

The Disillusioned George Orwell and George Bowling - A Naturalistic Perspective of *Coming Up for Air*

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The Study of George Orwell's Novels under the Perspective of Naturalism (SCWY 14-17):

Abstract

*A general survey of George Orwell's works can identify his influence from Emily Zola, a French novelist known as the leader of naturalism. A naturalist theme resurrects throughout almost all of Orwell's works, ranging from *Burmese Days* (1934), *The Clergyman's Daughter* (1935), *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936), *Coming Up for Air* (1939) in the 1930s to *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1948) in the 1940s. The tone and atmosphere of every novel is invariably pessimistic, and almost every protagonist is overwhelmed and readily accepts his own devastation. Flory commits suicide in *Burmese Days*; Dorothy Hare ends up as a trapped victim in every situation in *The Clergyman's Daughter*; Gordon Comstock becomes absurd, petty and deeply neurotic in the end in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*; George Bowling becomes disillusioned to find his idyllic hometown destroyed by the speculative builders, commercialists and capitalists and his nostalgic memory impossible to retrieve in *Coming Up for Air*; and Winston Smith, having been persecuted and tortured to such an extent as to betray his lover in the end. As a newly-born man, he happily accepts Big Brother whom he used to hate in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The present thesis endeavors to make an analysis of *Coming up for Air*, particularly, under the perspective of naturalism, to see how the environmental (modernity) force, to be more specifically, upon the individual physical existence and mentality finally brings about his disappointment and despair.*

Keywords: *Coming Up for Air*, George Orwell, Naturalism.

Naturalism is a literary movement that emphasizes observation and scientific method in the fictional portrayal of reality. Emily Zola, the important French novelist, is an advocate and practitioner of the movement. Naturalistic writers consider themselves realists, but they select the particular parts of reality as their subjects: misery, mice, corruption, disease, poverty, crime, prostitution, racism, violence, etc. Therefore, they are often criticized for being pessimistic and focusing on the dark side of the reality. The novels are experimental, with the writer as an observer and the characters as being observed. The writer discovers and analyzes the forces, or scientific laws, that influence the behavior of the characters, including the emotion, the hereditary, and the environment. As it is assumed to be an experiment, the author must maintain an impersonal, detached tone and a disinterested point of view. Additionally, the characters are normally doomed, and their fates have been determined by impersonal force beyond human control, and a sense that the universe is indifferent to human life (Naturalism [literature], Wikipedia).

George Orwell (1903-1950) was a prolific writer on topics related to contemporary English society and literary criticism, whom the British newsweekly *The Economist* in 2008 declared “perhaps the 20th century’s best chronicler of English culture.” Roger Fowler (2007) observes George Orwell’s indebtedness to Zola, “In 1940, he included Zola in a list of eleven “writers I care most about and never get tired of (CEFL, II, 39). In 1932, he tried to persuade Chatto & Windus to allow him to translate Zola (CEFL, I, 102). A book review in 1936 uses Zola as standard of comparison, and produces a characteristic Orwellian metaphor in which the organism of Zola is opposed to mechanical composition: ‘The scene of violence Zola describes in *Germinal* and *La Debacle* are supposed to symbolize capitalist corruption, best they are also scenes. At his best, Zola is not synthetic. He works under compulsion, and not like an amateur cook following the instruction on a packet of Crestona cake-flour’ (CEFL, I, 279). Indeed, a general survey of George Orwell’s works can identify Emilia Zola’s influence upon him. A naturalist theme resurrects throughout nearly all of his works such as *Burmese Days* (1934), *The Clergyman’s Daughter* (1935), *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936), *Coming Up for Air* (1939), and *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1948), to name just a few. Flory commits suicide in *Burmese Days*; Dorothy Hare ends up as a trapped victim in every situation in *The Clergyman’s Daughter*; Gordon Comstock becomes absurd, petty and deeply neurotic in the end in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*; George Bowling becomes disappointed to find his idyllic hometown destroyed by the speculative builders, commercialists and capitalists and his nostalgic memory impossible to retrieve in *Coming Up for Air*; and Winston Smith, having been persecuted to such an extent as to betray his lover in the end. As a newly-born man, he readily accepts Big Brother whom he used to hate as the absolute leader of the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The tone and atmosphere of every novel is invariably pessimistic, and almost every protagonist is overwhelmed and to gratefully acknowledge his own devastation or failure. The present thesis endeavors to make an analysis of *Coming up for Air*, particularly, from the perspective of naturalism, to examine how the environmental effect upon the individual existence and mentality finally results in his disillusionment and disappointment.

George Orwell wrote *Coming up for Air* in 1938, the year when Europeans, having not awakened from the nightmarish WWI, living in stress and tension, expecting another disastrous war to come along. The narrator of *Coming Up for Air* is George Bowling, fat, a middle-aged suburban insurance agent trying to cope with the changes in English society after WWI. George Bowling, is no hero whatsoever, judging from his obese

and clumsy appearance, his confusing and mundane family life, his boring and unadventurous job as an insurance agent and, above all, his reluctance in getting away from such a way of life. Likewise, his insight seems to be not a little bit farther reaching beyond his life, either. When he gets seventeen quid in a horserace, what he thinks about is the alternatives of either “a weekend with a woman” or “cigars and double Whiskies”. Finally, it is some miraculous force that brings about a somewhat heroic act of spending the money on a trip to Lower Binfield, the places of his childhood.

It is in 1938, the year which to Bowling, (or to Orwell, rather,) represents not only the stress and depression but also the inevitable decline before the WWII. He foresees the history sinking into the abyss of modernity. “I see the posters and the food-queues, and the castor oil and the rubber truncheons and the machine-guns squirting out of bedroom windows. (*Coming up for Air*, 561) A symbolic detail is that he is biting into a frankfurter, only to find it made of rotten fish stuffed within a rubber skin. George Bowling compares it metaphorically as biting into “the modern world ((*ibid.* p.559).” Indeed, what is the relationship between the man-made rotten fish, the Fascism’s baton and the aircraft in the sky? Bowling knows clearly that they have been closely interrelated ever since WWI. It is the very abyss toward which the modern society is going to. As in the modern world, the handcraft workshop is replaced by the industrialized international enterprises; the spiritual need of individual has to make place for the interest of a nation. People are wondering aimlessly around on the verge of cities, unaware of where they would be the next day. Bowling calls them “the dead” and “sleep-walkers” or “waxworks”. Whether the rotten fish or the aircraft is the merciless satire at the existence of human being in which they lose their power to steer their life. “I suppose even among the people passing at that moment there must have been chaps who were seeing mental pictures of the shell bursts and the mud...It was as if I’d got X-rays in my eyes and could see the skeletons walking”(ibidp.560). It is the same vision of the imminent crisis Orwell predicates in ten years in *Nineteen Eighty Four*: today it is Spain, Italy, German, and Soviet Union; tomorrow it will be the turns for Poland, France, and England. It is safe to say that the year of 1938 marks the apocalypse before the modern civilization collapse, and it is the tragic for modernity to committed suicide and this novel is in this sense the elegy Orwell composed for the modern time.

Man in Orwell’s works has no free will to control his life. He is completely thrown upon himself for survival in this cold world. There is always a powerful exterior force hindering him, exerting inescapable terror upon him. Any human fate has been pre-determined; and his attempt of opposition is futile. For instance, in *Nineteen Eighty Four*, Orwell portrays a state in which government monitors and controls every aspect of human life to the extent that even having a disloyal thought is against the law. The timidly rebellious Winston Smith sets out to challenge the limits of Party’s power, only to find out its abilities to control and enslave its subjects dwarfs even his most paranoid conceptions of its reach. George Bowling, having been fed up with his mundane life, makes his final attempt to struggle for salvation before the end of the world. By deceiving everybody in his family, he makes a trip to Lower Binfield, the places of his childhood “for air”. Here, he recollects the merry childhood before WWI, when people were not rich but they could get a sense of security from the expected way of life in the near future. Bowling recalls his childhood impressions of his family’s home and shop (his father was an animal feed merchant):

The very first thing I remember is the smell of sainfoin chaff. You went up the stone passage that led from the kitchen to the shop, and the smell of sainfoin got stronger all the way. Mother had fixed a wooden gate in the doorway to prevent Joe and myself ... from getting into the shop. I can still remember standing there clutching the bars, and the smell of sainfoin mixed up with the damp plaster smell that belonged to the passage. It wasn't till years later that I somehow managed to crash the gate and get into the shop when nobody was there. A mouse that had been having a go at one of the meal-bins suddenly plopped out and ran between my feet. It was quite white with meal. (*Coming up for Air* pp.566-7)

Note the use of smell to prompt memory; the simple details that nevertheless give the image and texture: "the stone passage", "the wooden gate"; and the clear focus on a mouse "quite white with meal."

And yet, the desperate attempt George Bowling made to summon years of past back for his self-salvation before the end of the world is only an impotent opposition to the cruelty and mercilessness of modernity. George Bowling's actions are merely an unconscious reaction before the collapse of the great empire as an ordinary English man. Nevertheless, George Orwell will not give the readers any comfort as he presents a detailed description of the pool in which Bowling used to fish has now turned into a rubbish-dump, the bombs falling from the aircrafts and the clumsiness of obese Bowling trying to dodge the bombs is not only the black humor of modern life but also a shattering of the idyllic illusion of the ordinary people.

Zola (1893) maintains in his essay "The Experimental Novel" that "in naturalistic novel, the author is an observer and an experimentalist. The observer relates purely and simply the phenomena which he has under his eyes. He should be the photographer of phenomena; his observation should be an exact representation of nature. He listens to nature and he writes under its dictation" (Zola 1893). Orwell has nearly all the virtues of an English writer: integrity, nobility, loyalty to the common sense in all experience. Indeed, Orwell has "the British Common Sense" in that he spares no effort in presenting us miscellaneous details, from which he inducts brilliant insights. Just as Roger Fowler comments "Orwell's work has been much admired for the concreteness and memor ability of his descriptions of settings and places" (Roger Fowler 27). Details such as the following, from the opening pages of *Coming Up for Air*, abound in Orwell:

Down below, out of the little square of bathroom window, I could see the ten yards by five of grass, with a privet hedge round it and a bare patch in the middle, that we call the back garden. There's the same back garden, same privets, and same grass, behind every house in Ellesmere Road. Only difference—where there are no kids there's no bare patch in the middle.

*Our dining-room, like the other dining-rooms in Ellesmere Road, is a poky little place, fourteen feet by twelve, or maybe it's twelve by ten, and the Japanese oak sideboard, with the two empty decanters and the silver egg-stand that Hilda's mother gave us for a wedding present, doesn't leave much room. (*Coming Up for Air*, pp544, 546).*

These two fragments, inserted in George Bowling's account of a morning at his house, contribute, with other jigsaw pieces, to an overall description of the spiritless modern housing estate where he and his family live.

Because the description is given in bits, the details remain prominent. Such empirical temperament gives a direct and straightforwardness to his works--he is true to life, willing to be an observer, and a reporter. He knows clearly how to depict a man trapped in an environment, and he is very sensitive to man's predicament, however, his analysis is always static and detached. Never does he attempt to delve into the cause of the effect. That is to say, Orwell only discloses truth without further explanation. He is said to be the most honest writer in British literature. As a journalist, and the first-class one, he witnesses the trauma of his time and the suffering of the people, and he cut open the hard cover of the modernity to expose the soft underbelly of an evil society. The Jacks-of-lent's mundane life and their futile attempt to get out of it is nothing but a self-parody of being manipulated by worldly affairs.

To sum up, George Orwell has been known to be the prophet of modern civilization in that he effectively reproduces in his works the declining of English civilization. Only with his common sense, he grasps the essence of history experience. His concerns about the fate of the people is based upon the concerns of the human being in general. Even in his time, modernity is the common goal for the whole world, so that he adopts a pessimistic attitude toward modernity and a paranoid of the final destination of the human being. To some extent, *Coming up for Air* is not about life of a specific man, Bowling, the loser, but rather about the "failure" itself of human beings in general. As in both Bowling and Orwell's mind, modernity is an endless nightmare, from the standpoint of 1938, the future is nothing but the continual of the nightmare and the past glory has been devoured by it. He calmly arrives at the conclusion that "All the things...that you tell yourself are just a nightmare or only happen in foreign countries...It's all going to happen... There is no escape" (*Coming up for air* 716). When the technocratic modernity overwhelmed the people inside, when old George Bowling was mourning for his lost youth at the pool, we becomes aware that what we should mourn for is the memories of "modernity" for we have once so obstinately stuck to the illusion of "development" and "progress", only to find our dead bodies in the rubbish heap of boots of Nazism and the industrial semi-products.

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