

# Modified Omniscient Narrative and Temporal Structure in *Seize the Day*

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**Abstract:** Impressing people with the profundity of its content and scope, Saul Bellow's fiction is often the embodiment of alienation, meaning of life, men's quest for spiritual discernment, and the possibilities of human awakening. Though the content and form have both shown their distinguishing excellence in his novella *Seize the Day*, it is always Bellow's theme that is under vast investigation, while the other charming feature of this story – its way of narration is not often discussed. This paper aims to analyze the narrative of *Seize the Day* from the perspective of narratology, figuring out how omniscient narrative and temporal structure are disposed to convey remarkable characteristics to *Seize the Day*. In general, this story is narrated by an omniscient third-person narrator, but the narrative voice is not an exclusive one all the time. Besides, the focalization of the omniscient narrator shifts whenever necessary, which devotes to exposing the instabilities of characters and events in the story. As to the temporal structure, variations existing in order, duration and frequency generate rhetorical effects in the story and make the structure of *Seize the Day* coordinate smoothly the interlaced temporal references, leading further instabilities and tensions to the movement of the narrative. In *Seize the Day*, Saul Bellow has showed a mastery of narrative voice, focalization and temporal structure, and demonstrated how incredible the narrative techniques can be in transferring a modified omniscient narrative and the temporal manipulation of acceleration and deceleration into a dynamic narrative progression, which offers readers the option to consider the possibilities of development, motivation and resolution in the entire narrative of the story.

**Keywords:** *Seize the Day*, Omniscient Narrative, Temporal Structure, Saul Bellow

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## 1. Introduction

Being one of the most distinguished postwar American novelists, Saul Bellow, has been the recipient of many Awards, including most importantly the 1976 Nobel Prize for Literature. Probably the features of Saul Bellow's writing can emerge most markedly over the span of a panoramic novel, yet his brilliantly-crafted novella *Seize the Day* draws readers in fully too. First published in 1956, *Seize the Day* is regarded by critical consensus as one of his most fascinating masterpieces and his most representative works, in terms of both theme and narrative technique. Sanford Pinsker in his critical essay describes *Seize the Day* as "arguably Bellow's tightest, most perfectly executed fiction" [10].

What makes *Seize the Day* so special is that Saul Bellow successfully explores the enormous themes within a tightly constructed structure, making it one of both excellence and succinctness. Despite the multitudes it covers, this novella

confines the development of a simple plot within the time frame of only one day in the life of Tommy Wilhelm. The narrative of *Seize the Day* synthesizes harmoniously Bellow's subtle authorial skills with variations to ordinary disposals. With the help of high intensity and great flexibility, this novella depicts vividly an icon for a modern American in spiritual crisis. Bellow's ability to establish a moving protagonist and treat weighty themes in a concentrated form well explains the very success of *Seize the Day*.

On the whole, the existing studies and researches about Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* have focused much on those thematic, cultural and ethical contents of his work, while only a little attention is paid to his narrative techniques. Early in 1990, Ellen Pifer contended in *Saul Bellow: Against the Grain* [9] that Bellow's fiction was radical and went against the grain of contemporary culture with its secular pieties. Jerrald Ranta discussed Bellow's writing construction in the article "Time in Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*" in 1995 [11]. More recent

studies about Bellow's works include Lee Siegel's "Bellow's Lonely Planet" [13], Hooti and Omrani's modernist study on *Seize the Day* [2], and Faruk Kalay's study about personality in this story [4], which all concern the content. Other scholars study this novel by comparing it with other writings like Jesmin's comparison of *Death of a Salesman* and *Seize the Day* [3]. Researches in the latest years still focus on the theme mainly, such as Marrouchi and Azmi's study in 2019 about the intellectuals in Bellow's world of fiction [7], and Sukhbir Singh's vedantic reading of *Seize the Day* [14].

While the content of *Seize the Day* has been exhaustively analyzed, there exists only a very small amount of systematic or even sustained analyses of Bellow's narrative skills about this novel. Some scholars have studied Bellow's narrative in his other famous works, for example, Li and Xu's "Identity Construction: Narrative Tension in Saul Bellow's *Herzog*" [6], but not much can be found about *Seize the Day*. In other words, more attention has been paid to "what" is in Bellow's fiction than to "how" Bellow constructs this work. No doubt Bellow's skills of composing a story can never be neglected. Considering the fact that Bellow's art of narrative has been inadequately examined, this paper intends to analyze the narrative of *Seize the Day*, showing how and from where the powerful impact of the novel comes and why Bellow's narrative techniques, not only his themes, can be of great importance too.

## 2. Modified Omniscient Narrative

The process of narrating a story is actually a way of construction. For years, many theorists still agree with Genette whose monographs on structuralist narratology are authoritative even today that narrative analysis revolves around two basic questions: "Who speaks?" – the question of the identity of the text's narrator or narrative voice, and "Who sees?" – the question of whose point of view orients the narrative text. Narrator and focalization together help readers to clarify those fundamentally characteristic components of a narrative, for example, the difference between the voice of the omniscient narrator and the perspective of a particular character. Therefore, the following part begins the analysis with the discussion of the two closely related issues in the narrative of Saul Bellow's novella *Seize the Day*.

### 2.1. An Omniscient Third-person Narrator

Narrators can be classified according to different frames of reference. The simplest distinction is grammatical, of which there are first-person narrator, third-person narrator and second-person narrator (who rarely appears in narrative experiments). Narrators also differ according to their degree of participation in the story. They can be internal or external, which means a narrator may or may not be a character in a story. As a result, it is important to determine the type of narrator in a narrative as this can inform readers how much the narrator injects into the narration and whether the information given by the narrator in each stage of the narrative can be trusted.

It will not be so difficult to detect that in the novella *Seize the Day*, Saul Bellow adopts a third-person narrator, who does not appear as a character in the story. Telling the story about other people, such third-person narrator often gets the absolute authority commanding practically godlike abilities like omniscience, so it is often called omniscient narrator. Cases that the narrator knows everything about the story abound in this novel. Just take the beginning part of *Seize the Day* for example, the narrator says that the protagonist "Wilhelm felt out of place" (p4) [1] among those old people with whom he lived in the same residential hotel. And "he had realized that ... today he was afraid. He was aware that his routine was about to break up and he sensed that a huge trouble ... was due." (p4) And when referring to another person Rubin who is "the man at the newsstand" (p5), the narrator also describes him as "He meant to be conversationally playful, but his voice...He didn't want to hear." (p8) Then, later when Wilhelm's father is introduced, what in character's mind is exposed again by informing readers that "He wanted Wilhelm, too, to feel it." (p22) In this arrangement, the narrator of *Seize the Day* has not been confined to what one particular character has seen or been told. The omniscient narrator gets the free access to the motivation, thoughts and feelings of the characters in the story.

Furthermore, the narrator here not only has an unrestricted knowledge of the story's characters but also its events. By employing devices such as "in the old days" (p6), "he recalled" (p8), "he reflected" (p14), and so on, the omniscient narrator of *Seize the Day* is fairly capable of introducing the events that happen at present or happened in the past when and where necessary. In short, standing in an outsider's position, an omniscient narrator should hold a panorama of the whole story, and for the most part it matches the case in the narrative of *Seize the Day*.

As a matter of fact, such an omniscient narrator of *Seize the Day* is not a random choice but well calculated in the conceiving of the narrative. Moving freely from character to character and event to event, the omniscient narrator here fits exceedingly to present a tightly constructed narrative of this novella in which the actual actions are taken only in one day while many have to be told through characters' recalling. What is more, the omniscient narrator's comprehensive world-view is particularly suited to reveal the protagonists' moral strengths and weaknesses. This is a most important factor in *Seize the Day* as the novel creates a more vivid characterization than a fluctuant plot. Besides, an omniscient narrator holds the possible highest degree of the exposure of materials to readers, the narrative of *Seize the Day* then seems objective, being real and close to everyday life and easy to be accepted by readers. These attributes of an omniscient narrator mentioned above just well serve the narration of *Seize the Day* and they may become the premise to the novella's success.

However, in a status like an outsider supposed to be provided with every information though, it is also the omniscient narrator who gets much freedom to decide how and how much to show readers the story. An omniscient narrator can fully perform the function or deliberately reduce

his role and give way to characters, which may bring both variations of narrative voice and focalization. Any change related to the specialty of an omniscient narrator can influence the reader's experience of a narrative and it then becomes worthwhile to be under careful investigation.

## 2.2. Focalization

A person is capable of both speaking and seeing, but in a narrative speaking and seeing may not be attributed to the same agent. Different from narrator, the agent that sees in the centre of consciousness is titled the term "focalization". "Focalization is Gerard Genette's term for this inescapable adoption of a (limited) perspective in narrative, a viewpoint from which things are implicitly seen, felt, understood, and assessed" [15]. This term pervades in analyzing narrative texts nowadays for the reason that "Genette's treatment has the great advantage of dispelling the confusion between perspective and narration which often occurs when 'point of view' or similar terms are used" [12]. Therefore, being more precise, this technical term "focalization" is widely accepted by most narratologists after Genette when discussing such topics as the position from which the events of a narrative is

observed or the outlook from which the events are related.

Just as the various intensities of thoughts and feelings come from the voice readers hear, so do they come up through the perspective readers see. Focalization can devote richly to how readers think and feel during the process of a narration. It concerns the question of "who sees" in a story, another fundamental component of narrative, which is crucial and unavoidable in the study of a narrative.

### 2.2.1. Free-focalization and Its Adjustment

Usually the narrator will be the focalizer, but focalization can change even from sentence to sentence during the course of a narrative, because it is not necessarily achieved through a single consistent narrative consciousness. In view of the fact that different types of focalization can cause different rhetorical effects, it is necessary to touch upon the category of focalization first. Though classifying in this area can never be neat, Genette's trichotomy of nonfocalization, internal focalization and external focalization is still classical today, so that, draw from Genette's language, Michael Kearns offers a sketch as follow:

Table 1. Types of Focalization [5]

TYPE	CHARACTERISTIC	EXAMPLE
Nonfocalized, or Narrative with Free Focalization	Narrator > Character (Narrator says more than character knows.)	"Omniscient" half of <i>Bleak House</i>
Narrative with Internal Focalization (Fixed or Variable)	Narrator=Character (Narrator says what character perceives and knows.)	Fixed: <i>What Maisie Knew</i> Variable: <i>Mrs. Dalloway</i>
Narrative with External Focalization	Narrator < Character (Narrator says less than character knows.)	"The Killers"

According to this classification, the narrative in *Seize the Day* is nonfocalized, because in the story the narrator tells more than the character knows. Since the omniscient narrator is frequently the focalizer in this novel, readers often see things through the narrator's eyes, just as they often hear his voice. However, this is not by any means always the case. The narrator may maintain a strict third-person narrative voice but meantime let the events be perceived through the eyes of characters. Examining the early scenes in *Seize the Day* closely, the position of observing things changes now and then from the narrator's to Wilhelm's or to his father's. When Wilhelm noticed his own reflection in the glass cupboard, "He saw a big round face, a wide, flourishing red mouth, stump teeth." (p6-7) Later while in his father's eyes, Wilhelm's image was viewed as follows: "Dr. Adler thought that Wilhelm looked particularly untidy this morning – unrested, too...He was breathing through his mouth and he...rolled his red-shot eyes barbarously." (p32) Later on, Wilhelm's appearance was mentioned again, but this time through the narrator's perspective: "He was not really so slovenly as his father found him to be...His mouth, though broad, had a fine outline, and his brow and his gradually incurved nose, dignity, and in his blond hair..." (p42) Via the focalization on different people's vision, Wilhelm's image is revealed with different

emphases, offering readers the chance to discover not only Wilhelm's insufficiency but also his good qualities that may have been long forgotten by characters in the story, even Wilhelm himself.

The omniscient narrator will not give up his position to see events without any reason. Every adjustment of the godlike narrator's focalization is on certain purpose. The omniscient focalizer in *Seize the Day* prefers to take turns to internal focalization or even external one under certain circumstances. Note the debut of Dr. Tamkin: "Someone in a gray straw hat with a wide cocoa-colored band spoke to Wilhelm in the lobby." (p57) An omniscient narrator of course knows who this "someone" is, but at that time Wilhelm did not realize it was actually Dr. Tamkin. In this case, the narrator's focalization shifts to the character's limited one. The information is restricted only to Wilhelm's partial knowledge and experience, yielding hence a sense of mystery to Dr. Tamkin.

Then, when Tamkin finally disappeared after their investment turned out to be a failure, Wilhelm was in desperate search of him — "At the top of the closet door sat a gray straw hat with a cocoa-colored band. 'Tamkin,' said Wilhelm...The hat was taken down, the latch lifted, and a stranger came out who looked at him with annoyance." (p105)

Again, it is Wilhelm's internal focalization. The omniscient narrator should have the idea where Tamkin had gone to and out of question that stranger was not Tamkin. On the contrary, Wilhelm did not know that and he was so eager to find Tamkin at that moment. The internal focalization sacrifices omniscience for a greater intimacy with the character. Narrative with such internal focalization arouses readers' echo to Wilhelm, as readers are prevented to know any more information about Dr. Tamkin except what Wilhelm has got. Because of his limited focalization, readers may become as anxious as Wilhelm to find out where Tamkin is, which increases much tension to the later part of the narrative in *Seize the Day*.

Besides the employment of internal focalization, external focalization emerges too in the narrative of *Seize the Day*, though it is not in large amount like internal one. One instance is the beginning of Chapter Five — "Patiently, in the window of the fruit store, a man with a scoop spread crushed ice... There were also Persian melons, lilacs... The many street noises came back after a little while from the caves of the sky." (p77) Here, peaceful scene is displayed through the film-like external focalization, which just forms sharp contrast to the furious struggle in Wilhelm's mind. And another example is at a special moment that is the ending of the novel, when at last Wilhelm found himself in a stranger's funeral during his search for Tamkin. The narrator does not tell readers whose funeral it is, and by adopting "one woman said... said one man... said another bystander" (p118), the identification of people in the funeral is avoided too. At least, people present in the funeral should know who the dead is, but in such scene it seems as if the narrator has pretended to know less than the characters. With the help of external focalization, the story presents objective or symbolic moments, leaving readers only to feel the background and speculate certain hidden meanings.

The above gives the evidence that the focalization in the narrative of *Seize the Day* is adjusted without much restriction. In this sense, it will be more suitable to say that in an omniscient narrative the focalization is free rather than non-focalized. Take one typical description as an example, when in the stock market, "Mr. Rappaport grumbled and whiffed at his long cigar, and the board, like a swarm of electrical bees, whirled" (p87). In the first half of the sentence, the omniscient narrator is the focalizer, as Mr. Rappaport's action is seen from his viewpoint. Contrarily, the second half of the sentence is viewed through Wilhelm's position, because it is actually in his eyes that the board seems like a swarm of electrical bees. Despite the maintenance of narrative voice in the whole sentence, the focalization turns to internal one without any clear declaration in the middle, which vividly shows how dazed Wilhelm was in the market. A qualified omniscient narrator like the one in *Seize the Day* is good at deciding when and where to move his position, offering readers ways to observe the story from different perspectives.

### 2.2.2. Rhetorical Effects of the Focalization

In the narrative of *Seize the Day*, the omniscient narrator is

not overtly limited by a fixed perspective, and each choice the narrator makes during the narration to present the events and characters is often of rhetorical effect. The omniscient narrator may or may not exercise his ability fully to see and say everything. When the omniscient narrator comes to be the focalizer, he is free to look into any character's mind or any dark corner of each event in the story. As a result, the omniscient narrator portrays all physical and emotional actions of characters as well as the inferred establishment of a moral norm in the novella *Seize the Day*. For instance, through the difference of Wilhelm's position and his father's to perceive things, contradiction and tension of the father-son relationship can be revealed.

However, the narrative is not a creation of all in balance. It is always the case that a particular stress is laid on a particular character. In order to focus on this particular character, internal focalization is used then to give readers the impression of seeing what the focused character is seeing or feeling. In the narrative of *Seize the Day*, the protagonist Tommy Wilhelm is no doubt the main focused character. Wilhelm's focalization greatly shortens the distance between the character and the reader, which well informs readers about how he views the world or others and simultaneously reflects his own personality. With Wilhelm's own obsession and bias, the whole depiction of the narrative possesses many similarities occurring in everyday life. What is interesting, while Wilhelm's inner world is intensively explored through internal focalization, the other characters' mental activities, like Tamkin's typically, are deliberately excluded in the novel. In the stock market, readers can only guess what Tamkin's viewpoint is and later doubt where he is like Wilhelm does. The internal focalization disguises Tamkin's feelings, opinions, and perceptions, establishing a mysterious image and bringing much suspense to the story.

On the other hand, the adoption of external focalization in different scenes can then generate another kind of suspense to the story. The one at the very end of the story is a good example where the camera-like external focalization enhances greatly the visual beauty of the final scene in the church, providing readers with the chances to break for a while and breathe some fresh air during the infusion of Wilhelm's heavy psychological burden. On the page ahead of the last, there still exist plenty of words exposing Wilhelm's confusing hidden thoughts. Due to the sudden change of focalization in the very end, readers lose the access to Wilhelm's specific wonderings, but can only find pure description as "He heard it and sank deeper than sorrow, through torn sobs and cries toward the consummation of his heart's ultimate need." (p118) The deprivation to Wilhelm's inner world caused by the external focalization is a major stimulative to a serene but open end of *Seize the Day*.

The choice of focalization is virtually crucial for the way a narrative is perceived by readers. The distance between readers and characters varies in different types of focalization, which influences the assessment of the elements and their relations in a narrative. The omniscient narrator's free focalization in *Seize the Day* reminds readers of the

ready-made ethic accepted by the majority. The protagonist Wilhelm's internal focalization stimulates readers' sympathy for the character and helps the story to be more lifelike. And the objective external focalization cools the fierceness of the conflicts in the story on particular occasions, which devotes to a flexibility of the narrative rhythm. Focalization in *Seize the Day* is free to change whenever necessary but never a random one.

### 2.3. A Modified Omniscient Narrative Mode

Take the novel as a whole, *Seize the Day* carries an omniscient narrator who tells and sees the story as an outsider. A narrative by an omniscient narrator is assumed to know everything connected with the story. In such a narrative, the third-person anonymous narrator holds a broader background and a panoramic view, looking into every character, every event of the story. For novels like *Seize the Day* where the characterization and motif are important while the plot and structure are tight, such mode of narrative is a good choice.

However, in the prominent omniscient narrative of *Seize the Day*, the general narrator does not stick to his authority all the time. Characters' voice or focalization is allowed, especially the protagonist Wilhelm's one. In such cases, the narrator and focalizer may not be identical. The withdrawal of the omniscient narrator's role in *Seize the Day* modifies the whole narrative mode into a multidimensional one. The duality of Wilhelm's role as narrator and character, or as focalizer and character at the same time, becomes a clear indication of one important characteristic in the narrative of the story. The omniscient narrative in *Seize the Day* perfectly includes the attributes of the limited first-person narrative voice and focalization, manifesting a complexity and flexibility an omniscient narrative can be.

The smooth shift of narrative voice and the focalization actually explores the skill of the intricate weaving of various events and characters accomplished through a complex substructure of the narrative. In this way, readers can pick up various intensities of thoughts and feelings from diverse voices, so do they pick up thoughts and feelings from different perspectives. Furthermore, the subtle modification of narrative voice and focalization in an overall omniscient narrative mode just like the one of *Seize the Day* brings much freedom in ordering time (and space) within a narrative text, constituting one of the primary ways of conducting meanings in a story and meanwhile turning the whole narrative into a more attractive one.

## 3. Temporal Structure in *Seize the Day*

Narrative consists of a succession of events, which inevitably creates a sense of time. A narrative can portray the features of temporal existence and it is in fact one of the ways that human beings organize the understanding of time. The temporal manipulation interweaves the acceleration and deceleration making the whole narrative into a progression – “the movement of a narrative from beginning to end and the principles governing that movement” [8] – which can

generate further instabilities and tensions in the movement of the narrative. Moreover, any changes of temporal structure, the arrangement of time in narration, may lead to alterations of other narrative elements like narrator and focalizer. Therefore, the study of temporal relationship is bound to be one of the most distinctive aspects in the analysis of a narrative.

Significantly, time is also a fantastic aspect in the novella *Seize the Day*. The whole story is presented within the time frame of one day in the life of the protagonist Tommy Wilhelm. On this important day, Wilhelm took actions but continuously agonized over past mistakes and held other people back from memories. The temporal manipulation in the narrative of *Seize the Day* creates such effect as if the novel interweaves what happens at present with what happened in the past, showing an obviously leaping characteristic of the story. The “recognition of how Wilhelm relates to time is important to understanding Bellow's handling of time in the novella – indeed, to understanding Wilhelm's story in general” [11]. Therefore, the part of this paper focuses on those time-related issues in Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*.

### 3.1. Order of Time

Statements about order refer to the question of “when” and discuss the relation between the assumed succession of events and their actual disposition of appearance in the narrative. An event can be narrated in advance of the moment it occurs on the timeline, which is called flash-forward or prolepsis. Conversely, an event can also be narrated in the context of events that occur later, which is called flash-back or analepsis. Both prolepsis and analepsis constitute a temporally second narrative compared with the narrative into which it is inserted. And both prolepsis and analepsis, are truly qualified to uplift the rhetorical effects of a narrative.

The novella *Seize the Day* traverses one fateful day in Tommy Wilhelm's life. The chronological time of this “day of reckoning” (p85) establishes the first narrative in the story. It begins from the moment Wilhelm went out of his hotel room in the morning, and ends when Wilhelm found himself finally released in a funeral in the very afternoon on that day. However, the simple plot of first layer does not mean the story is showed in a linear temporal order. *Seize the Day* is especially affluent in analepses or retrospections. This story actually alternates with troublesome events happening now and those painful ones happened before in Wilhelm's life, demonstrating all his physical and psychical struggles.

The analepses in *Seize the Day* are so prominent that they have occupied almost half of the narrative. Those analepses evoke past events happening on the preceding moment to the starting point of the first narrative with or even without a clear temporal mark. Sometimes, the omniscient narrator in *Seize the Day* informs readers a past event is narrated by introducing phrases like “four days ago” (p8), “on that very same afternoon” (p85), or much vaguer ones like “at first” (p17), “then” (p34), and so on. Meanwhile, some analepses are character-motivated. Typical examples lie in Wilhelm's interminable memories. When at lunch Dr. Tamkin talked with

him about the father-son relationship, “Wilhelm began to think about his own two sons and to wonder how he appeared to them and what they would think of him.”(p93) This issue aroused his recollection constituting the following whole paragraph. Then, his recalling moved from his son to his wife in separation who in his opinion “wanted ruin him, while she wore the mask of kindness” (p94). His wife then reminded him of his lover Olive who “would have married him if he had obtained the divorce.” (p94) In this example, the contents of the remembering, fearing, and hoping in Wilhelm’s thoughts evoke past events one by one. Such character-motivated analepsis appears without any temporal signals, displaying further Wilhelm’s characterization in detail and blurring readers’ sense of time to much degree.

Actually, many analepses in anachronies are not of a clearly-stated distinction to the timeline of the first narrative in *Seize the Day*. It is always the case that when one current event is taking on, another related past one is inspired to emerge then. During the conversation between Wilhelm and his father, after Dr. Adler mentioned Wilhelm’s car, the narrative then inserts “Wilhelm’s old Pontiac was parked in the street...he used it only on Saturdays...Last Sunday...he had gone out to...”(p33) By this means, the narrative turns back to the description of events that happened on last Sunday which later is proved to be a good illustration of Wilhelm’s deep love for his passed-away mother. Then, several minutes later in the same first narrative time, when his father saw Wilhelm’s dirty hands, Dr. Adler’s recollection was roused: “Only once – and never again, he swore – had he visited his room...”(p36) These dirty hands stimulate Dr. Adler’s impression of his son’s messed room, a side evidence of Wilhelm’s chaotic life. Arranged in such ways, events in Dr. Adler’s memory may happen before events stated in the omniscient narrator’s inserted narration, so the analepses to the first narrative in *Seize the Day* are not themselves in chronological order too. These immethodical analepses of anachronies are just tanglesome in the whole narrative of the novel, forging a messy temporally second narrative in *Seize the Day*. Such anachronies are closely related to the triggering events in the first narrative, but in clutter within their own system, which is a bit like a mouthpiece of Wilhelm’s unordered world.

The constant temporal shifts in the manipulation of time in *Seize the Day* make the order in narrative a much dazzling one. This feature of order in time can be of both fantastically mimetic and thematic functions. Picking up memories when seeing relative things are natural and integral in everyday life, so the disordered analepses in *Seize the Day* enhance the mimetic effect of the narrative in this sense. While the analepses clarify themselves in great abundance, the nearly nonexistence of prolepses in *Seize the Day* may imply Wilhelm’s little hope of the future and thus emphasize again Wilhelm’s great immersion in the past. As both Wilhelm’s physical and mental worlds are in chaos, the anachronies, to be more specifically those suffocating analepses in *Seize the Day*, have convincingly shown Wilhelm’s ambiguous temporal consciousness of past and present, which, if related to the novel’s title and Dr. Tamkin’s repeating advice “Seize the Day”

in the text, is then of much ironic effect and thematic importance. Wilhelm is indeed so deeply rooted to the past that he no longer seems relevant to the present, needless to say the future.

### 3.2. Duration of Time

Another facet of time is duration. It relates to the question of “how long” and looks at the connection between the span of the time that events are supposed to have actually taken up and the length or the amount of the text devoted to narrating those same events. Such relation can create an effect of rhythm in a narrative and naturally yield the pace or speed as the effect of acceleration and deceleration. Two poles of the acceleration and deceleration can be ellipsis and descriptive pause. And there may be an infinite range of variations between the two poles involved, “but in practice these are conventionally reduced to summary and scene” [12], correspondently leading to the effects of acceleration and deceleration.

In the narrative of *Seize the Day*, scene is more dominant than summary. In scenes, the span of story time and the length of narrative text are considered to be identical, or the latter can be even longer than the former. Besides those descriptive scenes that introduce settings or backgrounds of the story, a purer scenic form may just be of those dialogues in the narrative. In *Seize the Day*, dialogues are exposed in a great amount, and the longest section makes up even a whole chapter, that is, dialogues of Chapter Three between Wilhelm and his father. In this chapter, the conflict between father and son as well as many Wilhelm’s other troubles are reflected from the contents of dialogues added by the way of talking. As a matter of fact, in the first narrative timeline, this conversation may only last within an hour because it happened when the two were having breakfast together. However, the sense of time is much prolonged due to the lengthy dialogues which may just parallel the choking and ceaseless tribulation in Wilhelm’s lifelong time.

Similarly, distinct instances of deceleration also include conversations between Wilhelm and Dr. Tamkin. On their way back to the stock market after lunch, in order to drag on, Tamkin kept repeating his theories, while Wilhelm, lost in his thoughts again, was skeptical in mind but supportive in words. Though it is only “a few hundred yards separated the cafeteria from the broker’s” (p99), the page-by-page dialogues bear the sense of a longer time, which gives birth to readers’ sharing anxiety with Wilhelm to arrive the broker’s earlier. Such sections of scene in the narrative generate the effect of pauses in temporal span and engender willies a lot to both the character and the reader. The use of scenes in *Seize the Day* decelerates successfully the pace of the whole narrative at proper moments, making an ordinary day seem extremely long and thus significant enough to the temporal consciousness.

Meanwhile, the large quantity of scenes does not shadow the function of summaries. In a summary, a given story-period is compressed into a relatively short length of narrating. For example, the omniscient narrator in *Seize the Day* gives his comments about Wilhelm’s decisions that “This was typical of

Wilhelm. After much thought and hesitation and debate...Ten such decisions made up the history of his life..." (p23) By this means, all Wilhelm's false decisions in his life are made clear via six sentences. Through summaries, more information can be offered in brevity to perfect the plot of the novel. Readers may reconfirm their initial understandings about the characters or events in the story of *Seize the Day*. On the other hand, summaries may be regarded as nothing important at times, as more essential facts call for more detailed descriptions as usual. The narrative thus shifts the reader's attention to the scenario of more important thematic meanings. The acceleration of summaries to the narrative takes harsh comparison with the deceleration of scenes. The employment of summaries speeds up the narrative and belongs to indispensable parts of forming a narrative rhythm.

In fact, the choice of employing scene or summary and the question that to what degree they should be integrated are often of rhetorical effect. The favoritism of scene or summary can point out the degrees in the centrality of different events, as it is always those more important events that gain the detailed illustration, while minor ones are compressed. Consequently, if the most central event is mentioned lightly by summing up, the effect of shock or irony will then come into being. The deceleration of scenes and acceleration of summaries cooperate with each other to originate a rhythm of the narrative. Besides, as duration often stays within a rather indefinite range of the unmarked case, a skillfully-weaved narrative like *Seize the Day* just modulates perfectly the different variations in duration of time, directing readers' notice and concentration without much artificial imprint.

### 3.3. Frequency of Time

The last aspect to study temporal manipulation is frequency. It concerns the question of "how often" and examines the relation between the number of times an event happens and the number of times it is narrated in the text. Frequency often involves the issue of repetition. Strictly speaking, no repeated events are quite same in text, since the new context may change their meanings. However, repetition is more a mental construction. Considering frequency as mental formation, there are three forms of repetition relations between story events and their narration – singulative narrating, repeating narrating, and iterative narrating. These three can be enclosed in a narrative text synthetically.

Singulative narrating refers to narrating once or *n* times what happens once or *n* times. In this type, each mention of an event in narrative corresponds to one occurrence in the story. The subtype of narrating once what happens once is the most common narrative form to which particular explanations are unnecessary. But the cases of narrating *n* times what happens *n* times may draw readers' attention fully to the speciality of those narrated events. In *Seize the Day*, descriptions of Wilhelm's pant or breath emerge for many times, which especially catches readers' eyes. At newsstand in the morning, Wilhelm was "laughing, panted a little" (p6). When thinking of his father, "Wilhelm let out a long, bard breath" (p12). When talking about Dr. Tamkin with Mr. Perls, Wilhelm

"joined in with his own panting laugh" (p41). Later, when talking with his father, Wilhelm again "struggled for breath" (p49). Contrarily, when he saw the price of rye he bought rising, Wilhelm "could breathe more easily" (p81), at least for a while. Wilhelm was paying so heavily for his mistakes that he just could not breathe normally. These descriptions of pant or breath at various moments are self-evident about their implications. The high frequency of Wilhelm's pant shows his heavy burden of failures, and a sudden change of his breath indicates that even a very faint hope would be enough to give Wilhelm a break through these sufferings. The singulative narrative of narrating *n* times what happens *n* times, is itself an insistence to the vital role of the target phenomenon.

As to the second type repeating narrating, it is the case that telling *n* times what happens once. Repetitive cases function influentially in *Seize the Day*. For several times, Wilhelm's risky investment induced by Dr. Tamkin is narrated. Early when Wilhelm was talking with Rubin, the narrator mentioned it was truly not good for Wilhelm to hold orders of lard in the commodities market. And when Mr. Perls and Dr. Adler mentioned Dr. Tamkin, again the narrator explained Wilhelm had given a power of attorney over his last seven hundred dollars to speculate for Tamkin in the market. Later in Chapter Four, following the reporting phrase "five days ago" (p58), an elaborate section was devoted to the retrospect of how Wilhelm gave the money to Tamkin for venture. The repetitive narration about Wilhelm's last gambling causes readers to notice its importance more intensely. This is actually his most current plague that is seemingly pendent but doomed to be frustrated. An event like this investment possessing an absolutely authoritative position stands out in evidence by the treatment of repeating narrating.

The third type of frequency is iterative narrating which narrates once what happens *n* times. Such temporal structure in practice is closely related to the issue of duration, as iterative narrating often takes the form of summary which is one of the major aspects of duration discussed above. As a matter of fact, the three aspects of time – order, duration and frequency – are tied in and bound tightly together in a narrative text. As summary frequently asks for recourse to the services of the iterative narrating, so does scene do to the singulative narrating. More importantly, though analepsis (a deviation of order) often takes the form of summary, in *Seize the Day* it is a description that is more likely to appear in analepses. Such manipulation of time varies the sense of duration in *Seize the Day* and creates a unique rhythm to the whole narrative.

Furthermore, the alternation of scene and summary with a variety of singulative, repetitive, and iterative narrating can let anachronies in narrative time be more plausible, which achieves the mimetic function. In *Seize the Day*, much stress is placed on the analepses in the arrangement of order rather than prolepses that seldom exist in the story. And the preference for deceleration to acceleration by narrating more singulatively or repetitively than iteratively also motivates inquiries to both the plot and theme of *Seize the Day*. The lowered speed of narrating and the intricate description of past knotty events

greatly enhance the effect of demonstrating the weight of Wilhelm's lifelong psychological and economical burden. The interlaced past and present as well as the depth of being involved in pinpoints of the narrative blur the consciousness of time (and place) to such extent that it elevates the whole ubiquity of the story. All Wilhelm's interrogatories to life seem to be familiar to every ordinary man, making the whole story of *Seize the Day* be of much philosophical depth but at the same time of close intimacy to readers.

## 4. Relationship Between Temporal Structure and Narrative

As temporal structure is one component in all the elements of a narrative, the manipulation of time is correlative to issues like narrator, voice, focalization, and so forth. Any special treatment of time may cause certain changes in the whole narrative mode, so that the relationship between manipulation of time and other narrative aspects is worth to be shed a little more ink to.

### 4.1. Relationship Between Temporal Structure and Narrator

Temporal manipulation can in a way reflect the narrator's function. Since an omniscient narrator like the one in *Seize the Day* has an unlimited knowledge of events, he is free to narrate any character's past or future at any time. While a first-person narrator is limited within his knowledge, thus he may be more confined to what he knows about the past and can be never sure of what will happen in the future, but it will also seem natural for a first-person narrator to allude to a future which has already become a past.

However, in *Seize the Day*, both the omniscient narrator and the characters temporally performing the role of narrator rarely mention Wilhelm's future. The fact that the omniscient narrator deliberately refuses to choose prolepsis and prevents any character even to think about or give hints about Wilhelm's future contains the implication that Wilhelm is such kind of person related to no future. Too much emphasis is paid on Wilhelm's past in *Seize the Day*. Whenever Wilhelm felt bad he would think of something bad in past and when he felt good he just recalled those good old days. For example, in the stock market, Wilhelm always felt extremely blundering, but when he saw the price of rye rising "he was removed to his small yard in Roxbury. He breathed...He heard...No enemy wanted his life." (p82) Maybe the neglect of future by the omniscient narrator just provides readers with the very reason why Wilhelm always made wrong decisions in the story. The deviation in order of time is led by the omniscient narrator's preference on purpose.

Similar interpretation can be deduced likewise in the narrator's favor for deceleration in duration and singulative narrating in frequency of time. Therefore, it can be concluded that any kind of temporal manipulation that is excluded by an omniscient narrator can be of meanings. The freedom of temporal manipulation may be restricted by different types of narrator; yet, the presentation of an omniscient narrator with restriction in temporal manipulation brings rhetorical effects to readers of *Seize the Day*.

### 4.2. Relationship Between Temporal Structure and Focalization

Not only the narrator, focalization also affects the temporal manipulation. The alteration of scene and summery (aspects of duration) along with integrated use of singulative, repetitive and iterative narrating (aspects of frequency) can bring about changes in focalization. As a rule, nonfocalization in an omniscient narrative is panchronic because of an unpersonified and unrestricted focalizer; while internal focalization is somewhat synchronous because of the information regulated by the focalizer. And external focalization can be the most synchronous one due to its film-like operation. Therefore, an external focalizer is strictly limited to the present; an internal focalizer is limited mainly to his own knowledge about present and past; and an omniscient focalizer has all the temporal dimensions at his disposal.

In *Seize the Day*, scenic narration gets the predominance as explained above. In such cases, the verbosely singulative narrating seems to have relatively effaced the focalizer for a short while. In this case, the original omniscient focalizer or even a temporary internal focalizer in the narrative of *Seize the Day* makes place for an external one to a great extent, which allows readers to feel being personally on the scene.

In respect of the focalizer in repeating narrating, it may not be the uniform one in those repetitions. Consequently, what happens once can be narrated many times with different focalizers, disclosing diverse facets of one event and unveiling inconsistent opinions of different individuals with their distinctive personalities. Such statement can maintain a great deal of truth to the narrative of *Seize the Day* when applying to the issue of Wilhelm's unhappy marriage mentioned many times in Wilhelm's conversation with his father, with Dr. Tamkin, with Margaret through phone and with himself in his meditation. By such arrangement, each one's view is aired. This helps the narrative to be more authentic and indicates the omniscient narrator's efforts to be more objective.

Finally, focalizer in iterative narrating can also vary. Events that are narrated in summary may be seen from the omniscient narrator's eyes or the characters'. For most time, general introductions like "As usual, his coat collar was turned up..." (p32) are viewed from the omniscient narrator. But summaries like "When she would get up late on Sunday morning..." (p94) emerging in memories are actually revealed from Wilhelm's standpoint. The comparatively stable summary interwoven with different focalizations witnesses the inconstant profile of a narrative like *Seize the Day*, manifesting again the close relationship between time and narrative focalization.

On the whole, temporal relationship has visible features in the narrative of *Seize the Day*. All different aspects of time have dedicated to enriching the development of the complete narrative. Temporal structure can be divided into two layers in this novel with linear one of the first narrative and a disordered one of a temporally second narrative attributed to the interlaced narrator's flash-backs and the character's recollections. The two layers of the narrative time then mix with each other in an undercurrent of the narration through the



deviations of order, duration and frequency in temporal manipulation. The narrative of *Seize the Day* can never be so winning and charming without the special arrangement of relations within narrative time as well as those between time and other narrative aspects like narrator and focalization.

## 5. Conclusion

The powerful impact of Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* comes from not only the profound characterization, but also its tightly constructed plot, its language, description and organization, added by the ability to control successfully a fairly concentrated form containing those enormous themes, such as alienation, modern men's predicament, inner human connection, and so on. *Seize the Day* deals with such themes familiar to readers of Bellow's fiction, yet in this novella the distinctive characteristics of the narrative enable Bellow to render his themes more intensely and forcefully.

In the narrative of *Seize the Day*, Saul Bellow has worked against the grain of literary fashion and showed a mastery of narrative voice, focalization and temporal structure. Bellow feels free to introduce a new character, Dr. Tamkin as a typical example, any time in the course of the narrative, leading a change of focus which is almost guaranteed to be fatal to the working of *Seize the Day*. And the relations of character-narrator and text-audience are also well examined in this novel through modifying the narrative mode and violating the linear temporal structure.

In general, this story is narrated by an omniscient third-person narrator, but it does not mean the narrative voice is exclusive. Multi-voices, among which Wilhelm's is a most distinctive one, participate in the whole narrative, presenting the latent tensions in the development of the story. Besides, the nonfocalization of the omniscient narrator is adjusted during the narration now and then for certain rhetorical purpose. Such shift of focalization has effectively contributed to exposing the tense instabilities of characters and even events in the story. The modified omniscient narrative mode of *Seize the Day* is indeed flexible and compatible to such a narrative unfolding as a progression impelled by instabilities and tensions.

At the same time, the manipulation of temporal structure in *Seize the Day* also plays an important role in the narrative progression. Any variation in order, duration and frequency of time can lead the whole narrative to be a dynamic and expressive movement, offering readers the option to consider the possibilities of development, motivation and resolution in the entire narrative. And the special arrangement of time results in an intricate temporal structure for integrating different instabilities and tensions within the text.

Writers like Saul Bellow that is admired and re-read have been absorbed into the fine print of people's consciousness. In their ultimate resonances, Saul Bellow's novels echo the most

penetrating understandings and they are even untranslatable into words. This analysis of the narrative in Bellow's *Seize the Day* has demonstrated how incredible the author's narrative techniques can be in transferring a narrative into a dynamic movement. Saul Bellow is such a novelist that his fiction is densely nuanced in the progression of the narrative.

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