

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS IN PERCY WYNDHAM LEWIS'S *THE VULGAR STREAK*: A RESOURCE THEORY APPROACH

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Abstract

*This paper focuses on the one-sided interpersonal behaviour of Vincent Penhale, the main fictional character in Lewis's didactic thriller *The Vulgar Streak* (1941), in an attempt to unearth some of its peculiar sociological implications. To carry out this task we concentrate on the idiosyncrasy of his social interactions following American sociological Resource Theory by Uriel G. Foa, which explains social behaviour and the relationships conforming between individuals in everyday life in terms of transactions of six basic resources: love, services, goods, money, information and status. As a result, it is our purpose to show that this working-class man has such a pathological obsession with status that it leads him to disguise himself as a 'gentleman' and to indulge in ingratiatory tactics. This is why his daily social interactions in intimate settings like marriage, family and friendship, and in public ones aim at attaining social approval, certain privileges and power.*

1. Introduction

Lewis's novel *The Vulgar Streak* is set in an atmosphere of disquieting political machinations in Europe few months before the outbreak of World War II. Its story evolves around the figure of Vincent Penhale, who travels with his upper-class friend Martin to Venice. Here

they meet Mrs. Mallow and her daughter April, who are also members of upper class society. Vincent's rapid conquest (his name meaning *the conqueror* (42)) of April (and her class), and her sudden pregnancy accelerate their marriage and settlement in London. A few weeks later, Vincent's sister Maddie informs him of their father's death and imminent funeral. This tragic event turns out to be very grotesque with both siblings adopting patronising attitudes towards the rest of the family who, like them, are working-class.

One day, the Police discover information implicating Vincent's involvement in a fraudulent note forgery business and his complicity in the death of Tandish, a government agent assassinated by Vincent's friend Halvorsen a few days earlier. The story appears in the newspaper, and April reads it with amazement. Vincent feels repentant, and asks his wife for forgiveness, but April suffers a haemorrhage, leading to the loss of their baby and her eventual death. As a result, Vincent commits suicide.

In our view, this character's principles of conduct are very curious. This Englishman with fascist sympathies, disguised as a cultivated 'gentleman', looks, talks and *behaves* as such, while his social encounters are motivated by working-class ideals, such as money and the possession of high social standing. Bearing in mind Foa's and Foa's assumptions (1974) about *manipulative behaviour*, we maintain that Vincent behaves both as a *flatterer* and, to a larger degree, as an *ingratiator* in his social interactions.¹ Vincent aims to attain social approval (and, thus, achieve certain privileges) in order to exert power on his fellow men. However, he ends up behaving in this slanted way even with his wife, relatives and friends, and people belonging to the same class. Vincent flatters his wife April because he likes her sex and, above all, her money, and he is often proud of his cunning, since this helps him improve his social

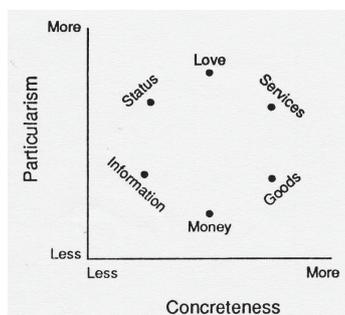
¹ Some critics confuse the term *ingratiation* with *flattery*. Foa and Foa (1974:252-254) base their assumptions about ingratiation on Jones' work (1964:11), where the scholar uses these two terms differently. Thus, *flattery* refers to the situation in which "the securing of attraction is less important than the securing of benefit, and when over-generous praise is especially involved"; *ingratiation* "is a class of strategic behaviours illicitly designed to influence a particular other person concerning the attractiveness of one's personal qualities". Both *flattery* and *cunning* are rejected throughout Lewis's critical production recurrently. The artist refers to these two notions, when he comments on the behaviour of British civilians in *The Vulgar Streak*. It is not strange that we observe a large number of illustrations of both types of illegitimate behaviour in *The Vulgar Streak*.

standing. As he says: "If I am able to deceive people that elates me" (30). Consequently, Vincent likes not only to flatter but also to plot, manipulate, and deceive April, his friends, his in-laws and relatives, and other people. Vincent's aim is to obtain social approval, since this is the only thing that will ultimately furnish him with financial standing in his fictional world. Nonetheless, the tactical ploys utilised by Vincent as instruments of power show only the erosion and deflection of such power.

2. Relevance of Resource Theory

The significance of Resource Theory in studying these aspects of *The Vulgar Streak* lies in the fact that it is an integrated methodological tool for understanding social behaviour and the relationships conformed between individuals in everyday life. This methodology is based on the idea that people depend on one another for the material and psychological resources necessary for their well being, which drives them to associate and exchange these two different resource types through interpersonal behaviour. Foa and Foa (1974:36) define a resource as "any commodity, material or symbolic, which is transmitted through interpersonal behaviour". To carry out this research on social interactions, they give meaning to behaviour, and then, class together those behaviours with similar meaning. In this way, they (Foa 1971, quoted in Converse *et al* 1993:15) differentiate the six basic dimensions of their resources structure classified as rewards and punishments according to six categories: love, status, information, money, goods and services. As a result, the location of each resource class according to its degree of *particularism* and *concreteness* produces the following structure of resources:²

² According to Foa (1971), quoted in Converse *et al* 1993:16), the attribute of *particularism* indicates the extent to which the value of a given resource depends upon the individuals involved in the exchange, and their relationship. Love is a highly *particularistic* resource since we tend to be highly selective when choosing a person with whom to exchange tokens of love. In contrast, money is the least *particularistic* resource because, in general, it matters very little with whom we exchange it, and of all the resources, money is most likely to retain the same value regardless of the relation between the agent and recipient. Services and status are less *particularistic* than love but more *particularistic* than goods and information. The notion of *particularism* is formerly explained by Parsons (1951), Longabaugh (1966) and Blau (1967); Foa (1976:80) applies this notion in order to construct his Resource Theory framework. The attribute of *concreteness* ranges from concrete to symbolic. Services and goods involve the exchange of some tangible activity or product and are classed as concrete. Status and information, on the other hand, are typically conveyed by verbal or paralinguistic behaviour and are thus more symbolic. Love and money are exchanged in both concrete and symbolic forms, occupying an intermediate position on this co-ordinate.



The Cognitive structure of resource classes.
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These principles concerning interpersonal behaviour and resource categories imply that every interpersonal attitude consists of giving and/or taking away one or more resources. According to Foa and Foa (1974), resource exchanges provide the means by which individuals can obtain their needed resources and, consequently, satisfaction in distinct settings. In this regard, their resources structure provides a framework for the systematic classification of interpersonal behaviour. This is why we consider Resource Theory to be more than adequate for describing the distorted significance of Vincent's social attitude and interactions in *The Vulgar Streak*.

Lewis's scholars have never considered *The Vulgar Streak* as one of the writer's masterpieces. In fact, some of his most well known critics, such as Symons (1969) or Edwards (quoted in Lewis1985), have rightly suggested that this popular novel has many faults. Lewis's early naïve support of Fascism leads him to bankruptcy. Thus, he feels forced to gain some money quickly. As a result, he writes *The Vulgar Streak* in a rush. Nonetheless, his later disappointment with Fascism drives Lewis to condemn the use of force, power, and corruption for its own sake, or as a means to fulfil one's selfish interests in *The Vulgar Streak*.³ In this

³ Biographer Meyers (1982:186) puts this situation well: "Fascist ideology was designed to attract the lower middle classes who were disillusioned by the post-war world, angered by social disorder, industrial stagnation, chronic unemployment and the collapse of currency, fearful of communism and hostile to traditional political parties. Though Lewis was educated and elitist, he shared all these political attitudes as well as a lower middle class income, and was anxiously concerned about how he would earn enough to live on. Because Fascism seemed to offer a stable society governed by a romantic leader who stopped decadence, guaranteed peace by opposing Communism, aestheticized politics and promised respect and rewards for the artist, it attracted an entire generation of modern writers who were radical in their literary technique but drawn to the new totalitarian politics. [...] Despite (Lewis's) genius, which may have led (him) to create an imaginative political ideal to replace crude reality, (he) failed to understand the most significant political issues of (his) time".

sense, we consider that its anti-war and didactic social spirit deserves some special attention for various reasons. First, the novel reflects the narrator's imperative desire to portray certain irregularities in contemporary government institutions and the British class-structure within society. Second, largely through one-sided satirical techniques, it describes the ways in which Western society took many of the aforementioned irregularities for granted at that time. Third, it shows Lewis's helpless effort to recreate the destructive effects of Fascism and war on Western civilization.⁴ Due to all these facts, it is our aim to analyse Vincent's ingratiatory conduct and biased commodity transactions in an attempt to throw some new light on certain sociological facts and implications recreated in this fictional work which have not been previously studied by Lewis's critics. As a result, this study illuminates two facts: on the one hand, the idiosyncratic portrait of the world and human relationships in *The Vulgar Streak*. On the other, the fact that Lewis's radical techniques constitute his own method of recreating and condemning the negative effects of the extreme degree of illegitimacy approved by the State, government institutions and society in his time, rather than an example of his bias.⁵

3. *The Vulgar Streak*: a resource theory analysis

One of the main reasons why Vincent deceives himself into believing that he conducts himself in strategic ways is the generalised class-discrimination spirit that exists in Britain. This character wishes to modify the current class-structure in his country since its State

⁴ Lewis writes various *anti-war* books such as *Left Wings Over Europe: Or, How to Make a War about Nothing* (1936) and *Count Your Dead: They Are Alive! Or, a New War in the Making* (1937) in this period. Here he shows the irrationality of the arguments used by those who tried to instil in people's minds the positive aspects of going through World War II. Concerning this issue, we support Head (1992:15), when the scholar posits that "Lewis's books have often been dismissed by his critics as pro-fascist apologetics" in an unjustifiable manner. In this regard, this paper attempts to show that Lewis is against the use of force and violence for its own sake, or as a means to attain pragmatic and destructive objectives in *The Vulgar Streak*. Thus, his recurrent portrait of aggressive human behaviour and relationships throughout his fiction is a radical technique used by him to illustrate their loathsome effects on society's functioning.

⁵ Following Corbett (1998) and other excellent critics such as Edwards, Munton, Normand, Hardegen, and Wragg, we believe that arguments of critics like Trotter, Julius, Ryan, Gilbert, Foster, Scott, Blair, Mengham, O'Connor, Stevie Smith or Hewitt do not often follow a correct logic, because they usually distort and manipulate quotations from the work of the writer in order to suit their particular interests. Thus, far from illuminating the production of Lewis, the last scholars describe him and his work in very unfair ways. Contrarily, we consider that certain aspects of Lewis' production such as its distorted social images must be studied within a historical perspective.

intervention economy only causes “misery and injustice” (182) to its less privileged segments and makes class-circulation in society impossible. This skewed principle, which conditions his actions and social encounters throughout the novel, affects to a large extent the view he has of himself, life, and people in general. As a result, he is driven by a compulsive desire to attain social standing (status) and to enjoy a life of pleasure and privilege (money). However, this obsession causes him to experience pathological disorders such as anxiety, frustration, and desire of retaliation (aggression), and leads him to indulge in ingratiatory practices and to try to exert power on his own species in his daily encounters.

Vincent experiences anxiety because he expects to receive concrete resources such as money and goods from his wife April and his mother-in-law Ms. Mallow, yet he is aware that the latter is suspicious of him and so he could lose this kind of resources at any time.⁶ Vincent also feels frustrated because he considers that he is deprived of his expected resources by the middle and upper classes.⁷ His disappointment stems from the fact that he has lost concrete resources and has been left with an amount that is below the minimum level. Thus, this perceived resource deficiency produces frustration in him. Furthermore, Vincent exerts aggression on several characters in the novel by inflicting the loss of some resource on them. He can be said to behave in an aggressive manner towards them because his acts are intentional and socially disapproved. Both of these elements introduce love deprivation into his aggressive acts, in addition to the specific resource involved and, thus, strengthen the effect of loss in his victims. Finally, Vincent considers that his fellow men possess power since they have more than a minimum amount of one or more resources and can, therefore, give these resources to others in exchange for resources possessed by them. Since Vincent is in need of concrete resources, he believes that the rest of characters exert power in various resources on him.⁸

Apart from these facts, we observe that the political and socio-economic circumstances of the stately urban environment of London,

⁶ See Foa's and Foa's (1974: 366-369) re-definition of *anxiety*.

⁷ Foa and Foa (1974: 220-240) also conceptualise the *frustration-aggression* sequence as a type of resource exchange.

⁸ See Cartwright & Zander (1968:216-217). These facts imply that there is a reciprocal relationship between *need* and *power*.

where *The Vulgar Streak* evolves, have enormous importance in defining the idiosyncrasy of Vincent's interpersonal attitude and relationships with other characters in the novel. This environmental situation promotes the transaction of concrete commodities, while disregarding *particularistic* ones. As Vincent says: "We should keep away from the cities. [...] I shouldn't wonder if all our troubles come from the monster cities" (10). In fact, the circumstances of this civilian *milieu* and the lack of social control effective instruments facilitate two phenomena. In the first place, the appearance of negative money, information and status transactions in some of its less privileged members like Vincent, his sister Maddie, and his friend Halvorsen. These three characters behave in this aggressive manner motivated by the extreme competition, jealousy, and hatred that exist between members of the same and different social and financial status. According to Vincent, these facts are not strange at all since the violation of social norms by high-class members has little effect as deterrent in this large city, while authorities punish regulation misuse severely when underprivileged members perform it. This is why he states that there is "One law for the Rich -One for the Poor. You can't escape from facts" (210) in his country.

In the second place, these external circumstances cause the State and its citizenship to accept an extreme degree of illicit human practices (disguised as democratic) as social norms. For example, Vincent's friend Halvorsen hates "the social order, as it exists" in Britain, and has a money theory: the State subjugates working-class members. Therefore, he considers that defrauding the current social order by counterfeiting money is not illegitimate but "a highly moral act". Here is Halvorsen speaking:

The modern state is based upon organized-*legalized*-Fraud [...] to counterfeit its fraudulent and oppressively administered currency [...] an act of poetic justice. (213)

At the same time, all these facts account for a large number of unsavoury aspects of civilian life: first, Halvorsen's alienation and criminal instinct; second, Vincent's mother's drug abuse; and, third, the latter's suicide. The socio-economic circumstances of this metropolitan area do not appear to fulfil Vincent and Halvorsen's expectations satisfactorily. Thus, the latter does not see his function in society adequately respected or appreciated by the State and society's larger segments. On the contrary, Halvorsen believes that the State promotes

the class structure system in his country, that is, a system that only favours a few social groups: upper and middle classes. Halvorsen experiences his shortage of *particularistic* resources like status, and of concrete commodities like money and goods as estrangement. This is why he is unable to find self-gratifying activities in society that engage him sufficiently, that is, the main sources of his existential predicament. This is why Halvorsen opts to be out of society, and involves himself and his friend Vincent in illicit practices such as note forgery. As a result, these two characters conduct themselves as real misanthropes or outlaws throughout the novel.

What is more, Vincent's mother spends her husband's pension on alcohol. This fact usually causes her to wander about the streets. Consequently, the Police often brings her home in a very bad state of health, something that is very degrading to her daughter Maddie ("It's so humiliating, Vincent!" (168)). Finally, Vincent commits suicide right after he realises that his wife has died because of his enormous cynicism.⁹ This is why he leaves a paper pinned upon his chest reading:

WHOEVER FINDS THE BODY,
MAY DO WHAT THEY LIKE WITH IT.
I DON'T WANT IT.
Signed. ITS FORMER INHABITANT. (230)

Thus, environmental circumstances in this large metropolitan area contribute to the unhappiness, low self-esteem and welfare and the unsatisfactory quality of life of Society's less privileged segments to a very large extent. The members of these underprivileged social layers share the feeling of being oppressed and exploited by the State, its institutions and representatives, and its privileged classes. This is why this fact plays such an important part in turning out their interpersonal behaviour to be one-sided in form, and their human relationships to be distorted in meaning. It is not strange that the overall interpersonal behaviour of Lewis's characters in *The Vulgar Streak* is inherently

⁹ We think that Vincent's suicide stems from the lack of moral rules in the society in which he inhabits. Concerning *suicide*, we find that Durkheim's (views clarify our assumptions. The sociologist 1967:164) considers that 'anomic suicide' has its origin in the characteristics of large sectors of modern industry, where the function of severe punishment in society is not considered to be very necessary, yet this is an important factor that permits the attainment of social unity. In fact, the need of such unity is something that Lewis calls attention to in this novel by throwing into prominence or representing its lack in it.

aggressive. Furthermore, social relationships are conflicting, superficial, and, often, unorthodox in nature. The need for social acceptance and personal significance is very high. However, interdependence and cooperation between members of both the same and different class and gender are very scarce.

Within this context, Vincent's wife April is a unique character, which reflects the positive side of human relations in *The Vulgar Streak*. Contrary to the rest of characters, the interpersonal attitude and resource transactions of April with her species are motivated by principles such as kindness and altruism in all types of settings. Thus, April is "in love" with Vincent and she trades resources with him determined by selfless love and communion only to gain intrinsic satisfaction and reward. In doing so, April is the only character who *says* she loves him and *means* it.

Naturally, this view of love is in considerable contrast with that of Vincent. His interpersonal behaviour and resource exchanges with her are determined by values that are egotistic, opportunistic, and deceitful in nature, and, above all, anchored in the exchange of rewards. In other words, he behaves towards her and other characters in the novel as if he were an ambitious businessman making deals with other businessmen in a market setting.¹⁰

4. Resource Theory impact on the fictional population of *The Vulgar Streak*

The study of the interpersonal behaviour and relationships performed by Vincent (and Maddie and Halvorsen *passim*) in *The Vulgar Streak* shows that Lewis makes use of the real satirist's scorn to condemn the extreme degree of hypocrisy, aggression, and illegitimacy that were prevalent in British society and institutions during the period between the two wars. Lewis does so by illustrating the forms and guises of this character's unorthodox tactics, the antecedents of such strategies, the

¹⁰ Throughout his work, biographer Meyers (1982) states that April (like Margot in *Revenge for Love*, Hester in *Self-Condemed* and Mary Chillingham in *The Red Priest*) is characterised by extreme kindness. These four female characters are tributes to Lewis' wife Froanna, who took care of Lewis while he was sick, and remained by his side, despite his always difficult and iced personality.

external conditions that favour their practices and their loathsome implications for social relationships.¹¹

The Vulgar Streak represents the seedy side of human relations, where a character like Vincent trades commodities directed toward objectives not contained in the implicit contract that underlies his behaviour and social interactions. In support of this view, we make Chapman's (1973: 134-135) words ours. Lewis shows "the socially acceptable means of escaping from the restrictions of working class culture" in a time in which "traditional normative and moral standards" were "in a process of disintegration".

Following the social scientist Blau (1967), we consider that big social changes, which benefit many segments of society, need to be originated in face-to-face social exchanges that are equitable, and above all, licit in nature, that is, like those performed by April in *The Vulgar Streak*. Otherwise imbalances emerge and these, in turn, give origin to power struggles, which transform into greater power struggles with increased opposition at a superior level. Since the resource exchanges Vincent performs to attain his needed commodities are not legitimate in meaning, they indirectly produce an imbalance of power and much dissatisfaction for the other participants involved. As a result, Vincent neither contributes any instrument to improve his own welfare, happiness, and "quality of life", nor those of the participants with whom he interacts. On the contrary, Vincent behaves like a cynic causing extreme human suffering to his wife April, who loves him selflessly, and to his sister Maddie, who has constructed her personality following his advice.¹² In this regard, Vincent does not provide any constructive instrument to reorganise Britain's illegitimate institutions, social structures and organizations as he wishes. Far from this, his resource exchanges in face-to-face interactions both in *particularistic* and in *non-particularistic* contexts are illicit in nature as well.

¹¹ These assumptions are not characteristic of *The Vulgar Streak* exclusively. They can be applied to novels such as *Snooty Baronet* and *The Revenge for Love* as well. As Chapman (1973:134) suggests: "where *Revenge for Love* exposes the sham politics of the class-war *The Vulgar Streak* explores through the medium of Vincent's experience the social snobberies and tensions inherent in British society".

¹² We agree with Chapman (1973:136) when the critic says: "Just as Vincent created his self, so, indirectly, has he created Maddie [...] Her modelling is a more passive form of counterfeit, but equally destructive of self [...] At the end of the novel, Maddie is still modelling and using her beauty to attract a man. In spite of Vincent's recognition of the hollowness of the pursuit, nothing has changed: the class trap still forces Maddie into this passive fraud".

Vincent aims to perfect society's deficiencies. Nonetheless, this brief study of his interpersonal conduct and relationships from a Resource Theory perspective has shown that he should co-operate with his own species if he really wishes to gain collective goals and to eradicate human distress and oppression. Since Vincent does not behave in this particular manner at all, he could be said to be one more victim of the Capitalist Establishment, and its individualistic ideology and values. Thus, Vincent's self-interests betray his social motivations, and lead him to use all types of ingratiation strategies and to exert aggression and power on his fellow men in all kinds of settings. As a result, Lewis succeeds in satirically reflecting all of these social implications, and in making Vincent conduct a positive act as well. In other words, he forces his audience to reconsider that new forms of social reorganisation were extremely urgent in order to attain more happiness and the betterment of life for all of its members, and to preserve the species. Perhaps, April's altruistic patterns of conduct and values are in the novel to show us the means to achieve so in real life.

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