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Defined by the Home: Housing and Class Connections in George Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*

Sarah Graham

In George Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, 1930s class stratification in London, England takes center stage. Due to housing shortages after WWI, slum life became more prominent in the eyes of every Briton. Inadequate government funding lead to overcrowding and the regression of tenement housing conditions, which only resulted in these lower-class houses falling into greater ruin. Thus, differences between the middle and the growing lower-class, especially in regards to housing, became more and more pronounced, until housing alone could be a determinant of class. Also due to the housing shortages, the working classes were unable to escape their living situations, and thus became influenced by the ruin that surrounded them. Using *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* as the primary text, I will attempt to show how housing and class are dependent on each other in 1930s London, especially in regards to the exclusive nature of class, the size of personal space, ownership of personal space, levels of health, and freedom of sexuality.

I focus entirely on the two main couples of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. First are the upper-class characters of Ravelston and Hermione who live in luxurious flats. The other couple is the lower-class Gordon and Rosemary, who live in rented rooms in tenement houses. Between these couples, a definite separation can be witnessed, due entirely to their housing differences. Gordon is a poor bookshop clerk who feels ashamed of his squalid living situation. Even though he and Ravelston are good friends, Gordon proclaims that he “never, if he could help it, set foot in Ravelston’s flat. There was something in the atmosphere of the flat that upset him and made him feel mean, dirty and *out of place*” (emphasis added 79-80). Gordon names a specific reason why he cannot enter Ravelston’s home: it’s because it is “overwhelmingly, though unconsciously, upper-class” (80). Ravelston is a magazine editor from a wealthy family, and his home reflects his fortune. Gordon feels he doesn’t belong in that rich setting, which creates a solid divide between Ravelston and Gordon, which relates to their classes as a whole. Gordon “felt he had no business [in Ravelston’s flat]—that this wasn’t the sort of place where he belonged. There

was a sense of guilt [...] when he was ruined and hadn’t a penny in the world” (187). Because of the evident class differences, Gordon is not at ease or accepted in an upper class home.

Conversely, when Ravelston visits Gordon’s home and encounters what working-class housing is like first-hand, he thinks it is “dreadful to think of anyone with brains and refinement living in a place like this,” thus insinuating that the lower-classes do not have either brains nor refinement (210). Ravelston briefly visits Gordon in the slums, but “the smelly place oppressed him,” and he quickly leaves (211). As an upper class citizen, the homes of the lower-class are not where Ravelston belongs. Sanitary inspectors in London in the 1930s recorded that “large numbers of [London] citizens [were] huddled together in one- or two-roomed dwellings in a most unhealthy, immoral, disgraceful, and *degrading* manner [...] *Swine live better.*” (emphasis added, Quigley 92, 94). If the poor are forced to live in such conditions because of their economic situation, they are forced to become part of that class, and mentally feel subordinate to upper-class citizens. One school of thought regarding slum tenants says that it is “senseless to say or to expect the slum hovel to produce a class compounded entirely of persons of high moral quality or heroic caliber,” therefore living in slum and tenement housing produces lower-class citizens (Quigley 133). It creates a vicious cycle.

Orwell’s depiction of ownership of personal space suggests that this is part of what defines stratified class housing. To begin with, we are presented with Gordon’s first housing arrangements: a lower-middle-class bedsit home on the edges of the slums. He rents his small, dirty, drafty room from his overbearing-mother-like landlady Mrs. Wisbeach. Gordon pays for Mrs. Wisbeach to tidy his room, cook his meals, and probably do his laundry, like some sort of mother for grown men. To stay in her lodgings, Gordon must follow her rules, in which “tea-making [is] the major household offense, next to bringing a woman in” (29). Though Gordon regularly breaks the tea rule, he must do so in absolute secrecy, for Mrs. Wisbeach has been known for “sneaking upstairs and catching you in the act” (29). Even letters,

personal objects delivered from the world outside the lodging house, are “pawed about” by [Mrs. Wisbeach](#) before being delivered (33). Gordon obviously has no freedom in his house, for he does not own the building nor his room. The amenities are rented to him, and he must toe the line for as long as he stays there. Gordon [doesn’t even own the furniture in his homes; they are](#) rented from the landladies. In fact, neither Rosemary nor Gordon “had ever owned furniture before; they had been living in furnished rooms ever since childhood” (245). Gordon explains that there is no “mingy lower-middle class decency [\[in the slums\]](#),” for the buildings and the people are so run down that it is impossible to pretend you’re not the lowest class (207). [Gordon’s lack of ownership of anything around him; his room, furniture, or the building, traps him within the confines of lower-class.](#)

Contrasted to Gordon’s housing is Ravelston’s living arrangement. While Gordon lives in one-room “homes,” Ravelston lives [alone](#) in a “four-roomed flat, which he thought was a poky little place” (80). [He does not have a landlady and is free to do whatever he pleases.](#) Attention must also be drawn to the furniture in Ravelston’s house, all of which he owns, as opposed to renting [it](#) like Gordon. Gordon is [given](#) a chance to try out this furniture, as he “awoke [after being released from prison] in a wide caressing bed, softer and warmer than any bed he had ever slept in” (186). Gordon has never owned anything [as](#) nice as this [bed](#), and probably never will, because of his income and class. [Ravelston’s freedom and luxury through ownership, due to his thick pocket book, is totally opposite to Gordon’s situation.](#)

If we again look back at Orwell’s housing portrayals, the dirt and disease [in tenement housing](#) becomes increasingly apparent. Orwell describes [in detail Gordon’s slum housing by saying:](#)

[Gordon] never made his bed properly, but just turned back the sheets, and never washed his few crocks till all of them had been used twice over. There was a film of dust on everything. In the fender there was always a greasy frying-pan and a couple of plates coated with the remnants of fried eggs. One night the bugs came out of the cracks and marched across his ceiling two by two. (208)

Hermione, as an upper-class citizen, is [also](#) quick to attach filth to the stigma of being poor, proclaiming (about the lower classes), “I hate them. They *smell*” (93). [This is a justified opinion as seen by the above description, and by the explanation that](#) when [Gordon](#) moves to [the heart of the slums](#), he “only

washed the parts that showed” (208). Even a Medical Officer of London comments [in a 1930s medical report](#) that “[i]n view of the slur often cast upon residents in the East-end [the worst slums] concerning their alleged dirty and verminous conditions [...] there can be no doubt that [...] some dirt and vermin is inevitable” (Quigley 135).

Beyond space, ownership, and [cleanliness](#), each character’s class also controls their sexual freedom. Gordon and Rosemary, because of their lower-class housing, cannot have sex, for other people control their personal space. When Rosemary visits Gordon she is “never allowed indoors, not even into the hall,” [because](#) Mrs. Wisbeach is adamant about women not entering her abode. Mrs. Wisbeach has a sexual control over Gordon, both literally and figuratively, because of her ownership of the house. Similar to Gordon’s situation, Rosemary lives “in a women’s hostel” that is run by “she-dragons,” where males are not allowed in (94, 121). Therefore, the two of them must leave their houses, [and reject the city and all forms of housing altogether,](#) in order to have intimacy. [They](#) go to the countryside in order to have sex under a bush, [like wild animals, thus degrading them and forcing them to feel even more like the lower class.](#)

Rosemary especially is concerned with what could result from unprotected sex, for she will lose her job if she becomes pregnant. [If she loses even the small income she has now, she would be unable to survive.](#) She acknowledges the alternative, where she can “[have] it done for only five pounds” (226). Unfortunately, the abortion Rosemary is referring to is probably an unsafe one, performed by amateur doctors, or by people who are not doctors at all. This demonstrates how class controls housing and thus also controls sex. Even in abortion practices, class is apparent. [Pamela Graves explains:](#)

Like birth control, abortion was a practice to which women of all classes resorted [even though it was illegal], yet one where class discrimination clearly prevailed. Women who could afford to pay for the service were able to secure abortions secretly from sympathetic doctors [...] working-class women, on the other hand, had to rely on neighbours who ‘helped out’ [...] or [\[on\]](#) self-induced abortion. Both methods involved a higher incidence of death and injury than among better off women. (196)

This was at first an unrecognized pattern, but declining population prompted the government to look over maternal mortality studies, which

inevitably called attention to [class-divided](#) abortion-related deaths. Gordon and Rosemary cannot afford condoms or safe abortions, thus reflecting the dangers their class forces upon them when it comes to sexual freedom.

The other couple in the novel, Ravelston and Hermione, use the privacy their class provides them in order to enjoy sexual freedom. Ravelston has no landlady, and therefore, no one to screen who enters his home. [Hermione](#) has her own key and [can](#) come and go as she pleases. While Ravelston returns home [at night](#) to [his](#) waiting female, Gordon must return to "his foul lonely room [...] his womanless bed" (95). Ravelston and Hermione have been "lovers two years," yet have never gotten married or lived in the same home (93). It is obvious from their casual attitude that they, especially Hermione who is described as 'rich,' can afford free sexuality, including birth control and safe abortions if necessary.

[At the end of the novel, Gordon and Rosemary channel Orwell's personal views when they finally escape their lower-class status by upgrading to a private apartment \(after Gordon gets a higher paying job\). They get married and move to a flat that is out of the slums. They do not share the flat with anyone else; "Oh Gordon," says Rosemary, "what fun it all is! To have a place that's really our own and no landladies interfering" \(246\). They "fell into absurd raptures over each separate stick of furniture," for they even owned the beds and chairs they sat on, instead of renting them like they had their whole lives \(245\). This demonstrates their growth and ownership of personal space, and makes them consumers, which they had not experienced before. They even use part of their income to right away buy an aspidistra for themselves, the ultimate symbol of the middle-class. Their change of housing and acquisition of belongings boosts them into a higher class, which then allows them the privacy and resources to have sex, and deal with the results of sex \(pregnancy\).](#)

As I have demonstrated, housing in London in the 1930s made huge gaps between the rich and

poor more apparent, and resulted in class cultures that were defined by housing. Lack of ownership of personal space, lack of privacy, lack of sanitation, and lack of sexual freedom all defined the lower-classes and was directly connected to their housing arrangements. Much like the deterioration Gordon succumbs to as the novel progresses, the London City Council proclaimed [in their 1937 London housing report](#) that the "psychological effect of living in mean surroundings, in houses which are dark, damp and dilapidated, and where privacy and cleanliness are obtained with difficulty, if at all, cannot be neglected in any attempt to assess the effect of faulty environment on the mental, moral, and physical fibre of the occupants" (London Housing 13). Tenement housing made [the lower classes](#) think and feel like lower class, and they were forced to accept this [and stay within its confining nature](#).

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