy's separation from his wife and children contributes significantly to his sense of isolation. Although he continues to support his family financially, he receives little affection or emotional support in return. Similarly, his father, Dr. Adler, refuses to acknowledge Tommy's emotional needs. Dr. Adler values independence and social respectability above compassion, creating an emotional barrier between father and son.

The urban environment itself reinforces the theme of alienation. Hotels, offices, restaurants, and financial institutions become impersonal spaces where human relationships are governed by economic interests rather than empathy. Bellow suggests that modernization has weakened traditional family structures and community values, leaving individuals emotionally disconnected from one another. Tommy's loneliness reaches its peak after losing his remaining savings in the commodities market. With no financial security, no supportive family, and no trustworthy friends, he confronts the painful reality of complete isolation. This emotional collapse demonstrates how alienation extends beyond physical separation to become a psychological condition.

Failure of the American Dream



The American Dream has traditionally symbolized the belief that determination, hard work, and perseverance inevitably lead to success and prosperity. *Seize the Day* challenges this optimistic ideal by portraying the life of a man who works hard yet repeatedly experiences failure. Tommy Wilhelm sincerely wishes to become successful and financially independent. He attempts different careers, tries to support his family, and continuously searches for opportunities to improve his situation. Nevertheless, his efforts produce disappointment instead of achievement. His experiences illustrate that success depends not only on personal effort but also on social circumstances, economic conditions, and emotional stability.

Dr. Adler represents the conventional American Dream. As a respected physician, he enjoys wealth, social prestige, and independence. However, his emotional detachment reveals that material success alone cannot guarantee happiness or meaningful relationships. His refusal to assist Tommy exposes the moral limitations of a society that values achievement more than compassion. Dr. Tamkin symbolizes another aspect of the American Dream—the illusion of quick financial success. He persuades Tommy to invest in speculative commodities by promising substantial profits. Instead of achieving prosperity, Tommy loses everything. Through this episode, Bellow criticizes the culture of greed and speculation that encourages unrealistic expectations and exploits vulnerable individuals. The novel ultimately argues that genuine fulfillment cannot be measured solely by wealth or professional success. Human dignity depends equally upon emotional security, ethical values, and meaningful interpersonal relationships.

Father–Son Relationship

The relationship between Tommy Wilhelm and Dr. Adler forms the emotional center of the novel. Their interactions illustrate the breakdown of communication between generations and the decline of family responsibility in modern society. Dr. Adler is financially secure and socially respected, yet he remains emotionally unavailable to his son. He repeatedly advises Tommy to become self-reliant but refuses to acknowledge his emotional suffering. Although Tommy seeks not only financial assistance but also understanding and affection, Dr. Adler dismisses his problems as personal failures.

Tommy's emotional dependence on his father reflects his desire for acceptance and unconditional love. Throughout the novel, he hopes that Dr. Adler will finally recognize his pain and offer comfort. This expectation remains largely unfulfilled, making their relationship one of the most tragic aspects of the narrative. Bellow does not portray either character as entirely right or wrong. Dr. Adler represents discipline, independence, and rationality, while Tommy embodies emotion, compassion, and vulnerability. Their inability to understand each other's perspectives illustrates the broader communication gap that often exists within modern families. The strained father–son relationship also reflects changing social values.



Traditional family structures emphasized mutual support and responsibility, whereas modern urban life often encourages individual achievement and personal independence. Bellow suggests that emotional neglect can be as damaging as financial hardship.

Materialism and Capitalist Society

One of Bellow's strongest criticisms is directed toward the materialistic values of modern capitalist society. Throughout *Seize the Day*, financial success becomes the primary standard by which individuals judge themselves and others.

Tommy's personal value appears to be measured according to his economic status. Because he lacks wealth and professional success, he receives little respect from those around him. Even his father evaluates him largely in terms of financial independence rather than emotional well-being.

The commodities market functions as a powerful symbol of capitalist uncertainty. Investors hope to earn quick profits despite unpredictable economic forces. Tommy's decision to trust Dr. Tamkin demonstrates how desperation can lead individuals to make irrational financial choices. His complete financial loss illustrates the dangers of placing excessive faith in material success. Dr. Tamkin himself embodies opportunism within capitalist society. He presents himself as a psychologist, philosopher, and financial expert, manipulating Tommy's hopes for his own benefit. His deceptive behavior illustrates how economic systems may reward manipulation rather than honesty. Bellow's criticism extends beyond economic institutions to society's broader moral priorities. He argues that when wealth becomes the highest value, compassion, trust, and genuine human relationships inevitably suffer.

Symbolism and Narrative Technique

Bellow enriches the novel through the use of symbolism and sophisticated narrative techniques. Although *Seize the Day* covers only a single day, numerous flashbacks reveal Tommy's personal history and explain the emotional roots of his present crisis. This structure allows readers to understand his psychological development gradually. The title itself, *Seize the Day*, carries symbolic significance. While the traditional phrase "Carpe Diem" encourages people to embrace life's opportunities, Bellow gives the expression a deeper existential meaning. Tommy must confront reality honestly rather than escaping into fantasies about future success.

Dr. Tamkin's distinction between the "real soul" and the "pretender soul" also functions symbolically. According to Tamkin, the pretender soul seeks wealth, status, and public approval, whereas the real soul



desires truth, compassion, and authentic existence. Although Tamkin's own credibility remains questionable, this philosophical distinction reflects the novel's central conflict between appearance and reality. The funeral scene at the novel's conclusion represents one of Bellow's most powerful symbols. Tommy weeps beside the coffin of a stranger, releasing years of accumulated grief, frustration, and loneliness. His tears symbolize emotional purification and spiritual renewal. Rather than depicting defeat, Bellow presents this moment as an affirmation of shared humanity and compassion.

Bellow's language combines realism with psychological depth. His detailed descriptions of Tommy's thoughts, fears, and memories create a vivid portrait of an individual struggling to maintain dignity within an increasingly impersonal world. The close third-person narration allows readers to experience Tommy's emotional turmoil directly, making the novel both intellectually engaging and emotionally moving.

Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* is widely regarded as one of the finest examples of twentieth-century American psychological fiction. Although the novel is relatively short, it addresses complex philosophical and social issues with remarkable depth. Bellow successfully combines realism, symbolism, and existential thought to create a narrative that is both intellectually stimulating and emotionally compelling.

One of the greatest strengths of the novel lies in the characterization of Tommy Wilhelm. Unlike traditional literary heroes, Tommy is an ordinary individual whose weaknesses, fears, and failures make him deeply human. Readers sympathize with him because his struggles mirror the anxieties experienced by many people in contemporary society. His desire for acceptance, dignity, and emotional security transcends cultural and historical boundaries, making him a universal character. Bellow also demonstrates exceptional psychological insight through his exploration of Tommy's thoughts and emotions. Instead of relying on dramatic external events, the novel focuses primarily on the protagonist's internal conflicts. This psychological realism enables readers to understand the emotional consequences of loneliness, insecurity, and repeated disappointment.

The relationship between Tommy and Dr. Adler is another remarkable achievement. Rather than presenting a simple conflict between a good son and an uncaring father, Bellow portrays two individuals shaped by different values and life experiences. Dr. Adler believes in discipline, independence, and social respectability, whereas Tommy seeks emotional support and human compassion. Their inability to understand one another illustrates the communication gap that often exists within families. The character of Dr. Tamkin has generated considerable critical debate. Some scholars interpret him as a manipulative fraud who exploits Tommy's desperation for personal gain. Others argue that despite his deception, Tamkin articulates important philosophical ideas concerning the distinction between the "real soul" and the



“pretender soul.” His ambiguous nature reflects the complexity of modern society, where truth and falsehood frequently coexist.

Bellow’s narrative technique deserves particular appreciation. The entire story unfolds within approximately one day, yet through carefully constructed flashbacks the reader gains access to Tommy’s entire emotional history. This compressed structure creates dramatic intensity while maintaining psychological depth. Every conversation, memory, and reflection contributes to the gradual revelation of Tommy’s character. Another significant aspect of the novel is its critique of capitalism and materialism. Bellow does not reject economic success itself but questions a society in which financial achievement becomes the sole measure of personal worth. The commodities market, represented by Tommy’s disastrous investment, symbolizes the uncertainty and moral ambiguity of modern capitalism. Human relationships become secondary to economic ambition, leading to emotional emptiness and social isolation.

From an existential perspective, *Seize the Day* emphasizes the importance of authenticity. Tommy repeatedly attempts to escape his failures through unrealistic hopes and dependence on others. Only after confronting the reality of his suffering does he begin to achieve emotional clarity. His breakdown at the funeral represents not defeat but acceptance of human vulnerability and shared existence.

Contemporary Relevance

Although *Seize the Day* was published in 1956, its themes remain highly relevant in the twenty-first century. Rapid technological development, globalization, and increasing economic competition have intensified many of the problems that Bellow identified decades ago. Modern individuals continue to experience loneliness despite unprecedented digital connectivity. Social media platforms often encourage superficial relationships while reducing opportunities for genuine emotional interaction. Like Tommy Wilhelm, many people struggle to maintain meaningful personal connections in increasingly individualistic societies.

The novel’s criticism of materialism is equally significant today. Contemporary culture frequently equates success with wealth, professional achievement, and social status. Young people often experience immense pressure to secure prestigious careers and financial stability. Those who fail to meet these expectations may suffer from anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Tommy’s experiences therefore continue to resonate with readers confronting similar social pressures. The father-son relationship depicted in the novel also reflects enduring concerns about family communication. Differences in values, expectations, and life



experiences often create emotional distance between generations. Bellow reminds readers that genuine understanding requires empathy rather than judgment.

Economic uncertainty further enhances the novel's contemporary significance. Financial crises, unemployment, inflation, and unstable investment markets continue to affect millions of people around the world. Tommy's failed investment in the commodities market serves as a reminder of the risks associated with speculation and the pursuit of quick financial success. Mental health has become an increasingly important area of public discussion in recent years. Tommy Wilhelm's emotional breakdown illustrates the psychological consequences of prolonged stress, financial insecurity, and social isolation. His story encourages readers to recognize the importance of compassion, emotional support, and mental well-being.

From an academic perspective, *Seize the Day* remains an important text for the study of existential literature, American fiction, psychological realism, and post-war cultural criticism. It continues to be widely taught in universities because of its rich thematic complexity and enduring philosophical relevance.

Conclusion

Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* stands as one of the most profound explorations of the modern human condition in American literature. Through the tragic experiences of Tommy Wilhelm, Bellow examines existential anxiety, alienation, identity crisis, family conflict, and the limitations of the American Dream. Rather than presenting a conventional success story, the novel portrays an ordinary individual struggling to preserve dignity and hope in a society dominated by material values. Tommy Wilhelm's failures reveal that financial success alone cannot provide emotional fulfillment or personal meaning. His relationships with Dr. Adler and Dr. Tamkin demonstrate the importance of compassion, trust, and authentic human connection. The emotional climax at the stranger's funeral symbolizes not defeat but spiritual awakening, suggesting that genuine humanity emerges through empathy and the acceptance of shared suffering.

Bellow's use of psychological realism, symbolism, and existential philosophy transforms a simple narrative into a timeless reflection on life, identity, and morality. His portrayal of loneliness and emotional vulnerability continues to resonate with contemporary readers facing similar challenges in an increasingly competitive and materialistic world. Ultimately, *Seize the Day* reminds readers that human dignity depends not upon wealth or social status but upon compassion, self-awareness, and authentic relationships. The novel encourages individuals to confront reality honestly, accept their imperfections, and discover meaning through genuine human experience. More than six decades after its publication, Bellow's masterpiece remains a powerful literary exploration of the universal search for identity, belonging, and hope.



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