

APOLLO AND MAMMON: THE PORTRAYAL OF MONEY IN LITERATURE



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Abstract

This is a little off beat, but I want to look at the way the world of business, management and finance has been perceived by imaginative writers through an examination of some seminal literary works from Dickens (Gradgrind and Micawber) through T.S. Eliot (“A lusterless protrusive eye/Stares from the protozoic slime”) to Philip Larkin (“Certainly the Foundation will Bear your Expenses.”). It will be readily seen through an examination of these texts that the world of business and finance has always been looked on with a jaundiced eye by creative writers. I will pose the question why and try to reach a few thought-provoking conclusions.

Keywords: Apollo, Mammon, Money in Literature

I'd like to begin with a quote from the song “Money” by Pink Floyd:

***Money it's a crime
Share it fairly but don't take a slice of my pie
Money so they say
Is the root of all evil today
But if you ask for a rise it's no surprise
That they're giving none away¹***



Here is an attitude well understood by anyone who pays the taxman reluctantly. Of course, we all want fairness and justice and to see everyone looked after when they're sick—but most people don't really want the government to take a slice of "their pie". Perhaps it is suggested in Roger Waters' ironic lyrics that money acquires a life of its own and has a profound power of corruption over us "Money so they say/Is the root of all evil today" Is this because it brings out the worst qualities in all of us: those of greed and of being parsimonious? It seems that the lyric suggests this, with its closing trope of "if you ask for a rise...they're giving none away".

Also in more classical forms of literary expression we find the same negative attitude to money. Charles Dickens of course expressed an almost wholly negative view of money and finance and this is possibly best exemplified in the famous quote of Mr. Micawber's from *David Copperfield*:

"Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen [pounds] nineteen [shillings] and six [pence], result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery."²

Dickens knew about the power of money and overspending from his own personal experience. When he was still a boy his father had been imprisoned for debt and Dickens had had to go and work at a boot blacking factory to help the family finances.³ It was an experience he never forgot and in his novels the men of commerce such as Gradgrind in *Hard Times* and Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* are heartless automatons piling up money without any thought for the misery they inflict on people. Even the names are enough to give us Dickens' point of view about them: Gradgrind and Scrooge!

Money doesn't really get a better portrayal in Shakespeare. The Bard puts the famous adage about being neither a borrower nor a lender in the mouth of Polonius who Hamlet accidentally kills due to his busybody eavesdropping habits. The Prince of Denmark doesn't express much regret at his action, saying:



“Indeed this counselor is now most still, most secret, and most grave, who was in life a foolish prating knave.”⁴

In another play, *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock, the moneylender, insists on cutting an equivalent pound of flesh from his victim’s body when the loanee is unable to repay an outstanding debt: an extreme attitude to debt collection!⁵

The fact is, that wherever you look in the world of literature you will hardly find a kind word to be said on the subject of finance and money. Perhaps this should not surprise us as writers are imaginative artists who always strive to perpetuate their art on the basis of laying bare the dynamics of conflict in society--and no one is better suited to play the part of the evil demon creating conflict than the heartless capitalist who sees all value in Euros and dollars.

In the modern age, literary antipathy for money has increased rather than become more muted. Partly this is due to the politicization of many writers in the 20th century due to the growth of socialism and communism. Perhaps it is also, at least to some extent, due to the loss of earlier ethical certainties: in a world which has lost its moral compass it seems the utilitarian laws of high finance can rule over all of us as a kind of metaphorical Satan, reducing everyone to the lowest common denominator of exact monetary value. In the modern literary world, money with its associations of drugs, fast food, instant access, credit, computers, faxes, fruit machines, and so on, is seen as the key to unlocking an ever more potent force of addiction (chemical, mechanical, electronic and digital) that enslaves and corrupts the world in mindless self-indulgence. Money is the essential key to this power but it is also controlled by it: it is a self-reproducing, cyclical process in which advanced financial societies are perpetually trapped.

Philip Larkin is one modern poet with this bleak, postmodern antipathy for money and our dependence on it. In his poem “Money” there is a deep dissatisfaction expressed with money as fetish object in and for itself and also with the sordid forms of self-indulgence it



can purchase while the modern “Everyman” traverses the primrose path of certain self-destruction.

*Quarterly, is it, money reproaches me:
‘Why do you let me lie here wastefully?
I am all you never had of goods....
You could get them still by writing a few cheques.’*

*So I look at others, what they do with theirs:
They certainly don’t keep it upstairs.
By now they’ve a second house and car and wife:
Clearly money has something to do with life*

*—In fact, they’ve a lot in common, if you enquire:
You can’t put off being young until you retire,
And however you bank your notes, the money you save
Won’t in the end buy you more than a shave.⁶*

It is unsatisfactory both to save money and to spend it then. Save it and you end up as miserly and corrupt as Dickens’ proverbial Scrooge. However, if you spend it you will become a victim of a mindless and spirit-crushing materialism: a self-perpetuating, vicious cycle of mindless consumerism. Moreover, whatever you do, money is sure to lead to your destruction in the end. Be a Scrooge with all that means in terms of loneliness and isolation or get turned over by the financial sharks who promise you everything but deliver nothing: “And however you bank your notes, the money you save/Won’t in the end buy you more than a shave.”

The last stanza of Larkins’ poem finishes bleakly and somewhat wistfully:

*I listen to money singing. It’s like looking down
From long French windows at a provincial town,*



The slums, the canal, the churches ornate and mad

In the evening sun. It is intensely sad.

Also for the Great Gatsby money had a musical note—but for him it resided in Daisy's voice. When Nick observes that Daisy has a strange and distinctive tone to her voice, Gatsby replies that it "sounds like money". This is not a compliment in the context of the novel which sets up a conflict between a base materialism and more abstract spiritual ideals. It is effectively a way that the author, Fitzgerald, has of telling us that Gatsby is wasting his spiritual investment in Daisy who will never be capable of appreciating the great profundity of his complex nature.⁷

Even T.S. Eliot was negative about money in his poetry—in spite of having worked as a banker during his early life in London. Speaking of a rich banker trying to appreciate high art Eliot, expresses his contempt:

A lusterless protrusive eye

Stares from the protozoic slime

At a perspective of Canaletto.

The smoky candle end of time declines.⁹

This seems downright mean towards the banker. He isn't simply being criticized for heartlessness or a lack of spiritual empathy with his poorer brothers. No! Rather, he is portrayed here as an inhuman monster lacking the slightest empathy with artistic endeavor of any sort! His "lusterless protrusive eye" is quite unable to understand anything with a spiritual dimension, because it originates from "the protozoic slime". However, he looks in the direction of a Canaletto painting because he does not wish other more appreciative people to understand that he is empty of the spirituality that is essential to a true appreciation of art of any kind.

The picture then, is fairly bleak. We simply have to accept that literature and money don't go together very well. Even conservative writers like Eliot possess an uncompromising antipathy towards money, finance and bankers. As suggested earlier, this is possibly due to the writer's inner need to always find a bad guy to initiate the conflict his stories must, of



necessity, thrive upon. However, it is also in some part due to the wide difference in mental mindset between a creative artist for whom life is an experiment in self-realization and a banker who wishes to take the fewest risks possible in order to hold and keep that which he already possesses--while placing little value on abstract notions like “creativity” and “spiritual development”.

This paper has, so far, been fairly bleak and negative about money as viewed by literary artists. Therefore, I’d like to try and inject a little hope into the paper before finishing, by looking at a couple of the more humorous literary comments about money. The great Oscar Wilde is always a good source of humour and he doesn’t let us down on the subject of money. Making good use of those twin engines of humour, paradox and irony, Wilde has the following to say: “When I was young I thought money was the most important thing in life; now that I’m old, I know that it is.”¹⁰

Finally, I will close by giving the last word to a comedic artist, Bob Hope. “A bank is”, he says, “a place that will lend you money if you can prove that you don’t need it!”¹¹

NOTES

1. Roger Waters is famously anti big business. See “Welcome to the Machine” and “Have a Cigar” from *Wish You Were Here*.
2. Perhaps the most famous quote in all of Dickens?
3. A humiliating experience for Dickens that was self-defining
4. The contempt is emphasized by the remark “I’ll lug the guts into a neighbor room”.
5. An example of hatred breeding hatred. Shylock is despised by everyone in Venice.
6. Larkin consistently used rhyme in ironic and paradoxical ways.
7. I presented a paper at the ALSCW conference in Indiana University in April, 2014, suggesting that Gatsby was the last of the original American pioneers.
8. However, Thomas had an axe to grind: he had been borrowing money from Eliot.
9. Some truly vicious vitriol from Eliot!
10. Most of Wilde’s quotes are understood as being heart-felt quotes of a direct kind. However, the majority are lifted from his plays.



11. A simple witticism or a hard truth?

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