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### Orwell the Underdog

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## Orwell the Underdog

Thomas Kolle

When studying George Orwell's life and works, it is impossible not to wonder what it was that incited him to live in such a seemingly impudent fashion. His idiosyncratic characteristic of regularly choosing to put himself in harms way baffles all who study his life and psyche. From choosing to live in squalor in both Paris and London, to putting his life in jeopardy on the front lines of another country's battle, to living out the last years of his life on a remote island in Scotland despite his diagnosed tuberculosis, Orwell never failed, when given the choice, to place himself in fate's fickle grasp. Though this trait of his is perplexing in the extreme, there are observable trends. Much of Orwell's seemingly masochistic tendencies are carried out in order to stand with the oppressed and downtrodden. Whether this was demonstrated by his attempts to live in a comparable manner, or by his endeavors to break down class structure in his literature, George Orwell clearly identified with the underdogs of society.

This tendency for self-destruction, and all its implications, completely shaped Orwell's literary career. Tracing back through his works, the predominant theme throughout deals with the struggle of the destitute or the oppressed. In his works of fiction, the protagonist is almost always a somewhat defeated, downtrodden individual from whom it is quite easy to draw lines of comparison to Orwell, himself; even when he was not reporting on his own destitution, he never failed to insert elements of his own life and identity into the character playing the unpleasant role. With such a distinct and overarching motif in Orwell's work, the question of why it was that Orwell identified so stalwartly with society's underdogs becomes one that is important to answer.

As a young boy, George Orwell was sent to an elite preparatory school by the name of St. Cyprian's. The essay *Such, Such Were the Joys*, which Orwell wrote towards the end of his life, narrates his time at this boarding school. In this essay, Orwell describes the miserable years he spent at St. Cyprian's in painfully personal detail. Being a great deal less wealthy than the majority of the other boys at the school, he was something of an outcast. From a very early age, despite his solidly upper middle-class status relative to the rest of the world, Orwell experienced the degradation of being at the very bottom of the social ladder within the confines of St. Cyprian's—the only world he knew. On top of this, because his parents could only afford to pay half of the tuition, Orwell was under constant pressure from the school's administration to earn a college scholarship in compensation. He describes this administration as being quite tyrannical in its reign, as well as being unapologetically biased towards the wealthier boys. It was there, in preparatory school, that Orwell developed his identity as a member of the less privileged, under-dog class. He was exposed to a near perfect microcosm of the class-divided, totalitarian ruled society that he would continue to explore throughout his literary career.

Though George Orwell famously requested that a biography never be written on his behalf, many have attempted to capture his life and essential character. One of the best regarded attempts is the work of Jeffrey Meyers. He, by his own admission, offers a darker portrayal of

Orwell than those traditionally given. Meyers, in the preface to *Orwell: Wintry Conscience of a Generation*, describes Orwell as “a noble character [who was] also violent, capable of cruelty, tormented by guilt, masochistically self-punishing, [and] sometimes suicidal.”<sup>1</sup> As summarized in John Rodden’s review of Meyers’ biography, “Meyers’ key argument is that Orwell essentially destroyed himself because he had a fixed, distorted image of himself as a hardy man of action who could invariably take risks and survive them.”<sup>2</sup> Meyers’ critical examination and analyzation of Orwell’s psyche is a constant presence throughout his literature concerning George Orwell. In another book, Meyers describes Orwell as being “instinctively masochistic.”<sup>3</sup> This is to say, Meyers attributes Orwell’s self-destructive tendencies, his “need to sabotage his chance for a happy life,”<sup>4</sup> to be purely an outgrowth of his fundamental character; a trait which needed no specific life experience in order to come to fruition.

Jeffrey Meyers points to the calamity of Orwell’s time spent as a police officer in Burma as being a distinct influence on his literary work. Meyers maintains that “In Burma, his Etonian detachment, skepticism and anti-establishment spirit came to the fore, and the longer he stayed, the more tainted he felt.”<sup>5</sup> Orwell wrote extensively about his time in Burma, both in nuggets within larger bodies of work, and in novels that featured many parallels to the reality of his experience there. In such pieces, he describes how he became gradually sickened by England’s colonial rule in the East: “For five years I had been part of an oppressive system, and it had left me with a bad conscience. . . . I was conscious of an immense guilt that I had got to expiate.”<sup>6</sup> Meyers uses quotes such as this to assert that, as Orwell observed the exploitation and oppression of the lower classes in Burma, he began to feel guilt at his own background; “He felt guilty about his colonial heritage, his bourgeois background, his inbred snobbery and his elite education.”<sup>7</sup> Here, Meyers partly acknowledges the role that Orwell’s education might have played in the views he would later develop towards social class—yet, throughout his narrative, Meyers goes on to focus solely on Orwell’s time in Burma as the explanation for these views.

I don’t think that Meyers interprets Orwell’s sentiments correctly. I don’t believe that Orwell was the least bit ashamed of his upbringing, as he bases much of his work on this very subject, and addresses it freely. I believe that being in a position of power in Burma, being a cog in the colonial system of oppression, forced Orwell into the realization that he was now in the same position as the wealthy boys at St. Cyprian’s—bullying and subjugating the destitute. These experiences left Orwell feeling quite conflicted because he was determined to break down class structure and make prejudice based on wealth a thing of the past. Yet the job suited him

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Meyers, *Orwell: Wintry Conscience of a Generation*, (W.W. Norton & Co., 2001), xviii.

<sup>2</sup> John Rodden, “Orwell: Wintry Conscience of a Generation.” (ProQuest, 2001), 101-4.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Meyers, *Orwell: Life and Art*, (University of Illinois Press, 2010), 50.

<sup>4</sup> Meyers, *Orwell*., 313.

<sup>5</sup> Meyers, *Orwell*., 72.

<sup>6</sup> George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, (Harcourt Inc., 1958), 148.

<sup>7</sup> Meyers, *Orwell*., 15.

rather well, as he did possess somewhat violent and sometimes bigoted tendencies: “All I knew was that I was stuck between my hatred of the Empire I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make my job impossible.”<sup>8</sup> However, after five years he could no longer stand the guilt of being an oppressor and returned to England. Upon his return, Orwell would immediately attempt to assuage these feelings of guilt by overcompensating and embarking on one of the most peculiar endeavors of his life: willingly becoming a half-starved tramp in both Paris and London.

Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London* describes his exploits as a tramp, displaying his determination to reconnect with the downtrodden of society after having been, in his mind, corrupted in Burma. Why else might a well-born individual such as Orwell choose to lower himself to living franc to franc, traipsing about from boarding house to spike with a group of men who were at the very bottom of England’s class divided society? It was done out of guilt, an argument which Meyers and I might agree upon, as Orwell genuinely felt as though he had betrayed himself and his own identity with his exploits in Burma. He drove himself to the very bottom of English society as a reaction to the sheer torment he had felt by playing the role of the oppressor for the first time in his life. I believe that Orwell took the job in Burma in an attempt to escape England’s class disparity, after having spent so many years at the top of the British education system. From the point of his return onward, Orwell would devote his career to exploring British class structure and advocating for its demise. Never wishing to regain the role of the oppressor, he began to subject himself to unnecessary extremes of lower-class life so as not to once again betray the identity he had acquired at St. Cyprian’s.

Another opinion is offered by Tom Hopkinson, author of the “select biography,” *George Orwell*. He never mentions Orwell’s risky and self-destructive behavior as others have, an immediate clue that his analysis of Orwell is incomplete. That is to say, Hopkinson seems to accept Orwell’s nature as being perfectly normal, as he states: “It was Orwell’s way, as we have seen, to do at any moment the thing he found most important,”<sup>9</sup> and makes no more mention of it. Nevertheless, Hopkinson is highly critical of Orwell’s affinity for the working class:

“Orwell shows an exaggerated, sometimes an undignified, humility towards the working-class but the artist has no business to feel himself inferior to his subject-matter, and the guilt Orwell expresses over his expensive education and middle-class background serves to embarrass the reader rather than win his sympathy for those whose life Orwell is describing.”<sup>10</sup>

Hopkinson acknowledges Orwell’s need to be associated with the down-trodden, yet does not consider it to be destructive, rather, he believes that it merely serves to embarrass Orwell’s readers.

These criticisms of Orwell’s sentiments are drawn directly from *The Road to Wigan Pier*, another one of his works of reportage. This book focuses specifically on struggling coal miners, their lifestyle, and living conditions in, what began as, Orwell’s attempt to break down class

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<sup>8</sup> George Orwell and John Carey, *Essays*, (Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 43.

<sup>9</sup> Tom Hopkinson, *George Orwell*, (Longman Group, 1977), 24.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

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structure. Though, it seems, that his views change throughout the work, Orwell refers back to his elite education numerous times as he examines the destitute miners:

“I suppose there is no place in the world where snobbery is quite so ever-present or where it is cultivated in such refined and subtle forms as in an English public school... your snobbishness, unless you persistently root it out like the bindweed it is, sticks by you till your grave.”<sup>11</sup>

Orwell’s experience at St. Cyprian’s was clearly a powerful influence on his choice to study and associate with close to the lowest class of England—he continually refers back to its implications on his own life, as well as the rest of the wealthier class, as he demonstrates the disparity within England’s class-driven society. Once again, his willingness to write on the subject of his education makes it clear that he was in no way ashamed of having attended a top-tier institution or having been born into a higher class, rather, it allowed him to see class barriers as they were.

Hopkinson points out Orwell’s odd proclivity towards classes beneath his own, chastises him, yet never offers an opinion as to why it was that Orwell might have behaved this way. Like Meyers, Hopkinson offers very little insight into how Orwell’s time at St. Cyprian’s influenced his life. He essentially brushes the period off as being merely a miserable stretch for Orwell; one which “set in his mind—he feels—a pattern of failure and depression”<sup>12</sup> without speculating as to how such a troubling childhood might have affected his views and principles. Hopkinson, like most critics, points to Burma as the defining period of Orwell’s life instead. Yet, Orwell’s traumatic time spent in Burma does not explain the intensely dogmatic nature that permeates all of his work. From everything that is known about Orwell, he was both proud and obstinate, sometimes to a fault. Since the birth of this particular quality cannot be explained by Orwell’s time in Burma, it can safely be assumed that it was present in the boyhood version of Orwell that attended St. Cyprian’s. Though Orwell always had a proclivity for self-pity, behind this guise he was always steadfastly unwavering in his convictions. Therefore, it is hard to imagine that the beatings and constant berating of the school administration did anything other than incite an intense desire for vengeance with young George Orwell, despite what he might have displayed outwardly.

Sam Leith writes a piece in *The Guardian* in which he explores the relationship between Orwell’s time at St. Cyprian’s and his narrative in *Such, Such Were the Joys*. Leith calls into question the validity of Orwell’s description of the prep school, surmising that he was not nearly as miserable there as he made out in his essay. Leith repeatedly cites points made DJ Taylor’s biography of Orwell, as they agree on two major fronts: that Orwell grossly exaggerated the distress which St. Cyprian’s caused him, and that his revelations in *Such, Such Were the Joys* were shaped by his adult life, specifically in writing *1984*, rather than his writing being influenced by his time at St. Cyprian’s. Though Leith acknowledges that there is a tradition of the corruption within English preparatory schools producing radical leftists, both he and Taylor do not believe that this is a class of which Orwell is a member. Leith cites a quotation from Taylor in his article

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<sup>11</sup> George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, (Harcourt Inc., 1958), 137.

<sup>12</sup> Hopkinson, *Orwell*, 12.

which reads: “I don’t believe he was at all radicalized until the 1930s.”<sup>13</sup> This is yet another instance of those who study George Orwell in-depth discounting the importance of his prep school days and the influence it would have on his life and works.

During the course of *Such, Such Were the Joys*, George Orwell acknowledges several times that the passing of time often distorts one’s memory of the past. Yet, he states that in the case of his memory of St. Cyprian’s “...it can also happen that one’s memories grow sharper after a long lapse of time, because one is looking at the past with fresh eyes...”<sup>14</sup> He does a remarkable job of looking back on his boyhood thoughts and emotions and analyzing them as an adult. To cite a specific instance in which Orwell asserts how miserable an endeavor it truly was to attend the school would be foolish, as it is a claim that is repeatedly reinforced throughout the entirety of the essay. Much of this distress stemmed from his upper middle-class status sticking out so very much within the crowd of the imminently rich and powerful. Orwell describes instances in which he was made to compare his father’s salary to that of one of the other boys, or else his plans for the holidays. Spending one’s childhood in an environment such as this can only have fostered feelings of intense resentment towards the wealthy class, as well as a permanent identification as an underdog. Orwell left St. Cyprian’s with a chip on his shoulder, leading to his becoming the champion of the downtrodden.

The argument of both Leith and Taylor seems to lack both substance and rationality. As Leith’s main evidence for thinking that Orwell was not entirely truthful in *Such, Such Were the Joys*, he cites a quotation from a childhood friend of Orwell’s who stated that she remembered Orwell as being a “happy child” during his time at St. Cyprian’s. Certainly Orwell, at times, had a somewhat distorted view both of himself and of reality—yet, it is unreasonable to rely on one remembrance of Orwell’s boyhood demeanor over Orwell’s own detailed and personal account of his childhood. In fact, Orwell, in the essay, states: “A child which appears reasonably happy may actually be suffering horrors which it cannot or will not reveal.”<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Leith never offers much in the way of evidence as to why he ultimately believes that Orwell’s account in *Such, Such Were the Joys* was a product of his vision in 1984. It seems much more likely that the first inspiration for the dark totalitarian world he imagined in his most famous work was the governing body of St. Cyprian’s: Sambo and Flip. Of course, Russian Communism provided an enormous amount of influence for 1984, however, Leith and Taylor fail to prove that the seeds for Orwell’s grim revelation were not, in fact, planted during his years at St. Cyprian’s.

I believe that a great deal of what is possible to decipher in regard to George Orwell’s idiosyncratic life choices can be discovered in *Such, Such Were the Joys*. He was a writer who, throughout his career, attempted to paint himself in a more favorable light than that which might have been strictly accurate. Therefore, given the deeply personal nature and stark display of vulnerability in this essay, I believe that it is, perhaps, one of his more truthful. His life was scattered with perplexing choices and tendencies, yet, when one analyzes his musings on his own childhood, his character begins to make more sense. Orwell was shaped by a childhood dominat

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<sup>13</sup> Sam Leith, “George Orwell’s Schooldays,” (The Guardian, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Orwell and Carey, *Essays*, (Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 1295.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 1330.

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ed by inescapable class structure and discrimination during his time at St. Cyprian's prep school. This caused him to develop a distorted view of himself as somehow being a social outcast or underdog, despite his respectable background. He would spend the rest of his life and the entirety of his literary career making self-destructive decisions in an attempt to live according to his distorted view of how he fit into society.

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