

Exploration of George Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* from Marxist Perspective

^{1*}Yasin Danish, ²Maria Khattak, ³Maheen zia, ⁴Eman Malik

^{1*}Corresponding author, Lecturer, Department of English and Modern Languages, Pak-Austria Fachhochschule, yasin.danish@fms2.paf-iast.edu.pk

²MS English, City University of Science and Information Technology, Peshawar, mariakhattak9@gmail.com

³Student, BS English, Department of English and Modern Languages, Pak-Austria Fachhochschule, maheenzia151@gmail.com

⁴Student, BS English, Department of English and Modern Languages, Pak-Austria Fachhochschule, sheemaayx@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between class consciousness, materialism, and individual autonomy in George Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, focusing on the influence of economic structures and capitalist values on the formation of individual identity and social relations. Drawing on a Marxist literary framework, the study examines class divisions, commodification, and the pressure to conform to bourgeois social norms in relation to Gordon Comstock's rejection of commercial success and his pursuit of literary authenticity. Using qualitative textual analysis, the study explores these tensions through a close examination of Gordon's interactions with Rosemary and Ravelston and his attitudes toward money, work, social status, and artistic production. The analysis demonstrates that Gordon's opposition to capitalism is characterized by an internal contradiction: although he rejects the bourgeois pursuit of wealth and social status, his dependence on material conditions repeatedly undermines his claims to artistic and personal independence. Poverty therefore functions in the novel not merely as a condition of economic deprivation but as a force that shapes consciousness, interpersonal relationships, and the individual's capacity to resist dominant social values. The study further argues that Orwell's critique extends beyond capitalism as an economic system to the ideological pressures through which capitalist values become embedded in everyday life and personal aspirations. By examining Gordon's struggle through the interconnected dimensions of class consciousness and material relations, the study contributes to Orwellian literary criticism by highlighting the tension between anti-materialist individualism and the material realities that condition such resistance. The findings suggest that Orwell's critique encompasses both capitalist valuation and the limitations of an individual rebellion that continues to reproduce the standards it opposes.

Keywords: Keep the Aspidistra Flying, Marxist literary criticism, alienation, ideology, false consciousness, commodification.

Introduction

Aspidistra is a houseplant that people in England use for their homes because it can survive through many years of life and reach its full growth potential. The characters in this novel constructed by Orwell display their ordinary appearance yet lack any significant qualities that make them stand out. Comstock develops throughout the story into an intelligent character who can adapt to different situations while displaying the intellectual style of the British upper class who lived during the 1930s. The author shows readers 1930s English society through his detailed description of an ordinary man who experiences a time when people lose their individuality because of spreading mass culture. The protagonist of the novel establishes his identity through domestic life because all his attempts to find himself through different societies fail to succeed (Hammond, 1982).

The entire social structure of society experienced disruption because of these social issues. George Orwell began his writing career during the nineteenth century, which industrialization had a strong impact on. The Industrial Revolution which started in Britain during the eighteenth century spread throughout Western Europe and North America and Japan and then to every part of the world (Hill 2014).

It is essential to note that the interwar era, during which *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) was written, was notoriously turbulent due to the unstable economies of the West. The 1929 Wall Street Crash was a significant event that occurred in 1929. The Great Depression started because this event happened, which continued for almost ten years and caused extreme income loss and record-high unemployment and production decline in industrialized countries like Great Britain (Bondarenko). George Orwell published his socially critical novel *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* in 1936. The 1930s London setting serves as the backdrop for the story. Gordon Comstock's desire to rebel against the money-god and the status system results in his path to an unhappy existence (Brunsdaale, 2000).

George Orwell demonstrates a critical yet humorous perspective on English suburban lower middle-class life during the interwar period through his 1936 novel *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. Through the eyes of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*'s lone male protagonist, Gordon Comstock, Orwell dramatizes the struggles of middle-class Englishmen who want to escape capitalist societies. *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* is loosely based on Orwell's own experience working at Booklover's Corner in Hampstead. Gordon Comstock, who is thirty years old and "moth-eaten," works as a bookshop assistant while attempting to establish himself as a poet "war on money" (Orwell, 2021).

Poverty means people lack essential resources that enable them to live satisfying and productive lives within their communities. The situation results in people needing to obtain basic items which include food, fodder, huts, houses, shelters, and stables. A poor hungry man does not have work because he lacks everything and his home was taken away. He experiences insecurity and weakness and alienation, so he resorts to violent resistance (Basheer, 2022). The working class felt it the most, as they were on the losing side of "the money war" as class differences widened.

The industrialization process created major problems for society, but it produced both positive and negative effects. The problems which existed in society in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries could easily be seen in the works of Orwell (Davies, 2022b).

This study examines the contradiction between Gordon Comstock's rejection of monetary authority and his continued reliance on monetary standards to evaluate artistic achievement, personal dignity, and intimacy. Through Marxist close reading, it investigates how alienation, ideology, false consciousness, and commodification interact within his attempt to resist capitalist values. Attention is given to the distinction between material constraints on Gordon's choices and the class judgments through which he interprets those constraints.

Research Objectives

1. To examine how capitalist class relations produce alienation in Gordon Comstock's work, identity, and social relationships in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*.
2. To analyze how capitalist ideology and false consciousness shaped Gordon's understanding of money, success, and resistance to capitalism.
3. To explore how the commodification of labour and personal relationships constrains Gordon's agency and complicates his resistance to capitalist values.

Research Questions

1. How do capitalist class relations produce alienation in Gordon Comstock's work, identity, and social relationships in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*?
2. How do capitalist ideology and false consciousness shape Gordon's understanding of money, success, and resistance to capitalism?
3. How does the commodification of labour and personal relationships constrain Gordon's agency and complicate his resistance to capitalist values?

Review of literature

The Oxford Handbook of Karl Marx states "Positive humanism, socialism, communism, the sphere of free individuality, the free association of producers, etc. are only a few of the phrases Marx employed to describe a post-capitalist society. He entirely interchanged these words. The idea that "socialism" and "Communism" are separate historical phases is foreign to his writings and only became part of the Marxist language after his passing" (Hudis et al., 2019).

The system of class differentiation which relies on property ownership enables one class to use its power and interests for the purpose of harming all other classes. The two forms of poverty which exist in society originate from two distinct sources the first emerges from exploitative relationships while the second arises from non-exploitative oppression. The definition of social classes states that social actors exist as defined categories based on the property relations which create their exploitation (Wright, 1994). The capitalist economic system establishes two social classes which divide society between property owners and working laborers who lack ownership rights. According to Marxist historical theory class struggle represents the main historical driving force while capitalism serves as the latest essential historical development. The decline of the Soviet Union and its allies in the Eastern bloc late in the 20th century appeared to signify the end of Soviet Marxism as a viable political or economic model (Nield & Seed, 1979).

Marxist Literary Theory and the Concept of Ideology

Marxist literary criticism studies literature as an outcome of economic conditions which functions as a battleground for competing ideological systems. Marxist criticism bases its analysis of literary works on the principles established by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels through their major texts *The Communist Manifesto* and *Capital* (Marx & Engels, 1848/2002; Marx, 1867/1990). Literature functions within this system to depict actual social conditions while actively constructing viewers' ideological understanding of those conditions (Eagleton, 2011; Williams, 1977).

Marxist criticism investigates the concept of ideology as its main intellectual focus. Terry Eagleton defines ideology as a system of representations which enables people to comprehend their social environment yet simultaneously hides the actual

economic factors which create social inequality (Eagleton, 2011). Eagleton claims that literature enables readers to identify the hidden social norms which exist in society especially those that define class status and economic interactions. Louis Althusser describes ideology as a system which transforms people into social subjects because social systems make people acquire their social identity and beliefs through processes which seem to happen naturally (Althusser, 1971). Dominant economic systems shape characters in literary texts who develop their understanding of the world through their economic-based desires.

The relationship between cultural elements and material conditions forms the basis of Marxist cultural analysis which Raymond Williams developed according to his research. Williams argues that cultural forms which include literature exist in social relations because historical conditions determine their creation (Williams, 1977). The literary texts from interwar Britain period show how people felt because their middle-class status was declining and they faced economic challenges.

Fredric Jameson demonstrates that stories contain ideological components because he asserts that readers must view literary texts as "socially symbolic acts" which use storytelling to express historical contradictions (Jameson, 1981). Jameson believes that literature creates a space where social conflicts and ideological struggles can be expressed through their written content. The novel *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* serves as a symbolic representation of ideological conflicts which appear in capitalist society through its exploration of class identity and economic authority.

Žižek (1989) offers a supplementary perspective on the persistence of ideology despite conscious criticism. This study uses that perspective to frame the question of how Gordon can reject monetary authority while continuing to organize his judgments around it. The textual analysis examines this contradiction through his evaluations of artistic success, dignity, and affection.

The review of the relevant works revealed that Marxism had profound effect upon society especially the lower or underprivileged class. They had a miserable life because of the prominent discrimination among different people based on wealth. The review identified niche for further studies from the lens of Marxist theory. Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* is selected as a suitable text to be analyzed through the Marxist theory.

Recent Studies

Morgan's (2022) "Existential Orwell: Capitalism, Religion, and Philosophy" examines the relevance of existentialism, particularly bad faith and absurdism, to characters' encounters with capitalist society in *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. This approach provides a philosophical context for considering the tensions between individual choice and economic dependence. The present study develops a different emphasis by examining how Gordon's rejection of monetary authority coexists with his internalization of class judgments, using alienation, ideology, false consciousness, and commodification as distinct analytical categories.

Tavares and Puglia (2022) explore *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* by exploring Gordon Comstock's disillusionment with capitalist society. The authors use the term "resigned dissatisfaction" to describe Gordon's failure to break out of the economic system in spite of his opposition of materialistic values. Their analysis focuses on Orwell's critique of capitalism and the impact it has on personal identity and social interactions. The study however offers a greater emphasis on Gordon's mental state than

the systematic use of other Marxist concepts like ideology, alienation or commodification.

Periyan (2025) explores Orwell's work as a literary critic and his opinions on literary matters, commercial publishing and ideological allegiance. The chapter asserts that Orwell posed challenges to both capitalist commercialization and dogmatism in ideology; he urged literature to be socially engaged and at the same time artistically independent. Orwell's criticism of the 'literature and culture being turned into a commodity' is exemplified in the chapter on *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. The study does not however attempt to offer a systematic Marxist analysis of the novel, but rather it examines Orwell's literary criticism.

In Morrell (2025) Orwell's political commitment is reconsidered as he is also seen as a modernist experimental writer of fiction. The study, which traces the evolution of Orwell's novels, including *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, argues that Orwell's literary aesthetics combine with his social criticism to uncover the capitalist contradictions. The chapter offers some useful insights into the techniques Orwell employed in his story, and the political dimension of his engagement, but not into primary Marxist ideas like alienation, ideology, or class struggle through the lens of the novel.

The edited Oxford Handbook of George Orwell, edited by Waddell (2025), gathers today's scholarship in the field which analyzes Orwell's fiction in historical, political, literary and ideological contexts. The volume reflects the renewed scholarly interest in Orwell's early novels and highlights their ongoing relevance to the discussions on capitalism, socialism and modern political thought. While the collection makes important contributions to the field of Orwell studies, none of the chapters provides a thorough Marxist textual analysis that combines class struggle, alienation, ideology and false consciousness into one analysis of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*.

Ullén (2026) introduces her discussion of the political fiction of Orwell, focusing on the connection between literary form and the critique of ideology. Its main concern is Nineteen Eighty-Four, but the study maintains that Orwell used literary devices throughout his work to reveal areas of power, ideology, and politics. The results reveal the enduring significance of Orwell's political writings for the understanding of today's systems of rule and social control. The research, however, does not specifically focus on *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* nor on its depiction of class relations of capitalism.

In the ninetieth anniversary of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, Törzsök (2026) reconsiders Orwell's critique of money, social status, and capitalist values, finding them to be very relevant today. The study highlights the importance of the relevance of Gordon Comstock's problems to readers of today's consumer society and economic insecurity. The article has many strengths, such as its perspective on the enduring importance of Orwell's social criticism, but it also is a very broadly interpretive piece, and does not make systematic use of the principle analytical tools of Marxist literary theory.

Research Gap

While *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* has been the subject of scholarly examination from a Marxist perspective, most contemporary research focuses on the novel as a critique of capitalism, poverty and/or class struggle. Far less research has been conducted on the interrelated aspects of class struggle, ideology, alienation and economic consciousness within a single Marxist

framework of analysis. Secondly, much of the past research is descriptive, which simply goes over the themes of the novel without using Marxist concepts to explain how capitalist ideology affects the identity, relationships and social consciousness of Gordon Comstock. This study aims to fill these lacunas by using a theory-driven Marxist textual analysis, which is based on the concepts of class struggle, class alienation, ideology and false consciousness to interpret Orwell's critique of capitalist society in a comprehensive fashion.

This study therefore offers a valuable addition to the Orwell scholarship by revealing the possibilities of a Marxist literary criticism in supplying a more complete picture of Gordon Comstock's psychological struggle and the ideology at work in capitalist society. This study examines the contradiction between Gordon's explicit rejection of monetary authority and his continued use of monetary standards to evaluate creative achievement, personal dignity, and intimacy. Its contribution lies in distinguishing material constraint from internalized class judgment and tracing how their interaction limits his attempt at individual resistance.

Theoretical framework

The study uses Marxist literary theory which relies on Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to examine George Orwell's novel *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. The novel's depiction of economic systems and social class and ideological systems and human actions calls for Marxist theory as its suitable framework. The text examines poverty and class anxiety and materialism and money's effect on personal identity which enables Marxist criticism to show how capitalist beliefs shape both society and individual thinking patterns.

Marxist literary criticism views literature as a reflection of material and economic realities. According to Marx and Engels (1848/2002), society is fundamentally divided into classes based on ownership of the means of production. In capitalist societies, the bourgeoisie controls economic resources and exercises power over the proletariat or working class. This unequal structure creates conditions which result in exploitation and alienation and generate class conflict. In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, Orwell uses Gordon Comstock's experiences to show these tensions which arise from his battle with poverty and materialism and capitalist society's demands.

Class relations provide the structural context for the analysis. Differences in access to resources and dependence on paid employment shape Gordon's opportunities, relationships, and sense of social standing. His resentment of wealth is examined as a response to these inequalities rather than automatically identified as collective class struggle. This distinction allows the study to investigate the limitations of an individual rebellion that challenges monetary values without transforming the relations through which material security is obtained.

Alienation provides a central category for examining the relationship between Gordon's employment and creative aspirations. In the "Estranged Labour" section of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx (1959) examines estrangement from the product of labour, productive activity, human capacities for free and conscious creation, and other people. Alienation therefore concerns the organization of labour and social relations rather than psychological dissatisfaction alone. Applied to Gordon, this concept illuminates the contradiction between his linguistic ability and its employment for commercial purposes. His advertising work rewards his creative skill while directing it toward objectives he rejects, whereas his withdrawal into poverty restricts

the material conditions necessary for poetic production. The analysis consequently examines both his estrangement from commercial activity and the limitations of attempting to overcome that estrangement through individual withdrawal.

The research study includes Louis Althusser's theoretical framework which describes how ideology functions through interpellation. Althusser (1971) explains that ideology operates by transforming people into subjects who will automatically assume the existence of current social systems as normality. In Orwell's novel money functions as an ideological power which controls how people interact with each other and their social rankings and their personal value. Gordon's inner struggle shows how strong capitalist beliefs control how people behave and think. He tries to break free from capitalism yet his mind keeps him bound to its belief system.

Williams's *Marxism and Literature* (1977) supplies a supporting cultural-materialist perspective for relating literary representation to material social relations. Within this study, that perspective informs the contextual examination of Gordon's class insecurity and the social meanings attached to work, money, and domestic respectability. It does not constitute a separate analytical procedure or an additional set of coding categories. The principal analysis remains organized around alienation, ideology and false consciousness, and commodification.

The framework uses Terry Eagleton's definition of ideology as a system that normalizes inequality while hiding exploitation to create its ideological framework. Orwell attacks the falsehood that they believe that wealth brings dignity, happiness, and social worth. The novel reflects the capitalist ideology that makes people measure themselves and others in terms of their economic welfare. The analysis is organized into three interconnected areas: alienation in work and relationships; capitalist ideology and false consciousness; and commodification and the limits of individual resistance.

This approach allows us to consider how Orwell derides capitalist society and how the systems of economics can destroy human relationships, their individuality, and their social existence.

Research Method

Research Design and Analytical Approach

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design and employs close textual analysis to examine George Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* through a Marxist literary framework. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate because the research questions concern the construction of meaning rather than the measurement of variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The analysis examines how language, characterization, symbolism, and narrative development represent the relationship between material conditions and individual consciousness.

Close reading constitutes the analytical method, while Marxist literary criticism provides the conceptual framework. The study therefore moves beyond identifying references to poverty or money to examine how particular textual details represent alienation, capitalist ideology, false consciousness, and commodification. These concepts guide the interpretation without predetermining that every instance of dissatisfaction or economic difficulty necessarily demonstrates capitalist exploitation.

The approach is primarily deductive because the analytical categories derive from the theoretical framework. However, interpretations remain responsive to the text, particularly where Gordon's conduct complicates his declared opposition to capitalist values. His statements are examined as

situated expressions of consciousness rather than automatically treated as Orwell's own position. Attention to narrative irony and the relationship between Gordon's judgments and other characters' conduct enables the analysis to distinguish the protagonist's perceptions from the novel's broader ideological tensions.

Primary Text and Selection of Passages

The primary text is the edition of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* identified in the reference list. The novel is selected because Gordon Comstock's movement between commercial employment, literary aspiration, poverty, and domestic responsibility provides sustained material for examining the relationship between economic dependence and individual resistance.

The complete novel supplies the interpretive context, while selected passages receive detailed analysis. Passage selection is purposive and guided by three criteria. First, extracts must illuminate one or more research questions through their representation of work, artistic production, monetary judgments, or interpersonal relationships. Second, they must contain features suitable for close reading, such as repetition, metaphor, evaluative language, dialogue, or symbolism. Third, the selection must include different stages of Gordon's development so that the interpretation accounts for changes and contradictions across the narrative.

Particular attention is given to Gordon's commercial employment and poetic ambitions, his childhood experiences of class distinction, his relationships with Rosemary and Ravelston, and his eventual return to paid advertising work. Evidence that complicates the central argument is also considered, including expressions of affection or assistance that cannot be reduced straightforwardly to economic exchange.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeds through successive stages of contextual reading, conceptual classification, and interpretation. The first stage establishes the narrative context of each selected passage, identifying the speaker or focalizing character, the circumstances of the statement, and its relationship to surrounding events. This prevents isolated quotations from being treated as self-explanatory evidence.

The second stage identifies relevant textual features. These include Gordon's repeated references to money, the religious language associated with monetary power, judgments linking poverty to personal inadequacy, and the symbolic function of the aspidistra. The analysis considers how these features construct meaning rather than merely recording the themes they mention.

The third stage relates these details to the conceptual framework. Alienation is examined where economic dependence obstructs Gordon's relationship with creative activity or other people. Ideology is examined where monetary standards appear natural or unavoidable. False consciousness is used more specifically to interpret Gordon's adoption of judgments that obscure the social production of inequality. Commodification is examined where labour, artistic production, or personal worth becomes subject to market valuation. A passage may illuminate several concepts, but the analysis explains their different functions rather than treating them as interchangeable.

The fourth stage tests each interpretation against the wider narrative. Gordon's claims about love, dignity, and money are compared with his own conduct and with the actions of

Rosemary and Ravelston. This comparison identifies whether a statement represents material constraint, internalized class judgment, personal resentment, or an unresolved combination of these forces.

Finally, the findings are organized around the three research questions: alienation in work and relationships; ideology and false consciousness; and commodification and the limits of resistance. Each analytical subsection connects textual evidence to a specific interpretive claim and explains how that claim contributes to the study's central argument.

Interpretive Rigor and Limitations

Interpretive rigor depends on making the relationship between evidence and argument explicit. Quotations are considered within their narrative contexts, conceptual terms are applied consistently, and alternative readings are addressed where the evidence permits them. The analysis distinguishes economic deprivation from alienation, awareness of inequality from collective class consciousness, and monetary concern from commodification.

The study offers a theoretically informed interpretation of one literary work. It does not treat Gordon as representative of all members of a social class or present fictional events as direct empirical evidence about interwar Britain. Historical context supports the interpretation, but claims about the novel remain grounded in its language and narrative organization.

Conceptual Framework

The study employs related but distinct Marxist concepts as analytical categories. **Class relations** refer to differences in access to economic resources, dependence on paid work, and the social authority associated with wealth. Gordon's resentment of affluent individuals is not automatically treated as collective class struggle; the analysis distinguishes personal antagonism from organized opposition to capitalist relations.

Alienation concerns the estrangement of individuals from productive activity, their creative capacities, and other people under material conditions that constrain meaningful self-directed activity. In Gordon's case, the concept guides the examination of tensions between commercial labour, poetic aspiration, and the social consequences of economic insecurity.

Ideology refers to the representations and practices through which historically produced social relations acquire the appearance of normality or necessity. The analysis examines how money becomes associated with dignity, success, and belonging, including in Gordon's own judgments.

False consciousness is used cautiously to identify moments when Gordon reproduces dominant class assumptions while obscuring the social conditions that produce poverty. It is not equated with ignorance of capitalism, since Gordon recognizes monetary power but continues to judge himself and others through its standards.

Commodification concerns the subjection of labour, cultural production, or human value to exchange and market valuation. The analysis distinguishes actual commercial relations from Gordon's perception that affection and personal worth depend on money. These distinctions allow the framework to explain the mechanisms represented in the novel rather than merely attaching theoretical labels to its themes.

Discussion

Alienation in Work, Creative Identity, and Social Relationships

Gordon Comstock's rejection of commercial employment expresses a desire to separate creative activity from monetary calculation. However, his attempt to establish an independent poetic identity encounters a material contradiction: writing requires time, security, and access to cultural opportunities that his chosen poverty restricts. His predicament therefore concerns more than dissatisfaction with income. It exposes the difficulty of pursuing self-directed creative activity while remaining dependent on the economic relations he rejects.

This contradiction emerges in Gordon's reflection: "Money for the right kind of education, money for influential friends" (Orwell, 1936/2021, p. 17). The repetition of "money" connects literary opportunity to resources that extend beyond individual talent. Education and influential friendships appear as conditions of cultural participation, suggesting that artistic recognition operates within unequal social relations. Gordon's frustration consequently identifies a material problem in the ideal of the autonomous artist: creative aspiration alone cannot secure access to the institutions and networks through which literary value is recognized.

Nevertheless, the passage also complicates Gordon's claim to independence. Although he condemns monetary standards, he imagines money as the condition that would enable his desired identity. His appeal for "money, only money" narrows a complex creative struggle to a single explanation. Money becomes both the obstacle to artistic freedom and its imagined solution. The passage reveals a tension between genuine material constraint and Gordon's tendency to make monetary deprivation explain every disappointment.

Alienation is most useful here when connected to the organization of productive activity. Gordon's desire to write poetry and his relationship with paid employment reveal competing uses of his creative capacities: commercial work provides income, while poetry promises activity whose value he wishes to define for himself. His refusal of commercial success does not resolve this conflict, because economic insecurity subsequently restricts the conditions necessary for poetic work.

Gordon interprets advertising as "Writing lies to tickle the money out of fools' pockets!" (Orwell, 1936/2021, p. 61). The verb *tickle* presents commercial persuasion as calculated manipulation. Read through alienation, Gordon's objection concerns the purpose imposed on his linguistic ability: a capacity he associates with artistic expression serves commercial ends. His success intensifies this conflict because the activity he morally rejects rewards the talent through which he hopes to establish independence.

The same contradiction extends into Gordon's relationship. His discomfort with Ravelston's wealth makes friendship difficult to experience independently of class difference. Financial assistance can alleviate deprivation, yet Gordon interprets dependence as a threat to dignity. Their relationship therefore reveals how inequality enters emotional life through shame and the fear of subordination.

However, Ravelston's assistance also complicates Gordon's assumption that wealth necessarily eliminates genuine concern. The analytical issue is the unequal position from which friendship occurs and Gordon's response to that inequality. This distinction prevents the argument from reducing every affluent character to a representative of exploitation.

"Their friendship was at an end; it seemed to him. The evil time when he had lived on Ravelston had spoiled everything.

Charity kills friendship.” (Orwell, 1936/2021, p. 215). The categorical verb *kills* makes dependence appear incompatible with friendship. A Marxist reading can interpret this formulation as evidence that unequal resources threaten Gordon’s sense of reciprocity and dignity. However, its absolute wording also requires critical distance: Gordon converts a painful experience into a universal rule, potentially obscuring the possibility of genuine care across class differences.

Taking together, these tensions show that Gordon’s pursuit of independence becomes self-defeating when resistance takes the form of withdrawal without changing the material conditions of his life. His experience illustrates the limits of individual refusal within continuing economic dependence.

Capitalist Ideology and the Contradictions of False Consciousness

Gordon understands money as a source of social power, but this awareness does not free his judgments from monetary standards. His opposition to capitalism coexists with the belief that poverty makes him less worthy of recognition and affection. The novel’s ideological tension lies in this coexistence of criticism and internalization.

The religious metaphor of the “money-god” gives money authority beyond its practical function as a medium of exchange. It suggests a system of valuation to which social life is subordinated. Yet Gordon’s persistent attention to this authority also demonstrates its hold over his imagination: even his resistance remains organized around the power he condemns.

His assertion that people cannot “care for you or love you” in the decisive sense when money is absent (Orwell, 1936/2021, p. 22) extends economic insecurity into a judgment about emotional worth. The statement presents exclusion as an almost universal consequence of poverty. It therefore makes historically produced class judgments appear unavoidable.

Crucially, Gordon’s assertion should not be treated as an objective description of every relationship in the novel. Rosemary’s attachment and Ravelston’s assistance provide grounds for questioning its totalizing logic. The contrast distinguishes material pressures affecting intimacy from Gordon’s conviction that affection is governed completely by money. His interpretation of other people’s motives reveals the depth of his monetary preoccupation.

His childhood experiences illuminate the formation of this outlook. The description of a poor child’s “snobbish agonies” (Orwell, 1936/2021, p. 48) connects economic difference with the internalization of social hierarchy. “Snobbish” is analytically significant because Gordon’s suffering involves adopting the standards through which he feels inferior. He resents exclusion while continuing to measure himself against the values that produce it.

This pattern becomes clearer in the statement that he “blamed his parents for their poverty as though they had been poor on purpose” (Orwell, 1936/2021, p. 49). The passage shifts responsibility from social conditions to individuals. Poverty becomes an apparent personal failure rather than a condition requiring structural explanation. False consciousness is a useful category here because Gordon’s judgment misrecognizes the source of disadvantage and directs resentment toward those who share it.

However, false consciousness does not adequately describe every aspect of Gordon’s outlook. He also recognizes that education, influence, and social recognition depend on unequal resources. His consciousness combines insight into economic

power with judgments that reproduce its hierarchy. This contradiction provides a more precise interpretation than describing him as either fully class-conscious or wholly deceived.

Althusser’s account of ideology helps explain why recognition does not automatically produce emancipation. Gordon’s sense of himself remains shaped by available standards of success and failure even when he disputes them (Althusser, 1971). His rebellion thus reveals the persistence of ideology within critical awareness: he can identify monetary domination while continuing to experience poverty as personal inadequacy.

Commodification and the Limits of Individual Resistance

Commodification becomes visible where Gordon’s labour and creative capacities enter commercial relations. Advertising requires linguistic ability to serve the production of market value, whereas Gordon seeks a poetic practice whose purpose he can determine independently. The conflict concerns who directs creative activity and the standards by which its success is measured.

However, poetry does not occupy a space wholly outside economic relation. Gordon’s concern with education, influence, publication, and recognition shows that literary aspiration also depends on material opportunities. The novel therefore complicates a simple opposition between authentic poetry and corrupted commercial writing. Economic pressures shape the conditions under which both kinds of production occur, although their purposes differ.

Advertising copy is described as containing “a world of lies” (Orwell, 1936/2021, p.17). Here, commodification concerns the commercial use of creative labour: linguistic effectiveness acquires value through its capacity to promote purchases. This differs from the earlier argument about alienation. Commodification identifies the market purpose governing the writing; alienation identifies Gordon’s estrangement from that purpose. Commercial writing thus connects the market valuation of Gordon’s linguistic ability with his estrangement from its commercial purpose.

A related process operates in Gordon’s treatment of personal worth. When he imagines affection and respect as consequences of wealth, monetary value becomes a measure of human value. This is an ideological extension of market logic into intimacy. Nevertheless, it should be distinguished from an actual commercial exchange: the analysis concerns how Gordon interprets relationships, not a claim that every relationship literally becomes a commodity.

Rosemary’s concern with security complicates his interpretation. A desire for stable living conditions can express practical responsibility rather than devotion to wealth. Reading her solely as materialistic would reproduce Gordon’s own tendency to reduce competing needs to the power of money. Her position introduces a difficulty his rebellion neglects: withdrawal from paid work has consequences for other people as well as for his desired independence.

Rosemary explicitly disputes Gordon’s interpretation of her motives: “It is not money, Gordon! It’s not that” (Orwell, 1936/2021, p. 203). Her repeated negation challenges his reduction of their disagreement to financial calculation. Gordon interprets the possibility of separation as confirmation that affection depends on income, whereas Rosemary rejects that explanation. Their exchange therefore exposes competing interpretations of economic insecurity rather than establishing Gordon’s monetary account as the novel’s final judgment. From a Marxist perspective, material

pressures affect the relationship without necessarily determining every emotional motive within it. Rosemary's response provides counter-evidence to Gordon's totalizing belief, although her denial alone cannot establish that money has no influence on her choices.

Gordon's eventual return to advertising consequently demands an interpretation that acknowledges several pressures. It may suggest accommodation to capitalist relations, but it also involves accepting material responsibility. The ending does not necessarily establish that monetary success resolves his earlier critique. Instead, it exposes the practical limitations of an opposition founded on individual deprivation.

The aspidistra gives symbolic form to this accommodation. Its association with ordinary domestic respectability connects Gordon's changing position to the social world he previously rejected. The plant's significance lies in the relationship between material security, belonging, and conformity, rather than in a simple equation between domestic life and ideological defeat.

Gordon justifies acquiring the plant by declaring, "It's the proper thing to have" (Orwell, 1936/2021, p.262). The adjective *proper* presents a social convention as an obligation. Read ideologically, Gordon's statement suggests that domestic belonging involves adopting recognizable standards of respectability. Yet Rosemary's resistance to the plant complicates this accommodation: the scene does not depict unanimous acceptance of bourgeois conventions. Its argumentative tone supports an interpretation of the ending as unresolved negotiation between security, conformity, and individual preference.

The novel's critique therefore encompasses both monetary domination and the inadequacy of Gordon's response to it. His rejection of wealth identifies real constraints, yet chosen poverty does not create an independent social position. By returning him to commercial employment and domestic life, the narrative raises the question of how resistance can become effective when survival and responsibility remain organized through the relations being resisted.

Conclusion

This study interprets *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* as an exploration of the contradictions between individual resistance and economic dependence. Gordon Comstock's experience of alienation emerges through the conflict between commercial labour, poetic aspiration, and the insecurity that restricts his creative and social life. His withdrawal from commercial success does not establish independence because the material conditions of artistic activity remain unresolved.

The analysis also shows that Gordon's criticism of monetary power coexists with the internalization of capitalist standards. His tendency to associate poverty with inadequacy and to interpret affection through wealth demonstrates how ideology shapes judgments even where its authority is consciously questioned. False consciousness is therefore understood as a contradictory process within his awareness, rather than as complete ignorance of class inequality.

Finally, the examination of commodification reveals how market valuation affects creative labour and Gordon's perception of personal worth. His return to advertising and acceptance of domestic responsibility expose the limitations of resistance based on individual deprivation. The novel's critical force lies in its interrogation of both economic domination and a form of rebellion that remains dependent on the values it rejects.

Implications

The study suggests that Marxist literary criticism benefits from distinguishing material dependence from the internalization of class judgments. Gordon's predicament demonstrates that recognition of economic inequality does not necessarily prevent an individual from reproducing the standards through which that inequality acquires social legitimacy.

This interpretation also qualifies the opposition between artistic autonomy and commercial labour. Gordon's experience indicates that withdrawal from paid employment cannot by itself secure creative independence when the material conditions of artistic production remain unresolved. The contribution is therefore a textual account of the contradictions of individual resistance, rather than a general claim about all subjects living under capitalism.

Reference

- Althusser, L. (1971). Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (Notes towards an investigation). In L. Althusser, *Lenin and philosophy and other essays* (B. Brewster, Trans., pp. 127–186). Monthly Review Press.
- Bantebya-Kyomuhendo, G. (2015). Oral tradition and literary portrayals of poverty; the evolution of poverty shame in Uganda. In E. Chase & G. Bantebya-Kyomuhendo (Eds.), *Poverty and shame: Global experiences* (pp. 21–34). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199686728.003.0002>
- Basheer, L. D. (2022). *The portrayal of poverty in Bernhard Shaw's Major Barbara* (Unpublished bachelor's thesis). Salahaddin University-Erbil. edu.krd
- Brunsdale, M. (2000). *Student companion to George Orwell*. ABC-CLIO.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE.
- Davies, L. L. (2022). Representing the poor. *Twentieth Century Literature*, 68(1), 1–24.
- Eagleton, T. (2011). *Why Marx was right*. Yale University Press.
- Hammond, J. R. (1982). *A George Orwell companion: A guide to the novels, documentaries and essays*. Macmillan.
- Harvey, D. L., & Reed, M. H. (1996). The culture of poverty. *Sociological Perspectives*, 39(4), 465–495.
- Hudis, P. (2019). Marx's concept of socialism. In M. Vidal, T. Smith, T. Rotta, & P. Prew (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of Karl Marx* (pp. 757–772). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190695545.013.50>
- Jameson, F. (1981). *The political unconscious*. Cornell University Press.
- Marx, K. (1990). *Capital: Volume 1*. Penguin. (Original work published 1867)
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (2002). *The communist manifesto*. Penguin. (Original work published 1848)
- Marx, K. (1959). *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844* (M. Milligan, Trans.). Progress Publishers. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/>
- Morrell, S. (2025). *Orwell and modernism*. In N. Waddell (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of George Orwell* (pp. 229–246). Oxford University Press.

- <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198860693.013.17>
- Morgan, E. A. (2022). Existential Orwell: Capitalism, religion, and philosophy. *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*, 14(2), Article 4. <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol14/iss2/4/>
- Orwell, G. (2021). *Keep the aspidistra flying*. Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1936)
- Periyan, N. (2025). *Orwell the literary critic*. In N. Waddell (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of George Orwell* (pp. 100–113). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198860693.013.8>
- Tavares, D. R., & Puglia, D. (2022). Resigned dissatisfaction: Comments about *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* by George Orwell. *Intelligere*. <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2447-9020.intelligere.2022.203736>
- Törzsök, R. (2026). *An enduring, uncomfortable mirror: Keep the Aspidistra Flying at ninety*. Orwell Society.
- Ullén, M. (2026). Radical dystopia: The comic modernism of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. *Orbis Litterarum*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/oli.70044>
- Waddell, N. (Ed.). (2025). *The Oxford handbook of George Orwell*. Oxford University Press.
- Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and literature*. Oxford University Press.
- Wright, E. O. (1994). *Interrogating inequality*. Verso.
- Žižek, S. (1989). *The sublime object of ideology*. Verso.

© The Author(s) 2026. Published by the Department of English, University of Chitral.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.