“Nae friends in this game. Jist associates”

On the Presentation of Alienation in Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting*

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Introduction

The publication of the novel *Trainspotting* marked the debut of Irvine Welsh’s career as writer, when it was first published in 1993. It later went on to become a huge commercial and cultural success, not only as a novel but also as a cult movie and later as a theatre play. Welsh himself lived a large part of his life in Leith and later the Muirhouse housing project in Edinburgh, places featured heavily in the text. Welsh also describes himself as an ex-heroine addict, lending some credibility to the novel’s presentation of heavy drug-use and the lifestyle associated with it (Wintle). According to Welsh’s biography published on his official webpage, *Trainspotting* was based on diary writings from his earlier years (“Biography”, n.d.).

In *Trainspotting*, the reader gets introduced to a group of unemployed youngsters addicted to drugs, trying to make ends meet through a series of fragmented narratives on life at the bottom of Scottish class society. David Marsh, Therese O’Toole and Su Jones conceptualize a class society as being “characterised by structured inequality: inequalities of access to scarce resources, based on age, class, gender, ethnicity and so on, which persist over time and constrain and facilitate the life chances” (129). Hence, it could be argued that *Trainspotting* also portrays a group of people who are trapped within alienating boundaries highly determined by their underclass affiliation. Scholar Collin Hutchinson writes on the nihilistic posture towards the dark subject matters expressed in *Trainspotting*: “Welsh’s novel delves further into left-liberal ambivalence by casting doubt upon the worth of communal identity even as its decline is regretted” (12). Hutchinson further argues on the nihilistic tone of the novel, that it only sparingly suggests that any collective or progressive effort could bring on salvation to the marginalisation plaguing the characters (12). The short narratives that make up the novel do not follow a linear timeline going from start to finish. More accurately, the
short narratives of *Trainspotting* can be considered to be random glimpses into their everyday lives.

Set in Scotland during the Thatcher-years in the late 1980’s, the novel conjures up a grimy image of British class society and the social cost of mass unemployment in the shadow of the declining industrial sector and the recurrent economic crises of the 1970’s. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s neoliberal politics, which many voters believed would solve the economic problems afflicting the UK at the time, instead led to what writer Colin Hutchinson calls “the decline of collective identity and solidarity among the working class” (117), meaning that during this time, a shift could be seen among the easily identifiable classes of modern society. This shift meant a re-emergence of a certain kind of poverty and social problems resulting from the unemployment of redundant industrial workers, which shattered the social structure of once thriving urban working-class communities (Hutchinson 103-106). The harshness of urban poverty became more visible with rising numbers of socially alienated people involved in crime, violence and drug-abuse within the working-class communities all over the United Kingdom. This resulted in many already employed moving out of such communities while the unemployed stayed put. What was left was a new divide between the working class and what became termed as an “underclass”, who lost the communal and social networks traditionally associated with the working class and became more dependent on (a highly underfunded) state welfare to make ends meet (Hutchinson 19, 107). In other words, by the end of the 1980’s when the narrative of *Trainspotting* unfolds, Thatcher’s libertarian monetary politics and personal battle against labour unions, rising wage levels and safe workplaces had accomplished little in regards of supressing the increasing numbers of the unemployed. On the contrary, the numbers showed an all-time high (Hutchinson 24). Furthermore, Thatcher’s ideological focus on the individual and political disregard for wider social issues had, in tandem with rampant unemployment, unsurprisingly led to a distinct increase in drug
The wallpaper is horrific in this shite-pit ay a room. It terrorises me. Some coffin-dodger must have put it up years ago . . . appropriate, because that’s what ah am, a coffin-dodger, and ma reflexes are not getting any better . . . but it’s all here, all within ma sweaty grasp. Syringe, needle, spoon, candle, lighter, packet ay powder. It’s all okay, it’s all beautiful... (Welsh 29)

Through these words the reader gets a glimpse into the lifestyles and mindsets of a sub-group of youngsters existing within the Edinburghian working-class communities: the Scottish underclass. British sociologist Charles Murray defines the concept of an underclass as poor people who are chronically living off mainstream society, either by collecting welfare and/or by committing crime (5). Sociologist Ken Roberts, on the other hand, defines the underclass as groupings disadvantaged in relation to the lowest class within a society that consists of a gainfully employed population (3, 42). Furthermore, Roberts argues that the situation should be long-term and typified by alternative social and cultural attitudes and lifestyles that exclude people economically and marginalise them from joining the regular workforce (3, 42). Robert Macdonald further elaborates on Ken Roberts’ definition and argues that the underclass should be defined as a class or social group at the bottom of the class structure that over time have become structurally and culturally alienated from the employed working class and society at large, often through processes of social and economic change and who now are reliant on state welfare and persistently linked to poor living conditions (5). In accordance to
the definitions above, Renton’s and the other characters’ lifestyles are examples of what it means to be a part of an underclass, existing in a fragmented and, as addicts, extremely selfish world of so-called friends where low-level crime and addiction to heroin marks the bottom of despair from living under such conditions. According to Hutchinson, in tandem with the addiction there comes a futility that makes any meaningful attempts at social co-operation with others practically impossible (Hutchinson 108).

In terms of the fictional characters included in this thesis, the reader gets introduced to the previously mentioned Mark Renton, also known as “Rentboy” or simply “Rent”, arguably seen as the lone intellectual of the group, hopelessly addicted to heroin and with a nihilistic outlook on life. According to Burgert Adriaan Senekal’s article, Rent embodies a highly negative stance against the world around him and what he considers to be a “consumer society”. He has from the get-go, intellectually excluded himself from any notion of taking part in it (25-26). Simon “Sick boy” Williamson makes his living as a charming scam artist, with an apparent talent for seduction. As his nickname suggests, Simon also has a history with heroin addiction (being sick, as in going through withdrawal symptoms) but it also works as a statement of the fact that he simply is “one sick cunt” (Welsh 15) – a highly egotistical and exploitative person. In his article, Senekal argues that the character Sick boy could be seen as a personification of the concept of normlessness (Senekal 27). Daniel “Spud” Murphy is a petty criminal and also a heroin addict. He is portrayed as a very kind-hearted person but at the same time as totally naïve: taking drugs just because it feels good. Senekal argues that he is a person who finds great meaning in being different from “normal” people, and as in the case of Rent’s resentment towards consumer culture, Spud has in his own way chosen to not take any part in society or involve himself in a culture that he perceives to only value a never-ending spiral of sleep and work (Senekal 31). He likens himself and his friends to a coven of vampires (Welsh 351), living their lives as eternal outsiders.
Not much has previously been written on the book *Trainspotting* in terms of literary analysis. Burgert Adriaan Senekal’s article cited above, “Alienation in Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*” (2010), examines *Trainspotting* through Melvin Seeman’s Alienation theory. The article focuses heavily on the sole aspect of the powerlessness of the characters. In other words, Senekal’s article does examine alienation, but does this largely through a list of composit ed themes or specific social problems afflicting each of the main characters, analysing their powerlessness in regard to general topics such as sex, nationality, age, gender, illness, consumerism or fatherhood, rather than an analysis of their agency in specific situations in the novel. Furthermore, Alfonso Gutiérrez-Sibaja’s article entitled “Abnormality and Stigmatization in Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting*” (2017) relates to discursive mechanisms within the narrative of *Trainspotting* that call for the stigmatization of the characters’ abnormal behaviour, taking its analytical cues from post-modern philosophers such as Michel Foucault and sociologists like Erwin Goffman. Gutiérrez argues that through the power of societal and medical discourse, mainstream society gets to select what is normal and what is not. And hence, being a deviate then equals being sick, in a society in which ideology justifies a science-based discourse like psychiatry to tell the truth about human nature (6-7). In other words, most of what has been written does examine class to some extent and often seems to have a sociological focus, looking at the hardships resulting from deviating lifestyles in relation to mainstream society. However, while this thesis can be considered to be related to the topics covered in these articles, especially to Senekal’s article, none of these texts utilize the Marxist concept of alienation or analyse specific parts of the text in accordance with Marx’s idea and Melvin Seeman’s elaborations of the concept.

The theoretical approach in this thesis will centre around the idea that the lifestyles and agencies of the characters portrayed in Welsh’s novel can be seen as representations of Karl Marx’s and Melvin Seeman’s concepts of alienation. In other words, this essay aims to
explore these concepts of alienation within the narrative of the novel *Trainspotting*. Due to a limitation of scope, this essay restricts itself to the three characters mentioned above and examines some very specific scenes of the novel which exemplify how Welsh employs the concept of alienation within the novel.

**Concepts of Alienation**

The Marxist theory of alienation was developed by Karl Marx in 1844, but the concept has a long history within western philosophical and political paradigms (Mészáros 27). Furthermore, it is a broad concept spanning over most practices inherent in western capitalist societies (Axelos 55), and according to Amy Wending, the concept of alienation informs the many subsequent insights of Marx and even though he does not use the word explicitly in his later texts, the essence of its meaning saturates Marxist theory – “As capitalism develops, so does alienation” (Wending 1). Marx’s basic idea of human nature is that humans historically have always been a creative, productive species, filling needs within the community that in turn fill the needs of the individual and that the nature of economic agency cannot be separated from production (Byron 379). Work is in this sense a gratifying practice bound to the very essence of the individual worker who can thrive as the determiner of his or her labour which becomes an appreciated part of his or her community (Byron 380). Hence, what Marx states is that this economic agency (i.e. manual labour, trading of goods and services, etc.) is a “primordial and essential part” of life (Axelos 56), while it also carries a potential risk of alienation. The roots of alienation can be found in any stratified economic system and in particular in the division of labour which exists as an alienating force, dividing human beings from their own work (Wending 57), resulting in a sense of detachment: from the products of one’s labour and ultimately from other human beings due to the competitive nature of wage labour and of the class society in itself (Lamb 33).
Alienation also relates to the relationship between social classes, in regard to how near or far they are positioned in relation to the control of the means of production and division of labour (5). On one end of the spectrum lies what Karl Marx called the ‘dangerous class’ (lumpenproletariat) - the so-called underclass, mentioned previously, made up of those living on the fringes of society, alienated in regards of social and economic power (83). Marx himself had a very negative view of this segment of society, perceiving people belonging to it as purely parasitical. Rampant criminality and other anti-social behaviour combined with a supposed culture of non-willingness to work and living off the system without contributing to it, make this class distinct from the “honourable” working class. Others have come to accept this segment as a part of the social reality of the prevailing social structure (MacDonald 2). On the other end of the societal strata exists the capitalist class which profits from the work of others. The working and middle class exists between these two extremes, selling their labour-power on the labour market. The characters in Trainspotting belong to the underclass. It is arguable therefore, that because of the inherent alienated state of the underclass, defined as the true outsiders of society and yet still very much conditioned by the workings of capitalism, the novel’s portrayal of this social group can in itself be seen as a sort of micro-version of the capitalist system, with its own power-relations, stratification, means of production, distribution and its own exchange of labour.

In the capitalist system it is not only wares that are commodified, but also human labour, giving rise to a special sort of social relation: the exchange of labour and the commodification of human work that inherently carries the seeds of alienation (Marx 49, 53). This power relation involves the few who control the means of production (the bourgeoisie) and who make a profit at the expense of the masses who have to sell their labour for a wage: the proletariat (Marx 47-49). As these laborers are seen as expendable instruments rather than human beings, the bourgeoisie’s predatory exploitation of the proletarian “prey” comes as a
logical step in a dehumanised economical paradigm (Marx 80, 85). Hence, capitalism thrives on individualistic isolation within a system that emphasises egotistical behaviour as a ‘natural’ fundament. This “economic lifestyle” plays a key part in Marx’s notion of alienation, in particular regarding alienation from fellow human beings (Lamb 9, 33). In the world of *Train-spotting*, the characters exist within a system on the extreme edge of the capitalist one described above. Senekal refers to this as an existence with no sense of community “other than in debased forms” (30). With this he suggests the sectarian, racist, sexist and dysfunctional forms of relationships between people portrayed in the novel. In other words, human relations found in the novel are mostly dehumanised, fake and amoral and every social interaction is essentially tainted by exploitation.

Senekal’s article argues that in being alienated, as in the case of the characters in Welsh’s novel, they all must have lost a pre-existing link to a society that they once had a connection to (26). In other words, this reasoning suggests that one cannot be alienated or otherwise excluded from something that one never had a relationship with in the first place. Senekal suggests that the changing social and economic circumstances in Scottish society during the Thatcher era, as mentioned previously, is partly a reason to why the social link broke for people like Rent, Sick boy and Spud, whom in one way or another ended up being excluded from society. Senekal further argues, much in accordance with Hutchinson’s writings on Thatcherism mentioned above, that during the timeline portrayed in the novel, Scotland very much transformed into the consumer/business society that Rent and, in a different way, also Spud, choose to reject and that Sick boy, through his entrepreneurial spirit in tandem with normless behaviour instead has chosen to exploit (Senekal 27).

Social-psychologist Melvin Seeman went on to redefine and clarify Marx’s conception of alienation. In his article “On the Meaning of Alienation” published in 1959 Seeman writes about alienation: “A concept that is so central in sociological work, and so clearly laden with
value implication, demands special clarity” (Seeman 784). So, by clarifying this rather abstract idea, Seeman aimed to refurbish it into a social-psychological tool to be used in analysing the individual’s social problems in modern society. While still focusing on the isolation of individuals within a society, Seeman added several components to the Marxist concept (Kiecolt 1). In the presentation of his work when receiving the Cooley-Mead Award in 1996, four major components in Seeman’s work are highlighted as: ‘powerlessness’ which specifies an individual’s sense of lack of control over events happening in life, ‘meaninglessness’, which signifies an individual’s sense of mistrust and scepticism regarding the usefulness of social relationships, ‘social isolation’, which expresses the loneliness a person feels because of a perceived lack of social bonds, and ‘self-estrangement’, which involves the feeling of an inherent meaninglessness of activities one has to be involved in in life, and also a sense of being “inauthentic” (Kiecolt 1). Furthermore, Seeman argues that alienation as ‘powerlessness’ is the essential component of the Marxist concept of alienation, based in man’s estrangement from fellow human beings and the commodification of humans as symptoms of a stratified society; however, he has attempted to deconstruct Marx’s polemical ideas attached to the concept (Seeman 784). Moreover, Seeman’s additional concept of ‘meaninglessness’ is related to Marx’s concept of alienation as it revolves around the extent to which the individual is able to understand his, her or other’s involvement within a given context (786). Uncertainty in terms of what is expected of one’s agency within this given context hinders the individual in terms of decision-making, leading to what Seeman calls “a low expectancy that satisfactory predictions about future outcomes of behaviour can be made” (786) – Individual choice and agency then take on the form of meaninglessness. Seeman’s addition of ‘isolation’ aims to explain how estranged individuals place a low value on social interaction with other human beings and exhibit a disregard for the cultural standards of the mainstream. As Melvin Seeman himself states, they exhibit a sense of ‘apartness from society’ (788-789). The final
addition Seeman made to Marx’s concept of alienation is the idea of ‘Self-estrangement’. Self-estrangement refers to the detached feeling of doing something just to be done with it, without any sense of personal gratification and just to gratify the need of others (790). In addition to the four previously mentioned aspects, Seeman’s idea of alienation also contains ‘Normlessness’ which has its basis in classic sociologist Emile Durkheim’s theory of anomie, in which a given society’s norms and values have become so weakly integrated in the individual that they no longer carry any real weight, causing him or her to act out in, from society’s point of view, a ‘normless’ way (787). Hence, Seemans’s (and Durkheim’s) concept of normlessness could, for example, have something to say about individuals, such as the characters in Trainspotting, who contrary to common sense and societal norms turn to crime to reach set goals and in the face of risking their health choose to use heavy drugs in order to escape a problematic existence. So, what Seeman has done with the Marxist concept of Alienation is to make it applicable to a wider array of life-situations being afflicted by what Marx called ‘alienation from fellow human beings’, or in other words, being removed from the mainstream as an outsider either by choice or otherwise.

Meaninglessness, Social Isolation and Normless Behaviour in the Chapter “Skag Boys, Jean-Claud Van Damme and Mother Superior”

In the first narrative of the novel, entitled “The Skag Boys, Jean-Claud Van Damme and Mother Superior”, the reader is introduced to Rent and Sick boy and get to follow them on their bizarre quest to buy heroin in one of Edinburgh’s famously dilapidated housing projects. Apparently, they are both in varying states of being strung-out from heroin-withdrawal and trying to ride out the situation by watching violent Jean-Claude Van Damme films on the television. Rent and Sick boy have already, when the chapter begins, lost whatever resolve they initially had mustered to get out of their unproductive state of alienation and rid themselves from their heroin habit:
— Rents. Ah’ve goat tae see Mother Superior, Sick Boy gasped, shaking his heid.

— Aw, ah sais. Ah wanted the radge tae jist fuck off ootay ma visage, tae go oan his ain, n jist leave us wi Jean-Claude. Oan the other hand, ah’d be gitting sick tae before long, and if that cunt went n scored, he’d haud oot oan us. (13).

Sick boy and Rent are childhood friends, but in this situation, it is clear that through their heavy drug-use, they have seemingly started to become alienated from each other as companions. There is the notion that Sick boy really cannot be trusted, that he would probably rather keep all the drugs to himself than share some of them with Rent, a social interaction built on the type of reciprocal competitiveness that Marx argued was a cause for social alienation. They are having an exploitative relation with their drug-habits as a very shaky social connection in which they both commodify each other to suit their respective needs. Also, as seen through Rent’s inner thoughts, what he really wants is for Sick boy to just to leave him alone, to leave Rent comfortable in his isolation from the influence of the harsh world outside.

In a sort of meta reflection of the situation in relation to the film on the television, Rent thinks: “As happens in such movies, they started oaf wi an obligatory dramatic opening. Then the next phase ay the picture involved building up the tension through introducing the dastardly villain and sticking the weak plot thegither” (13). The drama of the two being short on heroin, with withdrawal symptoms building up to the point to when the overpowering urge to buy more drugs, once again, gets to mark the predestined conclusion to another predictable day in their lives as alienated drug addicts.

In their egotistic state of fighting off the withdrawal symptoms, their sentiment towards each other could be argued to mirror the drama on the TV-screen, with their outlook of one another as a sort of villain. The thought of companionship is of little value as Rent reflects on
the company of his so called friend; ”The sweat wis lashing oafay Sick Boy; he wis trembling. Ah wis jist sitting thair, focusing oan the telly, tryin no tae notice the cunt” (14). The dramaturgy of heroin withdrawal is something they both probably have an equally good knowledge of, as does their knowledge of what makes up the rules of a Jean-Claude Van Damme film. There is also a juxtaposition of struggles, with the one going on with Rent and Sick boy in the living room, their withdrawal and the meaningless violence they are watching on TV. Rent reflects on what is about to happen: ”Any minute now though, auld Jean-Claude’s ready tae git doon tae some serious swedgin.” (14), which hints at some sort of catharsis from the boredom as well as of a release from their suffering, to beat each other up or ultimately give in to their drug addict identity. Rent reflects on Sick boy’s erratic and simultaneously pathetic behaviour - his powerlessness. “He moves ower tae the windae and rests against it, breathing heavily, looking like a hunted animal. There’s nothing in his eyes but need” (15). Rent sees in his friend’s selfish behaviour a reflection his own loss of control over his body and mind, which in turn paints the centre piece of their state of alienation that makes any effort to get back on their feet unfeasible. The short-term goal of recovering from their painful symptoms of withdrawal clearly beats any future prospects of clean living.

After pondering the probability of him getting charged extra by the video-store for not returning the Van Damme-tape on time, Rent and his “friend” co-opt the idea to go out together. They jointly leave the flat to go buy heroin from a dealer known as Mother Superior. This seemingly simple task soon becomes problematic because of the detached hostility between the two. Sick boy’s thoughts on the situation are “The point is ah’m really fuckin sufferin here, n ma so-called mate’s draggin his feet deliberately, lovin every fuckin minute ay it!” (15). Obviously, the issue of distrust and paranoia that Rent sees in Sick boy is also prevalent in how Sick boy perceives Rent, making their drug fuelled alienation from each other’s friendship a reciprocal matter. Rent and Sick boy decide to get a taxi. Sick boy reflects upon
his feelings towards his fellow human beings, strongly hinting at his isolation from them and their world, but also at the perceived meaninglessness of his peers’ endeavours: ”The stamp-oneyin self-employed ur truly the lowest form ay vermin oan god’s earth.” (16). Moreover, Sick boy continues with reflections on his views of others: “Supposed tae be a fuckin taxi rank. Nivir fuckin git one in the summer. Up cruising fat, rich festival cunt too fuckin lazy tae walk a hundred fuckin yards fae one poxy church hall tae another fir thir fuckin show. Taxi drivers. Money-grabbit bastards . . .” (15). Sick boy clearly has nothing positive to say about other people or society in general. One could say that he in fact seems to hate being around other people, and that he, in his social isolation and rampant normlessness, seems to have lost the ability to emphasise with anyone else’s needs but his own.

Sick boy, in his frustrated and strung-out state goes on to harass people and to jostle the crowd waiting in line to get a taxi. When getting physical with the other customers, threateningly pushing forth and opening the door on the sole taxi at the stand, Sick boy acts upon the aspect of his alienation that Seeman defines as normlessness. Simultaneously, Sick boy scares off the others by the threat of physical violence, spitting and swearing, Welsh makes this otherwise rather troubling situation funny by showing the extent of his bizarre and total disregard for his fellow human beings and in how he expresses the violent outburst of his verbally. ”Fuck off, ya plukey-faced wee hing oot. Git a fuckin ride! Sick Boy snarled as we piled intae the taxi.” (16). His crude language combined with an apparent lingual prowess makes his normless behaviour threatening and adds a level of absurdity to an everyday situation. Arguably, this portrayal of Sick boy also paints this alienated character in a more human, ambiguous light, of him being something more than just a stereotypical, raving addict on the street.

Rent and Sick boy travel through northern Edinburgh by taxi, towards the Muirhouse housing estate where their childhood friend Johnny Swan, also known as Swaney or Mother Supe-
rior, runs his own “shooting gallery” (a flat where addicts come to inject drugs) and supplies his customers with heroin. “Johnny Swan hud once been a really good mate ay mines, back in the auld days. We played fitba thegither fir Porty Thistle. Now he wis a dealer.” (18). When confronted with the other customers lying around inside Swaney’s flat, Rent is reflecting upon the effect that heavy drug-use ultimately has on people, in contrast to the casual drinker down at the local pub:

High cunts are a big fuckin drag when yir feeling like this, because thir too busy enjoying their high tae notice or gie a fuck aboot your suffering. 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 aboot anybody else (19).

In other words, there is clearly an inherent potential for alienation in the usage of heavy drugs like heroin. Renton here brings up the social isolation-aspect that comes with being high, because the high feels so good that other people become uninteresting during its duration. So, “the real junky” who is high most of the time will, according to Rent, become chronically isolated from his fellow man, and hence, will, while on drugs, never be able to really care about any other human being but himself. According to this reasoning there is also a sense of another of Seeman’s additions to the concept of alienation, namely in how fully Rent has given into this notion of justified nonchalance that he says comes with being a “real” drug addict – being in a state of meaninglessness. He is completely aware of his own involvement in his addiction and is also not the least uncertain about how his own decisions could turn this life of his around into a healthier direction. What he seems to lack at this moment is a real incentive that makes the necessary change meaningful to him, as the heroin lets him shed the
many layers of alienation that are weighing him down and for a little while feel good about himself.

**Alienation from Fellow Human Beings, Between Classes, Commodification, Meaninglessness, Self-estrangement and Powerlessness in the Chapter “The First Day of the Edinburgh Festival”**

In the following chapter, “The First Day of the Edinburgh Festival”, Rent is again about to try to overcome his heroin addiction. In this fragment of time, his so-called friend Sick boy has already successfully gone through detoxification from his addiction and is now trying to be instrumental in Rent’s latest attempt to go clean, giving him tips on this and that – little preparations that could ease the horrifying and painful procedure that Rent is about to undergo in his parent’s apartment. Before going to the grocery store, Rent prepares himself for his ordeal of having to face the outside world: "Ay took ma last shot in order tae git us through the horrors ay the shopping trip." (31). After shopping, Rent locks himself up in his childhood bedroom. Almost immediately, when the symptoms of heroin-withdrawal become apparent to him, Rent gives in to the powerlessness he feels in his alienated state:

As soon as ah become aware ay the sickness gripping me, it effortlessly moves from the uncomfortable tae the unbearable. […] It’s time for action. No way can ah crash oot and face the music yet. Ah need the old ‘slowburn’, a soft, come-down input. The only thing ah kin move for is smack. One wee dig tae unravel those twisted limbs and send us oaf tae sleep. Then ah say goodbye tae it. (28).

His awareness of the hardship of his situation, not at all able to cope with the alienating sense of powerlessness he feels in the face of his withdrawal quickly turns his once stout endeavour into a meaningless task enshrouded with uncertainty. The only real power Rent can
muster in this state goes into planning his escape from it by once again retreating back into drug use. This can be viewed as an example of the idea of self-estrangement, going back to both Marx and Seeman. The reader is, in this chapter, never presented with the rationale behind his sudden urge to rid himself of his addiction. With Sick boy’s successful attempt at going through withdrawal as the only real clue to a reason, and with Rent going back to his parents apartment to go through withdrawal, these external reasons and the apparent lack of his own thoughts on why he wants to do it, could be a hint as to why he has chosen to go through the procedure this time. He is in this sense mainly doing it because other people want him to, leaving out his own need and will from the equation, estranged from his own pursuit. This could be presented as an explanation for why he fails this time. “Ah shakily pit the phone doon. Two choices; one: tough it oot, back in the room, two: phone that cunt Forrester and go tae Muirhoose, get fucked aboot and ripped oaf wi some crap gear. Nae contest.” (33). So, after finally getting hold of someone who can supply him with heroin, Rent goes out to still his urges and ends up in Forrester’s flat in Muirhouse. A person who Rent has a problematic and submissive relationship with:

An ex-skag merchant always knows when someone is sick. Ah just don’t want the bastard knowing how desperate ah feel. While ah would put up wi any crap, any abuse fae Forrester tae get what ah need, ah don’t see the sense in advertising it tae him any mair than ah can help. […] He takes an age to answer. The cunt has started fuckin us aboot before ah even set foot in his hoose. He disnae greet us wi any warmth in his voice. — Awright Rents, he sais. No intros are made, but that’s the prerogative of my baw-faced icon, Mike Forrester. He’s the man in the chair, and he certainly knows it (36)
Reflecting upon this relationship with Forrester, Rent’s thoughts are reminiscent of what Marx implied regarding how the stratification of social and material power in society is reliant on how far or close individuals are located to the means of production and how this competitive nature inherent in capitalism alienates the individual from his or her fellow human beings. Forrester once was a “skag” himself (heroin user) who quit and instead reinvented himself as a successful distributor of drugs: a position in the stratosphere that places him much closer to the control of the means of production than Rent has ever been. There is a clear power-relation at play between the two, of two men being of a different class. Rent is in this context embodying the premise of the underclass - his days are spent in normlessness, engaged in petty crime or living on “giro” (an unemployment cheque offered by the British social welfare) to be able pay for his necessities, that is the product that Forrester has access to, hereby embodying the premise of the bourgeoisie, profiting from the struggle of others. Or, in other words, Forrester, the drug dealer, gets to profit from Rent, the addict’s urge to get high. Apparently, their relation is tainted by alienation, mistrust, dislike and oppression. Rent hates Forrester but in his inferior position, he has to pretend otherwise -” But ah still love him. Ah huv tae. He’s the boy holdin.” (40). Forrester clearly knows he is “the boy holdin” the product that gives him all the power in their relationship and is letting Rent know this through threatening behaviour. Both are, because of the system they exist within, very much alienated from each other’s value as human beings.

Meaninglessness, Self-estrangement, Powerlessness and Normlessness in the Chapter “Speedy Recruitment”

In the chapter “Speedy Recruitment”, the reader gets to know the character of Spud, who together with Rent is about to go on a recruitment interview forced on them by the unemployment office. When this chapter begins, the two friends are preparing for their interviews
by drinking Guinness at the pub. In this short conversation, Rent’s and Spud’s attitude towards getting a straight job becomes evident:

— Fuckin disaster fir me mate. Ah’m no wantin the fuckin joab. It’d be a fuckin nightmare. Renton shook his head.
— Yeah, ah’m likesay happy steyin oan the rock n roll the now man, ken?
— Trouble is though Spud, if ye dinnae try, if ye blow the interview oan purpose; the cunts tell the dole n these bastards stoap yir giro. […]
— Yeah . . . me n aw man. What ye gaunnae dae, likesay?
— Well, what ye huv tae dae is tae act enthusiastic, but still fuck up the interview. As long as ye come across as keen, they cannae say fuck all. If we jist be oorselves, n be honest, thill nivir gie either ay us the fuckin joab. (102)

Spud says he is happy staying on the “rock n roll”, hinting at the fact that a job would interfere with something important in his life, most probably with his drug addiction. Rent simply states that getting a job would be the worst thing that could happen to him, apparently hindering him from living the life that he has chosen. Welsh is here portraying the character’s alienation from mainstream society, highlighting a mundane and rather sad situation with humour. According to Seeman’s idea of meaninglessness as alienation, the uncertainty interspersed in this opportunity to get a job, and maybe improve their lives, also implies the two entering the mainstream. This prospect carries with it an uncertainty about the future that fills the characters with strong doubts of following through. According to Seemans’s concept of meaninglessness, it makes it impossible for them to make the “right” choice. Instead, they start to come up with strategies that will render them unemployable in the eyes of the recruitment managers in order to let them retreat back to the safety and predictability found in their
state of alienation. There is also the notion of self-estrangement involved in how Spud and Rent react to this perceived problem they are facing. They have not decided to go through with these interviews themselves, making the idea of them applying for a job someone else’s request. Not only have they not decided to undertake this ordeal themselves, they are in fact forced to do it; risking their “giro” payment if they do not acknowledge the demand. This makes the idea of them getting a job as something detached from their own will and leads them to see the interview as something that they just need to get through, which, as we already know, implies failing the interview. In a final act that speaks of how much disregard the characters feel towards a world they want no part in, Spud offers Rent his old tie together with some amphetamine before he goes on to meet the recruitment managers, to gracefully fail at getting a job.

Class-issues, Normlessness and Self-estrangement in the Chapter “Traditional Sunday Breakfast”

In the short narrative named “Traditional Sunday Breakfast” the reader gets what could be perceived as a symbolic narrative on the effects of the Marxist idea of alienation between both classes and human beings. Spud wakes up in someone’s cosy bed in a posh and neatly arranged bedroom after a night of heavy drug use: “Oh my god, where the fuck am I. Where the fuck […] ”OH FUCK... NO... please. No, no fuckin NO... (120). Out of place in this environment, in a hazy and dehydrated state and with no memories of the previous night, Spud realizes with horror that he probably is at a potential love interest named Gail Houston’s mother’s house. Highly embarrassed, Spud soon discovers that something unspeakable has happened to the bed. Something that threatens to make this already awkward situation even worse: “I had pished the bed. I had puked up in the bed. I had shat myself in the bed. My heid is fucking buzzing, and my guts are in a queasy turmoil. The bed is a mess, a total fucking
mess” (121). Further embarrassed, Spud wraps up the sheets, turns over the mattress and then proceeds to try and clean the mess from himself in the toilet. Upon returning, he notices his clothes lying aptly tucked on a table. He starts to nervously wonder who actually it was that had undressed him the evening before. Here the reader is presented with a theme of embarrassment regarding one’s personal nature in the face of an experienced normalcy: His bodily fluids, his naked body, not being in control of himself. But also, of the social stigmas that have led him to this situation - his lower class-affiliation, crimes and his addictions. Welsh here hints at the fact that it all comes down to the issue with the soiled sheets. The situation threatens to reveal secrets about Spud that will not play out well with Gail’s parents. All Spud wants, because of his interest in Gail, is that these aspects of him are kept secret in the Houston household. Dirty sheets – dirty secrets.

Drifting back to sleep, Spud later wakes up to the sound of a firm knocking on the door. Gail, the daughter of the house and Spud’s latest romantic interest while cheerfully upset with his drugs and alcohol-fuelled antics last night, invites him to partake in some traditional Sunday breakfast with her upper middle-class parents’ downstairs. Spud, the petty criminal and heavy drug addict is clearly out of place in this context. He panics as he makes an effort to hide and smuggle out the soiled sheets from Gail and her parents’ judgmental gazes; the sheets here acting as a dirty symbol of his truly alienated junkie-identity. Socially detached from the situation, Spud could be seen to inhabit Seeman’s concept of Self-estrangement as he tries to handle the situation in Gail and her parents’ favour, a situation that eventually ends in catastrophe. He could just get up and leave, but his kind-hearted nature, in contrast to Rent’s and Sick boy’s normless behaviour, makes him play along with the charade just to be done with it. He is hiding his true nature in plain sight, trying to act “normal” in front of them— or, in his own words tries “to become invisible” (122). Sitting through the stiff con-
versation, the inevitable inquiry comes up: that lump of sheets that Spud has been trying to hide under the dining table:

> Eh, Mrs Houston, I point to the sheets, in a bundle at my feet on the kitchen floor. — . . . Ah made a bit of a mess of the sheet and the duvet cover. Ah’m going tae take them home and clean them. Ah’ll bring them back tomorrow. (123).

A verbal battle of politeness regarding who should take care of the sheets ensues between Mrs Houston and Spud and it ends with her getting physical. She proceeds to, by force, pry the dirty secret from Spud’s bosom: ”I pulled it to me, towards my chest; but Mrs Houston was as fast as fuck and deceptively strong. She got a good grip and pulled against me.” (133). What follows quickly turns this traditional Sunday breakfast into a very untraditional Sunday breakfast:

> The sheets flew open and a pungent shower of skittery shite, thin alcohol sick, and vile pish splashed out across the floor. […] Brown flecks of runny shite stained Mr Houston’s glasses, face and white shirt. It sprayed across the linoleum table and his food, like he had made a mess with watery chip-shop sauce. Gail had some on her yellow blouse. Jesus fuck. (123-124)

Spud’s secret, the soiled sheets: a symbol of his alienated true nature as a lowly thief and drug addict - is finally revealed for all to see. He failed in his self-estranged effort to get through the situation without embarrassing Gail and her parents with his shortcomings. This leads to the worst possible outcome for him. Gail now knows all about him and his disgusting “shit”, and so do her parents. It is now time for Spud to leave the Houston household.
Conclusion

The short fragments that make up the narrative in Irvine Welsh’s novel *Trainspotting* let the reader become a fly on the wall inside a, for most people, totally alien world that can be both scary and sickening in its portrayal of the miserable living conditions that the characters have to endure at the bottom level of mainstream society. In this essay, it has been argued that the novel *Trainspotting* touches upon both Marx’s and Seeman’s ideas of alienation presented above, through heavily featured symptoms like drug addiction, violence and crime. It has also been argued through the examples presented, that the novel depicts alienation in a strange yet realistic fashion without any clear moralizing over the agency and choices that the characters make, perhaps even revelling in the absurdity of it all. In other words, Welsh brings the reader into the dreary, alienating experience of being part of the Edinburgian underclass, always relating to very heavy subject matters that are inherent in being dealt such a position in life.

As stated above, social issues relating to class and alienation in urban city life during the Thatcher-era in Scotland are central themes in the novel. *Trainspotting* is filled with more or less detailed descriptions of unemployment, stiff and patronizing meetings with the institutions that are supposed to care for the unfortunate in society and also the poor living conditions in the government subsidised housing projects. What is portrayed is basically a corrupt and, in many ways, failed consumer society, a sentiment very much featured and expressed in the thoughts of Rent, the intellectual of the group. However, because of the unstructured nature of the novel, it is hard to really come to terms with why life turned out the way it did for Rent, Sick boy and Spud. What came first? Alienation, or the normlessness that can be seen as the symptoms of their alienation? In Welsh’s novel, one could guess that both individual and social issues have led the characters onto their path of drug addiction and crime, pure egoism and dehumanization. There is no human warmth to be found in social bonds, just competition and paranoia - a sentiment which very much relates to Marx’s idea of
capitalism’s tendency to bring forth an alienation from fellow human beings and between the social classes.

Even though Irvine Welsh probably never meant to make any sort of political Marxist commentary on the realities of alienation within the bereaved underclass, his text does, in accordance with the objective of this essay, lend itself very well to such an analysis. Page after page is literally filled with examples of what can easily be interpreted as aspects of alienation and its symptoms, both in relation to Marx’s original concept and also in Seeman’s expansion on his ideas.

Regardless of their unemployment, their failed education or just a lack of sensible ideas of what to do with their lives, Welsh’s characters somehow became severely detached from their families, their community and ultimately from themselves and are seemingly lost in what can be seen as various symptoms of their alienation. What has caused this to happen is not really specified for the reader. However, from a Marxist viewpoint it can be argued that they have all lost contact with what is believed to be the essence of human nature, that through the workings of capitalism, they have been bereaved of their inherent creativity and productivity. Melvin Seeman’s elaborations on Marx’s concept can give the reader further explanations to the characters state of alienation through a palette of various social-psychological aspects, trying to explain the cause of their detachment not only through social factors, but by adding a psychological layer to the concept as well.

In conclusion, both Seeman’s and Marx’s ideas regarding the effects and causes of alienation on the individual do seem to fittingly describe the plight of the characters in Welsh’s novel. An understanding of the concept of alienation presents the reader with key knowledge, which provides an explanation for some of the characters’ behaviour in the novel. Also, Senekal’s additions are important in regard to the novel and how political change such as the neoliberal and consumer-oriented policies affecting Scotland during the 1980’s can
create both positive sentiments in a society and dismay. While most political initiatives arguably are intended to improve inclusion, there seems to exist an inherent potential for a willing, or unwilling, exclusion as well. Survival at the bottom of society leaves no room for true companionship and social bonding, at least not when it comes to the western capitalist countries such as Scotland. However, such a life could for some be the only way forward and the preferred choice. Swaney, the drug dealers’ short statement “Nae friends in this game. Jist associates” summarizes the social and political reality of Trainspotting in one impregnable sentence. It truly highlights the isolation, meaninglessness, self-estrangement, powerlessness and normlessness inherent in this type of lifestyle.

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