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## Reconsidering Orwell's Depiction of the Working Class in *The Road To Wigan Pier*<sup>1</sup>

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Jack Carroll

In the year of 1936, during the time of the Great Depression, George Orwell, an English author who was known for his socialist beliefs, was approached by the editors of the Left Book Club to write a “documentary report on the conditions among the unemployed in the north of England” (Orwell vii). Since he had already documented his time spent living among the working class and homeless in *Down and Out in Paris and London*—a time in which he subjected himself to a life of hunger, filth, and discomfort—Orwell had proven himself to be a committed socialist, as well as the Left Book Club’s ideal candidate to undertake their newest project.

Many critics have since recognized the final product of Orwell’s travels to the industrial north of England, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, as an accurate and objective account of Wigan’s working-class population—an account which Orwell’s publishers had originally assigned. In fact, Walter Greenwood declared Orwell’s descriptions of the living conditions among the unemployed as “authentic and first rate” (Pearce 411). Richard Rees described the first part of the book as a “straightforward account” containing “detached and realistic observation” (411). Furthermore, Arthur Calder-Marshall provided a similar review of Orwell’s report when noting that he “writes of what he has seen” and “does not exaggerate” (411). While these critics and other British socialist scholars of the time regard *The Road to Wigan Pier* as a truthful account of the living conditions among the working class, a thoughtful review and consideration of Orwell’s privileged childhood and its influence on his depiction of the poor indicate otherwise.

This paper will argue that Orwell’s bourgeoisie upbringing and unfamiliarity with the working class hindered his ability to portray his subjects, their living conditions, and their community in a manner that was not influenced by his own bias. Instead of impartially reporting on the working-class communities in the industrial north of England, Orwell departs from this task and documents his own reactions of disgust to the poor appearance of the people, their homes, and the neighborhoods which they inhabit. As a result of his failure to remain objective in his reporting, Orwell’s degrading depiction of these communities cannot be regarded as an accurate account of his surroundings during his time in the north of England. Rather, Orwell’s descriptions contribute to a publication that—despite its admirable attempt to uncover the brute suffering experienced by the poor—reflects his own repulsive perception of the working class.

In order to understand his tendency to describe his own disgusted reactions to the working class—despite being a committed socialist who sought to attract public attention to the struggles endured among the poor—it is important to first document the privileged and comfortable lifestyle that Orwell enjoyed from a young age. In his biography, *Orwell: The Life*, British novelist D.J. Taylor notes that Orwell was born into a “lower-upper-middle-class” family and a world of “enormous security and self-belief” (27). Throughout his early childhood, Orwell—unlike the impoverished subjects whom he would later write about—was the recipient of many luxuries including toys, books, medical care from doctors, and the adoration of his mother, Ida Blair, who planned her son’s education with “some enthusiasm” (28, 37). It was also during this time in

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which Orwell's parents forbade him, at the age of six, from playing with working-class children: a decision that he would later refer to in the second half of *The Road to Wigan Pier* as "snobbish" yet "necessary" in preventing children from growing up with "vulgar accents" (125).

This snobbishness and heightened sense of superiority to others—which would later influence his reporting and depiction of the working class—became a fundamental part of his identity when attending secondary school at Eton College. At Eton, Orwell was distinguished as a "King's Scholar" which meant that he was "absolved from all fees except basic living expenses" and became a member of "an intellectual elite within a social elite" (Taylor 58). Also, as King's Scholars, Orwell and his contemporaries were designated their own premises in the college which were separate from the other students who were referred to by the Latin phrase "oppidans" meaning town-dwellers (58). Taylor notably describes Orwell as having been "undoubtedly proud" of his newfound status, as evidenced by a letter from the time in which he describes "beastly oppidans," and that it "overhung his work, friendships, and opinions" all throughout his adulthood (58, 71).

Nowhere in his later years are Orwell's privileged upbringing and Etonian snobbishness more evident than in his time reporting on the living conditions among the working class when writing *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Instead of living among his subjects during his time in Wigan, Orwell had been known to frequently spend his nights in his sister's home in Leeds where he "evidently enjoyed the 'elbow room' of the Dakin's middle-class menage" (Crawley 141). After his first trip to the coal mines, Orwell (who was once identified as a "public school man" by his colleague, Jack Commons, after watching him "saunter" through the *Adelphi* office) was perceived by the northerners as emanating an "unconscious air of superiority" (Taylor 71, 213). Furthermore, Orwell is reported to have distinguished himself as a member of the bourgeoisie after being confronted by a "militant communist" in Sheffield: "'Look here, I'm a member of the bourgeoisie and my family are bourgeoisie. If you talk to them like that, I'll punch your head'" (213).

Despite the considerable amount of biographical evidence that indicates he was not the objective reporter that his publishers had initially sought, many critics continue to portray Orwell as the unbiased champion of the working class who documented their lives in an accurate and honest fashion. In his review of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Michael Amundsen describes Orwell as a "truth seeker" whose "clear-sighted and humane depiction of 'otherness' shows his skills as an ethnographer" (9). Even in light of potentially misrepresenting the reality of the living conditions among the poor, Amundsen proceeds to make the paradoxical claim that Orwell's "selectivity of facts" and his role as an "imaginative writer" meld to "create unique works of clear-sighted ethnography" (15, 16). Similarly, in his biography, *Becoming George Orwell: Life and Letters, Legend and Legacy*, John Rodden attempts to assure readers that Orwell's "creative imagination" is "rooted in fact," as well as that "many of the events in *The Road to Wigan Pier* really took place" (87). Also, in Gordon Beadle's analysis of the text, he suggests that the report is an accurate account of the "lives of and working conditions of the miners" (90).

In each of the previously mentioned reviews of the text, these critics—in an attempt to favorably portray Orwell as a hero of the working class—do not seriously consider the validity of Orwell's reporting. When praising Orwell for being an "imaginative writer" and having a "creative imagination," Amundsen and Rodden refuse to acknowledge that these traits could lead to

dishonest and biased writing. Also, each of the critics frequently disregard the historical context of Orwell's time in the north of England which includes his rushed reporting, insufficient contact with the Wigan community, and arrogant conduct with the poor. Furthermore, these critics (aside from Beadle, who makes note of Orwell's interest in the "poverty novel" as a child to portray Orwell as having always cared about the poor) disregard his privileged upbringing and its influence on his perception of others—most notably, the working class (Beadle 190).

Contrary to the claims of these critics who are desperate to portray Orwell as a hero of the poor, Orwell's degrading depiction of the working class and failure to remain objective in his reporting can, in fact, be found all throughout *The Road to Wigan Pier*—and as early as the first chapter. When reviewing his descriptions of Wigan's working-class communities, it is evident that Orwell's bourgeoisie upbringing hinders his ability to portray the people and neighborhoods that he encounters in an impartial manner.

When describing the living conditions in the Brooker's home, Orwell describes Mr. Brooker, who runs the tripe shop and lodging house alongside his wife, as "carrying a full chamber-pot which he gripped with his thumb over the rim" (12). Orwell further notes that the same "broad black thumb" left "thumb marks" on the "bread-and-butter" that was served to the lodgers at breakfast (15). When reviewing this moment in the text, it is important to note that it is more likely that a member of the bourgeoisie or upper class who is accustomed to a cleaner and more refined standard of living—such as Orwell, himself—would describe the specific details of Mr. Brooker's handling of the chamber-pot and the thumb marks on the food that he serves. In support of this observation, British novelist and contemporary of Orwell, Jack Hilton, recalls memories from his own working-class upbringing to further demonstrate that this particular passage is reflective of Orwell's own reactions of disgust and not a true account of the working-class experience: "I've carried po-s downstairs. AND I've always gripped the po with my thumb well over the brim...(o)ne inexperienced in po-s should get hold of one, feel its weight and carry it" (Clarke 774). In other words, given that he has been privileged enough to never have used a chamber pot, Orwell regards Mr. Brooker's use of his thumb in gripping the chamber pot's rim as disgusting instead of a practical and helpful way of handling it. Furthermore, after this particular passage, Orwell explicitly describes his disgust with the chamber pot when noting that its placement under the breakfast table one day prompted his departure—along with the Brooker's food which he describes as "vile" (17).

In addition to the Brooker's home, Orwell's disgust for the working class and unfamiliarity with the customs of their lifestyle later hinder his ability to objectively report on the appearance and lives of the people whom he encounters. When describing one inhabitant of Wigan, Orwell writes, "One woman's face stays by me, a worn skull-like face on which was a look of intolerable misery and degradation. I gathered that in that dreadful pigsty, struggling to keep her large brood of children clean, she felt as I should feel if I were coated all over with dung" (63). Instead of conversing with the woman whom he observes and then documenting her thoughts, upbringing, living conditions and struggles, Orwell merely regards her as a spectacle and observes her from afar. Given that he suggests that he would feel as though he were "coated all over with dung," were he to share her appearance, one may infer that Orwell's failure to approach and accurately describe the working-class woman is rooted in his repulsion by and contempt for her image. In his essay *Revisiting Orwell's Wigan Pier*, Robert Pearce further speaks to

Orwell's disconnect with this woman when describing Orwell as relying upon his own "mind-reading ability" to write about her (420). Pearce also criticizes Orwell's description of the woman when writing that "she felt as Orwell might have felt, not if he were in her position--an arguable position--but if he were covered with dung" (420). Similarly, in her review of Orwell's depiction of Wigan's female population, English novelist and contemporary of Orwell, Storm Jameson, notes the following: "Too much of (Orwell's) energy runs away in an intense interest in and curiosity about his feelings! 'What things I am seeing for the first time! What smells I am enduring! There is a woman raking ashes with her hands and here I am watching her!'" (Rae 78).

In further reviewing his vile depiction of the people of Wigan's working-class community, it is worth highlighting Orwell's tendency to describe his subjects as gross and disgusting insects and animals. In the first chapter of the text, Orwell compares all the inhabitants of the Brooker's home to "blackbeetles" who remain "creeping round and round" in "endless muddles of slovened jobs and mean grievances" (17). By referring to the working-class residents as "blackbeetles," Orwell reduces them to small insects that others find repulsive and he renders their life work as insignificant. In the same chapter, Orwell further reinforces the image of the working-class residents as disgusting animals when noting that the Brooker's home "stank like a ferret's cage" in the morning (6). Furthermore, Orwell's description of one of the Brooker's children as a "large pig-like young man" portrays the working class as composed of people who, like pigs, are heavy and have no awareness of their own filth, odor, and size (11). As a result of his tendency to describe his impoverished subjects as disgusting insects and animals, Orwell does not develop an accurate and objective account of the appearance of those who compose the working class. Rather, Orwell provides his readers with a description of his own personal reactions to and judgments of the working class whom he regards as inferior to himself. It is for the previous reason that Jameson once wrote that, "The first thing a socialist writer has to realize is that there is no value in the emotions...started in him by the sight, smell, and touch of poverty. The emotions are no doubt unavoidable. There is no need to record them. Let him go and pour them down the drain" (Rae 78).

Later in the text, Orwell further emphasizes his own disgusted reactions to his surroundings in Wigan when describing the outer appearance of the working-class neighborhoods that he encounters: "As you walk through the industrial towns you lose yourself in the labyrinths of little brick houses blackened by smoke, festering in planless chaos round miry alleys and little cindered yards where there are stinking dust-bins and lines of grimy washing and half ruinous w.c.'s" (51). One may infer that Orwell's grotesque depiction of the homes and buildings in Wigan as "blackened," "stinking," "grimy," and "half ruinous" stem from the higher standard of living to which he was accustomed as a child. In addition to Eton College, Orwell is known to have attended St. Cyprian's School which was once described as "an exceptional place" that was "laid out on a five acre-site, with spacious living quarters, a substantial dining hall, a gymnasium, and even a small chapel" (Taylor 36). It is also likely that, as a result of his bourgeoisie upbringing, Orwell's refusal to closely live among the poor and become familiar with their living conditions contributed to his critical and judgmental descriptions of the working-class neighborhoods in Wigan. This inference seems plausible given that, as mentioned earlier, Orwell was reported to have made frequent trips to his sister's home in Leeds (Crawley 141). Furthermore,

Robert Pearce notes that Orwell left Wigan less than two months into his six month trip that he had originally planned; in addition, Orwell had not been able to learn enough about these working-class communities to “fill a whole volume” (417, 418). Given this information, it comes as no surprise that Orwell, in this particular passage, attempts to depict all working-class neighborhoods as filthy, decayed, and broken-down. Also, his lack of familiarity with the living conditions among the working class likely accounts for Orwell's description of the Brookers as existing in the “tens and hundreds of thousands,” despite the reputation of their lodging house for being “probably the worst” one in Wigan (417).

Given the overwhelming amount of textual and biographical evidence that indicates that Orwell was not the objective reporter that many critics have depicted him as, one may begin to consider the manner in which *The Road to Wigan Pier* was received among the working-class population whom he observed. As one may surmise, the available research and information on the subject matter suggests that Orwell's report may have caused some people in Wigan to feel embarrassed and ashamed. Stephen Wadhams “in *Remembering Orwell*, remarks correctly that not everyone in Wigan thanked Orwell for ‘making the name Wigan synonymous with poverty and degradation’ (Davison 72)” (Crawley 144). In the same source, Crawley proceeds to note that Orwell's work “tarnished the reputation of Wigan and its residents,” as well as that “The disgusting smells in the Brooker's home lives on in the reader's mind and singles out working-class people” (145). In regards to the stigma that *The Road to Wigan Pier* inflicted upon the Wigan community, Davison denounces Orwell's depiction of the working class as infrequent bathers: “Unfortunately it is only too true that not only the working class of that time, but most English people had a reputation for bathing infrequently (73)” (145). Also, after noting that Orwell and his wife Eileen did not distribute copies of *The Road to Wigan Pier* to their working-class subjects after its publication, Davison comments that their failure to do so was a “regrettable oversight” (144-5). However, since it was reported that he “rushed” to finish writing *The Road to Wigan Pier*, it is not certain that Orwell would have shared the same opinion (Rodden 36). Given his apparent lack of concern for his book's reception among its subjects, one cannot help but conclude that Orwell's failure to provide the people of Wigan with copies of his work reflects his own failure to consider that the people of Wigan might have appreciated the opportunity to read his account of themselves, their living conditions, and their community.

After reviewing the details of Orwell's privileged upbringing; disgust for the appearance, habits, and living conditions of the working class; and the effects that his writing had on his subjects, it is worthwhile to further reconsider Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* as an accurate and objective account of Wigan's working-class population. Despite having been commissioned by the Left Book Club to write “a documentary report on the conditions among the unemployed in the north of England,” Orwell's emphasis on his own perceptions and his tendency to grossly depict his surroundings indicate that his writing failed to meet his publishers' expectations for an accurate and objective report (Orwell vii). In addition to failing to live up to the demands of his publishers' original task, as well as placing the historical reliability of *The Road to Wigan Pier* in question, Orwell's focus on his own reactions of disgust prompt other important considerations: Is it possible for a person of bourgeoisie status to observe and report on the living conditions of the poor in an objective and unbiased manner? Also, to what extent do one's own upbringing, cultural norms, and values influence one's perceptions of and interactions with those

from different socioeconomic backgrounds? If one were to respond to these questions with Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* in mind, it would be reasonable to conclude that a person of the bourgeoisie class would find it challenging to reliably report on the struggles of the poor and disadvantaged without conveying their own personal judgment. It would also be reasonable to believe that one's own upbringing and the social norms and values to which one is accustomed forever guide one's outlook on the people and environments which one encounters. Given these considerations, perhaps a person of the working class might have been able to produce a more authentic account of the Wigan community and come closer to fulfilling the expectations that were originally set forth by the Left Book Club.

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