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There's No Place Like Home: Orwell and a Return to the Domestic Sphere

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ABSTRACT

In his novels *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) and *Coming Up for Air* (1939), George Orwell depicts the world of the lower-middle class in the English suburbs during the Interwar period in the 1930s. Through the eyes of his two male protagonists Gordon Comstock of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and George Bowling of *Coming Up for Air*, Orwell shows the struggles of the middle class Englishman as he attempts to break from the imperfect society in which he lives. However, these novels, written rather early in Orwell's career, are understudied and overshadowed by his later works; in my paper I reopen a discussion of Orwell's earlier works, which are rich in complexity and dialectical in nature. In this paper I will argue that the novels do not end in a retreat to the domestic sphere, but may in fact support the average, middle-class Englishman's attempt to live decently and raise a family.

KEYWORDS

Capitalism, Domestic Sphere, George Orwell, Mass Culture, National Decline

“Our civilisation is founded on greed and fear, but in the lives of common men the greed and fear are transmuted into something nobler. The lower-middle class people in there, behind their lace curtains, with their children and their scraps of furniture and their aspidistras—they lived by the money-code, sure enough, and yet they contrived to keep their decency. The money code as they interpreted it was not merely cynical and hoggish. They had their standards, their inviolable points of honour. They ‘kept themselves respectable’—kept the aspidistra flying. Besides we’re alive. They were bound up in the bundle of life.”

-George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*

In his novels *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) and *Coming Up for Air* (1939), George Orwell, with an amused yet critical eye, views the world of the lower middle class in the English suburbs during the interwar period in the 1930s. Through the eyes of his two male protagonists, Gordon Comstock of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and George Bowling of *Coming Up for Air*, Orwell dramatizes the struggles of middle-class Englishmen as they attempt to break from societies tainted by capitalism. Loosely based on Orwell’s own experience working in the Hampstead-based bookshop Booklover’s Corner, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* tells the story of Gordon Comstock, a “moth-eaten” twenty-nine-year-old who chooses, somewhat perversely, to struggle as a shopkeeper at a used bookstore and write poetry after declaring his “war on money” (3, 120). Three years later, Orwell published *Coming Up for Air*, which follows a middle-aged, denture-wearing insurance salesman named George (Tubby) Bowling who attempts to temporarily break from pre-World War II English society in order to return to his boyhood home in Lower Binfield.

In both novels, Orwell presents his readers with male protagonists who appear on the surface to be rather unremarkable in appearance or talents. Over the

course of each novel, Bowling and Comstock develop into complex figures who are intelligent, adaptable, and funny, arguably capturing the experience and voice of the class-conscious Englishman during the 1930s. Orwell's attempt to depict the common man is reflected in both names of the protagonists: Gordon Comstock acts as a symbol of "the nation's common stock" and George Bowling may refer to the bowler hat, which was extremely popular with the middle-class Englishman of the 1930s (Kuchta 182, 174). By offering readers an intimate portrayal of the average man in a period of increasing anonymity and ubiquity of mass culture, Orwell immerses readers in 1930s English society, a period in which the middle class is widening and World War II is on the horizon. Though both protagonists strive to find their place and identity by escaping flawed societies, both novels conclude with the protagonists establishing a sense of identity within the comfort of the domestic sphere.

Though many critics, Jed Esty in particular, would argue that these Orwell novels depict 1930s England in a state of "pervasive national decline," I find that this reading of Orwell's work inadequately represents the complexity of Orwell's protagonists Gordon Comstock and George Bowling (Esty 9). In addition, reading these novels as mere signs of political and financial decline is complicated by, and overlooks, many textual nuances including Orwell's use of humor and irony to depict his protagonists' ambivalence about success. Gordon Comstock declares war on capitalism and rejects mass culture, leaving his job at an advertising firm to pursue a career as a poet. George Bowling takes a secret vacation to Lower Binfield, his childhood home near the River Thames, to escape his family and the premonitions of war that consume his thoughts. However, neither novel ends in failure, but instead concludes with the protagonists returning to and accepting circumstances in order to maintain their duty to family, which appears to offer the protagonists at least some measure of comfort and purpose. To view Bowling's and Comstock's return to the domestic sphere as merely a sign of decline would

disregard the agency that Comstock gains through the establishment of a family and the sense of purpose that Bowling gains from providing for his family. In this paper, I will argue that these critically overlooked texts are actually rather hopeful in the portrayals of middle-class English life in the 1930s, especially in comparison to Orwell's later novels such as *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), and deserve attention and continued critical study by twenty-first-century readers.

Ambivalence towards Success

In his novel *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, Orwell introduces his readers to Gordon Comstock, a public-school-educated poet living in the London suburbs who works in a shabby used bookstore. However, Orwell's protagonist is not the summation of the "[f]ivepence halfpenny," tattered clothes, and small amount of tobacco that is in his possession in the opening pages of the text (*Aspidistra* 3). Coming from a middle class family, Comstock had once gained a respectable position in the accounts department at an advertising firm, the New Albion. Though he "despised and repudiated the money-code," Comstock's poetry and creativity earned him the recognition of his boss and a promotion to copywriter's apprentice (51-2). Orwell writes that "Gordon showed, almost from the start, a remarkable talent for copywriting" and that this was in fact the first time that Comstock's writing and creativity led to success; this success suggests that he is basically intelligent and has creative potential, which is valued by his employers and capitalist society (53). However, Comstock viewed his success at the advertising firm as damaging to his spirit, deciding instead that he must seek out a job that would allow him to escape the "money-world"; though this attempted escape is depicted as rather noble, it is ultimately doomed (54).

Gordon Comstock's scorn of financial success and his decision to take a job in a used bookshop may be viewed by readers as an illustration of decline in prosperity in 1930s England. However, this reading of decline is complicated by Orwell's depiction of Samuel, or "Gran'pa" Comstock, who "rose on the wave of Victorian prosperity," becoming wealthy by "plunder[ing] the proletariat and the foreigner of fifty thousand pounds" (37). His exploited wealth was largely unsustainable as his children "dribbled it away" unsuccessfully in their various failed business attempts (39). Though readers are introduced to Gordon Comstock when he has a miserable bookstore job and only a few coins in his pocket, he is depicted as different from his family in that he refuses to live his life as a slave to capitalism or to engage in the exploitation of others. Through the characterization of Samuel Comstock as ruthless and unjust, Orwell challenges the view that the character of an individual can be assessed in terms of wealth or financial success; Orwell is critiquing capitalist society and making readers increasingly sympathetic towards Gordon Comstock's struggle to break free from this system.

In addition, Gran'pa Comstock is portrayed as a destructive force; the kind of man that Orwell will caricature in his later novel *Animal Farm*: "Man is the only creature that consumes without producing. He does not give milk, he does not lay eggs, he is too weak to pull the plough, he cannot run fast enough to catch rabbits. Yet he is lord of all the animals" (7). This image of man as a "lord" who "consumes without producing" is a portrait of Gordon's grandfather Samuel Comstock, who despite a virility to produce eleven children, ultimately inhibits his children's economic success and prosperity later in life with his oppressive demeanor. Orwell remarks "[h]e had lain upon them as a garden roller lies upon daisies," crushing their spirit and leaving them "listless, gutless, [and] unsuccessful" (38). This lack of productivity is also reflected in their disinterest in family, as many of the Comstocks died unmarried and produced only two grandchildren, one of whom is Gordon, who was "unintended" (39). Though

Samuel fathered eleven children, he seemed also to have destroyed the future of the Comstock family through the sheer force of his overbearing personality.

The contrast between Samuel Comstock's destructive desire for financial success and Gordon's interest in artistic dignity over wealth shows that Gordon's ambivalence about success is not only a sign of national decline. Although the wealth acquired by Samuel Comstock in the Victorian period has been lost, leaving Gordon and his sister Julia living arguably less comfortably than their parents, Gordon chooses to live his life as free from the stresses and demands of capitalist society as possible. In order to craft poetry untainted by American mass culture, which Orwell represents by vulgar advertisements and billboards consuming London, Gordon chooses to leave his respectable and comfortable position at the firm. Gordon's ambivalence about monetary success is thus rooted in his desire to live a more artistically pure life, free from the destructive forces of capitalism.

In understanding Gordon Comstock's chosen disinterest in success and self-inflicted poverty, one cannot merely argue that Comstock is "an idiot" who is "[t]oo self-pitying to see the world as it is" (Colls 40). I would argue instead that even though Comstock fails in his attempt to break from capitalist society, his struggle is still admirable, though at times it may appear ridiculous. Comstock, like Orwell, is "a 'public-school-educated Socialist'" with a desire to write and support the common man (Hitchens 121). His desire to break from the capitalist society in which he lived proves to be a more difficult task than expected. However, the narrator is somewhat forgiving of Comstock, as he struggles yet fails to live a life of poverty in order to write with a spirit untainted by capitalism. Readers are sympathetic to the financial anxieties consuming his thoughts, as these anxieties are shared by the common man and thus by readers. Therefore, the argument that Comstock is merely "[t]oo self-pitying" underestimates the character's complexities: his slight, though evident, literary success and his shared

humanity. In addition, this argument fails to recognize that the novel is loosely based on Orwell's own experience as a young writer who was employed in the Hampstead-based bookshop, Booklover's Corner, from 1934 to 1935, and thus the novel might contain a note of autobiographical self-mockery.

Like Comstock, George Bowling, the protagonist of *Coming Up for Air*, also appears rather disinterested in achieving success or accumulating wealth. Bowling is introduced to readers as he prepares for a day off from work at The Flying Salamander insurance company and leaves his home to take the train into London to get his new false teeth. Unlike Comstock, who is anxious over the little money he has, Bowling lives a life of relative comfort due to his position at the insurance agency and begins the day by deciding how to spend the seventeen quid he has won, unbeknownst to his wife, at the horse races. However, though Bowling has a respectable job and would be viewed by Comstock as a slave to the "money-god," he is also conscious of his artificial role in capitalist society. Bowling thinks that though "[t]he prole[tarian] suffers physically. . . . He's a free man when he isn't working," acknowledging the demeaning nature of his own kind of white-collar work (13). He goes on to admit that "[m]y own line, insurance, is a swindle . . . but it's an open swindle with the cards on the table," clearly suggesting a sense of disinterest in professional success as his work is a "swindle" (13).

Though Todd Kuchta has argued that Orwell depicts the suburban men of *Coming Up for Air* "as English avatars of the colonized: exploited, disposed of their homes, and plagued by feelings of powerlessness and enslavement," I instead argue that the lives of suburban men appear increasingly insignificant with World War II on the horizon (172). These men and women of the suburbs are members of the lost generation, who have already experienced a major world war that left them feeling powerless and defeated. Bowling, like the other "poor bastard[s]" who are never free from the burdens of maintaining a middle-class

existence in a capitalist society, works not to be successful, but to maintain decency (13). However, Bowling doesn't seem to feel that his disinterest in financial success is due to the exploitation of the common man in capitalist English society in the 1930s, but rather that his generation's involvement in World War I left him with a desire to lead a quiet, decent life in the suburbs.

Though Bowling appears disinterested in attaining professional success, his story is definitely not one of decline. Thinking back to his boyhood in Lower Binfield, Bowling believes that his father "would probably be rather proud of me if he could see me now . . . own[ing] a motor-car and liv[ing] in a house with a bathroom" (39). Though Bowling reflects back on his years in Lower Binfield with great nostalgia, he also establishes a comfortable middle-class life and escapes his lower-middle-class upbringing through hard work. Unlike his father who "[m]ostly . . . did a rather petty class of business," Bowling read often and prepared himself for a career in business, "suddenly turn[ing] highbrow" during his period of service in World War I (48, 115). Bowling's ability to educate himself and leave behind his rural childhood in Lower Binfield resembles the bildungsroman trajectory, as he reflects on his journey to adulthood. His marriage to Hilda Vincent further proves his financial stability and ability to maneuver up social classes, as she "belonged to . . . the poverty-stricken officer class" that had status but lacked money (156). Bowling's life does not show England in a state of decline, but instead a nation with opportunities for mobility, even though these opportunities may only exist within the realms of capitalism and mass culture.

Though both male protagonists appear disinterested in accumulating wealth and achieving professional success, this by no means indicates that the nation is in a state of financial, political, or moral decline. Both Comstock and Bowling are somewhat intelligent, well-read men; Comstock found success as the apprentice of a copywriter but quit his position in order to pursue a career writing poetry, and although George Bowling had to leave school to help support his

family, he worked hard to learn business and read often, earning a position at an insurance company. These flawed societies engender their ambivalence for success, in which both Bowling and Comstock live and work and from which both protagonists desire to escape.

The Attempted Escape

[H]e wanted some kind of job; not a “good” job, but a job that would keep his body without wholly buying his soul.

George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*

In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, Comstock attempts to escape Americanized mass culture in order to produce poetry of artistic dignity. With the reluctant support of his sister Julia, who struggles to maintain a decent lower-class existence, Comstock is free to quit his respectable position at the New Albion to pursue a career as a poet. Comstock declares war on the “money-god” and decides to work “the very reverse of a ‘good’ job,” taking a poorly paid position at McKechnie’s used bookstore (105, 55). In the opening pages of the novel, readers view Comstock after he has broken away from the “money-god” and capitalist society that he loathed. He is among stacks of old Victorian novels that sit on the bottom shelves “quietly rotting,” a scene that suggests Comstock’s escape is ill-fated in this environment of decay (8).

Across the street from his shop, a wall of billboards and advertisements that “symbolize ... the death and decay not only of English culture but the independence of English manhood” stare back at Comstock as he attempts to write poetry between assisting customers (Gopinath 74). Comstock despises these advertisements; they steal his focus and attention, reminding him of the individual’s anonymity in modern society. The constant gaze of the billboards

seems to make his dream of writing poetry even more difficult. Though Comstock's departure from the advertising firm enabled him to publish his short book of poetry entitled *Mice*, which was well received by numerous critics who noted that his work was "[o]f exceptional promise," the novel opens ironically with Gordon consumed with thoughts of how to ration his remaining cigarettes (*Aspidistra* 66). The reader's rather humble introduction to the protagonist suggests that, though Comstock has embarked on a noble journey to break with capitalist society, his consciousness of his own poverty has started to consume his thoughts, suggesting that his somewhat ridiculous attempt is doomed.

Comstock's disdain for the material trappings of English decency emblemizes his attempted escape from capitalist structures of power. Comstock is often described as wearing worn, tattered clothing, lacking any interest in dressing decently, and refusing anyone's assistance in purchasing new clothes by remarking that "[t]hey're suited to my station" (*Aspidistra* 108). His scorn for maintaining a facade of material decency is most vividly epitomized in his contempt for the aspidistra plant, which adorns the front windows of the lower-middle-class homes that line the block where he lives. Comstock decides he will even try to kill the aspidistra in his own window by "starving it of water, grinding hot cigarette-ends against its stem, and even mixing salt with its earth" (28). However, the plant continues to survive humbly, like the middle-class Englishman in general. His loathing of the aspidistra plant also sheds light on Orwell's mockery of Comstock's own self-pity as Comstock attempts to destroy this symbol of decency. Comstock's battle against the aspidistra allegorizes a struggle for agency, emphasizing Comstock's disempowered state.

In contrast to Comstock who strains to completely break from the capitalist system, Bowling, who basically accepts his role as a father, husband, and insurance man and maintains a façade of decency as suggested by his false teeth, desires to "come up for air" or temporarily break from society. After fifteen

years as a family man, Bowling remarks that he was “beginning to get fed up” with being a good father and husband (*Coming Up* 6). Bowling is also depicted as physically irritated, which materializes in the “disgusting sticky feeling” of a soapy neck that remains after he is rushed out of the bathroom by his son Billy (7). In these early moments of the novel, readers are introduced to a male protagonist who is in desperate need of a break from his job at The Flying Salamander, his wife “Old Hilda,” and his needy children (7).

However, Bowling’s trip back to his childhood home of Lower Binfield is not a vacation from his family. Over the course of the novel, George Bowling is haunted by visions of war to come; he envisions planes flying over the suburb in which he lives, “[h]ouses going up into the air, bloomers soaked with blood, canary singing on above the corpses” (24). Bowling’s only moments of comfort are when he suddenly flashes back to his childhood and his memories of a beloved fishing hole. Unable to confront his future and the future of England, George attempts to remove himself from the present to return to his past, to a state of lost freedom and innocence.

Though Comstock is a cranky poet and Bowling a bluff survivor, both characters share a distaste for mass culture, especially Americanized mass culture. We see Comstock’s distaste for mass culture most noticeably in his departure from the New Albion firm, but also in his contempt for the ads that capture his attention while at the bookstore. One such advertisement pictures a clerk drinking a cup of Bovex in a café that reads, ““Corner Table enjoys his meal with Bovex,”” suggesting that the man is not a man but reified as “the Corner Table” (*Aspidistra* 5; Gopinath 74). In this novel, mass culture, especially advertisements, takes from the average man his autonomy and strips him of his individuality in order to transform him into a malleable object, like the “Corner Table” (*Aspidistra* 5).

Similarly, in *Coming Up for Air*, Bowling compares mass culture to “[a] sort of propaganda floating around . . . [in which] nothing matters except slickness

and shininess and streamlining” (26). American brand names seem to consume London, as Bowling notes that restaurants no longer serve real food but instead “[j]ust lists of stuff with American names” (26). In the society of interwar London, things are not as they appear; this commonplace deception is manifested as Bowling bites into a frankfurter that is surprisingly, and rather disgustingly, made of fish. However, neither Comstock nor Bowling completely succeeds in escaping from modern mass culture.

The Thwarted Escape

The mistake you make, don't you see, is in thinking one can live in a corrupt society without being corrupt oneself.

George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*

Though Comstock finds some success as a poet, receiving fifty dollars from the *Californian Review* for one of his poems in addition to publishing *Mice*, he ultimately fails to truly break from capitalist society as his thoughts are constantly consumed by his lack of money. His escape from capitalist respectability, which supposedly freed his soul from the “money-god,” instead ironically increases his anxiety about money, clouding his ability to write. His break from capitalist society and embrace of poverty causes Comstock’s self-destructive nature to surface. Comstock remarks that “[i]t was the lack of money, simply the lack of money, that robbed him of his power to ‘write’” (*Aspidistra* 9). Throughout the novel, Comstock is completely preoccupied with money: borrowing money from Julia, spending money frivolously, and struggling with what little money he has. In addition, Comstock’s frivolous spending speaks to his self-destructive nature, and his lack of financial stability leaves him, at nearly thirty-years-old, living alone in a boardinghouse in which “tea-making was the major household offense, next to bringing a woman in” (29). Comstock’s attempt

to break free from the “money-god” leaves him disempowered with little peace of mind and independence.

Comstock’s obsession with his relative poverty eventually strains his friendship with Ravelston, his wealthy socialist friend whose help he often refuses, and complicates his relationship with his sister Julia, to whom he turns frequently for financial support though she also is barely surviving on a meager salary. Comstock’s frivolous spending of his payment from the *Californian Review* on drinks and tarts begins his downward spiral in which he is arrested for public indecency and disorderly conduct, causing him to lose his job at McKechnie’s bookstore. Comstock then finds an even worse paying job in an even worse bookstore, “go[ing] down, deep down, into some world where decency no longer mattered” where he appears even more miserable, though his own self-destructive tendencies cause his misfortunes (203). When Comstock seems to have given himself over to squalor and self-hatred, he is visited by Ravelston who advises him that one cannot live uncorrupted in a corrupt world and suggests that he seek out a better job with a higher pay. Though Ravelston’s advice does not immediately cause Comstock to surrender in his war against the “money-god,” it acts as a major turning point in the text, leading indirectly to Rosemary’s pregnancy and Comstock’s return to respectable professional life.

Comstock’s self-imposed poverty most acutely complicates the relationship with his girlfriend, Rosemary, as Comstock feels that his poverty prevents him from dating and marrying her. His obsessive thoughts of money inhibit Comstock’s ability to consummate his love with Rosemary, as he wonders, “how can you make love when you have only eightpence in your pocket and are thinking about it all the time?” (*Aspidistra* 139). In their only moment of intimacy, Comstock realizes he has stupidly forgotten to bring a condom. Rosemary questions, “[h]ow could you be so *thoughtless*” , to which he replies, “[y]ou must take your chance,” blaming his lack of financial stability for his self-

destructive nature (141-142). Though Gordon wants to marry Rosemary, he wonders, “how can you marry on two quid a week? Money, money, always money!” (104). In the essay “Orwell and the Feminists: *Difficulties with Girls*,” Christopher Hitchens argues that Rosemary “never even pretends to have the smallest idea what Gordon is talking about,” but I would argue instead that Rosemary tolerates Comstock’s lack of financial stability because, as an independent earner, she does not wish to be taken care of (Hitchens 148).

However, Rosemary finds Comstock’s insistence on shabbiness and squalor rather off-putting, asking him, “why can’t you look after yourself properly?”, to which he replies “[c]leanliness, decency, energy, self-respect—everything. It’s all money” (*Aspidistra* 108-109). However, Comstock’s financial insecurity causes him great anxiety, leaving him feeling emasculated as he cannot take Rosemary out for dates without constantly calculating his money. In addition, Rosemary’s financial independence may threaten Comstock, as her independence offers her a sense of agency and freedom outside of the domestic sphere. Emasculated by his own lack of financial freedom, Comstock seizes agency by verbally and physically coercing Rosemary to consummate their relationship, a self-destructive course of action that Rosemary refuses to pity. However, Comstock cannot remain free from the burdens of capitalist society and the financial demands of romance after Rosemary announces her pregnancy.

Escape from society is also thwarted in *Coming Up for Air*, as Bowling also quickly realizes that he cannot break from the present when he sees how much Lower Binfield has changed since his departure. The place that he remembers so fondly no longer remains, as Bowling remarks: “The first question was, where was Lower Binfield? I don’t mean that it had been demolished. It had merely been swallowed. The thing I was looking down at was a good-sized manufacturing town” (211). Bowling, attempting to escape from a London where “[e]verything [is] slick and shiny and streamlined” finds that his childhood town,

too, has grown, becoming more modern and prosperous (*Coming Up* 25-6). The town, which used to have a tiny population of two thousand, has sprawled into a population of twenty-five thousand, with factories and beautiful new houses lining private roads. Bowling's father's shop has been transformed into a tea shop and the old stockings factory is "making bombs nowadays," revealing to Bowling that Lower Binfield has not gone untouched by the mass culture of the period and the threats of war on the horizon (230). Lower Binfield is not then a symbol of national decline as it has actually progressed in terms of economic growth and development. What Bowling truly loses is a pre-war innocence and a state of childhood to which he can longer regress. Because the places in which Bowling spent his childhood days are unrecognizable, he learns quickly that one cannot return to the past or truly break from the present.

Bowling's attempt to "come up for air" is finally thwarted, and he is driven back into adult life when an English bomber plane accidentally releases a bomb over the streets of Lower Binfield, killing three and forcing him to realize that he cannot prevent the war on the horizon. With this newfound knowledge and a few comical situations including a run-in with his old girlfriend, Elsie, whom he describes as "merely shapeless," Gordon returns home to his wife and children (*Coming Up* 243). As he returns, Bowling wonders, "Why had I run away like that? Why had I bothered about the future and the past, seeing that the future and the past don't matter?", emphasizing that one must instead focus on the present (277-8). This knowledge strangely empowers Bowling, who intends to focus on the present needs of his family and wife, because that is all he can truly do.

The Protagonists' Return to Family Life

"He was thirty and there was grey in his hair, yet he had a queer feeling that he had only just grown up."

George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*

After Bowling and Comstock find that they cannot escape from modern London life, they return to the domestic sphere to take up their roles as fathers and husbands. Yet these returns are not a depressing setback, but instead a message of hopefulness. Through their reaffirmed duties to the English family structure, Bowling and Comstock embrace the ideals of English decency. Their roles as fathers and husbands offer the male protagonists a sense of agency and comfort in a modern English society of increasing anonymity.

At the conclusion of the novel, Comstock, who was greatly disempowered by his impoverished state, finds a renewed sense of agency in his ability to start a family and his realization of his creative powers manifested through the fathering of Rosemary's child. Comstock's commitment to Rosemary and their family is not truly affirmed until he visits a library and views two pictures of a nine-week- and six-week-old fetus; it is in this moment that Gordon finally realizes that "he had created" something of which he can be proud, far surpassing the poetry he has produced over the course of the novel (*Aspidistra* 234). Comstock's fathering of a child is the pinnacle of his creative endeavors, as it was truly his only creation that lacked ties to the capitalist society in which he lived. Though Orwell himself (under the pseudonym of Eric Blair) was unable to father a child, Comstock's desire to have a family may in fact reflect Orwell's own desire. According to Gordon Bowker's biography of George Orwell, while writing the novel in 1935, Orwell met his future wife, and they married on June 9, 1936. Though the couple tried and failed to have children, they later adopted a son, Richard Horatio Blair.

This suggests that the novel, with its arguably hopeful portrayal of the domestic sphere, is in fact quasi-autobiographical. Therefore, though Comstock's acceptance of the role of father and husband leads him to resume his position at the New Albion, Comstock is ultimately empowered by his familial duties and arguably has more peace of mind at the conclusion of the narrative, which would reflect Orwell's view of the family life at the time in which he was writing. This return to the middle class and the establishment of a family "signifies growth and maturity" for Comstock (Gopinath 85). He accepts his role in a society that is corrupt but inescapable and decides to "keep the aspidistra flying," stuffing his poetry manuscript "between the bars of the drain," watching it "plop into the water below" and exclaiming "vicisti, O aspidistra" (*Aspidistra* 240).

Comstock's new sense of empowerment is reflected in his ironic insistence on buying an aspidistra. He now views this once despised plant, a symbol of conventionality and a facade of English decency, as the "tree of life," a symbol for the lower-middle-class English family and its survival instinct (*Aspidistra* 239). Comstock's demand for an aspidistra plant, with him remarking that "[i]t is the proper thing to have. It's practically the first thing one buys after one's married. In fact, it's practically part of the wedding ceremony," is met with disapproval from Rosemary who argues that the aspidistra is "awful depressing" (246). Though Comstock's insistence may appear foolish and ironic, the choice to have an aspidistra in the house does not prove that Comstock has succumbed to the drudgery of middle-class existence but instead is an opportunity for Comstock to exert his agency as a husband and head of family, as Comstock remarks, "Didn't you promise to obey me just now?" (246). The fight concludes with the newly married couple going to the florist to purchase the aspidistra, which will now symbolize Comstock's somewhat comic sense of agency and dominance within his own domestic sphere.

Though Todd Kuchta argues that “[t]o keep the aspidistra flying is thus to wave the flag of defeat,” I argue that the aspidistra instead is actually only a self-conscious symbol of middle-class decency (182). As Comstock returns to mainstream society with a greater understanding of poverty, he no longer views the aspidistra as a surrender to mediocrity but self-identifies with the aspidistra as it “stands for the ordinary but ‘noble’ aspirations of the ‘common man’ that are integral to the family hearth” (Gopinath 87). Therefore, I would argue that Orwell views the English middle class of the 1930s empathetically. These middle-class men and women, like Gordon and Rosemary Comstock, “keep the aspidistra flying.”

Over the course of the novel, we follow Comstock’s struggle to break from the capitalist English society, which proves unfruitful in that his heightened anxiety about money clouds his ability to create poetry. Despite Comstock’s rebellion against the “money-god” and the New Albion, he only achieves a stable identity when he produces an heir and settles down to raise a family. Some critics view Comstock’s return to capitalist society and middle-class life as a sign of defeat and a retreat that “Orwell wants us to find . . . disturbing” (Kuchta 183). However, this argument fails to account for Ravelston’s assertion that man cannot live uncorrupted in a corrupt society and the fact that at Comstock’s moment of surrender “he was at peace” (*Aspidistra* 238). Though the average middle-class Englishman experiences society as a cog in a wheel, as reflected in the Bovex advertisements, one can still find a sense of purpose in the domestic sphere. In addition, Gordon Comstock does not simply retreat back into the domestic sphere and his job at The New Albion, but returns back into society a wiser man, knowing now that a life free from all the burdens of respectability is not perfectly free at all. In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, Comstock’s only successful break seems to come in his establishment of a family and the comfort and agency he finds within the domestic sphere; he returns to society with a new understanding of

money and decency as he learns to tolerate capitalism rather than fighting against it.

In *Coming Up for Air*, after bombs drop on Lower Binfield, Bowling looks at the destruction caused by this strange occurrence and thinks to himself, “This finishes me with Lower Binfield . . . I’m going home” (265). On his drive home, Bowling comes to the realization that his life, and the lives of all English men and women, is on the cusp of inevitable change. Bowling muses:

The bad times are coming, and the stream-lined men are coming too. What’s coming afterwards I don’t know, it hardly even interests me. I only know that if there is anything you care a curse about, better say good-bye to it now, because everything you’ve ever known is going down, down, into the muck, with the machine guns rattling all the time. (269)

Though these thoughts may be viewed as a period of existential crisis in which “Bowling is pretty much on his own,” I argue that these thoughts offer the protagonist a sense of calm in that neither he nor any other individual has the power or agency to prevent these changes from occurring (Colls 129). With this knowledge, Bowling returns to the only thing he “care[s] a curse about,” his family (269).

Though many critics, including Christopher Hitchens, criticize Bowling’s wife Hilda as “a tight-fisted and joyless type,” I would argue that, although an imperfect couple, George and Hilda do, in a way, truly love each other (Hitchens 148). From the beginning of the novel, Bowling admits that he is far from the perfect husband as he discusses cheating on his wife while on business trips and remarks that the thought of Hilda with another man would not bother him, stating, “not that I’d care a damn, in fact it would rather please me to find that she’d still got that much kick left in her” (*Coming Up* 22). In fact this portrayal of married life may be semi-autobiographical as suggested by D. J. Taylor in his article “Another Piece of the Puzzle” which states that “Orwell, by his own admission,

was unfaithful to his wife, but [their relationship was] durable,” like the marriage of Bowling and Hilda (1). At the end of the novel, Bowling returns to his wife with the realization that he really does care for her. Bowling thinks to himself:

So I’m fond of Hilda after all, you say? I don’t know what you mean by fond. Are you fond of your own face? Probably not, but you can’t imagine yourself without it. It’s part of you. Well, that’s how I felt about Hilda. When things are going well I can’t stick the sight of her, but the thought that she might be dead or even in pain sent shivers through me. (*Coming Up* 271)

Therefore, having certainty of the coming war, Bowling returns home, because this is what he truly cares about.

Keep the Aspidistra Flying and *Coming Up for Air* are complex comic novels that have been overshadowed by Orwell’s later, more explicitly political novels such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*. In fact, many readings of these earlier works may be influenced by the heavily allegorical fear of totalitarianism in Orwell’s more well-known, later novels. The influence of these later texts may in fact cause readers to view the lives of Gordon Comstock and George Bowling as bleaker than they actually are. This influence may shadow the novels’ interpretations, causing Todd Kuchta to view Comstock and Bowling rather one-sidedly as “English avatars of the colonized,” though they in fact do also practice agency and move freely in a minimally oppressive society, and leading Robert Colls to call Comstock “an idiot” for his self-pitying nature, failing to recognize that his self-destructive nature may be rooted in his unfruitful though admirable attempt to break from the imperfect society in which he lives (Kuchta 172; Colls 40). These later novels may also cause leading writers such as Jed Esty to make broad claims that for Orwell, amongst other writers, “imperial decline . . . impl[ies] national decline”; overall, bleakness is greatly overstated in such critical writings (Esty 215).

These arguments of decline, however, insufficiently register the complex and dialectical nature of the novels. Gordon Comstock and George Bowling are not examples of the “existential male antihero,” but they are characters, though slightly limited by the demands of society, who are capable of change and growth throughout the novel (Esty 9). In contrast to Winston Smith, the protagonist of Orwell’s novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* which concludes with Smith’s declaration of love for Big Brother after being tortured at the Ministry of Love, Comstock and Bowling freely choose to work and support a family. They are realistically-depicted characters whom readers both love and hate as they continuously struggle, fail, and succeed throughout the novels; they are the average, middle-class man who must work to support his family and maintain decency. I argue that because Orwell writes such complex protagonists in these novels, readers are sympathetic to the struggle of the everyday man, because their struggles are in fact shared struggles. The return to the domestic sphere at the end of the novel should not then be written off as a retreat or a sign of decline, because the domestic sphere is where our protagonists find a sense of agency, comfort, and purpose despite the mass culture society that surrounds them.

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