



# Alienation in Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

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*This article examines how Melvin Seeman's theory of alienation (1959) and modern alienation research manifest in Irvine Welsh's "Trainspotting". This is an important novel, not only because of its commercial success, but also because it depicts a specific marginalised subculture. Postmodernism and systems theory approaches, as well as changes in the social and political spheres have motivated researchers such as Geyer (1996), Kalekin-Fishman (1998) and Neal and Collas (2000) to reinterpret Seeman's theory. This article attempts to incorporate this new theory of alienation in the analysis of contemporary fiction. Seeman identifies five aspects of alienation, namely powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation and self-estrangement. Following Neal and Collas (2000), in particular, this article omits self-estrangement, but shows how the other four aspects of alienation have changed since Seeman's formulation. It is argued that "Trainspotting" depicts a specific occurrence of alienation in modern western society, besides normlessness, meaninglessness, and social isolation, highlighting Seeman's concept of powerlessness, in particular. The article further argues that applying Seeman's theory of alienation in the study of contemporary literature provides a fresh theoretical approach that contributes to the understanding of how fiction engages with its environment.*

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## Opsomming

### Vervreemding in Irvine Welsh se *Trainspotting*

Hierdie artikel ondersoek hoe Melvin Seeman se teorie van vervreemding (1959), sowel as moderne navorsing rondom vervreemding, in Irvine Welsh se "Trainspotting" manifesteer. "Trainspotting" is 'n belangrike roman, nie net omdat dit 'n kommersiële sukses was nie, maar ook omdat dit 'n spesifieke subkultuur uitbeeld. Postmodernisme en sisteemteoretiese benaderings, sowel as 'n veranderende sosiale en politieke klimaat, het navorsers soos Geyer (1996), Kalekin-Fishman (1998) en Neal en Collas (2000) genoodsaak om Seeman se teorie te herinterpreteer. Hierdie artikel is 'n poging om hierdie nuwe vervreemdingsteorie te inkorporeer in die analise van hedendaagse fiksie. Seeman identifiseer vyf aspekte van vervreemding: magteloosheid, betekenisloosheid, normloosheid, sosiale vervreemding en selfvervreemding. In navolging van veral Neal en Collas (2000) laat hierdie artikel die laaste aspek weg, maar wys hoe die ander vier aspekte van vervreemding sedert Seeman verander het. Daar word aangevoer dat "Trainspotting" 'n spesifieke vergestaltung van vervreemding in die moderne westerse leefwêreld uitbeeld, wat veral Seeman se magteloosheid op die voorgrond plaas, alhoewel betekenisloosheid, normloosheid en sosiale isolasie ook 'n beduidende rol speel. Die artikel voer vervolgens aan dat die toepassing van Seeman se vervreemdingsteorie 'n nuwe benadering tot die hedendaagse literatuur bied, veral ten opsigte van die wyse waarop hierdie literatuur betrokkenheid met die omgewing toon.

## 1. Introduction

Published in 1993 and nominated for the Scottish Arts Council Book Award in 1994, the first 3 000 printed copies of *Trainspotting* were reprinted sixteen times, and the novel had sold 150 000 copies by 1996 (Morace, 2001:73) when the film was released. *Trainspotting* was the most successful British film of 1996 and earned \$72 000 worldwide (Morace, 2001:80). By the end of the decade *Trainspotting* was a book, a play, a film, a spoken-word cassette, the subject of posters, T-shirts and a soundtrack. As Childs (2005:241) argues:

*Trainspotting* marked a literary shift because it created a new bestseller that was distinctly Scottish as well as distinctly working-class; it dealt with a subject and with an underclass that both society and fiction had largely chosen to ignore [...]. *Trainspotting* was read in clubs and appealed to the chemical generation; it encouraged music shops to sell fiction, alerted the middle-class to another side of Edinburgh, which has the high-

est HIV infection rate in Britain, and reaffirmed the potential of literature to provoke moral outrage.

*Trainspotting* is set in the mid-1980s in Leith, a suburb of Edinburgh, “A place ay dispossessed white trash in a trash country fill ay dispossessed white trash.” (p. 190.)<sup>2</sup> The characters convey a sense of being dispossessed by the English hegemony, as well as a lack of identification with Scottish society. It is a fast-paced novel, thumping along like Welsh’s favourite house music, creating the sense that the style mimics the subject matter “in that the voices and stories come thick and fast like the characters and conversations in one of the book’s pubs” (Childs, 2005:237).

The central characters, the “inner circle of Welsh’s *Inferno*” (Morace, 2001:52), are Francis Begbie, Sick Boy (Simon David Williams), Spud (Danny Murphy), Tommy and Mark Renton, whereas the peripheral characters such as Kelly, Dave (Davie) and Matty narrate small parts. *Trainspotting* consists of 43 sections, organised into seven parts, but a plot, in the conventional sense, is absent. As such, the fragmented narrative mirrors the fragmented lives and views of the main characters, where nothing apart from drug-dependency and abuse remains stable. The narrative loosely tracks the lives of these young Leith residents through heroin addiction, rehabilitation, re-addiction, and the multiple fragmentations of relationships, each with his/her own perspective. Although the details of their lives differ, the core themes of self-destruction and the inability to form stable relationships vibrate through every character’s narrative. The film uses Mark Renton as the main narrator, and even though his role is less prominent in the novel, he is the closest *Trainspotting* comes to having a central character.

## 2. Seeman’s theory of alienation in *Trainspotting*<sup>3</sup>

The two fundamental formulators of alienation theory are Karl Marx, as formulated in *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844* and *The German ideology* (1846) (cf. Ollman, 1976, and Seeman, 1959; 1966). Although Marx identifies three aspects of alienation, namely private property, the commodity character of labour, and the division

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2 References with only a page number refer to Welsh (2004b).

3 This discussion can only be introductory. (Cf. Geyer (1996), Kalekin-Fishman (1998), Neal & Collas (2000), and Senekal (2008) for more detailed discussions.)

of labour in society (Ekerwald, 1998:17), these classifications are not as useful to the current study as Seeman's. According to Roberts (1987:346), Seeman reformulated and elaborated on Marx's notion of alienation, and formulated a methodological framework, which is better suited to the study of sociological tendencies, and is therefore used by Neal and Collas (2000), Kalekin-Fishman (1998), Geyer (1996) and others.

Seeman was part of the surge in alienation research prominent in the mid-twentieth century when he published his paper, *On the meaning of alienation* (1959), followed by *Alienation, membership, and political knowledge: a comparative study* in 1966. At that time, Robert Nisbet (cf. Seeman, 1959:783) observed:

[I]n all the social sciences, the various synonyms of alienation have the foremost place in studies of human relations. Investigations of the 'unattached', the 'marginal', the 'obsessive', the 'normless', and the 'isolated' individual all testify to the central place occupied by the hypothesis of alienation in contemporary social science.

This trend continued throughout the 1960s, when disillusionment with government grew, particularly in the wake of antiwar protests and the 1968 student protests in Europe (cf. Seeman, 1972). However,

[d]uring the 1980s, as the postwar baby boomers grew older, and perhaps more disillusioned, and willy-nilly entered the rat race, interest in alienation subsided. The concept definitely [...] became less fashionable, although a small but active international core group continued to study the subject in all its ramifications, since the problems denoted by alienation were certainly far from solved – to the contrary, even. (Geyer, 1996:xii.)

This core group was called the Research Committee on Alienation of the International Sociological Association (ISA), who kept alienation studies alive until the 1990s, when there was again an upsurge of interest in alienation. Three developments caused this upsurge of interest, namely the fall of the Soviet Union, globalisation, the increasing awareness of ethnic conflicts, and post-modernism. First, the fall of the Soviet Union precipitated alienation interest in Eastern Europe, because "the population as a whole was finally free to express its long-repressed ethnic and political alienation, which had accumulated under Soviet rule", while "the existence of alienation was no longer denied and instead became a respectable object of

study” (Geyer, 1996:xiii). Secondly, the Internet and, in particular, YouTube play a significant role in highlighting ethnic conflicts. Geyer (1996:xiii) notes:

... though processes of globalization and internationalization tended to monopolize people’s attention during the last few decades, the hundred-odd local wars fought since the end of World War II, which were increasingly covered live on world-wide TV, claimed attention for the opposing trend of regionalization and brought ethnic conflicts to the fore.

This ties in with the third issue, postmodernism, with the trend towards positing increasingly eclectic worldviews because of an information overload stemming from the increased use of the media and the internet, and the breakdown of gender, national and even personal boundaries, as well as the questioning of metanarratives and cultural norms and values. According to Geyer (1996:xiii), “the world of simulacra and virtual reality tends to be an alienated world, for reasons that Marx and Freud could not possibly have foreseen”, prompting a change in the attitude towards alienation. Important now is the problem regarding the construction of meaning where the individual is often bombarded with an information overload, the changing circumstances regarding empowerment in an increasingly complex environment involving ever more lengthy feedback delays, and the impact of globalisation on the formation of identities and conflicts in the post-Cold War environment, what Kaldor (2006) calls *new wars*.

Seeman (1959) identifies five aspects of alienation, namely powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation, and self-estrangement.

Powerlessness refers to a gap existing between what a person wants to do and what that person feels capable of doing (Kalekin-Fishman, 1996:97). Seeman’s (1959:784) notion of powerlessness builds on Marx’s view, arguing that “the worker is alienated to the extent that the prerogative and means of decision are expropriated by the ruling entrepreneurs”. However, Seeman (1966:354) further incorporates the insights of the psychologist Julian Rotter (1954), who distinguishes between *internal control* and *external control*. Internal control refers to how much a person believes is attributable to intrinsic factors such as skills, effort and personality, whereas external control refers to a high premium placed on external factors such as chance or powerful others (Neal & Collas, 2000:20).

Since the postmodern world differs considerably from the world that produced Marx and even Seeman, Geyer (1996:xxiii) argues that the nature of powerlessness has changed, "where the core problem is no longer being unfree but rather being unable to select from among an overchoice of alternatives for action, whose consequences one often cannot even fathom". The increase in complexity has led to an acute delay in feedback; in sociological terms, accurate feedback allows a change in actions in order to reach a desired goal. Geyer (1996:xxiii) contends that the postmodern problem of powerlessness is one of severe delayed feedback, since the postmodern world has become so complex that the causal link between action and outcome becomes obscured. Geyer (1996:xxiv) writes:

The more complex one's environment, the later one is confronted with the latent, and often unintended, consequences of one's actions. Consequently, in view of this causality-obscuring time lag, both the 'rewards' and 'punishments' for one's actions increasingly tend to be viewed as random, often with apathy and alienation as a result.

Meaninglessness refers to a person's ability to make sense of events (Seeman, 1959:786) and thereby predict the outcomes of one's actions (Kalekin-Fishman, 1996:97). The postmodern world presents the individual with a vastly confusing world of opposing views, and bewildering options: a Google.com search of the term *alienation* on 4 August 2009 returned 4 940 000 results. The issue is thus no longer being unable to acquire relevant information, but selecting from an astounding range of options. Because adequate goal-relevant information is a prerequisite for a sense of control – as it allows the individual to predict the outcomes of his/her behaviour – such an information overload and the resulting sense of meaninglessness tie in directly with powerlessness.

### Normlessness

... derives partly from conditions of complexity and conflict in which individuals become unclear about the composition and enforcement of social norms. Sudden and abrupt changes occur in life conditions, and the norms that usually operate may no longer seem adequate as guidelines for conduct. (Neal & Collas, 2000:122.)

In this instance, the contemporary world is notorious: in the United Kingdom, sexual promiscuity, youth violence, and the binge-drinking culture are all familiar examples. Mayer (2008) suggests that "British youth is in crisis", and cites statistics indicating that the youth in the

UK are at the forefront of normlessness in the western world regarding alcohol and drug abuse, premarital sex, and violent assault.

Social isolation refers to the perception of exclusion from a particular community (Kalekin-Fishman, 1996:97) and the rewards offered by inclusion. The concept is often mentioned alongside atomisation, where individuals lack a sense of belonging (Neal & Collas, 2000: 114), despite the physical proximity induced by increased urbanisation in the twentieth century, and operates both on an individual and collective level: communities and subcultures often develop on the fringes of “what is seen as normal and human” (Ulvinen, 1998:261).

Self-estrangement is “the psychological state of denying one’s own interests – of seeking out extrinsically satisfying, rather than intrinsically satisfying activities” (Kalekin-Fishman, 1996:97). Neal and Collas (2000:22) omit self-estrangement from their discussion for two reasons. Firstly, they argue that self-estrangement is derived from the other forms of alienation; secondly, they refrain from discussing the fifth dimension “in part from the conceptual difficulty of specifying the nature of the ‘self’ from which one may be estranged”. Geyer (1996:xxvi) also questions the stability of the concept *self*, and in the light of modern debates regarding the fluidity of identities (cf. e.g. Van Coller & Van Jaarsveld, 2009), this article follows Neal and Collas’s approach in omitting Seeman’s final dimension of alienation.

### 3. Alienation in *Trainspotting*

Given the commercial success of both the book and the film, together with the many spin-offs (soundtracks, T-shirts, etc.), it is ironic that one of the central issues of *Trainspotting* is a critique of consumerism. The narrative starts in 1988 and ends in late 1991 (Morace, 2001:47), placing it in the wake of Thatcherite Britain and indeed overlapping with Margaret Thatcher’s reign. “What Welsh [...] suggests has ruined both Scotland and England is a homogenizing consumerism allied to a general embrace of middle-class values, with its commodification of the city and Edinburgh’s past.” (Childs, 2005:244.) Renton is highly critical of consumerism:

The fact is that ye jist simply choose tae reject whit they huv tae offer. Choose us. Choose life. Choose mortgage payments; choose washing machines; choose cars; choose sitting oan a couch watching mind-numbing and spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing fuckin junk food intae yir mooth. Choose rotting away, pishing and shiteing yersel in a home, a total fuckin em-

barassment tae the selfish, fucked-up brats ye've produced.  
Choose life. Well, ah choose not tae choose life. (p. 187.)

This rejection of consumerism masks his (and the other characters') exclusion from it, as Childs (2005:244) argues:

... the characters' rejection of heritage and consumerism is largely predicated on their exclusion from its benefits, and while they opt instead for the manufactured nihilism [...], there is evidence of a clear underlying desire for affluence and designer individualism that is economically rather than ideologically alien.

Schacht (1996:13) makes a crucial point when arguing that one can only be alienated from something

... to which one has been *and remains* meaningfully related, but from which one at the same time has come to be separated. Without a persisting link of some sort, the absence of participation and identification does not suffice. (Italics – RS.)

In other words, in order for Welsh's characters to be alienated from mainstream British society, they must have a pre-existing link with this society.

Welsh's characters are not only alienated from the world of their elders, but being Scottish, they are also alienated from the greater British society. In addition, cultural changes brought about by Thatcher's Tories, in particular an emphasis on consumerism and business, lead to inclusion or exclusion. Welsh's characters are alienated from all these concepts, not because they reject it, but because they do not fully reject it. The issue is thus the identification with consumerism, but at the same time the exclusion from it. Sick Boy is perhaps the most closely identified with consumer culture and the entrepreneurial spirit, remarking: "I am a dynamic young man, upwardly mobile and thrusting, thrusting, thrusting [...]" (p. 30). This is a crucial break between classical and postmodern theories of alienation, as the link between the alienated individual and that from which she/he is alienated is now emphasised. Welsh's characters identify with consumer culture in Britain, and can therefore be alienated from it.

In the film, Renton shoots the pit-bull in order to entice it to bite its owner; in the novel, it is Sick Boy himself (Deid Dugs), illustrating that he is worthy of his nickname: "They call um Sick Boy, no because he's eywis sick wi junk withdrawal, but because he's just one sick cunt" (p. 3). His character is a manifestation of norm-



lessness; he has no loyalty towards his friends, as Renton notes, Sick Boy “staggers through life leaving these interpersonal booby-traps fir his mates” (p. 12). When courting a woman (Sick Boy’s real addiction), he transforms into a charming young man, presenting a false self and telling her, “I’m more of a jazz purist myself” (p. 335). After Renton betrays his friends and flees with the £16 000 from the drug deal, he reflects: “Sick Boy will recoup the cash; he was a born exploiter” (p. 342), showing Renton’s confidence in Sick Boy’s “entrepreneurial spirit”. However, Sick Boy is an exploiter rather than the type of entrepreneur the Thatcher government had in mind, and becomes a parody of the entrepreneurial spirit.

Schacht (1996:7) argues that the “‘self’ must be relationally constituted”. Once this selfhood is constructed, associations based on similarities are often made with like-minded selves, and in the process “[r]egnant social groups construct their own ‘self’ identities and impose identities of ‘otherness’ on marginalized populations” (Langman & Scatamburlo, 1996:133). In *Trainspotting*, the identification with others is not based on similarities (apart from addiction), but elicits rather random, dysfunctional relationships. Heroin, the double-sided “life-giving and life-taking elixir” (p. 10), in contrast with speed and ecstasy, is not a social drug, as Renton relates: “Whereas the piss-heid in the pub wants every cunt tae git as ootay it as he is, the real junky (as opposed tae the casual user who wants a partner-in-crime) doesnae gie a fuck about anybody else.” (p. 7.) Friendships become superficial, arbitrary and expedient, often based on drugs or, in the case of Begbie, just a misunderstanding. Johnny Swan observes: “Nae friends in this game. Jist associates.” (p. 6.) Renton later reflects on this: “‘We are all acquaintances now’. It seems tae go beyond our personal junk circumstances; a brilliant metaphor for our times.” (p. 11.) After Tommy contracts HIV from sharing needles, youngsters harass or avoid him, exposing the fragile nature of their friendship: “Tommy will become mair vulnerable tae persecution. His friends will decline in their numbers as his needs increase. The inverse, or perverse, mathematics ay life.” (p. 316.)

Welsh inverts the positive and the negative in his critique of capitalism. Regarding “opportunistic infections” of HIV, it is said: “In our culture, it seems to invoke some admirable quality. I think of the ‘opportunism’ of the entrepreneur who spots a gap in the market, or that of the striker in the penalty box.” (p. 293.) “Opportunistic infections” exploit the weaknesses of the immune system, much like the characters in *Trainspotting* exploit the welfare system, or each other. Sharing, which is normally considered a positive attitude,

becomes negative when it spreads HIV through needle-sharing (Morace, 2001:65). This inversion highlights the desperate milieu of the characters, where the "normal" world is turned upside down, as depicted by Begbie's unpredictability: "Ah always felt thit a slight shift in the cunt's perception ay ye wid be sufficient tae change yir status fae great mate intae persecuted victim." (p. 75.) As with Begbie, their friendships harm them, in the same manner as HIV is spread through sharing needles or having sex. Connectedness becomes negative, inverting the normal human relational condition where meaning is derived from the connection with others.

Renton's only sexual relationships are with Hazel, Dianne, and Kelly, and every one of these relationships is dysfunctional. With Hazel, who was abused by her father (p. 76), it is a co-dependent relationship between two people who are not well adjusted to the world, as Renton remarks: "The reason Hazel sticks around wi me is because she's as fucked up as me." (p. 76.) Dianne, who is fourteen (p. 150), exploits him for hash (a form of cannabis) (p. 152) and could not provide any meaningful sense of partnership, given the age gap, although this does not deter Renton from sleeping with her. With Kelly, who aborted the baby for whom he seems to be responsible, he claims that he never knew she was interested in him, remarking: "Ah didnae really know much aboot women." (p. 13.) He even has sex with Sharon, his brother's pregnant partner, after the latter's funeral. None of these attachments foster intimacy, as "feelings of intimacy and sexual performances have become psychologically separated" (Neal & Collas, 2000:53) in the modern western world depicted in *Trainspotting*. Spud and Sick Boy, in particular, can also be cited as examples of this, pursuing sexual relations with no accompanying intimacy. No relationship – friendship or romantic relationship – has any substance. In *The bedroom secrets of the master chefs* (Welsh, 2006:94), Danny Skinner and Dougie Winchester are "related through drink"; in *Trainspotting*, the characters are "related through junk".

Traditional family values are not depicted in a positive manner in *Trainspotting*, as Renton remarks regarding Sharon: "She was caught in this git-a-man, git-a-bairn, git-a-hoose shite that lassies git drummed intae them, and had nae real chance ay defining herself outside ay they mashed-tattie-fir-brains terms ay reference." (p. 220.) In criticising the nuclear family, Renton suggests no alternative. In addition, Renton suggests that there is something amiss when Sharon defines herself in terms of the norms of the status quo, but his misidentification with the status quo is in fact an identification

of opposition: rejecting what capitalism and the status quo offer and defining his identity in this rejection. Neither is this depicted as in any way preferable to simply taking received norms and values – the outcomes of this lifestyle are just random self-destruction, addiction, HIV infection and drug overdose.

Fathers are mostly absent in the novel, or worse, share Begbie's attitude to fatherhood:

It's probably no even ma fuckin bairn anyway. Besides, ah've hud bairns before, wi other lassies. Ah ken whit it's aw about. She thinks it's gaunnae be fuckin great whin the bairn comes, but she's in fir a fuckin shock. (p. 110.)

He even hits June while she is pregnant, and holds her responsible for it: "N that cunt's deid if she's made us hurt that fuckin bairn. Ivir since she's been huvin that bairn, she thinks she kin git fuckin lippy wi us. Nae cunt gits fuckin lippy wi me, bairn or no fuckin bairn." (p. 112.) The nuclear family is non-existent, and so is the stability and intimacy it offers.

Fathers do not accept the traditional role of provider (or for that matter, fatherhood), and live predominantly normless lives. At Matty's funeral, it is stated: "Matty, though, had been a father in name only. The minister had irritated Shirley by describing him as such. She was the father, as well as the mother." (p. 295.) Sick Boy is indifferent to the death of Wee Dawn, who is identified as his baby, and Renton refuses to visit Kelly after her abortion (p. 11). Even Renton's brother, Billy, mistreats his girlfriend, Sharon: "She telt us a loat ay things [...]. How Billy wis a cunt tae her. How he battered her oan occasions, humiliated her, n generally treated her like an exceptionally foul piece ay shite." (p. 221.)

The third story in *Ecstasy*, "The undefeated: an acid house romance" (Welsch, 2004a), is a drug-fuelled love story, set in Edinburgh, and covers much of the same territory in this respect. It is told by two narrators, Heather and Lloyd, who meet in the highs of house music. She persuades him to give up his drug habit for the sake of their relationship. Lloyd relates his position (Welsh, 2004a:160):

I'm thirty fucking one which is possibly too old to be carrying on like this when ah could be married to a nice fat lady in a nice suburban house with children and a steady job where ah have urgent reports to write informing senior management that unless certain action is taken the organisation could suffer, but it's me and Purple Haze here together, fuck sake.

This position is shared by many television characters, e.g. Joey from *Friends* and Charlie from *Two and a half men*, and is often depicted in films such as *Fight club*, *Beautiful girls*, *101 Reykjavik*, and *Jesus' son*. In a sense, the characters in *Trainspotting* also suffer from this, specifically in the reluctance to accept responsibility for their actions, for their children, securing and holding a job, and forming mature relationships rather than drunken casual encounters. Living in the moment with no regard for the future or for long-term consequences is a familiar attitude in young people, but later on, settling down becomes the norm and it is no longer the standard to spend an entire night drinking, clubbing and using drugs. Renton and his "friends" therefore reject more than merely the conservative Tory's emphasis on the traditional nuclear family or the capitalist system, but also adulthood.

Unlike in *The undefeated*, drugs substitute and even replace love in *Trainspotting*. Sick Boy says to the dealer, Johnny Swan (who is also called Mother Superior, instilling him with religious and parental significance): "Swanney how ah love ya" (p. 11), and Renton reflects: "Ah love nothing (except junk), ah hate nothing (except forces that prevent me getting any) and ah fear nothing (except not scoring)" (p. 21). In *Trainspotting*, love has been replaced with drugs. Even sexual love is undermined when Alison exclaims: "that beats any fuckin cock in the world" (p. 9). Renton confirms this: "Take yir best orgasm, multiply the feeling by twenty, and you're still fuckin miles off the pace." (p. 11.) Renton's pursuit of Dianne is aptly named "The first shag in ages", for it is only when he comes off heroin that he regains his interest in women: "dope and drink has fuelled Spud and Renton's post-junk libidos to a rampant extent" (p. 130). Heroin thus acts as a substitute for intimacy and human connection. If, as Lenore Tiefer (cf. Neal & Collas, 2000:97) suggests, "sexual satisfaction grows in importance to the individual and couple as other sources of personal fulfilment and connection with others wither", heroin is a second-order substitute, substituting the substitute (i.e. love substituted by casual sex substituted by drugs).

Social isolation extends further than the representation of heterosexual relationships: "There is no sense of community in the novel, other than in debased forms: sectarianism, racism, sexism, dysfunctional families, 'mind-numbing' mass media [...] and the like" (Morace, 2001:71). In *Bad blood*, the AIDS support group comprises a diverse collection of homosexuals, intravenous drug users, and heterosexual people who contracted the disease. They form groups,

blaming the others for spreading the disease, finding identity in opposition:

The junkies resented the two homosexuals in the group. They believed that HIV originally spread into the city's drug-using community through an exploitative buftie landlord, who fucked his sick junkie tenants for the rent. Myself and two women, one the non-using partner of a junk addict, resented everyone as we were neither homosexual nor junkies. (p. 241.)

Spud's comparison with vampires (p. 263) further cements the image of their being outsiders, "completely out of synchronisation with most of the other people who inhabited the tenements and lived by a rota of sleep and work". He adds, "it's good to be different" in much the same way that Renton "chooses" not to belong to consumer culture. In this, they find a group identity, albeit with the abovementioned frail connections: "They are also drawn by a greater need, the need to belong to each other, to hold on to whatever force has fused them together during the last few days of partying" (p. 263). Other people are invariably viewed as outsiders while they are in this state. As Welsh (2006:59) states:

You just couldn't deal with people who *weren't* hung over, they were a hostile race; demonic predators who wanted to rip your soul out. They smelt the weakness from you, sensed the dirtiness, the otherness of you. (Italics – IW.)

Despite this kind of yearning, friendships in *Trainspotting* are as loosely connected as romantic attachments, and even when Renton betrays his friends, he only feels a little guilt towards Spud, but not towards any of the others (p. 343). Their connections among themselves are neither intimate nor substantive, being formed rather out of necessity, since they need money to support their assorted drug habits (Begbie being an alcoholic rather than heroin-addict, and Sick Boy being a womaniser).

Despite the use of the vernacular, there is no identification with the Scottish community:

Ah've never felt British, because ah'm not. It's ugly and artificial. Ah've never really felt Scottish either, though. Scotland the brave, ma arse; Scotland the shitein cunt. We'd throttle the life oot ay each other fir the privilege ay rimmin some English aristocrat's piles. Ah've never felt a fuckin thing aboot countries, other than total disgust. They should abolish the fuckin lot ay them. (p. 228.)

Renton's reflections expose existential problems with the notion of meaning, which seems to be fundamentally lacking as a basis or condition for existence:

Life's boring and futile. We start oaf wi high hopes, then we bottle it. We realise that we're aw gaunnae die, withoot really findin oot the big answers. We develop aw they long-winded ideas which jist interpret the reality ay oor lives in different weys, withoot really extending oor body ay worthwhile knowledge, about the big things, the real things. Basically, we live a short, disappointing life; and then we die. We fill up oor live wi shite, things like careers and relationships tae delude oorsels that it isnae aw totally pointless. (p. 90.)

As the most introspective of the characters, Renton is fully aware of his shortcomings, admitting that he knows and understands little (p. 13); yet he makes no effort to acquire the goal-relevant information to alter this situation. Seeman (1966:361) concludes: "those who are low in expectancy for control are not interested in and do not absorb control-relevant learning". Although Seeman focuses on political knowledge, having control-relevant knowledge of relationships and the opposite gender would create a similar reduction in powerlessness, as powerlessness is based on the same principles. Renton's lack of interest in control-relevant knowledge regarding women is therefore an indication of his powerlessness.

The other characters seem to share this lack of understanding concerning their immediate environment. After Matty's funeral

... [t]hey filed out into the cold night at closing time, heading for Begbie's place with a carry-out. They'd already spent twelve hours drinking and pontificating about Matty's life and his motivations. In truth, the more reflective of them realised, all their insights pooled and processed, did little to illuminate the cruel puzzle of it all. (p. 299.)

Powerlessness most clearly manifests itself in heroin addiction, as Renton remarks regarding Tommy: "How many shots does it take before the concept ay choice becomes obsolete?" (p. 174.) Renton is constantly on and off heroin, and notes:

Kicking and using again is like gaun tae prison. Every time ye go to jail, the probability ay ye ever becoming free fae that kind ay life decreases. It's the same every time ye go back to smack. Ye decrease yir chances ay ever bein able tae dae withoot it. (p. 317.)

However, Renton sometimes regards powerlessness as a positive characteristic (p. 202), in particular when it frees him of responsibility. Because powerlessness is depicted in this instance as a positive attribute, it only serves to underscore the alienation he manifests in relation to the norms of the status quo, as discussed in his rejection of the values of capitalism.

#### **4. Conclusion**

*Trainspotting's* fragmented narrative mirrors the fragmented lives and views of its characters, mired in drug addiction and socio-economic factors seemingly beyond their control. Seeman's concept of powerlessness is highlighted most clearly in this novel, although there is definitely also normlessness, meaninglessness, and social isolation. Welsh's characters in *Trainspotting* are powerless to escape their circumstances, their addictions, and the destructive co-dependent relationships (friendships and sexual relationships) they inhabit. The novel depicts a world in which interpersonal relations have become void of intimacy and meaningless beyond the ever-present need to obtain more drugs and the money to acquire them. Normlessness is depicted in characters so cut-off from society that traditional norms mean nothing to them. Fathers are practically reduced to sperm donors and routinely beat their girlfriends (for there are no marriages); even the "honour among thieves" is undermined when Renton robs his friends. Social isolation is vividly depicted in the novel in which the main characters form a group in opposition to the ruling consumerist/capitalist culture, although their internal connections are brittle at best. Complete (or near-complete) social isolation would be a positive thing in *Trainspotting*, as the relationships formed are as destructive as could be. They lead each other into violence, crime and drug addiction, being their own worst enemies.

This novel thus clearly epitomises alienated individuals in a sub-culture, cut off from the benefits of mainstream consumerist society as portrayed by the media, yet remaining anchored to its ideals and norms. As Welsh (2006:68) phrases the situation: "we held on to each other like orphaned baby monkeys, whose worlds were crumbling around them".

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