

Money Matters: Investigating Young Characters' Anguish of Alienation in Two Contemporary Novels in English
Bunsom, T.

CD Proceedings of the 1st Mae Fah Luang University International Conference 2012 "Future Challenges towards ASEAN Integration". Mae Fah Luang University, Chiang Rai. 2012. pp. 1 - 9.

The definitive version of this article was published as Bunsom, T. (2012) Money Matters: Investigating Young Characters' Anguish of Alienation in Two Contemporary Novels in English. CD Proceedings of the 1st Mae Fah Luang University International Conference 2012 "Future Challenges towards ASEAN Integration". pp. 1 - 9. Mae Fah Luang University, Chiang Rai.

MONEY MATTERS: INVESTIGATING YOUNG CHARACTERS' ANGUISH OF ALIENATION IN TWO CONTEMPORARY NOVELS IN ENGLISH

Thanis Bunsom¹

¹ Department of Language Studies, School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Bangkok 10140, Thailand

*email thanis.bun@kmutt.ac.th

Abstract

Georg Simmel, a German sociologist of the 20th century, proposes "the philosophy of money", describing how human relationships, resulting from modernisation and urbanisation, become more and more mediated by money. Familial bonds are thus usurped by more goal-oriented relationships between each member of society and without doubt, an individual's relationships to others and the world become inadequate. The inadequacy of human beings unavoidably causes psychological alienation that further affects their ways of living and their perception towards the society to which they try to belong. Based on Simmel's philosophy of money, this paper aims to study the alienating effects that money has on the lives of young protagonists in two contemporary Anglophone novels: Goh Poh Seng's *If We Dream Too Long* (1972) and Andrew McGahan's *Praise* (1992). Both novels share modern urban settings, recklessly driven by the force of materialism and the power of money. In addition, the young characters in the novels are constantly pressured and condemned by society for their lack of desire to keep up with the fast-paced world.

Key words: philosophy of money, materialism, alienation, young characters, contemporary novels

Introduction

Of course, this was not the land of milk and honey.

(Chris Barker, 142)

Barker (2008), a prominent Cultural Studies theorist, mentions the radical changes that are perpetrating our social orders and unavoidably affecting people's lifestyles today. In the second half of the twentieth century, especially in the Western world, the economic policy and the economic practice of nation-states have been dominated by Fordism and Keynesianism. Both ideas deal with large-scale production of standardized goods in the context of mass consumption that requires a system of relatively high wages in order to sustain the purchasing of high-volume production. Central to the mass production and mass consumption of consumer goods has been a developing culture of promotion and advertising deployed as a support to the selling process. Full-time employment has therefore been regarded not only as a social good but also as a personal "means of keeping the spending power that meets the capacity for production" (142).

The results of such complicated changes, however, are not all pleasant. Whereas a relatively high-paid labour force could do well, its low-paid counterpart is faced with hardships, both economically and socially. Economically, the prices of manufactured goods are continuously inflating, making it almost impossible for manual workers to acquire essential commodities. Socially, the influences of mass production and consumption irrevocably lead people around the world into the global society of "disorganized capitalism" (Lash and Urry, 1987) in which the capitalist class continues to be dominant and creates a wider gap between people based on their spending power and goods acquisition. The crisis of social division is worsened with the use of information and communications technology, accelerating the promotion of capitalist values of which money holds the central position.

To better understand the notion of money in the modern world, it is necessary to examine Georg Simmel, a German sociologist of the 20th century. He proposes the "philosophy of money" (1907) which creates a social context of domination and subordination. Simmel refers to instances of societal domination rendered visible in the money economy:

Present-day society is built upon the fact that some possess no money at all (lowest), others save something (middle), a third class can live permanently from its interest (highest strata). (62)

Simmel's theory explicates today's familiar social stratification in which the well-off are placed on the top of the pyramid, connoting the dominating power they have over other groups of people. Simmel posits further that the politics of money is equivalent to personal values, making it problematic in a sense that "money payments represent either complete liberty or total suppression" (400). In other words, those with spending power find money a source of freedom and control whereas those without it feel threatened, marginalised and alienated. As money and transactions increase, the value of the individual decreases and human relationships, including those within family unit, are based on what the individual can

do, not who he/she is. Capitalism, industrialization and modernisation have therefore transformed the world of the have-nots for the worse.

This paper aims to investigate and analyse the negative effects of the power of money upon individuals and their relationships to society through two contemporary Anglophone novels: *If We Dream Too Long* (Singapore) and *Praise* (Australia). The major reasons why literary texts are employed to illustrate the aforementioned social problems include what Lazar (1993), Maley (2001) and Hall (2005) maintain; literature provides a route into understanding the culture, history and people of a society. It also allows us to revisit human experiences with a more profound awareness. Furthermore, the two novels share a lot of comparable features. The stories deal with the lives of young protagonists living in fast-paced, consumerist, urban settings (Singapore and Brisbane respectively) who do not belong to their communities because of their passivity and indifference. Therefore, it is hoped that the interpretive analysis of the chosen novels can shed light on the undesirable effects of money in our modern society.

If We Dream Too Long: a dream or a nightmare?

If We Dream Too Long is widely regarded as the first Singaporean novel (Ann, 2010). The book tells the story of a young man, Kwang Meng, a recent hi-school graduate who is unable to further his college study because of the lack of financial support from his impoverished family. Meng lives with his family in a typical Housing and Development Board (HDB), or slab blocks of public housing flats. The setting of the flats, along with other description of places in the novel such as seedy bar districts, Jurong hills being flattened for factories and lands reclaimed from the sea, reflects the industrial development of Singapore in the 60s that happens so rapidly that it leaves unadjusted people, such as the novel's protagonist, adrift. Failing to get a grant from the government to study and being the first son in a Chinese family force Meng to take up a clerical job in a small company where his main responsibility lies in typing and arranging documents. Discontented and disheartened, Meng defies conventions around him by not wanting to work and always finding excuses to escape his office, the territory that imprisons him:

He had honestly not been feeling too well since he contracted poverty, loneliness, boredom, sexual frustration and periodic coughs and colds. Not to speak of his dreary job. (1)

According to the passage, the writer immediately introduces his readers to the tedious world of Meng, plagued by modern-day diseases such as poverty, loneliness and loath employment. The protagonist's existence is shaped by the preconditioned financial status of his family which marks his first alienation from the progressively business-oriented nature of his country. Despite being an ordinary individual, Meng's society and family demand of him no less. Meng is expected to study and become part of the working force of fast-developing Singapore, a small, newly independent country at the time. His failure to fulfill the role of a promising citizen of the country is further fuelled by his inability to please his family who

sees him as the main source of income and parental dignity. As the narrator of the novel describes,

Kwang Meng somehow felt that his father was disappointed when he took the clerical job. His father had always said that it was a life without prospects. A part of his dream ended, it seemed. Apparently, he looked down on his son, for a son should be capable of more; a son's achievement would be some justification for his own sacrifice. (7)

It can be inferred that his father's disappointment annihilates Meng's position in Singaporean society. If his father embodies the country's expectations of its people, Kwang Meng is definitely unsuccessful in living up to such expectations. His financial and educational deficiencies constrict his life choices; even a simple, clerical job needs eight months of waiting. As a result, he becomes marginalised and alienated from his family and community. He chooses to isolate himself in his own room and not socialize with his parents or his siblings. He dreams of faraway, exotic places and takes refuge in the sea. Swimming in the open sea is a getaway route for his monotonous job and futile life. Either it is his retreat or his escape, Meng certainly realizes that he does not fit in the mainstream society and that his taciturnity can protect him from the outside world.

To further demonstrate Meng's alienation in society, the writer juxtaposes Meng with different characters in the novel. His circle of friends is the first set of characters that shows a sharp contrast between him and other 'well-adjusted' Singaporeans. Hock Lai and Nadarajah are examples of the preferable Singaporeans because they are attracted to modern values that have failed to allure Meng. Hock Lai is a social-climbing Chinese who, after finishing high school, plunges himself in the world of finance and intends to marry Cecilia, the daughter of an influential entrepreneur. Towards the end of the novel, Lai is deemed to become a politician, implying a glorious future that awaits him. Nadarajah, an Indian-Singaporean, also has promising plans for his future. Coming from an affluent family, he is going to the UK to further his education, implying a better employment opportunity when he returns to Singapore. Evidently, the presence of Hock Lai and Nadarajah has embarrassed Meng as it makes him realize the differences between him and them that are getting wider and wider. Their paths are becoming more divergent and readers are not certain if their friendship will endure for much longer. Their last meeting, prior to Nadarajah's departure, foreshadows their soon-to-end relationship in which the protagonist is already treated like an outsider:

Hock Lai and Portia spoke mostly to each other. Kwang Meng was uncertain whether his being there mattered or not. Probably not, he thought, and then again, probably because sometimes a third person lends something by just being there. No, not exactly. His function was more ambiguous than that, having no specificity. (109)

According to the passage, Meng has come to discover the futility of his existence. Having no particular function or future to look forward to drives him farther from the group and society at large. Even though he tries to fit in and finds meaning for his life, the question of self cannot be answered:

He knew that life was supposed to have meaning, else to be born, to grow up, to live would be an unbearable futility, an absurdity. The answer was not to be found in books, he felt, nor in drinking, nor in anything that he knew. He only knew that he did not know. (98)

In addition to his classmates, the manifestation of adjustability in Meng's neighbour, Boon Teik, emphasizes Meng's inability to keep up with the fast-changing Singapore. Ann (2010) points out that although his HDB flat is identical to the one belonging to Meng and his family in type and locality, Boon Teik's has an attractive and pleasant décor that is local yet cosmopolitan, with batik paintings by local artists on the walls alongside prints of paintings by world artists such as Van Gogh, a Japanese paper lampshade and an Ikebana floral arrangement. Boon Teik's taste in classical books and music signals the emergence of future middle-class Singaporeans and the vivid description of his home simultaneously marks the future of Singapore as one of the most prominent, most international and richest cities in today's world.

Towards the end of the novel, Meng finds himself rudely awoken from his dream when his father is diagnosed with a fatal disease. Dreaming and swimming do not provide him a permanent abode; while dreaming comes to an end when one wakes up, swimming in the open sea against the tide will bring one back to the shore of reality. For Meng, demands and expectations are still placed on his shoulder. His mother reminds him of the responsibilities he has for his family as the eldest child, focusing on his obligations to financially provide for her and his younger siblings. The issues of money are her priority. The demand of Meng's mother is a clear illustration of the fact that in fast-changing Singapore, money, not emotions, becomes a mechanism for people's survival. The money-oriented relationship within Meng's family is stressed again in the final encounter between him and his father in which his father insists on giving Meng 10 dollars to entertain himself as a compensation for Meng's "rotten life" (154). With the 10 dollars note in his hands, Meng does not feel powerful; on the contrary, he feels more alienated and lost. Lacking education and financial stability, Meng's fate remains obscure. So does that of his family. The novel ends with his loss of communication intelligibility when he can no longer communicate with an old English woman who simply asks him for a direction to the Raffles Hotel, one of the landmarks of the island. This loss can also demonstrate his uttermost alienation from the outside world. His last statement "I go with all convenient speed" (155) is as ambiguous as his future because readers are not told where the character is heading to.

If We Dream Too Long is a significant illustration of how the increasingly urbanized and materialistic society such as Singapore can have alienating effects on its people. Kwang Meng is portrayed as a victim of the rapid development that changes people's interactions with one another and decreases the values of those who are not keeping pace with the changes. The intimate relationships between Meng and his family members and friends are replaced and devalued by the prevalent force of materialism and the possession of money, rendering the reconciliation impossible.

Praise: When praise for ambition is despised

Andrew McGahan, an award-winning writer from Australia, creates his protagonist, Gordon Buchanan, to be a typical young man in his early twenties who has completely lost his directions in life. In contrast to the intense features of aggressive Brisbane where he resides, Buchanan finds himself hopeless and clueless as to how his life is gearing towards. As a university drop-out, he works at a drive-through bottle shop of the Capital Hotel, one of the most famous landmarks in the city, where he earn only small incomes sufficient for the rent of a small flat in an old house. His neighbours comprise a group of marginalised people: old, single, unemployed and pension-dependent men, a Black man and a homosexual. These are the people which Australian society has no need of and Buchanan, being able to get along with them so well, is no exception. The writer's description of the protagonist makes it apparent that Buchanan does not fit in. Physically decayed, Buchanan has "long unwashed hair" (4), "a small penis" (19) and asthma (13). He is also "pale, unshaven and flabby" (48). Symbolically, his unpleasant corporeal appearance determines his social position as an unwanted outcast. In addition, the fact that toilets and kitchens are communal among the residents of the flat can be interpreted as the sense of belonging which, ironically, those people have while they have nothing in common with the world outside.

His deficient character is furthered revealed when he tells readers about his decision to quit his thankless job, his sole possession of an old car and 700 dollars he has in the bank. From the very beginning of the novel, Buchanan tells his readers of his indifference to the world of competition. He despises his work and does not possess what it takes to survive: strength and courage. His cowardice and passivity constrains him in his own realm where "[w]ork [is]n't the answer to anything" (2). Inert as he is, he is well aware of the significance of money:

It was a Wednesday night. I thought about it. Doing nothing for a while. It sounded fine, but I'd been out of work before and it'd never lasted more than a week or two. Money was the thing. You needed at least a little. (4)

Through the narration of the protagonist, McGahan portrays a life of fruitlessness in which nothing in society excites the individual and voluntary seclusion becomes a matter of personal escape:

New Farm Park was just around the corner from the house. It was definitely a better thing to be sitting there in the park than to be at the bottle shop. I sat there about an hour. The rain steadied, got heavy. I walked home. The afternoon moved on. There was nothing on TV. I prowled around the flat, wondering what to do with myself. There were no answers. (6)

The passage very well demonstrates Buchanan's dreary lifestyles. For him, having nothing to do and sitting around uselessly are more soothing than being at work. Alarmingly, as Brooks (1998) argues, "Gordon sits happily and relatively safely in liminal space: his contestation of boundaries is passive" (92). In other words, only in the secluded area and in his flat does he find comfort. In addition, the fact that the character can take refuge in the park implies the threatening nature of modernised, commercialised settings that he is forced to live in and live

with. Similar to Meng, the urban setting and the perpetual power of money have a destructive effect upon Buchanan's self.

To separate himself from the strong current of materialism and social expectations that dominate Brisbane and its citizens, he rejects conventionality and takes comfort in drugs, alcohol and sex. Through them, Buchanan's life falls into a series of hallucination and his alienation is mirrored more clearly. As he admits to the audience of his physical imperfection, we learn of his small penis-- the physical deformity that he ironically glorifies--, of his lack of strength and libido and of his acknowledgement of his affair with a man. All those corporeal defects echo his negation of stereotypical perceptions of what it means to be "masculine", rendering him different from the vast majority of people in society, especially from other "hardened men" (3) in Buchanan's own description. Furthermore, his physicality unavoidably influences his mentality, resulting in the lack of emotional attachments for his girlfriend, Cynthia, the inability to gain sexual satisfaction and the readiness to give up on life without really living it to begin with. In effect, while "the only thing that [i]s going to get [him] through sex [is] the alcohol" (18), "drugs like smack or acid or ecstasy will handle the day for [him] and he [doesn't] have to make any effort, like handing [his] life over to someone else for a while" (126). The passive acceptance of his physical and mental alienation pushes him further away from the mainstream Australian society.

However, the protagonist is not permitted to remain in his hallucinatory escape for very long. He is constantly put down by his parents at the family's Christmas party of his inferiority to his well-off siblings who are doctors and businesspeople. Whereas Buchanan has no insight into the prospect of a family life, most of his siblings are married, financially stable and have their own families. They are the reminder of reality and expectations placed upon individuals. Unable to live up to his brothers and sisters in terms of careers and financial stability, he is forced to reexamine his existence and eventually come to recognise his anguish of alienation, the feelings he has tried to set aside at the beginning of the novel:

It got worse. There was nowhere for Cynthia to go, nowhere for me to go. We weren't drinking, we weren't smoking anything, weren't taking anything, we weren't going out. (180)

The recognition of his alienation reveals yet another very crucial fact that money is an important tool for people to survive in today's society. Buchanan negotiates his way with Social Security through which he hopes to be granted the unemployment benefits, connoting how forceful the power of money can be upon an individual's survival. At the end of the novel, readers are told of Buchanan's final dilemma, either to succumb to the materialistic side of life or to remain lost in his own indolence. The passage is worth quoting in length:

I looked around the flat. I thought about things. It was almost nine months since I'd been employed. Did I want to go back? Was this life working or wasn't it? I didn't know any more. But a job, a *job*? Surely work wasn't the answer.

I walked to the nearest corner store. I had eight dollars. I stood at the counter for some time, looking at the shelves... I asked him to give me a pouch of White Ox tobacco. He put his hand out for money.

Eight dollars was just enough. (278-9)

According to the passage, the writer hints to his readers that the whole cycle of decadence is restarting itself when Buchanan, despite knowing that he probably will not survive without work, makes a final informed decision that work is not what he is made for. Buying a packet of cigarette, instead of saving eight dollars for food or other commodities, discloses to the reader his intention to alienate himself and flee from reality. We are then left to imagine the repetition of his life story: having meaningless sexual affairs, drinking, taking drugs, sitting, doing nothing and relying on Social Security to save him. Throughout the story, his existence straddles between the world of hallucination and the rude reality he is subject to face from time to time. After every attempt of escape and denial of awakening of the protagonist, the novel ends as ominously as it starts.

Praise gives us a dark account of being young, lost and alienated in the fast-paced, materialistic façade of an urban city. Victimised by his inactive and unmotivated, Gordon Buchanan has failed to catch up with Australian society in the 90s where having money and working define an individual's place and position. While drugs, sex and alcohol may be able to temporarily heal the protagonist's soul, reality and expectations will always keep haunting him and the anguish of alienation will not easily subside, permanently making his life a living death.

Conclusion: Where the borders of two souls collapse into each other

The paper has attempted to show that the power of money in the modern world can tremendously have negative effects on individuals. Both Kwang Meng and Gordon Buchanan fall prey to modernisation and materialism that control their lives in the urban environment. First of all, their lack of fortune and wealth limit their opportunities in life. For Kwang Meng, it takes away his education and the ability to improve his living conditions. For Buchanan, his small income allows him to live in a flat filled with allegedly unwanted neighbours. Because of such lack of opportunities in life, they are thus devalued and discriminated against by their societies, including their own families. In other words, their failure as perceived by society stems from the fact that they do not have money to please others. Corresponding to Simmel's theory, the novels reflect the human relationship in modern times that is determined by the possession of money, not intimacy.

In addition, both protagonists' passivity and indifference to race against their given circumstances make it difficult for them to reconcile with society because of their irrevocable alienation and marginalised positions. Juxtaposed with other characters in the novels who conform to expectations—Kwang Meng's two classmates and Buchanan's siblings, their alienating selves become more distinct. Therefore, they search for an escape route that will

allow them to be free from other people's judgements. While Kwang Meng prefers his own room and the open sea, Buchanan entertains himself with alcohol, sex and drugs. Finally, when their finalities arrive, both protagonists are figuratively slapped in their faces and forced to reexamine their own values. The health conditions of Kwang Meng's father bring about a big sudden change to his family and Kwang Meng is forced to take financial responsibility, something which he may not probably be able to do. His anguish of alienation will therefore linger as long as his duty as a provider is not fulfilled. Buchanan, on the other hand, has eight dollars to live on and still refuses to work. In his self-inspection, he admits being incompetent and is willing to fully let a packet of tobacco handle his aimless life for him. We can then assume that his anguish of alienation, despite his intention to set it aside, will come back and remind him of his lack of integrity whenever his money runs out.

If We Dream Too Long and *Praise* are therefore the novels that speak of the malicious effects of the power of money and the continuous pressure it puts upon individuals. The books point out that while the cities are rapidly developing and changing, the people are being forced to live in the world that requires an ability to adjust and catch up. Those unable to do so will be left behind and marginalised as a result. Their alienation will ultimately become the barrier of communication, as symbolically portrayed in Kwang Meng's speech intelligibility and Buchanan's asthma. While Kwang Meng is not capable of expressing himself, Buchanan has difficulties breathing in the wicked air of change. Without doubt, the disabilities will make their alienation perpetual and unrecoverable.

References

1. Ann KT (2010) Goh Poh Seng's *If We Dream Too Long*: an appreciation. *Interlogue Studies in Singapore Literature* 1: 7-37.
2. Barker C (2008) *Cultural studies: theory & practice*. 3rd edition. London: Sage.
3. Brooks K (1998) Shit creeks: suburbia, abjection, and subjectivity in Australian 'grunge' fiction. *Australian Literary Studies* 18: 87-100.
4. Hall G (2005) *Literature in language education*. London: Pelgrave.
5. Lash S, Urry J (1987) *Disorganized capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
6. Lazaar G (1993) *Literature and language teaching: a guide for teachers and trainers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
7. Maley A (2001) Literature in the language classroom. *The Cambridge Guide to TESOL*: 180-185.
8. McGahan A (1992) *Praise*. NSW: A&U.
9. Seng GP (1972) *If we dream too long*. Singapore: NUS.
10. Simmel G (1907) *The philosophy of money*. London: Routledge.