



**WANDERING BETWEEN CLASSES: THE DEPICTION OF POVERTY  
IN GEORGE ORWELL'S EARLY TEXTS**

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Philosophy  
in  
English (Literary Studies)

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August 2004

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## **Acknowledgement**

This thesis owes its existence to the help, support and inspiration of many people. I would like to express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to Prof. Yuet May CHING for her support and encouragement during the four years of this thesis' work. I must also thank Prof. Jason GLECKMAN and Dr. Peter CRISP who have provided urgent guidance and support at different stages of my work. I am grateful to Prof. David PARKER and his whole Department of English, since my several disastrous moments were contained in their concern and help – Tracy, Nellie, Olivia and Carol, you have been my angels! I also have to thank the external examiner of my thesis, Prof. Douglas KERR from the University of Hong Kong who read my thesis really carefully and gave me much guidance as well. My wonderful peers, the “328 Ladies”, especially Catherine and Christine were on my side and by my side. I will never forget our giggling days in our M.Phil. years.

Many thanks also go to my activist friends in the HKCI who have been sources of inspiration over these years. Debby, “O” (Miss Fung) and Frankie, your smiles and words melt my bitterness away, always.

My loving dad, mom and brother tolerated my weird time schedule / life style and craziness in the whole process of writing this thesis. Without my family's love, I would not have survived and stayed sane. My greatest gratitude is devoted to God. To Him I delegate all grateful feelings I cannot fully express to people I mentioned above.

## Abstract

Poverty is one major theme of George Orwell's early writings. What interests Orwell is the way people struggle for decent survival and independent thinking in their destitute situations. Four core texts are chosen in this thesis to study the depiction of poverty in Orwell's early works and how this lower-upper-middle class writer crosses the class boundary in order to fight for social justice and common decency.

Chapter One of this thesis explores the poor people's struggle for survival and their lack of thoughts, based on the narrative in *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933). The narrator of this book experiences drudgery in Paris and penury in London, constantly noting the reality of hunger killing thoughts. Chapter Two studies the impact of poverty on some middle-class characters presented in two novels, *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935) and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936). Facing social pressures and expectations, the two central characters attempt a struggle but they end up making compromises. The two characters' compromises or final decisions suggest that the disenfranchised people in society very often remain passive and their thoughts and actions are very much hindered. Chapter Three illustrates the relationship between social injustice and the working-class people's passivity. By studying *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), the last core text chosen for this thesis, readers observe the narrator's change of attitude caused by his interactions with the underclass. Once the middle-class narrator develops his fellow feeling for the working people, he yearns for a way out to end poverty, virtual slavery and injustice in society. Through this poverty series made up of the four texts mentioned, Orwell demonstrates to his readers the possibilities of breaking down class prejudice and constructing a social atmosphere in which every single member is treated with decency.



## 摘要

喬治·奧威爾 (George Orwell) 早期作品的重要主題是「貧窮」。奧威爾著眼的是窮人如何在困境中尋找生活的尊嚴和思考空間。本論文研讀四部奧威爾的早期作品，以探討作者筆下的貧窮世界，以及作者如何跨越階級界限為社會公義和人的尊嚴發聲。

本論文第一章根據 *Down and Out in Paris and London* 一書對貧窮的描寫，探討人如何在貧窮的環境下為生存和思考掙扎。第二章探究貧窮對個人做成的影響。奧維爾透過 *A Clergyman's Daughter* 和 *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* 兩部小說分別描寫兩位主角的貧窮經歷，指出一般人在社會壓力之下，終要妥協，也就是說社會裡位處弱勢的人根本沒有多少思考的餘地。第三章接續討論社會不公義導致勞工階層的利益不被重視。這一章研讀的文本是 *The Road to Wigan Pier*，此書的敘述者向讀者詳述他擺脫階級歧視的過程，本章會強調書中的兩層意義：敘述者對勞工階層的關切及認同，及他如何渴望帶動讀者衝破階級觀念以締造一個人人受到尊重的社會環境。

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## Abbreviations for Literary Texts

|                     |                                  |
|---------------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>Aspidistra</i>   | Keep the Aspidistra Flying       |
| <i>Clergyman</i>    | A Clergyman's Daughter           |
| <i>Down and Out</i> | Down and Out in Paris and London |
| <i>Homage</i>       | Homage to Catalonia              |
| <i>Wigan Pier</i>   | The Road to Wigan Pier           |

**“It is only when you meet someone of a different culture from yourself that you begin to realize what your own beliefs really are” (Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* 153).**



## Introduction

Poverty is a focus of George Orwell's early writings. Those writings, in different genres and on different subject matters, can be linked up with his major concern that poverty largely results from social injustices. Furthermore, class prejudice against the lower classes keeps social injustice in place. The writer's approach is usually to provide descriptions of poverty-stricken people's life and then ask why these people have to live in that way. Orwell's depiction of poverty is not simply about what he sees, but more about how he sees — or about how he develops his perspective. Studying Orwell's early writings on poverty, we as readers may find it necessary to figure out the writer's possible stance. Orwell's stance is aligned with the working people. He can see the poverty-stricken people's deprivation not only in economical terms, but in social terms. Finding it difficult to survive in destitute situations, few poor people can afford to contemplate their situations or the way out. They may even feel themselves less human, since how they perceive themselves relies heavily on how they are perceived or treated socially. *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), Orwell's first published book is about poverty. Moreover, there are three other books written about poverty among Orwell's early works, namely *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935), *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) and *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937). This thesis aims at studying Orwell's depiction of poverty in these four books, in the context of people's struggle for survival and independent thinking in their destitute circumstances.

Orwell in these four texts seems to suggest a solution for the poor, including the working-class people whose wages are not enough for a decent living. He hopes to change the *status quo* of society and to achieve that people's prejudiced

attitudes have to be changed. His argument is that two factors contribute to the establishment of the *status quo* and its reinforcement: the passivity of the working people and the unnecessary fear (mixed with scorn and even spite) middle-class people have towards the working class. His view suggests that his depiction of poverty is more than a release of sympathetic mood, or some “philanthropic intent,”<sup>1</sup> but a reflection of and challenge to the values of the middle class which is his own class. To present his narratives, Orwell usually in each text adopts a narrator who constantly wanders between his middle-class station and the underclass. The concept of wandering means that the narrator supposedly comes from the middle-class, but that this social background does not always project itself in the narrator’s observations. The narratives imply that throughout the years, there have been changes in the writer’s attitudes (from fear of the lower classes to fellow feeling towards all working people), and this evolution points to his profound concern for the common people’s struggles to survive and to think. Orwell has hope in democratic socialism because it upholds values such as equality and justice accompanied by an accessible and comprehensible sense of decency. The focus of this thesis is to identify the quest for decency in Orwell’s early texts about poverty.

Poverty and depression are the focuses of Orwell’s early writings. The four core texts chosen for this thesis, the “four books of the depressed mid-thirties” (Meyers 75), were produced at a time when the Edwardian era in which Orwell was brought up was definitely gone and the First World War had devastated the European civilization. The mid-thirties for England was a time of severe

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<sup>1</sup> Lynette Hunter suggests that the narrator of *The Road to Wigan Pier* does not seek for “philanthropic intent to aid the working classes, but his own tradition, why he thinks the way he does.” See L. Hunter, *George Orwell: The Search for a Voice*. 60



economic downturn, with industrialization causing cheap labour, high costs of living, chronic mass unemployment and wage cuts. There were numerous strikes, while “democratic values and such structures as labour organizations or parliamentary socialist parties associated with the search for social justice” (Oxley 25) which had been widespread were much weakened. In 1929, the Depression began and most European countries were distressed. The critic, B. T. Oxley notes that that was a time when poverty “came to be studied seriously and [was] seen as something remediable” (Oxley 8). During that time, Orwell was engaged in the craze for going over, a trend among the English writers in the 1930s. According to Valentine Cunningham, the author of *British Writers of the Thirties*, the term “going over” is a metaphor describing “an intimate part of the widespread feeling among the ’30s authors of being travellers, on the road, making some literal or metaphorical journey (or both)” (211). In this poverty series made up of the four core texts, the personae experiencing destitute situations can also be regarded as experiencing going over. Through the characters’ experiences, both the characters’ immediate consciousness and suffering are presented in two novels, *A Clergyman’s Daughter* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*; the narrator’s observations and comments on poverty are offered mainly in the two books, *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

Whether it is a character or a narrator voicing themselves, Orwell’s design is to develop a perspective that enables him and his readers to perceive some invisible aspects of the poor people’s work and life. For instance, the narrator in *The Road to Wigan Pier* feels ashamed to see coalminers work in the mines. The sight or “spectacle” is, on the one hand, memorable for him, since the miners’

bodies are covered in coal dust from head to toe and their actions of shovelling are done with incredible strength and speed. On the other hand, the narrator gradually sees his own class as the exploiter, the oppressor, when he begins to understand that their “travelling” is unpaid and numerous “stoppages” have to be deducted from their wages.

Nevertheless, by presenting the feeling of shame or guilt on behalf of a middle-class social member, Orwell is not pushing forward class hatred or conflict. The narrator makes it clear, again and again, that he has inherited a scornful outlook and many unquestioned conventional thoughts from his childhood, but he demonstrates how he has transformed himself. Orwell in an essay entitled “Marrakech” describes the “invisibility” (33) of human beings in the “tropical landscape” (32): workers who “work with their hands” (31), peasants with “the same colour as the earth” (32) and old women carrying a “crushing weight” (33) of firewood are all not quite visible to the narrator, because of their skin colour perhaps, because of their slow motions, because of their social status, above all because of the narrator’s lack of concern. To be able to perceive the other requires the awareness of the other’s suffering, a consciousness of class prejudice and a sense of commitment. It is also implied that if the middle-class narrator (or even the writer, Orwell himself) is able to cross the boundary, the other members of his class should be able to do so if they truly want to. After all, in these four core texts, the class issue is found to complicate the social problem of poverty, if not to cause it.

Chapter One of this thesis studies the depiction of poverty offered by a middle-class persona in the first chosen text, *Down and Out in Paris and London*. In this book, the narrative tone suggests the narrator’s sense of superiority over



the other characters appearing in it. The reason may be that only the narrator, not any of the characters, can speak directly to the readers, while the other characters have to be represented through him. It is also necessary to note that the narrator has social connections and the immersion — the experience of poverty — can stop whenever he surfaces again. This narrative stance effectively conveys an important message: acute poverty does not much affect the narrator's mentality, and he is even capable of presenting his experience, because he can turn to alternative ways of living, with his status and social capital. This chapter approaches the narration through the unique perspective of the narrator depicting the lower classes' life and work in Paris and London. According to the depiction of poverty in *Down and Out*, the probability for poverty-stricken people to survive with decency and to reflect on their suffering and rights is low and this view is explicated in the first chapter of this thesis.

Still, the sense of struggling for decency is strong in the next two novels. In Chapter Two of this thesis, I will try to show that the two novels, *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, present poverty's impact on individuals in the form of the characters' different responses to society's prevailing values. Dorothy Hare, the central character in *A Clergyman's Daughter*, complies with social pressure. Her endurance of poverty at different stages of her life experience makes up the narrative plot. The protagonist in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* is Gordon Comstock who constantly resists being molded according to social expectations required of him, by means such as rejecting a stable and "decent" (in the sense defined by a mainstream and capitalist world) job in an advertising agency. Although the two characters' attitudes contrast with each other, their behaviours of "class exile" demonstrate a common pattern:

escape-and-return. The endings of the two narratives suggest that these two individuals need to go back to their original social community for relief. The characters' final decisions are open-ended to the extent that even the concept of decent existence may have to be re-examined and re-defined, since values are constructed according to perspectives. But the respective narrators of the two narratives leave the potential debate there.

The final text in this poverty series, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, however, has attracted diverse opinions and criticisms because of two closely related aspects of its presentation: firstly, the narrative style of displaying different voices of different stances in a single discourse and secondly, the language or expressions used in illustrating the issues of class and poverty. If a reader approaches this book with an awareness of the narrator's evolution or self-education, the argument in the book becomes more unified and accessible. Chapter Three of this thesis will show that it is possible to trace the process of how the narrator's fellow feeling for the working people gradually grows into a yearning for socialism and common decency in *Wigan Pier*. Interpreting the narrator's or speaker's stance seems to be a necessary step to figure out this process. It is Orwell who places the narrator there to sometimes mediate but more often simply to present statements from different perspectives or stances. The function of this narrative style is two-fold: to show the changes taking place within the narrator himself, and to construct a more concrete "reality" with both arguments and counter-arguments (with both prejudicial thoughts and anti-stereotyping messages). The logic behind this technique perhaps arises from the idea that if human dignity is respected, no person should regard himself or herself as possessing the one-and-only-one correct point of view, including the correct

understanding or practice of socialism. Constant debating allows alternatives and possibilities to be proposed. This awareness of self-assessment sounds rational, and also seems particularly important for initiating a view or perspective liberated from prejudices. With these assumptions of self-criticism in the main argument of *Wigan Pier*, we may expect this writer to have actually exposed his own observations, such as those on the issue of poverty, to questioning and judgment.



## Chapter One

### Journey to Poverty in Paris and London

In the four core texts chosen for this thesis, Orwell undertakes a journey to gain knowledge of and understanding about poverty and people's reactions to it. The journey starts with the book, *Down and Out in Paris and London*. According to one critic, John Newsinger, the poverty depicted in this book is "not just a particular level of income or lack of it, but a way of life, a condition of existence, for hundreds of thousands of people" (24). The condition of existence here refers to the decent living and proper thinking poor people yearn for. Throughout Orwell's depiction of poverty in this book, we may be aware of his growing understanding of the issue of poverty as a social problem. John Atkins, another critic of Orwell's writings, draws readers' attention to the ground of Orwell's "self-mortification," a ground that implies two aspects of Orwell's disposition: "an extreme sensitivity to anything 'outrageously strange'" and "a passion for first-hand understanding" (Atkins 108). *Down and Out* is widely accepted as a record of a middle-class young man's first-hand experience with and observations of people's low level of existence, re-presented by the narrator in the book. About the narrator's initial or perhaps "outrageously strange" (Atkins 108) contact with poverty in this going over<sup>1</sup> (firstly in Paris and later in London), the narrator adopts a narratorial "you":

You have thought so much about poverty — it is the thing you have feared all your life, the thing you knew would happen to you sooner or later; and it is all so utterly and prosaically

---

<sup>1</sup> "Going over" refers to the common practice, during the '30s, of many English writers who took journeys inside or outside England for inspirations to write. Read Valentine Cunningham's description of this trend in *British Writers of the Thirties* p.211.



different. You thought it would be quite simple; it is extraordinarily complicated. You thought it would be terrible; it is merely squalid and boring. It is the peculiar *lowness* of poverty that you discover first; the shifts that it puts you to, the complicated meanness, the crust-wiping. (13)

This passage is taken from the beginning stage of the narrator's poverty, when some more intense emotions such as pains of poverty, frustration and anger are not yet presented. The perspective of the narrator seems to be quite close to that of an ordinary middle-class young person who feels poverty is somewhat detached from himself. At this point of the narrative, the middle-class readership is implied, since it is the narrator who deliberately stays with the poor people and shows a strong intent to disclose a world (or underworld) that is not known to his readers. Even for the narrator, experience there is "altogether curious" (13). Bernard Crick, writes in the biography, *George Orwell: A Life*, praising the narrator's heartfelt engagement in the going over: when the narrator "submerged, he knew that he could always surface again, and he always did; but while he was submerged he shared the life of tramps and destitutes totally, without compromise" (183). Understandably, the narrator, with his social status and connections, can turn to alternatives for financial or any other type of support, whenever he likes to do so. Hence, there is definitely a gap between the narrator's poverty experience and the destitute people's. This chapter of the thesis studies the narrator's observations including observations on his own survival and thinking in impoverishment in four ways: the perspective of the narrator, the comic presentation of the lower classes' survival, the working-class passivity in the Paris section of the narrative and finally, the depiction of tramps in the London section.

### **The perspective of the narrator**

As mentioned, the narrator's social background allows him to "surface again" after his experience with poverty and this, together with his education (such as that he received in Eton), allows him to enjoy superiority over most, if not all, his subjects of depiction, the poor people in Paris and London. The narrator's perspective contrasts with that of most people among the lower classes who, at least from his point of view, can see no further than overcoming continuous fatigue and hunger. The narrator spends the earlier part of his immersion journey in Paris among some "eccentric"(3) people, and he is able to realize the comic nature of his experience. Here is an example of his description about one job hunt that fails:

Once we answered an advertisement calling for hands at a circus. You had to shift benches and clean up litter, and, during the performance, stand on two tubs and let a lion jump through your legs. When we got to the place, an hour before the time named, we found a queue of fifty men already waiting. There is some attraction in lions, evidently. (30)

However, the narrator is definitely serious about poverty, and as John Atkins suggests, Orwell "refused to romanticize [poverty]" (103). *Down and Out* is a tale of the misery of some slave-like manual workers in Paris and of the hard-up people including the tramps, beggars and embankment sleepers in London. In the book's narrative, poverty-stricken people are usually barely surviving and hardly thinking. Poverty drives the afflicted lower classes towards constant struggles for their basic needs, such as food and shelter. Survival is the top priority on these people's minds. Hardships make their thinking beyond survival quite impossible. The narrator in the book on the one hand undergoes similar penury, but he also



engages in contemplation, thinking about the suffering brought by poverty. Since the narrator is a disguised figure, a temporary destitute, although his hard-up experiences are first-hand, yet detached. The narrator's unique perspective, the visitor's eye, makes the production possible, because the narrator's social status and poverty experience are combined together to serve as a prerequisite for the narrative to be composed. The visitor has to be a *plongeur* or tramp who is willing to write and capable of writing. The production of this text, in other words, requires both experiences of surviving poverty and the "peace of the mind" to put these experiences in writing.

A sense of detachment is implied by the narrator's placement, right at the beginning of *Down and Out*. The narrator begins with a quarrel in an exotic language (French), within an exotic country. The quarrel between a hotel-owner and her lodger does not even take place in the hotel where the narrator resides. Figurative enough, the setting points to the situation of this middle-class English visitor: it is just a temporary stay for him — he observes other people's disputes, lives in a rented shelter, in a foreign city, among "a floating population"(2). Within this "rackety" community, the narrator finds his hotel "dirty", but surprisingly and gradually, "homelike"(2). The narrator's mixed feelings express his placement suitably: however kind the lodgers are, this home-like lodge also reminds him that it is not his home at all. The outsider sense is evident.

Subjects chosen for depiction at the beginning of the narrative are people living in obscurity and poverty. In the eyes of the visitor-narrator, these lodgers are perhaps pitiful, but definitely "eccentric" (3). As the narrator says,

The Paris slums are a gathering-place for eccentric people —  
people who have fallen into solitary, half-mad grooves of life

and given up trying to be normal or decent. Poverty frees them from ordinary standards of behaviour, just as money frees people from work. Some of the lodgers in our hotel lived lives that were curious beyond words. (3)

Their way of living is “curious beyond words” in the sense that it is beyond the narrator’s and also the readers’ imagination. The narrator claims,

It would be fun to write some of [these lodgers’] biographies, if one had time. I am trying to describe the people in our quarter, not for the mere curiosity, but because they are all part of the story. 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, and then the background of my own experiences. It is for that reason that I try to give some idea of what life was like there. (5)

The indicated word “fun” in the first line of the quote refers to that feeling derived from writing about these people, yet understandably not from being one of them.

Nonetheless, because of the narrator’s unique role, amusement can be found in the narrator’s meditation, too. Crick also notes that Orwell’s immersion into a community of poor people is an act “with keen and stimulated discernment, even humour, not [of] pain all the way” (*Orwell* 183). The narrator’s acquaintance with his Russian friend, Boris, possibly can shed some light on this aspect of the text. Boris usually appears excessively optimistic and unreasonably hopeful about the future — a laughingstock in the eyes of the narrator. Boris is portrayed as a caricature filled with self-contradiction. For instance, Boris tells the narrator, “a man with brains can’t starve” (28) so that both he and the narrator should be



hopeful for tomorrow's luck, when they are both trapped in unemployment. However, starving is their reality, and Boris, some time later, qualifies his opinion and says, "if you have a chessboard you do not mind being hungry" (35). Immediately comes the narrator's monologue, "which was certainly not true in my case" (35). Another case of hilarity occurs when one of the ex-mistresses of Boris writes to reject his request (for paying him back money that she owes him), addressing Boris as "My Little Cherished Wolf" (32). As readers we may easily note that the laughable subjects include Boris firstly, secondly his ex-mistress and perhaps thirdly the ridiculous letter. It may be easily overlooked that the narrator has made an effort of putting the letter in full length there in the first place, and thus the narrator is also designed by the writer to share the sense of caricature. The narrator also compares his acute hunger which is "an ugly experience" to that of people who do fasting cures. He remarks, "Probably it seems different when one is doing it voluntarily and is not underfed at the start" (36). To go further on the lighter note, he says that on the following day he thought of pawning his overcoat, "but it seemed too far to walk to the pawnshop, and I spent the day in bed, reading the *Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*" (36). The narrator's exaggerated calmness at times and detachment most of the time contribute a lot to his own alienation.

Obviously, the narrator is curious about the ways in which people overcome their difficulties, such as the tricks they use, the lies they tell and the disguises or false identities they put on. Above all, the narrator's numerous "disasters" (14) are depicted in detail, realistically and personally. This leads to categorizing the book as a "non-fictional narrative," largely because of Orwell's unbelievably realistic depiction:

...so I passed the night on a bench on the boulevard. It was very uncomfortable—the arm of the seat cuts into your back—and much colder than I had expected. There was plenty of time, in the long boring hours between dawn and work, to think what a fool I had been to deliver myself into the hands of these Russians. (104)

Some critics believe that this book deserves a particular type of reading which should be a more intimate kind, or at least different from that of ordinary imagined fiction. For instance, Crick writes in the biography of Orwell, “[Orwell] wrote very directly, not theoretically, about poverty, and with a mixture of compassion and anger — however uncertain it is what derived from experience and what from imagination” (*Orwell* 201). No matter how much autobiographical truth *Down and Out* contains, what Orwell displays in the book is a sort of reality recreated.

### **The comic presentation of the lower classes' hard-up survival**

The narrator sees himself constantly being trapped in “mean disasters” (14) when shifting from the position of a respectable young man to being insolvent. Some passages in the book follow:

Your hair wants cutting, and you try to cut it yourself, with such fearful results that you have to go to the barber after all, and spend the equivalent of a day's food. ...

...You have spent your last eighty centimes on half a litre of milk, and are boiling it over the spirit lamp. While it boils a bug runs down your forearm; you give the bug a flick with your nail, and it falls plop! straight into the milk. There is

nothing for it but to throw the milk away and go foodless.

You go to the baker's to buy a pound of bread, and you wait while the girl cuts a pound for another customer. She is clumsy, and cuts more than a pound. '*Pardon, monsieur,*' she says, 'I suppose you don't mind paying two sous extra?' Bread is a franc a pound, and you have exactly a franc. When you think that you too might be asked to pay two sous extra, and would have to confess that you could not, you bolt in panic. It is hours before you dare venture into a baker's shop again.

You go to the greengrocer's to spend a franc on a kilogram of potatoes. But one of the pieces that make up the franc is a Belgium piece, and the shopman refuses it. You slink out of the shop, and can never go there again. (14)

According to the narrator, these "disasters" can be multiplied "by the hundred" (15). Except the boiled-milk case, the "disasters" just quoted barely "rob you of food" and are pettily related to keeping up appearances.

The sense of humour is well exploited in the depiction when it comes nearer to the topic of survival. The narrator and Boris have the following conversation when they are on their way to try their luck for a job at the Hotel X:

'Appearance—appearance is everything, *mon ami*. ... What a pity I did not buy a collar when we had money. I turned my collar inside out this morning; but what is the use, one side is as dirty as the other. Do you think I look hungry, *mon ami*?'

'You look pale.'



‘Curse it, what can one do on bread and potatoes? It is fatal to look hungry. It makes people want to kick you. Wait.’

He stopped at a jeweller’s window and smacked his cheeks sharply to bring the blood into them. Then, before the flush had faded, we hurried into the restaurant and introduced ourselves to the *patron*. (49)

One more example about looks: that *patron* finally hires them, but is quite an exploiter already, even if we do not consider his later deeds in mistreating his staff. When the *patron* lies to them about the exact date of the restaurant’s opening, the narrator observes and writes, “the *patron* answered grandly (he had a manner of waving his hand and flicking off his cigarette ash at the same time, which looked very grand)...” (50).

Apparently, some critics find these “disasters” mentioned too trivial to be named so. Not really disasters, they are at most, problems, in the eyes of some critics. Dolores Buttry in her essay compares Orwell’s descriptions of poverty-stricken existence with those in *Hunger* (*Sult* is the original Norwegian title), a novel written by Knut Hamsun, the Nobel Prize winner for literature in 1920. Buttry comments, “Orwell’s problem in Paris was really how to smuggle the items to be pawned past hotel proprietors”; her dismissal of Orwell’s “pain” seems justifiable, especially when Orwell’s case is compared with that of the hero in *Hunger* whose biggest problem is “how to keep himself alive” (231). Nevertheless, another critic, John Newsinger approves of the term “disasters” and is aware of the importance of exploring them, or at least treating them as problems: “[Orwell]” provides a litany of the petty humiliations and indignities that poverty brings, the way that it affects social interaction and turns minor setbacks into

disasters" (24). Moreover, deceit of any kind, such as smuggling clothes to be pawned past landladies, can be read as a combat between the rich and the poor. Buttry in her article quotes from Roger Ramsey (1976) that the poor are in the first place deceived by the rich and thus in turn, the poor need to deceive the rich for survival (Ramsey 164). Atkins, however, argues that these passages in the book help illustrate social factors determining the consciousness of people in poverty, since

... the preoccupation of the poor with matters which seem ridiculously petty to the rest of us was only intensified by the increasing complexity of modern life. The poor probably had to spend more rather than less time and energy adapting their straitened resources to the needs of modern society. There was correspondingly less time left over for the consideration of their spiritual condition, which must appear to them as a luxury.

(Atkins 96)

In short, it is a vicious circle; the more these poor people are worried about being normal, which requires "time and energy", the less they reflect on their rights, ultimate way-out and the actions to take.

The depiction also shows the narrator's various degrees of hostility towards the deceivers. Boris once brought the narrator to a Russian secret office for a job. The Russians there ask for entrance fees and remind them to bring "a parcel of washing" so as to pretend to be going to the laundry next time. It turns out that the several people are "simply swindlers" (48). Interestingly, the narrator's hostility to those Russian swindlers and their fake "secret Communist office" is fairly vague: "They were clever fellows, and played their part admirably. Their



office looked exactly as a secret Communist office should look, and for that touch about bringing a parcel of washing, it was genius" (48); the description can be compared with that of the *patron* of the restaurant who deceives his costumers by placing sharp knives on their tables, for "[s]harp knives, of course, are *the* secret of a successful restaurant" (116) and he treats the restaurant staff quite unkindly before and after the opening of the restaurant. Bearing this assumption in mind, we may thus realize the reason why Boris's smuggling of food is never treated as a crime or a moral decline of some sort.<sup>2</sup> The narrator indeed feels "disagreeable" (not necessarily shameful) towards Boris's actions, but simply because of the not-looking-good issue: "It is disagreeable to eat out of a newspaper on a public seat, especially in the Tuileries, which are generally full of pretty girls" (52). Above all, the narrator is "too hungry to care" (52). It is a moment when considerations of survival outweigh any thinking about looks or keeping up appearances.

This type of unusual and somewhat comic presentation of poverty does not only serve to amuse. Behind the amusement, there is the disparity of available social capital between the narrator and his subjects (the lower classes). Poverty is escapable and sometimes contains a comic nature, only because it is in the eyes of the narrator. Dark humour in these passages suggests that poverty is not romanticized at all in *Down and Out*. There is no impression in the narrative that humour can console the genuinely down-and-out people. What is expressed is a reality of the underworld in which hunger kills thoughts. The narrator notices that many of the unemployed people and low-paid workers often appear "half starved and half drunk" (3) in the lodging-house where he lives. Atkins remarks that

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<sup>2</sup> Dolores Buttry notes a "moral decline" brought about by poverty in *Down and Out*. The mentioned act, Boris's smuggling clothes, however, has not been commented on in her essay.



nobody “reading *Down and Out* can miss the degradation that runs through the life he describes like a thick vein” (85). The narrator having submerged himself is now able to express his subjective feeling about being half starved: “You discover the boredom which is inseparable from poverty; the times when you have nothing to do and, being underfed, can interest yourself in nothing. ... Only food could rouse you. You discover that a man who has gone even a week on bread and margarine is not a man any longer, only a belly with a few accessory organs” (15). Among the underfed people, drinking is a popular means, for example, “[o]n Saturday nights about a third of the male population of the quarter was drunk” (2) to obtain relief from hunger and from thinking. There is something more about the effect that hunger causes to the mind: “Hunger reduces one to an utterly spineless, brainless condition, more like the after-effects of influenza than anything else. It is as though one had been turned into a jellyfish, or as though all one’s belly had been pumped out and lukewarm water substituted” (36).

### **The Paris section: the working class’s passivity and slavery**

Many working people, though not starving, are trapped by unnecessary slavery which again makes thinking impossible. The narrator testifies to this, based on his work experience as a *plongeur*. In the narrative, right after the narrator quits this job, there is a discussion (in Chapter 22 in *Down and Out*) on “the social significance of a *plongeur*’s life” (117). We may note that it is the *plongeur*’s life, not just the *plongeur*’s work that concerns Orwell. Generally speaking, there are four aspects of a *plongeur*’s life which make up his misery: hardship, fatigue, limited social life and lack of time for thoughts. About the hardship of work — long working hours (over eleven or even up to seventeen, in

the narrator's experience) and the "fearful heat and stuffiness" (60) of the cellars — some descriptions of the kitchen work in the Auberge restaurant<sup>3</sup> follow:

The cook's working hours were from eight in the morning till midnight, and mine from seven in the morning till half past twelve in the next morning — seventeen and a half hours, almost without a break. We never had time to sit down till five in the afternoon, and even then there was no seat except the top of the dustbin. (108)

Also, there were always several copper saucepans to clean. Those copper saucepans are the bane of a *plongeur's* life. They have to be scoured with sand and bunches of chain, ten minutes to each one, and then polished on the outside with Brasso. (108)

When I had begun on the plates the cook would take me away from the plates to begin skinning onions, and when I had begun on the onions the patron would arrive and send me out to buy cabbages. When I came back with the cabbages the patron's wife would tell me to go to some shop half a mile away and buy a pot of rouge; by the time I came back there would be more vegetables waiting, and the plates were still not done. In this way our incompetence piled one job on another throughout the day, everything in arrears. (109)

One may argue that it is merely the *plongeur's* lack of luck to have worked in a

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<sup>3</sup> Although the descriptions solely belongs to the persona's case, not necessarily the case of other *plongeurs* in other restaurants, understandably, the persona's situation is representative — choiceless and rigid.



restaurant with “insufficient capital” (108) and thus that type of slavery is not representative at all for an ordinary *plongeur*. The type of fatigue mentioned by the narrator is indeed “typical,” however. He observes, “Nothing is quite real to [a *plongeur*] but the *boulot*, drinks and sleep; and of these sleep is the most important” (90); the slavery “taught me the true value of sleep, just as being hungry had taught me the true value of food” (91). The narrator portrays a *plongeur*’s life as unbelievably simple: “He lives in a rhythm between work and sleep, without time to think, hardly conscious of the exterior world; his Paris has shrunk to the hotel, the Metro, a few *bistros* and his bed” (90). This rhythm of living is a vicious circle since a *plongeur*’s life so reduced implies that no possible changes or improvement can be made or even initiated in the minds of these “wasted” (22) slaves, with fatigue in most of them.

The narrator shows a particular sensitivity to mannerism and he realizes drudgery brings fatigue which in turn affects one’s manner. Atkins notes that “as a general rule [Orwell] appeared to believe that poverty, leading as it did to the lowest kinds of job, resulted in a general degeneration of manners” (92). For example, working in the Auberge restaurant, the narrator sees his own manner being affected by the hard work which allows not more than five hours of sleep but requires seventeen hours of work each day (113). Two victims of this kind, the cook (an old woman) and the narrator frequently quarrel with each other in the kitchen:

We quarreled over things of inconceivable pettiness. The dustbin, for instance, was an unending source of quarrels—whether it should be put where I wanted, it, which was in the cook’s way, or where she wanted it, which was



between me and the sink. Once she nagged until at last, in pure spite, I lifted the dustbin up and put it out in the middle of the floor, where she was bound to trip over it.

‘Now, you cow,’ I said, ‘move it yourself.’

Poor old woman, it was too heavy for her to lift, and she sat down, put her head on the table and burst out crying. And I jeered at her. This is the kind of effect that fatigue has upon one’s manner. (114)

The cook and the narrator, however, do realize what is affecting their manners and sometimes they just apologize to each other for what they have said (110). Obviously it is the exhaustion that makes their manners deteriorate. We may consider that the characters’ short tempers to be resulting from the experience of being humiliated by drudgery on a regular basis. The “slavery” also makes them believe the work of constantly polishing silver and glasses in a comparatively cool pantry “humane” (66), and makes the staff drink heavily every Saturday night. Unfortunately, the relief gained from drinking only lasts shortly, as the narrator claims, “we perceived that we were not splendid inhabitants of a splendid world, but a crew of underpaid workmen grown squalidly and dismally drunk” (95). The narrator is so exhausted and bitter at that stage he realizes the way to gain some comfort is to compare his hardship with some other people who have been living like that for most of their lives: “When one is overworked, it is a good cure for self-pity to think of the thousands of people in Paris restaurants who work such hours and will go on doing it, not for a few weeks, but for years” (113). The narrator offers these accounts and writes that these *plongeurs* are “trapped by a routine which makes thought impossible” (117). Against the idea that *plongeurs*

are usually idle and unthinking, the narrator depicts these workers as “the slaves of the modern world” (117).

The future for these *plongeurs* remains dim, as long as one of the causes of their misery, the “fear of the mob” (120) amongst the middle-class people, prevails. The narrator thinks that the intelligent and cultivated people generally have this attitude: the working class is a “mob” just like a herd of animals and “low animals” (120) that can become dangerous if let loose or granted leisure, so “it is safer to keep them too busy to think” (120). Furthermore, the less wealthy but still cultivated people tend to side with the rich ones “because they imagine that any liberty conceded to the poor is a threat to their own liberty” (121). The narrator condemns this kind of “superstitious fear” which is built on a misconception that “there is some mysterious, fundamental difference between rich and poor, as though they were two different races” (121). The major differentiation of the rich and poor, according to Orwell, is their “income” and thus “the average millionaire is only the average dishwasher dressed in a new suit” (121). As long as the misconception prevails and the poor are regarded as a mob or a flock of animals by the well-fed, the lowliest jobs will remain slavery.

In the narrative, snobbery is not only found in the typical gentry, but even among the working class themselves, for instance, in waiters. Before studying the narrator’s exhaustive description of an average waiter’s mentality, we may first look into the narrator’s observation of a caste system among staff in the hotel: the staff “amounting to about a hundred and ten, had their prestige graded as accurately as that of soldiers,” from the manager, the *maitre d’hotel*, the head cook, the *chef du personnel*, to the cooks, waiters, laundresses and sewing-women, apprentice waiters, *plongeurs*, chambermaids, *cafetiers* and various other employees (69-70).



The narrator gradually realizes the power-relations in the workplace. On his first day working in the kitchen of Hotel X, an Italian waiter he works with tells him bluntly, "Well, I'm in charge here. ... To me, twisting your neck would be no more than spitting on the floor. And if there's any trouble, they'll believe me, not you. So be careful" (55). Threatening enough, but the waiter turns out to be "friendly"—the curses are "only a kind of probation" (57). The narrator also notes that "it does not do for a waiter to be friendly with *plongeurs*" (66) though Valenti, a waiter of a "decent sort" treats him as "almost an equal" (66) when no one else is around. The narrator staying in his position, without bitterness or any intention to break the class barrier, claims, "I used to enjoy talking to [a waiter], at slack times when we sat smoking down the lift shaft" (66). The narrator is afterwards able to figure out the waiters' mentality and perspective about their job in the hotel restaurant.

Waiters appear to the narrator as having the mind of a "snob" rather than of a worker. There is a dramatic scene of a waiter going into the hotel dining-room.

As he passes the door a sudden change comes over him.

The set of his shoulders alters; all the dirt and hurry and irritation have dropped off in an instant. He glides over the carpet, with a solemn priest-like air. ...

Then he entered the dining-room and sailed across it dish in hand, graceful as a swan. Ten seconds later he was bowing reverently to a customer. And you could not help thinking, as you saw him bow and smile, with that benign smile of the trained waiter, that the customer was put to shame by having



such an aristocrat to serve him. (67-8)

The narrator reminds readers that there is only a double door between the kitchen with its “filthy little scullery” (67) and the dining-room, the waiters’ theatre. The narrator chooses to intrude into the mind of a waiter and reveal its snobbery (“One day, when I have saved enough money, I shall be able to imitate that [customer]”). It is observed that the waiter provides services which bring a pleasure he “thoroughly understands and admires” (76). From snobbery among staff in the hotel restaurant, to the previously mentioned examples of people keeping up appearances, there is an unspoken reason for both the working-class and some sinking middle-class people to cling to a façade of gentility: they need the sense of security brought by it. Especially for the middle class, staying in (or never falling from) their class and maintaining the *status quo* are absolutely necessary.

### **The London section: depiction of tramps in London**

From the narrator’s point of view, the well-fed people exclude the poverty-stricken people as a different race which is exploitable. It is the “fear of the mob” (120) that drives the rich to treat the poor as slaves in the workplace and as animals in the causal wards. Tramping is a phenomenon resulting from the most obvious measures that the middle-class people take to exclude the lower classes. Tramps get a shelter from spikes<sup>4</sup>, but they have to travel from one spike to another daily (under the regulation that a tramp cannot stay in the same spike for two consecutive days). The narrator starts the London section narrative with a happy mood, creating an effect almost like that of dramatic irony. His high

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<sup>4</sup> A ‘spike’ provides temporary and free accommodation for tramps to stay overnight. Tramps can have a bath there, and their own clothes are taken away and workhouse shirts given instead. The so-called ‘spike meal’ includes half a pound of bread, margarine and tea.

expectation differs from readers' knowledge about the reality of economic downturn he has to face. After arriving at his homeland, the narrator realizes that London turns out to be equally battered by the Depression and this city appears "cleaner and quieter and drearier" (136). Orwell's books about poverty (especially *Down and Out* and *The Road to Wigan Pier*) are viewed as a kind of "tramping along metaphorical roads" (Cunningham 228) to discover England. The "literal tramping into the actually strange territories of the lower classes" (Cunningham 228) is initiated and represented in the second part of the documentary *Down and Out*. The immersion journey continues in London, after the foreign Paris, and the gaze of the narrator now turns to the English society which is depicted in a comparatively austere manner. Of course, however, the narrator does not know tramping is up ahead. When the narrator is crossing the Channel to go back to England from France, his mood is hopeful. The hopeful mood presented here, at the beginning of the London section, contrasts with the much more serious mood of the overall London section. The narrator's obvious eagerness in embracing the future to end his poverty is obvious, as he says, "It was, at any rate, notoriously impossible to starve in London" (129); but his enthusiasm keeps reminding readers of his previous contempt for his dear friend Boris who has been constantly in "hopeful mood" (29). If England means another down-and-out prison (after slavery in Paris) for him, are there reasons left for the narrator to be "patriotic" (in a narrow sense) still? The narrator's passion is portrayed as too overt and unreasonable, since the care-taker job he is heading for has just vanished and he is also aware that "England is a very good country when you are not poor" (127). Not long afterwards, there comes the moment he is poor and needs some "bad clothes" and "indeed, the worse the better" (128-9) in order to put on a



pauper's identity, to live a pauper's life.

Disguise, in this case, putting on a new identity — is a form of deceit. The narrator's makeover is finished in one action — putting on clothes got from a rag shop. Tramps' clothing shocks him so much with "a gracelessness, a patina of antique filth, quite different from mere shabbiness" (129). The narrator realizes the issue of looks, as "[c]lothes are powerful things. Dressed in a tramp's clothes it is very difficult, at any rate for the first day, not to feel that you are genuinely degraded. You might feel the same shame, irrational but very real, your first night in prison" (130). The transformation takes place in an inward direction, from the outside appearance to the inner psyche.

The narrator's sensitivity to social inequality was not born with him, but is acquired gradually through a process of transformation. The fellow feeling for people outside his class comes as a breakthrough. The identity change wins him the close greeting from a hawker who calls him "mate," but takes away his charm as women shudders away "with a quite frank movement of disgust" (130). This sudden loss of dignity inspires the narrator with a new sense of fellow feeling. Newsinger notes that people's attitudes actually offer a "moment of epiphany" for the narrator in his shabby new self — "with the middle class avoiding him and the working class treating him with casual familiarity. ... This acceptance by the working class was very important to Orwell. It was something he was to strive after for the rest of his life, but only occasionally achieved ..." (27-8). This kind of warmth or even "affection" echoes again in a scene in Orwell's much later writing, *Homage to Catalonia*. At the beginning of the narrative of *Homage*, the narrator meets an Italian militiaman in Spain and their greeting leaves him an everlasting memory and "utter intimacy" because "[the Italian's] shabby uniform and fierce



pathetic face” (2) signify the glory of that special moment, the start of the working people’s revolution. There is a desire in the narrator, even only “momentarily,” to break barriers, to be connected with the lower-class individuals (or a frontier soldier, in the case of *Homage to Catalonia*) on an equal basis and with mutual respect.

Tramping is a remote experience for both the narrator and, understandably, his readers. Hence, the narration needs to incorporate details about the underground living for illustration. The description of a lodging-house accommodating over fifty men, for instance, is very exhaustive. It is worthwhile to note that the narrator cares to mention some positive aspects to perhaps slightly undermine the intense obscurity:

We slept fifteen or twenty in a dormitory; the beds were again cold and hard, but the sheets were not more than a week from the wash, which was an improvement... I liked the kitchen. ...At night there were games of nap and draughts, and songs. ...Sometimes late at night men would come in with a pail of winkles they had bought cheap, and share them out. There was a general sharing of food, and it was taken for granted to feed men who were out of work. (134)

Not only being friendly and generous, some tramps manage to live on little, to an extent that the narrator has to applaud. An old and talkative tramp, for example, “seemed contented” and the pride he takes in his appearance (in spending money on a shave, despite an income of ten shillings a week only) is really “awe-inspiring” (135) for the narrator. Apparently, at that early stage of his tramping, the narrator finds no major difficulty in submerging himself to be among

the hard-up, as his transition (from being a *plongeur* to a tramp) is simple and easy, by a change of clothes.

The physical transformation at that stage, however, may still suggest the narrator's observing role and thus imply his detachment from this living style. Entering the "new world" in his clothes that are fairly like those of a prisoner's, the narrator comments, "You might feel the same shame, irrational but very real, your first night in prison" (130). The spike resembles a prison a lot, too, with its "rows of tiny, barred windows, and a high wall and iron gates separating it from the road" (144). The narration carries a profoundly austere tone when the narrator observes the tramps queuing outside a spike. The tramps are unlike prisoners, however, for that they are desperate to go into the spike, their last resort:

They are of all kinds and ages, the youngest a fresh-faced boy of sixteen, the oldest a doubled-up, toothless mummy of seventy-five. Some were hardened tramps, recognizable by their sticks and billies and dust-darkened faces; some were factory hands out of work, some agricultural labourers, one a clerk in collar and tie, two certainly imbeciles... they were a disgusting sight; nothing villainous or dangerous, but a graceless, mangy crew, nearly all ragged and palpably underfed.

They were friendly, however, and asked no questions. (144)

The sight is disturbing not because of the fact that they are "villainous or dangerous,"(144) or undeserved. Not at all. Rather, they are underserved, underfed and treated like "cattle" (145). In *Down and Out*, there is a whole chapter (Chapter 36) devoted to defending the tramps as individual human beings deserving integrity and dignity. For the narrator, these tramps are "the most docile,



broken-spirited creatures imaginable” — especially so when bullied by the workhouse officials (204). The narrator emphasizes that the tramps and beggars are “ordinary human beings, and that if they are worse than other people it is the result and not the cause of their way of life” (205). Another focus of his discussion on tramping is, in Orwell’s terms, its “nomadic stage of humanity” (203). The tramps’ routine is a “futile” one, as they have to walk “from prison to prison, spending perhaps eighteen hours a day in the cell and on the road” (207). It becomes very hard for them to break through the vicious circle of firstly being treated inhumanly and then seen as deserving such treatment. There is an example showing how the tramps are stripped of their clothes (for medical inspection in the wards) and also their privacy:

Naked and shivering, we lined up in the passage. You cannot conceive what ruinous, degenerate curs we looked, standing there in the merciless morning light. A tramp’s clothes are bad, but they conceal far worse things; to see him as he really is, unmitigated, you must see him naked. Flat feet, pot bellies, hollow chests, sagging muscles — every kind of physical rottenness was there. Nearly everyone was under-nourished, and some clearly diseased. (148-9)

The narrator is aware that though the paupers are extremely tolerant of maltreatment, they need to keep their form for their own good. They hate having their clothes kept away in the workhouse and to be given uniforms instead as a “stigma of charity” (199). Their own clothes offer them a sense of security, a sense of self.

The narrator is obviously upset by the fact of tramps being stripped of



freedom, dignity and even privacy. No wonder Meyers observes that the narrator “seemed happier as a *plongeur* than as an English tramp because it was easier to be déclassé outside his own country, and because he was fresher and the Parisian life had an exotic tinge despite the patina of antique filth” (78). The depiction of these hard facts of social injustice and prejudice in the London section achieves a two-fold effect: it shows firstly, what the class prejudices are and, secondly, how these prejudices worsen the current situation of tramps. The depiction of two particular paupers contributes very much to this presentation.

Orwell’s well-known sensitivity to appearances is energized in describing Paddy Jacques. Paddy is a typical tramp, but relatively “clean and decent” (149). Paddy is typical, according to the narrator, because of his sad and pale look (151). Paddy’s effort in maintaining his appearance intrigues the narrator’s attention: Paddy has a braid on his trousers and the braid, the narrator suspects, “figured in [Paddy’s] mind as a lingering scrap of respectability, and [Paddy] took care to sew it on again when it came loose” (151). The narrator feels puzzled by this young man’s contradictory sense of being “horribly ashamed of being a tramp” and having a tramp’s way such as picking cigarette-ends, rolling cigarettes with tissue paper of empty cigarette packets and talking not much outside the topic of “the best way of getting a free meal” (152). A more controversial scene is the one where the narrator and Paddy discover a bottle of milk on a doorstep and Paddy, after struggling for a while, does not go for “knocking it off” (152). Paddy can be read as “virtuous” (he is used to sharing his last crust of bread with the narrator), but the narrator insists that it is hunger that strips him of his courage to do the theft. In other words, inferior food (merely bread and margarine) and malnutrition destroy his “manhood”. Another pauper they meet later, Bozo (a *screever*, or pavement

artist) leads his own life very differently.

According to the narrator's description, Bozo has a unique awareness of appearance and social class. Both are shown by his wearing a beggar's rag but with a collar and tie. The narrator senses no fear, regret, shame or even self-pity in Bozo. Bozo shows vanity, taking himself as in "a class above the ordinary run of beggars" (168). The narrator approves of Bozo, quite certainly, because this "serious screever" (163) manages to keep his own mind "intact and alert" without succumbing to poverty. Bozo's ability to maintain thinking and survival at the same time — making his life run under principles (such as not picking up cigarette-ends from the pavement and refusing religious charity offered to him) — inspires the narrator to think about the possibility of genuine freedom in one's own mind. Newsinger notes that Orwell's depiction of poverty is more than exposing a social problem that exists universally. An equally important aspect of the depiction is poverty's "effects on the individual, and of the *mentality* of the poor" (Newsinger 24). In the portrayals of these two tramps, Bozo definitely stands out, since his perspective is relatively closer to that of the narrator's — both engaging (Bozo survives poverty) and detaching (he watches stars to escape from the sense of futility) in impoverishment. In other words, when this self-contained Bozo is compared with Paddy, Paddy appears as a much more piteous character.

In *Down and Out*, there is subtle criticism of some destitute people who themselves are scornful of other tramps. The depiction of an old woman tramp (the only female tramp in the narrative) who was suspected of having been once a "respectable widow" (196) and another "superior tramp" who was once a young carpenter (197) are two examples. Still, the narrator should not be regarded as being inconsistent in treating the poverty-stricken people. These two examples



show the narrator's contempt towards scornful mentalities in general. He gives two extreme types of attitude the tramps may have which are both far from showing decency: scornful thinking or a total lack of independent thinking. Back to the discussion of how the poor people think, we may regard Paddy as a truly pitiful case in the narrative because of his lack of thought: "The man who really merits pity is the man who has been down from the start, and faces poverty with a blank, resourceless mind" (182). It is precisely the poor people's resourceless minds and lack of social capital or connections that keep them at the bottom of society. This makes Paddy a worrying figure and at the same time, the fact that Paddy represents a great number of tramps facing the same dead-end future also worries the narrator. In one of Orwell's essays, "The Spike" (which is later developed to form Chapters 27 and 35 of *Down and Out*), it is stated explicitly that tramps are bound to be marginalized, because of their existence in poverty: "[tramps] have nothing worthy to be called conversation, because emptiness of belly leaves no speculation in their souls. The world is too much with them. Their next meal is never quite secure, and so they cannot think of anything except the next meal" (10). Their meal tickets (given to tramps to exchange for some tea and a bun) in the narrator's opinion are more like humiliation than charity.

The narrator suggests some practices for improving tramps' conditions, but receives harsh criticisms. For instance, in Chapter 36 of *Down and Out*, the suggested treatment is to enable tramps to work in workhouses which may even run a small farm. Newsinger views the imagined picture as "a palliative without social significance" (30) and a failure to match the scale of the economic crisis in the 1930s — registered unemployment was over three million people in Britain. Newsinger, however, adds to the above point that Orwell addresses the issue of



mass unemployment several years later when he writes *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Paradoxically, *Down and Out* is a “political failure” (Newsinger 31) in the eyes of critics such as Newsinger, but Orwell’s best book about poverty (225), for critics such as Buttry. After all, Orwell’s intent of raising social concern in the book is clear. *Down and Out* is made up of narratives inserted with commentary chapters about tramps’ slang expressions, the slavery of many working people, the treatment of beggars, legislation prohibiting begging and so on. Through his writing, Orwell seeks to call for a perspective — a perspective that is clear of the unnecessary fear (“fear of the mob”), based on reasoning when facing the dispossessed and marginalized people in society.

The vivid descriptions of hunger and depression become a remarkable strategy for Orwell to get his message over. Newsinger highlights the possible outcome this literary strategy would have had on Orwell’s middle-class readers, writing, “Orwell, the middle-class writer, shows his readers the painfully debilitating effect that hunger has on a middle-class person, not on the poor, but on someone like themselves. His account is all the more powerful because of this” (24-25). Newsinger’s remark coheres with the assumption that Orwell’s socio-political intent is constant and Orwell targets at his middle-class associates. Orwell expects his readers, after reading his individualistic descriptions, such as those of hunger making a person “spit very frequently” with the spittle “curiously white and flocculent, like cuckoo-spit” (36) to understand how poverty and hunger affect a human being’s body and soul, no matter which class that starving person comes from.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Struggles and Failures in Two Novels**

To depict poverty's impact on individual people, the writer can describe their suffering and also their reactions or responses towards poverty. This chapter studies two novels by Orwell, *The Clergyman's Daughter* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, to identify the two protagonists' struggles in their poverty-stricken situations. Compared with the two other texts, *Down and Out in Paris and London* studied in Chapter One of this thesis and *The Road to Wigan Pier* which will be studied in Chapter Three, these two novels, *Clergyman* and *Aspidistra* have been far from winning a reputation for their author. Some critics even consider these two novels — which deal with failure thematically — as literary failures in themselves. I do not intend here to focus too much on the criticisms about the limitations or weaknesses of these two novels' writing. Rather, in this chapter, I will address the two central characters' physical and psychological hardships caused by poverty and study how these characters come up with their decisions at the end of the two narratives. My view is that these two central characters' decisions and actions should be taken as largely responsive to the pressures and values of their society. This chapter will look into the characters' quest for decent survival in destitute situations through three aspects which may at times overlap: the two central characters' struggles and failures, Orwell's struggles and failures in writing these two novels and finally his intent and method in presenting these two narratives.

#### **Characters' struggles and failures**

The two central characters, Dorothy Hare in *Clergyman* and Gordon



Comstock in *Aspidistra* are members of the middle class living in the “down-dragging of *respectable* poverty” (*Aspidistra* 47). Both Dorothy and Gordon are in their late twenties, trying to “escape from the boredom and triviality of a middle-class existence” (Meyers 79) but in vain. As the narrator suggests, we all have an innate “terror of poverty” regardless of our class, but this kind of fear is different from the middle-class fear — the “fear of the mob” condemned by Orwell in *Down and Out* and later brought up again in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. The fear or terror of poverty is initiated because of the endless calculations, materialistic deprivation, humiliation and impoverishment associated with poverty. The depiction of poverty in the two novels mainly focuses on the central characters’ physical and psychological menaces, struggles and their mentalities.

In *Clergyman*, Dorothy’s struggles for survival demonstrate her attitude to life: living is complying. There are three phases (before, during and after her memory loss) of her life depicted and passivity dominates her characterization in all three phases. Dorothy’s life in the first phase is mainly about how to cope with bills and drudgery in the house and the rectory. In the early morning, hearing the snoring of her father, Dorothy has already started her work in the kitchen, but the “kitchen fire was a ‘beast’ to light” (2). Except on Sundays, half of Dorothy’s daily routine is devoted to “visiting” and endless services offered to people in the rectory. The most threatening and aching matter in her life, however, is paying off the bills and debts of her household: “She had remembered, with the ugly shock with which one remembers something disagreeable for the first time in the morning, the bill at Cargill’s, the butcher’s, which had been owing for seven months. That dreadful bill...there was hardly the remotest hope of paying it — was one of the chief torments of her life. At all hours of the night or day it was



waiting just round the corner of her consciousness, ready to spring upon her and agonise her; and with it came the memory of a score of lesser bills, mounting up to a figure of which she dared not even think” (4).

Dorothy struggles to fulfill the requirement of selflessness, according to her understanding of it, but life becomes unbearable for her. Ironically, most of the relevant descriptions are about how hard it is to act out what is expected of her rather than how much consolation she gains from her piety. For instance, “she was not having any bacon this morning — a penance she had set herself yesterday for saying ‘Damn’ and idling for half an hour after lunch” (*Clergyman* 16); her dutifulness in carrying out the rectory work is also depicted in a similar manner that work is tedious yet not necessarily meaningful, as “[h]er conscience had given her another and harder job — she had remembered those wretched, unmade jackboots, and the fact that at least one of them had got to be made tonight” (*Clergyman* 74). Her situation even makes Warburton, another character exclaim: “What a life you lead! Messing about with the glue and brown paper in the middle of the night! I must say, there are times when I feel just a little glad that I’m not a clergyman’s daughter” (76). Dorothy’s religious faith (reflected by work and frequent and severe penances) and hardships which are mainly caused by poverty make her life extremely stressful.

Dorothy tends to escape from this stressful life, whether consciously or not. Her mind wanders away from the worries (about bills) and agonies (of religious inadequacy) in the atmosphere of the church. According to Jeffrey Meyers, Dorothy’s most successful escape is “into nature worship” (Meyers 81). The relevant passage follows:

Suddenly it was quite useless attempting to pray; her lips

· moved, but there was neither heart nor meaning in her prayers. ...It seemed to her that actually she *could* not pray...the opening phrases of a prayer...were useless, meaningless—nothing but the dead shells of words. ... A momentary spear of sunlight had pierced the clouds. It struck downwards through the leaves of the limes, and a spray of leaves in the doorway gleamed with a transient, matchless green... A flood of joy ran through Dorothy's heart. The flash of living colour had brought back to her, by a process deeper than reason, her peace of mind, her love of God, her power of · worship. Somehow, because of the greenness of the leaves, it was again possible to pray. (*Clergyman* 11)

Unlike Meyers, Stephan Ingle does not regard Dorothy's fascination with natural beauty as carrying any religious (or secular) implications at all, writing, "[Dorothy] has little time to consider her faith, in fact little time for any spiritual preoccupations, though she is continually being sustained by natural beauty" (Ingle 29). For Ingle, Dorothy's joy obtained from nature "reflects Orwell's own great love of natural beauty" and Orwell regards nature as having "an almost mystical dimension" (29). I regard this scene of natural beauty as foreshadowing Dorothy's later loss of faith following her loss of memory. She needs nature to light up her spirit for praying in that scene and her faith presented in the narrative so far is not a mature or self-uplifting kind. Piety seems to be merely part of her routine life style. She neither questions the duty and piety required of her. The church on the one hand stands for an oppressive force while on the other hand it provides an excuse for her to live her life unquestioningly. Thus, when there



comes the time she has the chance of exile, her faith vanishes. Her quest for decency may opt for other ways out instead of religious faith. Whether her feeling about nature is for her worship as Meyers suggests, or for expressing Orwell's own ardent interest in nature as Ingle writes, one thing evident is that Dorothy's previous "life pattern" has been "a strain" on her (274), as remarked by Warburton, another character who tells Dorothy so when taking her back to Suffolk from Ringwood school. His words indicate that even a character not very close to Dorothy is able to tell her unbearable stress. Dorothy needs to vent her pressure urgently, but she cannot find a solution that can resolve her hardships and is at the same time acceptable for the community that is so demanding of her. Finally, amnesia gives her the escape needed.

Dorothy's passivity contrasts with Gordon Comstock's rebellious disposition. In *Aspidistra*, Gordon rejects decency, as defined by the values of the money-god worshipping world. In Gordon's childhood, there has been the idea in the child's mind about battling against or complying with the money-world (50): "You can be rich, or you can deliberately refuse to be rich. You can possess money, or you can despise money; the one fatal thing is to worship money and fail to get it. He took it for granted that he himself would never be able to make money" (47). Gordon, not long afterwards, declares "war on money" (48) and takes the initiative of not living a *decent* life by keeping a "blind-alley job" (59) as a second-hand bookseller's assistant. Gordon's gesture of rejecting the job is of course an important part of the narrative, but more than that, as Lynette Hunter observes, Gordon appears to be a character quite capable of articulating his mentality, as he is "more aware, more able to form ideas, and more conscious about language" (Hunter 36) than Dorothy and the preceding characters Orwell had so far created.



In spite of Dorothy's and Gordon's contrastive personalities, there is a similar pattern in the two novels. Meyers considers the pattern to be a "circular" and "ultimately unsatisfactory" one for "the characters [who] attempt to escape from their habitual lives [but] are forced back into them" (17). In that "circular pattern," "both Dorothy and Gordon, after experiences with meanness and poverty similar to those Orwell described in *Down and Out*, return to the economic security of their former lives and (somewhat unconvincingly) reaffirm its values: religious, for Dorothy; familial, for Gordon" (Meyers 79). Raymond Williams notes this escape-and-return pattern of the narratives as well and emphasizes the central characters' feelings of entrapment and oppression. Dorothy's and Gordon's escape from "an oppressive normality" ends up a failure, as Williams comments,

From the central characters of *The Clergyman's Daughter* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* to those of *Coming Up For Air* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, this experience of awareness, rejection, and flight is repeatedly enacted. Yet it would be truer to say that most of Orwell's important writing is about someone who tries to get away but fails. That failure, that reabsorption, happens, in the end, in all the novels mentioned ... (39)

Williams, however, reminds readers that despite the failure, it is the central characters' experiences of "awareness, rejection and flight" (39) that matter and make the novels worthwhile. Stephan Ingle also notes the predestined failure in the characters' struggles. Ingle calls it the protagonists' defeat and suggests that the themes of both novels are similar: "disenchantment, escape, failure and reintegration" (34). Both Ingle and Williams can sense Orwell's preoccupation

with the process of failure and suspect that Orwell might have seen his own career in these terms as well. For Orwell's characters, writes Ingle, "[r]eintegration always implies defeat" (34). Reintegration or "reabsorption" (Williams 34) of this kind can also be seen as individuals' being dissolved into the prevailing world. For instance, Dorothy makes cross-garterings and winged helmets for the performance in the conservatory and Comstock returns to the New Albion, his previous advertising company.

Gordon's poverty carries a pathetic nature, since it is self-imposed. Ingle suggests,

What makes poverty harder for Comstock to accept is that it is self-imposed; the advertising agency would always give him his job back if he were to ask. There should, however, be a real struggle in Comstock's abandoning the good or *decent* job, since he is perfectly aware of the hardship of the working-class life in his society after the Depression: Comstock "had got to get out of the money-world. It was queer. All over England young men were eating their hearts out for lack of jobs, and there was he, Gordon, to whom the very word 'job' was faintly nauseous, having jobs thrust unwanted upon him. (61)

Gordon's refusal to take the job might seem inexplicable, and possibly many readers may consider Gordon's decision to be merely serving a part of the plot. However, although an explicit reasoning behind Gordon's choice of exile is missing in the narrative, I would consider this as a decision rather than a flaw of Orwell's writing, because the narration intends mainly to construct experiences concerned with the pain of poverty for Gordon.



In *Clergyman*, Dorothy's exile has also been criticized as being too pragmatic a device in the narrative plot. Dorothy's loss of memory, her "sudden twist of fate", according to Ingle, "allows [the narrator] to whisk his character off on just the kind of excursion which he himself was apt to make" (29). I would like to emphasize that this exile of Dorothy in the text does offer vivid descriptions about marginalized people's "horrific conditions" (Ingle 29). Here is a sample passage showing the life of Dorothy the hop-picker:

It was a life that wore you out, used up every ounce of your energy, and kept you profoundly, unquestionably happy. In the literal sense of the word, it stupefied you. The long days in the fields, the coarse food and insufficient sleep, the smell of hops and wood smoke, lulled you into an almost beast-like heaviness. Your wits seemed to thicken, just as your skin did, in the rain and sunshine and perpetual fresh air. ...Dorothy sat against the sunny side of the hut, with a dry hop-poke across her knees to hold her dress down, alternately dozing and re-awaking. Two-thirds of the people in the camp were doing exactly the same thing; just dozing in the sun, and waking to gaze at nothing, like cows. It was all you felt equal to, after a week of heavy work. (121-2)

Obviously, Dorothy merely survives in her work, barely thinking about the way out of her slavery. Hunter notes that Dorothy has been in "mental enslavement" in the rectory and then during hop-picking, is subject to "physical enslavement" (31). The theme of hard work hindering thoughts prevails during her experience of hop-picking, echoing with the personae's experiences of hunger killing thoughts



in *Down and Out*.

Dorothy's feeling of being stupefied due to hop-picking contrasts with Comstock's agony in which there is no "real physical hardship" (62). In *Aspidistra*, as in the earlier novel, thoughts are hindered by low self-esteem caused by a low level of existence. Comstock feels that the "lack of money", however, damages his "brain and the soul" (62). Both central characters feel that their *thinking* suppressed. Dorothy is forced to be on the road after the hop-picking job is over (by that time, her memory has recovered): "Of the future she was utterly unable to think; even so far ahead as tonight she could barely see" (150). Hence, Dorothy walks to Trafalgar Square, a spot where many homeless people gather and there follows the third chapter of *Clergyman*, the Square scene that has attracted diverse comments and criticisms.

Dorothy's disturbing dream, just like her amnesia, gives her some temporary relief from the anguish and humiliation brought by poverty. Meyers suggests that "Dorothy's disturbing dream reveals her need to repress subconscious fears."<sup>1</sup> Her acquiescence so far is passive only in the sense that she accepts what her fate offers her without protest, but her attitude of complying and surviving is actually a choice in itself, repressing yet not overcoming her anxieties. What is revealed in her dream is actually the everyday struggle of her life at that time: exposure, the chilly air at night, food (shortage), policemen's intervention, singing of the hop-pickers and even their care for her: "*Mrs McElligot*: 'De poor kid, she ain't used to roughin' it de way us others are.' ...*Mrs Wayne*: 'She's a day born and bred.' " (176). This scene (imitating the Nighstown scene in *Ulyssess* of James

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<sup>1</sup> Cited from Jeffrey Meyers, 82. Please note that Meyers's idea that Dorothy's dream "foreshadows the amnesia" is not correct because her memory loss (in Chapter Two of *Clergyman*) takes place before the Square scene (in Chapter Three of the novel).

Joyce) is about lack, physical and emotional. When Dorothy's feet are cold she constantly asks those people around her, "Oh, how can you all stand it? Surely you don't have to do this every night of your lives? ... Oh, but how can you stand it? How can you go on like this, night after night, year after year?" (172-3). She is conveying both her fear of physical deprivation and also an ever-present mental anguish. Her dream is a representation of what has occurred in her tramping and hop-picking days. It is worth noting that among the hop-pickers and gypsies, Dorothy is not recognized as a member of the lower-classes, but the camp is still inclusive enough to let her be fed, be covered at night and be helped during work.

Dorothy's class feeling is different in magnitude and dimension from that of Gordon's. As a beggar in Trafalgar Square, Dorothy's accent and her manner of a gentlewoman are recognized by other people, since "her educated accent, which had made it impossible to get work as a servant, was an invaluable asset to her as a beggar" (185). However, she does not realize the advantage brought by her accent. Her class feeling is much fainter than Comstock's. We may study the manner Gordon screens his customers in the second-hand bookshop he works, with these descriptions: "A nice-looking boy, though for all his Nancitude. The skin at the back of his neck was as silky-smooth as the inside of a shell. You can't have a skin like that under five hundred a year" (*Aspidistra* 13); "Gordon watched [an old couple] go. They were just by-products. The throw-outs of the money-god" (16). Dorothy's class consciousness is mainly reflected by her sense of shame in begging, rather than by despising the lower classes. Dorothy's mentality of a clergyman's daughter does not show any snobbery and for her, there is no apparent difficulty or even any effort needed to submerge herself in that community among the marginalized people. She can both accept and be accepted by the lower



classes, probably because peculiar and shabby people are not rare in her acquaintance in the rectory. About human relationships, Dorothy's identity as a thin, fragile and perhaps submissive young woman may intrigue attention or curiosity from others, but not offense or hatred. Having been impoverished throughout her life, she is able to merge with the underclass (including tramps, hop-pickers and even prostitutes) quite effortlessly. Class consciousness usually escapes her mind, whether it is before, during or after her loss of memory.

Dorothy's amnesia divides her life in three phases quite neatly, whereas Gordon's life is two-phased, with his "drunken spree" (Meyers 85) as the turning point. The whole string of events — Gordon's getting drunk, hitting a sergeant mindlessly, being arrested and kept in the "clink," being charged 'drunk and disorderly' afterwards, losing his job because of the charge and Rosemary's pregnancy (her pregnancy followed by their consideration of getting married is the immediate cause) — drives him to return to the decent job in the advertising agency. Ingle regards Gordon's return to this job as a decision about morality and the critic combines the compromises made by Dorothy and Gordon to form the following metaphor:

Comstock felt only relief at the prospect of what he acknowledged to be a decent life. And in any case, he was merely fulfilling his destiny. ... since Comstock is seen to be following his fate when he rejoins the advertising agency and takes up his role in bourgeois society, we understand that finally his action has no specifically political implication, but a moral one: Comstock is taking up the cardboard armour and the glue pot. (34)



The two narratives describe how the central characters struggle when facing choices and social expectations of them. When his and Rosemary's baby is expected, Gordon complies with what has been long expected of him, "to turn respectable" (254). It is observed that Gordon deliberately chooses failure as it occurs to him that "[e]veryone rebels against the money-code, and everyone sooner or later surrenders. He [himself] had kept up his rebellion a little longer than most, that was all" (267). John Atkins suggests that "both Orwell and Gordon were deliberately choosing failure" (111). Comparing Orwell's invention of Gordon Comstock and Dorothy Hare, Atkins provides this summary:

"Orwell used his experiences of poverty to write *A Clergyman's Daughter* and was immediately faced with a problem which is strongly indicative of his own psychological needs. The difference between Orwell and Dorothy is that he sought poverty and she was forced into it by circumstances. This did not satisfy him. He wanted a closer parallel with his own experience. ...With Gordon Comstock in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* Orwell comes much closer to his own case. Gordon actively chose the gutter... The parallel seems to have been fairly exact: both Orwell and Gordon were deliberately choosing failure. The variation only occurred after this phase was complete, when Gordon chose the aspidistra and Orwell began to struggle toward the stars. He did not do it consciously but in fact he did reach up much higher than most of his contemporaries."(110-11)

Atkins's praise for Orwell is explicit, with stars — the only worthwhile items

available to the destitute, as illustrated in the narrative of *Down and Out* — used to signify Orwell's vision.

Orwell's characterization of Gordon is not an imposing kind. The narrator in *Aspidistra* does not show a concern to impose a rigid image of Gordon. If we pay attention to Orwell's characterization of Gordon and accept that this often frustrated and self-piteous character simply appears as he is intended, we may reach a similar conclusion with Mark Connelly. Connelly points out that Gordon is a "highly unrepresentative protagonist" (40) in view of the social ills brought by the Depression. What Gordon has been doing is nothing but going on "a kind of money-strike, which like a hunger strike must end in suicide or capitulation" (Connelly 40). When it comes to criticizing Orwell's (or actually, Gordon's) insensibility to the mass unemployment in English society, we may consider that Gordon's strike, his "money-strike" hardly awakens sympathy in readers. It may be easy to reach the conclusion that Orwell, in these two novels, neither brings his audience into the consciousness of the characters nor makes them understand the grounds of these characters' mentalities and choices. No strong reason for Gordon's "money-strike" is given in *Wigan Pier*, besides the vague impression implied by the orientation to Gordon's childhood and young adulthood. Gordon's rationale is not explicitly presented and the vagueness is left for discussion. Yet, in my view, how Gordon feels about social pressures is what the writer seeks to present through this character's destitute situation.

Gordon and Dorothy, though living in solitude during their exiles, keep reacting to and connecting with their society. This is particularly obvious when the characters finally show changes in their attitudes and courses of action. Gordon finally realizes his actions of rejecting social expectations are in vain,



since his mind still speaks in the language of clichés. He feels disgusted by, but cannot help complying with, the social assumptions.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Dorothy's return to the rectory is the result of "a need for some convention, some public acceptance" (Hunter 28). Afterwards, Dorothy still goes to church, but the reason of doing so is to attain a sense of decency and comfort gained from the religious and cultural background she is familiar with. Attending services is no longer a revelation of religious faith, because privately she has lost it. Both characters' choice, their "escape and return" signifies not only compromises made through yielding to financial needs, but also their understanding about the ultimate connections with the world that they may have a yearning for.

### **Orwell's struggles and failures**

Orwell as a writer may or may not intend to create central characters in the novels who share and display his own yearnings, thoughts or perspectives. Therefore, although many readings consider these two novels by Orwell to be created with reference to Eric Blair's life experience, our discussion here will focus on the characterization that helps construct the themes of the narratives, rather than weighing the authenticity of the descriptions presented in the novels according to the so-called reality in which the writer lives. Gordon, for example, demonstrates a perspective showing many flaws, such as selfishness. The explicit comment on Gordon in *Aspidistra* is that "[h]e had declared war on money, but that did not prevent him from being damnably selfish" (48). In Gordon's mind, his getting drunk (which then leads to a mess of incidents and so the loss of

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<sup>2</sup> L. Hunter writes about the way Gordon despises his clients in the bookshop where he works, suggesting, "[Gordon] speaks to others in clichés of gesture and vocabulary, acting up to their expectations of him, and thereby reinforcing their assumptions and his disgust." See L. Hunter, p.37.



his job) is totally excusable: “*Why* does one do these things? Money again, always money! The rich don’t behave like that. The rich are graceful even in their vices. But if you have no money you don’t even know how to spend it when you get it. You just splurge it frantically away, like a sailor in a bawdy-house his first night ashore” (208). At Ravelston’s place, Gordon ponders on his poverty with “frightful clarity”: “He took a sort of inventory of himself and his possessions. Gordon Comstock, last of the Comstocks, thirty years old, with twenty-six teeth left; with nothing before him except cadging and destitution, and nothing behind him except squalid fooleries. His total wealth a puny body and two cardboard suitcases full of worn-out clothes” (209). Gordon’s reflection, is, again, about his materialistic deprivation, but not quite about his morality, especially his “cadging” imposed on his sister, Julia, as the narration goes: “It might be a hundred quid he had ‘borrowed’ from [Julia] in all these years; and then even five quid he couldn’t spare her. Five quid he had set aside for her, and then spent it on a tart!” (209). Meyers’s harsh criticisms of Gordon seem fairly justifiable. Meyers emphasizes that Gordon “lacks integrity and honour” and the character’s “envy and self-pity tend to alienate the readers’ interest” (87). Furthermore, *Clergyman* appears to some critics to be also a flawed novel, and it shares a quality with *Aspidistra*, since both Dorothy and Gordon have an “unattractive streak of self-pity” (Meyers 85). Meyers regards Orwell’s characterization in these two novels distracts readers’ attention from the central characters’ suffering and hardship, and draws readers towards disapproval instead. We may note that, however, Meyers has not offered much discussion of Dorothy in that part of his argument. I would suggest that Orwell’s characterization of these two perhaps not very pleasant characters is a strategy to illustrate the enormous social impact on individual human beings.

The lack of readers' identification with Gordon may largely be caused by his extreme class consciousness. The character's "sense of entitlement to the relative comfort of middle-class life," such as the job offered by the advertising agency, is a kind of "upward mobility" or "privilege" that "many [others] do not have but which Gordon assumes as his birthright" (Stewart 155). Gordon's "birthright" probably arouses contempt in readers who may then ask the question: who is really suffering in society? A similar question has been raised in the narrative, by Ravelston, Gordon's rich Socialist friend. Through Ravelston's consciousness, the poor people in Middlesbrough have been spared a thought, but his fault is that he lacks "the fortitude or the will to act" (Stewart 160) or effect changes in society. Ravelston is at first introduced to the readers as a middle class socialist — young and amiable, having "not merely a charm of manner, but also a kind of fundamental decency, a graceful attitude to life;" admirably, "his whole life was a struggle to escape" the "fatty degeneration of the spirit" (*Aspidistra* 90) of his class. Unfortunately, this young Socialist on the one hand preaches Socialism (to Gordon, for instance); on the other hand, he is totally out of touch with the working class he is concerned about.

Ravelston represents the left-wing intelligentsia who have sensitivity to existing social injustices, but not the capability to stand up for the underclass. In other words, he has certain socialistic values, but those values do not gather him the courage to break through the class barrier to commit himself to experiencing poverty in close quarters. The narrator comments,

Ravelston persuaded himself that he was fond of pubs, especially low-class pubs. Pubs are genuinely proletarian. In a pub you can meet the working class on equal terms — or that's



the theory, anyway. But in practice Ravelston never went into a pub unless he was with somebody like Gordon, and he always felt like a fish out of water when he got there. (*Aspidistra* 95)

Ravelston owns the left-wing review *Antichrist*, but his lover never reads it. She tells Ravelston not to talk to her about the lower classes because she hates them and they “smell” (103). Ravelston has the type of class attitude that sympathizes with all poverty-stricken people, but does not grab the subtler or even crucial fact about poor people’s deprivation — their deprivation of decency. Ravelston is actually a caricature of the left intelligentsia who are harshly criticized by Orwell in his later works such as *The Road to Wigan Pier* and *Homage to Catalonia*.

Gordon is very well a contrastive character to Ravelston in terms of their understanding of financial and psychological needs of the impoverished people. Nonetheless, some critics such as Terry Eagleton views Gordon’s attack on Ravelston’s income and judgment as Gordon’s “arbitrary projections of private feeling” (26). The “private feeling” understandably means jealousy. The problem is that Gordon’s jealousy and other flaws of his personality become really distracting. Although Orwell presents Gordon’s “dramatic rejection of society” (Eagleton 26) vividly, the judgments Gordon makes do not have any impact on readers. In this way, readers may miss the chance to understand more about the society Gordon rejects and this lack of understanding, the incapability to recognize the personal sensation or pain brought by poverty is exactly the main weakness of Ravelston. Gordon simply gives readers an impression of an unreasonably cynical character. Gordon’s disgust towards Ravelston’s lack of courage to change the *status quo* is thus undermined.

Socialism is not a topic explicitly studied in *Clergyman*, but the exploitation

of labour and imposition of values are narrated to acknowledge the lack of decency and autonomy in many working people. Dorothy lives among these people. In *Clergyman*, “socialism” remains an insignificant term flashing in and then quickly fading out in a scene in which “electioneering” is mentioned and Warburton is mistakenly registered as a “Socialist” (38) and Dorothy, “the friend of Socialists” (39). Dorothy’s struggle to keep her teaching job and consciousness to reform the programme might reflect some of the observations and thinking Orwell the author would like to present, yet the socialistic sense in these passages is not evident. The narrator presents comic elements that are inevitably a kind of dark humour since the shadow of Dorothy being sacked always prevails in the Ringwood section of the narrative. Subject to Mrs Creevy’s (the headmistress’s) “talking to” in front of the parents, “[Dorothy] saw with dreadful clarity the helplessness of her position. Whatever happened, whatever insults it meant swallowing, she had got to keep her job” (233). Dorothy feels the threat right on the first day at Ringwood, as Mrs Creevy says, “If I hear any noise coming from this room, there’ll be trouble for somebody” (207). That “somebody” means Dorothy, of course. Dorothy’s frustrations in teaching owe a lot to her high expectations, her mission in the first place: “she would do whatever willingness and energy could do to rescue these children from the horrible darkness in which they had been kept” (214). The school, however, turns out to be a swindle run by Mrs Creevy with her maxim: “It’s the fees I’m after, not *developing children’s minds*” (235). The incident about “this Mr Shakespeare” as a “very *immoral* writer” (227) is supposed to bring amusement, at the same time showing the parents’ ignorance and their complicity, for their children are trapped in a swindle. There happens to be a subtle association of the censorship (of *Macbeth* and the



word “womb” in the script) in the Ringwood school and that in the publishing world in the 1930s. Peter Davison states that the “garbled” novel, *Clergyman*, had undergone changes affecting many pages and the amendments caused the “omission of a vital link in the story’s narrative line.”<sup>3</sup>

The two novels’ structures have been subject to criticisms. One example of these remarks is that *Clergyman* is too episodic, with some parts or sections of it lacking *meaningful* transitions from one to another. But as stated in the previous paragraph, Orwell came across obstacles in having the novel published, and despite the fact that Orwell viewed *Clergyman* as a “silly potboiler,” readers may take the sensitive environment of literary publication in the 1930s into consideration. Orwell’s discontent with the novel may be due partly to the “in-house censorship” it suffered. According to Meyers, *Clergyman* shows its “weak structure and unconvincing plot” (80) and the real failure of this novel is of

Orwell’s inability to find the correct form to embrace his experience and embody his ideas. As he realized, the novel’s divergent and disconnected episodes — in the rectory, with hop-pickers and tramps, and at the school — are essentially autobiographical and linked by the weakest transitions. Dorothy is transported into the squalid and boring world of the tramp by an unexplained loss of memory (Orwell’s use of psychology is extremely weak), and he omits the most potentially interesting part of the book by ignoring what happened to the heroine during the first eight days between Suffolk and London. (80)

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Davison indicates some changes required in “A Note on the Text” in *Clergyman*. v

Similar problems about the structure and the plot also appear in *Aspidistra*. Meyers considers the plot in *Aspidistra* to be too “mechanical” and some incidents depicted in the novel to be too coincidental, such as that Rosemary meeting Gordon in the open-air market; the plot is too mysterious, for several unacquainted characters work together to bail Gordon out from the prison; there are some other scenes unexplained and incredible (Meyers 86). Edward M. Thomas indicates another problem — the narrator’s intrusion or intervention in *Clergyman*. Thomas observes that the narrator has a tendency to include “bare comment of his own” (26) in the narrative. Thomas offers this example to illustrate his point: “Altogether, the farmers had the pickers in a cleft stick; but it was not the farmers who were to blame — the low price of hops was the root of the trouble” (*Clergyman* 118). The clause, “as Dorothy observed” inserted, cannot really wipe away the impression that the narrator, outside Dorothy’s consciousness, is simply too eager to thrust remarks into the narrative, or even into the central character’s consciousness. The intrusion of the narrator’s “bare comments” of this kind, also known as “intellectual control over the experience,” however, may be more acceptable in some other genres. Orwell’s style becomes “the strength of *Down and Out* and *The Road to Wigan Pier* because of the factual context and the autobiographical method” (Thomas 26). These two books’ non-fictional form allows the narrator’s own experience and conclusions to alternatively project onto the narrative. In other words, the projection of the narrator’s own comments makes the whole narrative a meaningful unity. In a relative sense, the two novels lack this very element, the narrator’s polemic commentary; thus many passages appear as chunks of impressions and observations.

Orwell’s political and social experiences sometimes cannot be represented or



revealed in the characters' immediate consciousness. Williams pays attention to Orwell's treatment of "the author's own presence" and criticizes the fact that Dorothy's significance as a central character is undermined, as Orwell's "attempted characterization of the girl as more than a surrogate presence is at times serious and detailed, at times merely functional. But a *sustained* identity, through diversity and dislocation of experience, cannot yet be realized" (Williams 44). Of the two central characters, Gordon in *Aspidistra* is given a greater degree of Orwell's consciousness. According to Williams,

Comstock is an active and critical figure in all the initial exploration, but increasingly there is a contradiction within the mode of observation. The active and resourceful persistence of Orwell, the impressive survival and remaking of an active self, is steadily cut out, as the accepting observation continues. What begins as a protest becomes a whine, and the reabsorption of Comstock into a world of manipulable objects is accomplished with a kind of perverse triumph: the 'character' of the intermediary (like the 'character' of Flory<sup>4</sup> or Dorothy) being the 'justification' of the eventual submission or defeat. (44)

Williams's identification of Gordon's situation reassures the dynamic relationship between the character and his creator. Gordon seemingly enjoys more autonomy and possesses a clearer image than Dorothy does, but Orwell is understandably manipulating the resourcefulness or even attitude of Gordon. Readers may take it for granted that the narrative about this self-pitying Gordon

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<sup>4</sup> Flory is the central character of *Burmese Days*.

who lacks “integrity and honour” (in Meyers’s perspective) is definitely contributing to the effect intended. If Comstock is to be a figure to be denounced in any case, it is Orwell’s design to leave him to be so. In short, Orwell has been successful in presenting Comstock’s failure.

The autobiographical foundation may not be always feasible for characterization in novels. This point can be derived from considering the possibly different perspectives shared by the author and the narrator, the author’s socio-political concerns, the accessibility of these concerns to the readers and the realization of these concerns in the immediate consciousness of characters. Meyers argues that Orwell’s projection of self into his writing hinders the author’s imaginative power shown in the work, because “he could not create characters outside himself and is not successful in grafting social analysis and political purpose on to the form of the traditional novel” (17). Meyers’s argument mainly focuses on the restraining nature of projection of the self in novel writing. One interesting phenomenon is that Orwell’s style is widely known as drawing on his experience and above all, his most famous or recommended works (and novels) also bear a great degree of his sense of self. Another possible view on Orwell’s achievement, or failure, or both involves looking into the intent of Orwell’s writing rather than the effectiveness of his methods.

### **Orwell’s writing: intent and method**

The narrative of Gordon suggests that poverty hinders not only one’s thinking, but also the development of human relationships. Thomas notes Orwell’s strong intent to get this message across, remarking,

Not only is Gordon’s relationship with Rosemary undermined,



but a friendship with the rich owner — editor of a left-wing review, is falsified by the money barrier. The situation embarrasses the one and embitters the other, and illustrates what Orwell elsewhere emphasized, that money and class differences cannot be overcome merely by deciding to ignore their existence. (27)

If class prejudices hinders sociability as such, Gordon's cynical attitudes and reluctant acceptance of friends' assistance are justified. Receiving financial aid from friends is humiliating for Gordon most of the time, but his feeling of being victimized by exploiters in society gives him a strong reason (or excuse) to receive money from people close to him such as his sister, Julia and also Ravelston. Meyers notes Gordon's double-standard mentality, but he considers that the characterization reflects poverty's effects on individuals, writing, "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" (87). Comstock's attitudes and deeds become significant in the narrative as implying the invisible yet unbreakable "money barrier." About Comstock's change and being drawn back, Meyers also notes that the decision reflects an attempted resolution:

At the end of the novel Gordon decides to link his destiny with the common men who mysteriously transmute the greed and fear of modern civilization into something far nobler. This idealistic commitment represents Orwell's attempt to formulate an acceptable solution to the overwhelming sense of disintegration and decay ... (90)

What exactly is the “something far nobler” is however, not indicated in Meyers’s argument, but Meyers’s comment on Gordon’s decision responds to the critic’s own observation of Orwell’s *intent* of writing as he writes, “Through his moral commitment and exemplary honesty, Orwell wanted to draw attention to man’s lost soul and then attempt to restore it” (11). In these two novels, we may be able to sense an obvious attempt for resolution in individuals’ destiny. The narratives present poverty’s impact and also a very important cause of poverty, unemployment. Orwell’s purpose seems to be drawing readers’ attention to the unemployed people who have been to some extent represented by the central characters in the two novels. If the purpose can be reached, a general understanding or at least sympathy might come along. In other words, the ultimate intent is a cry for decency and justice for the lower classes, especially the working class people who are suffering from impoverishment.

One sound method for achieving the purpose is deploying a narrator, or a persona-narrator. Meyers pinpoints his discontent with these two novels by comparing them with two successful texts (*Down and Out* and *Wigan Pier*) written on poverty, stating,

Both Dorothy and Gordon Comstock have an unattractive streak of self-pity that disappears in *Down and Out* and *The Road to Wigan Pier*. These books are superior to the early novels, not merely because they have a political purpose, but because in these works Orwell creates a successful persona that interprets experience in a direct and meaningful way. (85)

The referred and preferred “persona” here ideally can articulate his comments and opinions ‘freely’ and non-fiction seems to be a less restricting form than the novel



in this sense. Besides Meyers, Williams is also concerned with the need for the narrator's presence to fully express the recreated yet highly personalized emotions:

Having failed to solve his profoundly difficult problem in the novel, Orwell turned to other forms which were in practice more available. His social and political writing was a direct release of consciousness, the practical consequence of intervention. 'Shooting an Elephant', for example, is more successful than anything in *Burmese Days* not because it is 'documentary' rather than fiction — the fiction, as we have seen, similarly relied on things that had happened to him — but because instead of a Flory an Orwell is present: a successfully created character in every real sense. Instead of diluting his consciousness through an intermediary, as the mode of fiction had seemed to require, he now writes directly and powerfully about his whole experience. (49)

Even if we agree with Williams's idea that a persona-narrator may serve Orwell's writing purpose well through presenting the first-hand experience and comments directly, Orwell's role and the narrator's still have to be kept separate because the manipulation of voices or stances of the narrator is one technique the author may adopt; as we shall see in the coming chapter, manipulation of voices is also very useful in creating dialogue. Williams's concern with a character who "writes directly and powerfully about his whole experience" is not the main focus of our discussion here. We are trying to figure out Orwell's construction of his observations that are purposefully and complicatedly presented. Nonetheless, the narrator or character feasible, according to Williams's suggestion, is available in

the text, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (a reportage), following the production of these two novels. *Wigan Pier* is a work generally considered to provide a self-definition of a persona-narrator who exists both inside and outside the experience of poverty, with the strategy of firstly exposing details of subjects observed (in Part One) and then illustrating the foundation of the perspective (in Part Two) that frames his observation. This experimented genre, a mixed form, opens up another possibility for developing discourses about poverty and the class issue.



## Chapter Three

### **The Road from Fellow Feeling to a Yearning for Common Decency**

It has become evident that in Orwell's works on poverty a narrator is very much needed for opening up discussion. Further than that, it is important to identify what is expected of the narrator who speaks on behalf of a particular stance. Lynette Hunter, the writer of the book, *George Orwell: A Search For A Voice*, studies Orwell's manipulation of the narrator's stance in several works including the four core texts chosen for this thesis. Hunter emphasizes that the narrator does not always represent Orwell in terms of perspective or stance. Rather, the depiction of the life of the poverty-stricken working class and the unemployed people of northern England in *The Road to Wigan Pier* keeps displaying the narrator's voices representing various stances. Probably, Orwell's intent is to invite readers to actively interpret the statements made in the book. Unfortunately, however, "because of the tendency to fuse 'Orwell' with the narrator, many commentaries fail to perceive that it is a device of stance that should alert the reader" (Hunter 51). As Hunter notes, that type of neglect usually results in readings which are "restricted", rather than allowing interactions between stances and voices, or classes, to take place.

Among the four core texts in the series of this thesis, *The Road to Wigan Pier* presents Orwell's ambivalent feelings towards the working class most consciously and also offers his most overt analyses of the class issue. The just-mentioned assumption of Orwell's manipulation of the narrator's stance needs to be introduced before starting our discussion of the depiction of poverty in *Wigan Pier* because it helps us, the readers, to decipher many statements which may contradict to one another. In Part One of the book, for instance, there are descriptions drawing attention to poor housing, old people living alone "on the verge of starvation"

because of the Means Test, unemployed people's predicaments and so on; in Part Two which is a structurally complete split from the previous section, there comes the well-remembered and astonishing comment of "the lower classes smell" (119). It is necessary, therefore, to identify the narrator's stance. After all, *Wigan Pier* is concerned with not only "what the writer saw, but how he saw it. It is a discussion of assumptions and prejudices, how they govern our attitudes, our approaches and the way we see things" (Hunter 47). In other words, what the narrator sees (in Part One of the book) is worthy of attention, but it is also helpful for readers to note the perspective that frames that depiction. Why he sees so is the crux of the discussion intended. The reason why he sees or thinks in certain ways owes a lot to the narrator's middle-class upbringing, although he manages self-education and changes as a result. How his class consciousness has been established (or, in some cases, taught and trained<sup>1</sup>) is elaborated in Part Two of the book. The discussion in this chapter will not go into the critique of how much of the autobiographical truth *Wigan Pier* (especially Part Two) carries, but the point to make is that the narrator from time to time exposes the class-consciousness and prejudiced feelings that once dominated his mentality, thus offering a good start to open up the discussion of issues of class and poverty, and above all to call for changes in some willing readers. Ultimately, the narrator's mentality — that is his commitment to democratic socialism — very likely has been initiated by his sensitive concern about the working class. A worthy task for us is to recognize Orwell's belief in a reasonable way of living for the lower classes including the working class, amid the assumptions and prejudices in his society. The narrator concludes in the book that this reasonable way of living can only be obtained in democratic socialism — "Socialism means justice and common

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<sup>1</sup> Class awareness, according to the narrator's description, has been taught to him, while self-education of the narrator — at the time when he was in the police force in Burma, for example — breeds his antagonistic feelings to oppression in all forms.



decency” (164). Understandably, that observation presented by the narrator also belongs to Orwell. According to the discourse in *Wigan Pier*, socialism should be able to empower the lower classes, including the working class, because of its ultimate respect for human decency.

There is a profound sense throughout *Wigan Pier* that socialism and decency should be tied together. The narrator argues that if socialism cannot benefit or be comprehended by ordinary working people, this type of socialism is not something he upholds. The statement, “Socialism means justice and common decency” (164) employs relatively simple language in describing socialism, indicating Orwell’s idea that socialism should be understood by every single member in society, including people who are not intellectuals or who are not educated enough to understand ideologies or theories. Orwell’s choice of language is a response to the excluding nature of most socialist discourses of his time. In the book, there is the statement that “[t]o the ordinary working man, ... Socialism does not mean much more than better wages and shorter hours and nobody bossing you about” (164). Anthony Stewart writes in the conclusion of his book, *Orwell, Doubtless and the Value of Decency*, stating that decency is not merely a word that was used in Orwell’s time. The significance of this word lies in that “[i]n talking about what [Orwell] sees as the best potential for socialism, decency conveys for him this potential most accurately” (Stewart 153). Stewart defines “decency” (basing on the definition given by the *Oxford English Dictionary*<sup>2</sup>) to build up a “thematic link” between four texts<sup>3</sup> in Stewart’s project, reaching this conclusion:

The notion of decency ... requires a *commitment* to treat others

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<sup>2</sup> The definition of “decency” quoted by Stewart: “Appropriateness or fitness to the circumstances or requirements of the case; fitness, seemliness, propriety: of speech, action or behavior.” See Stewart p.153.

<sup>3</sup> The texts are *Down and Out in Paris and London*, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

appropriately, befitting 'the circumstances or requirements of the case,' as the definition says. The circumstances or requirements, simply put, involve the recognition that human beings deserve a minimum level of respect, the level we expect for ourselves.

(158)

Orwell's chief concern is whether decency for all social members is available. He offers the narrator, who is constantly learning from life experiences, the task to demonstrate various degrees of understanding of the lower classes. Hence, when reading *Wigan Pier*, a sensitivity to "decency" may help decipher the crux of Orwell's argument. That sensitivity enables us as readers to see that even though at certain points of the narration, there is a profound class consciousness in the narrator or there is even prejudice implied in some of the statements the narrator makes, Orwell's chief concern remains constant — decency should be available to all social members, regardless of their class or social status.

The narrator's fellow feeling for the working class, however, only exists in the eyes of the beholder. The narrator's fellow feeling is not something to be easily tracked (so as to know where exactly it is in the text) or quantified. Nonetheless, the processes of the narrator's self-education and changes in attitude can indeed be traced throughout his accounts of his continual interactions with people from lower classes — he has been aware of his class hostility first and finally he is determined to seek a solution. Richard Hoggart in his "Introduction" written for *Wigan Pier* states that there are indeed Orwell's, and not only the narrator's, fellow feeling to be sensed in *Wigan Pier*. We may read the relevant passage of the narrator's "memory of working-class interiors" first before continuing our discussions on Orwell's fellow feeling based on Hoggart's observations:

Especially in winter evenings after tea, when the fire glows in the



open range and dances mirrored in the steel fender, when Father, in shirt-sleeves, sits in the rocking chair at one side of the fire reading the racing finals, and Mother sits on the other with her sewing, and the children are happy with a pennorth of mint humbugs, and the dog lolls roasting himself on the rag mat—it is a good place to be in, provided that you can be not only in it but sufficiently of it to be taken for granted. (108)

The depiction of the “working-class interiors” is so positive that some criticisms attack the naivety of values endorsed in that scene. In the passage there are, however, conditions clearly stated for achieving that scene: the father as a “manual worker” needs to be “in steady work and drawing good wages ...” (108). Hoggart studies this controversial passage, writing,

This passage has often been called ‘sentimental’. On the contrary, it is not at all sentimental. It reflects the courage of Orwell’s own convictions, his own discoveries; the courage to admit that his heart has been opened. Many intellectuals today, as in Orwell’s day, can accept antagonistic judgements, and Orwell gives them plenty of those. But they are deeply uneasy before expressions of warmth and love... . (viii)

Hoggart is among those critics who are aware of Orwell’s fellow feeling and can comfortably apply this term. This critic comments, “For many people the fellow-feeling is harder to take than the anger...” (viii).

As I have noted, the narration in *Wigan Pier* presents its arguments from different perspectives. This technique is particularly needed when the class issue — which is largely about stances — is the very subject of study. Ultimately, however, the most crucial stance, the stance that sides with the working class, can be

recognized in the text. This chapter aims at tracing the process whereby the narrator's fellow feeling for the working people gradually grows into a yearning for Socialism and "common decency" (*Wigan* 164) for every person in society. From the narration in *Wigan Pier* we know that the fellow feeling for the working class was not born with this compassionate yet middle-class narrator. Not at all. His class hatred was evident, as he claims, "I was still revolted by their accents and infuriated by their habitual rudeness" (131); his firm stance is established finally, as expressed by these words, "It is possible that I personally, in any important issue, would side with the working class" (209-10). There has been a transformation process, a journey to lead to the changes in the narrator's outlook.

### **Fellow Feeling for the Working Class**

The narrator starts his journey with ambivalent feelings for the working class. The whole narrative in *Wigan Pier* begins with introducing the interior of a lodging house which appears filthy and decaying to the narrator. The lodging-house is mainly inhabited by unemployed people. These lodgers, or characters, do not merely happen to be in the narrative or in that setting; those readers reading on will realize that these characters are typical examples of people subject to the narrator's analyses in the book (including Parts One and Two). Hunter suggests that the narrator's interest in these people is initiated by mixed emotions which catch him in a "dilemma of desire and fear" (50). About desire, the narrator's desire to know (or even to feel) the hardships of workers such as coalminers and the unemployed people is obvious. He claims, at the beginning of Part Two, that he visited the coal areas of Lancashire and Yorkshire partly "to see what mass unemployment is like at its worst, partly in order to see the most typical section of the English working class at close quarters" (113). It is interesting to note that the commissioned research and writing



involved in this journey — taken by *Orwell* the writer — is not mentioned in the text which presents an educated middle-class narrator. At this point, a clear split of two figures, “Orwell” and the narrator is hinted at. Another emotion, fear, can be found in the description of the narrator’s first visit to a lodging-house:

Heavens, how I had to screw up my courage before I went in! ...I was still half afraid of the working class. ... I still thought of them as alien and dangerous; going into the dark doorway of that common lodging-house seemed to me like going down into some dreadful subterranean place—a sewer full of rats, for instance. (141)

The narrator states that he is “sufficiently typical” of his class to have “a certain symptomatic importance” (113) to give readers orientation about how his class awareness — developed since childhood — is challenged.

The narrator’s class awareness and superiority can be traced back to the time of his early going over in Burma. He had been serving in the Indian Imperial Police there and after being part of the imperialistic power for five years, within a system of “unjustifiable tyranny” (134), he realized a sense of guilt in himself and quit it. For him, the working class in Wigan Pier are “the symbolic victims of injustice, playing the same part in England as the Burmese played in Burma” (138). The oppressive nature in both the colonial rule and the social hierarchy provides the basis for this important “analogy.” He is honest about his urge to lessen his guilty feelings of having been part of the “machinery of despotism” (136), claiming, “I felt that I had got to escape not merely from imperialism but from every form of man’s dominion over man. I wanted to submerge myself, to get right down among the oppressed, to be one of them and on their side against their tyrants” (138). To actualize these aims, the narrator chooses “getting out of the respectable world altogether” (139-40).

In essence, his experiences of disguising and tramping thereafter are also a form of going over, as he did when serving in the police force in Burma, in the sense that he takes the actions and visits the places deliberately. In both cases, he attempts to cross the class boundary and questions his outlook constantly.

As in his Burmese experience, the narrator's deliberate actions do contribute to the changes of his attitude to the lower classes. He makes it clear that "rubbing shoulders" with the tramps cures his fear, the quite inexplicable but totally unnecessary "fear of the mob" (*Down and Out* 120). Of course his fear (towards tramps) vanishing is still far away from a case of 'fellow feeling'; not fearing tramps anymore is also totally different from being accepted by the working class. Tramps are, strictly speaking, social outcasts, not typical working people whom he would like to have contact with when going on that journey. Nevertheless, getting rid of the unnecessary "fear" is the first step to modify his outlook and to acknowledge that poverty is not understood "merely in terms of brute starvation" among people from "the lowest of the low" (*Wigan* 139-40). With a better understanding of poverty, the learning narrator then moves on to face the reality that "there are great numbers of people who are in work but who, from a financial point of view, might equally well be unemployed, because they are not drawing anything that can be described as a living wage" (*Wigan* 69). That realization of working-class penury (which is presented vividly in detail in Part One) forces the narrator to look forward to changes of the *status quo*.

Compared with Part One, Part Two of the book touches on the class issue and socialism more directly and personally. The narrator's "writing a certain amount of autobiography" (113) displeased the left-wing publisher, Victor Gollancz, who was however enthusiastic to publish Part One for the Left Book Club collection. I would like to make the point that the class issue is acutely problematic among



Orwell's leftist associates, to the extent that Orwell's disclosure of it is also an exposure of its confronting nature. Orwell's explicit and direct analyses of his own class's prejudiced thoughts may have caused offence to many socialists, especially his potential readers, hence Gollancz's worry. Richard Hoggart writes, "Gollancz couldn't accept that kind of directness about a class he knew only through his intellect" ("Introduction" to *Wigan* vi). Probably, the socialists who shared Gollancz's mentality had failed to recognize an extremely important issue: those intellectuals who promote, contemplate and implement social movements for the rights of labourers are not necessarily genuinely serving working people. That is why the narrator, finally collecting his sympathy (and empathy as well), long after the time when he perceived the statistics of unemployment as merely numbers & statistics, asks the question, "is it ever possible to be really intimate with the working class?" (106) in Part One. The answer to this question is not a straight "no," but the negative response is justified by both personal and public reasons elaborated in the second half of the book.

In Part One of the book, the narrator's acquaintance with the coalminers is friendly yet subtly detached. Although the narrator befriends the coalminers and even lives with some of them for a short time, he is never one of them. In the book, most descriptions of the coalminers are powerful and impressive, focusing on their physical strength and tolerance to hardships (caused by, however, injustice in many cases). It is again interesting to pay attention to the placement of the personae: it is the narrator who uncovers facts and defends the miners, but he himself is the physically weakest among them; the tough shovelling, together with the "travelling" (unpaid work) which angers him so much, is after all condensed into a single expression: "a pang of envy" (19), because it is really a "spectacle" (20) to watch the coalminers work; it is indeed a spectacle, but not many readers, he speculates, are

willing to “take the trouble” (18) to see it. The narrator therefore feels shameful to be standing in the mines watching the miners, since “humiliation” of such kind is an old one: he has been constantly aware of his share of oppressing the lower classes, enjoying the privilege of consuming something (in this case, coal as fuel) at the expense of the life and health of hard-up labourers. The narrator also makes the point that everyone needs fuel. It is not only the middle class who despise hard labour of this kind, or never spare a thought on it, but also the ordinary people who may find it invisible, too. Even this usually concerned viewer, the narrator, admits that when he is away from the sight of the coalminers, he hardly thinks of their work in terms of its significance and toughness. In other words, the narrator is making a claim, on behalf mainly of members of his social class, that they should not regard their intellectuality as being more noble than those black “most noble bodies” (20) covered in coal dust to provide the necessity, fuel. Readers at this point are invited to choose a more definite stance, or at least to be detached from the prejudices (against the miners) which are prevailing in society. One example of such prejudices is that miners being seen as gluttons, but the narrator testifies that “they eat astonishingly little” (35); miners are viewed “comparatively well paid,” but it turns out again that they are sometimes underemployed and have lots of fees and stoppages deducted from the wages.<sup>4</sup>

### **The System Condemned**

The narrator’s concern throughout Part One of *Wigan Pier* is to demand readers to break those prejudices. His approach is asking readers to see truth beneath sights, the surface. Prejudiced thoughts prevent people from seeing what is going on in the world of hardship, and also in the world of poverty. For example, the narrator

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<sup>4</sup> See *Wigan Pier*, 35-39 for data inserted in the narrative.



studies the phenomenon of “thieving of coal” and when presenting it, he uses the “narratorial you” for the action of seeing:

All day long over those strange grey mountains you see people wandering to and fro with sacks and baskets among the sulphurous smoke (many slag-heaps are on fire under the surface), prising out the tiny nuggets of coal which are buried here and there. You meet men coming away, wheeling strange and wonderful home-made bicycles — bicycles made of rusty parts picked off refuse-tips, without saddles, without chains and almost always without tyres — across which are slung bags containing perhaps half a hundredweight of coal, fruit of half a day’s searching. (93)

The reality of “thieving of coal” is some poor people risking their life and health to pick some fuel for survival, while there is “no harm to anybody” caused by their actions. To see through the poor people’s “theft” in order to understand their reality is what the narrator intends here. The subject pronoun, “you” implies a request for attachment from a learned reader, encouraging the reader to achieve clearer sights — despite the dirt of the miners and the fact that they are ‘hidden’ under the surface.

In the book, the housing problem is another issue that requires people to see reality with extra care. The descriptions of the “caravan-dwellings,” for example, highlight two aspects to expose the cause of the problem of poor-quality housing and the fact that the seriousness of this problem has been overlooked. Firstly, readers are given the social context of the problem: “Anyone who wants to see the effects of the housing shortage at their very worst should visit the dreadful caravan-dwellings that exist in numbers in many of the northern towns. Ever since the war, in the complete impossibility of getting houses, parts of the population have overflowed

into supposedly temporary quarters in fixed caravans” (56). In other words, poor people flock into these slum areas not by choice, but by necessity, having to face a severe housing shortage. One unfortunate thing about these people is that the caravans’ rent costs almost as much as houses and the caravan-dwellers thus do not really save money by living there. Secondly, the attention is drawn to the language, the term “caravan” itself: “[the word] is very misleading. It calls up a picture of a cosy gypsy-encampment (in fine weather, of course) with wood fires crackling and children picking blackberries and many-coloured washing fluttering on the lines” (56). The aesthetic assumptions are put against the reality that the narrator sees, as he comments, “I have never seen comparable squalor except in the Far East. Indeed when I saw [the caravans] I was immediately reminded of the filthy kennels in which I have seen Indian coolies living in Burma” (56). The romantic association of this kind of housing with some “cosy gypsy-encampment” is criticized by the narrator as unrealistic. Words, after all, are “feeble things” (52) and deceptive in many situations. The narrator reminds readers that there is a tendency in people to stereotype things and conditions, especially those they seldom have close contact with. The examples mentioned of the caravan-dwellings romanticized and the underestimated degradation of poor housing owe a lot to stereotyping. The main problem about typing is that the unquestioning attitude, at times expressed in language, obstructs people from seeing clearly, or even reinforces their misinterpretation.

Typing of people, not only conditions, creates similar problems. When we first meet the landlords, Mr. and Mrs. Brooker, in the first chapter of the narrative, we imagine that they represent society’s spiteful attitudes to the old and starving. According to the narrator, the Brookers see the “old-age pensioners living in their house, usurping floor-space, devouring food and paying only ten shillings a week [as]



a kind of dreadful parasite who had fastened on them and were living on their charity” (10-11). However, as Part Two of the book makes clear, the poor living quality of many lodging-houses is not some kind of device in the hands of some villainous landlords to mistreat the lodgers. The cause of housing’s poor quality is instead poverty suffered by those people owning poor housing privately: “a poor old woman who has invested her life’s savings in three slum houses, inhabits one of them and tries to live on the rent of the other two — never, in consequence, having any money for repairs” (52). The narrator is not proposing any solution to the problem he points out, but he is suggesting possible causes of those signs of poverty. Poverty does not simply emerge, but is induced by people’s attitudes and actions.

Although the narrator condemns the prevailing spiteful attitude to the disadvantaged, seemingly the narrator does not intend to single out the Brookers or any other landlords for harsh attack. No matter how much humiliation the Brookers bring to the lodgers, “it is no use saying people like the Brookers are just disgusting ... For they exist in tens and hundreds of thousands; they are one of the characteristic by-products of the modern world” (14). The landlords are not making big money in running that type of lodging-house, as speculated by the narrator, “I doubt whether they were really losing money over the old-age pensioners, though certainly the profit on ten shillings a week must have been very small” (11). The lodgers, consisting of mainly old pensioners, have to rely on the lodge owners for the provision of food and bed because of the government policy, the notorious Means Test. It is the system governing people’s life, especially the life of those with few choices: to choose to survive, or not. The narrator comments, “The most cruel and evil effect of the Means Test is the way in which it breaks up families. Old people, sometimes bedridden, are driven out of their homes by it” (73). According to the narrator, many of the poverty-stricken elderly have to choose from either living with

the family and having their children's dole deducted, or claiming their own pension, handing it over to some lodging-house owners and living on the "verge of starvation" (73). The problem of old and solitary pensioners living in filthy lodges is therefore, induced by specific government policies, the system, rather than the problems simply existing alongside many other social problems.

As mentioned, poverty is not exclusively reserved for social outcasts. The narrator also pinpoints the agony of the so-called "respectable poverty" (139) of some once ordinary working people. By now, the narrator may expect his readers to have learned and be able to see with a new and understanding perspective, to break through from their previous prejudices against unemployed people, writing, "The frightful doom of a decent working man suddenly thrown on the streets after a lifetime of steady work, his agonised struggles against economic laws which he does not understand, the disintegration of families, the corroding sense of shame ..." (139). There is a comparison of the narrator's past and present attitudes, in exposing his previous ignorance about "economic injustice" in his younger days, as he claims, "I had at that time no interest in Socialism or any other economic theory. It seemed to me then ... that economic injustice will stop the moment we want it to stop, and no sooner, and if we genuinely want it to stop the method adopted hardly matters" (139). The narrator does not move on from there to elaborate how economic forces contribute to the unemployment problem, but points out that there is actually a way out.

Illustrating the issue of unemployment, the sociological perspective of *Wigan Pier* is obvious, compared with the other three core texts which give mainly the personal dimension. In *Wigan Pier*, unemployment is no longer portrayed as a constant fear of characters as it is in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, as the humiliating experience of clinging to the job of school teaching in *A Clergyman's*



*Daughter*, or as the act of resisting a “decent” job in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. The poverty of working people in *Wigan Pier* primarily shows the injustice of a society where people put their life at risk for wages not even enough for a decent living. Unemployment, after all, is not an isolated social issue but instead can only be tackled when it is linked up with other issues such as the protection of labour rights, according to the narrator. The narrative implies that labour rights remain fragile, unless workers are seen as feeling human beings rather than merely a factor of production. The concern in the narrator’s illustration is how much chance there is for workers’ (especially poorly paid workers’) interests to be protected.

### **Class Difficulties**

The assumption underlying this question is that the interests of the working class do not merely rest in their wages which can get them out of poverty. The working-class people also need to be ensured that their autonomy and participation in society are recognized. This is where the narrator’s sense of “decency,” as early discussed, evolves into the larger idea of democratic socialism. Bernard Crick, in his essay, “The Values of Democratic Socialism” suggests that the “egalitarian assumption” should be added to modern socialist ideas: all men and women — regardless of their social status — should “be treated as citizens, but also be helped to count equally as citizens and, above all, expected to act as citizens” (*Socialism* 86). As long as Crick in that discussion narrows the “worker” down to mainly a “skilled manual worker” in industrial capitalist society, we may not conclude that he and the narrator are paying attention to the same specific type of working people. But all members of the working class deserve a reasonable amount of dignity and this is emphasized throughout the whole narrative in *Wigan Pier*.

Crick’s illustration of equality is useful to explain the crux of Orwell’s

presentation of the working class. The narrator's yearning for equality implies the lack of it — the existence of people disenfranchised either economically or politically, or both. Actually, equality does not entail the same treatment to everyone. Crick states overtly that “[e]quality does not mean sameness”<sup>5</sup> but rather proper endorsement for people to effect their rights. It does not matter if a citizen — in whichever class — chooses to put his or her right to use. A socialist and just society is supposedly responsible for making the point clear to its people that the freedom to use a right, such as claiming pensions, is in the hands of individual citizens. Orwell also tackles the issue of equality, through comparing the treatment received by the middle-class narrator and a half-blind retired coalminer. The class issue at this point is a counter-argument to the assumption or habitual thinking of some middle class people that the lower classes may deserve less respect or, at any rate, that the respect (or human dignity) they do deserve is only offered or granted by the enfranchised (such as the welfare staff of the colliery). By illustrating the different treatments of the two classes, Orwell aims to alarm his society concerning how urgently equality is needed:

Here was a man who had been half blinded in one of the most useful of all jobs and was drawing a pension to which he had a perfect right, if anybody has a right to anything. Yet he could not, so to speak, *demand* this pension — he could not, for instance, draw it when and how he wanted it. He had to go to the colliery once a week at a time named by the company, and when he got there he was kept waiting about for hours in the cold wind. For all I know he was also expected to touch his cap and show

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<sup>5</sup> Crick, *Socialism*, 91. In that essay, Crick elaborates how liberty, equality and fraternity are complementary in building up “a common core ground of meaning amid [many] revolving and colliding concepts of Socialism.”(Crick, p. 79).



gratitude to whomever paid him ... (43-44)

The narrator reminds his readers that he himself will never receive treatment as low as that because of his own “bourgeois status.” In this way, Orwell reminds us that pensions and other financial aids, which are supposedly an empowerment to the poverty-stricken people, the lower classes, instead become a source of humiliation when administered by those too insensitive to offer dignity or “decency” to the underprivileged.

Yet even if we accept Orwell’s egalitarian ideas — expressed in his observation of social stratification (in the specific example of humiliating treatment received by the half-blind old miner above), how do we as readers account for what seems to be a shallow narrative sense in this work? For some critics, this incident, similar to the case of the narrator meeting another old miner (named Old Jack) in the lodging-house, demonstrates that the relationship between the narrator and the old miner is just a “fleeting acquaintance, cursorily presented and cursorily admired.”<sup>6</sup> Keith Alldritt makes this point in an essay, but it is to note that actually Alldritt is not saying that to attack Orwell for that seemingly shallow acquaintance at all. There may be the impression that Orwell, after all, still tends to type the people from classes lower than his. I would like to point out that this accusation has a big loophole. Firstly, as long as the presentation is made by the narrator, Orwell’s *own* stance is never fully known. Secondly, as Lynette Hunter emphasizes in her studies, the narrator in *Wigan Pier* is constantly “aware and learning” (61) and thus the middle-class type that the narrator represents should be noted. It may not be the case at all that Orwell intends to present a narrator or *persona* who adopts an authoritative tone to depict his encounter with that half-blind old miner in discussing

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<sup>6</sup> Keith Alldritt regards the encounter as “not a very important experience” for the narrator, trying to prove that *Wigan Pier* is “a work of introspective autobiography” in terms of its genre. See K. Alldritt, 65.

the class issue.

Another quite obvious example of this type of self-critical attitude is found in Part One of the book, about a working-class woman. It is a frequently studied passage about a young woman unplugging a drain — viewed by the narrator from the inside of a railway train leaving Wigan: “She had a round pale face, the usual exhausted face of the slum girl who is twenty-five and looks forty, thanks to miscarriages and drudgery; and it wore, for the second in which I saw it, the most desolate, hopeless expression I have ever seen” (15). In this case, typing normalizes poor people’s sufferings in discourse, presented by that “we say that ‘It isn’t the same for them as it would be for us’, and that people bred in the slums can imagine nothing but the slums” (15). This descriptive passage is solely from the narrator’s point of view, but attracts different responses indicating critics’ diverse interpretations of the speaker’s stance. There are at least three directions in interpreting that scene. One direction is about the narrator’s (the observer’s) incapability to feel how the young woman (the observed) feels. Hunter’s comment is of this kind: the narrator at that moment “has the sympathy for her, but does not understand her predicament” (50). Another direction is about the narrator’s old sense of guilt arising from his class feelings, as Bernard Crick writes in the biography of Orwell: “... the train leaving Wigan is itself a symbol of the writer’s almost desperate pain at being merely an observer, a member of another class who, having done his contracted task, is carried off remorselessly and mechanically simply to write about ‘what can be done?’ ”<sup>7</sup> The third trend seems to be related to the guilty feelings of an observer observing the oppressed. The narrator remarks, “For

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<sup>7</sup> B. Crick studies that passage by comparing it with Orwell’s writing in ‘The Diary’ and the passage’s “poetic sensibility” is emphasized (See B. Crick, *George Orwell: A Life*, p. 287). Apparently, Crick assumes that *the narrator* and Orwell are the same figure and overlooks the case that Orwell’s “contracted task” is not the same “task” of the narrator visiting mines and households.



what I saw in her face was not the ignorant suffering of an animal. She knew well enough what was happening to her..." (15). Douglas Kerr, in his essay, "Orwell, Animals, and the East" studies the observer's assumption in which the observer "has to do her thinking for her, and humanize her by filling out her unthinking vacancy with self-consciousness. However, her expression shows that she needs no passing bourgeois sentimentalist to make her aware of her misery" (240). Kerr reminds us that there are also examples, such as in Orwell's Burmese writings, in which the observer's "superior or fastidious or appalled aloofness is suddenly breached by an intimate if unwanted revelation of the inwardness of the other, making a claim that the observer cannot ignore" (240). The narrator's attempts to explore the underclass's reality aim at more than showing sympathy. These descriptions of his attempts are actually harsh criticisms on firstly the oppressions induced by his class and secondly, his class's ignorance about the oppressions and harm they have caused. To be detached from the ignorance is the narrator's present stance and the more he understands the lower classes, the more clearly he sees that they are individuals having feelings, not merely types. The narrative is therefore against oppression and simultaneously against stereotyping.

The harm of typing lies in the neglect of the typed people's reality — their thinking and survival. If we as readers rule out the narrator's "revelation" (in Kerr's term) yet resorting merely to the narrator's shame of being a member "carried off remorselessly and mechanically" by the train (in Crick's wording), we may be missing the constantly learning narrator's progress and limiting our reading within the old perspective of the comparatively young middle-class narrator. Hunter theorizes Orwell's exercise of typing and manipulation of voices. Her focus on "the difference between the two voices: between the stance of a 'type' and the stance of a learning individual voice" (Hunter 63) is significant for us to approach the narrator's

comments on the interactions between him and the lower classes. Having read Hunter's observation, we may conclude that Kerr's idea of the narrator's "revelation" as well carries a sense of the narrator's education and Crick's idea emphasizing the guilt in the narrator can also be regarded as implying the education theme, as Crick is aware of the narrator's journey which is both literal and figurative. About that scene, Hunter makes comments similar to that of Crick's, "The narrator is warm, safe, enclosed from the cold outside; the train is an escape bearing him away from the disgust of his earlier experience" (Hunter 50). Understandably, the narrator's "earlier experience" during the journey gives him the ground for analysis later in the book.

The whole narrative of *Wigan Pier*, including Parts One and Two, presents the learning process of the narrator. His learning and changes are crucial for his new perspective developed which initiates his fellow feeling for people outside his class. As mentioned, typing obstructs people from seeing the more genuine nature of the other, but typing itself should not be neglected in the discussion of class distinctions, because it represents many people's understanding of the other. If the goal is to break down class prejudices, the first step will be to face them, to "start by understanding how one class appears when seen through the eyes of another" (122). According to the narrator, contact of two classes is generally "confrontation", as he writes, "the meeting of proletarian and bourgeois, when they do succeed in meeting, is not always the embrace of long-lost brothers; too often it is the clash of alien cultures which can only meet in war" (154). There are some more examples of these seemingly superficial expressions about the class issue, while the narrator appears on neither side: "In order to symbolise the class war, there has been set up the more or less mythical figure of a 'proletarian', a muscular but downtrodden man in greasy overalls, in contradistinction to a 'capitalist', a fat, wicked man in a top hat



and fur coat. It is tacitly assumed that there is no one in between ..." (210). Nevertheless, these statements should not be considered as reinforcing the prejudiced thoughts of the readers, but as presenting the situation as it is. Moreover, the narrator's stance is implied. His approach of stating his stance is to firstly use expressions like those just quoted to question the ground of certain prejudices and then provide reasons according to his own experience — such as his inherent class awareness and later observations — to further break these prejudices down.

The narrator accepts the presence of class differences, although he requests changes in people's attitudes. He understands that people cannot totally get rid of their own class feelings unless the individuals give up a part of themselves — whether it is one's habitual thinking, lifestyle or accent, stating, "It is in fact very difficult to escape, culturally, from the class into which you have been born" (209). The narrator states,

All my notions ... are essentially middle-class notions; my taste in books and food and clothes, my sense of honour, my table manners, my turns of speech, my accent, even the characteristic movements of my body, are the products of a special kind of upbringing and a special niche about half-way up the social hierarchy. (149)

Apart from the personal dimension, the narrator offers a metaphor, "a wall of stone" to describe the seemingly unbreakable class boundary. For the subtle nature of the class barrier, he then modifies the metaphor and calls it a glass wall. Interestingly, the narrator in presenting this metaphor again makes use of again personal interactions with some miners:

Even with miners who described themselves as communists I found that it needed tactful manoeuvrings to prevent them from

· calling me ‘sir’; and all of them, except in moments of great animation, softened their northern accents for my benefit. I liked them and hoped they liked me; but I went among them as a foreigner, and both of us were aware of it. Whichever way you turn this curse of class-difference confronts you like a wall of stone. Or rather it is not so much like a stone wall as the plate-glass pane of an aquarium; it is so easy to pretend that it isn’t there, and so impossible to get through it. (145)

In this passage describing the sense of detachment, the narrator is not blaming the miners. The situation just shows that all people are subject to the prevailing social hierarchy — the difference is that the working people tend to comply with it, while the narrator by then manages to put a lid on his class consciousness, at least temporarily at that moment. If we accept the assumption of the narrator’s learning process, it will be necessary for us to be aware of both ends of the process: not only the narrator’s learnt and mature observations, but also some negative expressions displayed in the book to signify his mentality in the past.

According to some readers, Orwell is guilty of “exaggerating violently” because of his technique of presenting the actual language of class prejudice. For example, “the lower classes smell.” Victor Gollancz, the publisher of the Left Book Club collection (with *Wigan Pier* included), feels obliged to remark so, in the “Forward” of the book<sup>8</sup>:

I do not myself think that more than a very small proportion of [the middle class] have this quaint idea... In any case, the moral is that the class division of Society, economic in origin, must be superseded by the classless society... in which the shame and

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<sup>8</sup> V. Gollancz mistakes Orwell’s wording, though, in writing the quote “the working class smells.”



indignity so vividly described by Mr Orwell — I mean of the middle class, not the lower class — will be impossible.

*(Complete Works 219)*

The socialists sharing outlooks similar to that of Gollancz's are actually overlooking, if not ignoring the fact that for the very purpose of educating readers, Orwell through the narrator highlights "his personal ignorance or limitation" (Hunter 53) in the past to reflect the potential mistakes his own class may commit. Moreover, it is not only that the negative expressions are given, but the harm brought by class prejudices and the causes of those prejudices are analyzed. The narrator recalls,

... no feeling of like or dislike is quite so fundamental as a physical feeling. Race hatred, religious hatred, differences of education, of temperament, of intellect, even differences of moral code, can be got over; but physical repulsion cannot. ... It may not greatly matter if the average middle-class person is brought up to believe that the working classes are ignorant, lazy, drunken, boorish and dishonest; it is when he is brought up to believe that they are dirty that the harm is done. (119)

Let us also pay attention to the statement made by the narrator a few pages later in the text: "A working-man's body, ... is no more repulsive to me than a millionaire's. I still don't like drinking out of a cup or bottle after another person — another man, I mean: with women I don't mind — but at least the question of class does not enter" (122). The innate fear can go away, if one is willing to get rid of it. Hence, it is reasonable to see the negative and (relatively more) positive statements in the book, as both educational devices. After all, the recollection (about how he has been brought up to believe that the lower classes smell), the example of his resistance to and the workers' difficulty in resisting class distinction (the narrator being called

'sir'), and his reasoning in breaking down class prejudices (physical repulsion easily built but hard to remove) are all for a clear goal: to effect changes in the *status quo*, in people's attitudes.

### **Yearning for Socialism**

The tone of the narrator, however, is not very much of an imposition. He does not need to impose his values or ideas, as his narration's strength lies in the affective description of usually first-hand experience. As Hunter notes, the narrator would like to start with his own changes to effect changes among his social class; he shows readers how he has been treading on the road and facing injustices that are caused by and also affecting the whole society. What worries him most seems to be the vicious circle made up by two factors, as illustrated in the text: the passivity of the working class and the lack of security of the middle class. I called the narrator's emotion worry, but there is also rage in him when he talks about poverty. One example is his "discovery" of the unemployed people's misery which serves to explain the passive role of the working class:

The middle classes were still talking about 'lazy idle loafers on the dole' and saying that 'these men could all find work if they wanted to', ... I remember the shock of astonishment it gave me, when I first mingled with tramps and beggars, to find that a fair proportion, perhaps a quarter, of these beings whom I had been taught to regard as cynical parasites, were decent young miners and cotton-workers gazing at their destiny with the same sort of dumb amazement as an animal in a trap. (79)

Quite similar to the case of an old miner who claims pensions in the colliery, these people's failure to have a job leads to their "petty inconvenience and indignity" (44).



They do not “act”, but are “acted upon.” Even for some lower classes who do work, such as the hop-pickers, the narrator senses that they are equally passive in their work and life: “... I asked the sweated pickers (they earn something under sixpence an hour) why they did not form a union. I was told immediately that ‘they’ would never allow it. Who were ‘they’? I asked. Nobody seemed to know; but evidently ‘they’ were omnipotent” (44).

Passivity makes the working class, in many situations, resemble “slaves.” The old miner mentioned in the previous paragraph “feels himself the slave of mysterious authority” (44). Apart from the lack of support from trade unions or financial security, poverty itself brings about confinement, since it is associated with slavery. Kerr studies Orwell’s texts and judges that there is a connection between poor people and animal in Orwell’s presentation. The “life of the underclass” appears “essentially bodily and mindless” (238) and hence, thinking becomes a luxury that these people cannot afford. Poverty brings confinement to not only their bodies (with long hours of work of those such as hop-pickers and dishwashers) but also their souls (as the workers do not have the “leisure” for thinking). The coalminers experience both types of confinement, in this sense, as their hardship is in a dark world literally and figuratively, invisible to most outside people: “It is so with all types of manual work; it keeps us alive, and we are oblivious of its existence. ... it is so vitally necessary and yet so remote from our experience, so invisible...” (30). Richard Rees suggests that Orwell’s speculation of a planned society requires justice and equality. Barely surviving is just a “slave state”; being well-fed still does not wipe away the nature of slavery. In other words, a planned society in which most social injustices are still preserved would be a “slave state” where the slaves “well-fed and contented” would gradually realize themselves stripped of autonomy

and freedom yet “not even well-fed.”<sup>9</sup> The narrator emphasizes that the workers in England would remain passive unless a planned (or, in Orwell’s quest, a democratic socialist) society is achieved. At this point of our discussion, the urgency of drastic changes is quite evident.

In *Wigan Pier*, the working-class passivity is partly a cultural issue. The ways in which the working people or poorer classes cope with their boredom and distress during the economic depression help illustrate this point. They consume more and more cheap luxuries and tasty but not nutritious food, “lowering their standards” (81) with “fish and chips, art-silk stockings, tinned salmon, cut-price chocolate (five two-ounce bars for sixpence), the movies, the radio, strong tea and the Football Pools” (83). Some “tasty” food is preferred to “dull wholesome” food among the poor because they need “some cheaply pleasant thing” (88) to stand the boredom and miseries of poverty. The narrator shows mixed feelings towards this phenomenon. On the one hand, the “psychological adjustment which the working class are visibly making is the best they could make in the circumstances” (83) — in short, they do not lose “self-respect”; on the other hand, the increased consumption of cheap luxuries has been a “very fortunate thing” for the ruling class because it distracts the suffering people’s attention and no revolutionary urges can be built up in that case. The narrator does not owe it to any scheme intended by the government, since the process takes place gradually, under the influence of economic forces generated by “the manufacturer’s need for a market and the need of half-starved people for cheap palliatives” (83). The main problem implied by this phenomenon is that the poor people feel they have choice while in fact they do not.

The passivity of the underclass is presented alongside the middle-class people’s

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<sup>9</sup> That society is then later represented by one in which “oppressed animals [are] ruled by pigs” in *Animal Farm*. See R. Rees, p. 60.



fear towards working people. Here is a metaphor given by the narrator about his class's anxiety: "In [the middle-class man's] eyes [the workers] are a sinister flood creeping towards to engulf himself and his friends and his family and to sweep all culture and all decency out of existence" (123). Treating class prejudices, Orwell puts many of them in words directly and bluntly, probably for two reasons. The first reason is, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, to open up discussions by presenting the thoughts of different classes (and thus their different stances); the second reason is to show how the issue of class worsens the social problem of poverty. Orwell as a socialist (though usually not considered dogmatic) stands out from his contemporary counterparts largely because he is courageous enough to risk offending his readers who are mainly from the middle class.

Orwell's technique of presenting his stance should therefore be viewed as a technique of promoting socialism, the way out for many poverty-stricken workers. Siding with the working class and breaking down prejudices against them are two actions complementary to one other. Some examples of the narrator's language of presenting prejudices in order to defend the underserved against those prejudices have been covered in this chapter already. The narrator in the concluding pages of the book urges people to at least face the prejudices, even if they are not able to break any of these yet. In reality, it is far easier for some middle-class members to identify "the exploiter" and "the exploited" (211) than to act against their inherited class feelings. The narrator's idea is to let the middle class who are "robbed and bullied by the same system" as the working class, for example, "the clerk, the engineer, the commercial traveller, ... the village grocer, the lower-grade civil servant and all other doubtful cases" (211) join with the working class. There are two very strong statements backing this suggestion: "One, that the interests of all exploited people are the same; the other, that Socialism is compatible with common

decency” (214). The first statement, about the common interests of all exploited is about both economic and cultural considerations. The second statement reiterates what the narrator has suggested in the text about what a socialist must remember: “Socialism means justice and common decency” (164). “Common decency” is a term reinforcing the need for respect for people in all classes. Anthony Stewart studies decency in Orwell’s works and emphasizes that “[o]nce we ignore the concerns of ‘others’ as part of the fostering of our interests, it is that much easier to demonize or exploit them” (159). The narrator in *Wigan Pier* does not condemn class superiority, but he describes the harm and maltreatment the superior class may impose onto the underclass. The manner of viewing oneself as having a definite, unquestionable or the sole correct perspective (for both the middle and the working classes) is also subject to Orwell’s attack.<sup>10</sup> Through the narration which may at times sound deliberately restrictive or even prejudicial, Orwell asks his readers to break through from social prejudices and to be aware of the fact that decency should be available for all people in all classes.

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<sup>10</sup> A. Stewart suggests that the ability of self-criticism decides whether the character is a positively presented one, writing, “[The] desire for certainty is usually a target for satire in Orwell’s work. We see this satire at work in the narrators’ relationships with the indecent characters in the four novels. The narrow perspectives of Flory, Gordon, Napoleon, and O’Brien are all revealed by the narrators as solipsistic....” See p. 159.



## Conclusion

We have studied the narration of poverty in the four texts chosen, within three different but interrelated frameworks presented respectively in three chapters. These frameworks help us to identify Orwell's main concern in his writings on poverty — the people's quest for survival and thought in their destitute or poverty-stricken conditions. In a broader sense, these four texts also form a series showing people's quest for human dignity or decency. Orwell's argument is that common decency and justice can be obtained in socialism, or more accurately speaking, Democratic Socialism. If it is a socialist society truly for the people, justice and decency should be available, and comprehensible as well, to all social members, including the working class<sup>1</sup>. In these four texts, Orwell treats poverty as a big social problem affecting people outside his class, but most importantly, he constantly addresses the real miseries of the underclass that he can — and he thinks his class is obliged to — understand. Poverty's harm starts with the limited opportunity for the poor people to either move away from poverty (for example, unemployed people have to buy a newspaper every morning and reach the workplace before seven o'clock, if they want to get employed) or to defend themselves against prejudices (such as the impression that miners hate washing themselves properly) which are prevailing in the society. Bernard Crick's definition of poverty demonstrates a similar mentality expressed in those texts by Orwell, as it implies that decency is much more than mere survival: "Poverty is not just not starving, it is being shut out from all the things that public opinion holds necessary for a decent life" (*Socialism* 95). Following that implication, decency means common people having the opportunities to exercise their rights without

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<sup>1</sup> The narrator suggests that jargons of socialistic ideas such as "bourgeois ideology", "proletarian solidarity" and "expropriation of the expropriators" should be avoided, because these phrases only make a common working person feel "disgusted" rather than "inspired by them." (*Wigan Pier* 208)

feeling constrained by their social status. Hence, I would say that in Orwell's presentation there is a gradual realization of the fact that poverty and the class issue are almost inseparable and therefore, to face poverty as a social problem one cannot avoid the class issue. Orwell reaches and presents this resolution (with hope in Democratic Socialism) in the last book of the series, *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

The frameworks mentioned in the three chapters of this thesis are actually three narrative perspectives in approaching poverty. Chapter One studies *Down and Out in Paris and London*, the first book of the series, noting that the narrator in the book is a middle-class persona who slips into poverty by accident. Similar to *Wigan Pier*, *Down and Out* is a non-fiction, journalistic work carrying a certain autobiographical strain in depicting the narrator's first-hand experience and observations of people's low level of existence, in Paris and London. The key question raised in this chapter is: how much possibility there is for the underclass to move beyond their existing mode of living which is full of hardships and to think beyond their survival? The depiction of a *plongeur's* work and life in *Down and Out* suggests that there is little chance. The narrator points out that many working people, such as the *plongeurs* and cooks in an ordinary hotel kitchen, simply suffer from unnecessary slavery.<sup>2</sup> A *plongeur's* work, according to the narrator, is mainly wasteful and ridiculous because much of it is for keeping up the restaurant's image of providing quality and "luxurious services."

Keeping up appearances is a major concern for both the lower and the middle classes. In the Paris section of *Down and Out*, deceit is applied to many aspects of life for surviving poverty, such as finding a job (Boris smacks his cheeks sharply on a glass window "to bring the blood into them" (49) to remove the pale look of

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<sup>2</sup> Constant fatigue keeps a *plongeur* from contemplating his own life and thus proper mannerism sounds trivial to him. The narrator claims that he often quarrels with the cook "over things of inconceivable pettiness" (*Down and Out* 114).



hunger), to stay under a shelter (the characters smuggle out and then pawn their clothes, dodging the landladies' notice) and to have food (Charlie's girlfriend pretends to be pregnant for free meals in the government maternity hospital<sup>3</sup>). Keeping up appearances also becomes a real matter for some sinking middle-class families, too, and they spend much household income on that. The narrator's criticism of his class's consciousness of gentility, however, does not seem extremely harsh. The reason may be that the narrator understands the pressure and difficulties many sinking middle-class people suffer when they need to appear deserving of their social status. He is aware firstly, how nonsensical these behaviours may appear in the eyes of the lower classes, but secondly, how these behaviours show the strong tendency to maintain the *status quo* among people in his class. These middle-class people believe that gentility is what separates them from the lower classes who may get loose and then become free to lay their hands on middle-class benefits and privileges. This fear, called by the narrator the "fear of the mob" (120), is totally unnecessary and its harm is that it allows social injustices to prevail.

Tramping is a social phenomenon resulting from this type of fear. Tramps are kept away from a stable shelter and dignity is stripped from them. Tramping is not a choice<sup>4</sup> of lifestyle, since "[tramps] are ordinary human beings, and that if they are worse than other people it is the result and not the cause of their way of life" (205), but a resort due to their lack — which is financial, social and psychological. But of course, the whole narrative of tramping is framed within the narrator's perspective and even when he is on the road, his impoverishment is

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<sup>3</sup> For Charlie's and his girlfriend's story, see *Down and Out* 97-99.

<sup>4</sup> In the text of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, the narrator writes about how he disguises himself as a tramp in order to be "getting out of the respectable world altogether" (*Wigan Pier* 139-40). His experience of tramping and staying in spikes at night is obviously an exception.

not equivalent to that kind suffered by real tramps. His social connections, intellectuality and the strong motive (implied by the narrator's tone) to narrate his and others' stories allow the narrative in *Down and Out* to be produced. The narrator needs this unique role — a poverty-stricken yet middle class observer — for some experience to be written about: the narrator survives hardships, observes and analyzes problems concerning poverty and finally puts his experience into words, owing to his ability to leave penury behind whenever he chooses to. Through experiencing and observing poverty, how it feels (for a middle class individual like him) to be in acute poverty is what the narrator intends to tell his class.

Chapter Two of this thesis thus focuses on the presentation of poverty's impact on two middle-class individuals (the two novels' central characters) undergoing hardships of poverty. These characters, Dorothy Hare in *A Clergyman's Daughter* and Gordon Comstock in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* try to escape from their class. The narratives in the two novels depict their struggles and the pain of poverty. Dorothy's and Gordon's struggles are generally considered by critics as personal failures because these two protagonists end up going back to their previous social communities. Their exile or escape is also remarked by some critics as showing a pattern of escape and return. Nonetheless, I would like to emphasize that the characters' awareness of their entrapment (in the form of duty in Dorothy's case, and in Gordon's a job he despises), resistance, escape and going back altogether demonstrate a process showing their struggles, failures and growing self-understanding. The process of the characters' escape and return conveys a profound sense of quest, again, for survival and independent thinking.

Poverty strikes both central characters but its impact on their thinking is not



the same. Gordon definitely feels the anxiety brought by poverty on his social relationships such as those with Rosemary (his girlfriend) and Ravelston (his rich publisher friend). He claims that his lack of money (though self-induced) damages his "brain and soul" (62), harming his dignity, obstructing his thinking and creativity for writing; Dorothy does suffer from poverty no matter whether it is before, during or after the strike of amnesia, but poverty and tramping do stop her from thinking of herself as a decent human being, as the narration goes: "Of future she was utterly unable to think; even so far ahead as tonight she could barely see" (*Clergyman* 150). It is quite obvious to the readers that the reasons leading to the two individual characters' poverty are totally different, but these reasons are not merely to do with personal traits or fate, but show the social dimension of poverty. These characters' actions are actually responses to the social forces surrounding them.

The characters' different responses to the oppressive social environment reflect their quite opposite attitudes to life. It is reasonable to say that Dorothy is passive, while Gordon is resistant to, carrying out what is socially expected of them. Dorothy's struggles for survival show her attitude: life for her means compliance. Taking care of the household (and of course, dealing with "dreadful bills"), paying visits to neighbours, praying (or struggling to settle down and pray) in the church are all examples of behaviour that belong to a young woman, a rector's daughter, a dutiful Christian, in her community. Her hop-picking, tramping and humiliating experiences in sticking to her teaching job also imply the tendency of acquiescence in her nature when facing financial difficulties. Even finally her refusal to marry Mr. Warburton can be interpreted as an action conforming to her understanding of a decent young woman's behaviour: she should reject marrying a notorious "rascal."

She struggles, but usually within a frame — an identity defined socially. Facing social expectations, Gordon rejects a “decent” job offered by an advertising company because of his determination to reject any kind of decency that is defined by the values of the “money-god worshipping world.” He chooses to work as an assistant in a second-hand bookshop, being aware that it is a “blind-alley job” in terms of both career prospects and wages. That should be a real struggle for Gordon, as out there in his society most common people are suffering from the Depression, with many young ones “eating their hearts out for lack of jobs” (61). Raymond Williams considers Gordon’s action as a get-away from “an oppressive normality” (39) and, in Williams’s observation, this pattern of central characters trying to dodge from the prevailing social values yet finally failing is typical of Orwell’s narrative writings. As emphasized, poverty’s impact — the characters’ suffering — is presented through these characters’ behaviours and attitudes.

It seems that in these two narratives the characters’ actions are not as important as the reasons behind the actions. Similarly, the depiction of poverty in these two novels may function to show clearly Orwell’s concern for the social and political factors to a larger extent than the hardships and suffering resulting from these factors. These assumptions may help explain why Orwell allows his character, Gordon, for example, to appear utterly selfish: “It might be a hundred quid [Gordon] had ‘borrowed’ from [Julia, his sister] in all these years; and then even five quid he couldn’t spare her. Five quid he had set aside for her, and then spent it on a tart!” (*Aspidistra* 209) and self-pitying:

[Gordon] took a sort of inventory of himself and his possessions. Gordon Comstock, last of the Comstocks, thirty years old, with twenty-six teeth left; with no money and no job;



in borrowed pyjamas in a borrowed bed; with nothing before him except cadging and destitution, and nothing behind him except squalid fooleries. (209)

These passages, however, describe Gordon's personality which is significantly needed to construct the major part of the narrative. Gordon's traits and resistance to social molding are crucial to let the readers witness all the steps he has taken to make his final decision of return. In *Aspidistra*, there is no explicit reasoning given by the narrator for Gordon's "money-strike" (in Meyers's term), but Gordon's hatred of the fact that people are socially defined by possessions is, however, very clear: "Don't you see that a man's whole personality is bound up with his income? His personality *is* his income. How can you be attractive to a girl when you've got no money? ... And it's rot to say that kind of thing doesn't matter. It does" (*Aspidistra* 105). It may not be Orwell's intent to explain plainly why Gordon constantly turns his relationship with Rosemary into turmoil out of Gordon's extreme sensitivity in the money matter, but the narrator's purpose is to describe how Gordon feels exactly in his situation, when poverty actually erodes his self-esteem and his trust in other people.

One important issue about poverty's impact on individuals is the damage it causes to human relationships. Gordon feels that Rosemary's delay in having sex with him is a price he has to pay for poverty; his cynical attitudes and behaviour in front of Ravelston is even stronger evidence of "the money barrier." Edward M. Thomas observing these two male characters writes, "money and class differences cannot be overcome merely by deciding to ignore their existence" (27). Nevertheless, facing the reality of class barriers, Orwell shows attempts to offer a resolution, not exactly by breaking the class boundaries (which is an attempt

perhaps never made by the narrator in the novel), but through two steps: drawing readers' attention to the battered personalities of individual characters and pointing out how these individuals finally decide their own placement: settling down under the collective social values. Both characters, Gordon and Dorothy choose to return to their previous social setting, but the significance goes beyond removing themselves from poverty-stricken survival — it is their social connections and relationships (that is, family) which provide an answer and closure to their previous actions.

The answers given in the novels' endings are open-ended, a quality I would consider to be a strength rather than a weakness in Orwell's writing. The endings presented in these two narratives seem to be disapproved of by some critics such as Williams and Ingle who think that Orwell (perhaps at this early stage of his writing career) lacks "the necessary grasp of socialist ideology to conceive of a form of society in which his characters could integrate without having to admit failure ..." (Ingle 135). There are also criticisms attacking the political and artistic aspects of these two endings. But what if Orwell in the first place has never intended to propose "a form of society" at that particular stage? It is possible that the writer is more willing to let his characters who have been social outcasts (having experienced starvation, unemployment and imprisonment) go back to the mainstream society and still let the values embedded in the characters' final decisions be subject to questioning.

When it comes to *The Road to Wigan Pier*, we may speculate (but never be certain) that Orwell realizes one very effective way of passing his message to readers is by allowing his own presence to enter into the text. There are two advantages of this narrator-persona design: firstly, first-person narration allows "a



direct release of consciousness”<sup>5</sup> to present the narrator’s understanding of common decency that should be available to all members in society. Secondly, the narrator-persona makes himself responsible for what he argues for and presents. He risks being challenged and implicitly shows readers the fact that all ideologies should also be up for challenge. Orwell’s presentation requires the narrator to be not imposing but self-critical.

In Orwell’s writing of these four texts, ideological thinking of any kind is not presented as an absolute or fixed resolution. The narrator manipulates stances to present his arguments from different perspectives. Hunter approves of Orwell’s strategy “to question the attempt to make humanist values fixed standards in themselves, in other words he refuses to accept any grounds as unalterable.”<sup>6</sup> A very explicit statement made in *Wigan Pier* is “Socialism means justice and common decency” (164). Instead of jargon such as “proletarian solidarity” Orwell draws attention to people’s quest, especially working people’s quest for a decent existence. The quest provides a thematic linkage for all four texts chosen for this thesis. Orwell deliberately adopts terms which do not appeal to intellectual jargon in order to minimize the authoritative or imposing tone. The definition, “Socialism means justice and common decency” offers a basis for Orwell’s whole analysis of *Wigan Pier* in terms of the relationship between the two issues, class and poverty. Class prejudices contribute to social injustices which create economic problems for disenfranchised people in society. The tasks of pushing forward his argument and offering suggestions (mainly about Democratic Socialism) are taken up by the narrator in the book. The narration demonstrates a

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<sup>5</sup> Raymond Williams’s expression. See Williams, *Orwell*, p.49.

<sup>6</sup> Hunter makes this point to defend Orwell against “Gollancz’s famous introduction condemning [*The Road to Wigan Pier*] for facile calls to Liberty and Equality” and other critics “who complain that [the book] provides no definite answers.” See L. Hunter, p.7.

process of a middle class *persona* who gradually breaks through from class difficulties and realizes a sense of fellow feeling for the working people in himself. The narrator's fellow feeling goes beyond sympathy and he finally adopts a stance — emotionally he sides with the working class and in action he fights for working people's interests and decency through his writing. I consider that stance to be Orwell's as well, and some more detailed illustrations can be found in Chapter Three of this thesis.

Chapter Three of this thesis traces the process in which Orwell's fellow feeling for the working class gradually grows into a yearning for a democratic socialist society that upholds common decency. The process or path mentioned is also a process of self-education presented in the form of the narrator's autobiographical narrative (mainly in Part Two), together with *reportage* (mainly in Part One). *Wigan Pier* is a narrative about the narrator's changes of attitude, inviting readers to change their attitudes and gradually the *status quo*. In other words, the narrator's self educating experience is supposedly for readers to be able to carry out their own self-education. The values such as decency, equality and justice are supposedly learned by the readers, after they have learned from the narrator's continual interactions with the lower-class people.

In our discussion, learning refers to a process of achieving a new perspective to perceive and understand reality. The learning process does not solely belong to the narrator, but also to the readers. The narrator illustrates in the text that our awareness of other people's decency, especially when they are outside our class or culture, can help eliminate prejudice. As mentioned, the narrator's presentation of his arguments is at times very complex because of his manipulation of voices. If a reader manages to adopt a perspective or gain a sensitivity to decency in other



people, he or she perhaps can decipher the ultimate stance of Orwell who is siding with the working class. One challenge to comprehending or interpreting *Wigan Pier* is about its presentation of various stances and voices. But if we are capable of presuming that Orwell's writing of *Wigan Pier* is indeed an action asking for decent survival and independent thinking for the common people, it becomes clearer that the language and expressions of class prejudice specified in the book are actually exposed to questioning and critical judgment. The passage of a young working-class woman unplugging a foul pipe has been used in Chapter Three of this thesis to indicate the once-limited vision of the narrator. The narrator's understanding of the decent living of a working-class family, presented in the scene of the working-class interiors sounds straightforward and simple: stable job and reasonable wages. This "working-class interiors" scene does not impose any class value or confrontations.

In *Wigan Pier*, the narrator constantly promotes the self-examining attitude. The ability to be self-critical is particularly needed when there are class boundaries to break down and where class differences — whether or not turned into class hatred — exist. The narrator opens up discussion through presenting different stances, including questioning his own observations. The narrator demands readers to be detached from the "common ignorance" (Hunter 54) of society, from class prejudices and over-stereotyping, for a clearer view to perceive how poverty results from social injustices. Orwell himself, after finishing *Wigan Pier*, practices what he preaches: he joins the P.O.U.M. militia in the Spanish Civil War in order to fight (literally) for the working class, in another going over. This part of experience has been developed and studied in *Homage to Catalonia*. There we have his search for alternative experience in a foreign land, after experimenting

with alternative styles, voices and genres in his writing, in order to side with and speak up for the exploited. Orwell, in his writings, requests his readers to achieve a new perspective of minimal prejudice, if not actually prejudice-free. That perspective is not likely to be born with a person, but established consciously. Orwell shows his readers that he himself has travelled a long way to acquire that perspective. His experience of that journey and his profound concern for all social members, who should enjoy a decent existence, are presented by his writings on poverty at the early stage of his writing career.



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