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Feeling Lonely in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and *Down and Out in Paris and London*

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'A woman despises a man who's dependent on her and sponges on her' (Orwell, Keep the Aspidistra Flying, 103)

Failure and loneliness pervade Orwell's writing. In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and *Down and Out in Paris and London,* Orwell suggests that loneliness and failure are intrinsically linked by money. In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying (Keep),* Orwell constructs a character that leans into failure. Gordon Comstock's vehement hatred of the 'money-world' guides him to live in squalor outside society, to push away relationships, and live in isolation. *Down and Out in Paris and London (Down)* explores the communities that form amongst the poor, and the inertia that prevents class-mobility. Both texts consider the limiting factor of money in gaining access to love, sex, and companionship, and explore the transactional nature of relationships. Orwell examines failure on multiple levels: systemic failure, economic, romantic, sexual, personal failure, and the ensuing loneliness of these failings. Orwell's writing is interested in failure and loneliness on the scale of the individual and the collective. He is engaged in a criticism of the system that facilitates these experiences, the people who subscribe to it, and those who attempt to subvert it.

The purchase of intimacy is a common theme in both texts. Both *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* discuss prostitution and sexual starvation. They describe the loss of access to women and sexual gratification that accompanies poverty. Orwell compares sexual hunger to physical malnourishment. In *Down,* Orwell portrays Paddy's attitude towards women, he 'looked at women with a mixture of longing and hatred. Young, pretty women were too much above him to enter into his ideas, but his mouth watered at prostitutes' (*Down* 120). He would 'turn hungrily' to see them (*Down* 120) . Orwell uses his characters to explore involuntary celibacy in relation to money; something that Gordon and Paddy both suffer from. He reveals that Paddy 'had forgotten that one could aim higher than prostitutes' since he lost his job (*Down* 120) . This signifies that the loss of self-esteem that accompanies economic decline also worsens loneliness.

This predicament is mirrored in Gordon's belief that poverty hinders his relationship with Rosemary. He fixates on 'Women, women!', the repeated exclamation indicates his desire and exasperation towards women (*Keep* 89). He yearns for Rosemary, yet 'it was with a kind of resentment that he thought of her small, strong body, which he had never seen naked' (*Keep* 89). There is a duality in his frustration. On the one hand, there is an impression that Gordon feels entitled to Rosemary's body that is emphasised by the sentence structure. He describes her 'small, strong body', as if he is savoring the words, distracted from his resentment for a moment. His resentment returns after a brief pause, reminded that he had never seen her naked. On the other hand, there is a real sense of sadness and deprivation; 'Why should one, merely because one has no money, be deprived of *that?'* (*Keep* 89). Gordon is adamant that his lack of money has stolen sex and marriage from him, for 'how can you marry on two quid a week? Money, money, always money!' (*Keep* 91). This suggests that the poor are barred from the institutions that celebrate love and companionship, reiterating the limiting effect of money on relationships.

Sadistic expressions of sexuality are present in both texts (Buttry 233). Gordon and Charlie violate and dehumanize women. Orwell facilitates this by using animalistic imagery. The violent and gratuitous rape scene in *Down* is symptomatic of a desire to escape loneliness at the expense of another's autonomy. Charlie converges love, brutality, sexual domination, and freedom in a profoundly disturbing assault. He compares himself to a fierce animal, reminiscing 'I pulled her off the bed and threw her on to the floor. And then I fell upon her like a tiger!' (*Down* 12). Orwell writes a vivid depiction of a hunt, emphasizing the ferocity of the man who hunts his prey. The scene depicts extreme violence that has been glorified in the mind of the perpetrator. The contrast between the shocking turmoil of the assault and the ensuing 'dust, ashes, nothingness' prompts a shift in the reader's interpretation of the scene (*Down* 12). Charlie reflects, 'In the same moment it was finished, and I was left—to what?',

left to walk back to his ‘cold, solitary room’ (*Down* 12-13). This emptiness suggests he was trying to soothe a sense of isolation. There is an anger reflected in both Charlie and Gordon, and their depraved actions, which although unjustifiable, may be considered as attempts to retaliate against their own loneliness.

Gordon also uses animal imagery to convey his unsatisfied sexual urges. ‘This woman business! What a bore it is! What a pity we can’t cut it right out, or at least be like the animals—minutes of ferocious lust and months of icy chastity’ (*Keep* 89). Both Charlie and Gordon lean into instinct, emphasizing their urge to diverge from the world governed by social codes of conduct. This conveys a desire to leave society, to reject the world in which poverty and impotence are equated. Gordon leers at women in the market: ‘But even here he felt his solitude. Girls were thronging everywhere, in knots of four or five, prowling desirously about the stalls of cheap underwear’ (*Keep* 91). There is duality in the word ‘prowling’ that allows Orwell to portray the girls as both predator and prey. While he looks with a perverse gaze, ‘None had eyes for Gordon. He walked among them as though invisible, save that their bodies avoided him when he passed them’ (*Keep* 91-92). He is disempowered in relation to women. Despite reducing them to ‘bodies’, by synecdoche the women maintain their agency, avoiding him.

The combination of his poverty and foul treatment of women further isolates Gordon. The most perturbing act of violation in *Keep* occurs when he assaults his girlfriend drunk in an alleyway. Following an exorbitant dinner at Modigliani’s, Gordon becomes sexually predatory, and ‘suddenly seized her and twisted her backwards. He wanted her badly, and he did not want to waste time over preliminaries’ (*Keep* 144). This implies that Gordon expected a return on his investment. Orwell reveals the other side of Gordon’s belief that poverty causes involuntary celibacy. Money grants access: ‘He thrust his hand right into the front of

her dress. The movement was curiously brutal, as though she had been a stranger to him (...). She was not Rosemary to him any longer, she was just a girl, a girl's body' *(Keep* 145*)*. The use of punctuation stunts the sentence, drawing attention to her progressive reduction into an anonymous body. Terry Eagleton states 'Once Gordon's money-doctrine is accepted, we are persuaded to half-excuse his more self-indulgent behaviour—his callous treatment of his girl-friend Rosemary, for example—because lack of money becomes a covering formula for all types of weakness' (94). Perhaps more disturbing is that there are no lasting consequences for Gordon's actions, for all his actions are the product of his economic circumstances. The indirect consequence perhaps being that he 'must' rejoin society once he impregnates Rosemary. Both Gordon and Charlie fail to exercise empathy, and intentionally abuse women. Both react to loneliness in a manner that actively magnifies it.

In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying,* financial failure solidifies gender roles. Gordon and Rosemary's trip to the countryside draws acute attention to Gordon's preoccupation with upholding the image of provider. Throughout the trip he worries about his ability to cover their expenses. When Rosemary offers to pay, Gordon becomes insolent: 'a man pays for a woman, a woman doesn't pay for a man' (*Keep* 102). In turn, he affirms social values that are part of the system he purports to reject. Circuitously, he subscribes to it because he allows himself to be emasculated by the rules of the money-world. When Rosemary does pay, she does so secretly, 'so that he might pay the fares and not be shamed in public by letting a woman pay for him'(*Keep* 127). Gordon projects his value-system onto others, insisting that 'A woman despises a man who's dependent on her and sponges on her' (*Keep* 103). He conflates his insecurity of a woman paying for him with his sexual anxiety, as 'all he could remember was that in two years she had never yielded to him. She had starved him of the one thing that mattered' (*Keep* 103). This suggests that Gordon's perception of poverty has a castrating effect upon him, for when he finally has the opportunity to sleep with Rosemary,

‘that business of the eightpence had usurped his mind. He was not in the mood any longer’(*Keep* 126).

Collective loneliness is expressed in both texts. Orwell’s journey through Paris and London is punctuated by his encounters and friendships with people who welcome him, and guide him through cities, teaching him how to live in poverty. Overarching societal loneliness makes it possible for the tramps to have a community while experiencing the loneliness of being alienated from society. This sense of community is founded in shared hardship, and their gathering. While loneliness is pervasive in *Down,* the tramps themselves are not entirely alone. They amass for ‘a free cup o’ tay and bun’ (*Down* 111), and together, form a raucous ‘ring of dirty, hairy faces grinned down from the gallery, openly jeering’ (*Down* 145). The homogeneity of their appearance and behaviour identifies them as part of the same group. The latter part of the sentence probes the power hierarchy and suggests there is power in the unity of the tramps, for ‘What could a few women and old men do against a hundred hostile tramps’ (*Down* 145). This highlights a common resentment towards the system that oppresses the poor.

In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying,* shared loneliness is manifest in the symbol of the aspidistra. The aspidistra plant is a running motif throughout the text, an emblem of the lower middle-class. It accompanies Gordon’s progression from someone who despises the plant and the values it represents, to someone who insists that he and Rosemary have an aspidistra in their home. In “Poem, Creed, Letter, Foetus,” Martha Carpentier asserts that ‘the bizarre title stresses this novel’s semiotic focus (one could hardly “fly” a potted plant), with its conflation of the Aspidistra, a symbol of middle-class Victorian England, with the flag, a sign of national identity’ (Carpentier 104). However, the signification of the potted plant can be extended beyond this assertion. A potted plant, in itself, is contained life. Within the confines

of ‘mean lonely houses, let off in flats and single rooms’ (*Keep* 73), the possession of a potted aspidistra becomes a desperate attempt to maintain domestic order.

In *Down*, the tramps establish an extra-societal and mutually supportive community for the estranged, that deals in the currency of fag-ends, bread crusts, and the belief that ‘one good turn deserves another’ (*Down* 157). For many, however, this ‘unity’ is accompanied by a loss of individual identity and inertia. Orwell observes in the Salvation Army shelter ‘obediently as sheep, the whole two hundred men trooped off to bed, under the command of the officers’ (*Down* 123). The men are dehumanised and grow subservient to the authorities that oppress them. Bozo, however, offers an alternative perspective on poverty and purports that economic failure does not inherently equate to personal failure; ‘it don’t need to turn you into a bloody rabbit—that is not if you set your mind to it’ (*Down* 129). He acknowledges that most tramps succumb to their poverty and the loneliness of it, but emphasizes that this is not a predetermined fate. Bozo’s voice cuts through both *Down* and *Keep.* What he says is relevant to both texts because it upsets a common belief system that has been established about the association between money and failure. Although Bozo faced the same hardships as other tramps, ‘nothing could make him succumb to poverty. He might be ragged and cold, or even starving but so long as he could read, think and watch for meteors, he was, as he said, free in his own mind’ (*Down* 131). This suggests that abandoning the belief that money is a governing entity that dictates the life one can lead is where true freedom lies.

Throughout much of *Keep*, Gordon’s character can be defined by his inaction. Gordon tries to leave society to write, but finds the conditions of poverty too hard to fuel creativity, lamenting: ‘Could you write even a penny novelette without money to put heart in you?’ (*Keep* 10). Inertia and failure are interconnected here. The nature of Gordon’s failure is complex. He quits his stable job at the New Albion, plunges himself into financial scarcity,

and yet actively avoids any job that may be lucrative. Gordon 'never shaved', 'never made his bed properly' and 'never washed his few crocks', preferring to sink 'down, down into the ghost-kingdom, the shadowy world where shame, effort, decency do not exist!' (*Keep* 180-181). These actions can be considered symptoms of failure. However, the final scene, wherein Gordon and Rosemary argue about purchasing an aspidistra, introduces ambiguity. Throughout the novel, Gordon has acted as a critic of society, distinguished from the people he judges by virtue of 'his superior insight' (Eagleton 99). His return to lower middle-class life is multifaceted, and can be considered as a failure, a success, or merely a transition. It is a compromise to his 'rebellion', which he had kept up 'a little longer than most, that was all.' (*Keep* 206). It conveys the futility of his war on money, and implies it was destined for failure from the start (*Keep* 40). Eagleton points out that 'In believing that money is the root of all failure', Gordon is 'essentially endorsing bourgeois values, bound to the world he rejects by simple inversion' (Eagleton 94). This suggests that Gordon has endorsed the values of the money-world, throughout his transition from opponent to proponent of lower middle-class life. This is the first time, however, that the decency of the lower middle-class is viewed as a life-source: 'they kept themselves 'respectable'—kept the aspidistra flying. Besides, they were *alive*' (*Keep* 207). This echoes Carpentier's depiction of the aspidistra as the flag of the lower middle-class; once a symbol of repression, now a symbol of 'relief' (*Keep* 205).

Down and Out in Paris and London and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* are in conversation with each other, and explore the relationship of money to failure and loneliness. While *Down* documents Orwell's experience of poverty in Paris and London, and *Keep* presents Gordon's resignation to lower middle-class life, both texts agree that money influences the way people connect. They address its effect on self-esteem and the weaponisation of sexuality in response to loneliness. Orwell ultimately reveals that the impact money has is dependent on the individual, as Bozo refuses to succumb to his poverty,

and Gordon eventually finds pleasure in domesticity: ‘It was what he had secretly pined for; now that he had acknowledged his desire and surrendered to it, he was at peace’ (*Keep* 206).

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