

The ability to see ourselves in the lives of others is what defines the value of literature to society. 'Rich Man, Poor Man' by Irwin Shaw, and 'Gobseck', by Honoré de Balzac are respectively a novel and novella which both explore themes of money and relationships from different perspectives, but with some overlapping similarities. Money defines lifestyle, and lifestyle defines whether society will accept someone or reject them. 'Gobseck', set in 1830 shows how money and relationships interrelate to define standing in society. 'Rich Man, Poor Man', a modern novel in comparison, being set in 1969, portrays the same themes in present society. Up to this day, it continues to be a fact of life that personal relationships are scrutinized by society, and who the relationship is with and what state it is in, makes all the difference.

A piece of fictional writing allows an author to highlight all the good and bad they observe in society, making their readers reconsider their own morals and choices. Without multi-dimensional characters based on real people fictional books would only be a pleasant past time, rather than thought provoking and potentially life changing. Well written books can be truly life changing, making the reader notice something that they have never given any thought to before, until the author pointed it out through their writing. Money and relationships are not new social ideals by any means, but every writer describes them in their own way, and the way that they are shown in one book may not mean anything to one reader, but can make all the difference to another. The characters created by the author are a vessel to conveying their ideas, and as such, must be realistic and relatable. Real people are a mix of both positive and negative traits, but rarely does one outweigh the other so drastically as to make the character as good as a fictional hero or as evil as a villain. In fiction, characters must also contain this mix to come across as plausible, such as Tom from 'Rich Man, Poor Man'. Shaw created a character who comes across as a troublemaker, but not creating trouble just for its sake, rather incidentally as he tries to find his way. His choice of relationships, from which he cannot benefit, but only suffer, mean that the audience empathize with him as the 'good guy'. Writers put their readers in the character's shoes, making them reflect on their own lives at the same time as those they are reading about. This can lead to the audience deciding to change something in their own habits or behaviour as they question their own moral standing.

'Rich Man, Poor Man' is an excellent novel for making its readers question their own moral choices, and to what extent they would be willing to bend their standards. Its central theme is directly related to the American Dream, which is still a large factor in the modern world.

Shaw portrays it as a negative thing, one which can only be achieved through many moral compromises. As a result, 'Rich Man, Poor Man' is full of sexual, economic and social conflicts as well as a longing for material success. He explores the idea that to achieve ultimate good, one first must commit many wrongs. Niccolò Machiavelli, an Italian diplomat of the Renaissance period described it on the larger scale of whole countries and their leaders in his book 'The Prince', and put it as such, "[i]n our own times the only leaders we've seen doing great things were all reckoned mean. The others were failures" (16). Shaw and Machiavelli both observed and commented on the same trend on different scales. In Shaw's novel, his characters are forced to go to terrible lengths to achieve the material success they were raised to aim for from a young age. This forces the audience to reflect upon their own goals, which they may recognize in the lives of the characters they are reading about. In a society focused on lifestyle, money is at the centre of everything. The quality of the neighbourhood one lives in, and that of their house and car defines which social circles will accept them. There is a constant pressure to keep one's job, to move up the ranks, earn more, and buy more. As it was put by Jean-Jacque Rousseau in 'The Social Contract, "man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains" (1). Rousseau identified this in the 18th century, long before the world had become what it is today, but the social ideals that drive people's behaviour have not changed. The strive to constantly have more means that people are not able to enjoy what they already have, as it is never enough, it can always be better, bigger, more expensive. Authors such as Balzac and Shaw hope to highlight this fact for their readers to make a positive impact in their lives because this lifestyle driven mentality is passed down from generation to generation.

Shaw and Balzac both explore to what extent a person's upbringing affects them later in life, as well as at which point environmental factors and life circumstances take over. 'Gobseck' explores the theme of upbringing in a similar way to 'Rich Man, Poor Man', and its effect on children when they become adults and need to make their own choices, but focuses specifically on paternity. Père Goriot's daughters symbolize the self-centred egoism which develops because of a father who spoils them to an unthinkable extent. They cannot survive without money, which becomes a measure for their love, as they love their husbands only for their money, a nobleman and banker respectively, and their father only while he is rich. Père Goriot is ostracized by his sons-in-law when he loses his wealth, eventually withering away and dying without his daughters by his side. Shaw's characters are also raised to believe that material success is the key to happiness, as well as being given a negative perception of

relationships. This is clearly visible with Gretchen, the eldest child, who is given dark advice by her mother, who “was constantly imploring her not to allow herself to decay, as she had done. [...] With marriage, her mother intimated, decay set in immediately” (Shaw, 15). Being nineteen when the story begins, Gretchen is the eldest of the three siblings Shaw portrays. She symbolises frustration in romantic relationships, as her two marriages end unhappily and her many affairs fail to give her the satisfaction she seeks. Through Gretchen, Shaw shows the reader how children can be set up to fail because of a parent’s negative lesson, one which can affect them years later when they are already attempting to lead their own, independent lives. Shaw provides the reader with mixed messages that reflect the many factors which affect a person in the real world. He presents the audience with Gretchen, doomed to be haunted by her mother’s words, but also contrasts her two brothers. Raised in the same family, their lives go in very different directions. Rudolph is the responsible one, their parents’ favourite while Thomas, known as Tom, is the troublemaker. Their choices of relationships help to identify who they are as people, Rudolph makes positive relationships only with people he can gain from, and he does this very well, resulting in a successful business of good profit. On the other hand, Tom remains in toxic relationships the same way that Gretchen does, his friend Claude gives him up the moment things get complicated. In this way, Shaw shows the reader how two brothers growing up in the same family can go down very different paths in life, one becoming a rich business man, the other poor and constantly on the run. This is the same message that the audience is likely to get from ‘Gobseck’. Balzac conveys the idea that people are not predetermined by their psychological makeup, but rather by environmental factors. The environment is made up of many things, these include the obvious such as housing and which part of the city the character spends most of their time in, but it is also made up of all the people that the character interacts with. Society is focused on lifestyle and money, but as such, individuals who cannot keep their emotions and ambitions in check fall into the trap of greed.

Greed and money have been interconnected since society has existed. Having what one needs, and what one wants can be two things very far apart, because while “[e]arth provides enough to satisfy every man’s needs” (Mahatma Gandhi), it does not provide enough to satisfy “every man’s greed.” As such it is the topic of many novels, but each time it is shown from a different perspective. Balzac’s opinion in ‘Gobseck’ can be summed up in one statement towards the end of the novella, “[i]f we could picture the thoughts of those who stand about a deathbed, what fearful sights should we not see? Money is always the motive-spring of the

schemes elaborated, of all the plans that are made and the plots that are woven about it!” (73)

Through the narrator Gobseck, Balzac can convey his dark opinion, it being that as much as one may marry for money rather than love, so may one plot murder if it is to be of benefit. It is not money as such which leads to greed, but rather that one can never have enough of it. Even when living a rich and lavish lifestyle the characters in ‘Gobseck’ who represent real people, are never satisfied. There can always be more money, there is no such thing as being too rich. It is this lack of a limit which frequently leads to greed, as people have enough to be satisfied, but cannot enjoy it because they want more. However, more money is not guaranteed to lead to the happiness that people seek, as “[h]e who is not contented with what he has, would not be contented with what he would like to have” (Socrates). Money can buy happiness to a certain degree, as for example, a nice house rather than a cold and dingy one will certainly result in satisfaction, but happiness beyond material gain can only be achieved through good relationships. Healthy relationships are a key ingredient to one’s happiness, as all humans require good social interactions to lead fulfilling lives. Therefore, authors such as Shaw and Balzac point out through the example of their characters how marrying for money does not result in happiness any more than having toxic relationships out of loneliness.

The ability to see oneself in the lives of fictional characters defines literature’s value to society. Writers may bring to light all of what they see in society, whether it is the foolishness of true love, or the greed that results from the empty search to gain wealth. Shaw and Balzac both do this to great effect through their writing because they have realistic characters. This allows them to give their voice shape, as they discuss moral choices regarding the American Dream, how upbringing and the environment both effect a person and how money can lead to greed. A good piece of writing has the power to change the reader’s life, make them realize something they had not seen before, analyse it, and make a positive change in their lives which will lead to a much happier ending than for that of the characters in either ‘Gobseck’ or ‘Rich Man, Poor Man’. In fiction, tragic endings are often necessary to ensure that the reader will give the ideas which are explored some thought. This means that the reader can make a difference in their own life, and in those of the people that they then interact with; because when a piece of fictional writing is cleverly done, one might find themselves in the story.

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