There are various strands in existentialist philosophy and it will be hard to find two existentialist thinkers with identical views on all elements that their thought covers. There are often sharp convergences and, in any case, important differences in emphasis. But one view that could be perhaps called cardinal to this body of thought it that "the possibility of choice is the central fact of human nature." Almost all of Bellow's fiction dramatizes what has come to be known as modern man's predicament -- his loss of moorings and of a sense of community, his feeling of alienation from a world which he finds absurd and the despair resulting from these.

But a concern with what Bellow himself has called man's "subangelic" nature is also a persistent presence in all his fiction. As Bellow himself said in the context of modern fiction:

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\text{The dread is great the soul is small; man might be godlike but he is wretched; the heart should be open but it is sealed by fear. If man wretched by nature is represented, what we have here is only accurate reporting. But if it is man in the image of God, man a little lower than angles who is impotent, the case is not the same. And it is second assumption, the subangelic one, that generally make. For they are prone, as Nietzsche said in } \textit{Human, All Too Human}, \text{ to exaggerate the value of human personality. I don't know whether exaggeration is quite the word, but what is suggests we can certainly agree with. why}
\]
should wretched man need power or wish to inflate himself with imaginary glory? If this is what power signifies it can only be vanity to suffer from importance. On the nobler assumption he should have sufficient power to overcome ignominy and to complete his own life. His suffering, feebleness, servitude then have a meaning. This is what writers have taken to be the justification of power will do this, the power of the imagination will take the task upon itself.¹

The essay was "Distractions of a Fiction Writer" and it is a vital document to an understanding of Bellow's thinking on modern fiction in general and his own fiction in particular.

Saul Bellow's fourth novel, *Seize the Day* is in fact a novella. It is a reflection of the times in which it was written. The novel was written in a post-war world. First and foremost, war created dissolution and in many cases dislocation because of forced immigration. During the war many people, Jews especially, were escaping the Germans and, thus, fleeing, when they could. Also, American troop and other members of the alliance were disillusioned to see that such horrors could exist. Finally, and in opposition to the above, the war had a positive effect of creating an economic boom. There was also a surge in technological interest in America. The reasons for this surge are two-fold: America was rich and America was involved in a post-World War II cold war with the Soviet Union, since the countries competed technologically. It is
in this world that a man like Tommy Wilhelm is lost. Thus World War II created several factors that serve as a backdrop to Tommy's isolation in the novel, an isolation that represents the feeling of many during that period. Bellow places the protagonist of his novel at odds with the world around him. Tommy's "inner" world, his feelings and his human needs, are in constant battle with the external world of money and business.

Critics interpret *Seize the Day* in many ways, especially about the ending and the theme. Their opinions range from future-expecting to tragedy. Robert Dutton interprets this work as future-expecting. He thinks Tommy experiences baptism in the funeral scene and heads for a kind of peace, getting over the lament.\(^2\) Herbert Gold, writing about *Seize the Day*, says,"... there is a redeeming power in self-knowledge, and a redeeming pleasure."\(^3\) According to Julius Raper, Tommy experiences a "collective mind," and "through this realization, free[s] himself of their destructive personal influence" by watching another person's coffin.\(^4\) Gilbert Porter is of the view that Tommy experiences a "possibility of communion" and moves towards regeneration.\(^5\) Several psychological readings have diagnosed the causes of Tommy Wilhelm's internal conflicts. John J. Clayton and Eusebio Rodrigues established that Tommy is masochistic, and more recently Gordon Bordewyk has shown that Tommy is also narcissistic.\(^6\)

The very first chapter illustrates many important points about the novel and about its characters. First of all, the novel's point of view is of great
significance because it affects the novels tone, mood, and character studies. The point of view is primarily a third person omniscient narrator. However, when the narration travels into the mind and thoughts of Tommy Wilhelm, it often fluctuates in point of view and often takes on the first person. As a third person, omniscient narrative voice, the narrative also journeys into the minds of other characters but, mostly, everything is seen through Tommy's perspective.

The novel opens with the following lines: "When it came to concealing his troubles, Tommy Wilhelm was not less capable than the next fellow. So at least he thought and there was a certain amount of evidence to back him up. He had once been an actor -- no, not quite, an extra -- and he knew what acting should be" (7).

These opening lines of the novel, spoken by the third person, omniscient narrator, establish certain thematic threads that will be woven throughout the book and that are, from the beginning, pointed out as important. First of all, the quote introduces the idea of concealment. It implies that not only does Tommy Wilhelm "keep up appearances," but so does everyone else. In other words it points to the masks and the many layers of the "modern man." This introduction to the idea of "appearances" is then followed, appropriately, by a conversation between Tommy and Rubin -- the man from the newspaper stand in the hotel where Tommy is staying -- about clothing which is an ultimate symbol of "layering" and "appearances."
Furthermore, it tells the reader that the protagonist was once an actor. However, significantly it also points out that he was not quite so, for he was an extra. This indicates that Tommy may be, in many ways, a failure. Also, it illustrates that perhaps Tommy, who could not make it as an actor, will not be as good as "he thought" at keeping his mask strapped on tightly. In short, it concisely foreshadows the book and gives the reader an idea of who Tommy is all within the first three sentences of the novel.

The present western mind no longer finds superhuman absolutes within man’s grasp. The self therefore becomes the absolute for which men must search, and the unending process of the search makes consciousness the sovereign factor even when the consciousness may reveal its very limitations. Becoming conscious, then, is an essential part of the search for the self because it helps the individual become more himself as well as because aware of the obstacles to becoming himself.

In *Seize the Day* Bellow shows Tommy’s consciousness in a state of perpetual activity either through recollection of the past and its critical analysis or through a scrutiny of the present. Disgusted by his father’s whitewashing of his failure in the presence of another guest at the hotel, and Tommy thinks(and Bellow projects Tommy's consciousness through a very effective combination of the third person narrator with an almost stream-of-consciousness technique):
He was a little tired. The spirit, the peculiar burden of his existence lay upon him like an accretion, a load, a hump. In any moment of quiet, when sheer fatigue prevented him from struggling, he was apt to feel this mysterious weight, this growth or collection of nameless things which it was the business of his life to carry about. That must be what a man was for. This large, odd, excited, fleshy, blond, abrupt personality named Wilhelm, or Tommy, was here present -- Dr. Tamkin had been putting into his mind Hotel suggestions about the present moment, the here and now -- this Wilky, or Tommy Wilhelm, forty-four years old, father of two sons, at present living in the Hotel Gloriana, was assigned to be the carrier of the load which was his own self, his characteristic self. There was no figure or estimate for the value of this load. But it is probably exaggerated by the subject, T.W. Who is a visionary sort of animal. Who has to believe that he can know why he exists. Though he has never seriously tried to find out why. (43-44)

The passage reveals at least three things. One, that Tommy feels defeated. Two, that at least partly his sense of defeat is aggravated by the disgust provoked in him by the false values causing his father to be hypocritical. Three, and most important, that Tommy is not merely conscious of his down at heel condition but of the burden that his characteristic self is.
Tommy Wilhelm is a man in his mid-forties, temporarily living in the Hotel Gloriana on the Upper West Side of New York City, the same hotel in which his father has taken residence for a number of years. He is out of place from the beginning, living in a hotel filled with elderly retirees and continuing throughout the novel to be a figure of isolation amidst crowds. Tommy asserts his differences from the old men and women among whom he lives; yet his condition is no better than theirs. Still he tries to conceal the crisis, which threatens to overwhelm him. Later he realizes "that he was no more capable than the next fellow when it came to concealing his troubles. They were clearly written out upon his face" (52). The novel traverses one very important day in the life of this self-same Tommy Wilhelm: his "day of reckoning," so to speak.

Although the main action of the novel is confined to a single day, there are several flashbacks into Wilhelm's past. These flashbacks capture crucial moments or choices that help to explain Wilhelm's present crisis. While he is at the newsstand, prolonging going into the dining room to face his father, Tommy's memories are triggered by Rubin's casual remarks.

The first flashback gives information about his stock market investment made through Dr. Tamkin, the pseudo-psychologist. He had recommended that Wilhelm invest money in lard. Foolishly believing the man, Wilhelm had entrusted the remainder of his savings to Tamkin. Now he justifiably fears he has lost everything. There is an intended irony in the fact
that Wilhelm's money is tied up in lard, for he is a fat, slovenly man; when he sees his own reflection, he calls himself a hippopotamus.

The reflection on Tamkin leads into a reflection on his father, Dr. Adler, who shows no affection for his son. More than anything, Wilhelm yearns to be loved by this man; but he has no comprehension of how to reach his father. As a result, he feels like he is drowning in life. It is appropriate, therefore, that he remembers a line of poetry from Milton's *Lycidas*: "Sunk though he be beneath the wat'ry floor."

Tommy then recalls another element in his personal history that might account for his father's attitude towards him. In spite of his parents' objections, Tommy dropped out of college to go to Hollywood and seek a career as an actor. Certain he was going to make it and needing a better stage name, he officially changed his from Wilhelm Adler to Tommy Wilhelm. Ironically, "Wilhelm had always had a great longing to be Tommy. He had never, however, succeeded in feeling like Tommy, and had always remained Wilky"(). Tommy, therefore, has always longed for a normal, successful life -- the life of a winner, a Tommy -- but he has always been a failure -- the life of a loser, a Wilky. Unfortunately, Tommy rarely sees and accepts things as they are until it is much too late. As a result, he seldom makes normal, sensible decisions based upon facts.

Tommy's decision to go to Hollywood proved to be disastrous. He misread some comments made by Maurice Venice, supposedly an agent for Kaskaskia films, and based upon those comments he left college to pursue an
acting career. Although he goes to Hollywood without Venice's backing, he assumes the agent will help him; he is also sure he can make it on his own. The naïveté that Wilhelm has about being a Hollywood star borders on being pathetic. As expected by everyone, Tommy flunks his screen test, confirming his status as a loser. He has no choice but to return home to New York and face the disappointment and disapproval of his father. Although Tommy feels betrayed by Venice, he takes no pleasure in later learning later that the man has been arrested for pandering or that Venice's lover, Nita Christenberry, has been sentenced to three years for prostitution.

Having reviewed in his mind some of his major mistakes of the past, Tommy summarizes them in a kind of self-flagellation, which only makes him more depressed and anxious. The chapter ends with Wilhelm saying a silent prayer to God; it is a drowning man's appeal for help from the only source that he has left available to him. The anguished prayer is a result of his acknowledging his past mistakes and his father's rejection of him.

Although only a short period of time passes in this first chapter, much is learned about Tommy and some of the people who surround him. From the time he steps onto the elevator and "sinks" to the bottom floor until the moment of his silent, anguished prayer, Bellow successfully captures the loser image of his protagonist and the pathetic plight of his current situation. The tragic mood of the novel is also clearly captured.
Tommy is an idealist surrounded by the pressures of the outside world. He is isolated and, thus, is forced to turn inward. The urban landscape is the symbol that furthers his isolation, for he is always "alone in a crowd." This isolation and inner struggle is the predicament of modernity. Tommy Wilhelm seems to be a failure in life. He had once been an actor in Hollywood, unsuccessfully. He has recently been fired from a corporate salesman's job. His estranged wife will not give him a divorce, and he is being strangled by her monetary demands and child support payments for his two boys, who he is rarely allowed to see. And he is almost broke now. We first meet him in a residence hotel in New York City where his father lives -- a retired physician in his late seventies who's amassed a considerable fortune. Tommy's meeting him for breakfast, hoping to get some financial help, as well as emotional support. But we soon learn there's no possibility of either. His father is vain, selfish, and judgmental, and he is ashamed of his son Tommy. To his face Dr. Adler calls Tommy self-indulgent, lazy, and sexually promiscuous, and he refuses him any financial assistance whatsoever. In fact, the reader also begins to wonder about Tommy's character. He is dirty and slovenly, a liar, a college drop-out who ran off to Hollywood against his parents' advice, a man who married his wife after he had made up his mind not to, and a person who generally does not seem to have taken any control over his life.
Tommy looks "much younger than his years"(9) and in his college days, he "could charm a bird out of a tree"(9) and even now he can do that. He is in fact "very attractive," but his own estimation of himself is:

You had to allow for the darkness and deformations of the glass, but he thought he didn't look too good. A wide wrinkle like a comprehensible bracket sign was written upon his forehead, the point between his brows, and there were patches of brown on his dark-blond skin. He began to be half amused at the shadow of his own marveling, troubled, desirous eyes, and nostrils and his lips. Fair-haired hippopotamus! -- that was how he looked himself.(10)

Although he is actually very attractive, Tommy thinks of himself as mentioned above. He is not only a social loser, but also a mental loser who despises himself as worthless. His life so far has been series of failures. Maurice Venice, who is actually a pimp, tempted Tommy to take camera test, but the result was not suitable for him. His quitting of college and going to Hollywood was also a big mistake. Tommy admits that his change of name to Tommy Wilhelm was a "mistake" (21). He had made up his mind not to marry Margaret, but eventually got married after elopement. Thus, "After much thought and hesitation and debate he invariably took the course he had rejected innumerable times" and "Ten such decisions made up the history of his life"(19). These serial failures and crises have an adverse influence on
Tommy's mental condition, and, as already mentioned, he thinks of himself as a social loser.

The novel portrays Tommy as a man who is drowning. The imagery that surrounds him is the imagery of water and he is constantly "descending" and "sinking" into hellish depths. However, the author must bring into question the character of Tommy because although he constantly blames others, such as his father, his wife, or Dr. Tamkin, for his strife and place in life. He must learn to take credit for his own mistakes. He is character in flux, a character that wavers between victimization and a temptation to martyrdom and a self-acceptance, and he wavers too between childishness and maturity. Nevertheless, it is this very fluctuation that will help him on his way to seeking truth because, as Dr. Tamkin says, the path to victory is not a straight line.

Tommy's problem is that he is an outsider or victim in a world governed by the money principle. He has failed at all he has tried, but the world's criterion of a man's worth is the extent of his financial success. Wilhelm's father, himself a success, lies to his friends about Wilhelm, saying, "His income is up in the five figures somewhere"(13), and then despises his son for not living up to this lie.

When Bellow published *Seize The Day* in book form in 1956, he included with it three short stories, "A Father-to-Be," "Looking for Mr. Green," and "The Gonzaga Manuscripts;" all three of the stories deal with the terrible power of money. In *Seize The Day*, Tommy suffers from a lack of money and
his father's unwillingness to help him, even though he has saved a fortune in his lifetime. But Dr. Adler has lived through the Depression of the 1930s and knows the fear of losing everything.

*Seize The Day* shares affinities with *Herzog*. Both Herzog and Wilhelm are in the midst of a serious domestic crisis when they approach their fathers for money. Both also have extra-marital affairs with catholic girls. *Seize The Day* also shares some similarities with *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*. Bellow extends in *Seize The Day*, the experiment with the first and third person points of view that he had made in the earlier two works. All three books also present several images of crowds with "imploring, wrathful, despairing" faces.

The idea of money in the novel is involved with images of decay and death, or of falsity and inversion. Dr. Adler is "a master of social behaviour"(28), but feels no natural paternal affection for his son. The suggestion here is that the social mask hides emptiness. The Hotel Ansonia, the "neighbourhood's great landmark ... looks like a baroque palace from Prague or Munich enlarged a hundred times, with towers, domes, huge swells and bubbles of metal gone green with exposure, iron fretwork and festoons" (5). Here we have an image comprising both falsity and decay -- just as Dr. Adler hides reality behind a mask, so the money principle attempts to change reality by creating a great false dream-palace, but cannot stop its domes from going "green with exposure."
The men who inhabit the money-world, as Bellow describes it, are old, afflicted or dying. Dr. Adler is plagued by a fear of imminent death; his friend Mr. Perls has "a bone condition which is gradually breaking him up" (42). Tommy's two acquaintances at the brokerage office are "Mr. Rowland, who was elderly, and Mr. Rappaport, who was very old"(79).

Money and death are equated even more explicitly than this; money seems to have replaced the very life-blood. Tommy thinks of the past, when he had money: "I flowed money. They bled it away from me. I haemorrhaged money" (40). Mr. Rappaport is a man "who had grown rich by the murder of millions of animals, little chickens" (86). And one of Tamkin's theories concerns the relationship between aggression and the need to make money: "People come to the market to kill. They say, 'I'm going to make a killing.' It's not accidental. Only they haven't got the genuine courage to kill, and they erect a symbol of it. The money" (69). Tamkin is expressing here what Wilhelm himself thinks, though he could not articulate it, and what Bellow suggests everywhere in the novel, through different images.

Tommy himself is dying in this world, and it is his attempts to save himself that *Seize the Day* is about. He is not a very sympathetic character -- he is dirty, weak, a masochist. But he is heroic, because he alone in the novel is willing to assert something in opposition to the money-principle, and this assertion is the basis of his conflict. He believes in a spiritual reality, a love, which is quite alien to lucre, but he is too weak to find this reality, and so he
suffers: "And though he had raised himself above Mr. Peris and his father because they adored money, still they were called to act energetically and this was better than to yell and cry, pray and beg, poke and blunder and go by fits and starts and fall upon the thorns of life"(56). Here Tommy is defining his own conflict; he has an ideal which is beyond money, and so is potentially superior to the father who torments him. But in spite of this, Dr. Adler and people like him are able to act successfully in the world, but Tommy, overwhelmed by self-pity and self-hatred, is not. This is why Dr. Tamkin seems attractive to Tommy -- he apparently unites knowledge of the superior with understanding of the money-world, and the ability to "act energetically."

Evil, thus, has a solid physical existence in Seize the Day, embodied in money and what it creates. Money represents death, and Tommy is dying. He complains that he is "choked up and congested" and chokes himself in front of his father to show what he feels his wife is doing to him. Images of congestion and of suffocating burdens are common: "He pressed his lips together, and his tongue went soft; it pained him far at the back, in the cords and throat, and a knot of ill formed in his chest"(14). The unifying metaphor of the novel, as mentioned earlier, is of drowning; early in the story Tommy remembers a line from "Lycidas." Robert Kiernan observes:

Because the narrator....must still be understood as imitating Wilhelm’s sensibility, the parallel to Lycidas should be understood as Wilhelm’s own contrivance and the passage should be
understood as mocking Wilhelm's sense of himself as a drowning man. His sense of histrionics rather than instinct for regeneration causes Wilhelm to embrace the destructive element he otherwise avoids.  

When Tommy fears that Tamkin is going to lose all his investment, he thinks: "The waters of the earth are going to roll over me" (77). The final movement of the novel, recording Tommy's moment of insight in the funeral parlour, is also the resolution of this metaphor, for he experiences an actual sensation of drowning:

The flowers and lights fused ecstatically in Wilhelm's blind, wet eyes; the heavy sea-like music came up to his ears. It poured into him where he had hidden himself in the centre of a crowd by the great and happy oblivion of tears. He heard it and sank deeper than sorrow, through torn sobs and cries toward the consummation of his heart's ultimate need.(118)

In his illness, Tommy seeks to be healed. Both his father, Dr. Adler, and Dr. Tamkin are "healers," but his father, the man who can give him the healing words of love and sympathy, prefers to "remove himself from the danger of contagion"(108), and give him nothing. So Tommy turns to Dr. Tamkin, the man who, he thinks, can heal him.
Tommy and Dr. Tamkin are apparently opposites. Tommy is burdened, sluggish, defined by images of weight: "Though he called himself a hippopotamus, he more nearly resembled a bear"(23). Tamkin, on the other hand, represents alertness. If Wilhelm is a hippopotamus, he is a bird: "What a rare, peculiar bird he was, with those pointed shoulders, that bare head, his loose nails, almost claws"(82). His language and ideas are bird-like; articulately he flits from idea to idea, a master and lover of words. Tommy, on the other hand, is inarticulate, finds difficulty with words, often using them like clubs, without regard to their meaning: "Too much of the world's business done. Too much falsity. He had various words to express the effect this had on him. Chicken! Unclean! Congestion! he exclaimed in his heart. Rat race! Phony! Murder! Play the Game! Buggers!"(17).

However, if Tamkin is a bird, he is an unreal one. At the point where Tamkin is described as a bird, the image of the bird is used three times in three different ways. It is used to describe Dr. Tamkin; it is also used to describe the noise of the working of the stock-board, "which sounded like a huge cage of artificial birds"(81). And it is used in a vision of the countryside, of Tommy's one-time home in Roxbury:

He breathed in the sugar of the pure morning.

He heard the long phrases of the birds.

No enemy wanted his life.(82)
This third image is related to a belief that Tommy, suffocating in the city, holds, that hope and love exist, somehow, in the country: "... there are also kind, ordinary, helpful people. They're -- out in the country" (72). This is what the bird, and by association Tamkin, means to him -- the realization of his dreams, the key to the world of love. But the bird Tamkin is really associated with are the artificial birds of the brokerage office, not with the birds of pastoral. In fact, Tommy has already noticed this about Tamkin, that beneath the appearance there lie the same weaknesses and fear that characterize Tommy himself: "When his hypnotic spell failed, his big underlip made him look weak-minded. Fear stared from his eyes, sometimes, so humble as to make you sorry for him" (96). Tamkin is nevertheless essential for the lesson Tommy has to learn. Tommy's illness is defined in his relationship with his father, his cure in his relationship with Dr. Tamkin. Although Tommy sees that Tamkin is a fake, he throws himself upon him, not merely because of Tamkin's "flavour of fatality," but because of the rightness of Tamkin's insight: "True, true! thought Wilhelm, profoundly moved by these revelations. How does he know these things? How can he be such a jerk, and even perhaps an operator, a swindler, and understand so well what, gives? I believe what he says" (99). Tamkin can diagnose the illness of the world, and Tommy's illness too, so the latter looks to him for a cure. Tamkin's theory of the two souls is what really moves Tommy: there are two souls, the real soul and the pretender soul, the pretender soul sapping the strength of the real soul, and the real soul wanting to kill the pretender soul because of its falsity. This
seems to Tommy to define his own problem. He sees Tommy as the pretender soul, because Tommy is a stage name, of course, being Wilhelm Adler. Tommy, then, represents the life he took up in rejection of that urged him by his parents. So his real soul is, perhaps, the boorish Wilky; Wilky represents the part of him that relates to his father, and to what his father has created in him. Wilky is a childhood nickname, a name that Dr. Adler still uses to define Tommy as a child, and with which Tommy occasionally reviles himself: "You fool, you clunk, you Wilky!"(25). Whatever the truth, Tommy recognizes that Tamkin is talking about a split in him that he himself has noted before. Long before this the novel says, "Wilhelm had always had a great longing to be Tommy. He had never, however,. succeeded in feeling like Tommy, and in his soul had always remained Wilky"(25).

Although Tommy looks to Tamkin as a saviour, he finds him to be a fraud-saviour. Tommy's investment is lost and Tamkin disappears. It then becomes clear that Tamkin is the most obnoxious manifestation of the money-world, for although he seems to transcend it, he is its worst representative. Tommy learns from Tamkin's lessons, but to Tamkin himself they mean nothing. He is impressed with his own rhetoric, a lover of ideas and theories, but the ideas he articulates are in no way a part of him. He points the way, but cannot follow it himself. This is deeply ironical: Tommy hates cynicism, he "was especially horrified by the cynicism of successful people. Cynicism was bread and meat to everyone"(16). He looks for it everywhere, but torn
between his realization that Tamkin is a fake and his need to believe in him, he fails to see how cynical he is. Still, Tamkin has taught Tommy much, and is to lead him to one more, the most important, lesson, in the symbolical ending of the novel.

It is towards the end of the novel, in the very last chapter, that Tommy is discovering who he is. He goes through a process of elimination of sorts. For instance, the chapter begins with Tommy using the language of his father. He claims that he is "carrying" Tamkin on his back, as well as his wife and all of his problems. This is precisely the language his father used in giving his son advice: he told him to never "carry anyone on his back"(). It begins with this adoption of language but it is as though, by the middle of the chapter, Tommy has necessarily shed his father.

Tommy needs to see himself as more than Tamkin's surrogate son, as more than his pupil, as more than his father's son. Therefore, Tamkin needs to abandon him and his father needs to reject him. It is for this reason that, in this chapter, as soon as Tommy enters the hotel, a person asks him if he is Dr. Adler's son. In short, Tommy will have to learn to be more than just someone's son if he is going to come to any kind of understanding.

The same kind of thinking applies to the reason for the argument with his wife. He needs to see himself as more than just Margaret's husband. He needs to stop caring so much what others think of him and he needs to begin
to see the world through his own eyes and not through "blind" eyes or through
the surrogate eyes of others. It is only when he is left completely alone that he
can begin to piece together the puzzle.

Bellow is a master of juxtaposition because it seems as though he is
saying that truth can only be reached through paradox and through confusion.
After his raving fit of anger, Tommy goes out into the street and is able to
begin to see humanity once more: he sees "motive" and "essence:"

On Broadway it was still bright afternoon and the gassy air was
almost motionless under the leaden spokes of sunlight, and
sawdust footprints lay about the doorways of butcher shops and
fruit stores. And the great, great crowd, the inexhaustible current
of millions of every race and kind pouring out, pressing round, of
every age, of every genius, possessors of every human secret,
antique and future, in every face the refinement of one particular
motive or essence—I labor, I spend, I strive, I design, I love, I
cling, I uphold, I give way, I envy, I long, I scorn, I die, I hide, I
want. Faster, much faster than any man could make the tally. The
sidewalks were wider than any causeway; the street itself was
immense, and it quaked and gleamed and it seemed to Wilhelm
to throb at the last limit of endurance. And although the sunlight
appeared like a broad tissue, its actual weight made him feel like
Tommy can see the basic human needs in people because he can, for once, clearly see them in himself and so a moment of solidarity is again juxtaposed against a moment of terrible angst and isolation.

Furthermore, it takes the death of a stranger for Tommy to come to a complete rebirth: "On the surface, the dead man with his formal shirt and his tie and silk lapels and his powdered skin looked so proper; only a little beneath so -- black"(117). In this one image come together all the images of false appearance in the book: Dr. Adler with his false social manner; the old women in the cafeteria, who "were rouged and mascaraed and hennaed and used blue hair rinse and eye shadow" (91); the eccentric Estonian lady, "a rouged woman in her fifties"(105); Tommy himself, thinking he can hide behind a cigar and a hat; Tamkin, the artificial bird, hiding his fear. Tommy, faced with the blackness underneath, weeps for himself, for mankind, and finally for reasons greater than these, and beyond his ability to explain: "Soon he was past words, past reason, coherence. He could not stop. The source of all tears had suddenly sprung open within him .... The great knot of ill and grief in his throat swelled upward and he gave in utterly and held his face and wept. He cried with all his heart"(117-118).
It is only through distance and separation, ironically, then that Tommy can achieve understanding. There is distance between those who have caused him grief and there is a rare "distance" the dead human being that will lead him to understanding. The understanding comes in the form of tears -- water. Finally, water has become a redeeming force, after having been such a dangerous one throughout. Water symbolizes, here, a kind of rebirth. The tears are a "happy oblivion," and they lead him to the "consummation of his heart's ultimate need." In the course of one day, Tommy has learned his hearts desires and has learned to melt away his mask and armour. He has used his "day of reckoning," wisely, for once. He began this chapter using his father's language but ends the chapter with a discovery of his own language: feeling, tears, and love. Thus Tommy Wilhelm achieves a moment of vision and insight, a vision which, if it cannot change his condition, must change him.
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