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Joseph Wolf
SUNY Geneseo

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Struggling For An Answer to Capitalism: Evelyn Waugh and George Orwell's Pessimistic Approach

Joseph Wolf

The global economic crisis in the 1930's farther complicated the already unstable social and political upheaval of the era. The continued divergence of wealth and poverty created a dismal view of the future of the social world, while conflict loomed in the political. Themes in Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* and George Orwell's *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying* appear to reflect a concern for capitalism as the basis for the English and global economic system. Both of the authors use satire and direct critiques of capitalistic qualities to illustrate this distrust, but Waugh and Orwell combat the issue from different ends of the socio-economic ladder. *Vile Bodies* satirically displays the impulsivity and irresponsibility of privileged English youths in their lack of concern for money, safety, or the wellbeing of others. Their actions show the impermanence of their class and economic situation in an unstable society and how these actions may contribute to their own downfall. Conversely, Orwell depicts lower classes in Gordon Comstock's fruitless battle against the "Money God", which leads him to a hellish life of poverty and sorrow. However, despite their critical stances, both authors fail to present a tangible alternative to the problems they explore. Instead, Waugh and Orwell present a prophesy of war and destruction as the inescapable, natural path for Capitalistic societies.

Evelyn Waugh was born into the upper-middle class, yet his involvement with or relation to individuals similar to The Bright Young Things in *Vile Bodies* is unclear. However, observation of such people led to his grim understanding of how their culture and lifestyle affected English society. Waugh's characterization of the careless youths in *Vile Bodies* draws from his impressions and exposure to the early 20th century Futurist art movement. In the 1909 *Futurist Manifesto*, F.T. Marinetti outlines the goals of the Futurists and the reasoning behind their art and actions. Coming into the new century, the futurists rejected the foundations of former art and society and embraced elements of speed and mechanization. Waugh's interest in these ideals is apparent in direct reference to them in *Vile Bodies*. The Manifesto states, "4. We declare that the splendor of the world had been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of

speed... a racing automobile...is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace" (Marinetti). Although Waugh may not have completely agreed with all of the doctrines, the representation of these specific mechanical elements and rejection or ignorance of the past in favor of the present in *Vile Bodies* is apparent. However, to what ends does Waugh utilize these elements? It is entirely possible that he is mocking the Futurists when their glorious automobile's flawed nature ultimately causes Miss Runcible's death. Her death could also be an indication that the Futurist thinking is flawed and will lead to destruction if taken to an extreme. According to Brooke Allen, Waugh's writing style is similar to the Futurist style of art, "With a minimum of description Waugh succeeds in reproducing the aura of the recently modernized, mechanized city almost solely through his use of accelerated dialogue and truncated conversations" (321). Allen suggests that Waugh's writing is stylistically representative of the art form, which supports the idea that *Vile Bodies* could be an attempt to praise Futurist ideals. Based on the Manifesto, it is difficult to say exactly where the Futurists stand concerning capitalism. On one hand they praise, "the nocturnal vibration of the arsenals and the workshops beneath their violent electric moons," suggesting support of the power of the machine over man. While on the other, "want to exalt movements of aggression," such as organized labor. This complicates labeling Futurists as pro or anti capitalists definitively.

Another element linking Waugh to Futurism is the lack of political alignment that is characteristic in both Waugh's writing and modern artistic movements (Allen 319). This lack of ideological commitment separates Waugh from partisan conflicts and allows for fluidity in his art and personal life. He is shielded from an alignment that might cause rigidity in thinking and restriction of social interaction, which enables Waugh to have a unique perspective. Despite this, his conversion to Catholicism does suggest an inner connection with morality and human decency, which affect his perspective and outlook. Although Waugh had not yet converted at the time of this particular work, after his conversion he adhered to Catholicism as a "rock in the midst of social and moral decay",

which may explain some of his moralistic tendencies (Wiley 263). By observing the world around him, it is likely that the effects of capitalistic culture conflicted with what Waugh believed to be the morality of mankind even before this conversion. If this is the case, the pessimism in *Vile Bodies*, the depiction of the Bright Young Things, and the resolution in destruction could be Waugh's way of leveling things out moralistically. This pessimism is also reflected in the Futurist Manifesto. Section nine of the Manifesto states, "We want to glorify war – the only cure for the world" (Marinetti). Waugh seizes war as a way to extinguish indifference and fickleness of English capitalism instead of offering a solution in *Vile Bodies*. This seems to be an escape rather than a solution, and can be seen as one of Waugh's disadvantages.

The emptiness of the Bright Young Things is a critique of the capitalist society that supports them. Like a Futurist piece they are always on the move; searching for parties, social interaction, and new innovations, rather than politics and current events. Their irresponsibility and incompetency is shown in their lack of concern. Money, safety, and personal well-being are all thrown away in order to embrace this lifestyle of self-indulgence. They embody the constant movement and thus the beauty of continuous motion. Without such a system as capitalism, the Bright Young Things would neither have time nor the ability to enjoy the luxuries their life has to offer. As a direct result of their place in society they are free to live with no recourse for their actions. From their perspective the past is irrelevant and the future can be faced without fear. It seems that all the parties and extravagance that Waugh depicts show the wantonness of their lives, and comes to an apex when Adam, exasperated, says to Nina, "Oh Nina, *what a lot of parties*" (Waugh 170). This irritation suggests that although the lifestyle may be fun, it does not achieve anything, and disrupts productivity and development. Adam seems to be one of the only people in the novel to come to this realization. This could be because his situation makes him a participant of the lifestyle but not a cause. His exasperated nature could be a voice of reason calling out for an answer to the point of it all.

Keep the Aspidistra Flying is George Orwell's satiric response to the same capitalistic society that Waugh criticizes in *Vile Bodies*. In his book, Orwell's aggression towards a capitalist economy, or at least consumerism, is presented through Gordon Comstock. On a personal vendetta against

the "Money God", Comstock quits a well-paying job and turns to a life of self-enforced destitution. This results in Gordon's endless pessimism, which is a device for relating Orwell's observations of a flawed and horrid world. Looking out the bookshop window Gordon sees poster advertisements:

Corner Table grins at you, seemingly optimistic, with a flash of false teeth. But what is behind the grin? Desolation, emptiness, prophecies of doom. For can you not see, if you know how to look, that behind that slick self-satisfaction, that tittering fat-bellied triviality, there is nothing but a frightful emptiness, a secret despair? The great death-wish of the modern world. (16)

This London street is brought to life devoid of redemption or hope; only one example of Gordon's dismal portrayal of his world.

Orwell, like Waugh, did not limit himself by subscribing to one ideology, however he did indicate that his novels are, "directly or indirectly against totalitarianism" (Lutman 149). Despite this overreaching theme in his novels this lack of ideological definition allows the freedom of open criticism for nearly anything, including Capitalism. Orwell makes it clear that Gordon in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* is also ideologically ungrounded. He clearly does not support capitalism and does not appear to subscribe to much religious, political, or ideological doctrine. Gordon is described as having dabbled in Socialism at a young age, but he quickly outgrew it, "Every intelligent boy of sixteen is a Socialist. At that age one does not see the hook sticking out of the rather stodgy bait" (43). This direct rejection of Socialism is interesting because it hinders a clear alternative and possible solution to capitalism. This lack of identity leaves Gordon bitter and aggressive externally and internally.

Gordon's outward hostility is a manifestation of the inner battle that he subjects himself to. He left advertising and consumer society to find time and inspiration he felt resulted in true art, however Gordon finds himself in a more Hellish life than ever before. He needs money to create *London Pleasures* because of the comforts necessary to engage his work; Cigarettes, tea, and inspiration, which come from a well filled bank account and stomach. Instead Gordon only has one suit, a drab room with dregs in a contraband teakettle, and an unfinished manuscript. Realizing his inability to create whether well-off or destitute casts Gordon into downward spiral of despair. This indicates that either complacency or rejection of capitalism both end in misery, which culminates in inevitable death

and destruction that Gordon prophesizes. Whether this destruction is physical or moral is unclear, but analyzing George Orwell's stance on ideological and political matters, it can be inferred whether he truly believes that capitalism will result in the devastation Comstock thinks.

Although George Orwell may not have identified with any one political ideology it is still possible to trace the basis for his critiques of modern society. Gordon Beadle adheres to the fact that "the precise nature of his [Orwell's] political posture simply cannot be defined and analyzed within the context of any identifiably modern political ideology, party, or movement," but also suggests that Orwell's highly critical and political work and was the result of influence from the moral Victorians (278). This separated Orwell and enabled to freely and objectively critique the nature of his own time. The most dominant influence of the Victorian era seems to have been Charles Dickens, "in the formation of Orwell's social and political consciousness...Orwell shared Dickens's preference for a moral rather than ideological approach to social and economic injustice" (Beadle 289). Waugh and Orwell are very similar in their moralistic perspectives. Using morality and humanity as a compass to guide criticisms of the modern world, they both come to the same conclusion that capitalism has many morally objectionable traits. It is unclear whether it is the moralistic argument against capitalism that drives the hatred in Gordon Comstock or whether it is a general disgust for the system as a whole. It is likely that Gordon's contempt stems from the disparity between the indulgence of the wealthy and helplessness of the poor. However this moralistic element is somewhat confounded by Gordon's sexual encounters and self-indulgence when he comes into money. These actions are perhaps devices used by Orwell to indicate that morality and moral thinking are not a solution to the problems of capitalism and can offer no alternative. Beadle also notes that attachment to Victorian values could be the reason for Orwell's pessimism:

Orwell's novels, literary criticism, and social commentary may be read as a kind of Victorian critique of modern society. He departs from the Victorian intellectual tradition only in his pessimism, which was itself largely a product of the rapid and seemingly inevitable erosion of Victorian values and ideals in the twentieth century. (289)

This insight into where Orwell's sympathies and expectations for society lay is important because it may indicate where to look for good in his works. Gordon Comstock's teakettle is a possible symbol for the good in him because although not specifically Victorian, it exemplifies English traditions and ideologies that Orwell sympathizes with.

The aversion to capitalism in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* brings up the same question that it does in *Vile Bodies*, what solutions are offered to the problems raised? The answer it seems is nearly nothing. Since Orwell pulls Gordon out of his long fight, nothing is really resolved. This uncertainty in the solution is reflected by Orwell's independent political stance. Beadle quotes Orwell as saying, "capitalism leads to dole queues, the scramble for markets, and war...collectivism leads to concentration camps, leader worship, and war. There is no way out of this" (291). Orwell focused his attention on criticizing the, "British class system, economic inequality, imperialism, and other aspects of the capitalist system" as other Marxists did, but he believed that "Marxism offered a false and dangerous solution to the evils of capitalism" (Beadle 294). This political indecision leaves both reader and critic little to go on when trying to find Orwell's overall answers to his own critiques. In the case of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* it does not appear that there is a solution to this extremely difficult and complex situation. When faced with the new pressures of his relationship with Rosemary and a child on the way, Gordon reluctantly ends his war against the consumerist culture and resumes his previous job. Immediately after doing so, he feels an enormous weight lifted from his shoulders and becomes a bit less pessimistic, "once again, things were happening in the Comstock family" (248). At first glance this may seem like Orwell is indicating that capitalism is not necessarily evil after all. However, the intense portrayal of Gordon's entire fight suggests that Orwell does not want to accept this, but he has no alternative. It seems as though Gordon's return to his previous lifestyle indicates that capitalism has its flaws, but cannot be escaped or overturned by individual disruption.

When looked at side by side, the similarities between the messages of the two novels are clear. These two authors have created unique perspectives on capitalism by pointing out its flaws from both the top and bottom of the English hierarchy. Yet, both authors still appear to come to the same conclusion, despite their discontent with the

system. This inability to provide a solution to the problem could reflect a general feeling of helplessness in the English population as the global economy continued to plummet and the likelihood of war increased with the rise of fascism. The instability of global politics of the time is reflected by the pessimism of both Evelyn Waugh and George Orwell regarding capitalism, and uncertainty of other existing systems. With nothing else to effectively combat the injustices they saw with the capitalist society, they had to rely on their critiques to show the flaws in societal structures and hope that something better could come from them.

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