The Relation between Father and Son in Seize the Day from the Perspective of Lacanianism

Jingqi Hu
Tianjin Foreign Studies University, Tianjin, China

Abstract: This paper examines the relation between father and son in Saul Bellow's Seize the Day from the perspective of Lacanianism, focusing on the mirror stage and symbolic father. It argues that Wilhelm's self-identity is shaped by his father's emotional detachment and failure to provide guidance, leaving Wilhelm isolated and confused. The analysis shows how the breakdown in communication and lack of symbolic support lead to Wilhelm's existential crisis and identity loss, illustrating the psychological consequences of an absent symbolic father.
***Keywords*:** father-son relationship, Lacanianism, mirror stage, symbolic father

1. Introduction

Jacques Lacan, the famous French psychoanalyst and founder of postmodern psychoanalysis, introduced the theory of the mirror stage in 1936. This theory, which describes the confusion between reality and imagination in early human development, has been widely applied in literary criticism. Lacan's mirror stage refers to the process by which an individual recognizes themselves through an external reflection (such as parents or society). This stage is crucial in the self-construction. In Seize the Day, Wilhelm's self-identity is not constructed through his father's recognition or support. On the contrary, Dr. Adler's indifference and criticism leave Wilhelm lost in his self-identification.

To delve deeper into the relation between father and son in Seize the Day, Lacan's modern psychoanalytic theory can be applied to the novel's specific events and examine the role of the father in Wilhelm's self-construction and the conflicts between them. The following analysis focuses on Lacan's mirror stage, the symbolic father, and language.

2. Text analysis

"He expected me to look out for myself and never gave me much thought. Now he looks down on me." (2013)[1] Wilhelm's father shows no concern for his repeated failures and difficulties. In their interactions, Wilhelm's father does not offer emotional comfort or understanding but instead often appears aloof and even disdainful. Wilhelm's feelings of powerlessness and shame in front of his father profoundly affect the construction of his self-value. For instance, when Wilhelm asks his father for help, the father's cold response makes him feel like a failure, unable to meet his father's expectations.

In this situation, Dr. Adler can be seen as a reflective mirror, but this mirror does not provide Wilhelm with stable and continual self-identification. Instead, Wilhelm experiences his failure through his father's indifference, which leads to extreme anxiety and self-doubt. According to Lacan's framework, Wilhelm fails to achieve integrated self-identity through the mirror representing Dr. Adler and is instead caught in a fragmented and confused self-identification. This emotional rupture signifies that Wilhelm's mirror stage has not been successfully completed and that he is trapped in a crisis of self-identification.

Lacan (1977)[2] believes that in the process of the formation of the subject, the dominant role is the symbolic order. In the symbolic order with the intervention of language, the subject finally completes the social self-certification and becomes an objective fact carried by language and symbols. The symbolic order exists before the subject, and the subject is born in the specific cultural and social field without any choice, and is controlled and manipulated by the rules of the symbolic order. The force that plays a major role in the symbolic order is language. Language is an objective condition that exists before the subject. The specific expression of language in society is a variety of historical and cultural heritages, a variety of ideological expressions and a variety of myths, legends and so on.

Based on Lacan's theory, the father is not only a biological figure but also the symbolic father, representing law, morality, social norms, and the order of language. The symbolic function of the father is to help the child enter the social order through prohibition and command, but Dr. Adler's failure to fulfill this symbolic role leaves Wilhelm unable to establish his own social identity. In the relationship between Wilhelm and Dr. Adler, the father is not only emotionally distant but also fails to serve as a guiding symbolic father. In Chapter III, Wilhelm receives a bill from his ex-wife Margaret, which he cannot

afford to pay. Yet, the father does not offer any help but instead questions why Wilhelm doesn't solve the problem once and for all. "I can't give you any money. There would be no end in it if I started. You and your sister would take every last buck from me." (Bellow 1988) Moreover, when Wilhelm faces unemployment and a financial crisis, Dr. Adler offers no effective guidance or help. This absence of the symbolic father makes Wilhelm feel disconnected from the social order and unable to find a clear goal to pursue.

According to Lacan's theory, the symbolic role of the father should be to help the child enter the social order through words and actions, and to teach the child how to face the challenges in life. In Seize the Day, Wilhelm's father fails to fulfill this role. While he provided material support to Wilhelm as he grew up, that support did not guide Wilhelm into the social order or help him establish a healthy social role. Dr. Adler doesn't guide him through social norms, but through an indifferent attitude that makes Wilhelm even more confused and difficult to find his place.

In addition, Dr. Adler never taught Wilhelm how to face the difficulties and challenges of life. Throughout the novel, Wilhelm often feels that his failures are not recognized or understood by his father, and this symbolic absence of a father exacerbates Wilhelm's sense of powerlessness and grievance. He has never been able to get the social role and identity construction from the symbolic role of his father, but struggled in the extreme confusion.

In the conflict between the father and the son, the "father" embodies the steadfast commitment to Jewish traditions and culture, whereas the "son" represents a departure from these traditions. (1995)[3] This tension between father and son illustrates the differing attitudes of two generations toward Jewish cultural heritage and their level of assimilation into American society. The struggle between tradition and assimilation is evident in the Jewish community, particularly in the confusion and loss of identity experienced by Jewish immigrants.

In the novel, Dr. Adler serves as both Wilhelm's biological father and a symbolic representation of the "father." As a successful second-generation Jewish immigrant, Dr. Adler was immersed in Jewish culture from an early age, with Yiddish being his first language. Having been born into a Jewish family and raised within a Jewish cultural framework, he naturally upholds Jewish values and remains loyal to the beliefs and commitments of his ancestors. Consequently, he perpetuates Jewish cultural traditions and ethical standards in his professional life, marriage, and family. He prioritizes the preservation of his family's honor and status, emphasizing practicality, patience, self-control, and diligence as the means to achieve success as a doctor through his own intelligence and effort. He maintains the Jewish tradition of rationalism and a deep appreciation for knowledge, and his wife is also a university graduate.

Similarly, he expects his children to value education and encourages them to pursue higher learning, which is why he is deeply troubled by his son's decision to drop out of college, though he refrains from openly expressing his disappointment. Emotionally, he exercises restraint, remaining faithful to his wife and maintaining a stable marital and family life. Dr. Adler relies solely on his own efforts, rarely trusting or depending on others, and he resists being controlled by anyone.

Dr. Adler can be described as a partially assimilated Jew. As he himself admits, he worked hard to escape less respectable jobs and rise into the American middle class. He adapted more readily than his son Wilhelm to the cold, materialistic nature of American society. While Jewish culture places great importance on father-son relationships and familial bonds, these values are notably absent in Dr. Adler's case. (1971)[4] In this sense, he represents a semi-assimilated Jew. His use of the nickname "Wilky" for his son Wilhelm reflects his reluctance to fully embrace his ethnic heritage. He does not identify strongly with Judaism and has even chosen cremation for his eventual passing, a decision that underscores his assimilation into American culture. Wilhelm is a representative of the "son". He is a third-generation Jewish immigrant and a representative of the failed children of the American middle class. Wilhelm cannot adapt to a ruthless and society. He grew up in the American society and was educated in the American culture from a very young age, which advocates individuality and seeks freedom and independence. (1992)[5]

In the novel, Wilhelm wants to pursue freedom by changing his name. The very act of giving up his ancestral name indicates his rejection of his Jewish heritage and his desire to have a new Americanized self, thus becoming a true American. The names Wilhelm and Wilkie symbolize the conflict between the two selves in Wilhelm's character: the conflict between the fact that Jews desire to maintain their national identity and the desire to be assimilated into America.

As Wilhelm struggles to assimilate into American society, his failure to establish a stable position leads him to recognize that altering his name was a misguided decision. He comes to understand that he cannot fundamentally detach himself from his Jewish roots. While a name is merely a symbol, it also serves as a representation of Jewish identity. After facing defeat, Wilhelm becomes aware that he is not only psychologically connected to his Jewish heritage but also physically and temperamentally shaped by his Jewish family. Ultimately, he realizes that no matter how much he changes his name or attempts to distance himself from his Jewish identity, he cannot escape the influence of his Jewish heritage.

"Father and sons by blood" highlights the father's unwavering commitment to Jewish tradition and the resulting tension

and discord with his son. (1983)[6] The father's dedication to tradition and the son's divergence from it form the core of their conflict. The father's deep attachment to tradition signifies that he can never sever his connection to it, as he himself embodies tradition. In contrast, the son must assimilate into American culture to integrate into mainstream society, which often requires a significant departure from traditional values.

3. Conclusion

Through Lacan's modern psychoanalytic theory and the specific episodes of Seize the Day, the complex role of the relation between father and son can be reflected in Wilhelm's self-construction. Wilhelm fails to establish his self-identity through his father's "mirror image" and fails to obtain an effective social order identity from his father's symbolic role. The conflict between the father and the son symbolizes the degree of acceptance of Jewish cultural traditions and the degree of assimilation into the American culture, which shows the difference in the values of the father and the son, and also represents the doomed failure of Wilhelm's communication with Dr. Adler. The indifference and breakdown of communication between Wilhelm and his father exacerbates his sense of isolation and loss of identity. These episodes not only reveal the Dr. Adler's obstruction of Wilhelm's individuation process, but also demonstrate the absence and inner conflict of the symbol representing father figure described by Lacan, which ultimately leads to Wilhelm's insurmountable predicament.

References

[1] Bellow, Saul. Seize the Day. Penguin-Odyssey Editions, 2013.
[2] Jacques Lacan. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. Penguin, London 1977.
[3] Scholem, Gershom. The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality. Schocken Books, 1995.
[4] Allen Guttmann. The Jewish Writer in America: Assimilation and the Crisis of Identity. Oxford University Press, 1971.
[5] Pinsker, Sanford. Jewish American Fiction 1917-1987. Twayne Publishers, 1992.
[6] L. H. Goldman. Saul Bellow's Moral Vision: A Critical Study of the Jewish Experience. Irvington, 1983.