



Seize the Day

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Tommy Wilhelm is a loser. He is divorced, unemployed, broke, undereducated, self-indulgent, and dependent (on pills and his father, among other things). He lives in a hotel in New York City and wants desperately to put his life in order. Tommy, like all Bellow protagonists, has trouble determining how to cope with the modern world.

One of the symbols of Tommy's problems, and those of modern society generally, is his relationship with his father. Tommy's father lives in the same hotel and is disgusted with his son's weakness. He refuses to give the one thing Tommy wants most--sympathy.

Tommy makes one last grasp for success by investing in the commodities market under the dubious influence of Dr. Tamkin. His money quickly evaporates and with it his hopes.

At this lowest point, however, Tommy has an epiphany. He accidentally happens into a church during a funeral, and, after looking at the body of a man he does not know, breaks into uncontrollable weeping.

Tommy weeps for the man, for himself, and for the human condition. He is transported beyond his own particular problems to a cathartic suffering for all mankind.

Bellow sees the problems of the modern world as essentially matters of the spirit. In a high-pressure, pluralistic, threatening, materialistic world, people must find a way to live and to remain human. Tommy does this by recognizing that human beings, for all their weaknesses--or perhaps because of them--must accept and share one another's burdens.

Bellow offers this important response to the modern condition in a comic tale that is a contemporary classic, one which later helped win for him the Nobel prize.

Bibliography

Braham, Jeanne. *A Sort of Columbus*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984. Examines Bellow's novels as centering on the theme of discovery and how his heroes pursue a personal vision tempered by, yet transcending, the American experience.

Clayton, John. *Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man*. 2d ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979. Discusses Bellow's characters as alienated and paranoid, yet acting in such a way as to affirm the brotherhood of man.

Newman, Judie. *Saul Bellow and History*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984. Provides a summary of critical opinions of Bellow's religious and psychological views of life. Sees Bellow as a novelist concerned with the effect of history on his protagonists.

Pifer, Ellen. *Saul Bellow Against the Grain*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990. Argues that each of Bellow's heroes is in conflict with himself. The conflict between reason and religion ends with the hero's affirmation of a metaphysical or intuitive truth.

Seize the Day: Seize the Day

Trachtenberg, Stanley, comp. *Critical Essays on Saul Bellow*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979. A compendium of the most significant critical essays about Bellow's novels.

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