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A Study of George Orwell’s Early Novels

Hidetoshi Kimura

George Orwell’s ability as a novelist has considerably underrated hitherto. His early novels, especially, have been either disregarded as etudes or unduly underestimated, compared with his books of reportage or books of collected essays. Keith Alldritt, for instance, remarks: “Orwell obviously had neither the intricate sensibility nor the creative energy of the true novelist. Even at its best his work is heavily derivative. And this deficiency is compounded by his failure to follow his true masters.” As a matter of fact, his early novels have distinct political and social themes, therefore it could be said that his political essays or books of reportage such as *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), or *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) would be by far effective than his novels in respect of directness and persuasiveness, as far as the themes concerned.

Yet it must be noted that the political themes which Orwell tried to tackle surpass mere propaganda by dealing with them in the form of novel; and that he selected the form because he thought he could give the themes profundity and width through the aid of various functions which the form of the novel intrinsically has: style, narrative, plot, characterization, portrayal of the human relationship and psychology, depiction of scenes or coherent structure of the story, etc.

In this paper I will try to examine how Orwell acquired his own artistic style and expressions by analyzing his four early novels. And I hope that this analysis would help realize his struggle to write novels, and it would
also help understand some of the essential points and the true value of his novels.

Orwell at first tried to write a novel along the line of the tradition of the nineteenth-century novels. One of the reasons is that he thought it best form to expand political and social themes persuasively; another is that he sought to fulfil his artistic intention through the form of novel after publishing *Down and Out in Paris and London*. He writes of his first novel, *Burmese Days* (1934), in “Why I write” in 1946:

> I wanted to write enormous naturalistic novels with unhappy endings, full of detailed descriptions and arresting similes, and full of purple passages in which words were used partly for the sake of their sound. And in fact my first complete novel, *Burmese Days*, which I wrote when I was thirty but projected much earlier, is rather that kind of book.³

In fact, the novel has many “detailed descriptions” of the Burmese natural sceneries and “purple passages” depicting the actions and psychologies of the characters. Nevertheless, Orwell’s intention is partly successful in depicting the social atmosphere and personal feelings of suffocation and helplessness in Burma of the thirties, which had been suffering under the colonial rule of the British Empire.

Thus, one of the themes of the novel is imperialism or colonialism, which followed directly his brilliant essay, “A Hanging”, in 1931. But Orwell does not treat imperialism in an abstract and purely political form; he focuses on the moral deterioration of man under the imperialist system,
rather than on the outright violent rule over the Burmese and exploitation of them. All the characters in the novel, both the Englishmen and the Burmese people, are morally deteriorated and corrupted under the system. Flory, the protagonist, who has been working for a timber firm in Burma for fifteen years, is no exception. Out of boredom he has fallen in ill habits like other Englishmen: liquor and his relation with a Burmese mistress. And the English Club, the main stage of the novel, is filled with decayed and suffocating air; their conversation and relationships are flat and dull. In this sense, the description of the hot and stifling climate of Burma is effective as the background of the subject-matter.

Although Flory has some moral defects, he cannot align himself with the imperialist sentiments like other members of the English club. He cannot behave as a good sahib, who proudly shares "a white man's burden" as Rudyard Kipling extols. On the contrary, he loathes the hypocrisy of imperialism. He cannot, therefore, associate well with other Englishmen of the Club. He utters rebellious remarks only to his Indian friend, Dr Veraswami, who believes the racial superiority of the white and abases himself before the English. Here lies Flory's predicament and the ironical situation.

Thus the theme of imperialism is linked with the second of the subject-matters: how a solitary man rebels against the establishment. This theme recurs in all but one of Orwell's novels, among which Nineteen Eighty-Four is the most exhaustive. Flory's revolt, however, is not so much radical; its overt aim is to propose Dr Veraswami for membership of the English club. Only, the Englishmen in the club are most conservative and are bigoted in racial prejudice, so that his aim is rebellious enough in their eyes. And Flory, afraid of being openly expelled from the English community, fluctuates between hesitation and resolution to take an act. His rebellion, unable to be realized as a concrete action, must be distorted and deformed in his
mind all the more. A revolt within one’s thought must be directed either to a way of a hermit or to self-complacency. Flory does not take either way; instead, he seeks salvation of himself in the love with Elizabeth Lackersteen. It can be a salvation from his solitude, but cannot be a solution for his revolt against imperialism. In the story his love is rejected by her and he finally commits suicide. But he is fated to fail from the beginning as far as his revolt is concerned.

Besides, Flory’s solitude and predicament are incurably enhanced by his sense of inferiority. The birthmark in his face is the cause of his inferiority complex; he has been haunted by this physical defect: “He [Flory] always remembered the birthmark when he had done something to be ashamed of.” He cannot behave dauntlessly in the Club nor towards Elizabeth chiefly owing to it. His sense of inferiority reaches a culmination when Verrall, a Military police officer and son of a peer, appears and Elizabeth begins to be attracted to him.

And yet, as Flory is a middle-class person and a graduate of a second-rate public school, he is irrevocably situated on the fringe of rulers in a British colony. It makes his sense of inferiority all the more complicated. To be sure, he treats the Burmans benevolently and he is much interested in the Burmese culture. Nevertheless, his attitude is after all a pity for the oppressed as a member of the rulers; his relationship with Ma Hla May, his mistress, and Ko S’la, his servant, is not at all on equal terms. This is clearly revealed when he casts off Ma Hla May because of the appearance of Elizabeth. Flory is obliged to look straight at his own hypocrisy and to feel a sense of guilt:

He could not look at her [Ma Hla May]; he stood helpless, pale, hangdog. Every word she said was justified, and how tell her that he could do no other than he had done? How tell that it would have been
an outrage, a sin, to continue as her lover? He almost cringed from her, and the birthmark stood on his yellow face like a splash of ink. (146)

Flory's recognition of his inferiority complex and his sense of guilt also leads to his recognition of the problem of alienation. He must see the fact how difficult it is to get through the wall which alienates man from man owing to the class-distinction and the racial prejudice. This is where the psychological effects of imperialism are revealed: as David Kubal suggests, "Imperialism never unifies but always separates man from man." It is indispensable for Flory to seek solidarity with others so as to be liberated from his predicament and sense of guilt. To that end, as Orwell writes in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, "it is necessary to alter oneself so completely that at the end he should be hardly recognizable as the same person." But Flory does not choose the way to change himself, so that he is to be revenged by Ma Hla May. After being dismissed, she blackmails him frequently and finally discloses their relation openly before the Englishmen, including Elizabeth, in the church; with that decisive dishonour and the consequent loss of hope for the love of Elizabeth, he commits suicide.

It seems that Orwell gives various meanings to Flory's suicide. First, it suggests the recognition that a sense of inferiority is so ingrained that one cannot erase it until his death, as Flory's birthmark ironically fades with his death. Secondly, it reveals that a rebellion limited within one's mind like Flory's is fated to be suppressed by the system, and so one must promote the self-alteration thoroughly with the solidarity with other people. Thirdly, as Flory is ruined by Ma Hla May, it implies the hollowness of imperialist dominion in their colony; the ruler is, after all, in an essential way, "dominated" by the ruled, as described impressively in Orwell's famous essay, "Shooting an Elephant".
Burmese Days, then, is not merely a political novel to expose the evilness of imperialism and colonialism. It succeeds in depicting human aspects of the matter to a considerable depth, not only by mixing the plight and the revolt of Flory with his inferiority complex, but also by piling the concrete examples of hypocrisy of the imperialist dominion in Burma through various characters. Especially, the contradictory and complicated sentiments of the Burmese people are expressively described: for instance, U Po Kyin, the Sub-divisional Magistrate, and Flory's servant Ko S'la.

U Po Kyin is a self-made man, using all the means to climb the social ladder in colonized Burma; therefore he is a powerful and evil boss in this district. It goes without saying that he is corrupted and has been taking advantage of the imperialism system for his own purposes. And the purpose of U Po Kyin is also important in terms of the plot. He fully understands the vulnerability of the English and he utilizes it to his aim: he intends to be a member of the English Club using all possible means, because the membership is the highest position and prestige the Burmese can hope to get. To attain that purpose, U Po Kyin tries to slander Dr Veraswami, spreading scandal about him in letters to all the Englishmen in the district. Besides that he raises the controlled riot so as to show his power to the Englishmen. And finally, as a decisive means, he sends Ma Hla May to demand monetary compensation from Flory while he is in church, because he is an obstacle in the way of excluding Dr Veraswami. In light of this, the existence of U Po Kyin is the wirepuller of the plot in both meanings.

As to Ko S'la, he has been Flory's servant since his first day in Burma. He has been enjoying the position of an English bachelor's servant, because it is much easier to serve a bachelor than to serve a family: "Like all bachelor's servants, Ko S'la was lazy and dirty. . . ."(48) However, he was devoted to Flory in his own way:

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He would never let anyone else serve Flory at table, or carry his gun or hold his pony's head while he mounted. On the march, if they came to a stream, he would carry Flory on his back. He was inclined to pity Flory, partly because he thought him childish and easily deceived, and partly because of the birthmark, which he considered a dreadful thing. (48)

And he has his own notions about how the Englishmen should behave; for instance, he thinks that his master Flory should play tennis with other Englishmen, instead of drinking whisky all day: "Tennis, according to his notions, was a mysterious ritual incumbent on all Englishmen, and he did not like to see his master idling in the evenings."(49) But his laziness, which he has been accustomed in Flory's service for a long time, is fatal in the end; after Flory's death, he inherits four hundred rupees under Flory's will, and he sets up a tea-shop in the bazaar, but the shop failed soon. Ko S'la is depicted as a typical Burmese servant, and in a sense he is also corrupted under the imperial system; at the same time, he is a sort of a victim of the system, because his devotion as an Englishman's servant has undermined his human nature gradually and he has remained lazy, incapable of getting skill or knowledge of any other jobs than that of a servant.

On the other hand, the characterization of the Englishmen is not successful. Their characters are not fully individualized, and tend to merge into a typical sahib. Ellis, Westfield, Lackersteen, Maxwell and Macgreger can be substituted one another; one may have an impression that these five Englishmen are in fact one person. It is only in their attitude and behavior towards the Burmese that plausibility of their characters is shown. A typical example is seen in the conversation between Ellis and the butler in the Club:
'How much ice have we got left?'
'Bout twenty pounds, master. Will only last today, I think. I find it very difficult to keep ice cool now.'
'Don't talk like that, damn you — "I find it very difficult!" Have you swallowed a dictionary? "Please, master, can't keeping ice cool" — that's how you ought to talk. We shall have to sack this fellow if he gets to talk English too well. I can't stick servants who talk English. D'you hear, butler?' (25)

As a whole, *Burmese Days* cannot be said to be finely wrought, because the author does not keep enough distance from his own experience in Burma as an officer of the Indian Imperial Police. This appears typically in Orwell's ambiguous and inconsistent attitude towards Flory the protagonist. In the former part of the novel he empathizes with solitude and self-pity of Flory. The following passage may illustrate this:

A pang went through Flory. 'Alone, alone, the bitterness of being alone! So often like this, in lonely places in the forest, he would come upon something — bird, flower, tree — beautiful beyond all words, if there had been a soul with whom to share it. Beauty is meaningless until it is shared. If he had one person, just one, to halve his loneliness! (55)
to the relationship is not plausible enough. Alldritt points out this problem:

At one point Flory is about to propose marriage to Elizabeth Lackersteen; but Flory’s continuing loneliness is necessary to the thematic import of the novel and so an earthquake, of all things, is introduced to prevent the proposal from taking place. And at the very moment when Flory is supporting the nomination of Dr. Veraswami as the first Asian member of the English Club, the body of an Englishman murdered by the Burmese is brought in, creating a wave of anti-Burmese feeling and robbing Flory of the opportunity of taking a clear-cut moral stand.8

And the shift of mind of Elizabeth is also inconsistent: though she does hate Flory’s way of thinking because she feels that it is the same as intellectuals’, and Flory’s view on the Burmese and their culture, she really loves him when he shows nerve and manliness; and during the relationship she does not care about his birthmark, but finally in the church scene “She hated him now for his birthmark. she had never known till this moment how dishonouring, how unforgivable a thing it was.”(260) To think of that, as George Woodcock suggests, Elizabeth is “the first of the series of temptresses who in all but one of Orwell’s novels lead the heroes, through illusion that it is possible to escape from the loneliness, towards their various defeats.”9 In fact, the temptress of that image recurs in Orwell’s novels: Rosemary in Keep the Aspidistra Flying, Hilda in Coming up for Air, and typically, Julia in Nineteen Eighty-Four.

For all these defects of the novel I have mentioned, we may say that Orwell succeeds in telling us, through Flory’s agony and sentiment, the deterioration and predicament of man which imperialism created and had been spreading. And we can easily admit that the virtue of Burmese Days

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is not in the verisimilitude of the plot but in excellent descriptions of the milieu and sentiment of various characters under particular circumstances. We can also infer, after examining some of the thematic problems in *Burmese Days*, that this novel includes most of Orwell's life-long motifs, and that it is a prototype of his later novel despite the differences of the style and the form.

3

*A Clergyman's Daughter* is Orwell's most experimental novel. But, as is well known, Orwell regretted the novel, so that he bought and burnt the copies at every opportunity, and refused to have it reprinted during his life.

Orwell experienced hop-picking in Kent, a life of the slum in London and the clink, and he taught in a third-rate private school at that time. Although he had written some parts of those experiences in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, and in some essays, Orwell wanted to gather those diverse experiences in a form of a novel. Therefore, he selected the form of the picaresque, in which a protagonist criticizes hypocrisy of the ordinary way of life, especially hypocrisy and decay in moral and way of life of the upper sphere, traveling through various aspects of the society, and which is a suitable form to incorporate sundry episodes into one novel with verisimilitude. Yet, unfortunately, Orwell's artistic intention did not succeed, as almost all the critics, including Orwell himself, admit.

Several reasons for the failure of the novel can be mentioned. One of the principal reasons is that the portrait of Dorothy Hare, the heroin of the novel, is not adequate for the author's satiric intentions. As George Woodcock suggests, Orwell has great weakness in characterization.10 His deficiency in characterization, among others, rests on creating female characters: as Elizabeth in *Burmese Days* is portrayed as a flat woman who
lacks genuine human depth, Dorothy does not have an impressive personality. Dorothy's subtle emotions, which should be lying in her heart, are not successfully depicted. Hence she is no better than a sort of abstract character created for the purpose of conveying various episodes. As to other characters, they are all type figures created for the author's satiric purposes: Reverend Hare, Dorothy's father, the obstinate and unsympathetic clergyman; Mr Warburton, the snobbish and lustful country gentleman; Mrs Creevy, the merciless and greedy schoolmistress. If Orwell's intention in the novel was only satire and criticism on the contemporary English society, these characters may be sufficient. And yet, only Dorothy is not suitable among these characters. Here we find the author's intention ambiguous and incoherent.

What is more, the author intrudes frequently, so that the personality of Dorothy becomes thin all the more. It is evident, as we read Orwell's early essay, "Hop-Picking", that the scene of hop-picking in the novel is very close to the essay in point of the style and contents. And its style of reportage clashes with the naturalistic style of the first chapter in which Dorothy's busy day with routines of the church is described in detail. The Trafalgar Square episode in the third chapter, a sole unrealistic passage, is out of place in the stream of the novel. A unified style is not necessarily indispensable for a novel, but in the case of this novel, the satiric intention of the author might have obtained excellent results with using more unified style and more humorous tone.

The main theme is the process of alteration of mind of Dorothy. Because of a sudden amnesia she journeys around the various aspects of the actual world outside the church. For alteration of Dorothy's mind, the association with the outcasts is especially important. After she recovers consciousness, she is taken to Kent for hop-picking by three Cockneys, Nobby, Flo and Charlie; and there, having no money, she experiences a joy
Looking back, afterwards, upon her interlude of hop-picking, it may always the afternoons that Dorothy remembered. Those long, laborious hours in the strong sunlight, in the sound of forty voices singing, in the smell of hops and wood smoke, had a quality peculiar and unforgettable. . . . Yet you were happy, with an unreasonable happiness. The work took hold of you and absorbed you. It was stupid work, mechanical, exhausting, and every day more painful to the hands, and yet you never wearied of it; when the weather was fine and the hops were good you had the feeling that you could go on picking for ever and for ever.\textsuperscript{11}

There, among shabby hop-pickers, she experiences human companionship, which she has never known in a genteel and hypocritical life of the middle class. She finds “common decency” in the community of the hopfield. And as the hop-picking season is nearing the end, Nobby is arrested for having stolen apples, the shock of which drives her to regain her memory. And with her recovery of memory she is aware that she has lost religious faith which has supported her life as a clergyman’s daughter; she remembers that she has not uttered a prayer since leaving home:

Mechanically, she began a whispered prayer, and stopped almost instantly; the words were empty and futile. Prayer, which had been the mainstay of her life, had no meaning for her any longer. (126)

With the loss of faith she leaves the hopfield, the microcosm of “ragged democracy”. Consequently, she must search for a means for living alone, without Nobby, Flo and Charlie’s support. In that course, paradoxically,
she rearranges herself. After various experiences in the underworld and the short period of teaching in a horrible private school, she returns to the rectory, forgiven by her father; and she resumes the same life full of routines as she led before her loss of memory. But she must fill the vacuum produced by the loss of faith, her mind fluctuating constantly. She has fallen into the dilemma: while working hard every day as a clergyman’s daughter for the church, she has no faith. Towards the end of the novel, she tries a curious prayer:

‘Lord, I believe, help Thou my unbelief. Lord, I believe, I believe; help Thou my unbelief.’

It was useless, absolutely useless. Even as she spoke the words she was aware of their uselessness, and was half ashamed of her action.

(260)

Therefore she must find a new meaning in her routines themselves.

The smell of glue was the answer to her prayer. She did not know this. She did not reflect, consciously, that the solution to her difficulty lay in accepting the fact that there was no solution; that if one gets on with the job that lies to hand, the ultimate purpose of the job fades into insignificance; that faith and no faith are very much the same provided that one is doing what is customary, useful and acceptable. She could not formulate these thoughts as yet, she could only live them. Much later, perhaps, she would formulate them and draw comfort from them.

(261)

This might be, as George Woodcock suggests, the existentialist solution for the absurdity of life: after all we can give a meaning to the world surround-
ing us only by our own inner experiences and revelation in a godless world.12

This position is significant when we reflect upon our own existence surrounded with the absurd. In fact, the absurdity of the world is a recurrent subject-matter in the modern literature. Nevertheless, it has a little signifi-
cance as a practical answer to the social conflicts and absurdity. In the end Dorothy's final decision amounts to a change of heart. This may be where Orwell regretted the novel later, and further, where his lifelong dilemma lay. Later he discusses this problem in an essay on Charles Dickens.

Progress is not an illusion, it happens, but it is slow and invariably disappointing. There is always a new tyrant waiting to take over from the old — generally not quite so bad, but still a tyrant. Consequently two viewpoints are always tenable. The one, how can you improve human nature until you have changed the system? The other, what is the use of changing the system before you have improved human nature? . . . The moralist and the revolutionary are constantly undermining one another. Marx exploded a hundred tons of dynamite beneath the moralist position, and we are still living the echo of that tremendous crash.13

This may be an everlasting question of man. But it can be said, at least, that he could not satisfy himself with the theory of a change of heart which disregards the problem of a change of the social system. Orwell's political search was, in a sense, a process of trying to find out a solution for the gulf between them. Dorothy's dilemma, therefore, could be regarded as the author's dilemma in a way.

Orwell rebelled against the snobbishness and "shabby-genteelness" of the middle class through his renunciation and down-and-out life, but he was still in the phase of finding out the way to give practical power to his revolt.
In that struggle he approached socialism, and on the other hand, at the nadir of the subworld he rediscovered what is good in the tradition and the life of people as it was. That is what he called “common decency.” Although *A Clergyman’s daughter* is a failure owing to the disharmony between the author’s intention and the style and the structure, it is in this novel that Orwell expressed for the first time the notion of “common decency” for which he was to fight during his life thereafter. And the motif that one can truly recognize the value of common decency only through the experiences at the nadir of society is more distinctively presented in his next novel.

4

*Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, published a year after Orwell’s second novel, is the story of a solitary revolt of Gordon Comstock, the protagonist, against the modern society where he thinks almost everything is ruled by money. Gordon was humiliated at his preparatory school because of having little money, which is to become his trauma; thereafter he has waged war on money. (Later this motif is presented in a long essay, “Such, Such Were the Joys” in 1952.) Gordon works for a publicity company as a copywriter after his graduation from a public school, but he quits the job on the ground that the company is a minion of the “money-god”. At present he works as a clerk of a small bookshop, desiring to be recognized as a poet. It is a fight against the “money-god” in his own way to have relinquished a well-paid and promising job and place himself in a poor condition advisedly.

He curses the capitalist society fiercely, but the exaggerated expressions make somewhat a comical effect.

Money, money, all is money! Because he had no money the Dorings snubbed him, because he had no money the Primrose had turned down
his poem, because he had no money Rosemary wouldn't sleep with him. Social failure, artistic failure, sexual failure — they are all the same. And lack of money is at the bottom of them all.14

And Gordon sees the social alienation and decay in advertising posters, which he thinks symbolizes a commodity-society:

The sense of disintegration, of decay, that is endemic in our time, was strong upon him. Somehow it was mixed up with the ad-posters opposite. . . . Corner Table grins at you, seemingly optimistic, with a flash of false teeth. But what is behind the grin? Desolation, emptiness, prophecies of doom. . . . The great death-wish of the modern world. Suicide pacts. Heads stuck in gas-oven in lonely maisonettes. French letters and Amen Pills. And the reverberations of future wars. Enemy aeroplanes flying over London; the deep threatening hum of the propellers, the shattering thunder of the bombs. It is all written in Corner Table's face. (21-22)

What Gordon recognizes in the advertising posters is to the point but for some exaggerations. And yet the question is how he lives in this society. In the case of Gordon, he does not intend to participate actively in a social movement to reform the society, but his only action is try to keep clear of "money-code" and make a tirade against "money-god" as we have seen. In doing so he is to fall into a distorted relationship with others. For example, he cannot borrow money from Ravelston, a rich socialist, out of his vanity, whereas he "borrows" money from his sister Julia, who has laid her hopes on him from his childhood at the sacrifice of herself and led a frugal life. As a matter of course, he knows this self-deception of himself:
Poor Julia! Gordon made off with his five bob [which he had borrowed from her] as soon as he decently could. Why is it that one can’t borrow from a rich friend and can from a half-starved relative? But one’s family, of course, ‘don’t count’. (137, Italics mine)

Here we see clearly that the author depicts his hero with bitter irony, keeping a calculated distance from him: the author makes Gordon’s self-denying rebellion get lost in a maze of self-deception and self-torment. His downward orientation, after all, stems from a sense of inferiority to money of what the narrator calls “the landless gentry”; and his war against money is the mere reverse of his envy of the rich, which is expressively described in his relation with Ravelston. Gordon himself understands that his rebellion is full of contradiction and ambiguity, and perceives that workers who earn as little as he live vigorously even in poverty: “How right the lower classes are! Hats off to the factory lad who with four pence in the world puts his girl in the family way! At least he’s got blood and no money in his veins.”(51) This is why he hates the aspidistra, the symbol used as the middle class all through the novel, which is laid in his poky room of a boarding house. Though he tries again and again to kill the plant, it is a vain effort; he may be able to kill a real aspidistra, whereas the aspidistra in his mind is “practically immortal”.

Gordon’s rebellion reaches the extent of comical absurdity in the scene of a hiking to the suburbs of London with his girl Rosemary. There she for the first time brings herself to make love with him; and yet she shrinks away in horror at the point of intercourse, because he has forgotten to bring a prophylactic. Even at this moment, Gordon attributes it to lack of money:

There you are, you see! Money again! Even in the most secret action of your life you don’t escape it; you’ve still got to spoil everything.
with filthy cold-blooded precautions for money's sake. Money, money, always money! Even in the bridal bed, the finger of the money-god intruding! In the heights or in the depths, he is there. (155)

Here Gordon's war against money turns into a Quixotic caricature.

But unlike Don Quixote, Gordon comes to dwell at a dingy room in a slum after some dishonorable accidents; his downward orientation almost touches the bottom. And here he realizes clearly that his rebellion sprang from his "shabby-genteel" consciousness and at last he is determined to abandon completely his last piece of pride of the middle class.

Before, he had fought against the money-code, and yet he had clung to his wretched remnant of decency. But now it was precisely from decency that he wanted to escape. He wanted to go down, deep down, into some world where decency no longer mattered; to cut the strings of his self-respect, to submerge himself — to sink, as Rosemary had said. (221)

An aspidistra which he finds even in his dingy room is dying, which implies that his dropout from his own class becomes almost complete, though in "a hole-and-corner" way.

But paradoxically, by being in the underworld, Gordon comes to perceive the raison d'être of the moral sense of the middle class and its solidness supported by the tradition. He also comes to realize that his fight in a perverse and hole-and-corner way is, after all, no other than a childish fret. Therefore he thinks:

The lower-middle-class people. . . 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, they were alive. They were bound up in the bundle of life. They begot children, which is what the saints and the soul-savers never by any chance do.

The aspidistra is the tree of life, he thought suddenly. (260-61)

Hence at the end of the story, with her pregnancy as a turning point, Gordon gets married with Rosemary and manages to go back to the publicity company where he worked before. John Wain, who is seen one of the “Angry Young Men” and wrote Hurry On Down in 1953, criticizes the ending of the novel:

... it is fairly clear that Orwell originally intended the story to be sardonic, bitter little parable about what happens to the soul of a society that plants itself in money and still expects to flower. He managed, indeed, to hold this course fairly steadily for most of the distance, but in the closing pages everything collapses, tripped up by one of its author’s basic confusions. ... But what ought to be a fine, gloomy satiric ending turns unexpectedly into a renascence.¹⁵

Despite this criticism, we must note this: it is this “renascence” of Gordon through his submerged life that Orwell implies in the novel. Gordon’s decision is not a mere surrender to the bourgeois value. Flory in Burmese Days has to commit suicide so as to erase his birthmark, the symbol of his inferiority complex, whereas Gordon chooses the way to return to the very foundation of his own class which he cannot deny notwithstanding many efforts. What Orwell meant to say may be that unless one fights against
“money-god” standing in his own base, he will surely fall into the trap of “a frightful emptiness, an inescapable sense of futility.”

It can be said that *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* as an Orwellian version of Bildungsroman which presents the process of human development of Gordon through his fight and defeat. Furthermore, as Gordon’s feelings and actions are sometimes presented bombastically to the extent of a burlesque, the novel has a humorous and even a comic air. Orwell’s exaggerated expressions, which has often been criticized as his characteristic flaw, are considerably effective in point of exemplification of a rebellious sentiment of a young man. And as the novel has only three major characters, the portrayal of human relations among the characters, at which Orwell was poor indeed, does not appear as a conspicuous flaw. Although Rosemary is not portrayed as a convincing figure like other female characters in Orwell’s novels, Ravelston is presented a good deal successfully. He is satirized as a “saloon Bolshevik” who mouths Marx while being afraid of mingling with real workers and living in guilty ease. But it is only a part. Viewing the whole character, Ravelston is described, not with an ironical tone but with a sympathetic one: the author describes how a man of the upper middle class falls into a dilemma and sufferings when he decides to take part in the socialist movement. Woodcock indicates about the characterization:

But he [Gordon] has a little man's arrogance and viciousness which Orwell completely lacked, and possesses no share of his creator's generosity or compassion. These characteristics are given to another character, Ravelston, who also shares Orwell's tallness, his way of dressing, his public-school background and his editorial ineptness. Seeing that Orwell attacks "the bourgeois socialist" exhaustively and rather
exaggeratedly in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, written a year after the novel, we find that the characterization of Ravelston is calculated and restrained. As we see the points above, Orwell intends to present the way of a middle class man to participate in the social reform through two contrastive characters, Gordon and Ravelston. Although the author portrays Gordon ironically and sometimes comically, he sees Gordon’s "rebellion" as a kind of meaningful detour at the deepest point.

Thus we could say that judged as a novel *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* achieves considerable success aside from the coarse depiction of the relations among chief characters. And in point of the history of the English literature, the novel can be rightly placed as a pioneer of the novels of the “Angry Young Men”, or “Neo-picaresque novels” in the 1950’s: especially, John Wain’s *Hurry On Down*, Kingsley Amis’s *Lucky Jim*, John Brain’s *Room at the Top*, Alan Sillitoe’s *Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*.

The success of the novel is due to the fact that Orwell came to have the presence of mind enough to hold a certain distance from his own experiences, especially those of his “Burmese days” and the down-and-out life. Therefore, we may say that he entered a new phase in his process of searching for a literary form suitable to his socio-political themes.

*Coming up for Air*, the last of Orwell’s four early novels, was written four years after *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. In the meantime, his two books of reportage, *The Road to Wigan Pier* and *Homage to Catalonia*, were published. At that time he became a socialist and was deepening his unique ideas of socialism through various experiences of his own, especially those in the Spanish Civil War. He wrote this novel early in 1939, when the situation increasingly grew strained and a world war was about to break
Thus a presentiment of the impending war is one of the major themes of the novel, and an exclamation of crisis is recurrently uttered by the hero, George Bowling:

Whichever way you cross London it's twenty miles of houses almost without a break. Christ! how can the bombers miss us when they came? We're just one great big bull's-eye. And no warning, probably. Because who's going to be such a bloody fool as to declare war nowadays? If I was Hitler I'd send my bombers across in the middle of a disarmament conference. Some quiet morning, when the clerks are streaming across London Bridge, and the canary's singing, and the old woman's pegging the bloomers on the line, — zoom, whizz, plonk! Houses going up into the air, bloomers soaked with blood, canary singing on above the corpses.¹⁸

But the tone of the novel as a whole is not dismal but rather humorous, as we see in the citation above. Orwell succeeds in presenting vividly a sense of immediate crisis, paradoxically by making the hero a fat middle-aged inspector of an insurance company, who narrates humorously the story in the first person, using for the most part colloquial style.

Although Bowling expresses many Orwellian ideas, he differs not only from his creator, but also from all the other protagonists in Orwell's novels. He does not try to revolt against his surroundings or the social system like Flory or Gordon; instead he has a tenacious vitality and a firm root in his own life. And he refuses to take a definite action, though he is aware of what is happening in the world. What is more, he is not troubled by a sense of inferiority from which he cannot escape by himself. He is fat and is called "Fatty" or "Tabby", but he does not care much about it, He says in
a casual manner:

I'm fat — yes. I look like a bookie's unsuccessful brother — yes. No woman will never go to bed with me again unless she's paid to. I know all that. But I tell you I don't care. I don't want the woman. I don't even want to be young again. I only want to be alive. (163-64)

And as to a sense of money matters, he differs from Gordon or his wife Hilda, who comes from an Anglo-Indian family. He is free from "shabby-genteelness" of the sinking middle class.

But she [Hilda's] got this feeling that you ought to be perpetually working yourself up into a stew about lack of money. Just working up an atmosphere of misery from sense of duty. I'm not like that. I've got more the prole's attitude towards money. Life's here to be lived, and if we're going to be in the soup next week — well, next week is a long way off. (137)

In view of these points, we can infer that Bowling personifies to a good extent the image of people on whom Orwell laid his hope when he thought of "the British Revolution" in his long essay, "The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius" in 1941.

The plot of the novel is not a complicated one. Bowling is walking down the Strand, the shopping quarters in London, on the day he has gotten the new false teeth, when he suddenly and without presentiment goes into the world of his boyhood reminiscence through association with a newspaper poster. It is the period he passed his boyhood in Lower Binfield before World War I. Lower Binfield in his recollections is a place where "it was summer all the year around", and was filled with sweet memories,
especially those linked with fishing.(37) To Bowling fishing and the pond where he used to fish are the symbol of the vital past. And then he decides to visit Lower Binfield after an interval of more than thirty years, in secret to his wife. His journey into the past not only springs from nostalgia; it is also a tiny attempt to escape from the suffocating situation of the modern world and from the haunting presentiment of war. But the trend of progress has changed Lower Binfield completely. Therefore Bowling's nostalgia is turned into disillusionment one after another. And the climax of his disillusionment is the scene in which he sees the dark pond in the secret copse turned into a rubbish-dump. The pond where a lot of large fish used to be was his secret place in his boyhood; and his central desire and aim of the journey was to fish there. Realizing that his journey has resulted in utter disenchantment, he mutters:

One thing, I thought as I drove down the hill I'm finished with this notion of getting back into the past. What's the good of trying to revisit the scenes of your boyhood? They don't exist. Coming up for air! But there isn't any air. The dustbin that we're in reaches up to the stratosphere. (215-16)

It is Bowling's loquacious monologue that supports this simple plot and draws the reader vigorously in it. And the monologue is written in a colloquial and crisp style as seen some citations above and it has also a jovial and humorous tone; by that time Orwell had accomplished his original style of prose through journalism and reportage.

A considerable success of *Coming up for Air* is mainly due to the characterization of Bowling; minor defects of the novel come to fade before the vigorous attractiveness of this central character. The portrait of Bowling is, in a way, inconsistent, but as George Woodcock suggests, "like
Don Quixote, he soon wins his way into our minds as a kind of probable improbability, and once we have made that acceptance, his monologue immediately takes on a consistency of its own."²⁰ It could be said that despite some artificialities Bowling is most convincing and attractive of all the characters created by Orwell. Further, the success of the novel is also due to Orwell's descriptive power. Especially in the novel, the description of the recollections of Bowling's boyhood, which takes up a third of the novel, is exceedingly impressive and vivid. And we may even say that the description of fishing at the pond surrounded by the beautiful copse is among his best prose. In light of this, John Wain's following remark goes too far, but has some truth in it: "As an artist, his [Orwell's] best passages — indeed, his only passages which have the genuine, unforced of imagination — flower from pure nostalgia."²¹

As to the subject-matters, we can easily perceive that in Bowling's humorous and talkative narrative lie the distrust of vanity and hypocrisy of the modern civilization and a sense of despair that the traditional culture to which he belongs is rapidly vanishing. The former is very close to Gordon's anger in its content. But as Bowling's distrust, unlike Gordon's fretful cursing, springs from the real feelings of his own life rooted in a common culture, his words are given a certain dignity. There is a scene in which he eats a frankfurter, which is filled with fish instead of meat. He sees decay and spuriousness of the modern civilization in it:

The frankfurter had a rubber skin, of course, and my temporary teeth weren't much of a fit. I had to do a kind of sawing movement before I could get my teeth through the skin. And then suddenly — pop! the thing burst in my mouth like a rotten pear. A sort of horrible soft stuff was oozing all over my tongue. But the taste! For a moment I just couldn't believe it. Then I rolled my tongue round it
again and had another try. It was fish! A sausage, a thing calling itself a frankfurter, filled with fish! I got up and walked straight out without touching my coffee. God knows what that might have tasted of. . . . It gave me the feeling that I’d bitten into the modern world and discovered what it was really made of. (26-27)

This feeling of Bowling’s is also a literary expression of Orwell’s furious attack against the cult of mechanization and progress expanded fully in *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

His abhorrence of the “slick and stream-lined” world is connected firmly with his deep affection for the past. It is not the remote past but the world before 1914, in which he thinks there had been solidness of life and a sense of continuity. Such a world in which he was raised is “just about at its last kick” by the mechanical progress, and human alienation has been accelerated. (74) Hence he gives a cry of despair:

> There’s something that’s gone out of us in these twenty years since the war. It’s a kind of vital juice that we’ve squirited away until there’s nothing left. All this rushing to and fro! Everlasting scramble for a bit of cash. Everlasting din of buses, bombs, radios, telephone bells. Nerves worn all to bits, empty places in our bones where the marrow ought to be. (168)

This may be a little sentimental and exaggerated, but at least, it gives a literary shape to the common apprehension of people. And at the same time Bowling also knows that the past world was far from a utopia: the world full of drudgery, filth, and poverty. Besides, as it is symbolical that Bowling himself makes a journey to the past by his own car, he too is irrevocably involved in the machine civilization. The mechanical progress is an undeni-
able trend, and this dilemma cannot be easily solved.

Thus his journey to the past is fated to end in an utter disillusionment from the beginning. What remains to the end is another keynote, a presentiment of war. This is connected with his haunting fear of the advent of a totalitarian world. As he goes back home from the journey, Bowling says:

I'll tell you what my stay in Lower Binfield had taught me, and it was this. *It's all going to happen.* All the things you've got at the back of your mind, the things you're terrified of, the things that you tell yourself are just a nightmare or only happen in foreign countries. The bombs, the food-queues, the rubber truncheons, the barbed wire, the coloured shirts, the slogans, the enormous faces, the machine-guns squirting out of bedroom windows. It's all going to happen. (223-24)

Bowling's fear is to "come true" fully in the nightmare world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but in his tone there is little will to fight against that trend. His inner will is only to keep alive whatever the circumstances becomes. This attitude of the protagonist could be partly regarded as an influence of Henry Miller. A year after the novel Orwell writes toward the end of "Inside the Whale":

It seems likely, therefore, that in the remaining years of free speech any novels worth reading will follow more or less along the lines that Miller has followed — I do not mean in technique or subject-matter, but in implied outlook. The passive attitude will come back, and it will be more consciously passive than before. Progress and reaction have both turned out to be swindlers. . . . Get inside the whale — or rather, admit that you are in the whale (for you are, of course). Give yourself over to the world-process, stop fighting against it or pre-
tending that you control it; simply accept it, endure it, record it.  

As to political viewpoints and actions, Orwell did not assume a passive attitude like Henry Miller. He took part in the political situation more positively than ever. But in point of literary attitude the extract above may be regarded as his declaration of abandoning his literary line along which he had proceeded since *Burmese Days*. In light of this, *Coming up for Air* is the last of Orwell's early novels in an essential sense. He could not, however, write such a "passive" novel as Henry Miller's; and it is doubtful that he really intended to write such novels. At any rate when he gave up writing a realistic novel, he turned to political novels in a narrow sense of the word, i.e., *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Although Orwell's reputation as a novelist has rested mainly on *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, we cannot dismiss his four early novels simply as failures. To be sure, each of them has more or less flaws as a novel and did not gain an instant reputation. And yet they have intrinsic qualities worth reading: especially *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and *Coming up for Air* do. In each of the two novels Orwell succeeded in giving the suitable style and form to his socio-political themes; and originality of his socio-political ideas are convincingly expanded through the form of novel. And we could admit that John Wain's view of Orwell as "a writer of polemic" is correct if we regard Orwell's socio-political ideas as polemic. In fact we must admit that Orwell's ideas and thought are not of a simple nature, and that as they were created in empirical ways rather than systematic thinking, the contents of his ideas are very stimulative and controversial. In light of this, in Orwell's novels, the polemic content is the very core.
of their framework in which the reader's interests are strongly drawn whether or not he is in favor of the polemic content.

This point becomes clearer when we compare Orwell with communist writers of his time. Communist writers such as Christopher Caudwell and Edward Upward wrote novels with more definite political purposes than Orwell, based on the "Socialistic Realism" theory. Yet political content in itself does not give life to novels. Orwell once remarked, "all art is propaganda", but he also realized that all propaganda is not art. Most of communist writers too hastily intended to focus on particular subject-matters which they thought were helpful for the Party's lines; they dismissed most of intrinsic qualities of the novel.

Thus Orwell's endeavor to create the suitable styles, plots, and characters to present his socio-political themes in the form of the novel could be judged successful on the whole. And it is the very ideas and themes of Orwell that sustain the coherence of his works, because most of the unique ideas and controversial points presented in his early novels are not settled in our time even after the disappearance of the overt rule of imperialism or the collapse of the Soviet Union. And so Orwell's work will continue to be alive until the socio-political problems that Orwell posed vanish from our world.

Notes

2. Some critics regard *Down and Out in Paris and London* as a fiction, but Bernard Crick points out: "Its [Down and Out in Paris and London's] great fame came only in 1940 when Penguin printed 55,000 sixpenny copies, classifying it both on the cover and in their trade list as 'Fiction'. (No records survive


7. Orwell writes in “Shooting an Elephant”: “Here I was, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd — seemingly the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys.” George Orwell, “Shooting an Elephant,” *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol. I, 269.

8. Alldritt, 23.


10. Woodcock, 269.


86-87.


16. However, some critics censures the characterization of Ravelston. For example, David Kubal remarks: “Philip Ravelston is nothing more than a stick figure.” Kubal, 101.

17. Woodcock, 125.


19. As some critics suggests, this might be regarded as the influence of James Joyce’s *Ulysees* (1922).

20. Woodcock, 147.


23. He became a member of the Independent Labour Party, dissident Marxist party in England, in 1938, and in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, published in 1941, he advocates “the English Revolution”. He was to write energetically political essays on journalism from the outbreak of World War II until his death in 1950. In effect his essays written during this period take up about three quarters of all.

24. See Wain, 181.