



“The lower classes smell”: An Olfactory Reading of George Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier*

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Abstract

The Road to Wigan Pier (1937), set in twentieth-century Northern England, serves as an olfactory text, overlooking class conditions, suspended between the two world wars. Orwell confronts class division, authoritarianism and communism in his novel and talks about socialism leading to its utopian alternative. This paper will argue how, by applying politics and aesthetics to smell, one could analyse class distinctions and class consciousness in *The Road to Wigan Pier* and whether this envisioned utopia is achieved in modern times. Orwell is haunted by a ‘stench’ from the very first day of his journey, and he writes about it so tactfully that one starts to smell the poverty, unemployment, and lodging-house issues the ‘lower classes’ were facing back in that era. This paper, divided into three sections will begin by tracing Orwellian critics, reviewers, and intellectuals who targeted middle-class aversions to industrial ‘stench’, by referring to contemporary responses to the text. It will be followed by Orwell’s obsession with the disempowered class of England through a close reading of the literalisation and deconstruction of smell in this text and his other subsequent texts. It will then discuss how Orwell uses the politics of smell to ideas of alienation, exoticisation, and eroticisation – leading to class division, not only between the English ‘upper class’ and ‘lower class’, but the whole English class as superior to the East (especially Burma and India). To conclude, the paper will argue in a broader aspect how smell is not merely an antithesis between good or bad smell but a parameter of *somatic synaesthesia* and how it stands in as an unconscious tool for the judgement of both ethical and unethical categories of smell.

Keywords: Olfactory ethics, Socialism, Class division, Somatic synaesthesia, Imperialistic industrialisation.

Introduction

Reviewing Smell Across Orwell:

George Orwell, the famous author of *Animal Farm* (1945) and *1984* (1949), wrote *The Road to Wigan Pier* in 1936 under the commission of Victor Gollancz. Orwell’s (1933) previous work,

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Down and Out in Paris and London serve as a stepping stone for this book, as his experiences with poverty in Paris and London mirror industrial Northern England perfectly; the geographical change does not assuage poverty in an amorphous experience. Published in 1937 by Gollancz, *The Road to Wigan Pier* faced widespread criticism. Even though the first part of the book was praised for its veracity, the second part of the book was met with various reactions; the majority of critics like Arthur Calder-Marshall, Victor Gollancz, Harold Laski, and others, questioned Orwell’s idea of socialism, justice, liberty, and freedom. Gollancz himself wanted to publish only the first descriptive half of the book, but later, being coerced by Eileen O’Shaughnessy, Orwell’s wife, and his agent, published the book with a foreword. His idea of socialism wholly differs from Orwell’s; in fact, Gollancz questions Orwell’s conception of socialism, liberty, and justice, for he never once defines in his book what his understanding of these words is. Gollancz, in the foreword, harshly critiques Orwell by calling him names such as “frightful snob” (Meyers, 2002, p. 95), crank, and anti-intellectual; he even goes as far as to refer to the second half of the book as an attack from the enemy force. Orwell was placed under surveillance by the Special Branch from 1936 due to his research for the book. Orwell’s journey towards Northern England, specifically Wigan,¹ as suggested by Jack Hilton to him, “for there are the colliers and they’re good stuff” (Clarke, 2016, p. 765), serves as a premise for the first half of the book. Upon hearing the book’s title, one might assume that it is about a journey to Wigan Pier, but surprisingly, the infamous or rather, thanks to Orwell, the now famous Wigan Pier does not exist; in fact, it never existed. Orwell (1937/2020) confesses so in his book: “Alas! Wigan Pier has been demolished, and even the spot where it used to stand is no longer certain” (p. 70). The pier Orwell was talking about was probably a coal loading staithe, a wooden jetty, where wagons from a nearby colliery were unloaded into waiting barges on the canal. It was used as more of an ironic, humorous joke popularised by George Formby, than a real landmark. The first part of the book is a documentation of the condition of the depressive class in Lancashire and Yorkshire, as Arthur Calder-Marshall says, “Mr Orwell is detached. He writes of what he has seen. He does not exaggerate. There is no need to.” (Meyers, 2002, p. 102) The book opens with Orwell’s description of a dwelling house turned into a tripe shop and lodging house by the Brookers couple, a place filled with dirt, both literally and metaphorically. Orwell’s (1937/2020) introduction of the couple instantly fills the reader with a sense of disgust; Mr. Brooker, “a dark, small-boned, sour, Irish-looking man” (p. 6) whose hands are never clean and most of the time he is seen carrying a full chamber-pot, and Mrs. Brooker, an invalid always complaining and pining for old-age pensioners living in their house to die. In the second and third chapters, he provides a vivid description of the work conditions in the coal mines and miners, the ugly truth hidden by the comforts of modern civilisation. From chapter four onwards, Orwell becomes more and more of an anthropologist, giving the reader accounts of the rents of different lodging houses to draw a clear picture of the lodging house issue. The slight change in narration might throw off some readers, but Walter Greenwood, defending Orwell in his review comments, “Most readers, unfortunately, are mentally spineless and, as soon as they see tables of statistics ... turn the pages to a more agreeable chapter or lose interest in the book altogether” (Meyers, 2002, p. 100). Orwell visits lodging houses, talks with the people living there, assesses its labyrinthine state and sharply critiques not only the government but also its inhabitants. They are addicted to their poverty (in a way) and enjoy the lack of self-respect that comes with their lowness of class: “it is equally certain that their circumstances do not encourage self-respect” (Orwell, 1937/2020, p. 56). Chapter five continues with the statistics, but with accounts of dole given to unemployed people, he also dives deeper to discuss the problem of unemployment and what measures are taken to improve it. The second part of the book is semi-autobiographical. As Gollancz says,

¹ First inhabited by the Romans, Wigan was always a “town built on coal” (Fletcher, 2005, p. 66). The first document of coal rights of Wigan is dated to 1350. Wigan was the most successful industrial towns, for its coal “burned as bright as a candle”, and it was used in a variety of markets for different purposes. Wigan had three coal-tippers which were referred to as the ‘pier’ - Bankes, German, and Brankers. The last pier was demolished on 1929, as railways gradually replaced canal trade.

“Mr Orwell now proceeds to act as devil’s advocate for the case against Socialism” (Meyers, 2002, p. 94). He talks about socialism and reasons why people are so opposed to a system that will benefit them. He criticises the contemporary socialism party leaders and describes how they alienate themselves from the working class: “And in itself it is quite enough to explain the alienation of decent minds from Socialism” (Orwell, 1937/2020, p. 148). Orwell was against totalitarian control from either spectrum of political ideology, and this served as the reason why he did not join the communist party of Spain under Stalin’s rule. Instead, he was a part of the POUM during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).² Though the book faced negative criticism after its publication and is not recognised as one of the more famous books of Orwell, it served its purpose back then as it is doing now- unveiling the reality of industrial towns through the eyes or rather ‘smells’, of its people. Critics like Alex Woloch, Lane Crothers, and D. Eric Schansberg have worked on this book in the past and other scholars are still working, reading it from the lens of socialism, Marxism, and anti-imperialism, but this paper will focus on an olfactory analysis of George Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier*. One might assume the predominance of the word ‘road’ in the title came to life because Orwell was always trying to escape from Wigan, or better, Wigan’s smell. Orwell, in 1936, wrote to Jack Common, “I have been in these barbarous regions for about two months ...I am beginning to pine to be back in the languorous South” (Orwell, 2013a, p. 66). No matter what Orwell says in his book, it was quite clear that he hated its smells, and we cannot ignore the fact that Orwell judged things quite a bit based on smells, as he writes to his mother at the tender age of eight, “I am very sorry to hear we had those beastly freaks of smelly white mice back. I hope these arnt smelly one. if they arnt I shall like them” (p. 18). Given all these facts, it becomes quite clear as to why Gollancz was so cryptic of Orwell writing about smells: “I believe myself that Mr Orwell is exaggerating violently: I do not myself think that more than a very small proportion of them have this quaint idea” (Meyers, 2002, p. 94). Gollancz was a Jew, and he admitted why his identity as a Jew might become a predicament in understanding the olfactory issues of the text: “among Jews of this type, class distinctions do not exist”, whereas Orwell was a middle-class Englishman, taking the role of Phelan’s ‘unmarked’³ in the olfactory spectrum. It is important to note that when Gollancz says class distinction does not exist between Jews, it in a way reinforces the stereotypes of the eighteenth century of Jews as the other, outsider, and alien race existing “outside of normal physiology” (Rosenthal, 2024, p. 363) and social categories. Blumenbach in the eighteenth century classified racial identity into five types, where “Jews occupied an ambiguous and unstable place” (p. 362). According to him, Jews were the most distinctive race due to their physical characteristics; they present “the most notorious and least deceptive [example], which can easily be recognised everywhere by their eyes alone, which breathe of the East” (p. 362). This was not only limited to scientific anthropological ideas, but writers of the eighteenth century also described Jews as having distinct skin colour, “dark and goggling eyes, prominent nose, and bad smell” (p. 363). Jews were seen as morally corrupt, smelly, ugly, and greedy in literature. Beginning with Shakespeare’s (1600) Shylock from *The Merchant of Venice* (although it dates back to the early seventeenth century) to Daniel Defoe’s (1724) *Roxana*, the Jews have always possessed the role of the ‘other’. A character from Knipe’s (1715) *A City Ramble* describes the Jews as a polecat and bearer of a diseased body, which should be kept in quarantine before they are to meet others. Thus, Gollancz’s confession that “it is a long time since I have read so living a book, or one so full of a burning indignation against poverty and oppression” (Meyers, 2002, p. 92) not only affirms his identity as a socialist

² Orwell joined the Spanish Civil War (17 Jul 1936- 1 Apr 1939) right after he finished writing *The Road to Wigan Pier*. His essay “Looking Back on the Spanish War” serves as one of the truest war-documentary of the civil war. In the essay he talks about his experience in the battlefield, chaotic political situation of that time, and how history was being historicized.

³ Janice Carlisle in her paper “The Smell of Class: British Novels of the 1860s” takes Peggy Phelan’s (1993) theory of “The Politics of Unmarked” from the book *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. Phelan’s idea of the unmarked - white, male, hetero is subverted by Carlisle, here middle class, male, hetero becomes the unmarked. The opposed binary position of marked is taken by “the supposedly subjugated inferior”. (Carlisle, 2001, p. 4)

but also as a Jew who stands at the other end of the spectrum of olfactory sensitivity, as the marked.

The Smelly White Mūs(e)⁴

The Road to Wigan Pier draws a vivid picture of the industrial towns of the 1930s England. The book is not merely an accurate documentation of an economically depressed Northern England, but also serves as a literary space in which Orwell demonstrates how language itself can be deftly wielded to engage with serious social realities through suggestion and nuance rather than direct exposition; an olfactory reading of the book will clearly show that. The quotation used in the title of the paper, “the lower classes smell” (Orwell, 1937/2020, p. 123), focuses mainly on two ideas – ‘lower class’ and ‘smell’, both of which have been used in abundance by Orwell in this book. He uses ‘smell’ thirty-seven times, while the term ‘lower class(es)’ appears only ten times; notably, eight of these instances follow the idea of physical repulsiveness associated with them, particularly in relation to the way they smell. Orwell’s perception of the lower classes is summed up in the idea that they smell bad, which might seem offensive at first glance, but if one traces the history of the word ‘class’ and how it came to mean what it means today, his equation gains credibility. Raymond Williams (1976) in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, traces the word ‘class’ from the “Latin word *classis*, a division according to property of the people of Rome” (p. 60), and it came to its modern social meaning, “a would-be specific description of a social formation” (p. 60) only in the period between 1770 and 1840, following the period of Industrial Revolution. Thus, the notion, that it is smell that creates class and not vice versa, for the body, the producer of smell, has existed way before the definition of class as one is familiar with today. It is interesting how industrialism has reshaped both the standard definition of class and Orwell’s idea of class as discussed in the book. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, class and smell assimilate to create a class structure; Orwell (1937/2020), identifying the smell of the room that “stank like a ferret’s cage” (p. 4) not only informs the reader about the pathetic condition of the lodging-houses inhabited by the working-class people, but also dehumanises them, evoking the image of a room manifested (or rather man-infested) by animals. In a way, Orwell ends up creating a distance between man and animal, rather than between upper-class people and lower-class people. An idea that also follows in Orwell’s (1945) *Animal Farm*, where the ‘comrade’ pigs end up shapeshifting into the upper-class bourgeois man: “The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig” (p. 92). The only reason he can write about class structures is that he is not a part of the working class, as Orwell (1937) says, writing not only requires leisure, but it is important to have solitude and peace of mind, which “is never easy to attain in a working-class home” (p. 78). It is also his class privilege that allows him to leave the room and return to identify the smell of an animal from the smell of a human. Orwell dehumanises the human body for its natural bodily functions, but the nation is humanised to create a bodily sensation (discussed later in the paper). He compares the working-class with animals and the imagery of the animals is picked very selectively. He uses the metaphor of black beetles; the ‘black’ here symbolising the white British men who work in the coal mines and are always covered in coal dust. His application of words like ‘subterranean’ and ‘labyrinthine’, with the insect imagery “creeping round and round” (p. 14), evokes the sense of hell where one is stuck forever and is always smelling of sulphur. It is *as if* the coal miners bring back a piece of hell with them every time they emerge from the mines (with their smell). Orwell then uses food as a symbol of the hierarchy of smell; food for the lower class is survival. The food for them is stored in such a way that one is reminded of an apothecary: “For dinner there were generally

⁴ The word ‘mouse’ originates from the Proto-Indo-European root *muh₂s-* (or *mus-*), which generally referred to the small rodent. This ancient root evolved into the Proto-Germanic term *mūs*, which directly gave rise to the Old English *mūs*. The word *mūs* and *muse* has a visible punning to it. The visible pun of these two words created the word ‘*mūs(e)*’ in this paper, describing the white English working class men who served as a muse to Orwell for *The Road to Wigan Pier*. The Burmese men also served as a kind of a muse for the exoticisation visible in the text.

those three penny steak puddings which are sold ready-made in tins” (p. 13). The smell of the tin overpowers the smell of the food. Laski rightly points this out in his review, “But having, very ably, depicted a disease, Mr Orwell does what so many well-meaning people do: needing a remedy (he knows it is socialism), he offers an incantation instead” (Meyers, 2002, p. 105). But one must question if they are suffering from an illness, and if they are not prepared to accept socialism, what should work as a medicine? Is it the rice pudding? The rice pudding, where one is unsure of the ingredients it is made from, is not dissimilar from Orwell (1937/2020), who called himself a socialist, even though he “had not much grasp of what Socialism meant” (p. 136). Orwell has used food not only as a tool for class division but also for racial subjugation. He compares the food habits of the Englishman with an Indian or Japanese man and concludes, “Our unemployment allowances, miserable though they are, are framed to suit a population with very high standards” (p. 96). Alienation in *The Road to Wigan Pier* works in a very subtle, nuanced way; the southerner not only recognises a fellow southerner due to the linguistic brotherhood, but it becomes a question of olfactory companionship and recollection of collective memory: “He caught my eye and suddenly divined that I was a fellow-Southerner.” (p.14) One alienates the ‘other’ based on smell; the individual recognises another individual differently from the community. The very reason the “Brookers could never understand why” (p.14) the “sharp-nosed Cockney” (p.13) left the lodging house with so much disgust and why Orwell soon followed his lead. Karl Marx (1844), in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, remarks that alienation is not a simplistic one-way process. He talks about estrangement of labour, things, one’s conscious self, and finally “estrangement of man from man” (Marx, 1844, p. 78). In Marx’s (1844) idea of estrangement, it “appears in the worker as an activity of alienation”, whereas, “in the non-worker as a state of alienation” (p. 83). Orwell represents this argument in his book, in a way, where the entire working-class people, see themselves as a ‘community’, and for them it is the ‘individual’ self that is the ‘other’ this is why when he tries to mingle with the working-class people just as he did with social outcasts, he fails miserably: “But when you come to the normal working class the position is totally different. To begin with, there is no short cut into their midst” (Orwell, 1937/2020, p. 150).⁵ The book began with Orwell’s description of the lower class, but he is not only observing them as an auxiliary of class structure, his gaze is that of the penetrator who doesn’t shy away from the squeamishness that comes with the lowness of the class. He, as a writer, presents to his readers the real conditions of the working-class people while sympathising with them, but it is difficult to sympathise with a community he considers himself to be a part of but (materially) does not belong to: “I was born into what you might describe as the lower-upper-middle class.” (p. 117) No matter how Orwell (1937/2020) tries to be one with the working class, his super-egotistical capitalist conscience would never allow him to be: “I have seen just enough of the working class to avoid idealising them” (p. 111). He can think about the harshness of the working-class, but he cannot feel it: “When I *thought* of poverty I *thought* of it in terms of brute starvation” (p. 145), (my emphasis) and even if he feels it, it will be more of an intellectual than a material feeling. It is easier for Orwell to negotiate with the working class as a bourgeois author than as an industrialist, for he knows where his expertise lies. Naturally, he wishes to improve the lives of prostitutes, beggars, and tramps, for he cannot tolerate moral pollution but not better to that extreme where they can replace him. He has a soft spot/parent-like affection for the lower-class people who have some sense of self-respect, for he mentions how he admired Old Jack, because even in his poverty, he never once

⁵ The same pattern is seen in Sam Byers’ app’s novel, *Come, Join Our Disease* (2021), where the protagonist Maya, while travelling on the train, alienates herself from other passengers:

For me, as I turned my face and guided my nostrils from passenger to passenger, it was more of a sequence, a scale, as if I were able to pick out not simply the combined scent of the massed travellers, but individual armpits, signature sweats, the rank breath of dehydrated mouths hanging open. (p. 74)

Byers (2021) takes this alienation to another twist, when the readers are met with Maya’s sudden urge to become one with this “collective contamination” (p. 74) by making her consume pieces of dirt food found stuck on the side of the train seat. She in a way becomes a fitting citizen of Orwell’s imagined world where everyone “smell together, eat together, sweat together” (Byers, 2021, p. 75).

asked for a cigarette. He feels pity for the brown-faced boy who did not ‘cadge’ for his innocence when he was falsely accused of theft in the Spanish military camp. He later consoles the boy with brandy and chocolate, but he is well aware of his own guilt, his own bourgeois prejudice: “For a few minutes I had half believed him to be a thief” (para. 3). Whereas, his attitudes towards the bourgeois intelligentsia is completely different, he hated how they twisted the truths, romanticized the war for their own benefit, for he recalls, “but look back a bit, dig out the files of *New Masses* or the *Daily Worker*, and just have a look at the romantic warmongering muck that our left-wingers were spilling at that time” (para. 1). Orwell (1943) was not against the idea of war for he believed, “who don’t take the sword perish by smelly diseases” (para. 1) but he feared that, “the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world” (para. 4), his age had completely denounced the concept that “history *could* be truthfully written” (para. 4) and this is where he departs from the conventional socialist role. He also never claims to be a communist wanting to eradicate poverty; he simply tries to alleviate the miseries of the working class by providing socialism as an alternate social system. Orwell (1937/2020), in his book, offers socialism as a political as well as an olfactory device for the redistribution of smell, so that he “may sink without further struggles into the working class where” (p. 224) he belongs, losing his aitches or rather his sense of hygiene.

The Fragrant Brown Mūs(e)

Harold J. Laski, while reviewing *The Road to Wigan Pier*, writes, “It (the first part of the book) takes an ugly section of British life, and it forces us to confront it for the ugly thing that it is” (Meyers, 2002, p.104). Upon reading the sentence out of context, or rather in a psychosexual context, as Freud was one of the most prominent figures of that era, one might conclude that Laski was comparing Northern England with British ‘junk’. It not only serves as a slag heap of the nation, but when the nation turns into a body, it becomes the embarrassing part of the body that must remain hidden. The same humanisation of the nation is seen in the book, where industrialism ruins England: “In a crowded, dirty little country like ours one takes defilement almost for granted” (Orwell, 1937/2020, p.16), more of a binary relationship between a man and a woman, an idea that also resonates in William Blake’s (1794) “The Sick Rose”. The coal miners, representatives of industrialism, covered in coal-dust, “emerging as black as a Negro” (p. 33), are always perceived as a threat to England, represented as the white, sweet, virginal woman. It is *as if* England’s pure air is robbed by an overpowering smell of coal burning. It doesn’t just stop with polluting England, because industrialism paved the path for imperialism. History for the colonized begins with imperialism, but for the colonizers, it begins with the smell of the burning coal in the steam engine. On the one hand, Industrialism corrupted the “purity” (p. 226)⁶ of England, threatened the gentility of the lower-upper-middle class white men and on the other, imperialism made England eternal; the colonies served as a playhouse for them as “with cheap horses, free shooting, and hordes of black servants, it was so easy to play at being a gentleman” (p. 119). Imperialism for them served as a sublimation; it was easy for them to cling to their dignity, gentility, and their aitches. The working class of England, who were openly hostile towards the aitch-pronouncing class, who wished “that the word *hygiene* could be dropped out of the dictionary” (p. 69), neither cared for the gentility of their class nor about the smell they produced. It is this overpowering, intolerable smell that turns the lower-class gender fluid. One cannot distinguish between the men and women of the working class because they both smell bad. Orwell’s description of the Brooker’s lodging house clearly testifies to that: “The smell of the kitchen was dreadful, but, as with that of the bedroom, you ceased to notice it after a while” (p. 13). Thus, we can say gender distinction through smell is a privilege limited to the upper class. The lower class might be gender fluid in that sense, but it does not mean it can get rid of gender performativity: “Practically never, for instance, in a

⁶ The word is used by Richard Hoggart in the Afterword of *The Road to Wigan Pier* to describe how Gollancz added a foreword to the book to protect the ideological sentiment of the readers of his Left Book Club from Orwell.

working-class home, will you see the man doing a stroke of the housework. Unemployment has not changed this convention” (p. 77-78). The women are aware of their dreadful destiny, for they have submitted themselves religiously to their working-class condition, accepting to deal with the collective stench of the community by “poking a stick up a foul drain-pipe” (p. 16). Orwell uses smell as a tool for exoticisation, eroticisation, and gendering in this book. Smell has always been a tool for the West to exoticize the East; Orwell is not exempt from it. He recounts a memory where he was comfortable/habituated enough to let a Burmese boy be in charge of his dressing, and the primary reason he gives for it is, “he was a Burman and undisgusting; I could not have endured to let an English manservant handle me in that intimate manner. I felt towards a Burman almost as I felt towards a woman.” (p.138) The exoticisation of the Burmese woman works on a deeper level, for the Burmese prostitute is different from the English one; she has gold skin, ivory teeth, and bargains with the author, “I said ‘For twenty silver pieces, /Maiden, sleep with me.’/.../ Stood out for twenty-five” (Orwell, 1925/2013b, ll. 7-12). She is the perfect Oriental dream for the West. England’s prostitution is a result of brute starvation, whereas the ‘virgin’ voiced Burmese prostitute of Mandalay appears more as a seductress in Orwell’s poem “Romance”. The image of the ivory teeth, a colonial trade commodity, compensates for the lack of teeth of the Englishman working for the industries, for them ironically “Teeth is just a misery” (Orwell, 1937/2020, p. 93). In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, this exoticisation mainly stems from olfaction; the smell of the Burmese people is not disgusting for him, in fact, it is a smell “that makes one’s teeth tingle” (p. 138). The white English upper class felt queasy towards the white English lower class, but “at any rate the Burmese, were not felt to be physically repulsive. One looked down on them as ‘natives’, but one was quite ready to be physically intimate with them” (p. 137). Exoticisation like alienation also works both ways: “The Chinese, I believe, say that a white man smells like a corpse. The Burmese say the same” (p. 138). Ironically, Orwell did not feel disgust towards the smell of a Burmese boy, but imperialism disgusted and traumatised him. He escaped class-friction in Burma but after five years of serving in the Indian Imperial Police Force he “hated the imperialism” (p. 139) and came back to the same class-friction, trying to find a solution for it to release himself from a kind of a moral anxiety: “I was conscious of an immense weight of guilt that I had got to expiate” (p. 143). Though Orwell tried to escape from the cruelties of imperialism by leaving Burma, the experiences haunted him throughout his life; he could not help but talk about them even in this book. Similarly, one does not escape a bad smell simply by substituting places that smell good. One is haunted by the memories of bad smell, as Orwell (1937/2020) himself says, “I shall never forget the reek of dirty feet” (p. 134). In a way it is as if it is one’s ethical, olfactory duty to smell the bad so they can appreciate good smell; in that way smell becomes religious where one has to go through temptation and not succumb to it to successfully reach heaven, as Orwell (1937/2020) says, “It is a kind of duty to see and smell such places now and again, especially smell them, lest you should forget that they exist; though perhaps it is better not to stay there too long” (p. 15).⁷ If one is to stay in a place that smells bad for too long, they themselves become a part of it, following the process of olfactory adaptation or habituation. It then becomes an intellectual and individual question, for the

⁷ In modern-day novels, such as Byers’s *Come Join Our Disease*, it becomes an olfactory duty to smell the bad smell, the protagonist of the novel finds solace and freedom in the stench of her own faeces. One can also argue that even Byers fails to overcome the exoticization of the female body. His vivid description of Maya, Zelma, Kim, Saddle, Margot, and Ama, all six women living in a tiny basement-like space making a tiny community, and performing the “ritual” (Byers, 2021, p. 196) of defecating on the same space reminds the readers of Shakespeare’s (1606) three witches cackling, “Hover through the fog and filthy air” (1.1.12). This ritualistic rebellion in the novel is re-packaged as the modern-day dirty protest movement, presumably inspired from the 1970’s Irish Dirty Protest or No Wash Protest movement that took place in Maze prison, when the Irish republic prisoners were protesting the British government’s decision to remove their political prisoner status. In the novel readers are primarily faced with Ryan, Seth, and Harrison (taking the role of the holy-trinity) trying to salvage Maya from drowning in her own sins or rather urine in this scenario. Strategically, Ryan, Seth, and Harrison are not worried about every single homeless person, it is specifically Maya whom they want to resurrect because she is “nearly like us” (Byers, 2021, p. 14). One also cannot ignore the exoticization of the East in the novel, “that night we ordered an excessive Indian takeaway and ate it’ with our hands, sitting on the dusty floor” (Byers, 2021, p. 180); the floor is mentioned as ‘dusty’ but the food just had to be excessively Indian for it to awaken a sense of repulsion in the readers.

duration of resistance tests their ethics before becoming one with the ‘community’, or rather be punished to make a whole new community for submitting to the words of the serpent of the ‘subterranean’.

Olfactory Ethics in Post-Orwellian Era Towards a Conclusion:

Orwell’s (1937) *The Road to Wigan Pier* is full of references to bad smells, he doesn’t simply travel from one place to another, he journeys from one stench to another: “the train was rolling through open country before the villa-civilisation began to close in upon us again, and then the outer slums, and then the slag-heaps” (p. 17). The attitude towards certain smells has changed throughout the centuries. Robert Muchembled (2020), in *Smells: A Cultural History of Odours*, while talking about the attitude towards sweat, opines that: “The erotic thrill felt by women — not men - at their lover’s sweat is in fact a better match for the role of androstenone, according to modern science” (p. 79). Though we cannot generalize this point of view, for there are other determining factors, both personal and socio-political. The acceptance of the smell of cigarettes has also gone through changes in different social systems. Orwell was a chain-smoker, and he started the habit of smoking while residing among the working class, because in the 20th century, tobacco and alcohol were cheap and easily available to everyone: “the ordinary man spends more on cigarettes than an Indian peasant has for his whole livelihood” (Orwell, 1946, p. 9). In *Books v. Cigarettes*, he condemned his countrymen for spending more money on cigarettes than on books, though he is guilty of the same crime: “I am spending far more on tobacco than I do on books” (p. 8). Cigarette smell travelled from being a sign of modern glamour and adulthood in the early 1900s to becoming a symbol of health risk, social deviance, and moral irresponsibility in the 21st century. Orwell, through the politics of olfaction, reintroduces his readers to two classes with two different categories of smell: the collective smell of a community that is identified with the working class and the olfactory individuation that is associated with the non-working class. The hyper-moral conscience associated with smell is declassified by the collectivization or categorization of the smell. The upper class is always associated with an analytical sense of smell, i.e, one can smell them and identify them individually, whereas the working class is a carrier of the smell of a community: “In a working-class home - I am not thinking at the moment of the unemployed, but of comparatively prosperous homes - you breathe a warm, decent, deeply human atmosphere which it is not so easy to find elsewhere.” (Orwell, 1937/2020, p.112) For when it comes to the bodily smell of the labour class one can only accept the *pecunia non olet*, for “capital appears in the myth in its deodorized cleanness mystifying its smelly origins” (Hajdini, 2024, p. 132) and not the other way around. In a post-Orwellian world, one is still haunted by the parameters of somatic synaesthesia. A body whose empirical responses are subsumed to olfactory labour, whose ethical and aesthetic characteristic, psychosexual in origin systematically invert the supplementarity of odour to other organs of reception and which deconstructs any analytic doctrine that does not originate with the smell of class-consciousness (or consumption) or the arousal of the desire for an equal distribution of odours, qualifies as somatic synaesthesia. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, socialism’s smell was a political disaster, and it is quite the same in today’s given scenario. The question then becomes: if the poor people always smell, and socialism is not politically viable, is capitalism, whose smell we cannot purchase without a monetary price, the elusive ideal that exists outside Orwell’s text. Hajdini (2024), in his book establishing a link between Freud’s notion of primary repression and Marx’s primitive accumulation, debates that no matter how many times one tries to argue that capitalism is devoid of its smelly origin, it is simply not the truth,⁸ for he believes in the Freudian genesis of financial interest and reaches the conclusion that money is the ultimate alienating commodity. Moving forward, if we are to follow Freud’s argument that “There is an unmistakable social

⁸ Hajdini (2024) argues in his book, “The deodorized Spirit of capitalism, that is, the Spirit of freedom, equality, property, and of universal emancipation, is haunted by the smelly spirits of its origins” (p. 133).

factor at work in the impulse of civilization toward cleanliness” (Friedman, 1959, p. 2) and that there is “choice of a fetish, of a coprophilic pleasure in smelling which has disappeared owing to repression” (p. 2), it becomes quite clear why slum tourism rises as the new parameter of somatic synaesthesia.⁹ Though they continue to occupy the space of the societal *other* just as they did in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, waiting for new Orwells to arrive and purify themselves of the *bourgeois man’s burden* they carry.¹⁰ To conclude, even though Orwell’s view of socialism completely changed in his later works, by reading *The Road to Wigan Pier*, one can grapple with almost every social issue plaguing 20th century Britain. An olfactory reading just adds a new nuance to these as one can never “escape from disgusting smells of human origin.” (Orwell, 1943, para. 1)

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⁹ Slum tourism in itself is not a new phenomenon, it in a way is the repetition of the ‘primitive accumulation’, as Malte Steinbrink, “notes that the trend started in Victorian London over 150 years ago, when people from the London upper class were curious to see what happened in the East End” (Melik, BBC News, 2012). Many places of formerly colonised nations are attracting thousands of tourists, and they are being sold like experiences of “meaningful, educational, and enlightening encounter with the authentic” (Dias de Sousa, 2023, p. 5) rather than “places of suffering, death and inequality” (Dias de Sousa, 2023, p. 14).

¹⁰ In the end, we are met with either morally superior tourists romanticizing poverty on TripAdvisor’s travel reviews of slums or modern olfactory utopias like Sam Byers imagined, where Ryan, Seth, and Harrison try to fulfil the white man’s burden by rescuing Maya, a name whose origin lies in Sanskrit, but her ethnicity remains undisclosed.

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Bio-note

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