George Orwell
*Keep the Aspidistra Flying*

Page references are to the Penguin Classics edition.

**Freewriting prompts:**
- Starving artist stereotypes?
- What defines masculinity?
- The freedom of wealth?

**Background:**
- Published during the inter-bellum period in 1936. It anticipates WWII, but also gestures to a coming “class war.” See the references to planes and bombs on pp. 16, 21, 93 (bottom), & 257 (bottom).
- The “merry war” between the sexes may inform the class war. See pp. 128 & 244. It also explains the film version’s title.
- Orwell was active as a socialist and unionist. Despite his current reputation from 1984 and in particularly the CIA funded film version of *Animal Farm*, his works consistently critique capitalism and totalitarian governments. His other texts, and especially *Road to Wigan Pier* and *Homage to Catalonia* (about the socialist revolt in Spain), make his labour-oriented sympathies quite clear.
- Orwell died of tuberculosis on January 21, 1950.

**Themes:**
- Class is a major theme in the novel. Class is marked by a number of factors, ranging from visual appearance (clothing and visible signs of financial affluence), as well as accent, family, and other more difficult to change factors. See the following for examples:
  - p. 15 – compare para. 5 and final paragraph. Contrast “the nancy” and the old woman. Note “people of this type” (15)
  - p. 16 – compare para. 2, 3, & 4. If people are “just by-products,” then how do individuality and artistic creation relate to social context and social relations?
  - p. 39 – Comstocks as “middle-middle class.”
  - p. 41 – top and bottom of page continue class markers of “middle-middle class.” Contrast “the middle-middle classes, in which nothing ever happens” (41) against “once again things
were happening in the Comstock family” (277) when Gordon goes back into business.

- p. 87-89 – Gordon and Ravelston are contrasted according to class, not the least indicator of which is their names (first versus family name).
- p. 228 – even in the slums, where Gordon aims to escape class divisions, he recreates them himself in his marking of accent and pronunciation of his patrons.

Masculinity is another significant theme in the text. We should consider the nature of masculine identity in the same manner in which we see the artificially constructed nature of femininity, as per feminist discourse.

- In what ways is Gordon confined by his gender roles, and is this similar to the class boundaries in the text? Is this a more powerful motivator in his ‘conversion’ at the end?
- pp. 1-3 – how is Gordon emasculated by his poverty? Particularly see p. 3, para. 1.
- p. 14 – the sexual relationship is blurred into the advertising, which includes “Tight khaki shorts but that doesn’t mean you can pinch her backside” (14). Thinking of Rosemary leads Gordon into status marked by products and possessions.
- p. 25 – “fat man” for Flaxman. Does this mark his masculine identity?
- p. 79 – para. 1 (all). Being recognized by the “girls” affirms him in a peculiar way. Again, how does the general support (or derogation of) his masculinity (in part through sexual identity) connect to his identity and selfhood in general?
- p. 105 – do class and the meeting of sexual desires become elided here? Is sexual satisfaction and the soothing of masculine identity another element within class, or are they symbiotic?
- p. 242-3 – money, wealth, sexual satisfaction, and masculinity are all tied together here in the page shift.

Advertising plays a significant thematic role in the text. It is also important to note that Orwell was required by his publishers, under legal advice, to change the references to advertisements in his text (see the introduction, pp. vi-vii). See the following passages:

- p. 3-4 – very bottom of 3, over to 4. Advertising is being marked out in the opening as an important topic. Note that on p. 4 the advertisements lead directly into poetry, and that fluttering
advertisement paper is the inspiration for the poem at the heart of the novel.

- p. 5 – note that the thoughts of poetry lead Gordon right back to advertising
- Do these advertisements already give an answer to the challenges to Gordon’s masculinity that we’ve outlined?
- p. 14 – as with the discussion of masculinity, the advertisements here lead into sexual speculation and desire.
- p. 16 & 21 – Decay and the coming war are tied to advertisements here.
- p. 46 – advertisements in the Underground leads to discussion of the Money God. How does advertising replace religion in this identity formation?
- p. 93 – the aspidistra (class propriety) is connected to the Roland Butta poster, discussion of Capitalism, and the outbreak of war as the nature conclusion, the telos, of such things. Is Orwell suggesting that the teleological aim of Capitalism is warfare and WWII (when it is anticipate, not retrospectively looked back on) as a class war?
- p. 102 – “poverty is spiritual halitosis” (102) and the ads sell the solution to the trappings of poverty and social isolation.
- p. 257-8 – This is the central moment. What ethical dilemma is Gordon facing. Note that the advertisement leads directly into the class war notion. Like the ending of 1984, where Winston loves Big Brother, Gordon “did not any longer want that war to happen” (258).
- p. 262-3 – this is Gordon’s last satire of advertising, but now he seems to long to be in it. What are the advertisements really offering him?

- Poetry, or artistic creativity in general, is the other major concern of the novel. We are allowed to watch the creative process in Gordon’s endless revisions of his poem about London and the Money God, and also how this inspiration is deeply rooted in other experiences.
  - p. 4 – poster advertisements lead to poetry
  - p. 13 – smoke stacks of industry lead to poetry
  - p. 19 – posters are actualized
  - p. 25-6 – References to John Keats.
  - p. 70 – financial obligations lead to poetry
This is a key passage. The poem was originally published by Orwell as “St. Andrew’s Day” in the journal *Adelphi* in 1935.

Significant word-choices are underlined

**Poem from pp. 167-168**

Sharply the menacing wind sweeps over  
The bending poplars, newly bare,  
And the dark ribbons of the chimneys  
Veer downward; flicked by whips of air,

*Torn posters* flutter; coldly sound  
The boom of trains and the rattle of hooves,  
And the clerks who hurry to the station  
Look, shuddering, over the eastern rooves,

Thinking, each one, “Here comes the winter!  
Please God I keep my job this year!”  
And bleakly, as the cold strikes through  
Their entrails like an icy spear,

They think of rent, rates, season tickets,  
Insurance, coal, the skivvy’s wages,  
Boots, school-bills, and the next instalment  
Upon the two twin beds from Drage’s.

For if in careless summer days  
In groves of Ashtaroth¹ we whored,  
Repentant now, when winds blow cold,  
We kneel before our rightful lord;

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¹ A city of Bashan, in the kingdom of Og (Deu 1:4; Jos 12:4; Jos 13:12; Jos 9:10). It was in the half-tribe of Manasseh (Jos 13:12), and as a Levitical city was given to the Gershonites (Ch1 6:71). Uzzia, one of David’s valiant men (Ch1 11:44), is named as of this city. Hebrew plural form of Ashtoreth, the name of the Canaanite fertility goddess and consort of Baal. Also a demon in Medieval materials.
The lord of all, the money-god,
Who rules us blood and hand and brain,
Who gives the roof that stops the wind,
And, giving, takes away again;

Who spies with jealous, watchful care,
Our thoughts, our dreams, our secret ways,
Who picks our words and cuts our clothes,
And maps the pattern of our days;

Who chills our anger, curbs our hope,
And buys our lives and pays with toys,
Who claims as tribute broken faith,
Accepted insults, muted joys;

Who binds with chains the poet’s wit,
The navvy’s strength, the soldier’s pride,
And lays the sleek, estranging shield
Between the lover and his bride.