

From Flesh to Fortune: Deconstructing the Metanarrative of ‘Rags-to-Riches’ in David Szalay’s *Flesh*

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Abstract

This paper explores and deconstructs the narrative structure of ‘rags-to-riches’ in the 2025 Booker Prize winner novel *Flesh* by the Canadian-Hungarian author David Szalay. Before deconstructing, the paper identifies that the rags to riches is an often-used narrative technique found in various literary works. However, the paper identifies this practice as an over-arching, all-encompassing structure using Jean-Francois Lyotard’s idea of ‘metanarrative.’ Through the chosen text, the paper argues that *Flesh* adopts the recognizable path of the rags to riches narrative only to undermine the ideological assumptions of the metanarrative that sustains it. The portrayal of social mobility in the novel is seen as a result of chance and social circumstance, rather than merit or ambition. In exposing this journey of upward class mobility as a fluke, the text exposes the rags to riches as a metanarrative built on promises which are culturally unstable – thereby critiquing the larger socio-cultural myth dictating the need to ‘progress’ and to ‘advance’ in life.

Keywords: David Szalay, *Flesh*, Booker Prize, Jean-Francois Lyotard, rags to riches, postmodernism, grand narratives, metanarrative, class mobility, meritocracy myth, chance vs merit.

Introduction

The tale of rising from poverty to prosperity has exercised a peculiar tug on the cultural imagination across literary history. Such narratives of social ascent promise that hardship can be overcome through perseverance and determination, causing one's humble beginnings to transform into good fortune. Dickensian novels such as *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*, for example, use the journey from deprivation to comfortable circumstances as both a plot structure and as a moral framework. In *Great Expectations*, Pip receives a sudden fortune from a benefactor, but realizes that the life he built on it is false, as the fortune belonged to a convict, and after the convict's death, to the crown. What is meritorious is the fortune that Pip earns himself. In *Oliver Twist*, Oliver seems to earn his fortune through a pure heart which leads him into the care of kind friends, and later on, to his rightful inheritance. The criminals in the cast are either arrested, or die owing to their deeds. This tale has many similarities to the 'rags-to-riches' narrative often seen in fairy tales, where the protagonist faces rough and deprived conditions in the beginning of the story, but earns a fortune due to kind deeds, a pure heart, or cunning. Quite famously, Horatio Alger Jr. was known to write similar rags to riches narratives. These discussed the industrializing economy of nineteenth century America and proffered hard work and moral integrity as the key to success in such an environment. As Carol Nackenoff writes, "The stories stress the importance of morality, the prevalence of middle-class occupations, and modest rewards, and the unattractiveness of selfish materialism... It is my contention that, in Alger's fiction, economic success is measured against common and undesirable outcomes of the Gilded Age." (64). Such narratives, whether Dickensian, Alger's fiction, or folkloric, often reinforce the belief that social mobility is the natural reward for integrity and effort, presenting economic advantage as both achievable and deserved. Therefore, the 'rags-to-riches' plot structure has become more than a recurring literary technique and instead operates as a broader cultural narrative about how merit and opportunity intersect to bring about wealth and helps probe into questions about the fairness of social systems which push such grand narratives.

Literary theory views such a narrative with scepticism, however. It can be looked upon as a metanarrative. The concept of metanarrative was first put forward by Jean-Francois Lyotard, in his work *The Postmodern Condition*, in which he describes a metanarrative as an overarching story

told by a society to justify its values and structures. Giving the example of philosophy, he states, “I will use the term to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse... making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth.” (xxiii). Here he is pointing out that all such philosophies offer metanarratives about the workings of a society, forming an encompassing structure that defines other stories. The rags to riches narrative falls in the same metanarrative structure. When viewed from this framework, it can be seen how narratives of progress, success, and meritocratic mobility shape how individuals interpret both personal achievement and hierarchy. Contemporary fiction questions such assumptions, exposing the gap between the ideological promise of upward mobility and the complex realities which govern social advancement.

This paper argues that David Szalay’s novel, *Flesh*, opens up the possibility of the critique of this gap. The novel features István as its protagonist, whose life journey appears to resemble the rags to riches advancement, at a cursory glance. A young man from a modest background, he gradually finds himself moving within increasingly affluent circles. But upon further investigation, the text resists the reductive and simplistic moral logic usually associated with the rags to riches metanarrative. The text repeatedly shows how István’s advancement is not the result of his determination or exceptional ability or even hard work, but rather, it is owing to the intersection of circumstance, networking, and the right sexual relationships. Consequently, the novel reproduces the structure of the rags to riches narrative while destabilizing the ideology of the metanarrative dictating it. This paper argues that *Flesh* adopts the recognizable path of the rags to riches narrative only to undermine the ideological assumptions of the metanarrative that sustains it. Through the portrayal of social mobility as a result of chance, bodily presence, and social circumstance, rather than merit or ambition, the text exposes the rags to riches as a metanarrative built on assumptions which are economically untrue.

The Structure of the Rags to Riches Metanarrative

The rags to riches metanarrative follows a recognizable sequence of events. A protagonist begins life in morally or economically disadvantageous conditions, encounters difficulties, and later on achieves

wealth or higher social status. Strong morals and a stringent adherence to them is the element which provides this narrative its allure. In such a narrative, success is achieved as an outcome of perseverance, virtue, or talent, while hardship is the proving ground where the hero outshines. Hence, this literary and cultural metanarrative serves as the expression of the belief that social mobility is within everyman's reach and can be achieved through hard work and a strong moral compass. The 'rags-to-riches' metanarrative finds various iterations throughout literature.

Lyotard describes that the primary function of such metanarratives is to legitimize social and political institutions, values, and systems of authority. Citing science as an example of a metanarrative, he writes

...to the extent that science does not restrict itself stating useful regularities and seeks the truth, it is obliged to legitimate the rules of its own game. It then produces a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status, a discourse called philosophy... if a metanarrative... is used to legitimate knowledge questions are raised concerning the validity of the institutions governing the social bond: these must be legitimated as well." (xxiii; xxiv).

From this lens, the rags to riches metanarrative gets revealed as expression that serves as a powerful narrative for legitimizing meritocratic progress by presenting upward mobility as the natural reward for effort and character, reinforcing the idea that existing social hierarchies are fair and permeable. It, therefore, becomes a cultural mechanism through which economic inequality can be looked upon as temporary and surmountable, or even something that must be endured – a myth celebrating and apologizing for capitalism's deeply entrenched class divisions.

As hinted above, the prevalence of this metanarrative can be seen in fairy tale or folk narratives. Characters of humble origins in these stories eventually achieve wealth or status through fortune or moral virtue. Cinderella is rewarded with eventual fortune due to being good and obedient, and the woodcutter who dropped his axe in the lake gets rewarded for honestly pointing out which axe is his. Later, the structure becomes adapted to more realistic settings where magical intervention gets replaced with determination, (Dickensian novels come to mind here), but the underlying logic remains consistent. Hardship and adversity are the beginnings of a journey. If one travels it through with moral cohesion and perseverance, one would find its conclusion which promises prosperity and social status. Perhaps it is meant as an inspirational

narrative. In her introduction to Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*, Clarissa Pinkola Estés explains Campbell's concept of the monomyth. "Borrowing the term monomyth, a word he identifies as one coined by James Joyce, he puts forth the ancient idea—that the mysterious energy for inspirations, revelations, and actions in heroic stories worldwide is also universally found in human beings. People who find resonant heroic themes of challenges and questing in their own lives, in their goals, creative outpourings, in their day- and night-dreams—are being led to a single psychic fact. That is, that creative and spiritual lives of individuals influence the outer world as much as the mythic world influences the individual." (Introduction). So, perhaps, the rags to riches metanarrative can be viewed as an attempt to influence psychology positively through a mythical structure of success.

However, the assumptions of this narrative are questioned by sociological perspectives. Pierre Bourdieu, for instance, emphasizes that social mobility is shaped not just by individual effort, but also by forms of capital that individuals possess or acquire through their environment. These capitals could come in the form of economic resources, social networks, and cultural knowledge, all of which influence the opportunities available to individuals within a given society (79). He describes capital thus:

It is a *vis in situ*, a force inscribed in objective or subjective structures, but it is also a *lex insita*, the principle underlying the immanent regularities of the social world. It is what makes the games of society... something other than simple games of chance offering at every moment the possibility of a miracle... Capital, which, in its objectified or embodied forms, takes time to accumulate and which, as a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical and or expanded form, contains a tendency to to persist in its being, is a force inscribed in objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible." (78).

From this perspective, the rags to riches narrative can be looked upon as an oversimplified representation of the mechanisms of economic mobility as it assigns success only to personal merit, while obfuscating the sociocultural and economic conditions that in actuality restrict advancement. Bourdieu's ideas reveal the underlying ideological function of the rags to riches metanarrative. While the narrative portrays that social barriers can be overcome by effort, it does so while hiding the fact that it may never be possible to overcome the complex and uneven

distribution of opportunity within capitalistic society. Contemporary literary works often examine this ideological conflict by reproducing the familiar structure of ascent in order to question the ideas that sustain it. In this manner, narratives that appear to follow the traditional arc of success might expose the ideological complexities of the rags to riches story.

The Portrayal of the ‘Rags-to-Riches’ Narrative in *Flesh*

Szalay’s novel appears to follow the broad outline of the Rags to Riches metanarrative structure, as it does have a protagonist who moves from humble beginnings into circles of social wealth and privilege. The story follows István from his early life in Hungary where his living conditions are characterized by financial limitations. For instance, as he helps a neighbour with shopping, the narrator informs the reader, “There’s no lift in the building and their flats are on the fourth floor.” (Szalay 12). István works for the same neighbour for a little money. “Sometimes at the weekend he works on her husband’s allotment. Her husband pays him to do that. The thick mud sticks to his shoes so that after a while his feet feel heavy in them and start to look like lumps of mud themselves.” (Szalay 18). This signifies the conventional rags stage of the metanarrative. It therefore establishes a character whose economic position makes upward social mobility desirable and legible, as he is someone who would benefit from a better financial position. Thus, the early sections of the story indicate that István’s life will proceed according to the usual narratives of social ascent.

But it does not do so according to the expected patterns. As the novel progresses, István’s movements into affluent environments does seem to be similar to the phases of the rags to riches stories. However, the mechanisms by which this happens are different and deliberately understated. His advancement does not happen owing to his deliberate efforts and strategic intuition. Rather, it is the result of encounters and relationships. His first breakthrough in life, for example, occurs by chance when he happens upon a rich man being attacked in an alley, and the attackers run off at the sight of him. He calls out and it “...seems to be enough. Two figures separate themselves from the darkness. He sees them as short-lived silhouettes against the end of the alley, where there’s the light of some other street.” (Szalay 102). And just like that, he gains an opportunity for a better job than the one of a door security guard, which he had before. There is nothing heroic or even brave in the incident. It is simply chance. Sustained labour or exceptional talent have

nothing to do with these opportunities, which are defined by circumstance, proximity and contingencies of social interactions. The outward shape of the progression, however, does look like a success narrative as István does vacate his earlier difficult circumstances and does gain wealth.

This appearance of upward progress is emphasized by the appearance of elite environments. István gains access to social surroundings which have material comfort, status, and exclusivity, which show a clear departure from his early life. “There’s something about him, István thinks, something that doesn’t quite fit with these surroundings – with the pictures on the walls and shelves full of books and polished surfaces with framed photo and other objects on them.” (Szalay 106). (AI starts) These surroundings become the markers of his success and fortune. They signal that the protagonist has arrived at a higher rung of the ladder and gained social capital, as Bourdieu would put it. Yet, Szalay’s portrayal of these environments remains clinical and observational and not celebratory, rendering the details of these environments with a restrained precision that only seeks to highlight their nuances without making them seem desirable. Consequently, the external indicators of success do appear, but their narrative significance remains ambiguous.

Hence, a pattern can be seen in which the narrative does preserve the structural features of the rags to riches metanarrative, but refrains from engaging with the moral framework that upholds it. István’s journey can be charted through a familiar narrative of an upward social climb as his movement from marginality to social privilege definitely occurs, but without clearly-defined effort, ambition, or moral striving, which creates a disjunction between the various aspects the rags to riches metanarrative, especially – its form and meaning. The structure of Szalay’s narrative is similar as there exists a tension beneath the surface, which is central to the novel’s experience. By reproducing the external shape of social and economic progression and leaving its motivating principles unearched, the novel makes the reader question the assumptions that underpin stories of social ascent – why is it that one strives for financial and social success? István’s story does display the possibility of transformation, but destabilizes the moral framework which makes this transformation legible.

The Non-Factor of Merit

The central assumption of the rags to riches metanarrative stands on the idea that success is earned and one must work hard to achieve it. This narrative tries to reinforce that discipline and moral perseverance are the virtues on which wealth and social advancement are supposed to be gained; in *Flesh*, however, this assumption is systematically dismantled. Alongside his social ascent, the novel persistently disconnects that ascent from any notions of effort or deservedness. Having thus removed merit as an accounting factor, success becomes contingent, embodied and arbitrary.

An emphasis on chance is one of the primary ways the novel does this, as the example above of István's chance-encounter rescue displays. He never demonstrates sustained ambition or pursues a goal. His life unfolds as a series of encounters none of which are initiated by him, and which redirect his path in ways he does not anticipate or engineers. They happen in this manner. "About a week ago he ran into Ödön in the town... Ödön seemed pleased to see him and asked did he want to earn some money?" (Szalay 39). As can be seen, opportunities from István arrive owing to proximity to others, through shifting circumstances, and through moments which are largely accidental. Hence, the structure of the novel, by removing merit from the trajectory of success, causally challenges traditional success stories, where reward is the direct consequence of merit.

Instead of merit, István's body becomes the factor which contributes to social mobility. The title of the novel itself foregrounds the importance of physical presence hinting at the materiality of the body which plays a central role in shaping István's trajectory. This neatly maps onto Bourdieu's forms of social capital, as István's physical attractiveness, sexuality, and capacity to generate desire become social capital in the novel, which earn him recognition. As defined by him, "Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources that are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group¹¹—which provides each of its members with the backing of the connectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' that entitles them to credit in the various senses of the word." (84). In this sense, the novel reframes upward mobility as a result of István's physical attractiveness providing him social capital. Here, mobility is not owing to internal qualities such as intelligence or moral virtue, but due to

something that is mediated through external, embodied, very material characteristics. In this manner, the ethical framework of the rags to riches metanarrative gets rewritten in Szalay's novel, replacing the moral language of merit with an ambiguous economy of physical and affective exchange.

More importantly, István is not an active participant in his own life journey, his role could be thought of more akin to a witness, passively navigating his affairs and accidental ascent. He simply responds to external stimuli – whether they be social settings or events happening to him, and his climb up the social ladder is not something he creates or orchestrates. This is evident in his dialogues which never move beyond single-word responses like “Sure” and “Okay.” It's not that he is a man of few words, it's just that István is a background to his own life. He's a protagonist who doesn't espouse or work for the meritocratic ideal and neither does he imbibe a sense of entitlement in regard to success some people who are talented feel, they ‘deserve.’ Such a portrayal further erodes the meritocratic myth that prevails in the Westerns capitalist society. An excerpt from an exchange he has with Noémi shows his passive approach to life and his ideas about money and wealth:

She takes a moment to absorb that idea. ‘You've got money do you?’ she asks.

‘Sure,’ he says.

‘What money?’

‘Money.’

It's some money from his mother for his birthday. He doesn't tell her that. (Szalay 58)

If one pays attention to his responses and internal thought, we can detect that his passivity is not a nonchalant façade he puts on but an incoherence between overarching ideas about success and his internal virtues. This very disjunction highlights how Szalay uses István to undermine the idea that success is the result of labour or intense hard work. Together, these elements expose the instability of the meritocratic ideal of the rags to riches metanarrative, poking holes at the larger myth of merit being rewarding, and a more problematic vision that a hardworking person will sooner or later achieve ‘success.’ By presenting success as the outcome of chance encounters, and largely unintentional movement, the novel suggests that narratives of upward mobility often rely on simplified and misleading explanations, where cause and effect do not necessarily correspond to each other – one just happens to lead to the other.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to trace how *Flesh* initially appears to reproduce one of the most familiar narrative patterns in literature through the depiction of István's movements from modest beginnings into the opulent world of wealth. The novel follows the path which displays the rags to riches structure, complete with its depiction of his humble beginnings to a phase of struggle and finally, the achievement of success through accumulation of wealth. Yet, this paper argues that the significance of the novel lies not in reinforcing this materialistic approach to success but in its systematic unravelling of the assumptions that sustain this mythological grand narrative. By consciously choosing to preserving the superficial form of the success narrative and by stripping it of its usually-pedaled moral and merit-based assumptions, Szalay's work transforms, what at first glance seems, a recognizable story of ascent into a critique of the ideological underpinnings behind it. This paper opens up further avenues of research, like the analysis of intersection of masculinity and the rags to riches narrative; the comparison of the social ascent of men and women; and on a larger scale, what it means to be successful in the late capitalist era?

The analysis tried to demonstrated several key ways in which this transformation has been carried out. First, the novel replaces the principle of merit with contingency, showing István's advancement as a result of chance encounters and circumstances, rather than being caused by deliberate effort or exceptional ability – to put it colloquially, he just “happened to be in the right place at the right time.” Secondly, it foregrounds the role of the body, portraying desire and its enactment as a valid form of social capital that offer access to opportunity. Finally, it features a protagonist whose passivity challenges the ideal of active individual agency, which have always been appended to the stereotype or fabled trope of the ‘hero.’ All these elements expose how traditional narratives of upward mobility depend upon simplified and misleading accounts of causation regarding economic success.

Hence, it can be seen how the novel participates in a broader contemporary scepticism regarding the idea that social and economic mobility is governed by fairness or merit. By revealing the fragility of such assumptions embedded within the rags to riches metanarrative, the novel invites a reconsideration of how success is imagined and explained, especially in the contemporary neoliberal-capitalist setting. After the promise of effort leading to reward has been rendered unstable, what

remains is a narrative in which success occurs without clear determination and wealth fails to produce a meaningful resolution.

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