

1999

Had enough of people for a while : alienation in postmodern British fiction

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Miller, Farah L.

"Had enough of
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British fiction

May 31, 1999

"Had enough of people for a while"
Alienation in Postmodern British Fiction

by

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A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

Of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English Literature

Lehigh University

May, 1999

This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts/Science/Education.

5 MAY 1999
Date

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Abstract

"Had enough of people for a while" Alienation in Postmodern British Fiction

Farah L. Miller

The joint forces of the capitalist market and the media have quelled the modernist fear of isolation while simultaneously characterizing the postmodern condition as thwarted and lonely. They carry out both tasks by concealing traditional feelings of loneliness and replacing human bonds with material interests. Evidence for this alienation is found in five British novels written during the past twenty years: *Money* by Martin Amis, *How Late It Was, How Late* by James Kelman, *Great Apes* by Will Self, *The Winshaw Legacy* by Jonathan Coe and *The Beach* by Alex Garland. Through both style and the subject matter these novels expose the disconnection and confusion inherent to life in the late twentieth century. The most striking evidence in support of postmodern isolation is their exclusion of romantic love.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Western society saw a decline in religious belief in favor of scientific discourse. The absence of spirituality caused the modern condition to be characterized by anxiety about the ability to understand humankind. Yet, when in 1915 Kafka wrote *The Metamorphosis* to address this anxiety, he was actually a prophet of today's postmodern condition. Gregor Samsa's discovery that he has been disconnected from humanity and transformed into a hideous bug continues to resonate with readers; it may be even more applicable to the late twentieth century than its own era.

The joint forces of the capitalist market and the media have quelled the modernist fear of isolation while simultaneously characterizing the postmodern condition as thwarted and lonely. They carry out both tasks by concealing traditional feelings of loneliness and replacing human bonds with material interests. In *The Cultural Turn*, Jameson explains this phenomenon. He says, "The scandal of the death of god and the end of religion and metaphysics placed the moderns in a situation of anxiety and crisis, which now seems to have been fully absorbed by a more fully humanized and socialized, and culturalized society: its voids have been saturated and neutralized, not by new values, but by the visual culture of consumerism as such" (150). Commercial images make otherwise lonely individuals feel like they are a part of something important. Kafka was therefore a prophet of the postmodern condition because the market and the media disconnect individuals from humanity and transform them into a series' of socially constructed fragments.

Since there is a very fine line between the climate of disconnection expressed by Kafka and the postmodern condition, several theorists have attempted to pinpoint

distinguishing factors of the latter. Their current overwhelming response to Lyotard's influential definition of "postmodernism as incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv) is to say the market and the media are responsible for widespread alienation. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard himself says, "Economic 'redeployment' in the current phase of capitalism, aided by a shift in techniques and technology, goes hand in hand with a change in the function of the state" (14). Jameson calls the recent phase of the market economy "late capitalism" in reference to developments in Thatcherism and Reaganomics during the 1980's, and shows how "Capitalism now reacts to and compensates for the closing of its productive moment.... Money becomes in a second sense and to a second degree abstract" (142). Media critic, Douglas Kellner says, "Rather than identity disappearing in a postmodern society, it is subject to new determinators and new forces.... Yet, the variety of possibilities in an affluent image culture creates highly unstable identities" (257).

In support of this idea that postmodern solutions to problems of modernity are illusory Terry Eagleton lists "what we actually have" in the postmodern era: "the mobilities and transgressions of the capitalist order, the hedonism and pluralities of the marketplace, the circulation of intensities in media and disco..." (18). The market and the media, however, are not necessarily separate. The market controls the media by the predominance of corporate ownership. The media fuels the economy by preserving the master status of consumer. Together they perpetuate a competitive spirit and provide technological alternatives to positive human interaction. Hence, their positions in the postmodern condition are complimentary. The market and media work as a team to advance alienation at a rapid rate.

Evidence for this alienation is found in novels written during the past twenty years. Drawing on Kafka's style as well as several other modern predecessors including Joyce and Conrad contemporary writers reveal particularities of the postmodern world. John Self, the protagonist in *Money* by Martin Amis, could be called the quintessential postmodern character because he barrels through life addicted to the twentieth century. For Self, the physical pleasures of alcohol, fast food and pornography bought with credit money outweigh any kind of deeper relationships based on real worth. The word play Amis employs shows Self's predicament is in fact, metaphorical isolation. The narrator says, "I'm called John Self, but who isn't" (7). Self represents the twentieth century individual who is alienated from society because of his attachment to the market and the media.

In addition to Amis' portrait of an exaggerated postmodern individual I will examine four other British novels that speak to the contemporary experience of isolation. I intend to show that novels are becoming increasingly more concerned with thwarted protagonists, and they reveal a particular type of aloneness grown out of the postmodern world. In both *How Late it Was, How Late* by James Kelman and *Great Apes* by Will Self the protagonists are literally different from the rest of the world they inhabit and therefore separate from it. Conversely, in *The Winshaw Legacy*, by Jonathan Coe and *The Beach* by Alex Garland, the protagonists choose to withdraw from society.

Since I have already shown that the market and the media are two primary factors causing this alienation it is important to realize these authors write in reaction to the economic policies of Margaret Thatcher. In *The Thatcher Decade*, Peter Riddell says, "There have certainly been similarities... in what has happened in Britain and the United

States, but this reflects the circumstances of the times more than the ideology” (4), and argues that “In many respects, Britain is a more divided, less secure and harsher society, but it is economically more competitive” (204). The media also plays a large part in these postmodern tales. Television and video games affect these characters so that their selves are almost entirely constructed around fictions. As Kellner says, “Media culture... provides the material and resources to constitute identities” (259). Sometimes they cannot recognize a true self or society at all.

By referring to media images the books become postmodern in form as well as content. The five authors display the fragmented postmodern condition by shifting perspectives, including textual gaps, writing unexplainable plots and disjointing narrative. Jameson includes all of these techniques under the general terms “pastiche and schizophrenia.” He says, “In a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead style, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum” (7). I intend to show how each of these novels exposes the disconnection and confusion inherent to the postmodern condition through both style and the subject matter.

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“You party last night?” he asked. He couldn’t straighten his face for more than a couple of seconds at a stretch.

“What’s your name?”

“Felix.”

“No, Felix,” I said, “I did it all by myself.”

“... You gonna party now?”

“Yeah. But all by myself again. Damn it. I got problems you wouldn’t believe.”

(*Money*, 21)

Amis introduces *Money* as a “suicide note,” and says it is addressed to “you out there, the dear, the gentle.” The point of this preface is to indicate that John Self is dying. Yet, a suicide is a very specific type of death; it is knowledgeable self-destruction. Therefore, a suicide note is meant to be an explanation for why the deceased could not cope with life. Self says, “I must be *very unhappy*. That’s the only way I can explain my behavior. Oh man, I must be so depressed. I must be fucking suicidal. And I wish I knew *why*” (118). Hence, the reader’s position is to figure out what is wrong with Self.

Clearly, he is killing himself with physical addictions. He is an alcoholic and a smoker, and as the narrator he lets the reader know about both problems in the opening pages of the novel. He says, “Unless I specifically inform you otherwise, I’m always smoking another cigarette” (13). Likewise, the reader is meant to understand he is always drunk. He usually mentions what he is drinking or if he needs a drink, but in case the narrator’s repetition does not make Self’s alcoholism clear, he also says, “*Never do anything* is the rule I try to stick to when I’m drunk. But I’m always doing things. I’m drunk. ‘Never do anything’: that’s a *good* rule” (49). He is also a pornography addict. When he talks about needing the “human touch” he says, “Soon, I’ll have to go out and buy one” (61). It is important to him that he is able to satisfy physical desires quickly, and from sex to fast food he finds a way to do so. Therefore, on the most basic level Self is committing suicide by destroying his physical condition.

Self’s addictions are also fatal because they are isolating him from society. Like the protagonists in *How Late it Was, How Late* and *Great Apes*, Self is separated from the world around him because he is a drunk attempting to function in the mostly sober

everyday world. In fact, Self admits his drinking distances him from others when Martina talks about “the vulnerability of a figure unknowingly watched – the difference between a portrait and an unposed study” (126). He asks the reader, “Why do we feel protective when we watch the loved one who is unaware of being watched?” (126), and responds to Martina, “Perhaps drunks are like that too.... I mean, they don’t know they’re being watched. They don’t know anything. *I don’t know anything*” (127). While he does not link alcoholism and isolation overtly he shows the reader that he knows why he is suicidal -- he knows he is missing out on real feelings and human relationships.

Ostensibly, Self is gaining an understanding of the fact that his obsession with money is destroying his humanity. When he stops drinking long enough to read the books Martina lends him he makes the ironic connection between the room number 101 as the torture chamber in Orwell’s 1984, and his room number 101. He says, “Perhaps there are other bits of my life that would take on content, take on shadow, if only I read more and thought less about money” (207). He even says to Spunk Davis, “It’s the twentieth century feeling. We’re the jokes” (270). Self’s problem, however, is that he makes these discoveries, but puts away Martina’s book and focuses on business. He will not allow himself to make strong connections. Self remains obsessed, addicted and therefore isolated.

So, he knows his behavior is self-destructive, but nevertheless asks to be watched as both a drunk and a narrator. He tells the reader:

My life is also my private culture – that’s what I’m showing you, after all, that’s what I’m letting you into, my private culture. And I mean *look* at my private culture.... It really isn’t very nice in here. And that is why I long to burst out of

the world of money and into – into what? Into the world of thought and fascination. How do I get there? Tell me please. I'll never make it by myself.  
(118)

Essentially, the suicide note represents the moment Self's private culture is made public. It is his cry for help, not necessarily the real destruction. Later he says, "I do need it, your sympathy" (196), and "Take life away. It's too hard, too difficult" (253). By the end, Self's pleading foregrounds his obsession with money. He has literally been stripped of this obsession because Fielding has robbed him. Left penniless and alone he says, "Don't be like me, pal. Sister, please find another way. Soon you and I will no longer exist. Come on, let's feel a little fear together" (350). This final plea emphasizes the importance of connection; it implies togetherness can save the Self.

Of course, it is questionable whether or not Self is capable of these revelations. He is an unreliable narrator. Although he makes it clear that he is an addict and ultimately a dupe his narrative is witty and intelligent. Moreover, as a drunk the narrator can leave out the events he has blacked out providing several gaps in the narrative – a common postmodern device. In the final pages, the reader meets a less intelligent John Self. He is a man who claims to have undergone moral regeneration, but the novel is not that neat. Rather, nothing is as it seems in *Money* because Amis wants to illustrate the world as totally confusing. With a narrator like Self he keeps understanding at a distance from the reader and elucidates the experience of fragmentation.

He didn't want to worry about it now. He didn't want to even think about it, the situation, because he couldn't control it, he couldn't do anything that would help it. All he could do now was look after himself. He was feeling fucked.

(*How Late it Was, How Late*, 59)

Only two things marked the Busner house as being unassimilable, different, other, as furnished by the delusion as by furnishing: there were all sorts of handholds attached to the walls at convenient heights for bustling apes.... There were these, and there was also the oppressive, rank smell of those animals, who although now absent, were bound – like the three bears – to return.

(*Great Apes*, 231)

The issues raised by Kelman and Self fit into the framework Amis provides with *Money*. In *How Late it Was, How Late* the police have beaten Sammy to blindness, and the novel is concerned with his attempt to function in the world without sight. Similarly, in *Great Apes*, Simon Dykes finds himself in a parallel chimp world trapped in a chimp body. His task, as psychiatrist Dr. Busner explains is to either “recover his submerged – but still present – sense of his own chimpunity, or else... adjust to the world, despite perceiving it through the lens of this perverse delusion” (268). In both novels, therefore, the authors emphasize the feeling of isolation present in the postmodern world that John Self recognizes. They, however, do not delve into the cause for this isolation at all; rather, they explore the postmodern idea that people act from unclear motives. Fielding has no real reason to rob John Self. Likewise, Sammy's sight loss is never explained and Simon's transference into chimpunity is left a mystery. Instead, Kelman and Self introduce healing characters, like Dr. Busner, who attempt to adapt Sammy and Simon into the worlds they feel so removed from. This approach presents readers with the difficulty isolated individuals encounter when they try to re-connect with a world that has become an abstraction – in other words, the fast-paced, technological postmodern world.

Sammy's affliction is actually a metaphorical blindness Kelman uses to illustrate the process of loneliness turning to paranoia. First, Kelman's choice to make the narrator speak about Sammy as you or "ye" includes the reader in Sammy's anxiety. Although each description applies to specific events in the novel, taken out of context, Kelman's sentences become powerful statements about individuals in the postmodern era. The narrator says, "So ye just blundered about the place bumping into walls and fucking lampposts and innocent members of the community out for a fucking stroll" (251). This is obviously in reference to Sammy's blindness, but hidden within the sentence is the fact that people do not take the time to study their surroundings.

Like John Self, Sammy is "blundering" through without any real awareness of what is happening to him. In *Money*, Self says:

Sometimes I feel that life is passing me by, not slowly either, but with ropes of steam and spark spattered wheels and a hoarse roar of power or terror. It's passing, yet I'm the one who is doing all the moving. I'm not the station, I'm not the stop: I'm the train. I'm the train.

(108)

While capitalism spins the world around, fueling everything from fast food restaurants to love Self realizes he is a large part of the process. He is so used to motion he cannot slow down. Amis shows that while it seems like the world is fast-paced, most of the people who inhabit it create the problem. Like Self, they are absorbed in their own lives, their minds churn and essentially this reinforces the illusion that the whole world is moving to fast. Sammy's experience is an abstraction of this feeling to illustrate that people, in the postmodern world, are like both characters -- "blundering" through without any idea of where they are going.

Sammy thinks about what it means to be blind. He remembers:

that army programme he saw on the telly about this blind guy could stand on one side of a wall and know what was happening on the other. He could actually pick up what was going on in a different room, whereabouts people were standing and all that.... It was like he had developed some sort of different sense-organ all the gether. Right enough it was congenital. So it maybe wasnay possible for the likes of Sammy. Probably ye had to be a baby; that first few hours ye were led kicking and screaming yer way into the world. Cause all weans are blind at birth.

(101)

In a typically postmodern fashion, Sammy's knowledge of blindness is shaped by television, but it leads him to the valuable comparison between his condition and the experience of an infant. Like an infant, Sammy is entering a new world, and is threatened by the possibility of not being able to function in it.

The comparison also implies everyone is subject to blindness for some small portion of life. The experience of blindness, therefore, lurks beneath the surface of humanity. Kelman reveals the common viewpoint that evolution is an eye-opening process in which a blind infant grows into an observant informed adult. Yet, he points out that in the postmodern world television programs blind the public to the value of real experience. Thus, he links postmodernity with a type of restricted development where human beings are reduced to infants who cannot adapt to their environment.

The result of Sammy's blindness is anxiety for the reader. The doctor he sees says, "It's in your own best interest to adjust to the physical reality. You mustn't allow things to prey on your mind. Obsessive behavior should be guarded against" (222).

Delving into Sammy's experience, however, shows that it is impossible for him to stop obsessing. The reader feels anxious because while Sammy stumbles through his life he/she sifts through clues about what crimes Sammy may actually be involved with. Sammy, however, is mostly indifferent to his situation.

He will not accept help. The clerk Ally offers his services, but Sammy is stubborn. He thinks, “Nay cunt was gony get him out of trouble; nay cunt except himself” (245), but Ally forces aid on Sammy by sending Peter to him. It seems like his son will be the salvation Sammy needs to adapt. Yet, when Peter asks, “Da could I see ye off?” he says, “Nah son it’s not on; come here; give us yer hand.... The worst about all this is saying cheerio to the likes of yerself, but what can ye do, ye’ve got to batter on, know what I’m saying” (373). Then Sammy is “out of sight”: blind, paranoid, and so isolated that he no longer exists. Like John Self he is heading toward death. In fact, the song stuck in his head defines his situation. He sings:

On a Sunday morning sidewalk  
Wishing lord that I was stoned  
For there’s something in a Sunday  
Makes a body feel alone  
And there’s nothing short of dying  
Half as lonesome as the sound  
Of the sleeping city sidewalks  
Sunday morning coming down  
(262)

Afterwards, he cries, but this desperation is media constructed. Capitalism is to blame for his alienation since his blindness is a result of money. Despite his disappearance from society he uses a radio song to define his emotions.

Through satire, Self follows Simon’s story to a less bleak end than Sammy’s, but reveals the experience of isolation nevertheless. Simon’s paintings of “the interior of a Boeing 747 as its nose explodes on the Earth’s crust” and “the interior of the Stock Exchange beneath a tidal wave” were meant to be “satiric,” but “as he worked on them he saw that this was not so... The human body had – Simon felt – been pushed out over a

purely local void” (25). Likewise, Self’s novel is a satire, but the message of human beings losing perspective on their world and becoming increasingly alone is clear.

The descriptions of Simon’s paintings make Self’s novel more overt than Kelman’s about the idea that technological developments including the media cause isolation. After they are converted to chimp paintings in the chimp world, Dr. Busner says the subject matter is “the body of the archetypal chimp constrained, crushed and distorted by the pressures of modern, urban life” (182). Simon is never returned to his human world; rather, he accepts chimpunity. The point is that he has been “constrained, crushed and distorted.” It does not matter whether he is really a person or a chimp, only that he and the reader are confused. At the end, Dr. Busner says to Simon, “Your conviction that you were human and that the evolutionarily successful primate was the human was more in the manner of a satirical trope” (404). Thus, Kelman shows the satirist is a figure privileged by isolation – alienation from society provides him with a new perspective on society.

Despite the attention he pays to Simon’s paintings, Self like Kelman, is most interested in the experience of isolation. In fact, the beginning scenes, when Simon is transplanted to the chimp world, mirror Sammy’s experience with blindness “for there was something awfully wrong with the way Simon was moving – as if his very limbs were unfamiliar to him” (101).

Like Sammy, Simon gives into alienation, but Self is more overt in his indictment of the postmodern condition. After he has been locked in Charing Cross Hospital, the narrator says, “His madness – he felt – was beginning to take on a new texture.... Could his humanity be the delusion – and his chimpunity – preposterous sign! – the reality?”

(210). He begins thinking about the chimp world as real to decrease his feelings of isolation and anxiety.

Since Self is writing within the realm of satire and not realism he points to this reaction because he wants to mock it. He makes the reader see that assimilation is Simon's only choice in the matter if he does not want to remain locked up, and therefore a much more attractive option than Sammy's disappearance from society. It seems ridiculous, however, that Simon, a human, would assimilate into the chimp world "for Simon, although more present in the world of chimpanzees... nonetheless felt his humanity as strongly as ever" (308). (And Self has made sure the reader knows Simon was human by opening the novel with pre-chimp chapters!) Yet, it also seems just as ridiculous that a world exists where chimps show deference with their asses. Through satire, Self implies the way humans show deference is equally ridiculous. Likewise, it is absurd for people to pretend they fit into the postmodern world when they do not. The practice of using media images to re-connect with humanity should be as strange as Simon connecting with chimpunity.

Dr. Busner and Simon believe offspring hold the key to curing Simon's feelings of isolation much like Ally does when he sends Peter to Sammy. In both novels the relationship between parent and child represents the only bond people believe unbreakable. Simon, however, "had thought that the intense physical sympathy he felt for his infants would keep him anchored to the world, but he'd been wrong" (235). Therefore, Kelman and Self suggest the postmodern world is isolating individuals from each other so completely they are even disconnected from their own children.

At the outset, Simon refuses to believe his children cannot cure him. In turn, the missing third Dykes child becomes the focal point of his assimilation, and the greatest source of confusion in the novel, for both protagonist and reader. That is to say, even though Simon accepts Dr. Busner's theory that the "adoptive infant at London Zoo... [represents] the very keystone of his unfortunate delusion" (366) the reader cannot make any real sense out of this explanation. Rather, it follows Self's satirical plan by flipping a common belief upside down. Instead of using the infant to remind Simon of his humanity Dr Busner expects when he "comes muzzle-to-muzzle with this animal, the negative cathexis he has constructed around the notion of humanity may well be dissolved" (366). The infant represents another aspect of fragmentation in the postmodern world, a small replacement for real human emotion.

Indeed, after Simon sees the infant he embraces chimpunity. The human child, however, is not the only reason why he chooses to abandon his beliefs. He says, "Yes, there's that and there's also this camp – that's wrought a change in me as well, seeing the lengths that that female has gone to to deny her own chimpunity" (404). The experience of seeing another figure living in isolation scares Simon into acquiescence. Clearly, Self the satirist wants to point out the ubiquity of such a decision – it is not so far-fetched to heal alienation with conformity.

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"I think," he said, "there's two main reasons people don't like doing the Rice Run. Number one, it's a complete hassle. Number two, it means visiting the world."

"The world?"

"The world. It's another Daffy thing. The world is everything outside the beach." I smiled.

(*The Beach*, 142)

It had been a long day. I wanted nothing more, now, than to spend the evening alone in my flat with the television and the video recorder. I'd had enough of people for a while. They were exhausting.

(*The Winshaw Legacy*, 116)

So John Self pleads for help, but is isolated because he is more interested in money than people and engages in self-destructive behavior. Sammy is stubborn and paranoid so he disappears, and since Simon Dykes is trapped in a chimp world without any route back to humanity he just gives in. In contrast, Richard and Michael Owen do not want to conform. *The Beach* and *The Winshaw Legacy* revolve around these two characters who consciously remove themselves from society and indict postmodern culture in a way John Self, Sammy and Simon do not. That is to say Amis, Kelman and Self deal with the problem of isolation in the postmodern world by creating protagonists who lack the same kind of insight. Conversely the stories Garland and Coe present spell out postmodern problems plainly. Essentially, these protagonists come to the conclusion John Self, Sammy, Simon and most postmodern individuals try to avoid – isolation is lonely, and the more isolated a person becomes the more he loses himself.

Specifically, *The Beach* and *The Winshaw Legacy* address the effects of cinema, television and video games on the human experience, and suggest that the division between art and life has blurred in the postmodern world. Of course, this idea is also brought up in *Money*, *Great Apes* and to a lesser extent in *How Late it Was, How Late*. The actors John Self hires cannot distinguish between their movie roles and real life, and Simon's transference into the chimp world is foreshadowed by his artistic vision of a giant ape in Oxford Circus. Yet, Michael and Richard are linked to contemporary

technology in a more concrete way. Both men escape society, fashion their lives after experiences with media, and lose themselves to fictions.

Coe reveals Michael's isolation by setting up *The Winshaw Legacy* in a typically postmodern form. Like *Money*, there is no clear author. Eventually the narrative spirals out of control because the entire novel is the story of how a book came into being. The book in question is Michael's chronicle of the Winshaw family, but he admits that writing about the Winshaw's became a task to fulfill personal vendetta. He says, "the boundary between fiction and reality was no longer one which [he] was interested in observing" (331).

The most prominent example of how the line between fact and fiction is blurred is Michael's obsession with "What a Carve Up!" The movie is the focal point of *The Winshaw Legacy* because Michael devotes all his energy to re-living his experience with the unfinished scene. There are, however, several other examples of merged reality and fantasy. Yuri Gagarin's crash, "Orphee," the Gulf War, and Thatcherism are intertwined with Michael's story. Thus, the novel acts as a constant reminder that it is a work of fiction. In the prologue Michael says, "I wish [Yuri] had remained an object of unthinking adoration, instead of becoming another of adulthood's ubiquitous, insoluble mysteries: a story without a proper ending. I was soon to find out about those" (35). It follows that the final chapters do not lead to a proper ending. They are a fantastical re-creation of a story already told.

Michael's experience exemplifies the transition from modern to postmodern isolation. At the beginning, he is literally isolated, living alone without human contact. Ostensibly, the reason why he chose to hide from the world for years was his mother's

confession. He tells Fiona, "After that night I just stayed in my flat and didn't really go out or speak to anyone for two, maybe three years" (419). Instead, he sat alone with his television, VCR and "What a Carve Up!" for company. When Fiona first visits Michael, he is so used to having technology substitute for human companionship that he tries to switch her off with a remote control.

Michael's desire for isolation was also a reaction to his study of the Winshaws. Their presence in the novel acts like money in *Money* or the police in *How Late it Was, How Late*; they represent corrupt politics, economics and media in the business of blinding individuals to important truths. Coe's intention is to reveal the prevalence of this corruption in the market and the media. Michael quotes a review of a particular film about animal slaughter that says, "It's a reminder that what is inevitable may also be spiritually unendurable, that what is justifiable may be atrocious... that, like our Mad Mother Nature, our Mad Father Society is an organization of deaths as well as of lives" (252). Therefore, just as the Winshaws are symbols, Michael stands for the individual positioned against "Father Society." He is trying to defend himself against destruction by the avaricious Winshaw forces otherwise known as capitalism.

When Fiona is dying, he blames the family overtly. He says,

They sit at home getting fat on the proceeds and here we all are. Our businesses failing, our jobs disappearing, our countryside choking, our hospitals crumbling, our homes being repossessed, our bodies being poisoned, our minds shutting down, the whole bloody spirit of the country crushed and fighting for breath. I hate the Winshaws, Fiona. Just look what they've done to us. Look what they've done to you.

(413)

Indicting them, however, emphasizes the fact that his only alternative to living with corruption is to completely withdraw from reality. He says earlier, "I'm not sure I can go

on with this” (356), and indeed when Fiona dies he decides, “There [is] no point in leaving the cinema, this time” (419). The market and the media have done what they do best – they have alienated Michael and given him an illusory alternative. While his first decision to isolate himself from the world was a phobic reaction to substitute fiction for reality this second isolation is a totally surreal merging of art and life. The novel switches from first to third person narrative to indicate the fact that Michael moves into a realm of fiction where he can act out his wildest dreams – dreams that are constructed from other works of art courtesy of postmodern technological advancements.

Richard follows a similar pattern of abandoning reality in exchange for a media constructed self in *The Beach*. He thinks he has rejected capitalist society when he chooses communal life on the beach, but his devotion to television and video games maintains his status as a consumer. Although Garland writes the book totally from Richard’s perspective he indicates a particular moment when alienation begins to obliterate the protagonist’s self. Richard says,

Sitting in the glade with the shadow of the clock-hand branch lying across the ferns, smoking my cigarette. I choose this moment because it was the last time I could pinpoint that I was me being myself. Being normal.... Sometimes it feels to me that I walked into the glade and lit the cigarette, and someone else came along and finished it. It’s a cop-out, because it’s another thing that distances me from what happened, but that’s how it feels.

(67)

Like John Self’s effort to make his private culture public, Richard’s observation helps him deal with his behavior in isolation. Actually, Richard is more like a John Self character than one might think. He admits to being “the addict’s addict” (96) bearing an uncanny resemblance to Self’s attitude in *Money*. Even though his narrative voice is

apologetic and he seems like a relatively average guy his memories of the beach are morally reprehensible.

Early on, he rationalizes assimilating to beach life by saying “If something seems strange, you question it, but if the outside world is too distant to use as a comparison, then nothing seems strange.... Assimilation and rice. These were just things to accept – new aspects of a new life” (116). Thus, he begins isolating himself from the world and assimilating into a new community where new routines that seem unfamiliar are not particularly dangerous. Later, however, he becomes isolated from the camp itself, and the more alone he is the more menacing he becomes. He extends the saying to rationalize his desire to eliminate Zeph, Sammy and Christo. His progression reveals the task of isolating oneself from the world as a type of moral decline. Therefore, Richard is not totally like John Self; he becomes a sick character as opposed to Self who starts out that way.

Just as Michael’s experience is the re-enactment of a movie scene, Richard’s memories are based on cinema, television and especially video games. The media literally helps him escape from the world in that Etienne’s plan to reach the island is based on an episode of the television show “The A-Team.” More generally, he compares his experiences to those of an American soldier in Vietnam, but his ideas are based on the multitude of war movies he has been exposed to rather than historical facts. “The only missing element was a Doors soundtrack,” he says to describe going on missions with Jed, and concludes they were “too familiar to be strange” (235). Furthermore, he is sure that “the split second before Game Over [in a video game]... provides a rare insight into the way people react just before they really do die” (111), and says, “In deference to

video games I gave myself three lives” (254). Ultimately, the fact that Richard’s private culture is constructed by public culture allows him to distance himself from his actions. He says, “The strange thing is that beyond us I can see the lagoon and a white smear of sand over the treetops. But that isn’t possible. We never saw the lagoon until we reached the waterfall,” and that is “surreal because it’s a sight I never could have seen” (83). Rather, that is an image inspired by cinema because like Michael, Richard is watching himself.

The content of *The Beach* reveals the postmodern condition, but Garland writes the most traditional narrative form out of all five novels. The only unexplainable aspect of the plot is the presence of Mr. Duck. Daffy begins as a recurrent nightmare and grows into a hallucinatory vision with the power to control Richard’s actions. He, like Ally in *How Late it Was, How Late* is a postmodern guardian angel. They are replacements for spirituality, imaginary protectors rooted in the market and the media.

The Disney thing works for that. even more than just richard being made up of public media stuff, the camp is too.

Richard says, “I’ve never grown out of playing pretend, and so far there are no signs I ever will” (133).

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“There are all these terrible things going on in the house, this homicidal maniac wandering around the place, and yet he finds all of that less frightening than the thought of being alone with this wonderful woman for a whole night. And I’ve never forgotten that scene: it’s been with me for the last thirty years. For some reason.”

“Well, that’s not hard to understand either, is it?” said Fiona. “It’s the story of your life, that’s why you’ve never forgotten it.” She took the last lychee out of the bowl. “Do you mind if I have this? They’re so refreshing”

(*The Winshaw Legacy*, 152)

Perhaps the most striking evidence these novelists give in support of postmodern isolation is their exclusion of romantic love. In Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach," the narrator despairs over the ubiquity of misery. He prophesies modern concerns about religion by saying, "The Sea of Faith/ Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore/ But now I only hear/ Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar." In the last stanza, however, he finds salvation in his lover:

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! For the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

The postmodern characters are faithless, but they have replaced religion with the market, television images and video game metaphors. Worst of all, in their lonely condition they have no lovers to turn to. These men are either trapped in dysfunctional relationships or condemned to unrequited loves and media constructed fantasies. The unfinished scene from "What a Carve Up!" consumes Michael Owen, but it is the story of all of their lives; it is a postmodern love story.

John Self and Sammy are the only characters who are in relationships, but both are totally dysfunctional. For Self, girlfriend Selena Street is another commodity on the market. He realizes she sleeps with him for his money, refers to her as a "gold-digger," but accepts this and supplies her with access to his bank account. He says, "You know where you are with economic necessity. When I make all this money I'm going to make,

my position will be even stronger. Then I can kick Selena out and get someone even better” (28). Their entire relationship is based on this non-committal attitude. Both, Self and Street employ trickery and lies to make their relationship more exciting. “She’s faithful to me, that Selina. True, she behaves like someone who is unfaithful to me all the time.... But she behaves like that because she knows I like it” (125), Self explains. He is willing to pay for a romantic relationship because he judges her by values of pornography and prostitution as instilled by the market and the media.

Although Sammy refers to his wife Helen throughout *How Late it Was, How Late*, Kelman never introduces her to the reader. Like his blindness, her absence is a symbol for disconnection in the postmodern world. Sammy says, “Sometimes she left a note. And she might have this time. That was the fucking point, but how would he know if she had” (78). Her truancy extends past the moment of the novel, and therefore Helen is just as unfaithful to Sammy as Selena is to John Self. Both of these relationships are dysfunctional because they are built on falsity rather than romance.

In *The Winshaw Legacy*, Fiona characterizes Michael and the other male protagonists when she says, “You’ve probably never learned to form real relationships with people” (146). Specifically, Michael follows the framework of one of three childhood dreams he remembers where he imagines sleeping with a beautiful woman because he has a crush on class-mate Susan Clement. He says, “It would have been easier for me to fly to the moon than express my real feelings” (161).

Michael’s ex-wife Verity is mentioned as mistake to show his failed attempt at romantic love. By marrying when he was too young Owen catalyzed his collapse into isolation. His subsequent exchange with Alice Hastings reveal his inability to express

romantic feelings. When he first sees her he says, "I hadn't made love to a woman for more than nine years, and I had in the mean time an inveterate starrer" (262). He replicates this idea when he arrives at Joan's house. He feels closeness with her, is attracted to her, but when she asks to sleep with him he refuses and runs. His desertion of Joan proves he is unable to commit to closeness at all.

With Fiona and Martina Twain, Coe and Amis provide foils to dysfunctional relationships. They resurrect Michael and John Self, but are unavailable for true healthy relationships. Fiona draws Michael out of madness and teaches him to receive the closeness he would not accept from Joan. He is "astonished by the intimacy of her gesture[s]" (154) because she touches him on a physical and emotional level. Likewise, Martina gives Self books to read and schools him in friendship. He says, "I hold her. I am full of abstract desire and something else I don't understand and can't identify" (303). These figures teach Michael and John Self they need romantic love.

Fiona's tragic death and Martina's inaccessibility at the end of *Money*, are therefore, lessons in heartbreak. For all their help, this unrequited aspect of the resurrection relationships makes them indicative of the postmodern condition. Likewise, Richard's feelings for Françoise are completely unrequited. *The Beach* lacks any romantic love plot. In turn, obsession with Françoise foregrounds his experience, and her unavailability is another symbol for disconnection.

When the narrative spirals out of control the protagonists escape their alienated fate by fulfilling love relationships. Richard says,

I leaned over and kissed Françoise. She pulled away, or laughed or shook her head, or closed her eyes and kissed me back. Etienne woke, clasp[ing] his mouth in disbelief. Etienne slept. I slept while Françoise kissed Etienne.

Light years above our garbage bag beds and the steady rush of the surf, all these things happened.

(75)

He uses nature to express the postmodern condition of fragmentation. Life seems less futile and lonely because of the existence of multiple possibilities. Michael is finally able to stay with Phoebe for the night, but only within the constraints of a media constructed scenario. After the night-mare of losing Fiona he chooses this possibility to fulfill a wish for romantic love and connection that otherwise would not come true. Even John Self claims to have discovered a real relationship at the end of *Money*. He says, "Georgina loves me. She said so" (362), but this is a different Self than the narrator we are familiar with. This man who claims to be capable of romantic love lives in the postmodern fantasy world where the media and the market manufacture fulfilled dreams.

Of course, the protagonist who chooses to blind himself to the fact of alienation most blatantly is Simon Dykes, and his experience with romantic love mirrors his acquiescence. Like Gregor Samsa, Simon discovers he is not the man he was when he wakes up "his consort's breast cushioning his cheek" (73). I return to Kafka to prove these authors are concerned with the same alienation as the modernist writer. Simon, however is not crushed by humanity like Gregor; he accepts "chimpunity" and we can only assume he will be mating with Sarah as well as many other chimpanzees. Self uses satire to express fragmentation as well as isolation. Upon conclusion, if there is any doubt over the distinction between today's brand of alienation and traditional loneliness, the absence of functional relationships in the lives of these five protagonists proves the postmodern condition is one where humans are incapable of real human interaction. Like Richard says, they will only connect, in the stars, fragments of light and possibility.

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## VITA

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In 1998, Farah graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Lehigh University with a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature and Psychology. During her time as an undergraduate she was active in theater, spent six weeks studying geology in Wyoming and Idaho, edited an academic journal, studied abroad at University College London in London, England, and made wonderful friends. For her senior project she compiled her memories in *Postcards and Train Schedules*, a collection of creative writing and was awarded the first place Williams Fiction Prize for "Voice Lesson," a short story in three parts. Granted Lehigh's Presidential Scholarship for academic excellence, Farah was able to complete her graduate work at Lehigh in one academic year, tuition-free. This thesis was written in partial fulfillment of the Master of Arts in English Literature. She plans to use her background in the humanities to remain undecided about life but committed to learning and imagination, and thanks her mother Melody for so much love and support.

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