



## DELINEATING AMERICAN VALUES THROUGH THE *SEE YOU IN THE COSMOS* NOVEL BY JACK CHENG

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on American values in the "See You in the Cosmos" novel. This research aims to identify the types of American values represented in this novel. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method. Additionally, the writer does library research to support the research. The results of this study indicate that there are six American Values in the novel See You in the Cosmos. This study applies Stuart Hall's Theory of Representation, by which meanings are formed and transmitted among members of a culture. This theory involves the use of language as a medium of representation of a value.

**Keywords:** American values, novel, representation

### INTRODUCTION

Literature is something that can define broadly. Some academics define literature from various perspectives. The term, "literature" encompasses all forms of written expression, with the condition that not every recorded item qualifies as literature according to the more general definition. As a result, reports typically use adjectives such as "aesthetic" or "artistic" to differentiate literary works from more common items such as telephone directories, newspapers, court records, and scholarly publications (Klarer, 2004). We know that literature expresses what we do and what we feel from this definition. This expression is described in an imagination which is commonly referred to as a literary work. Several literary works in literature, such as films, poetry, plays, and novels, and in this research, the literary work that will analyze is the novel.

The novel is one of many possible prose narrative forms. Richard Gill (1995) states that, in writing, there is a recognition that a novel is something especially made by an author so that a reader will respond to it in a particular way. Based on the above explanation, the writer believes that the work is also strongly connected to human experience or the author's opposition to a specific group. The novel is used as a medium of expression to convey the values that exist in society. The novel is a medium of communication and expression, generally a series of life stories. Novels use literary language that has an expressive aspect that carries the tone and attitude of the author. Therefore, the literary language in the novel does not only state what is said but also wants to influence the reader's perspective, persuade him, and finally change it (Pradopo, 1997). In writing novels as a medium of expression, there are usually values that reflect the values in society. The values in this novel usually reflect conditions or phenomena in the community. According to Lina & Setiawan (2017), Values describe what is good or bad in a specific cultural environment for an individual or a community.

One of the pretty popular values is American Values. In American values, there are several values that Americans generally believe. According to Althen (2003), several American values include individualism, freedom, competitiveness, and privacy, equality, informality, the future, change and progress, the goodness of humanity, time, achievement, action, work, and materialism and, the last is directness and assertiveness. One of the novels that the author will examine related to this topic is the novel entitled "See You in the Cosmos" by Jack Cheng. This novel discusses the harshness of life, which is described through the character of a child named Alex Petroski. However, this novel also shows the American values that have been attached to the characters in the story. Even though some people never visited America in person and witnessed some American values there. However, they can see the application of these American Values in several literary works in America. One of the literary works is a novel, which is generally influenced by events and values that we encounter daily. A novel is usually told about the behavior of someone who is a character in the novel. With the behaviors shown and the

activities carried out by the characters in the novel, the readers can see the application of American Values in everyday life. Whether their actions and behavior reflect American values or not.

This topic of values is essential for further discussion because values reflect our feelings about right and wrong. Values help a person grow and develop, and the decisions we make every day reflect the values that exist in a person. Today, many people do not practice good values. Even though America has excellent values and is applied by many people, the increase in discrimination, crime, and things like that still often happens, which even contradicts the values that are their principles. That is why the researcher decided to discuss this topic further.

## METHOD

This research employed Stuart Hall's representation theory. Representation is a technique for investigating anything visible through language, speech, and movement, in which each individual has their unique style of representing something (Sari & Pranoto, 2021). Regarding literary works representing a culture or value, Stuart Hall (1997) says that language is a unique medium to 'understand' things, where meaning is produced and exchanged. Language can produce meaning because it acts as a representative system of information. When it comes to representing thoughts, ideas, and feelings in culture, language is one of the most important media to use. This theory is used to figure out the use of language to represent the American values in the novel. To support the theory, the writer also uses a constructionist approach. In this constructionist approach, the construction of meaning occurs via language.

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method. As part of the descriptive qualitative method, writers are encouraged to gather data and conduct analysis based on library research as part of their writing process (Yunara & Kardiansyah, 2017). Descriptive qualitative writing is a form of writing in which the writer explains the results of an analysis using words and sentences (Adepati & Samanik, 2018). Additionally, the writer conducts library research to support the descriptive qualitative technique. According to Zeid (2004), library research obtains data from libraries. There are several steps to get maximum results in this research. The first step is to classify the data according to the research question, second analyzing existing data, third evaluating the result of the analysis, and the last concluding the result of the study.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Individualism

One of the characteristics of the characters shown in this novel is self-reliance. Self-reliance is one of the characteristics that indicate individualism. This is supported by an Essay written by Emerson in 1841, Individualism, according to Emerson, is defined as a strong and persistent faith in one's intuitions. It can conclude that individualism leads to a person's freedom and independence to be responsible for himself. Individualistic culture in the United States encourages people to choose a style of life that they think will lead to happiness and success in their lives. As previously explained, self-reliance and individualism are America's most recognized values. This self-reliance and individualism mean a person's ability to achieve his dreams and take responsibility for his own choices, reflecting America's history (Fithratullah, 2021). So basically, self-reliance and individualism have been around for a long time in American history, so this value has been attached to most American society.

*"I said I think we can afford a dog because I've been getting the on-sale food from safeway and making my own sandwiches for school instead of buying hot lunch, and also I got a part-time job helping Mr. Bashir stack magazines at his gas station" (Cheng, 2017, p 6)*

In this novel, eleven-year-old Alex lives alone with his schizophrenic mother. His older brother lives in a different city for work. Here Alex decides to raise and take care of his adopted dog without the help of others even though at first his older brother forbade it because he doesn't like it when the money is used for needs other than groceries and house. At the child's age, he works part-time to support himself. As previously explained, individualism in American Values leads to independence. One example of self-reliance is found in an article made by Emerson in 1841. The article states that one instance of self-reliance is getting things done for oneself without relying on others, "lifting your weight" by paying your expenses and taking adequate care of yourself. This is what happened to Alex because no one else wanted to take care of his dog, but he insisted on taking care of his dog without the help of others, so he was trained to be more independent in doing things. This quotation shows that Alex can rely on himself.

*"I told him I'm more responsible than a lot of thirteen-year-olds I know. I said I'm more responsible than even a lot of fourteen-year-olds." (Cheng, 2017, p 21)*

According to the interpretation of the value of individualism inherent in American culture, which believes that individuals may be self-sufficient, Alex thought he could take responsibility for himself, even to thirteen years old. Like the values expressed by Emerson, this value emphasizes confidence in thinking, abilities, beliefs, and originality. The point is that everyone can be intelligent according to their version, which refers to each person's best version (Marinoya, Hossain, 2006). How can they survive, how can they take responsibility for themselves, and how can they achieve their goals. Alex boldly says that he can take responsibility for himself. In Alex's character, he already has his thoughts and beliefs to rely on himself, which is the foundation of his individualism.

*"Steve said he still can't believe my mom and Ronnie let me come here by myself, and I told him they usually don't care what I do as long as I don't bother them too much." (Cheng, 2017, p 49)*

This quotation can conclude that Alex is an independent child because he can travel far and rely on his own. Alex traveled to New Mexico from his home in Colorado with his dog. He who was still a child dared to travel far alone. Alex feels free to do so as long as he can fulfill his dream of joining the SHARF competition. This quotation shows that Alex has this value of individualism. Additionally, the quotation refers to his mother and brother, unconcerned with what Alex does as long as Alex refrains from interfering. From this, it is also seen that his mother and Ronnie have this value. Because in that case, they seem to prioritize themselves by letting Alex do what he likes so that he doesn't bother his mother and Ronnie, which they don't like. Alex's independence that can rely on himself and his mother and his brother that prioritize themselves is the characteristic of individualism.

*"I'm legally an adult. If I want to go, I'm going to go." (Cheng, 2017, p 141)*

This dialogue is spoken by Terra while talking to Alex. At that time, Alex told Terra to ask his mother for permission when he was going on a long trip, but Terra felt that she was an adult and he could make decisions like the above on his own. The study found that Americans believe that they will get a happy life by relying on themselves or self-reliance and individualism. This quotation shows that Terra is individualistic because she feels that her decisions are her right and her responsibility to make her happy. Americans think of other people and think of themselves as individuals too. Terra believes that her freedom is her right and cannot be changed by others.

## 2. Competitiveness

Competitiveness is one of the values pretty well known among American society. The character of American individualism influences competitiveness. Individualistic Americans are prone to viewing themselves as competitors with others (Althen, 2003). Americans are very competitive in many ways, trying to make that happen. In this case, Americans will compete in many ways and be very optimistic. Reporting from USAHello.org Competition often leads Americans to be very busy. Americans work hard to improve what they do continually. Based on the explanation about competitiveness, in the novel See You in the Cosmos, this quotation shows the competitiveness values that reflect American values in American society.

*"Maybe after my launch I can get another iPod and build another rocket, I can build Voyager 4, and then next year I can come back to SHARF and launch that too, and then I'll do Voyager 5 the year after and--" (Cheng, 2017, p 66)*

Competitiveness in American society is something that is considered good. American has a high competitive spirit and will continue to realize what he dreams. Even Americans usually have plans that they have drawn up to realize their ambitions. They confirmed that challenge or force everyone to produce the best humanly possible. As a result, foreign visitors will see competition fostered in America, even at the youngest age level. In this case, Alex does not know the results of the competition he will participate in. But he is very confident about what he is doing. Americans feel that highly competitive people will do best in them, and, ultimately, societies that encourage competition will thrive the most. But he is very confident about what he is doing. Americans seem very optimistic and have a lot of motivation to show they can when they do something.

*"And now I'll go watch the Civet Prize Launches and learn from the college teams about how they build their rockets, and then I'm going to build Voyager 4, and if that fails too then I'm going to learn from those failures and redouble my efforts again." (Cheng, 2017, p 72)*

If someone has value competitiveness in him, then that person will continue to achieve his goals. Americans will continuously improve what they do to achieve their goals. In this case, his rockets can't fly very

high because the rockets he makes don't even reach a hundred feet. But even though Alex failed, he was not easily discouraged and gave up. After he gets the knowledge, he will increase his efforts in making his rocket. Alex doesn't give up, and he even has plans to build another rocket and continues to improve his rocket if it fails again.

*"They're all here trying to win the Civet Prize and their rockets are so huge..." (Cheng, 2017, p 60).*

The quotation states that they are all trying to win the Civet Prize, which is done by making their rocket as good as possible. In this case, the rocket made is enormous. This shows that making big rockets is one of their efforts to win the competition. Most Americans will be very ambitious and severe when they want something. They will try their best to make it happen. This is because of the competitive spirit that is subconsciously attached to an American. American has competitive confidence in them and will continue to show their best to win. This shows the competitiveness of America.

### 3. Informality

One of the American values reflected by the characters in the novel is informality. One of the most obvious things about informality in American society is how to address someone. Even sometimes, someone with a higher position is more comfortable being called by the first name without the designation "Sir" and "Ma'am." Americans employ just a few titles in their everyday conversations, saving them for medical and religious experts, military and police personnel, and university professors, amongst other occupations. "Sir" and "Ma'am" are mainly used when addressing persons whose names are unknown or when dealing with service providers.

*"ALEX: What is it, Zed? (Cheng, 2017, p 35)*

*ALEX: Sorry Zed, It just – I have ants in my pants because... (Cheng, 2017, p 35)*

*ALEX: Hey Zed, why did you make a vow of silence in the first place? (Cheng, 2017, p 39)*

*ALEX: Hey Steve! (Cheng, 2017, p 179)"*

This novel is about a boy who is eleven years old and lives in Colorado, a state in the United States. Zed and Steve are much older than Alex, but Alex casually and effortlessly only calls someone older by their name. This also happens in the family environment they are used to calling their sister or brother only by name.

*"ALEX: It's OK. You did good, sister?"*

*TERRA: Can we please not use that word right now? Just call me Terra" (Cheng, 2017, p 121)*

In the conversation, Alex is Terra's half-sister; they haven't seen each other for a long time, so Alex calls her sister. But here, Terra asks to be called by name without mentioning 'sister.' As previously explained, most Americans are very informal and prefer to be called by name only. Americans tend to be more open about calling someone, so most of them don't mind it. Americans still respect other people, someone who is older and has a higher position. But the way they interact tends to be more relaxed. This shows the value of informality that exists in most American society.

### 4. The Future, Change and Progress

Future-oriented is one of the traits shown by the characters in this novel. This character is portrayed by Alex, the main character in this novel. When confronted with this situation, compared to older societies, Americans are less interested in their history and traditions. They believe that they control what happens in the future or influence it. Cross-cultural trainer L.Robert Kohls in Althen (2003) said that if you want to be American, you must believe that you can improve. This means that Americans have to think that they can make a difference from now on.

*"Maybe after my launch I can get another iPod and build another rocket, I can build Voyager 4, and then next year I can come back to SHARF and launch that too, and then I'll do Voyager 5 the year after and--" (Cheng, 2017, p 66)*

In this passage, he has plans for the next years. Before even knowing whether the actions they take today will work or not, Americans will believe in a further direction. As Americans think that the future will be 'more and better than the past,' as Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck noted in Tiejuan Guo (2008). He felt that what would

happen in the future would be better and more extraordinary. The following quotation shows Americans who are constantly trying to change for a better future

*"I'm not going to stop until my Golden iPod is on its way into deep space." (Cheng, 2017, p 136)*

In the quotation above, Alex does not seem to never give up on his dreams. He said that he would not stop until he achieved his goal of launching his iPod with a rocket. This progress will make the future a reality. In addition to thinking about the future, they think about progress and changes in the process. Therefore, Americans will be unyielding until something they feel is better for the future is realized. In the quotation above, Alex thinks about the changes and progress of his rocket, which he will not stop if the rocket can not launch.

## 5. Materialism

American is a hard worker. The term "hard worker" refers to someone who works extremely hard in the workplace and in other aspects of their lives, such as housewives, scholars, and those who donate their time to charity organizations. Americans will try to stay productive and have some time to rest. The result of hard work, this action is called materialism. Ward and Wackman in Erciş and Türk (2016) stated that materialism as a philosophical viewpoint that believes that material possessions and money are essential for personal satisfaction and societal progress. In this materialism, Americans focus on material objects that make them happy. Their hardworking nature refers to material things such as money, property, successful careers, cars, or other material goods.

*"He Told me they were still a very young company then and they spent so much time working on Cloud 1, and everyone was working nights and weekends for eight months straight leading up to launch." (Cheng, 2017, p 71)*

The quotation above shows a very hard-working American. The quotation clearly shows that the workers there spent a lot of time working on the launch. They become exceptionally productive and work late into the night and even on weekends. They will work very hard to achieve the targets that have been set. Indeed, the hard work they have done leads to happiness and wealth. They work relentlessly and work continuously, of course with a purpose. Of course, those who work very hard will also get the rewards they deserve. Apart from the possible rewards, this is also related to their career success. As previously explained, the goal for career success indicates the value of materialism in American values.

*"They could either let it stop them or they could redouble their efforts, figure out what went wrong, and fix their mistakes so they can make the next try a success." (Cheng, 2017, p 72)*

In the quotation above, it can be seen that it is not just working hard like working without stopping. They want to learn from their mistakes and fix them for maximum results. Because they want to learn from their mistakes to achieve success, Americans never give up; they want to run a process that is not easy. As previously explained, American also refers to success in this materialism value.

*"And now I'll go watch the Civet Prize Launches and learn from the college teams about how they build their rockets, and then I'm going to build Voyager 4, and if that fails too then I'm going to learn from those failures and redouble my efforts again." (Cheng, 2017, p 72)*

From this quotation, it can seem that Americans are not shy about learning from others. Nothing is impossible for an American. As the saying goes, where there is a will, there is a way; where there is a will, there is a result. This adage is appropriate for an American; there is always a way to an end. If they feel their efforts are still lacking and cause failure, they will continue to increase their actions; as explained earlier, the nature of American hard work and unyielding refers to materialism.

*"Steve said he's really excited for tomorrow because \$50,000 is no joke." (Cheng, 2017, p 50)*

Ward and Wackman in Erciş and Türk (2016) defined materialism as a philosophical viewpoint that believes that material possessions and money are essential for personal satisfaction and societal progress. In this case, Steve is very enthusiastic about the prize competition they are participating in. Americans are money-

oriented. They will work hard and enthusiastically to get material in the form of money or something like that. As previously stated, the orientation of materialism sees material and money as personal happiness.

## 6. Directness and Assertiveness

Another value contained in the novel *See You in the Cosmos* is directness and assertiveness. Americans are known for being direct. This implies they will often tell us what they believe and be assertive in their demands. In America, being assertive is often regarded as a positive trait. Althen stated that Americans tend to express something they do not like directly. Americans often believe that direct communication between the parties concerned is the most effective resolution of issues or disagreements.

*"LACEY: Uh-huh. And that's my sister. Her name is Evan.*

*ALEX: That's a really weird name for a girl." (Cheng, 2017, p 27)*

The first time Alex met Lacey and her sister was on the train to New Mexico. He met Lacey, and Lacey introduced his sister, Evan. Alex felt the name 'Evan' was a strange name for a girl, and he said it directly even though he had only just met the two of them. Alex expressed it without hesitation and directly expressed it.

*STEVE: I didn't know you were going to have a dog with you either—hey, can you make sure he doesn't slobber all over the window back there? (Cheng, 2017, p 43)*

Steve and Alex just got to know each other. At that time, Alex was riding in Steve's car to go to SHARF, and previously Steve did not know that Alex would take the dog with him. Steve, who felt that he would be disturbed by Alex's dog, firmly warned Alex to ensure that he was not slobbering all over the window. As an American, Steve felt better when he said it directly and definitely for his good. If Steve didn't warn Alex outright out of reluctance and eventually Alex's dog got in Steve's car, that would be much more uncomfortable for Steve. This is what Steve did to commemorate Alex and his dog, which indicates Steve's directness and assertiveness value as an American.

## CONCLUSION

There are several American Values depicted in this novel. These American Values include individualism, competitiveness, informality, directness and assertiveness, the future, change and progress, and materialism. The values are presented explicitly and implicitly. This explicitly means that the reader can easily see values from the dialog or narration. In contrast, implicitly, it can be seen from the characteristics of the characters in the novel. In conclusion, this novel contains some American values applied by American society and can represent American values. The American values seen in this novel can also be an example for someone who is not American and does not understand the values usually applied there. The American values in this novel can also be a lesson to continue improving our quality as human beings.

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