Chapter IV

Keep the Aspidistra Flying
Introduction

The subject matter of the novel, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, is hero’s revolt against his involvement with the life of poverty. *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936), Orwell’s third novel, centres around the theme “the struggle against the money-god”\(^1\) and the problem of a “useful” life.

**Biographical Elements in the Novel**

Orwell’s writings provide a focus into his private experience and family background. It also provides a focus into the subtlety of his response to his environment. In 1934, Orwell was living in Hampstead Health. It was a favourite area for writers and artists who were trying to get either literary or artistic recognition. It was a popular haven for the writers who came in numbers to purchase the second hand books. Gordon’s vituperative comments on the merits of different kinds of books, the writers and the buyers in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, could be taken as a parallel to Orwell’s own satirical observation of contemporary writers. Orwell did not have any steady job then; he did not make any concerted effort to look for any full time job. Comstock’s diatribes against the commercial civilization proved that Orwell was strongly opposed to the ‘money-god’ because it destroys the artistic impulse of an individual. He realized, as much as Comstock did, that marriage was a bit of compromise forcing the couple to accept many bourgeois conventions.

Orwell’s central vision of total grimness and despair, born amidst the sense of approaching disaster in the thirties and intensified by the greater horrors of the forties, is repeated throughout his works like a fatal portent of dissolution and doom. *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* is Gordon’s vision of the deathliness in modern life, of London slaving under capitalistic oppression, which makes him long for a cleansing holocaust:

“He had a vision of London, of the western world; he saw a thousand million slaves toiling and grovelling about the throne of money. The earth is ploughed, ships sail, miners sweat in dripping tunnels underground, clerks hurry for the eight fifteen with the fear of the boss eating at their vitals. And even in bed with their wives they tremble and obey.”\(^2\)

In this novel Orwell’s own struggle against ‘money-god’ is reflected. The
main character, Gordon Comstock is so dominant in the action of the plot that criticism of this novel has consistently focused on his character and generally critics associate Comstock and Orwell. For Christopher Hollis "Comstock is Orwell with all fun left out." Laurence Brander also makes a more detailed comparison:

"Gordon was middle class, educated, well read and tries to write. He can be witty, as Orwell can, understanding as Orwell can, sudden and quick in thought, as Orwell was... when he is socially submerged, as Orwell once was, we can believe that his mind suffers as Orwell's did. It shows how easy it is to identify Orwell with his creations."  

The identification of Orwell and his characters which runs through all criticism of his writing is to a degree justifiable, for the biographical basis of at least this novel is undeniable. In this instance, we know that Orwell himself spent time working in a cheap London bookstore as does Gordon Comstock. John Mander, for example, says that Gordon's "snarling at the 'nancy -boys' who frequent the bookshop where he is working" ...is an " obsession" that is "clearly not Gordon Comstock's, but Orwell's."  

Theme and Portrayal of the Main Character

The central theme of Keep the Aspidistra Flying, in its protagonist's words is "the struggle against the money-god." Unfortunately, the tendency is to associate Comstock and Orwell. Orwell's acknowledged master and model for the novel of poverty is George Gissing, who wrote that his aim was to depict "a class of young man distinctive of our time-well educated, fairly bred, but without money." Like Gordon, the writer-hero of Gissing's New Grub Street (1891) "Knew what poverty means. The chilling of the brain and heart, the unnerving of hands, the slow gathering around one of fear and shame and impotent wrath, the dread feeling of helplessness, of the world's base indifference. Poverty! Poverty!"

Gordon Comstock, the main character in the novel, and his struggle against the 'money-god' is closely related to the theme of the novel. Like Flory in Burmese Days, Gordon Comstock is disenfranchised from the norm of his society; unlike Flory, however, Gordon has chosen his isolation. Like Dorothy, Gordon experiences the sub-worlds of England in the 1930's; unlike Dorothy, Gordon descends into these worlds willingly. Like both Flory and Dorothy, Gordon's ultimate problem is whether to accept or to reject society. But whereas Flory is finally "cast out" from his world and whereas
Dorothy finally accepts hers as inevitable, Gordon's choice to accept society is conscious-and crucial to him. Gordon was born as an unattended child in 1905, the last of a family in the most dismal of class, middle-the landless gentry. Its Victorian founder had dynamically plundered both proletariat and foreigner of fifty thousand pounds; its present members are dead alive, gutless and unsuccessful, drifting along in an atmosphere of semi-genteel failure:

"It was impossible to imagine any of them making any sort of mark in the world, or creating anything, or destroying anything, or being happy, or vividly unhappy, or fully alive, or even earning a decent income." 

In the family there are now only deaths, sickness and constant financial harassment:

"It was not merely the lack of money. It was rather that, having no money, they still lived mentally in the money-world-the world in which money is virtue and poverty is crime. It was not poverty but the down-dragging of respectable poverty that had done for them." 

Year in, year out, nothing ever happens. In Gordon's own family, there are five living members and combined income is about £ 600 per annum; combined ages 263 and they are the kind of people automatically elbowed from the centre of the things, never being involved in anything whether it is travel, fighting, imprisonment, marriage or childbirth; and there seemed no reason why they should not continue in the same style until they died.

Gordon grows up in an atmosphere of cut down clothes. Huge sums are wasted on his education. Although academically he is unsuccessful, he manages to train his mind along the lines that suit him; reading books denounced by the headmaster; developing unorthodox opinions about the church of England, patriotism and the Old Boys' Tie; running a school review called the Bolsheviek. Very early he understands money and the swindle of modern commerce:

"What he realized... was that money-worship has been elevated into a religion. Perhaps it is the only real religion- the only really felt religion- that is left to us. Money is what God used to be. Good and evil have no meaning any longer except failure and success."

The aspidistra symbolizes the money respectability from which there are only two escapes of being rich or refusing to be rich. As it is established in the
school that Gordon is a nuisance and he will be never successful, he decides to declare secret war on the money-god making it his special purpose not to succeed.

Six years at a 'good' job do not destroy his intention of writing. His mother's death deeply influences his thoughts. During this period of poverty he realizes that if one genuinely despises money, he cannot live, on the contrary, he is the helpless slave of the money until he has enough of it to live on.

He joins a second job with New Albion Publicity Company and realizes that the modern world is 'a panorama of ignorance, greed, vulgarity, snobishness, whoredom and disease'. One advertisement ('Corner Table Enjoys His Meal With Bovex') gives rise to this meditation:

"Corner Table, heir of ages; and victor of Waterloo, Corner Table. Modern man as his masters want him to be. A docile little porker, sitting in the money-sty, drinking Bovex....Corner Table grins at you, seemingly optimistic, and with a flash of false teeth. But what is behind the grin? Desolation, emptiness, prophecies of doom."

Again being dissatisfied, he works in a bookshop and has the illusion of being outside the money-world; but soon he realizes that there is no hardship; but there is constant humiliation. There is the mental deadness and spiritual squalor that inevitably comes when your income reaches a certain level. He says that 'faith, hope, money-only a saint could have the first two without having the third'. Poverty is spiritual halitosis. Its world is a filthy sub-existence, a spiritual sewer. In a modern society cleanliness, decency, energy and self-respect all cost money.

As a result, Gordon the poet lives in extreme poverty in 1934 with five pence-half penny. His overcoat is the spout for fifteen shillings; he lives in a house where the hall smells of dish-water, cabbage, rag-mats and bedroom slops. He is lonely, moth-eaten, his mind sticky with boredom. He is busy writing a long poem called "London Pleasures" and expresses with disgust the futility of life without money:

"Could you write even a penny novelette without money to put heart in you? Invention, energy, wit, style, charm-they have all got to be paid for in hard cash."

The city, London, is not a community but merely isolated clusters of meaningless lives drifting drowsily and chaotically to the grave. He and the rest are corpses, rotting upright. Thirty years of futility have led him into blind alley:

"You serve the money-god or you go under. social failure, artistic
failure, sexual failure. And lack of money is at the bottom of them all."  

His relationship with two persons is important to him; one is Ravelston, the editor of a Socialist periodical who is trying to escape from his own class to become an honorary member of the proletariat. The other is Rosemary whom he can afford to meet only in the streets, who loves him but will not sleep with him. There is a film of money between them:

"All human relationships must be purchased with money. If you have no money, men won't care for you, women won't love you."  

For any woman a man without a large income is dishonoured, because he has sinned against the aspidistra; the female message to the male is to chuck away his decency and make more money.

With Rosemary he goes on a disastrous hike that starts off with the extravagant happiness of falling into absurd enthusiasms over everything they see, moves through a nasty meal at a pretentious hotel and a quarrel over love making, and ends with his confession that he has only eight pence left and will have to borrow for the rest of the day.

Gordon's life is nothing but one job lost; a search for another starts. A ten-hour-a-day, thirty-shillings-a-week job in a Lambeth two penny lending library seems to provide the underground haven he wants where there are no relatives or friends, no hope, fear, ambition, honour or duty. His night of drunkenness seemed to have been a turning point:

"He liked to think about the lost people, the underground people, tramps, beggars, criminals, prostitutes. It is a good world that they inhabit, down there in their frowzy kips and spikes. He liked to think that beneath the world of money there is that great sluttish underworld where failure and success have no meaning; a sort of Kingdom of ghosts where all are equal. That was where he wished to be, down in the ghost-Kingdom, below ambition."

Losing contact with the world of money and culture, living in hostile conditions and severe poverty, Gordon decided to take up his old job with the New Albion to end his war on money and its gods. He feels repentant:

"There was a peculiar sensation, an actual physical sensation, in his heart, in his limbs, all over him. What was it? Shame, misery, despair? Rage at being
back in the clutch of money?.... Now that the thing was done, he felt nothing but relief; relief that now at last he had finished with dirt, cold, hunger and loneliness and could get back to decent, fully human life." 16

He realizes that members of lower middle class manage to preserve their decency:

"They had their standards, their inviolable points of honour. They 'kept themselves respectable'- kept the aspidistra flying. Besides, they were alive. They were bound up in the bundle of life. They begot children, which is what the saints and soul-savers never by any chance do." 17

He drops the manuscript of London Pleasures—the work that was to be created outside the money-world-down a drain. He marries, and with Rosemary furnishes a flat. As they return with a newly-bought aspidistra, she feels the baby move inside her well. Well, once again things are happening in the Comstock family.

The novel has also been judged, generally harshly, according to how the various critics respond to the character of Gordon; criticism becomes a popularity contest. For Hollis, Gordon is a “bitter fool”, an “impossibly perverse, difficult, self-centred, unloveable man”;18 for Stephen Greenblatt: he is “obnoxious and detestable...narrow minded, irritable, intolerant, ignorant, vain, arrogant”. 19 For Wyndham Lewis, Gordon is merely “frightful”.20 Such judgments are understandable, perhaps, for Gordon is during much of the novel all that these terms imply and more; but such facile evaluation leads to misinterpretations of the book. Thus, it is said that “under the sheer weight of Gordon’s ugliness” the theme of the novel is “smothered and forgotten” 21 About Gordon Comstock, Orwell expresses plainly elsewhere:

"The essence of being human is that one does not seek perfection, that one is sometimes willingly to commit sins for the sake of loyalty, ...." 22

**Hero’s Revolt and his Involvement with Poverty**

In his exposition of poverty, Orwell focuses on a realistic vision. He realizes that it is the wrong socio-political and socio-economic system that obstructs the poor from passing a viable human life. It is the ‘politics of starvation’ that forces them to be dehumanized and miserable. Orwell was shocked to discover that even food was used as a political weapon. The socio-political and socio-economic order is set up in such a design by the dictators that the poor are never allowed to come out of the
abysmal poverty. The poor are untrammelled in the man-made network. These economic conditions do not allow them to educate their children and get out of the pit of poverty. Children are kept underfed so that they could neither revolt nor even think of their predicament. In this novel, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, Orwell displays the agony of poverty, desolate houses and sick people. He writes:

“The Comstocks belonged to the most dismal of all classes, the landless gentry. In their miserable poverty they had not even the snobbish consolation of regarding themselves as an ‘old’ family fallen on evil days, for they were an ‘old’ family at all, merely one of those families which rose on the wave of Victorian prosperity and sank again faster than the wave itself.”

The Comstocks are economically depressed. On account of their stark poverty, they have lost their courage, potency, vitality and capability of facing the problems. Orwell attempts to show that in the life of poor people there is perpetual negation. Orwell, like Dickens, peeps into the life of poor. He has written in *Down and Out in Paris and London*:

“Poverty is what I am writing about, and I had my first contact with poverty in this slum. The slum, with its dirt and its queer lives, was first an object-lesson in poverty.”

Orwell asserts that “the first effect of poverty is that it kills thought”. It dehumanizes the man and makes him beast-like. It weakens man’s physical, mental and spiritual powers. Gordon, the protagonist of the novel *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, resigns his job from the publishing firm and takes an honest job which was devoid of swindle and drudgery. He goes on to depend on two pounds a week. He takes refuge into slums and abjures the life of competition and drudgery:

“Money again, always money! Lack of money means discomfort, means squalid worries, means shortage of tobacco, means ever-present consciousness of failure—above all, it means loneliness. How can you be anything but lonely on two quid a week?”

G.B. Shaw also writes in *Major Barbara*:

“The greatest evils and crimes is poverty.”

Ravelston, his friend, says that the rich are growing richer. They live in their own paradise of comfort and luxury. They do not realize suffering and
helplessness of poor. No one bothers to think that the poor take impure and polluted food.

It is true that Gordon’s chosen exile to the marginal poverty of lower-class London is an overt reaction to “the money-god”; to Gordon, “Money, money, all is money!” But though poverty is that against which Gordon is rebelling, his hatred is larger. Gordon really hates modern life, and modern life is symbolized by that most eminent agency for the corruption of language and advertising. He looks out from his shabby book-store at “ad-posters” across the street, in which “Corner Table Enjoys His Bovex” with the “face of a self-satisfied rat”, “a docile little porker.” Orwell exposes the catastrophic world of advertising agency:

“Corner Table grins at you, seemingly optimistic, with a flash of false teeth. But what is behind the grin? Desolation, emptiness, prophecies of doom.... The great death wish of the modern world. Suicide pacts.... Enemy aeroplanes flying over London; the deep threatening hum of the propellers, the shattering thunder of the bombs. It is all written in Corner Table’s face.”

Orwell conceived the idea that corruption of language is an inevitable precursor of physical destruction. However, once that physical destruction arrives in the fact of World War II, violence becomes comprehensible and strangely tolerable. The unbearable aspect of modern life will prove to be the corruption of language. Advertising is the “inevitable price” that Gordon must pay. Orwell is heavily ironic toward Gordon, picturing him as a self-pitying adolescent of twenty-nine. In Mrs. Wisbeach’s house, where he has a room, “tea-making was the major household offence, next to bringing a woman in”; defiantly Gordon makes his own tea.

Even Gordon’s self-imposed poverty and self-imposed rebellion exhibit a heavily ironic attitude of his author who may be suggesting that Gordon must learn, in effect, to unlearn some of these beliefs—at least those beliefs which are unqualified and unrealistic.

At the third-rate private school to which Gordon’s mother sent him, literally killing herself to raise the money, Gordon was abused by the other boys because of his relative poverty, an experience Orwell himself suffered and which he recounts in his bitter essay, “Such Such Were the Joys”. The effect on Orwell is long lasting.

Rejection of money, Gordon systematically adopts as his future way of
life, is his “boyish” attitude: “He was against the money-god and all his swinish priesthood. He had declared war on money; but secretly, of course.”

Though it is Gordon here who sees politics and economics as intervening against the natural sexual act. Orwell also shares this belief, even though he is generally ironic toward Gordon’s attitudes in this book. The existence in itself becomes progressively more grim. Finally even sex is seen by Gordon in terms of money. He is walking the streets, lamenting his loneliness, thinking of his girl, Rosemary Waterlow. He condemns his sexual urge:

“How damned unfair it is that we are filled to the brim with these tormenting desires and then forbidden to satisfy them! Why should one, merely because one has no money, be deprived of that?”

He further complains:

“You won’t sleep with me, simply and solely because I’ve got no money...if I had a decent income you’d go to bed with me tomorrow.”

All the obstacles in Gordon’s life are his own solipsism. He rejects conventionality in others and precisely bases his own actions on a quasi-Victorian system. It is not clear that the cause of the trouble—their love is not consummated—is the lack of money:

“Money, money, always money! Even in the bridal bed, the finger of the money-god intruding!”

Gordon’s disturbed soul is the by-product of his manifold conflicts. Firstly, moral emptiness baffles Gordon to which he has sunk. Secondly, Gordon’s progress “underground” makes the shallowness of his beliefs clear. The way he spends the money proves three facts: that Gordon is under the affective power of money; that his attitudes are sham; that he shares the same lower-middle-class values he so fanatically condemns. Though his conscience is troubled regarding his sister, to whom he owes much money and who is herself poverty-stricken. He seems to prove that money does brutalize. But it is by no means clear that “money is any more the culpable agent than his own puerile self.”

Gordon does not completely escape the bourgeois world. The aspidistra plant of the title is the recurring symbol which represents the middle-class and its values. From the very beginning of the novel, Gordon has had a “sort of secret
feud with the aspidistra.” The other world that intrudes upon Gordon is love rather than money.

When Rosemary tells Gordon that she is pregnant, his first reaction is that it is a “disaster”; “the thought of a baby, his baby growing in her womb had awoken in him no emotion except dismay.” But when Rosemary offers to have an abortion, Gordon suddenly loses his egoism.

The baby may have been the immediate “the precipitating cause”; but the true cause is realization of the wrongness of the life he has been leading, a new, mature understanding of the demands of this world. Gordon’s war with the money-god and the middle class had led him to a kind of living death; to Orwell this is a heinous sin, for it is wasteful and unnecessary.

“He had blasphemed against money, rebelled against money, tried to live like an anchorite outside the money-world; and it had brought him not only misery, but also a frightful emptiness, an inescapable sense of futility. To abjure money is to abjure life. Be not righteous over much; why shouldst thou die before thy time?”

The religious metaphors are in terms of seclusion-and seclusion is wrong. They combine with social terms of maturation. Orwell generalizes his outlook towards money:

“Everybody rebels against the money-code and everyone sooner or later surrenders. He had kept up his rebellion a little longer than most, that was all. And he had made such a wretched failure of it!”

The social language in which Gordon now thinks elevates the once despised middle class to the status of the means by which society is saved. The conflict between money and decency seems resolved:

“...they lived by the money-code, sure enough, and yet they contrived to keep their decency. The money-code as they interpreted it was not merely cynical and hoggish. They had their standards, their inviolable points of honour. They kept themselves respectable—kept the aspidistra flying.”

The term “decency” is to be Orwell’s highest praise. Gordon may insist to Rosemary that they have an aspidistra in their apartment, in a symbolic surrender to a world which is now transformed from the evil money-god to the responsible middle class. Orwell, the realist, seems to believe that no matter the cost, man must
accommodate his society. But life is not abstract and absolute, and life is what man must contend with. The coming baby brings life once again into the dreamy monotony of Gordon’s world:

“Well, once again things were happening in the Comstock family.”

The realistic relatism that Orwell has stressed through Gordon is the willingness to live a system of wrong values for the greater good of society. The cost of accommodating society will have gone too high. The gentle, comic wrongs of New Albion will become transformed into a framework of absolute totalitarianism and oppression; the subjection of self to society will become an evil means rather than a positive goal. Thus *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* takes part in the Spanish Civil War, and there comes to apprehend the political and moral beliefs which will raise him to the stature of a major political and artistic writer. The apprenticeship has ended.

**Symbols of Prosperity for Slum-dwellers: A political Satire**

Poverty makes people physically sick, mentally weak, culturally poor and socially inferior. They are to be hated as they are poor. The slum-life is a symbol of poverty. The slum dwellers live in sub-human conditions, they look at middle class world with admiration. The aspidistras are one such items from the other, outside world which they keep by way of imitation. Aspidistra is a symbol of prosperity and happiness and becomes depressing and meaningless in a slum.

Gordon, the poor leads a life of utter humiliation, gets no respectability from the rich. He comes to feel that he is poor. Orwell feels that poverty brings always humiliation. Ravelston, Gordon’s friend, the editor of the Anti-Christ meets him once in a fortnight. Besides his beloved, Rosemary refuses to marry him as he is poor. Orwell writes:

“And if you have not got money, you are not nice. You are dishonoured, somehow you’ve sinned. Sinned against the aspidistra.”

According to Orwell poverty is not merely a physical condition of the life but a total emotional collapse too. Gordon and Rosemary cannot marry because they are poor; poverty keeps them apart.

In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, Gordon Comstock, perceives the fallacy, hollowness, treachery and triviality of the modern world. Man, in this world of propaganda and pseudo-advertisement, seems to have lost his inherent
metaphysical and spiritual values. Gordon, like other protagonists, finds himself a misfit in the hostile world and therefore, he rebels against the inhuman and mercantile world which is, of course, a worshipper of 'money-god'. George Orwell writes: "He was in the money-world but not of it." 44

What Orwell attacked is the money-god that controls man's morality and conscience. Orwell writes "that was what it meant to worship the money-god! To sell down, to Make Good, to sell your soul for a villa and an aspidistra." 45 Gordon, no longer, wants to sell his conscience. He renunciates the world of 'money-god'. He wants to bide time in the slum. He wishes to be:

"Under Ground, Under Ground: Down in the safe soft womb of earth, where there is no getting of jobs or losing of jobs, no relatives or friends to plague you, no hope, fear, ambition, honour, duty-no duns of any kind. That was where he wished to be." 46

Gordon comes to realize the corrupting influence of money. He rebels against the inhuman collective consciousness because he finds individual integrity, solace and a sense of shelter among the proletarians who suffer in the soulless world but stay humane. Hence, declaring war on money and its abuse, he attacks the hollow pretensions and spiritual barrenness of the commercialized society where man does not have enough freedom to sustain his individual integrity. Keith Alldritt comments: The deadening effect of serving the money-god is really the chief theme of Keep the Aspidistra Flying.

Man is caught in the net, he is compelled to sell his identity and conscience at the cost of 'Profit and delight', Gordon and Winston Smith, both refuse to accept the inhuman codes of society. He declares war on money for "they had accepted the money-code and by that code they were failures". 47 Gordon retires into the slums. Perhaps he wanted to purify his soul through penance. Orwell seems to share the metaphysical and mystical experience. Perhaps, George Herbert also explores such experience in his poem, "The Pulley":

"Yet let him keep the rest.
But keep them with repining restlesness.
Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
May toss him to my breast."48

Orwell exposes 'The Waste Land,' and 'Unreal City'; he also explores the cruelty of 'April' and symbolically he unfolds the crippled human condition. Steinhoff writes:

"He is no Prometheus, but rather, like the central personage in Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground, he is a mouse, hyperconscious, cherishing his own spite, taking pleasure in his own humiliation."49

Comstock returns to the existing world with a note of compromise and marries his beloved Elizabeth. Steinhoff finds a note of optimism:

"The intellectual in Orwell's book is reconciled to tough, persistent, and healthy world of ordinary-decent men by the thrilling fact that his wife is going to bear his child."50

Besides the spiritual sterility exposed in Coming Up for Air and Keep the Aspidistra Flying, Orwell also shows concern for the dehumanizing demon unleashed by war. The effects of commercialization and war are far reaching. They break down the social, moral, religious barricades. In fact, even the sacredness of life itself is reduced to nothing. The fear of annihilation becomes more devastating than death itself and the very feeling, love and happiness become soured and stale. Man's dehumanization is complete. John Atkins rightly says:

Orwell approached politics through poverty, but later, when the new totalitarian regimes replaced poverty by security in return for social servility and political discipline, he realized that the crux of modern politics is liberty".51

Orwell's characters of lower middle-class return to the society with renewed sense of compromise and common decency. They bear a sense of morality and conscience. Gordon, like Dorothy Hare, returns to a "decent, fully human life,"52 with a note of hope and courage. In Man and Superman, Shaw raises the question of money and rightly says: "Man thrive better on disappointments in love than on disappointments in money."53 Poverty cannot be romanticized. It is a dreaded reality, which has to be overcome by love, sympathy and understanding. It is the hope in such a change on which Orwell depends for a better tomorrow.

Orwell writes the purpose of writing in Down and Out in Paris and London:
“Poverty is what I am writing about, and I had my first contact with poverty in this slum. The slum, with its cist and its queer lives, was first an object-lesson poverty”.54

George Orwell was aware of the class consciousness. This class consciousness get heightened between the rich and the poor, the exploiter and the exploited and between the oppressor and the oppressed. It was this discord that made Orwell argue for a classless society. G.B. Shaw also while writing about democracy had written :

“Money talks; money prints; money broadcasts; money reigns; and kings and labour leaders alike have to register its decrees, and even by a staggering paradox, to finance its enterprises and guarantee its profits.”55

Money or lack of it does overturn everybody's apple-cart and clear and fissure between different classes whose interests clash. The poor would always be repulsed because he is poor. Poverty becomes a sin at whose altar the highest ideals tremble and collapse. Comstock, the protagonist, in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, is hated, humiliated and repulsed by the rich and the capitalists because he is poor. It is money which matters. It is his poverty which dehumanizes him. He says :

“Money, once again; all is money. All human relationships must be purchased with money. If you have no money, men won't care for you, women won't love you; won't that is, care for you or love you the last little bit that matters. And how right they are, after all! For, moneyless, you are unlovable. Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels.”56

Such awareness of class-consciousness becomes serious and heightened when Rosemary refuses to marry him. He attributes it to class-consciousness. The class-consciousness might also be felt in the imperialistic system where the difference is imperialistic and racial. D.H. Lawrence also exposes the conflict between the upper class industrialists and miners, and the workers. Clifford, in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, avers to get mixed with the miners. Both Orwell and Lawrence disgusted the industrialized and capitalistic pattern of society. Because, it was the class-consciousness which bifurcated man in separate compartments. D.H. Lawrence writes eloquently:

“Clifford would never go outside the park in his chair. He could not bear to have the miners stare at him as an object of curiosity.”57
Poverty is one of the most important factors which separates class from class, man from man. Orwell wanted to diminish and wipe it out. Poverty is always humiliating and discriminating. Katharine Mansfield eloquently comments on the predicament of Lil and Else. The servant's daughters will grow up to be servants. Therefore, even in their childhood they are treated as one, the brunt of everyone's insults. "The Doll's House" is not for them. It is for the other children. In fact their poverty denies them even their childhood. They are outsiders, not only classwise but age-wise too. The stern voice of the aunt chides the Kelveys children:

"You know as well as I do, you're not allowed to talk to them. Run away, children, run away at once. And don't come again, said Aunt Beryl! And she stepped into the Yard and shooed them out as if they were chickens."\(^{58}\)

The process of dehumanization is boundless. In addition, Orwell's essay "The Art of Donald McGill", brings fresh insight into the proletarian and working classes:

"The corner of the human heart that they speak for might easily manifest itself in worse forms, and one should be sorry to see them vanish."\(^{59}\)

Orwell laments at the sinister designs of the politics of poverty and of the apathy meted out to them in the pseudo-socialistic world wherein man instead of shouldering responsibilities of life, takes refuge into the cloister of "personal immortality."\(^{60}\) Orwell elegantly writes:

"The evil of poverty is not so much that it makes man suffer as that it rots physically and spiritually."\(^{61}\)

In his remarkable essay, "How the Poor Die", Orwell exposes the desolatory state of hospitals in which natural "death almost by definition, means something slow and painful".\(^{62}\) Orwell is shocked to see the proletarian and working classes in utter neglect and pity devoid of their bare necessities of life. He writes:

"The business of people just like animals, for instance, with nobody standing by, nobody interested, the death not even noticed till the morning-this happened more than twice."\(^{63}\)

The politics of poverty inculcated against the working classes, is thus limitless.

Orwell's experiences in *Down and Out In Paris and London* are his direct reaction against, and refutation of, this privileged school ethos, just as his use of a pseudonym (George is the patron saint of England, Orwell an East Anglian river)
beginning with that book is an attempt to abandon that hateful part of his life that he associated with St. Cyprian’s. He writes that ‘People always grow up like their names. It took me nearly thirty years to work off the effects of being called Eric: and when he gave up the family name of Blair, he rejected the Scottish birth of both parents and the odious cult of Scotland that pervaded his snobbish school. The hero of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* admits that “Gordon Comstock” was a pretty bloody name, but then Gordon came of a pretty bloody family. The “Gordon part of it was Scotch, of course”.

Comstock’s experience at a school where nearly all the boys were richer than himself and tormented him because of it led to his renunciation of ambition and the world of money. As Comstock says:

> “Probably the greatest cruelty one can inflict on a child is to send it to a school among children richer than itself. A child conscious of poverty will suffer snobbish agonies such as grown-up person can scarcely even imagine.”

This may not be the ‘greatest’ cruelty, but it is the one Orwell suffered.

Orwell’s suggestions for the alleviation of poverty are both pragmatic and politic, and he hopes to improve conditions by clarifying common misconceptions in the light of first-hand experience: ‘You thought it would be quite simple; it is extraordinarily complicated. You thought it would be terrible; it is merely squalid and boring.’ Like Dickens, who tried to persuade his middle-class audience that the poor were not evil and were not to be blamed for their poverty, Orwell explodes a number of common prejudices by explaining them. Educated people fear workers because they do not understand them and despise beggars because they fail to earn a decent living. (That “money has become the grand test of virtue” is a major theme of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*.) Tramps tramp because they are compelled by law to do so; they are too docile to be dangerous and too destitute to be drunk. Orwell, middle-class by birth and working-class by experience, contrasts the two classes in order to reveal how hatred and fear force them into opposition.

Orwell is not in full control of his style in this novel. It is repetitive to the point of boredom and exasperation (“Money, money, always money!”) and liberally sprinkled with poetic allusions (Gordon is, or was, a poet) which are rather forced and banal:

> “Novels fresh from the press – still unravished brides, pining for the paper knife to deflower them- and review copies, like youthful widows, blooming still though
virgin no longer, and here and there, in sets of half a dozen, those pathetic spinster- things, ‘remainders’, still guarding hopefully their long preserved virginity.\textsuperscript{67}

Besides quotations in this passage from Keats and Marvell, there are ineffectual allusions to the Bible, Virgil, Chaucer, Villon, Wyatt, Peele, Shakespeare, Milton, Mandeville, Blake, Baudelaire, Francis Thompson and D.H. Lawrence, and Orwell’s laborious use of poetic allusion is another example of his difficulty in transforming experience into a traditional novel. (By contrast, the numerous references to nineteenth – century English writers in \textit{Women in Love} oppose the tradition and solidarity of that period with the chaos and disintegration of the modern age). But the worst example of Orwell’s ‘poetic’ style is his metamorphosis into a sexual landscape of the countryside where Gordon attempts to seduce Rosemary. While pheasants (which Gordon considers the embodiment of ferocious animal lust) loiter ‘with long tails trailing’, he says the trees are phallic, the knobs on the bark are ‘like the nipples of breasts’ and the boughs ‘like the wreathing trunks of elephants’. And just before he’s screws himself up for the effort of seducing the virgin, ‘the warm light poured over them as though a membrane across the sky had broken’.

Another major flaw in the novel is the character of the hero, Gordon, who lacks integrity and honour, and whose envy and self pity tend to alienate the reader’s interest. He is selfish and ‘horribly unfair’ to Rosemary about the use of contraceptives; parasitic with Julia and Ravelston; cowardly with waiters and servants; improvident and lecherous, callous and cold-blooded, without self-respect or principles. But Gordon is more ridiculous and weak than wicked, for Orwell intends him to be an essentially sympathetic hero and suggests that these traits stem less from personality defects than from poverty.

Orwell’s characters are the true spokesmen of his views on culture. Their love for the past, their interest in nature, their delight in the common pleasures of the earth make them essentially refined and cultured. Bernard Crick opines:

“To see some good in the past is, for Orwell, to show hope for a better future: even under poverty and oppression, the human spirit, common pleasures and common decency are hard to crush.”\textsuperscript{68}

The authenticity of Crick’s remarks finds suitable evidence in \textit{Keep the Aspidistra Flying}. The hero Gordon Comstock voluntarily opts for a life of poverty when he abjures
the money – code. The lack of money brings not only essential shortages in his life but makes him suffer from a sense of failure, frustration and loneliness. But in one of his excursions to Burnham Beeches with his beloved Rosemary he delves deep into the mysteries of nature and takes delight in natural, sensuous pleasures, which only a man of heightened sensibilities can show. Such feelings can only be rendered in the language of poetry or expressed by a man of poetic sensibilities:

"Oh Gordon, what a lovely day"

'Lovely'

'And, oh, look, look—Look at all the rabbits in that field!'

Sure enough, at the other end of the field, innumerable rabbits were browsing, almost like a flock of sheep. Suddenly there was a flurry under the hedge. A rabbit had been lying there. It leapt from its nest in the grass with a flirt of dew and dashed away down the field, its white tail lifted. Rosemary threw herself into Gordon's arms. It was astonishingly warm as summer."89

Thus, we see that all the characters of Orwell — Flory, Winston Smith, George Bowling or Gordon Comstock belong to the low-middle class but they are the mouthpieces of Orwell's views on culture, Abhorring the industrial and commercial civilization of rubber, glass and steel, Orwell's characters seek refuge either in the organic community of the past societies or the idyllic surrounding. It is by these subterfuges that Orwell's characters show their love of common pleasures and retain the common decency of human beings. Bernard Crick interprets Orwell's solutions to the problems of culture both in the past and in the near future for the common man:

"The past for the common man was one of 'mouldy bread', poverty, disease and fear; the future will be of 'rubber, glass and steel', he said; but at least, within the present, if employment can be beaten, there are homely contentment's and fraternal virtues which contrast vividly with both middle class acquisitiveness, competitiveness and propriety and with the restless power hungry arrogance of the intellectuals."80

Cultural critic Lesley Johnson points out that all writers felt the decline in traditional culture in the romantic literary tradition and it included Leavis, Eliot, Huxley, Orwell and D.H. Lawrence. "The question of the lowering of standards of the traditional culture through its widening social basis is perceived to be an issue by all writers within this
romantic literary tradition.”

Orwell opines that the middle class cannot be the upholder of any standard of culture. But he is hopeful that the lower middle-class by sharing an identity of interest with the working class by sharing an identity of interest with the working class can become natural leaders of men, if they realize the value of common sense and common decency, which the middle class fails to realize. Bernard Crick rightly suggests that people like Winton Smith and Bowling can become the natural leaders if they share oneness of interest with the working class as both of them are equally exploited. Almost all his characters belonging to the low-middle class envy the working classes for their sense of common decency and for their brimming vitality of life. Gordon Comstock in Keep the Aspidistra Flying realizes:

"How right the lower classes are! Hats off to the factory lad who with four pence in the world puts his girl in the family way! At least he's got blood and not money in his veins.”

Orwell's numerous characters seem to admire domesticity and solitude where there is comeliness, naturalness, and human values. He finds the modern man's kitchen deserted and lifeless. Orwell's many heroes escape to the world-solitude, which symbolizes their inclination towards human life. His dynamics of humanism extends a profound love and sympathy for the suffering humanity. He wants to employ a sense of conscience and morality in order to prevent man from being, further, deprived of his essence. He was craving for certain positive values for the survival of man in the world. He is without any doubt, the conscience of our generation.

Orwell's novels seriously and emphatically expose the pathetic condition of the down-trodden and the poor who pass a wretched life in endless slums. On the other hand, Orwell finds them an embodiment of human values, conscience, generosity and uprightness. He goes on to hope on them.

An embittered indignation against the evils of commercialism, capitalism and pseudo-advertisement, find expression in Keep the Aspidistra Flying. Gordon Comstock an embittered man, refuses to worship the money-god and chooses to live in a slum for he finds a shelter in it away from the menace of dehumanizing commercialism. Like D.H. Lawrence, Orwell believed that culture and civilization attain total harmony if balance between body and spirit, flesh and soul is achieved which form
the humanitarian infrastructure of the whole society. His novels also explore a sense of metaphysical wisdom, natural instinct and mysticism.

Orwell is a thinker who constantly continued to defend the rights of the proletariat, the suffering and exploited individuals. It seems a distinguished argument in the age of orthodoxies, organizations and regimentation.

Like Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, G. B. Shaw's *Apple Cart* recriminates against plutocracy, pseudo-socialistic and pseudo-democratic values. Perhaps king Magnus, wants to restore democracy in true sense:

"Politics, once the centre of attraction for ability, public spirit, and ambition, has now become the refuge of a few fanciers of public speaking and party intrigue who find all the other avenues to distinction closed to them either by their lack of practical ability, their comparative poverty and lack of education, or, let me hasten to add, their hatred of oppression and injustice, and their contempt for the chicaneries and false pretences of commercialized professionalism".  

Hence, Orwell's idea of "democratic socialism" seems justified.

**Achievements and Shortcomings of the novel**

Most of Orwell's novels can justly be called episodic and the autobiographical ones. The episodes are organized by his conclusion. Much of this criticism can be applied to *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. Here the hero, Gordon Comstock, like Orwell has declared war on all kinds of success. He gives up a job with good prospects in an advertising agency and skins lower and lower in the social scale, ending up as the assistant in a seedy penny to library. But having decided to abandon the respect of others and his own middle class respect, he discovers that these things and money are valuable in life. In an excursion to the country with his girlfriend, Rosemary, Gordon realizes the importance of money. He overspends on lunch, and all afternoon feels the humiliation of having to get home on her money. The episode in the novel illustrates that Orwell himself in the name of Gordon emphasizes that money and class differences cannot be overcome merely by deciding to ignore their existence. After sinking beneath respectable society and rejecting everyone, including Rosemary, Gordon recants completely, when he finds that she is pregnant by him. He decides to marry, and is to take up his old job in advertising. Orwell is not very clear in his conclusion
that the rejection of money and success leads ultimately to the rejection of ordinary human feeling.

**As an Outlet of Orwell's Neurotic Experiences**

The book is painful and aggravating to read since it is the utmost unbroken expression of self-pity. Indeed together with *A Clergyman's Daughter*, it forms the best evidence for the psychological interpretation of Orwell's work. Hence Orwell has been criticized as a man of neuroses, giving violent and abscessed expression to the traumas of his early life, and these two novels certainly have an atmosphere of enclosed, hidden unhappiness which may indicate that the act of writing then was a type of therapeutics but this argument does not hold much validity as Orwell's other writings are totally different e.g. *Coming Up for Air*, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty Four*.

**Conclusion**

The best part of Orwell's criticism is that he shows a talent for the evocation of a mood in a charming and dry humorous way and for the extraction from that mood of an intellectual argument. The conclusions, which he drew, were his way of controlling the plot in which he does not achieve much success. Orwell's concentration on isolated and contradictory fact prelude his delicate arrangement of the episodes in a generalized way within a very short space of time. Gordon accepts the evil; it means the willingness to live within a system of wrong values for the greater good of the society. But Orwell also realizes that the cost of accommodating society will go too high in future. As Gordon is educated into social self-sacrifice in 1936, in fact, it is an end of Orwell's own education and he goes to Spain to take part in the Spanish Civil War and there comes to apprehend the political and moral beliefs which dominate the themes of his later work. His experiences in the life of scarcity and insecurity have helped him in acquiring a stature of major writer by fusing political satire and artistic purpose in creating an artistic work of par-excellence.

In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* ironic advertising slogans evolve into seven 'commandments' of *Animal Farm* and finally into Newspeak. Winston Smith's society is a terror to be avoided, not a refuge to be sought. The realization of self in language changes to the denial of all such possibility through language. Orwell employs the use of animal metaphor to suggest human states of behaviour.

Textual exegesis is the only way by which we can judge, and the only
way we can accurately understand ideas in imaginative writing, be they polemic, didactic, or aesthetic. I concur fully with David Lodge in his *Language of Fiction*. “Literary critics can claim special authority not as witness to the moral value of works of literature, but as explicators and judges of effective communication.” Orwell's novels are indeed structures which imply and reveal directly moral, social and political concerns.

In our time, we seem to have forgotten the political nexus of literature. To a Shakespeare, a Spencer, a Milton, a Wordsworth, politics is an essential part of art. Perhaps Orwell and his relationship with politics and art can re-establish an object lesson for our time. An extended reading of Orwell's writings leaves behind some message that in this century, the artist must contend with the world if either art or politics is to have meaning.

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