

Exploring the Father-Son Relationship in *Seize the Day* through Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory

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Abstract

This essay thoroughly examines the father-son relationship in Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* through the framework of Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory. By focusing on three key Bowenian concepts — differentiation of self, family projection process and emotional cutoff—this analysis reveals how Wilhelm's emotional struggles are shaped by his dysfunctional relationship with his father, Dr. Adler. The essay explores how Wilhelm's emotional dependency, internalized projections, and failed emotional cutoff contribute to his ongoing psychological distress.

Keywords

Family Systems Theory; father-son relationship; dysfunctional relationship; Saul Bellow; *Seize the Day*

1. Introduction

In Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*, the protagonist, Tommy Wilhelm is portrayed as a man in his forties struggling with personal failures, an unsatisfactory career, and a fractured sense of self. At the heart of his turmoil lies his dysfunctional relationship with his father, Dr. Adler. This relationship, marked by emotional distance and harsh criticism, plays a major role in Wilhelm's anxiety and confusion. Through the lens of Murray Bowen's family systems theory, this father-son dynamic can be understood as an example of how dysfunctional family patterns reinforce negative cycles of emotional pain and personal dysfunction.

Murray Bowen's family systems theory is a pioneering approach to understanding the dynamics of family relationships and their impacts on the emotional development of individuals. Bowen's theory revolves around the idea that families function as emotional units, and that individual behavior cannot be fully understood without considering the family system as a whole. Using Murray Bowen's family

systems theory, this essay examines how three core concepts—differentiation of self, family projection process, and emotional cutoff—interact and contribute to the perpetuation of Wilhelm's emotional struggles. Rather than treating these concepts as isolated phenomena, the essay will argue that they form a coherent system of emotional patterns and create a cycle of dysfunction that Wilhelm cannot easily escape.

2. Literature Review

Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* has drawn significant attention from critics due to its exploration of human isolation, identity crises, and the complexities of familial relationships. Central to the novel is the strained father-son dynamic between Tommy Wilhelm and Dr. Adler, which serves as a crucial element in understanding Wilhelm's emotional and psychological struggles. Several scholars have addressed this relationship, emphasizing its role in Wilhelm's existential crisis and its broader implications within the family structure.

In "The Tragic Dimensions of Tommy Wilhelm," Galloway suggests that Dr. Adler's coldness and constant criticism leave Wilhelm emotionally stunted, preventing him from developing a sense of self. Galloway writes, "Wilhelm's struggle is less about his personal failures than about the inherited emotional incapacity he suffers from his father, whose love, or lack thereof, suffocates Wilhelm's very sense of being" (Galloway 88). This reading aligns closely with Bowen's concept of differentiation of self, as Wilhelm's inability to separate his identity from his father's judgment leads to his emotional and existential collapse.

Similarly, in an analysis of *Seize the Day* in *The Family and the Self in the Modern Novel*, John Mephram explores the psychological impact of Wilhelm's relationship with Dr. Adler. He writes, "The coldness of Dr. Adler is not an isolated flaw but a symptom of a deeper familial pattern, one that Wilhelm has inherited and cannot break free from" (Mephram 47). Mephram's interpretation reflects Bowen's idea of multi-generational transmission, highlighting how emotional patterns from previous generations continue to affect family members' behaviors and relationships.

These studies lay the foundation for understanding the dysfunctional father-son relationship in *Seize the Day* and its profound impact on Wilhelm's sense of identity and self-worth. By applying Bowen's family systems theory, we can further explore how this relationship perpetuates Wilhelm's emotional struggles and how it connects to broader themes of family projection and emotional cutoff.

3. Differentiation of Self: Wilhelm's Emotional Dependency on Dr. Adler

Differentiation of Self is a concept in Bowen's theory that refers to the ability of an individual to separate their own thoughts and emotions from those of others,

allowing for greater emotional autonomy. Individuals with a low level of differentiation tend to have difficulty making independent decisions and are often emotionally dependent on others, particularly family members. Bowen defines this concept as follows: “Differentiation is the process of separating the intellectual and emotional systems. In a family, the emotional system is reactive to anxiety, and the differentiation of self is a process of regulating that reactivity” (Bowen 346). This inability to separate one’s emotional responses from the family’s collective anxiety leads to the perpetuation of dysfunctional dynamics, as seen in the relationship between Wilhelm and Dr. Adler.

In *Seize the Day*, Wilhelm’s sense of self is constantly shaped by his father’s criticisms. His emotional world is deeply influenced by his father, Dr. Adler, and his anxiety about his appearance is a clear manifestation of his excessive reliance on his father’s opinion. Wilhelm’s preoccupation with his physical appearance is not only a matter of self-perception, but a reflection of his need for validation from his father. His perception of his own aging and physical deterioration works as a visible marker of his internal anxiety and self-doubt. For instance, Wilhelm repeatedly reflects on his graying hair, which he interprets as a symbol of his own aging and failure. This statement clearly links Wilhelm’s anxiety about his physical appearance to his father’s critical gaze. Beyond the appearance anxiety, when Wilhelm discusses his career failure, Dr. Adler responds with disdain, inferring him as weak and incapable. As Wilhelm tries to explain his marital problems, his father’s dismissive attitude invalidates his struggles, leaving him feeling helpless and unworthy. Wilhelm becomes unable to separate his own identity from his father’s harsh evaluation of him, further trapping him in a cycle of emotional reactivity and self-doubt. This mirrors Bowen’s idea that low differentiation of self leads to a heightened emotional response to family dynamics, which Wilhelm embodies through his constant need for validation from his father (Bowen 346).

Wilhelm’s dependency on his father for validation is evident throughout the novel. He cannot separate his identity from his father’s judgment, and his emotional responses are consistently driven by the need for his fathers’ approval. This emotional dependency prevents Wilhelm from developing a stronger sense of self and leads to an overwhelming sense of anxiety and self-doubt. Wilhelm’s sense of failure, therefore, is not solely his own but is largely a product of Dr. Adler’s critical projections. He is unable to build his own sense of self-worth without father’s judgment, leading to a deep emotional dependency on Dr. Adler’s approval. Even when Wilhelm tries to make decisions or change his circumstances, he is haunted by his father’s evaluation, preventing him from developing his own path.

4. Family Projection Process: Dr. Adler’s Influence on Wilhelm’s Self-Worth

The Family Projection Process in Bowen’s theory describes the way in which

parents project their own unresolved emotional issues onto their children. These projections often lead children to internalize their parents' fears and anxieties, affecting the children's emotional well-being. Bowen explains, "The family projection process is one of the primary ways through which families transmit emotional dysfunction across generations" (Bowen 267).

In this case, Dr. Adler's judgmental attitude towards Wilhelm is not just a reflection of Wilhelm's behavior but a projection of his own unacknowledged anxieties and disappointments. Dr. Adler's behavior toward Wilhelm is often rooted in his own emotional failures and insecurities. He is incapable of acknowledging his son's struggles or offering empathy because he is too focused on his own disappointments. In the context Dr. Adler reveals that his father is a tailor, and that the family comes from humble beginnings. He emphasizes how his father, starting with nothing, managed to build a life for himself through hard work and perseverance. This reflects Dr. Adler's pride in his father's ability to "make something of himself" despite no support. Dr. Adler uses his father's success story to criticize Wilhelm. At the end of the third chapter, the father refuses the son directly by saying "I want nobody on my back. Get off! And I give you the same advice, Wilky. Carry nobody on your back." (Bellow 51) Besides, Dr. Adler continually criticizes Wilhelm for his failure to achieve success, saying, "Wilky, it's entirely your own fault" (Bellow 46). This criticism reflects Dr. Adler's projection of his own fear of failure onto his son. Rather than offering constructive advice or guidance, Dr. Adler externalizes his own sense of insecurity onto Wilhelm, framing him as the embodiment of his own anxieties. The family projection process contributes significantly to Wilhelm's struggles with self-worth, as he is unable to separate his own identity from his father's critical judgments. He begins to see his own failures as reflections of his inherent inadequacy. Wilhelm internalizes these projections, adopting his father's critical view of himself as a fundamental truth. Thus he begins to believe that he is indeed weak, incapable, and unworthy of success. For instance, he keeps calling himself "hippopotamus" or "Ass! Idiot! Wild boar! Dumb mule! Slave! Lousy, wallowing hippopotamus!" (Bellow 52) His self-loathing and acknowledgement of immaturity is the testament to Dr. Adler's projection.

This is consistent with Bowen's theory, which suggests that when children are projected upon, they often internalize the projections and build their self-identity around these distorted views. Wilhelm's struggle with self-worth, particularly his anxiety about aging and failure, is a direct result of Dr. Adler's emotional projection onto him. Wilhelm's emotional system becomes inextricably tied to his father's judgment, reinforcing the dysfunction within their relationship.

5. Emotional Cutoff: Dr. Adler's Detachment and Wilhelm's Withdrawal

The Emotional Cutoff is another critical concept in Bowen's family systems theory,

referring to a process where individuals attempt to distance themselves emotionally from family members in an effort to avoid unresolved anxiety. Bowen argues that "All people have some degree of unresolved emotional attachment to their parents. The lower the level of differentiation, the more intense the unresolved attachment. The concept deals with the way people separate themselves from the past in order to start their lives in the present generation. Much thought went into the selection of a term to best describe this process of separation, isolation, withdrawal, running away, or denying the importance of the parental family." (Bowen 424) This emotional distancing may manifest in physical separation, but more often, it occurs on a psychological level.

Both Dr. Adler and Wilhelm engage in emotional cutoff. Dr. Adler's emotional detachment is evident throughout the novel. He is cold, critical, and unresponsive to Wilhelm's emotional needs. When Wilhelm seeks validation or comfort from his father, Dr. Adler responds with harsh, dismissive remarks. For example, when Wilhelm tries to discuss his personal failures, Dr. Adler replies, "I don't understand your problems. I never had any like them." (Bellow 46). Dr. Adler has already emotionally distanced himself from Wilhelm, refusing to engage in meaningful or supportive interactions. "Neither did this last confession touch Dr. Adler's sympathies or sway his calm old heart or affect the color of his complexion." (Bellow 49) His response to Wilhelm's struggles is to belittle him, providing no emotional support. This lack of emotional engagement leaves Wilhelm feeling abandoned and rejected.

In response to this emotional cutoff, Wilhelm begins to withdraw further, retreating into himself in an attempt to protect himself from further emotional pain. He withdraws from this relationship both physically and psychologically. He leaves the family in the pursuit of acting career and changes his name into Tommy, reliving himself from the control of his father. Many years later, in his forties he still tries to avoid the alone time with his father. Psychologically, Wilhelm emotional cutoff is most apparent in Wilhelm's internal reflections. He recalls his father's critical words, which continue to haunt him even when they are apart. His withdrawal, however, does not resolve his feelings of inadequacy but instead deepens his sense of isolation. The cycle of emotional cutoff exacerbates Wilhelm's internal conflict.

Bowen's theory suggests that emotional cutoff does not lead to true emotional separation but rather prolongs unresolved issues. Wilhelm's withdrawal from Dr. Adler only deepens his sense of inadequacy. Rather than finding peace, Wilhelm's inability to confront his father's criticisms leaves him emotionally paralyzed. Thus, the emotional cutoff between father and son fails to alleviate the underlying tensions and only perpetuates their dysfunction.

6. Conclusion

Through the lens of Bowen's family systems theory, the father-son relationship in

Seize the Day can be understood as a complex web of emotional dynamics that shape Wilhelm's sense of self. The concepts of differentiation of self, family projection process and emotional cutoff offer valuable insight into the ways in which Wilhelm's identity and emotional struggles are influenced by his relationship with his father, Dr. Adler.

The low differentiation of self in Wilhelm, his emotional dependency on Dr. Adler, the projection of Dr. Adler's own anxieties onto Wilhelm and the emotional cutoff between father and son all contribute to Wilhelm's struggles with identity, self-worth, and emotional distress. By recognizing these patterns, we can gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which family systems shape individual behavior, and how these emotional dynamics continue to influence future generations.

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