



”If I Could Think of Somewhere to Go”

Alienation in S.E. Hinton’s *Rumble Fish*

”Om jag kunde hitta någonstans att gå”
Utanförskap i S.E. Hintons *Rumble Fish*

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the alienation experienced by Rusty-James in S.E. Hinton's *Rumble Fish* (1975). It more specifically centers on the causes of his alienation and how the alienation is illustrated in the novel. The analysis shows that the alienation Rusty-James experiences is caused partly by socioeconomic factors; for example his lack of hope for the future is closely connected to the fact that he belongs to a low socioeconomic class. In addition, there are also psychological factors, for example a childhood trauma. The alienation and its causes are mainly illustrated through the symbolism of the featured Siamese fighting fish and how Rusty-James' relationships are depicted.

S.E. Hinton's *Rumble Fish* (1975) deals with the difficulties of growing up and finding one's place in the world. The story is narrated by main character Rusty-James and is mostly built up like a flashback of his teenage years. The story begins with Rusty-James running into his childhood friend Steve at a beach in California. This causes Rusty-James to look back at his formative years as a teenager. At the beginning of the flashback Rusty-James' older brother, the Motorcycle Boy, unexpectedly returns home after having been missing for a couple of weeks. The Motorcycle Boy is famous in their hometown and Rusty-James wants to be just like him when he grows up. One night the Motorcycle Boy breaks into a pet shop in an attempt to free the pet fish into the river, but he is killed by a cop. The fish die as well. Following this incident, the story is brought back to the present, where Rusty-James stands on the beach with Steve. Rusty-James says goodbye and hopes that he will be able to forget all the memories Steve brought to the surface.

The aim of this essay is to look closer at the alienation of the main character, Rusty-James. I argue that his alienation has its roots in socioeconomic circumstances and Rusty-James' warped concept of love. Furthermore, I argue that the causes and the alienation itself is illustrated through the depiction of Rusty-James' relationships and through symbolism. I will use Marxist and psychoanalytical theories as a framework to highlight these aspects of the novel. The whole novel revolves around abandonment and alienation, both caused partly by the society surrounding the characters and the traumas they carry with them since childhood. Very little previous research exists that discusses Hinton's novel – which is a little bit strange considering its large readership - which makes the present study fill a gap in the field. Firstly, the concept and causes of Rusty-James' alienation will be viewed from a Marxist perspective. The Marxist theories will be a helpful tool when trying to understand how society shaped the characters and helped cause their problems. Secondly, the focus will move from Marxist theories to psychoanalytical theories. The psychoanalytical theories will be useful when looking at the childhood of the characters and the relationships between the characters. Lastly, it will be possible to see how the things uncovered through the Marxist and the psychoanalytical perspectives are reflected in terms of symbolism in the novel.

It is sometimes claimed that Marxist and psychoanalytical theories do not go together, and it is not an easy fit. Ernesto Laclau explains how it is possible to bridge the gap between the fields in his article "Psychoanalysis and Marxism". Laclau claims that it is not a question of replacing one theory with another, but rather to find "an *index of comparison*" (330). He suggests that one should question what exists beyond the traditions of concepts and their meanings, beyond the Marxist tradition, in order to find "the original meaning of the

categories of this tradition” (Laclau 330). The core of all concepts, Marxist and others, is ambiguous and if one can find that ambiguity it is possible to see past the limitations of Marxist concepts (Laclau 331). Seeing the ambiguity of concepts and categories “allows for the establishment of a *true* dialogue . . . between Marxism and psychoanalytic theories” (Laclau 331). Laclau emphasizes that one must not replace one theory with the other, “the unconscious instead of economy” for example, but rather view it as “the coincidence of the two” (333). The concept of alienation is a social phenomenon within Marxist theory, but it affects the individual and therefore it is also relevant to make use of psychoanalytic theories. With this in mind, I have made use of both Marxist and psychoanalytical theories in this essay.

As previously stated, a Marxist perspective of Rusty-James’ alienation will begin the essay. Eagleton in *Marxism and Literary Criticism* says that Marxist criticism considers what kind of historical conditions were in place during the time the literary work was created (Eagleton xi). Marxist criticism also “aims to understand *ideologies* – the ideas, values and feelings by which men experience their societies at various times” (Eagleton xiii). Ideologies are for example ideas, values and laws that are made up by the ruling class (Eagleton 5). In order to explain how ideologies work and what they are, one must begin by explaining what makes them necessary. Marxist critics claim that social relations in a society and between men are limited and partly constructed by how they produce their material life (Eagleton 4). For example, the relationship between the capitalist class and the proletarian class are based on the fact that capitalists buy the proletarians’ labor-power to make profit (Eagleton 5). These relationships and structures related to production are difficult to break out of and makes up what, according to Eagleton, Marx called “the economic structure of society” (qtd in Eagleton 5). This could be described as the base of every society.

From every base or structure rises a “superstructure” (Eagleton 5). The superstructure can be certain laws or politics that are in place to “legitimate the power of the social class which owns the means of economic production” (Eagleton 5). Ideology is part of a superstructure, since it is the values, ideas and ideals that the ruling class spreads with the same intent as the laws and politics – to validate their power (Eagleton 5). To return to the previous example, the capitalist class would set up a superstructure of laws, politics and ideology to validate their power over the proletarian class. According to Marx, the capitalist class owns the proletarians because if the proletarians do not work for the capitalists, they will not get any money and if they do not get any money they will eventually die (661). To keep this kind of power over another class the capitalists need to reinforce it with ideas, laws and

values that favor them – ideology and superstructure. It is vital for the ruling class to make it seem like their interests are the best interests for everyone in society; otherwise they will lose power (Marx 657). Ideology is the illusion the leading class projects to make it seem like what they do will benefit everyone, not only themselves. It encourages people to live out their roles in a class-society (Eagleton 15). Marx points out that the class who owns the means of production often are also considered to be the leading class intellectually, making it difficult for lower classes to influence the society (656). This makes it even harder to question the values, ideas and laws of the ruling class, since they are generally considered to be beneficial for everyone. It is difficult for someone from the lower classes to stand up against the upper classes because as they are controlled they are also made up to be inferior in every way.

A term often used in this essay is *alienation*. Marxist criticism discusses the concept of alienation, though usually closely related to labor. According to the online glossary of the Marxist Internet Archive, Marx was worried about how industrialism would make the laborers alienated from the product they made and from their own labor. Alienation happens when the workers no longer can relate to the product they are making and therefore lose their sense of recognition in the work (“Alienation”). This phenomenon mostly happens to the lower classes in society, since they are the ones working in factories. According to Tyson in *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* (2006), Marxist theories claim that everything happens because of material and historical circumstances (Tyson 55). In other words, the events in one’s life depend on one’s socioeconomic class. Those who belong to a high socioeconomic class have a better chance to improve their life and have a good standard of living, while those belonging to a lower class have very limited means to try to change their situation (Tyson, 54). The concepts ideology and alienation are relevant for the essay because Rusty-James and his family live in a working-class part of town where many struggle with drug addiction, and gang violence has been a problem in the past. Rusty-James’ father has no job and depends entirely on government benefits, placing the family in one of the lower socioeconomic classes in society. This influences Rusty-James’ life in a negative way and contributes to him being alienated.

The influence of the socioeconomic class you belong to is very easily spotted when looking at Rusty-James and his friend Steve. They have very different views of the future and their chances to make it out of town. Rusty-James seldom talks about the future. When Rusty-James’ friend Steve talks about moving out of town when he gets older, Rusty-James remarks that he cannot relate: “I quit listening. I don’t see any sense in thinking about things far off in the future” (Hinton 13). At a later occasion, when he has gotten the news that

he will be transferred to another school outside of his turf, the headmaster asks him if it is not time for him to start thinking about his future. Steve also points at Rusty-James' lack of plan for the future: "You're just like a ball in a pinball machine. Getting slammed back and forth; and you never think about anything, about where you're going or how you're going to get there" (Hinton 113) he says to Rusty-James in a desperate try to make his friend open his eyes.

One of the main things that differentiate Rusty-James' and Steve' view of the future is Steve's strong faith in the American Dream. Steve firmly believes that if you work hard enough, you will get to wherever you want to be. In the eyes of a Marxist critic, the American Dream is a false ideal. It is a part of the ideology the upper-class has created to stay in power. Eagleton explains that the economic structure of a society is built on the social relations between people and the classes in the prevailing class-system (5). From this structure certain ways of thinking, values, ideas and rules rise, all of them favoring the social class in power (Eagleton 5). These ideas, values and laws form an ideology and through enforcing this ideology the upper-class can stay keep the power (Eagleton 5). The main purpose of the ideology is to assure all or most of the citizens that it is natural that one of the social classes rules over all others (Eagleton 5). It is also possible to create an ideology which is so effective that the rest of society does not notice that one of the social classes has power over the others (Eagleton 5). The ideology encourages people to live out their roles in the class-society and "tie them to their social functions and so prevent them from a true knowledge of society as a whole" (Eagleton 15).

The American Dream is a well-established ideal which is said to apply to everyone, but not everyone gets the opportunity to make it. Rusty-James thinks to himself that "I had to worry about money, and whether or not the old man would drink up his check before I got part of it . . . and I had a cop itching to blow my brains out . . . So I didn't have much time for serious thinking about my life" (Hinton 63-64). The American Dream is an ideal that does not appeal to Rusty-James, because he does not have the ability or material conditions necessary to begin to work his way up through the class system. This is an example of how parts of the ideology encourage people to do their part in the class to which they belong without questioning it. Rusty-James is not aware of the possibilities his future could hold because he is too busy trying to stay alive. The American Dream benefits Steve more than it benefits Rusty-James, because Steve has more material and economic means to start working his way up. The American Dream clouds the vision of the citizenry and makes it easy to blame the lower classes for not reaching success, instead of pointing to the richer classes for

not giving the unfortunate the means necessary to succeed. The false ideal that tells society that if you work hard enough you will become rich makes it easy for people from higher socioeconomic classes to look down on the lower class and label them “lazy” and “unambitious”. This makes it possible for the wealthy and powerful classes to stay in power – because it seems to the public as if they have earned their power and therefore should get to keep it. In a society where the natural way of thinking is to view the suffering of the less fortunate people as something they brought upon themselves, it is very difficult to change your position on the social ladder.

Rusty-James is still young and the authority he has to answer to is his school. School should help Rusty-James get more opportunities for a better future, but it does not. Rusty-James’ school does not do much to support Rusty-James to try to ensure his development towards academic success. They place him in an environment where he is uninspired, with people he feels have nothing to offer him from a motivational standpoint:

I’m always in dumb classes. In grade school they start separating the dumb people from smart people and it only takes you a couple of years to figure out which one you are. I guess it’s easier on the teachers that way, but I think I might like to get in a class with some different people sometimes instead of the same old dummies every year. (Hinton 44)

The headmaster tells Rusty-James that he has to change schools and that “they are equipped to handle your kind” at the new school (Hinton 62). Rusty-James does not want to go to the new school because he has enemies there, who would not hesitate to kill him if they got a chance. His school does not take this into account at all. The headmaster’s reality and Rusty James’ reality are very different from each other and the people in school do not try to see Rusty-James’ side of things. They do not care about Rusty-James’ living situation. Rusty-James’ school does not offer him a worthy chance to build the base of his opportunity to advance in the socioeconomic classes, because the false ideal of the American Dream is at work here too. School holds Rusty-James responsible for his own suffering because, according to the false ideal, if you work hard enough you will make it. This leads the school to believe the blame is entirely with Rusty-James who did not try hard enough, when in reality the school could have tried harder to make it possible for Rusty-James to perform results. All in all, the point of the American Dream is to keep the lower classes in their place, because it is vital for the

continued wealth of the successful that they stay poor. The American Dream allows a select few to make it to wealth while many suffer.

The subject of social struggle was as important in the film adaptation of *Rumble Fish* as it is in the novel. The film adaptation was released in 1983, which was fitting, writes Jeffery Chown in *Hollywood Auteur: Francis Coppola*, because during this time the unfair differences between the rich and poor people of America were yet again a relevant and well-debated issue (166). Chown describes *Rumble Fish* as one of Hinton's "heartfelt cries against societal determinism" and notes that the novel is built on the controversial conviction that juvenile delinquents' problems originates "from class barriers and urban environments rather than from inherent personality" which Marxist critics would agree with (169). No one seems bothered by Rusty-James' grim view of his future. The school writes him off as a juvenile delinquent, thinking that the "troublemaking" is part of his personality and something that cannot be changed, when it is rather a consequence of how society has treated him.

Years later, when Rusty-James has grown up, the Motorcycle Boy is dead and Rusty-James has been let out of reformatory, he meets Steve, who happily proclaims he was right about the fact that if you work hard enough to get somewhere, you will get there eventually. Rusty James answers, "It'll be nice when I can think of someplace to go" (Hinton 133). Steve, who believes in the concept of the American Dream, is content that his efforts are paying off, while when Rusty-James gets the opportunity to do something different than only trying to stay alive, he finds himself perplexed. Even after becoming an adult there seems to be a pattern of hopelessness in his life, closely connected to his past. Rusty-James is alienated from society in the sense that he does not seem to think he makes a difference or even matters in society. He is "marginal to [his] cultures" (Winthrop 291). This state of mind can lead to revolution, if the marginalized people realize they are being wrongfully treated and try to make a reform (Winthrop 291). Rusty-James does not revolt against the oppression he was brought up in, but his brother does – at least symbolically – by trying to release the Siamese fighting fish into the river. When he does this he opens Rusty-James' eyes to the limitations of their way of living. Following this incident Rusty-James goes to reformatory for a few years, but after that he goes to California and in contrast to the Motorcycle Boy, he seems to stay there rather than go back to their hometown. When the Motorcycle Boy returns from California he claims that he "never got past the river" when Rusty-James asks how the ocean was. At another point the Motorcycle Boy says that "There weren't so many walls in California, but if you're used to walls all that air can give you the creeps" (Hinton 99). The Motorcycle Boy cannot let go of the very limited life he has lived in favor of starting over

again in California, where the ocean and the possibilities scare him. Rusty-James may feel the same way, since his opinion on California is never revealed, but it seems he would rather stay there than go home; he wants to get away from where he came from.

From a psychoanalytical point of view, Rusty-James' alienation originates in family problems and failed attempts to seek attachment. In "Varieties of Loneliness" Millicent Lenz describes several different types of alienation and their causes. Relevant to the case of Rusty-James is Lenz' mention of lack of primary relationships as a cause of alienation (675). Primary relationships seems to be closely related to family since absent parents, the death of a loved one or homelessness are examples of failed primary relationships. Sometimes this is combined with suffering from poverty or some other sort of oppression. Rusty-James lacks primary relationships. His mother left when he was two years old and took his older brother, the Motorcycle Boy, with her. Rusty-James has not seen his mother since. During his childhood he lives with his father, who has become an alcoholic and is rarely at home. The Motorcycle Boy, after being returned to their father shortly after their mother left, also lives with Rusty-James and their father, but disappears now and then without telling anyone where he goes or when he will be back. Tyson explains that everyone has a role in "the family-complex" which has a huge impact on the rest of one's life (13). The fact that Rusty-James was abandoned as a child and is continually neglected by his father affects his character a lot. These events form Rusty-James' role in his family and his concept of self-worth. When stepping into a role in the "family-complex", it can be difficult to break out of it (Tyson 13). Rusty-James' role does not strengthen his self-worth as it should; rather, it seems to break him down.

Moreover, Lenz argues that a person lacking primary relationships usually desperately seeks attachment to another human being (675). Rusty-James seeks this attachment from his older brother. The Motorcycle Boy is famous in their hometown and was favored by their mother, thus it makes sense for Rusty-James to seek the approval he has not gotten from his parents from the Motorcycle Boy instead. Rusty-James follows his brother around almost everywhere, but no matter how hard he tries, he seems to have little success in his quest for attachment. When Rusty-James has been badly hurt by two muggers and is barely conscious he hears his brother repeating to himself that Rusty-James is not dead. His reflection on this is that the Motorcycle Boy sounded "surprised that he was glad about it . . . Like it had never occurred to him that he loved me" (Hinton 98). On another occasion the Motorcycle Boy mentions that Rusty-James seems to be "messed up all the time, one way or the other" and Rusty-James immediately wonders at the fact that the Motorcycle Boy worries

about him, stating, “I was a little surprised he’d worry about me . . . he was the coolest guy in the world . . . but he never paid much attention to me” (Hinton 56). These examples show that the relationship Rusty-James wants, the primary relationship, is not functioning with his brother either, since it has not even occurred to Rusty-James that the Motorcycle Boy cares about him.

Rusty-James idolizes his brother to a fault and wishes to be just like him when he grows up. It is possible that he has realized that the Motorcycle Boy has never been left behind and therefore believes that if he was more like his brother, everyone would like him better, including the Motorcycle Boy himself. When Rusty-James tells people about his wish of becoming the Motorcycle Boy, they always tell him that he is nothing like his brother and never will be. It is true that the brothers are very different. Rusty-James is characterized as an impulsive boy who often lets his temperament get the better of him, while the Motorcycle Boy seems unable to find interest in anything, which is a crucial part of his character. Interestingly, when Coppola adapted the novel into a movie, this character trait was a vital part of how the part of the Motorcycle Boy was played. In *On the Edge: The Life and Times of Francis Coppola*, we are told that Mickey Rourke, who portrayed the Motorcycle Boy in the movie adaptation, was told by Coppola to approach the part as “an actor who no longer finds his work interesting” (qtd. in Goodwin 347). In the novel, the Motorcycle Boy is described by one character as “royalty in exile” and their father explains to Rusty-James that the Motorcycle Boy was born “with the ability to do anything and finding nothing he wants to do” (Hinton 92, 128). Rusty-James admits to not being very smart and often feels left out when his brother and father have conversations he does not understand, while the Motorcycle Boy is smart, likes to read and got perfect grades in school. Rusty-James looks up to his brother and wants to have a good relationship with him, but fails. There are too many barriers between them.

In addition to failing his attempt to get attachment from his brother, a repressed childhood trauma may play part in Rusty-James’ alienation. Early in the novel, Rusty-James describes how he is scared of being alone, claiming that when “nobody was at home, I would stay up all night, out on the streets where there was some people” (Hinton 37). This fear gets mentioned on several occasions and when Rusty-James tells the Motorcycle Boy about it, the Motorcycle Boy has a reason for it. The Motorcycle Boy says that when their mother left and took him with her, their father went out to get drunk and did not come home for three days, leaving Rusty-James alone in a big house at the age of two. The Motorcycle Boy suggests this is why Rusty-James is scared of being left on his own. Rusty-James does not remember this

event and he describes trying to understand what the Motorcycle Boy describes to him as “trying to see through fog” (Hinton 84). Repression is defined by Tyson as “the expunging from consciousness” of unhappy childhood events or traumas (12). Repression does not eliminate the traumatic events, she explains, but rather gives them more power over the individual trying to repress them (Tyson 13). Repression is often made out to be a passive memory, but contrary to this belief it is an active part of one’s unconscious (Tyson 13). Rusty-James gets scared and anxious when he is on his own, because being alone triggers the real reason for his fear – fear of abandonment. He is afraid of being abandoned yet again and at the same time he does not want to admit to himself that his mother and father already have abandoned him. According to Davis in *Inwardness and Existence: Subjectivity in/and Hegel, Heidegger, Marx, and Freud* (1989) repression is a defense that someone, in this case Rusty-James, uses to avoid and conceal the core problem (the fear of abandonment) and anxiety is what happens when this defense fails to conceal the problem (267). Even though Rusty-James has repressed the trauma he went through as a child, it still rules parts of his life as exemplified through his fear of being alone.

All of these instances of being abandoned or rejected ultimately makes Rusty-James desperate for what Winthrop in “Alienation and Existentialism in Relation to Literature and Youth” calls genuine encounters. Winthrop discusses the concept of genuine encounters as a possible way out of alienation (294). He describes a genuine encounter as “an experience shared by two individuals who have succeeded in contacting each other authentically” (Winthrop 294). The two persons experiencing the encounter do not have to identify with each other, but must be able to see events and ideas from the other’s perspective and respect it (Winthrop 295). During the encounter, the pair should not have to worry about insecurities, but rather feel safe in spite of them (Winthrop 295). A genuine encounter could make up for Rusty-James’ lack of primary relationships and partly ease his alienation, but unfortunately he does not experience genuine encounters.

Rusty-James’ lack of genuine encounters is illustrated through his relationships with other characters in the book. He makes a mental list of people he likes and comes up with a few names. Following this, he “wondered if [he] loved anybody” and thinks of Patty, the Motorcycle Boy, his father and Steve (Hinton 38). Last, he tries to make a list of people he can really count on, but finds no one to put on the list. This indicates that his relationships are unstable. He claims to love Patty, yet he is unfaithful to her. When she finds out they have a fight about it and ultimately break up. Rusty-James contemplates what this means and concludes that “I couldn’t see what messing around with a chick at the lake had to do with me

and Patty” and he cannot see why Patty would let this affect their relationship (Hinton 68-69). Winthrop explains this by claiming Rusty-James is alienated from the opposite sex, which is described as not understanding the needs or mentality of members of the opposite sex (290). Rusty-James seems completely unable to realize that Patty expects him to be faithful to her when they are in a relationship. Rusty-James’ inability to understand Patty and their communication problems make it impossible to call their relationship a genuine encounter, since a genuine encounter includes being able to see things from each other’s perspective.

The next person on Rusty-James’ list is the Motorcycle Boy. This relationship cannot be called a genuine encounter either because Rusty-James cannot count on his brother or be himself with him. Rusty-James looks up to his older brother a lot and surely loves him, but he is blind to any of his brother’s negative sides. Rusty-James spends a lot of time with the Motorcycle Boy, when the Motorcycle Boy has not disappeared off to an unknown destination, as he has a tendency to do every so often. Rusty-James also describes not really connecting with the Motorcycle Boy when talking about his eyes, which “made me think of a two-way mirror. Like you could feel somebody on the other side watching you, but the only reflection you saw was your own” (Hinton 33). Rusty-James also describes that his brother never really pays attention to him and that he watches him “amused but not interested” (Hinton 89). Despite Rusty-James claiming to love him, it is very questionable if what he feels is love. They spend a great deal of time alongside each other, but Rusty-James is busy trying to be like the Motorcycle Boy and therefore cannot be genuine with his brother, since he is simply trying to step into a role. It is clear, however, that the Motorcycle Boy cares about his brother, constantly being the knight in shining armor sweeping in to save his little brother when things are about to go horribly wrong. But, even so, the Motorcycle Boy himself is so alienated that it is very unclear if he actually connects with anyone throughout the novel. The lack of exchange in the relationship is also a sign that it is not a genuine encounter.

Rusty-James also mentions his father as a person he possibly loves. The relationship between Rusty-James and his father is not especially healthy or properly functioning and cannot under any circumstances be called a genuine encounter. His father is an alcoholic and the cause of the trauma which caused Rusty-James’ fear of being alone. He is very rarely home and if Rusty-James needs to get a hold of him, he is most likely to be found in a bar. Rusty-James expresses having difficulty trying to make up his mind about how he feels about his father. He states that “we [him and his father] got along okay”, but also that “sometimes he’d [the father] ask me a question . . . but I could tell he was just trying to be polite” (Hinton 58). Rusty-James also describes that he could not hate his father, but “I just

wished I could like him better” (Hinton 58). The father also puts Rusty-James in a tricky economic situation as he does not work to bring any money to the family. The allowance he is given from the government rarely goes to supporting Rusty-James, but is rather used to fund his alcohol consumption. The father is not a very present parent or individual in Rusty-James’ life. Late in the novel, Rusty-James sits down with his father to ask whether or not his mother is insane. The conversation gets going and slips into the story of how Rusty-James’ father and mother met. Rusty-James describes this moment as “the first time I came anywhere near to understanding my father . . . [or] saw him as a person” (Hinton 127).

The last name on Rusty-James’ list is Steve. Steve is Rusty-James’ best friend and their relationship is the closest thing to a genuine encounter Rusty-James experiences. Steve is introduced early in the novel and shows up fairly often throughout. He is described as being smart and is not used to the tough life on the streets. Rusty-James always invites Steve to come along when there is going to be a fight or something similar, even though he knows Steve does not have much experience or interest. If it is an important event, Steve shows up even though he does not really want to. He is mentioned as being the oldest friend Rusty-James has and in exchange for Steve helping him with homework, Rusty-James makes sure that no one tries to beat Steve up. Even though they are evidently good friends, Rusty-James sometimes gets violent with Steve, taking out his anger on him if he happens to be in the way. Most of the times Rusty-James lashes out against Steve, Steve has made a remark about the Motorcycle Boy that Rusty-James did not appreciate. Rusty-James can be himself with Steve, which is very rare. Rusty-James sees this as a possible reason to why “Steve was my best friend instead of B.J. I didn’t have to keep on being the toughest cat in the neighborhood for Steve” (Hinton 112). The fact that he can let his guard down around Steve is what makes their friendship the closest thing to a genuine encounter Rusty-James gets. The occasional violence unfortunately indicates that this is not a good relationship after all. The relationships that have now been mentioned are the ones Rusty-James seems to believe are those who matter the most to him, but none of them are genuine encounters.

Another aspect of alienation is brought up by Winthrop, who suggests that one of the most important reasons for human misery is that people experience “an unclear concept of what constitutes a true sense of community” (289). Rusty-James’ definition of a true sense of community seems to be closely connected to the old gangs, which clearly illustrates how lonely and alienated he is. It makes sense to connect gangs with a feeling of community since they go through a lot together - all the fighting and getting hurt, watching each other’s backs. The gangs are built on loyalty to the members and above all the president of the gang you are

a part of. Ultimately for Rusty-James, the president in question was his older brother. Rusty-James refers back to the days of the gangs with much nostalgia and makes it very clear that he wants things to go back to the way they were. The Motorcycle Boy does not think much of the gangs and may understand, but he does not share his brother's fascination and love for the old days.

Essentially, Rusty-James seems to miss the gangs because he felt a sense of belonging, which he has lacked ever since the gangs disappeared. This is something he realizes that his brother has no desire for, which is why his brother does not feel the need for leading a gang anymore. At one point in the novel Rusty-James is beaten down by muggers and has a near-death experience. As he is falling into unconsciousness he thinks about the people closest to him and the reactions they would have to his death. He thinks that "Patty . . . [would] really be sorry now" - his father's only comment would be "What a strange way to die" and his mother would never find out that he died (Hinton 95). He also presumes that his friends would think it was cool that he went down fighting. He mentions no one who he thinks would miss him or outright be sad, which also gives a clear insight concerning how lonely he feels.

Additionally, most of the adolescents in the old gangs, and those wishing for new ones, are characters who seem not to have much of economic capital. Some of them, like Rusty-James, probably have very limited chances of ever gaining economic capital. When the gangs were active they could work as a way of filling this void with geographical capital. The gangs fought about owning streets or expanding their turf, in other words expanding their geographical capital. Steve, who does have actual goals and options in life, describes the gangs and the fights as "just a bunch of punks killing each other" because that was all it was to him (Hinton 101). To Rusty-James and other adolescents without economic capital, hope for a better future or a belief in the American dream the gangs meant a lot more. The Motorcycle Boy is the one who put an end to the gangs and the violence, which can be explained by the fact that he has no need for the acknowledgement or sense of belonging that the gangs provided for many others. When the Motorcycle Boy dissolved the gangs many lost their only capital and their community. Essentially, the poor socioeconomic circumstances push these adolescents into thinking that the violence is worth the capital and the belonging they get out of the gangs, and when the gangs ended most of them lost everything they owned or had built their reputation and identity on.

Another part of the illustration of Rusty-James' alienation in the novel is symbolism. The Marxist theories and the psychoanalytical theories have uncovered the cause

and effect of Rusty-James' alienation and now follows how this is reflected through symbolism. I argue that the Siamese fighting fish, also called rumble fish, are a symbol for Rusty-James and his alienation from society. The Siamese fighting fish can also be considered a symbol for the Motorcycle Boy to some extent. In contrast to Rusty-James who is a constant presence in the text due to him being the narrator and main character, the Siamese fighting fish only make a short yet important appearance in the text. Despite this, it is possible to map out a number of similarities between the descriptions of the fish and the characterization of Rusty-James. In Coppola's movie adaptation of the novel, the fighting fish are in color, while the rest of the movie is in black and white. This shows the importance of the fish in the movie as well.

When Rusty-James first encounters the Siamese fighting fish in the novel he notices that they are separated one to a bowl and is puzzled about this. While Rusty-James is never alone, he is almost always lonely. He feels left out because he cannot follow the conversations of his friends and family because he does not understand them. His brother lets him hang around a lot but rarely pays him any attention. The lack of genuine encounters mentioned earlier makes Rusty-James sealed off from the world from a psychological viewpoint, while poor socioeconomic circumstances make him sealed off from the benefits of society and any opportunity for a better future. The Motorcycle Boy is lonely as well, especially when he goes deaf and seals himself off from the world. Moreover, Rusty-James is also described as being in a glass bubble after becoming colorblind and deaf after the Motorcycle Boy's death: "I was in a glass bubble and everyone else was outside it and I'd be alone like that for the rest of my life" (Hinton 132). He uses the same description to explain how the Motorcycle Boy sees the world. It is also said that in contrast to Rusty-James, the Motorcycle does not want to belong anywhere.

Yet another thing the Siamese fighting fish and Rusty-James have in common is a kind of 'kill or be killed' mentality. The Siamese fighting fish are separated because "they'd kill each other if they could", says the Motorcycle Boy (Hinton 123). This sort of aggressiveness can to some degree be ascribed to Rusty-James as well. Gang fights used to be a serious problem in his hometown until the Motorcycle Boy made everyone sign a treaty to put an end to the violence, following an incident where a young boy from his own gang got beaten to death. Rusty-James romanticizes the rumbles and hopes the gangs will come back. Rusty-James speaks about the fights over and over again, giving the reader the impression that he misses the sense of belonging the gangs gave him. He describes the vibe of the fights as "everybody was all set to kill or be killed, raring to go" (31).

While Rusty-James is willing to do almost anything to be like his brother, their opinion on the gangs differs. The Motorcycle Boy clearly despises the fights and considers them meaningless, saying the kids fought for fun or because they were scared to death. These opinions and views on gangs make Rusty-James very upset, because he still misses the gangs and the loyalty and belonging he felt among them. He would rather embrace a culture where kids kill other kids over essentially nothing than be as lonely as he feels now. All in all, the teenagers in their town used to try to kill each other, and they would still try to, if the excitement of breaking the treaty had been stronger than the fear of the Motorcycle Boy's wrath. Not unlike how separated bowls keep the Siamese fighting fish from killing each other, the treaty keeps the teenagers in town from killing each other.

Furthermore, the Motorcycle Boy claims that the Siamese fighting fish are self-destructive. He explains to Rusty-James that "if you leaned a mirror against the bowl they'd kill themselves fighting their own reflection" (123). Similarly, Rusty-James expresses self-destructive actions. For example, when the Motorcycle Boy is dead and Rusty-James finds himself alone, he breaks the window of a police car and slashes his wrists on the remaining glass (132). The loss of the Motorcycle Boy, in addition to Rusty-James' fear of being alone and now finding himself lonelier than ever makes him decide that self-destruction to the severe degree of a suicide attempt is better than having to face himself. The finality of the situation of being deaf and colorblind forces Rusty-James to face himself, much like leaning a mirror against the glass of a bowl, and it makes him try to kill himself, like the fish would do if you show them their own reflection. The Motorcycle Boy may not be as obviously self-destructive as his younger brother, but trying to release the fish into the river is an act of self-sacrifice which leads to his death.

When the Motorcycle Boy takes the fish from the pet shop, he claims they would not try to kill each other in the river because there is so much space for them to live independently. On his way there, he gets shot by a policeman and dies. The fish do not make it to the river and die as well. This act can be interpreted, in terms of symbolism, as the Motorcycle Boy not trying to free the fish really, but more so trying to free his brother and perhaps himself. The Motorcycle Boy sees a pattern of hopelessness in his life and can see it being passed on to his brother. He is more aware of their situation than Rusty-James. Whereas the Motorcycle Boy does not want to belong anywhere, that is all Rusty-James has ever wanted. When trying to free the fish, he really wants to try to give his brother the freedom of opportunity in his life, as well as a chance to get out of their hometown. It is too late for the Motorcycle Boy – he went to California, but returned because he got homesick. The

Motorcycle Boy's previously quoted remark about California is relevant again: "There weren't so many walls in California, but if you're used to walls all that air can give you the creeps" (Hinton 99). The Motorcycle Boy is so used to the limited life he lives in his hometown that he cannot settle down somewhere else, but he wants his younger brother to give it a try before it is too late for him too. The fish die, along with the Motorcycle Boy, but Rusty-James makes it to California when he gets out of reformatory. He is confused and unsure about where he is going or what he will do, like the Motorcycle Boy. But in contrast to the Motorcycle Boy, he is not alone, which indicates at least some parts of the old pattern have been broken.

Moreover, the death of the Motorcycle Boy serves as the climax of the story and is an important tipping-point for the main character. After the Motorcycle Boy's death, Rusty-James practically turns into his older brother, even becoming colorblind and deaf just like him. Being like his brother is something he has always wished for, but he immediately realizes it to be more than he bargained for and tries to kill himself as described above. The Motorcycle Boy is more self-aware than his brother. He sees a pattern of hopelessness in himself, he sees it being passed onto his little brother and he knows he has to try to make a permanent change. His attempt to free the fish is in reality an attempt to save himself and his brother from the lives they are bound to lead. When the Motorcycle-Boy dies Rusty-James gets a glimpse of the Motorcycle Boy's view of life and from then on is probably able to see the hopelessness he is stuck in. Rusty-James does not entirely break the vicious circle of hopelessness caused by poverty and bad parenting, seeing as he seems to be as hopeless when he has grown up as he was when he was young. This makes it easy to dismiss the Motorcycle Boy's sacrifice as being in vain, but it is important to remember that he manages to leave town after getting out of reformatory, claiming he never went back to his hometown, and that is something the Motorcycle Boy never could do.

In summary, alienation is an essential part of main character Rusty-James and one must take several different aspects of his life into consideration to make sense of it. He is alienated both from society as a whole and from the people surrounding him. Rusty-James belongs to a low socioeconomic class which causes one aspect of the alienation he experiences. His socioeconomic situation, and the limitations it brings make it difficult for him to feel needed in society and contributes a sense of meaninglessness in his life that he never manages to get rid of. This makes him alienated from society and leads him to believe his future is hopeless. The other part of Rusty-James' alienation is caused by psychological factors. His parents are neglecting him, which causes a childhood trauma affecting his life

even in his teenage years. The lack of attachment he relates to his parents and his core issue – fear of abandonment – makes him desperate to connect with other people. This fails, leaving him feeling lonely and has him losing sight of who he is. This is what makes him feel alienated from other people. These two parts of alienation are illustrated in the text through the depiction of Rusty-James' relationships, as well as the symbolism of the featured Siamese fighting fish. A closer look at all of Rusty-James' major relationships shows that the relationships are dysfunctional and does not give him the attachment and security he needs. Furthermore, the Siamese fighting fish share many characteristics with Rusty-James and also his brother: the limitations of their fish bowls, the self-destructiveness and the brother's hope to give both the fish and Rusty-James a better future. While the Siamese fighting fish die, along with his brother, Rusty-James moves on with his life and pushes forward. The always lonely teenager constantly surrounded by people manages to make a change and leaves his hometown, something that gives the reader hope for his future.

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