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Existential Angst: A Reading of Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*

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I want to express my gratitude to
all the Professors who taught me what I know now,
especially Susana, my supervisor, who helped to find the way;
my friends, who supported me in many ways;
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1. Abstract

ABSTRACT: Existentialism is a philosophical doctrine focused on the human being in face of reality that has been attracting many writers for decades. Many scholars have been discussing the Existentialism in Saul Bellow's production. This work analysis the American author's novel *Seize the Day* through a bibliographical review. Applying presupposes defended by Jean-Paul Sartre to the novel it was possible to find connections with the French thinker's ideas though the novel lacks some density when compared to other Existentialist works.

Keywords: Existentialism, Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day*

RESUMO: Existencialismo é uma doutrina filosófica focada no ser humano em face da realidade, que vem atraindo muitos escritores há décadas. Muitos estudiosos vêm discutindo a possibilidade de Saul Bellow poder ser considerado um escritor Existencialista. A presente pesquisa analisa o livro do autor Estadunidense *Seize the Day* através de uma revisão bibliográfica. Aplicando os pressupostos defendidos por Jean-Paul Sartre ao livro foi possível encontrar conexões com o que defende o pensador Francês, embora falte certa densidade ao livro de Bellow quando comparado aos de outros trabalhos Existencialistas.

Palavras-chave: Existencialismo, Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day*

2. Introduction

It is said that freedom is every man's dream. But what happens when it is effectively given to man? A probable answer to this apparently simple question could be: 'enjoy it!' However, freedom can be a burden, because it compels the human being to make choices as well to assume their consequences. In literature, freedom of choice is a broad theme that has been very much discussed. In *Seize the Day* it is explored by Saul Bellow in the US of the mid-1950, a very particular moment concerning historical, political and social aspects, such as the strengthening of the American Way of Life after the end of World War II and the cold war. In the novel, the protagonist, Tommy Wilhelm, embodies a counter position to the 'successful-man' mandatory cultural concept of the period in the US: Wilhelm is a 'loser'.

Because it deals with such themes, *Seize the Day* has been considered by some scholars an exemplary Existentialist novel. Other scholars defend a contrary position. Saul Bellow, by his turn, has never labeled himself an Existentialist, although that was an important philosophical tendency when the book was published. The present research was motivated by this controversy, as well by my personal interest in Existentialism after reading *The Stranger* (1942), by Albert Camus, defining as its objective to seek for elements in the book that can classify it as representative of the philosophical doctrine in literature, starting from the hypothesis that *Seize the Day* can be considered an Existentialist novel. In order to raise evidence of Existentialism in the book, the method used was a bibliographical review, followed by a search for tenets that relate the novel to three main principles: a) existence precedes essence; b) subjectivity is the basis of existence; c) God does not exist, therefore people are lonely in their decisions, what causes existential anguish.

The conclusion reached by this study gives account that *Seize the Day* can be considered an Existentialist work, but it lacks some of the density found in others works classified as Existentialist. Bellow's novel follows a realistic atmosphere, while other Existentialist novels use Absurdism to cause estrangement. Estrangement is the literary element that highlights illogical situations given as normal in certain circumstances, which helps to clarify the point made by an author.

3. Historical Context

On April 12, 1945, when Truman took office as President, his country was one of the chief participants in WWII. Allied to the Soviet Union, which communist regime was ideologically against Nazism, both countries were resolute to defeat the Nazi Germany. In the name of this alliance the US President hinted to his Soviet ally, Joseph Stalin, that a new weapon had been developed by the US against Japan. Within that same year, after the Japanese government's refusal to surrender, the President of the United States authorized atomic bombs to be dropped on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Three days later, the devastated Asian country surrendered.

Those two bombs, amongst other military actions, not only ended that war, but also marked American participation and, more specifically, President Truman's attitudes in armed conflicts. Much criticism would subsequently arise. Oppenheimer, the scientist called 'father of the atomic bomb', in a White House meeting "expressed remorse over the dropping of atomic bomb and alluded to scientists' feelings that they had blood on their hands [being called by Truman through a letter to Dean Acheson as] 'crybaby'" (Lacey, 178). Later, when the author and historian Herbert Feis raised questions about Truman's strategy in WWII, the President was short: "It is a great thing that you or any contemplator 'after the fact' didn't have to make the decision (...) I knew what I was doing (...) I have no regrets and, under the same circumstances, I would do it again" (Lacey, 179).

War finished, the allied powers were joined by agreements around further actions against those gathered along the Nazi regime. Among other decisions was the distribution of power over the defeated countries, reinforcing a paradoxical feeling from the US toward Russia; their foreign policies kept them geographically close, but

strengthened rivalry respecting their ideological orientations. Both were economic and military superpowers fighting against a common enemy: the advance of the Nazi Germany. Thus, ideological differences were put aside for a while, but not forgotten. Irritated with the Secretary of State because of isolated attitudes in relation to foreign treats “keeping him in the dark”, Truman expressed his discontentment against Russian’s political ideology in a letter of 1946:

I think we ought to protest with all the vigor of which we are capable the Russian program in Iran (...) It is also in line with the high handed and the arbitrary manner in which Russia acted in Poland. (...) At Potsdam we (...) were almost forced to agree to Russian occupation of Eastern Poland (...) At the time we were anxious for Russian entry into the Japanese War. Of course we found later that we didn’t need Russia there and Russians have been a head ache for us ever since (...) we should maintain complete control of Japan and the Pacific. We should rehabilitate China and create a strong central government there. We should do the same for Korea. Then we should insist on the return of our ships from Russia and for a settlement of the Lend-Lease Debt of Russia. I’m tired babying the soviets. (apud Poen, p. 39, 40, 41).

This divergence was part of how those countries were politically configured at that time. The Soviet Union, after the 1917 Revolution had been governed by a communist regime organized around an ideal of common welfare above individual needs. The US, in contrast, born as a promised land, had plenty of opportunities for those who worked hard and fought in defense of individual rights.

Once the alliance was no longer necessary, Truman returned his attention to another advance: now, communism was the target. Trying to prevent communism from spreading to countries such as Greece and Turkey, two neighbors that were quite unstable politically at that time, Truman addressed the American Congress and successfully launched a plan against totalitarian regimes through a major foreign policy, known as Truman Doctrine.

The policy adopted by the US, however, represented much more than helping Greece and Turkey. After the war, Europe was physically, morally, and financially devastated, not having the means for reconstruction. Therefore, the only country that

could help the reconstruction of Europe, the US, unveiled a much more ambitious program. In 1947, the US President indicated as Secretary of State a former General, George Marshall, who developed and implemented a plan that would turn Europe into a modernized economy. “The Marshall Plan rested squarely on an American conviction that European economic recovery was essential to the long-term interests of the United States” (Hogan, 26).

The plan created the ECA (Economic Cooperation Administration) through which the US sent money to European countries in need, accompanied by an envoy, usually a notorious American businessman, who would give financial assistance on how to use the money. Since many of these countries had exhausted their foreign exchange reserve in the war, they could only trade goods with the US using the dollars sent by America. As George Marshall declared in a speech at Harvard University on June 5, 1947, “Europe’s requirements for the next three or four years of foreign food and other essential products – principally from America – are so much greater than her present ability to pay that” (Salmon, 29). Shipped supplies were also included in the plan. For the sake of guarantee that no mistake happened on the way, all assistance sent to Europe carried the Marshall Plan label. Inside a shield that recalled the American flag, one could read the sentence "For European Recovery-Supplied by the United States of America (...) replaced by the slogan (...) Strength for the Free World-From the United States of America" (Sherman, 23) in the last days of the plan.

Although an efficient strategy aiming at the dissemination of freedom for those under totalitarian regimes, the war had not been finished, it had just gained a different configuration. Instead of direct attacks, the US and the URSS supported many conflicts in different countries, as well stirred scientific competition between them; that was the Cold War. Amid this veiled war climate, spies became one of the major preoccupations

in the United States, taking the government to investigate definitely anybody. In Congress, Senator Joseph McCarthy was the most important feature fomenting communist paranoia in American life. During a speech at Wheeling, West Virginia, he presented a simple paper in which there would be names of hundreds of communists working for the State Department.

The great difference between our western Christian world and the atheistic Communist world is not political (...) however, lies in the religion of immorality invented by Marx (...) carried to unimaginable extremes by Stalin (...) if the Red half of the world triumphs (...) The reason why we find ourselves in a position of impotency is (...) rather because of the traitorous actions of those who have been treated so well by this Nation (...) the finest homes, the finest college education and the finest jobs in government we can give. (...) This is glaringly true in the State Department. (...) I have here in my hand a list of 205 (...) names that were made known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping policy in the State Department. (Donaldson, 36-38)

McCarthy's speech triggered an anti-communist crusade carried out by FBI that extrapolated the limits of government staff, tracking teachers, ordinary people, workers, famous artists; everyone could be a suspect. In the US 1950's 'red' was not just Physics' definition of a phenomenon, but the color of the communist party, which commanded Russia, representing their values throughout the world. If that same color is in the first and the last stripe, taking large part on American flag, there it symbolizes Hardiness and Valor, while for communists it represented the blood of those who fought for their country. Red for the US 1950's was a permanent state of alert.

American offensive against communism used a much more sophisticated way: instead of bullets, the American Government decided for an enormous propaganda pro-American values. "In 1955, the United States Information Agency (USIA) printed 12.400 copies of a lavishly illustrated booklet called 'My America'" (Belmont, 3). Written by a former State Department official, Arthur Goodfriend, the pamphlet was based on impressions that a selected group from American culture, business, journalism,

theology, and academia had about America and its people concerning freedom, moral, religion and political and civil liberties. Carefully elaborated, the pamphlet included personal declarations given by the participants and inserted in Goodfriend's own memories, surrounded by different ethnical groups. As a result, he created a historical and at the same time familiar document for the readers charged with the main values of American society.

Like any product to be sold, the publicity of American values counted with more than pamphlets. Since war times there already was some kind of censorship and control over movies, avoiding subversive themes as well as promoting US victories. In fighting against Eastern values, all possible media for all ages were used. "Movies, broadcasting, and public schools were targets for those who wanted to purge America of all possible traitorous ideas" (Spring, 159). Thus, a new way of life was 'naturally' built on the original American concept of individual effort and self-reliance, as opposed to socialist ideals. Designed for those who wanted to succeed, determination, hard work, and natural ability were fundamental characteristics. In contrast, those deprived of any of these key elements for success were naturally excluded from American society; there was no place for losers in the American Way of Life.

4. Literary Context

The main purpose of this paper refers to the possible connection between Saul Bellow, more specifically through his book *Seize the Day* (1956), with Existentialism. Thus, this section will try to depict the literary milieu where this philosophical doctrine blossomed in Europe, the resonance of these ideas in US writers in the 1950's, and its repercussion in the cultural and literary movements of the 1960's.

The starting point chosen for this paper is the German philosopher Friedrich Hegel because of his thesis about self-consciousness. Hegel states: "Each self-consciousness requires the recognition of the Other (...) to achieve self-certainty and this recognition is achieved through the process known as 'master-slave dialectic' [which occurs because] human beings need to recognize each other as similarly conscious beings in the world to be sure that they exist" (qtd in Tidd 16). The Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard reacted against Hegel's thought for considering it an abstract rationalism; this reaction generated Kierkegaard's assumptions that could be considered as the starting moment for modern existentialism.

Kierkegaard, in opposition to Hegel's abstraction, "suggests that philosophy should concern (...) those questions that confront every existing individual: how should I use my freedom? (...) how can I be true to myself, or to another person?" (Carlisle, 1). Kierkegaard's reflection about subjectivity contributes to sustain the whole Existential modern thought.

Another important name, largely known by his novels, whose work is considered as part of the basis of modern Existentialism is Fyodor Dostoevsky. His discussion about human being comes from the same real source that would later motivate the system created by Karl Jaspers. But while the German thinker Jaspers witnessed

atrocities during the Nazi Regime, the Russian writer retrieved, especially from his exile in Siberia, the most terrible experiences of his life. Creating characters that revive this 'sensitive memory' could be read as a concrete defense of the irrationality that operates in human beings. Some of his most important works are *The House of the Dead* (1862), *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1869), and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).

Also in the basis of modern Existentialism is Friedrich Nietzsche, whose thinking supports further debates about human beings and their decisions. Nietzsche's most famous argument concerns the death of God. He was "interested in the *belief in God* as a cultural phenomenon, (...) like Hegel (...) and Dostoevsky, with the effects of such a belief in the moral conception of life in a people" (Solomon, 116). Disbelieving in values constructed without an experiential basis, the German thinker distinguishes human beings from the other animals, arguing about the human capacity to develop their own sense of reality based on their evolution as well on social rules. Consequently, reality and morality are contingent constructions determined by human interests. As a result, the apprehension of reality by people depends on the limits of their interest. Lacking an 'absolute voice' to determine their actions, human beings may fall into nihilism that, on one hand, shows their vulnerability in face of reality, and, on the other, leaves them free to take control of their existence.

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche construct their arguments for Existentialism on their concept about human beings and the choices they make. Karl Jaspers, a German psychiatrist and philosopher, held a belief in philosophy as a method for human beings to achieve self knowledge and, consequently, freedom. For him, "Philosophizing is a process of thinking as inner action in which the thinker comes to an authentic awareness of himself and reality by pressing beyond or transcending everything objective" (Grabau, xii). It is not impossible that the enormous problems he had in face of the Nazi

Regime triggered his belief that the profound knowledge would only be achieved through the experience of strong feelings, yet the rational experience would not be enough.

Many of these reflections gained more visibility when Jean-Paul Sartre gave his own contours to Existentialism and started to divulge his ideas. Attracted by phenomenology, he begins to conceive another possibility of thinking and publishes an essay titled *The transcendence of the ego* (1936), in which he puts in question Husserl's thought respecting principles found in the phenomenological school. Through this essay Sartre diverges about the necessity of a transcendental ego, arguing for an empirical ego. Years later, forced to take part in Existentialism, as further explained by Simone de Beauvoir, the French thinker elaborated a speech that, among others, rendered the, although improvised, important lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1945). In this work, Sartre tries to explain his own view of Existentialism arguing for two main themes: "existence precedes essence" and "subjectivity must be the starting point" (Sartre, p. 20).

Among those embracing Existentialism was Simone de Beauvoir. It was only in 1963, in her autobiographical *The Force of Circumstance*, that de Beauvoir commented on hers and Sartre's engagement to Existentialism. Earlier, in 1944, when she released *The Blood of Others*, the philosopher Gabriel Marcel had attached her name to the term Existentialism, a word which Beauvoir was not acquainted with at that time. Questioned about it, the French thinker could only remember the term from Kierkegaard, whose work had influenced her. After a certain time she decided to take profit from it. In later works Existentialism was present with the due feminist contour. "As a feminist phenomenologist (...) she believes that existence precedes essence: 'one is not a woman'; she is made into a woman." (Finlay, 63). *The Second Sex* (1949), her most

famous publication, seems to converge with Kierkegaard's theory concerning subjectivity. However, there are controversies about her status as a philosopher, since she did not create any system.

Like de Beauvoir, Albert Camus did not create a philosophical system, sustaining his positions through novels and essays. Camus generates controversy among scholars about being an Existentialist author, since he rejected the label and split with Sartre due to programmatic divergences. Those who advocate in favor of his belonging to that doctrine hold as evidence that Camus devoted his whole life to discussing human beings and their choices. Such an argument related to Camus discussion of the human beings sustains the Absurdism of his work seen in circumstances created by the author for his characters, attested, for instance, in *The Stranger* (1942). It is through the absurd that they reach the understanding that nothing exists, expressing Camus' nihilist perspective.

Also enlisted by many scholars among the Existentialist is Franz Kafka. The Czech writer created short novels in which Absurdism perhaps goes much beyond that of Camus. Clear examples of that are *The Metamorphosis* (1915) and *The Trial* (1925). His characters are usually regular components of society set in obviously impossible situations that, because they are not denounced as dreams or vertigos but receive a normal treatment, cause the effect of estrangement in the reader. Through this artifice, Kafka offers the reader a way to realize the absurd of those situations, always setting the human condition in the center of the discussion.

Having highlighted those who participated in the birth of modern Existentialism, this study turns its attention to the US, where the doctrine conquered many thinkers. Among them is Hazel Barnes, a scholar with a vast knowledge about Existentialism who translated into English Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943). In addition to her classes and books, Barnes' interest in the philosophical doctrine motivated her to

produce a series of TV programs for its popularization. Another important name is William A. Earle, an author who constructed a reputation due to his transit between Existentialism, Phenomenology, and Surrealism. Earle's *Objectivity: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology* (1955), *The Autobiographical Consciousness* (1972), and *Mystical Reason* (1980) are the basis of American Existentialism. Another thinker who contributed with US Existentialism is the German-American Walter Kaufman. He worked as teacher, but was poet, photographer and translator also. In addition to a vigorous literary production, his translations of Nietzsche's works, such as *The Antichrist* (1954), transformed the conception that Americans had about the ideas of the German philosopher. Also John Daniel Wild, author of *The Challenge of Existentialism* (1955), who devoted his life to a university career, was an important feature of American Existentialism, participating in the foundation of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy.

In the same way as in Europe, modern American Existentialism was not restricted to academic works, breaking into fictional literature, giving voice to respectable authors in the US 1950's. Charles Bukowski focused most part of his work on Los Angeles' ruined people usually involved with all sort of problematic situations. Instead of writing from the outside, Bukowski lived the marginal life that rendered an existential element for his writings either in prose or in verse. He is the author of *Post Office* (1971) and *Women* (1978) among others. Following a somewhat different path, and still in activity nowadays, is the playwright Edward Albee. His plays are associated with Absurdism, dealing with "truth, illusion, sense of reality, sense of identity [because, as he explains,] illusions are ok, delusions are ok, as long as you understand what they are"¹. His most famous works are *The Zoo Story* (1958) and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962).

¹Source: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mYzO2_IbWl4

Parallel to these writers classified as Existentialist, there developed in the US 1950's a literature interested in an aspect also found in the philosophical doctrine: the possibility of transgression. More than writers, they were artists who used more than written words to express their aversion to the well behaved American Way of Life. A central feature in this disobedient scenario was Jack Kerouac. Kerouac, like Bukowski, used to recreate his life in the form of novels. For that, his 'non-stop' method of writing could be compared to the automatic writing used by pre-surrealists. From 1942 until his death, the American writer and poet published many works, *On the road* (1957) being probably the most famous one. Kerouac was living in New York City when he first made contact with a group of writers, poets, and social, cultural interventionists, later called by him Beat Generation. Allen Ginsberg, reading his long poem *Howl*, included in *Howl and Other Poems* (1956), William S. Burroughs, with *Naked Lunch* (1959), Neal Cassidy's *Pull My Daisy* (1951), written with Kerouac, and John Clellon Holmes' *Go* (1952), only to cite a few, made clear their own view about a time that also belonged to them. Dotted with a strong capacity of persuasion, they had a lucid comprehension of what had remained from WWII and strategically used their behavior to construct the Counter Culture. Resisting peacefully along the time, the Counter Culture entered the 1960's giving birth to the hippies and their flower power. To that generation all culture of control should be replaced by freedom, peace and love.

5. The author, his work, *Seize the Day*, and Existentialism

In spite of his long life in the US, Bellow was born in Quebec, Canada, in 1915 and lived the first part of his childhood in Russia, to where his family moved when he was two years old. In that country, they endured the post-Revolution deprivations that affected bourgeois families. Bellow experienced personal oppression due to religious issues from his family and found refuge in writing. On the other hand, as a member of a Jewish Russian family that had lived in Quebec, Bellow learned Hebrew, Yiddish, French, and English, using those languages to read, for instance, important Russian novelists or Shakespeare. In the US, he attended Northwestern University, in Chicago, where he graduated in anthropology and sociology, and not literature, for the English department seemed to be anti-Jewish for him. A Trotskyist, Bellow became a US citizen in 1941 and experienced teaching at the University of Minnesota from 1946 to 1948, when he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. He lived for a while in New York, returning to Chicago in 1962 to teach at the University of Chicago, where he remained for decades.

Retrieving themes from his own experiences, Bellow used his life to transform good or bad moments into writing. As a result, the author had a prolific production and received many awards. His first book was *The Dangling Man* (1944), followed by *The Victim* (1947). In 1956, he wrote *Seize the Day*, which received many prizes. *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), *Herzog* (1964), and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* received the National Book Award. *Humboldt's Gift* (1975) won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and Bellow received the Nobel Prize in 1976. Also, in 1968 he received the B'nai B'rith Jewish Heritage Award, for excellence in Jewish literature. In 1976 he received America's Democratic Legacy Award of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith.

Bellow also wrote plays, published articles in different magazines, and worked in the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict as a war correspondent.

Bellow's novel *Seize the Day*, published in 1956, was the fourth fictional work of his career. The whole story happens in one single day of the protagonists' life, in New York City. Tommy Wilhelm – whose real name in the book is Wilhelm Adler – is a middle-aged man who lives in the Hotel Gloriana, the same as his father, an old, extremely respected former Professor in the medical area. Wilhelm tries to establish a father-son relationship with Dr. Adler, but his old father can only see the disappointment his son represents. Wilky, as his father calls him, had tried many forms to achieve success, including a star-career in Hollywood when young, and lately as a salesman. Between these failures, Wilhelm got married, separated, had two boys, tried to engage with another woman and struggled against the end of the relationship because he could not get divorced. He tried one more time, investing all his reserves in a partnership with a mysterious Dr. Tamkin in the stock market. Tamkin seems to hypnotize Wilhelm, who foresees his complete bankruptcy, but does not know how to react. At the end of the novel Wilky is seen crying at a funeral.

Perhaps because of the strength of his main characters, *Seize the Day* has given rise to many studies. Darryl Hattenhauer, in *Tommy Wilhelm as Passive-Aggressive in Seize the Day* Bouson (1995), explores the protagonist's personality, especially in relation to his father, while Francesco Aristide Ancono bases his argument on Freudian theories to discuss family's psychological pressure in Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*. *Writing the Absence of the Father: Undoing Oedipal Structures in the Contemporary American Novel* (1986). Roberto Birindelli, in *Saul Bellow, Mr. Joyce e il mito: Mitopoiesi in 'Seize the Day'* (1998), mentioning the relation between Tamkin and Wilhelm, interprets the book as a sort of advisory fable about following another's ideas,

whereas Diane Kim Bowman's *This Man Will Self-Destruct: Kafkaesque Ambiguity in Saul Bellow's Seize the Day* (1991-1992), states that Wilhelm is responsible for his decisions and consequent results. However, exploring other aspects, Gordon Bordewyk's *Saul Bellow's Death of a Salesman* (1981) finds evidences of Arthur Miller's play influencing Bellow, Patrick Costello argues for the rupture between the traditional and the new represented by Dr. Adler and Wilhelm in *Tradition in Seize the Day* (1987), and in *The World's Business' in Seize the Day* (1998), Julia Eichelberger avoids relying on psychological motivations for Wilhelm's attitudes because she comprehends that ideological constructs weigh much more over him.

The story stresses the protagonist facing moments of decisions, as well as the result of the decisions he has made. Certainly, those are common aspects in Existentialism. However, because different analyses of Saul Bellow's fictional literature take different points of view when considering whether it could or could not be considered Existentialist, it is worth listening to some of those different voices. In *The Jewish American Novel* (2007), Codde poses the discussion that many critics have been making, usually examining Bellow's work as a whole. Codde says:

Although Bellow's early novels have often been dubbed 'existentialist' (...) a detailed analysis of what specifically related these works to French existentialism was often left out completely (...) many critics even see Bellow as one of the chief detractors of existentialism (p. 123).

Codde's criticism asks for a return to basic ideas about Existentialism. Firstly, three fundamental concepts for the book analysis will be extracted from Jean-Paul Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism*. One of them is: "we base our doctrine on pure subjectivity" (p. 18), which Cooper, in his *Existentialism: a reconstruction*, explains as "projects and intentions which he [human being] is on the way to realizing, and in terms of which sense is made of his present condition" (p. 3). Another important feature of Sartre's thought is: "man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself,

and only afterwards defines himself” (p. 22). Finally, as a consequence of his free-will, “man fully comprehends his isolation, rendering us incapable of reestablishing solidarity with those who exist outside of the self” (p. 18). The Existential Anguish resulting from this special condition is explained by Handerek, in *Phenomenology and Existentialism in the Twentieth Century*. “For Heidegger, Angst is a state in which the individual participates when he realizes his own finitude” (p. 195). The state mentioned by the German thinker is experienced by a human being because he realizes that he is lonely in his decision. Nobody can divide the responsibility for decisions made or for any consequences of those decisions because, according to Existentialism, choice is made individually.

Specifically about *Seize the Day*, Cheever confirms the philosophical approach in the book mentioning that it “explores the existentialist, inner-directed, and other-directed models of self in terms of the question of Jewish assimilation” (p. 149) in *Real Phonies: Culture of Authenticity in Post-World War II in America* (2010). Chametzky, on the contrary, in *Death and Post-modern Hero/Schlemiel* (1998) argues that “Bellow was/is no Existentialist. He decries more than once in his critical writings intellectual handwritings and fashionable angst” (p. 118). Cronin, in *Small Planets: The Short Fiction of Saul Bellow* (2010), somewhat confirms that position, classifying Bellow and other writers as “single-mindedly parody (...) of modernist philosophers [and their work] as literary formulas they use to stage heroes who experience a muted transcendence” (p. 335). Raper, discussing the repercussion of Existentialism on 1950’s English-speaking writers in *Narcissus from rubble: competing models of character in contemporary British and American Fiction* (1992), believes that “the existential outlook was an important current in Anglo-American literary circles, one strong enough

to provoke the sort of challenge to its view of human situation found in *Seize the Day*”
(p. 10).

6. Literary elements

6.1. Title

The title of novel, *Seize the Day*, comes from the Latin expression, *Carpem Diem*, found in Horace's Book I of the collection *Carmina* (23 B.C.). Interpretations of its meaning slightly vary, usually taking the form of a warning about how fast time passes and how obscure is the future, highlighting therefore the importance of each moment in life. Such an interpretation matches perfectly one of the central themes of Bellow's book, but the title was rather a choice or decision than a conclusion reached by the author. Bellow wrote more than one version before the definitive one with different titles: 'Here and Now-Here and Now', 'At Foot of Mr. Serenity' and 'One of These Days', subsequently. 'Seize the Day' was probably the final decision because it seems to fit better the author's comprehension of life, especially because of the reality lived by Jewish people on concentration camps. The expression 'Seize the Day' is related to the actions, or inactions, of the protagonist, but it is only in the last lines, when Wilhelm looks at the face of a dead man that he realizes the cruel reality of life and the here-and-now takes the proper effect, closing the idea that had been started in the title.

6.2. Settings

The whole story happens in one summer day, from morning to afternoon; however, the year is not given, only inferred. In a conversation between the protagonist and his father, they believed that Wilhelm's mother had died around 1931 or 1934. In another moment Wilhelm mentions talking with his mother twenty five years before. Therefore, presumably the story happens around 1956, the same year the book was published. New York is the scenario chosen by Bellow for the novel, placing the protagonist in the Hotel Gloriana on Broadway. That Hotel, Broadway and the

Brokerage office are the main places described along the story. The atmosphere varies from somber to partially lighted and it is usually constrained. In the very first page, the lobby of Hotel Gloriana “is dark, sleepy” (1). The weather is basically rainy and nebulous, with some spokes of sunlight. Actions usually occur in tight places, such as elevators, phone booths, and a coffin. Claustrophobic sensation is caused even by people. Everywhere there are talkative masses and their stuff invading all spaces. Even looking out the high windows of the Hotel Gloriana, buildings blasting from earth like corn stems in the field confirm how enclosed the protagonist feels.

6.3. Characters

The main characters of the book form a compact block with very precise functions. Wilhelm Adler, called Wilky by his father, is the protagonist. He is a middle-aged man who lives in the Hotel Gloriana, the same as his father. Wilhelm has lost everything and lives miserably, jeopardizing his hopes on what he dreams will be his big turn up on life. In opposition to Wilhelm is his own father, Dr. Adler. Diagnostician, the extremely respected former Professor only wants to live peacefully, taking profit of the reputation he constructed for himself. Completing the group of major characters is Dr. Tamkin, a German allegedly holding a graduation as Psychiatrist. Tamkin is also an opposition to Dr. Adler because he pays attention to Wilhelm’s thoughts and because of his obscure style of life.

Minor characters in the story are Wilhelm’s ex-wife Margaret, whose relationship with the protagonist consists merely of financial requests and complaints about Wilhelm’s instability in life. They have two boys: the fourteen-year-old Tommy, and the nine-year-old Paul. Rubin, the owner of a newsstand in the Hotel Gloriana, is a person who shares some ideas with Wilhelm. Catherine is Wilhelm’s sister. Married and younger than her brother, she sees in her father the financial support for her artistic

work. In the Hotel Gloriana Wilhelm is surrounded by elderly people. Mr. Pearls, a representative of the German Jew community in NY, is Dr. Adler's friend and host at Gloriana Hotel. Among the old speculators is the weak and nearly blind Mr. Rappaport, who made fortune raising chickens, and Mr. Rowland, a retired bachelor who speculates in soy beans. Pearl and Rappaport are names that refer to classical authors regarding Jewish culture. Olive is the woman Wilhelm is in love with but is about to lose because of the difficulties created by Margaret to give him the divorce. Maurice Venice could be considered an icon of the American Dream in the novel because he plants in Wilhelm the dreamy Hollywood stardom. Pretending to be a headhunter, he foresees a star in Wilhelm, but this ends as one more frustration for the protagonist. Artie, Wilhelm's cousin, a distinct student and Professor, represents another opposition to the protagonist.

6.4. Plot

Tommy Wilhelm, or Wilky for his father, is the epicenter of all the conflicts in the story. Wilhelm never lived in peace with his choices, neither with its consequences. On the contrary, he usually aggregated more conflicts trying to hide his mistakes. His attitudes are probably triggered by long-time troubles with his father, a man whose low stature is inversely proportional to the shadow that his only son feels covered by. In addition, Wilhelm carries in his emotional memory unsolved problems related to his mother occasioned by him and by his father. The protagonist recurrently draws back memories of his errors, always trying to convince others and himself that those failures are justifiable. Trying to do his best, he gambles for the last time, and one more time he fails. Once his father refuses to help and his ex-wife pressures him, Wilhelm faces reality for the first time and does not resist it.

6.5. Themes

Conflicts like those experienced by the protagonist highlight the human condition and are explored by Bellow through different themes. Here are some of them. Modernity, represented by the transformation of landscapes caused by the construction of new buildings, the insertion of stranger habits in people's lives, like TV, and the giant mass of people in the streets. In the chain of criticisms to Modernity, Capitalism is a theme acidly treated more than once in the book. The protagonist, perhaps because of his disorganized financial condition or because he is pressed to reach success, externs his discontentment with the importance dispensed to money. As a direct result of the US financial system, though without direct citation, is the 1950's American Dream, represented by those who succeed in the big city, such as Dr. Adler, Mr. Pearl, Mr. Rowland and Mr. Rappaport. They could be also associated with Tradition. Wilhelm's opposition to those values results in a Clash of Generations, theme that would be intensified in the following decades. In the micro-universe of Hotel Gloriana, Broadway and the places where Wilhelm and Tamkin pass, Social Class division is clearly marked. In addition to that, Multiculturalism takes part in the configuration of the streets. Wilhelm expresses more than once how much he misses the fields, evidencing Distance from Nature in a city like New York. Seize the Day is per se a theme, as mentioned in the beginning of this section. The Human Condition, a central theme in the book, encompasses psychoanalytical and philosophical approaches such as Isolation, Invisibility, and Ethics. Religiosity, predominantly via Jewish citations, more than a theme, could be considered a constant preoccupation in Bellow's fictional production.

6.6. Narrator and Point of View

The events are presented by an omniscient narrator, with some space for the protagonist to describe his and other characters' thoughts. Regarding the point of view,

in most part of the story, the reader gets acquainted with the events through the protagonist's voice, although he also gets an idea of what Dr. Adler thinks about his son.

6.7. Symbols

Bellow also uses some symbols to convey his meaning. Water is present, both denotative and connotatively. Some concrete water citations are the silver jug on Tamkin's room as well the river Hudson that could be seen through the window, the swimming-pool, baths, and rain. Bellow uses verbs like "poured [and] sank" (125) to create images related to Wilhelm's emotional turmoil. Other important elements are mirrors. They are in Hotel Gloriana telling Wilhelm about himself. In the same Hotel, he is among great men, but those are only pictures in cigar seals and he is only a reflex "in the glass cupboard full of cigar boxes" (10). Finally, he sees his future in the face of a dead man. The author refers to flowers, but following the negative mood of the entire novel. Lilacs, mentioned twice, have a purple color. Tulips, which exist in varied colors, but in the novel specifically, have a black stain. There is still a car full of flowers, but they are part of a funeral. In different occasions cigarettes are lit or cited along the novel. Perhaps the most important contrast based on that symbol are between Wilhelm carrying butts in the pocket of his jacket and Mr. Rappaport demanding for a store in which could be found the long size, "Churchill-type cigars." (109). Among the symbols representing modernity, could be cited the buildings and coca-cola. Wilhelm used to drink more than one bottle before breakfast. The American drink was booming in the 1950's, already recognized as an American symbol.

6.8. Language

The language used in the book is predominantly colloquial. Bellow uses a Standard English that is accessible to the average reader. The protagonist does not use a

refined vocabulary, even talking to his father. Actually, he uses words and constructs his sentences based on 'street language'. The only moments he uses sophisticated language is when remembering poems read in the past.

7. Analysis

In the present study I analyse Saul Bellow's novel *Seize the Day*, starting from the hypothesis that the novel has connections with the Sartrean Existentialism, which is based on three principles: a) existence precedes essence; b) subjectivity is the basis of existence; c) God does not exist, therefore man is lonely in his decisions, what causes existential anguish. So as to conduct such analysis, I posed some questions. In this section they are discussed as a way of supporting my conclusion.

1. One of the tenets of existentialism is that there is no essence, that life is nothing until it is lived. Do Tommy Wilhelm's actions illustrate such an attitude? In what sense?
2. Existential anguish is a result of man's realization that his actions have an impact on others and that he is, therefore, responsible for humankind. In what circumstances does anguish, anxiety or abandonment occur in the book in relation to the protagonist? What are the causes?
3. Can Tommy Wilhelm be taken as a representative of the American Way of Life? If so, why? If not, is he responsible for his own destiny or a victim of the system?
4. If we assume that Saul Bellow is constructing his protagonist as a "loser", could his inadequacy be considered a conscious rebellion against the system, perhaps announcing the counter-culture movement, or simply a cowardly attitude of a man without objectives?

With the purpose of answering the first question, I place Sartre's voice about what, according to him, Existentialists mean by 'existence precedes essence'. He says that man "will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself" (Sartre, 22). With this statement Sartre alludes to two fundamental elements of his doctrine: freedom of choice and the responsibility that man has for his life. Given that,

pieces of information about Wilhelm's personality will support the answer. Bellow offers the very first words of the novel to his protagonist. "When it came to concealing his troubles, Tommy Wilhelm was not less capable than the next fellow" (7). The author outlines a failure on his protagonist's personality. In addition, Wilhelm blames himself for past errors. "I should have done hard work all my life" (10) and he makes some move to change; seeing that he was losing money playing gin, he decides for watching a movie. However, even this decision is related to his most common form of 'concealing troubles': illusion. In the past, a quarrel with his mother, who suggested him to follow his father's career, either for the association with his father or because his mother mentioned his cousin's success, made him decide for a dreamy try in Hollywood. In the present, Wilhelm has not changed his behavior. The protagonist "was ripe for the mistake (...). And so, when he tasted the peculiar flavour of fatality in Dr. Tamkin, he could no longer keep back the money" (63). The narrative shows that Wilhelm's actions have foundation in his beliefs. It occurs, according to Existentialism, due to a particular ability that a human being has to decide and analyze later consequences. Bellow punctuated the story with decisions that took the protagonist to a miserable ending in a novel that discusses realistically key issues for the US 1950's. Any different solution would play against Bellow's thesis. Finishing in tears in a stranger's funeral is an illustration of the only life that Wilhelm constructed.

Anguish, anxiety or abandonment as it is posed in the second question is illustrated by Sartre with the example of a military leader who, ordered to command an attack, has to interpret that command "and it is on this interpretation that the lives of [many] depend" (27). If, according to an Existentialist explanation, there is God regulating man's actions, that soldier would find support on Him. However, Existentialists, supposing that God does not exist, see men lonely in their decisions. A

decision under a circumstance like in the example can result in anguish. It means that anguish is a consequence of abandonment. In the novel, the protagonist is aware of the consequences of his decisions, although he sometimes tries to ignore it. Wilhelm decided for a career in Hollywood, staying there for seven years. “Long before that time his ambition or delusion had ended, but through pride and also perhaps (...) laziness he had remained in California” (11). Whether for pride or laziness, Wilhelm decided not to go back home. In my reading it happened because, aside any of those feelings, he knew that he had made a mistake and, alone, he knew what would find at home. “His father was ashamed of him” (17). Sustaining this notion is one of the most miserable passages on the book. Wilhelm, his father and Mr. Pearl are having breakfast, when the two old men disdain the lies told by Tamkin, with whom Wilhelm had just invested all his savings. Wilhelm tries to argue, but his father ignores him and laughs with his friend. Wilhelm, desperate, lonely and perfectly cognizant of what he had done, laughs pathetically. Certainly, the best example of his Existential anguish is a heavy memory of an attitude that caused suffering to his mother. He knows his responsibility for that, with a tough aggravating: she is dead. There is no return for excuses, no second chance. He is locked outside in deep sorrow and guilty. Another circumstance that equally held Wilhelm inside a breathless straitjacket was the non-relationship he was forced to live with his children. But, different from what happened to his mother, the boys are fine; Wilhelm suffered alone. His anguish consists in the impossibility of a full relationship with the boys after his decision to separate. Wilhelm is a little boy in a giant body, seeking for a father in the next older man to solve the puzzle of his life.

The protagonist lacks that basic ballast that gives direction to a person. His naïve nature always rebels against the system, not because he follows any program but because he fears what could come in the future, strongly counting on the axis of the

whole operation the miserableness that his father devotes him. Constructing Dr. Adler as the representation of the status quo, Bellow strategically symbolizes his own opposition to the American Way of Life, providing Wilhelm with a humanistic nature that prefers the fields or “watch the kids play potsy and skip rope” (49) instead of the convoluted modern life of the big cities. Wilhelm is a passive opposition to the mandatory form of life in the US 1950’s, of which NYC is a major representative. The metropolis is a living icon of what big systems can do to the inadequate. All of those crowding Broadway streets, in a way or another, run after the Dream. Wilhelm, who did not create immunity, succumbed. He is neither responsible nor a victim; he is a result of what reality can do to a pure soul.

Such an antagonism between Wilhelm and reality is also expressed through his aversion to money and all that it represents. The other side of such ‘disinterest’ is the ease that it represents. The protagonist dropped the ‘Adler’ of his name. That could be read as a brave act, because he had decided to live on his own, and also because it could mean that dropping Adler he would be replacing Wilky by a name that he had chosen, a baptism all of his own. However, Wilhelm replaced his family name by a name from his fantasy because he did not have psychological structure to reach the height his father did. For his father and all the society the legendary diagnostician Dr. Adler represents, Wilky was a loser. Wilhelm’s rebellion is less a genuine act against a system that he really comprehended than a person crying out for help.

8. Conclusion

In this study I have been discussing the novel *Seize the Day*, written by Saul Bellow and tenets of the Sartrean Existentialism with the purpose of finding connections between the book and the philosophical doctrine. Based on that discussion, I conclude that my hypothesis was correct when I believed that there were elements in the novel belonging to Existentialism. I only punctuate having missed some Absurdism in *Seize the Day*. The Absurdism that I refer to is the estrangement used to highlight bizarre circumstances given as normal by a determinate social group, which helps to clarify the point made by an author. It can be found in novels like *The Metamorphosis* (1915), by Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (1925), from the same author, *The Stranger* (1942), by Albert Camus or Samuel Becket's play *Waiting for Godot* (1949). But, in spite of this lack, there are many other elements which support my view.

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