

2007

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## Recommended Citation

Madrazo, Christen M., "Comstock's Lack and Desire: A Lacanian Reading of Orwell's *Aspidistra*" (2007). *Seton Hall University Dissertations and Theses (ETDs)*. 1156.  
<http://scholarship.shu.edu/dissertations/1156>

Comstock's Lack and Desire:  
A Lacanian Reading of Orwell's *Aspidistra*

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in

the Department of English

Seton Hall University

3 May 2005

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Abstract:

In his most unpopular work, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, George Orwell describes Gordon Comstock as miserable in his poverty. Still, Orwell makes it quite clear that Comstock has chosen this condition. Leaving his “good” job at the New Albion advertising company in order to declare war on the Capitalist “money god,” Comstock subjects himself to an impoverished life as a poet. Always “tirading against Capitalism” (Orwell 87), yet opposed to any of its alternatives and obsessively concerned about his status as writer, son and lover, Comstock represents a fragmented figure struggling with the Capitalist definition of masculine identity.

Specifically, Comstock’s struggle to identify himself as poet, the ideal master of language, reflects what Lacan describes as the “castration complex in the masculine unconscious” (“Phallus” 575). This complex is revealed through the desire to restore identity through the Lacanian concept of the “ideal- I,” the form following the “objectif[ication] in the dialectic of identification with the other” and that which follows the period in which “language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject” (Lacan, “Mirror” 76). Attempting restoration through language, Comstock seeks to harness language through poetry, as well as through his continued attempts to manipulate his position within his relationships with both Ravelston, as surrogate father figure and Rosemary, as surrogate mother figure. His treatment of both as the validating Other works as an attempt to assume the role of the unattainable phallus as symbolized both by his poem in progress, *London Pleasures*, and the indestructible aspidistra plant. His eventual entrance into fatherhood at the novel’s conclusion, however, is enough to make him destroy this poem and buy a new aspidistra, thus illustrating the link between language, sexuality and identity.

George Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* is perhaps his most unpopular novel. The silence of most Orwell critics regarding the novel speaks the loudest. Even major Orwellians, such as his biographer Jeffrey Meyers, find it worth noting only for the autobiographical parallels to Orwell's life. The novel's ambiguous ending and its anti-heroic pessimism have been praised but only as mere asides in overviews of Orwell's oeuvre and/or as transitional comparisons to one of the more acclaimed works, such as the ever popular *1984*. In fact, many critics, including Frank Thomson, have recognized *Aspidistra* solely for its creation of Gordon Comstock as a character who represents in "spiritual ancestr[y]" (238) the later, more carefully constructed Winston Smith of *1984*.

Beyond Comstock's role as the embodiment of Orwell or the precursor to Winston lies a character worth far more analysis. Plagued by the influence of money over the British middle class, the obsessive Gordon Comstock is fearful and anxious regarding something far greater than class structure. Gordon Beadle, in his study of the Orwellian depiction of British poverty admits that the novel is "...perhaps more a confession of the inner turmoil and obsessive fears of the author struggling to become a successful writer than a fictionalized study of poverty" (195). In support of his purpose, Beadles further states, "Yet Orwell still manages, in Gissing-like fashion, to present a convincing picture of the disastrous effects of poverty upon artistic creativity"( 195). While Orwell depicts the tragedy of artistic sterility through Comstock, Beadle's first statement provides insight into a character marked by Orwell as "objectifying his own inner misery" (84).

Orwell's work in *Aspidistra* displays a depiction of despair that goes beyond social regime and its legitimizing ideology. Although the novel appears largely political on a surface level as affirmed by John Rodden, who reports that "Political theory, sociology, and history courses make incredible use of *Burmese Days*, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and *Coming up for Air*" (217), Comstock's longing for truth displays Orwell's attempt to decode human nature itself on a more complex level. His characters represent a human fallibility that goes beyond their surrounding class structure. His focus on language as well as on the individual psyche as oppressed by external forces requires a much more intricate reading.

While Comstock is displayed as miserable in his poverty, Orwell makes it quite clear that he has chosen this condition. Leaving his "good" job at the New Albion advertising company in order to declare war on the Capitalist "money god," Comstock subjects himself to an impoverished life as a poet. He lives in a filthy boarding house, works at a second-rate bookshop for low wages and, in desire for self-punishment, wills the receipt of rejection letters from publishers as well as his long-term girlfriend, the virginal Rosemary. Faced with an aspidistra plant at every corner, a symbol of the middle class's dismal pride, Comstock dedicates his life to slowly killing his own aspidistra as well as to completing his epic poem, *London Pleasures*. After he makes a drunken fool of himself in front of his friend Ravelston, Comstock seemingly "gives up" until receiving the news of Rosemary's pregnancy. Signifying his acceptance of fatherhood, Comstock destroys his epic and insists that Rosemary accompany him to buy a new aspidistra for their window, asserting happily that "the aspidistra is the tree of life" (Orwell 239).

The shift of the novel's major symbol from depressing to exhilarating provides for critique of this ambiguous conclusion. Mitzi M. Brunsdale notes "This 'happy ending' does not seem to fit the generally frustrated, acrid atmosphere of the novel" (65). The plant thus

represents more than simply the false hope of the middle class, an assumption that denies the assertions of Richard H. Rovere who states in his introduction to *The Orwell Reader*, “His novels were direct...Orwell posed no riddles, elaborated no myths, and manipulated no symbols...There is not much to do with Orwell’s novels except read them”(xviii). Disagreement with this statement launches Quintana’s argument in “George Orwell: The Satiric Revolution” as well as my own.

Through its emphasis on both past and present relationships, as well as internal and external dialogue, the work demands psychoanalytic interpretation and specifically the post-structural linguistic and psychoanalytical theory of Jacques Lacan. While certainly no other psychoanalytical studies of *Aspidistra* have emerged, it is still surprising that very few have surfaced regarding Orwell’s more popular pieces. Beyond Graham Good, who slightly touches upon “sexual love, privacy, and memory of the personal and collective past” in his work on *1984*, as well as the input of Paul Roazen in his article “Freud, Orwell, and *1984*,” very few critics have attempted any major psychoanalytic claims. Comstock’s obsessive quest for identity in both language and sexuality as analyzed through a Lacanian interpretation brings new meaning to *Aspidistra* and to Orwell’s awareness of the construction of the human psyche through language.

Emphasizing the link between sexuality and language Lacan states in “The Agency of the Letter” that “...it is the whole structure of language that psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious” (413). Lacan contends that “identity is constructed in language” (Rose 32) and furthermore that “the ‘I’ with which we speak stands for our identity as subjects in language” (Rose 31). As language shifts, the subject’s identity also shifts and hence, for Lacan, there remains an undifferentiated space between subjects and language, that which is defined by lack.

The desire to fulfill this lack begins with primordial separation and is marked by the symbolic function of the Lacanian phallus.

This awareness of lack drives Orwell, as well as his characters, to harness language in the search for truth. Orwell's attention to language, as strongly portrayed in "Politics of the English Language," certainly indicates his own understanding that language is much more than a vehicle for social commentary and/or plot. Meyers writes in "George Orwell and the Art of Writing" that "Orwell's ideas about language and style of politics, expressed in witty how-to-do-it essays as well as in weekly political commentary and literary journalism, are not merely relevant to this moment, but more desperately needed than ever" (92). Meyers goes on to affirm that Orwell saw language as "a powerful tool for conveying ideas, but also as a demanding and enthralling art with a moral imperative to search for the truth" (93). This "search for truth" through language adds to the complexity of Orwell's work and particularly to a Lacanian reading of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*.

A neurotic social critic described as "always tirading against Capitalism"(Orwell 87) yet opposed to any of its alternatives and obsessively concerned about his status as writer, son and lover, Comstock is much more than a "mouthpiece for all the stock complaints against the drab life of middle classes"(Popkin 80). He displays a character struggling with the Capitalist definition of masculine identity. Comstock's struggle to identify himself as poet, the ideal master of language, reflects what Lacan describes as the "castration complex in the masculine unconscious" ("Phallus" 575). This complex is revealed through the desire to restore identity through the Lacanian concept of the "ideal- I," the form following the "objectif[ication] in the dialectic of identification with the other" and that which follows the period in which "language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject" (Lacan, "Mirror" 76). Attempting



restoration through language, Comstock seeks to harness language through poetry, as well as through his continued attempts to manipulate his position within his relationships with both Ravelston, as surrogate father figure and Rosemary, as surrogate mother figure. His treatment of both as the validating Other works as an attempt to assume the role of the unattainable phallus as symbolized both by his poem in progress, *London Pleasures*, and the indestructible aspidistra plant.

Comstock's desire to attain the "ideal-I" through both language and the Other can be understood through Lacan's assumption that identity and sexuality are bound. Linking the gendered psyche to classic Marxist readings of Orwell, Rita Felski's argues in her study "Nothing to Declare: Identity, Shame, and the Lower Middle Class":

The relationship between gender and the lower middle class is...a complex one...The lower middle class is strongly feminized...many of the values and attitudes traditionally associated with the lower middle class are also identified with women: domesticity, prudery, aspirations toward refinement...Whereas the working class is represented through images of a virile proletariat in left rhetoric, the lower middle class is often gendered female, associated with the triumph of suburban values and the symbolic castration of men. This theme is eloquently summarized by the hero of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. (43)

Felski's brief interpretation of Comstock addresses the point that Orwell is attacking much more than class dynamics. Rather, Orwell displays Comstock's rigid refusal to accept the Capitalist definition of manhood. The tragedy here, as perhaps displayed by the novel's conclusion, is that man is never able to fully escape the "ideological world [which] conceals from the conscious subject who is supposed to feel whole and certain of sexual identity" (Mitchell 26). Comstock's

longing to fulfill the ideal image of the masculine as defined by Capitalism and his simultaneous hatred for his own class are thus linked on an unconscious level. Through his displaced blame of money itself, Comstock exhibits anxiety indicative of Felski's assertion that his feminized economic status leaves him "lacking" within a Capitalist patriarchy grounded in Oedipal competition. His desire to understand this lack through language is at the core of this dilemma. For language, as per Lacan, is structured upon this lack.

Comstock reflects upon this predicament stating, "How damned unfair it is that we are filled to the brim with these tormenting desires and then forbidden to satisfy them!" (Orwell 103). This desire and lack of satisfaction speaks specifically to a psychoanalytic interpretation of Comstock's dilemma and his quest to fulfill his lack as marked by the Lacanian phallus. According to Lacan the phallus is "a signifier ...not a fantasy...nor is it an object...Still less it is the organ—penis or clitoris—that it symbolizes" (579). Most importantly, it is unobtainable and definable only through function (Lacan, "Phallus" 579). The longing for fulfillment that Comstock exhibits is linked to his inability to fill the void of the unobtainable phallus through the Capitalist definition of manhood. To withdraw from the "money world" in order to dwell within the realm of poverty as a "writer" is to shrink from the socially accepted construction of the masculine "ideal," that which Comstock associates with the ever popular aspidistra plant of the striving middle class. For the ideals of manhood within the Capitalist sphere are those neither Comstock nor Orwell are willing to conform to.

Comstock makes this choice purposefully and adamantly, insisting on his goal to "get out of the money world" (Orwell 56) by leaving the New Albion and refusing to find another job of similar status despite his qualifications and his "wonderful 'cleverness'" (Orwell 41). His sacrificing of one ideal for another is Comstock's attempt to make sense of his loss through

language as restoration. Of his failed attempts to do so, Orwell writes “It was money, simply the lack of money, that robbed him of his power to ‘write.’ He clung to that as to an article of faith” (9). “Clinging” to this excuse, Comstock attempts to blame money for his lack of “power” over language and his inability to complete *London Pleasures*, “a huge ambitious project...[that] he had felt so certain...he was equal to...” (Orwell 31). As Jacqueline Rose states in her introduction to the Lacanian study, *Feminine Sexuality*, “Subjects in language persist in their belief that somewhere there is a point of certainty, of knowledge and of truth” (32). The fantasy of his completed poem is, for Comstock, this delusional “point” by which he is able to make sense of his loss.

Of Comstock’s awareness of this delusion however, Orwell writes:

...it was quite certain, indeed, that it [the poem] would never be finished...in moments when he faced facts Gordon himself was aware of this...It was too big for him, that was the truth. It had never really progressed, it had simply fallen apart into a series of fragments...that was all he had to show—just fragments incomplete in themselves and impossible to join together. (31)

Symbolic of Comstock’s own self, the image of the “fragmented” poem represents his inability to attain the “truth” and wholeness Rose asserts subjects attempt to gain through language. That Comstock recognizes real “truth” in the admission that the poem is “too big for him” represents his unconscious understanding that his own self, made up of “just fragments incomplete in themselves” is “impossible” to reconstruct. That “‘identity’ and ‘wholeness’ remain precisely at the level of fantasy” (Rose 32) is supported by the symbol of the incomplete poem, an image that serves to represent Comstock himself.

His frustration with the inability of language to restore and reconstruct is also displayed through his hatred of the advertisements he obsessively analyzes throughout the work, those which Comstock “had his private reasons for hating...” (Orwell 6). Comstock’s “private” reasons are linked to his unconscious awareness that what he desires is impossible to attain. One ad that he particularly hates reads ““Hike all day on a slab of Vitamalt!”” (Orwell 14). Orwell describes the ad: “A youthful couple, boy and girl, in clean-minded hiking kit...that girl’s face! The awful tomboy cheerfulness of it! The kind of girl who goes in for Plenty of Clean Fun. Windswept. Tight khaki shorts but that doesn’t mean you can pinch her backside” (15). This satiric description links Comstock’s hatred of the ads to a female sexual withholding and arguably to his inability to buy the product, which is also linked to his inability to consume the girl. Later, Comstock’s inner dialogue rants, “Social failure, artistic failure, sexual failure—they are all the same” (Orwell 78). By connecting these failures as “the same,” Comstock exhibits a core sense of loss indicative of his unconscious castration complex. This lack is exploited by the ads that function in support of the Capitalism system.

Despite his hatred for the ads and for his self-proclaimed “war against money” (Orwell 48), Comstock refuses to acknowledge alternate social structures. His insistence to a very frustrated Ravelston that neither Socialism nor Capitalism will solve the “wants” of man depicts a subtle understanding of man’s inevitably fragmented position. After mocking the Socialist concepts of ““communal kitchens,”” ““community hikes,”” and ““free abortion clinics”” (Orwell 88), Comstock responds to Ravelston’s desperate question, ““Well, what *do* we want, then?”” with the answer, ““All we know is what we don’t want. That’s what’s wrong with us... We’re stuck”” (Orwell 88). His diatribe throughout the work is called into question as a result of this confession. Openly admitting that he “wants,” suggests loss and a desire to fill that loss. Yet the

fact that Comstock does not know “what” he wants indicates that he is not fully conscious of what he wants, and furthermore, that he can not attain it. Contrary to his neurotic claims throughout the text, Comstock’s suffering is founded not within any particular social system itself but rather within his own inability to fulfill his loss of mother through identification with the father.

This loss, which is responsible for man’s fragmented identity and its ensuing anxiety, begins collectively and individually for Lacan the moment “The mother is refused to the child in so far as prohibition falls on the child’s desire to be what the mother desires” (Rose 38). Furthermore, Rose states with regard to this origin that “In Lacan’s account, the phallus stands for that moment of rupture. It refers mother and child to the dimension of the symbolic which is figured by the father’s place”(38). In an entire chapter devoted to Comstock’s childhood and past familial relationships, Orwell depicts a character fractured by his inability “to be” what his mother desires.

Within the Capitalist structure, this desire is marked by money as phallic signifier. Money itself receives displaced blame for the traumatic “moment of rupture” the phallus “stands for.” As Lacan states, “...the signifier institutes lack of being in the object-relation, using signification’s referral value to invest it with the desire aiming at the lack that it supports” (“Letter” 428). That money signifies the phallus as symbolic of “lack” further indicates its link to desire. As explained by Rose:

The phallus represents a moment of division (Lacan calls this the subject’s ‘lack-of-being’) which re-enacts the fundamental splitting of subjectivity itself...The phallus thus indicates the reduction of difference to an instance of visible perception, a *seeming* value. (41-2)

Thus, the phallus' significant yet "seeming" value only exists through loss itself and is, accordingly, by its very nature unobtainable and non-representable. Likewise, Comstock's longing to fulfill his desire manifests itself within his insistence that he can escape desire itself by removing himself from the constructed "money-code"(Orwell 45).

As indicated in the regressive chapter in which Orwell describes Comstock's family and a rather depressed past, this decision to remove himself does not occur until after his mother's death. Orwell writes:

Four months after his mother's death Gordon suddenly walked out on his job. He gave the firm no reasons...from now on he would breathe free air, free of the money-stink. He had not consciously waited for his mother to die before doing this; still, it was his mother's death that had nerved him to it. (49)

That his mother's death motivates Comstock to leave the job he has always despised indicates that his position there is marked by his desire "to be what the mother desires"(Rose 38), that which is symbolized by giving off a "money-stink." The fact that this longing is something that marks his unconscious castration complex is indicated by the fact that he does not "consciously" wait for her death in order to seek restoration elsewhere.

Comstock's relationship with his mother, as linked to his longing to represent her desire, is largely marked by his guilt over his inability to do so: "...a dreadful feeling of guilt mingl[ed] with his misery. He did not exactly know how, but he half divined, that his mother had killed herself in order to pay his school fees" (Orwell 47). The indirect suspicion that Comstock is responsible for his mother's death reveals the core of his struggle. Furthermore, his "half" suspicion alludes to the "lack" of wholeness both traumas have left with him. His fragmented sense of self as well as his guilt continue even after her death, as projected upon his older sister,

Julia, a sacrificial mother figure whom Comstock continuously borrows money from and who “suffered more for Gordon than for herself” (Orwell 57).

Despite the fact that “She [Julia] idolised Gordon,” (Orwell 41) and sacrificed her ability to open a tea shop in order for him to go to school and “Make Good” (Orwell 53) Comstock, who continues to borrow from her throughout his entire life, “repa[ys] her...by despising her because she was not pretty and not ‘clever’”(Orwell 41). This simultaneous guilt and hatred are clearly linked to Julia’s role as mother figure, as Comstock’s real mother desired more than anything for him to fit the masculine Capitalist ideal. By extension, Comstock’s treatment of Rosemary in his false assumption that she desires the same is clearly linked to a projected parallel between her, his mother, and his sister.

The fact that Comstock blames women for his sense of lack indicates an origin linked to his separation from his mother and is reenacted in Orwell’s first chapter. Described as “never quite unconscious of his small stature” (Orwell 5), Comstock is introduced to readers within the very first pages as staring intently at his own reflection. Orwell writes:

From the dust-dulled pane the reflection of his own face looked back at him. Not a good face...He lengthened the focus of his eyes again. He hated mirrors nowadays. Outside all was bleak and wintry...A nasty raw wind. There was a threatening note in it as it swept over; the first growl of winter’s anger. Two lines of a poem struggled for birth in Gordon’s mind. (5-6)

The connection between Comstock’s reflection, his hatred of mirrors, and his reactionary retreat to the linguistic “struggle” to “birth” a new poem largely can be understood through the Lacanian mirror stage. In the essay “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function,” Lacan contends:

It suffices to understand the mirror stage in this context *as an identification*, in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image—an image that is seemingly predestined to have an effect at this phase...(76)

The original moment of Comstock's recognition of his own identity as independent subject is hence reenacted in the above mentioned passage. Having "assumed" an image constructed by "lack," Comstock, aware of his "small stature" and his hatred of mirrors, attempts to retreat from this "threatening" reenactment via poetry in order harness the loss through language.

Of the male subject before the moment of identification Lacan asserts:

...still trapped in his motor impotence and nursling dependence—the little man is at the *infans* stage thus seems to me to manifest in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, prior to being objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores it, to the universal, its function as subject. This form would, moreover, have to be called the "ideal-I." ("Mirror" 76)

Unable to literally retreat to this "primordial form," Comstock attempts to symbolically retreat to some sort of "ideal" through his effort to "birth" new lines of poetry. By attempting to reconstruct his identity, Comstock tries to construct the embodiment of the "ideal-I." The quest to re-identify himself as poet specifically provides him with the false hope that he can restore his already fragmented image, the one which is not "good," by mastering the very subject for which the function lies in restoration, that of language. Lacan tragically identifies this desire however, as both inevitable and impossible, claiming: "...this form situates the agency known as the ego,



prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction” (“Mirror” 76). The attempt to restore this loss or to fully regress to the moments prior to this split are marked by its fictional nature.

Based on a fictional restoration, Comstock struggles with the lines and temporarily pleases himself with his poetry. Orwell writes:

The menacing wind blows over—no, sweeps over, say. The something poplars—  
yielding poplars? No, better, bending poplars...No matter. The bending poplars,  
newly bare. Good

*Sharply the menacing wind sweeps over*

*The bending poplars, newly bare.*

Good. (6)

Comstock’s immediate reversion to these lines illustrates his attempt to become the “ideal-I.” He twice describes his lines as “Good” and hence implies that he is pleased with his identity as poet, at least temporarily. This approval directly opposes his earlier description of his identity, that which he stared at via reflection and labeled as “Not...good.” His retreat from a fragmented identity, inevitable as per the original moment of recognition within the mirror stage leads to his approval of his fictionalized identity as poet. For Comstock the “ideal-I” exists within this identity as poet and, furthermore, through his poems themselves.

As soon as these lines receive his approval, Orwell writes in an immediate subsequent passage, “But the impulse died away in Gordon’s mind. He turned the money over in his pocket” (6). Representing the impossibility of total fulfillment, Comstock’s inspiration to write and to in turn fulfill his construction of the “ideal-I” is destroyed by his awareness of the Capitalist conception of this ideal as signified by the money (or lack thereof) in his pocket. This dividing moment continually circulates throughout the novel and notably replicates the original moment

of rupture each time the lines “*Sharply the menacing wind sweeps over/ The bending poplars, newly bare*” (Orwell 6) are neurotically repeated and/or altered throughout the work.

As the lines echo through his head, Comstock paces the store with contempt for the books around him. Orwell writes “He hated the whole lot of them, old and new, highbrow and lowbrow...The mere sight of them brought home to him his own sterility. For here he was, supposedly a ‘writer,’ and he couldn’t even ‘write!’” (Orwell 8-9). Comparing himself to rows of authors who, as per his view, are constructions of the absolute ideal, Comstock links his failed attempts with language to the image of failed sexuality using word “sterility.” That this represents Comstock’s original split from his mother is supported by Rose who states that the “‘truth’ of the unconscious is only ever that moment of fundamental division through which the subject entered into language and sexuality and the constant failing of both” (53). By describing his linguistic failure using a word that connotes sexual failure, Comstock displays the only truth available to him: that of the inevitable failure of his quest to harness both.

In addition, Comstock then recalls the “evil memories”(Orwell 8) of his own published poetry book entitled “*Mice.*” Orwell writes through the perspective of Comstock that “The single wretched little book that he himself had published two years ago, had sold exactly a hundred and fifty three copies and then been ‘remaindered’; and even as a remainder it hadn’t sold” (8). By comparing his smaller success to those of infamous writers’ Comstock displays his frustration with an inevitable inability to create the “ideal-I.” His intense desire to do so, however, is largely based on his disgust with his “remaindered” prints. Rose states that “‘desire’ [ ] can be defined as the ‘remainder’ of the subject, something which is always left over, but has no content as such”(32). As his poetry represents identity, the concept of the “remainder” is directly paralleled to Comstock’s desire itself.

Of the relation between identity, desire and man's struggle to obtain it via both language and Other, Lacan writes, "This gestalt is also replete with the correspondences that unite the *I* with the statue onto which man projects himself, the phantoms that dominate him, and the automaton with which the world of his own making tends to achieve fruition in an ambiguous relation" ("Mirror" 76-7). Projecting himself via comparison onto other writers who serve as dominating "phantoms" as well as to the "world" he has himself created, Comstock accordingly finds himself in the "ambiguous" position of a published (and at one point selling) author who he still does not yet consider whole.

This perception is further supported by the role of "the Nancy" in this first chapter, a character who Comstock despises more than any other customer who enters the store. "The Nancy" clearly represents elements of Comstock himself and his adamant hatred for him reflects his own self loathing. Lacan writes of the fantasy of attaining the "ideal-I" that we must:

...take into account the mirrored disposition of the *imago of ones own body* in hallucinations and dreams, whether it involves one's individual features, or even in one's infirmities or object projections; or we take note of the role of the mirror apparatus in the appearance of *doubles*, in which physical realities manifest themselves...("Mirror" 77)

Comstock's obsession with watching "the Nancy" as notably the only character he continuously circles back to throughout the bookstore scene, indicates an interest in him that reflects his interest in his own self. Described as speaking in a feminized "R-less Nancy voice" (Orwell 13) "the Nancy" heads straight toward the poetry section, exclaiming "'I *adore* poetry'" (Orwell 13). Furthering his importance Orwell writes "Gordon knew his type...Not an artist himself, exactly, but a hanger-on of the arts..."(14). That Comstock "knows his type" infers a type of

projected double. Furthermore, he judges the customer's identity as "not an artist himself exactly." Similarly, Comstock struggles with his artistic identity as well displayed by his consistent placement of the title "writer," in quotation marks indicating an altered meaning.

Sealing their role as doubles Orwell writes:

Without speaking he ["the Nancy"] held out the copy of Lawrence poems and awkwardly extracted three florins from his pocket. In handing them to Gordon he dropped one. Both dived for it simultaneously; their heads bumped against one another. The young man stood back, blushing sallowly...He clutched his book to him and slipped out with the air of having committed some disgraceful action...Gordon was alone. (20)

Described earlier as both noticing Lawrence as well as similarly digging through his pocket aware of his one coin, Comstock is clearly marked as the despised "Nancy's" double through the image of their complimentary positions. That their heads actually "bump" reinforces this mirror image yet it also serves to represent the tension between them with regard to identity.

Furthermore, at this point, Orwell shifts from the consistent position of the third-person perspective used to reflect Comstock's stream of consciousness to that of only indicating "the Nancy's" perspective. The lack of Comstock's perspective regarding this happening alludes to a linked consciousness between the two.

Of the now "alone" Comstock Orwell writes: "The reflection of his own face looked at him from the grayish pane. Gordon Comstock, author of *Mice* ...and moth eaten already. Only twenty six teeth left..." (20). The immediate retreat to his mirror image in the pane further constructs the alignment of "the Nancy" with his own self. His departure, leaving Comstock "alone" hence yet again repeats the original moment of loss and represents Comstock's lack-of-

being. The reemphasis on his full name, a clear symbol of identification as well as the title of “author,” the symbol of his longed for identity display an attempt to attain “the total form of his body by which the subject anticipates the maturation of his power in a mirage...” (Lacan, “Mirror” 76). Regardless of whether “the Nancy” indeed functions as a “mirage” or, as described by Lacan as an “hallucination,” the subject and object joined in wholeness as represented through their mirror image mergence is in fact impossible. This impossibility is emphasized by Comstock’s description as “moth eaten” and hence not whole. The link to sexuality and the identity of the “ideal-I” is also sealed here with regard to the sexual imagery of teeth. Like the letters available for Comstock’s construction of language, his sexual maturity is measured by the amount of “twenty six.”

That during this section Comstock begins the only work Orwell will display in completion is indicative of the link between the loss of his mirrored double and his retreat to the “wholeness” seemingly offered by language. In his discussion of metaphor and metonymy Lacan asserts that:

...the poem celebrates, namely, the promise of acceding to paternity... Thus it is between a man’s proper name qua signifier and the signifier that metaphorically abolishes it that the poetic spark is produced, and it is all the more effective here in bringing about the signification of paternity in that it reproduces the mythical event through which Freud reconstructed the path along which the mystery of paternity advances in the unconscious of every man. (“Letter” 423)

Comstock’s “poetic spark” is hence marked by his quest to fulfill the “ideal I” through the role of the poet, an identity that he arguably links with paternity, as representation of the phallus. The “mythical event” that has constructed his “unconscious” is given agency via poetic language.

His struggle hence represents the unattainable quest for the symbolic role of the lawful father, as ideal.

Accordingly, Lacan asserts that “Language exists—to use it to signify something altogether different from what it says” (“Letter” 421). Thus what Comstock’s poetry literally “says” at this moment of reenacted division: “*Sharply the menacing wind sweeps over/ The bending poplars, newly bare*” (Orwell 6) is irrelevant. Instead, his desire “to say” represents his loss and his ensuing quest to attain the phallus through linguistic restoration. Rose states “...the mirror image represents the moment when the subject is located in an order outside itself to which it will henceforth refer” (31). The fact that these lines are “henceforth refer[ed]” to throughout the remainder of the piece, excluding the section thereafter Comstock assumedly attains the “law” as biological father, indicates the importance of this moment and its symbolic function as launching Comstock, as subject, into language.

That the completion of this unnamed poem occurs fairly soon after his failed attempt at intercourse with Rosemary links Comstock’s desire for the phallus with regard to its solely symbolic connection to the role of successfully possessing father. His relationships with the roles of both his biological and surrogate father figures throughout the piece however complicate the role of the father with regard to identity and loss. Comstock’s attempts to deconstruct identification with his biological father represent his father’s failure to enforce the loss of the mother. This is because while Comstock’s father occupied the paternal position, he did not fulfill the needs of the mother, failing himself to meet Mrs. Comstock’s desire for the Capitalist conception of the phallus. Orwell clearly displays Comstock’s disdain for having to identify with a father castrated by a Capitalist society in the following passage. He writes:

His [Comstock's] father, especially, was the kind of father you couldn't help but be ashamed of; a cadaverous despondent man, with a bad stoop, his clothes dismally shabby and hopelessly out of date. He carried about with him an atmosphere of failure, worry and boredom. And he had such a dreadful habit...of tipping Gordon half a crown right in front of the other boys, so that everyone could see that it was only half of crown when it should have been, ten bob! Even twenty years afterwards the memory of that [ ] made him shudder. (42)

Comstock's negative memory of a father with whom he was embarrassed to identify exemplifies the castrated male as portrayed by the Capitalist view. Notably in this passage, however, Orwell does not curse the money that defines his father's failure, as he normally does when defining his own, exclaiming in blame, "Money, always money!"(141). Rather, he judges his father according to the same standards by which he claims to loathe. Furthermore, this passage displays "the conjunction of desire, insofar as the phallic signifier as its mark, with the threat of or nostalgia based on not having"(Lacan 582). Nostalgically, even "twenty years" later, Comstock is "ashamed" that he ever identified (and seemingly still does) with a man who "did not have" the phallus in front his male peers. His embarrassment displays conflict in identifying with a man who both simultaneously represents the phallus as the paternal father figure as well as withholds it through his failure to meet the ideals.

Since within the Lacanian picture the subject's "future depends on the law introduced by the father"(Lacan, "Phallus" 582), conflict clearly arises for Comstock as he attempts to function in the symbolic phase of adulthood. For, as Rose explains:

The place of the phallus... follows from Lacan's return to the position and law of

the father... [and] Lacan uses the term “paternal metaphor”...as a reference to the act of substitution...whereby the prohibition of the father takes up the place originally figured by the absence of the mother. (38-9)

As a result of denying his identification with his “paternal metaphor,” Comstock accordingly refuses the option for phallus “substitution.” He thus renders himself incapable of filling the void suffered from the original split between mother and child. Unable to substitute the father for the phallus within the Capitalist realm of desire because of his father’s lack of money, Comstock is left unable to cope with his original loss of the mother.

Accordingly, the adult Comstock functions within the Lacanian model of the castration “knot.” In his introductory outline of “Signification of the Phallus,” Lacan states:

We know the unconscious castration complex functions as a knot: 1. in the dynamic structuring of what is analyzable in the neuroses, perversions, and psychoses; [and] 2. in the development that gives its *ratio* to this first role: namely, the instating of the subject of an unconscious position without which he could not identify with the ideal type of sex or even answer the needs of his partner in sexual relations without grave risk, much less appropriately meet the needs of the child who may be produced thereby. (575)

Surely the “ratio” Lacan attributes to the neurotic perversions is continually displayed by Comstock through his repetitive tirades in which he blames money for existing “at the bottom of...”(Orwell 78) the failures of religion, sexuality and art (Orwell 78). This first link, that of religion, is depicted by Freud as perhaps the ultimate neurosis in his work *Totem and Taboo* and is displayed through the reoccurring motif that links money and religion to the failed fulfillment of both loss and desire. Orwell consistently depicts Comstock as neurotically mocking Old



Testament statements such as “Thou shalt make money”(Orwell 44) and “Circumcise ye your foreskins, saith the Lord”(Orwell 65.) These commands clearly depict the threat of loss within the realm of Capitalist desire as ordained by society’s collective father: God. Likewise, Comstock furthermore displays an extension of this link stating, “Money is what God used to be”(Orwell 43). Assumedly, Comstock is referring here to a society that has shifted its attempts to alleviate loss from its worship of God, the “father,” to money itself as “law.” Inevitably, however, this loss can not be alleviated through “Amen Pills”(Orwell 16), nor can it be alleviated through money.

More specifically, and as previously cited, the “development that gives its ratio” to such examples of religion as neurosis is first marked, according to Lacan, by the subject’s “unconscious position without which he could not identify with the ideal type of his sex”(575). Comstock is a character unconsciously positioned as unwilling or unable to identify with the ideal depiction of the successful male of Capitalist society due to his father’s failure to do so. For, according to Comstock, “the one fatal thing is to worship money and fail to get it” (Orwell 44). Comstock sees his father as guilty of such a “fatal thing” and as failing to get (or represent) the phallus, as signified by money. He thus accordingly wishes to disassociate himself from a father defined by the very loss he is intended to fulfill.

This disassociation extends to Comstock’s inability to relate to other members of his own sex as well. Orwell writes, “It was queer: All over England young men were eating their hearts out for lack of jobs, and here was he, Gordon, to whom the very word ‘job’ was faintly nauseating”(56). Defining himself as separate from the ideal young man of Capitalist England, Comstock, who is described several times as middle-aged, is aware that his lack of desire to fit the ideal role of male is “queer.” His longing for manhood does not include the ideals expected

of him within the Capitalist system, yet his longing for masculine identification with the phallus prevails all the same.

Orwell similarly depicts Comstock as equally unable to identify with other “older” men. These men notably bear a strong resemblance to the ideal his father attempted to represent.

Orwell writes:

The types he saw all around him, especially the older men, made him squirm. That was what it meant to worship the money-god! To settle down, to Make Good, to sell your soul for a villa and an aspidistra! To turn into the typical little bowler-hatted sneak—Strube’s “little-man”—the little docile cit who slips home by six-fifteen to a supper of cottage pie...and then perhaps a spot of licit sexual intercourse if his wife “feels in the mood!” What a fate! (48)

In this passage, Comstock clearly exemplifies both facets of the Lacanian “knot.” His refusal to become like “the types he saw around him,” emphasizes the second functioning of the unconscious castration complex: the inability to identify with the “ideal.” The “dynamic structuring of symptoms” here includes a neurosis depicted by religious allusion, as well as a perversion displayed for the disdain of “licit sexual intercourse.” Furthermore, if the men he speaks of resemble the life his own father failed to construct, the “wife” depicted thus represents for Comstock, the mother. All of these connections point to Comstock’s neurosis and display the symptoms of the unconscious castration complex as prescribed by Lacan.

Comstock’s recreation of the “paternal metaphor” as combined with the “ideal type of his sex” through Ravelston as social surrogate, however, displays a remaining hope in the substitution of the phallus through the ideal of the lawful father figure. As a figure whom Comstock both admires and resents, Ravelston has access to wealth and publication (as

emphasized by his title as Editor and Chief of socialist magazine, *The Antichrist*) and, unlike Comstock, Ravelston does not return home every night to a “cold womanless bedroom” (Orwell 72). Like language, Ravelston also serves as a point of false reference for Comstock through his role as Other. Of this concept, Rose explains that “The Other appears to hold the ‘truth’ of the subject and the power to make good its loss” (32). As representative of paternal law, Ravelston’s access to money, publication and women indicate his seeming possession of the phallus and accordingly, his representation of “truth.”

Seeming to represent the phallus because of this access, Orwell describes Ravelston as “whom he [Comstock] adored” (95). Comstock “adores” Ravelston because of his privileged position and his seeming representation of the ideal. Inspired to think of his poem while walking home from their evening of drinks and conversation, Orwell writes:

*Sharply the menacing winds sweep over.* The poem he had begun on Wednesday, of which six stanzas were now finished, came back into his mind. He did not dislike it at the moment. It was queer how talking with Ravelston always bucked him up. The mere contact with Ravelston seemed to reassure him somehow. Even when their talk had been unsatisfactory, he came away with the feeling that, after all, he wasn’t quite a failure. (99)

That their conversation, the exchange of language between subject and object, “bucks” Comstock “up” implies Ravelston’s fictionally elevated position as representative of the phallus and Comstock’s belief that he can obtain this phallus through his mere association with its possessor. That their mere “contact” leaves Comstock with the conception that he is not “quite a failure” identifies Ravelston as the ideal figure Comstock’s biological father fails to represent.

It matters not whether this exchange is “satisfactory” because of the Lacanian claim that:

...language exists to use it to signify something altogether different from what it says. This is the function of speech that is more worthy of being pointed out than that of disguising the subject's thought (which is usually indefinable)—namely, the function of indicating the place this subject in the search for truth. (“Letter” 421)

This “search for truth” is for both men harnessed within the exchange of language provided in conversation. Similar to the ways in which Comstock grapples with his desire to restore loss, Ravelston too is described as lacking. Orwell writes of Ravelston, “...the truth was that in every moment of his life he was apologising, tacitly for the largeness of his income. You could make him uncomfortable as easily by reminding him that he was rich as you could make Gordon by reminding him that he was poor” (81). Orwell’s comparison of the two hinges on the “uncomfortable” nature of loss. In this statement, the phallic signifier of money is separated from its relation to that of the symbolic phallus, existent only through its absence. Both Ravelston and Comstock are hence analytically linked in this way, regardless of their financial status.

To Comstock, Ravelston represents the ideal because of his tri-fold position of privilege. To Ravelston, however, who is described as wanting to believe “that life under a decaying capitalism is deathly and meaningless” (Orwell 83), yet recognizing that with his “eight hundred a year... life [is] pretty good fun” (Orwell 84), Comstock represents a type of ideal because of his continual choice to live within the realities of poverty, something Ravelston “can’t really *feel*” (Orwell 83). In accordance with their complimentary positions, Lacan states:

...the primordial relationship with the mother manifests, replete as it is with that Other who must be situated *shy of* the need that Other can fulfill. Demand already

constitutes the Other has having “privilege” of satisfying needs, that is, the power to deprive them of what alone can satisfy them. The Other’s privileges here thus outlines the radical form of the gift of what the Other does not have...

(“Phallus” 579-80)

Both Ravelston and Comstock are in possession of what the “Other” is “shy of.” While Ravelston is representative of a Capitalist version of “privilege,” he claims to desire a Socialist regime, producing *The Antichrist* in his efforts, a longing that surely proves the fiction of money as phallus and his attempt to identify with a form of language that inverts the concept of the “Money God.” Comstock, on the other hand, is what Ravelston attempts to signify through his own “lifelong attempt to escape from his own class and become, as it were, an honorary member of the proletariat” (Orwell 80). This attempt, like the attempt to attain the phallus that it signifies, is described by Orwell as “foredoomed to failure” (80).

Ravelston’s failure is indicated by his discomfort in the low-class pub Comstock takes him to. Orwell writes:

Gordon shoved open the door of the public bar, Ravelston following. Ravelston persuaded himself that he was fond of pubs, especially low-class pubs. Pubs are genuinely proletarian. In a pub you can meet the working class on equal terms—or that’s the theory anyway. But in practice Ravelston never went into a pub unless he was with someone like Gordon and he always felt like a fish out of water when he got there... There was a moment’s hush and people glanced inquisitively... Ravelston pretended not to notice that they were staring at him... But Gordon had already shoved his way ahead...(86-7)

Ravelston's desire to believe that he is "fond" of such experiences displays his quest to achieve a sense of wholeness he assumes in some way exists at the "proletarian" level. That Comstock leads the way into the pub, "shoving" the door and then "shoving" his way "ahead," indicates his privileged masculine position over Ravelston in this context. Comstock soon secures this position using language to make Ravelston feel even further subjected by ranting about the "bloody, sneaking, squalid meanness" (Orwell 90) of living in poverty, knowing full well that this "embarrassed Ravelston horribly" (Orwell 90). Despite Ravelston's lifelong dedication to understanding poverty, language still fails in "explanation," yet succeeds in provoking his "embarrassment." In reiteration of the Lacanian claim, Rose contends that "Language is the place where meaning circulates"(32). Their exchange indicates the forever failing function of the signifier to restore the subject's lack.

Manipulating the conversation in a way that secures his current position of privilege, Comstock further complicates the relationship between subject and object by indirectly referring to his desire to kill Ravelston. Orwell writes:

"I couldn't commit suicide, real suicide. It's too meek and mild. I'm not going to give up my share of earth to anyone else. I'd want to do in a few enemies first."

Ravelston smiled again. "And who are your enemies?"

"Oh, anyone with over five hundred a year."

A moment of uncomfortable silence fell. Ravelston's income, after payment of income tax, was probably two thousand a year. This was the kind of thing Gordon was always saying...(88)

Comstock's "saying" that Ravelston is his enemy ironically both secures and inverts his position as privileged subject within this linguistic exchange. By making Ravelston "uncomfortable" and

leaving him passively “silent,” Comstock actively secures his position as the masculine ideal. As representative of what Comstock desires, however, implying that he would want to kill Ravelston secures his role as the forbidding father within the knot of Comstock’s unconscious castration complex.

“For Lacan,” as Rose states “the subject can only operate within language by constantly repeating that moment of fundamental and irreducible division” (31). Ravelston’s role as this paternal figure of privilege within the ratio is further supported by Comstock’s later departure from Ravelston, during which time he states to himself via inner dialogue “Never stay too long with those you love...” (Orwell 95). The fact that Comstock makes reference to murdering the father figure he “loves” is a sure indication that his desire for the phallus is linked to what he believes is desired by the mother. As this desire is signified within the Capitalist sphere as money, it is only appropriate that, unlike Comstock’s real father who mortifies him by tipping him “only half of a crown when it should have been, ten bob!” (Orwell 42), Ravelston considers “whether Gordon would accept a tenner” (Orwell 91) then soon after offers to lend him ten quid instead.

Ravelston’s ability to offer much more than Comstock’s biological father is linked to his privileged position as representative of the phallus. As possessor of money, Ravelston represents the figure who possesses the desire of the mother and hence the phallus itself. This desire is linked to the novel’s major symbol, the aspidistra. The plant, with leaves “shaped like Agamemnon’s sword” (Orwell 36), undoubtedly serves within the novel as the ultimate symbol for the Capitalist representation of the unobtainable phallus. Accused by Ravelston of obsessively “talk[ing] a great deal about aspidistras” (Orwell 93), Gordon shouts in a type of absurd sincerity, “Aspidistras are a dashed important subject!” (Orwell 93). The symbol

represents for Comstock the importance of his loss of male adequacy and a longing for his own representation of the phallus, one other than the one accepted within the Capitalist interpretation.

Depicting Comstock in his one room flat staring at the plant, Orwell writes:

Gordon had a sort of secret feud with the aspidistra. Many a times he furtively attempted to kill it—starving it of water, grinding hot cigarette-ends against its stem, even mixing salt with its earth. But the beastly things are practically immortal. In almost any circumstance they can preserve a wilting, diseased existence. (28)

Comstock's "secret feud" with the Aspidistra represents his internal and unconscious struggle to both reject and obtain the indestructible phallus. His sarcastic representation of the plant as the "flower of England!" serving to glorify the "beastly"(44) middle class's false hope of attaining the Capitalist version, displays Comstock's awareness of his own fruitless longing. His symbolic longing leads to his unattainable desire for the plant's literal demise and accordingly for a demise of his feelings of loss.

Comstock's obsession with the aspidistra as representative of his inability to attain the phallus through paternal identification is further linked to his seeming inadequacy as a sexually functioning adult. His inadequacy depicts both the Freudian and Lacanian claim as depicted by Juliet Mitchell that "...the development of the human subject, its unconscious and its sexuality go hand-in-hand, they are causatively intertwined" (2). Blaming his unconscious inabilities on the object of his sexual desire, Comstock shouts at the virginal Rosemary who refuses to consummate their relationship via intercourse:

"They [women] are to blame, finally! Because it's the women who really believe in the money-code. The men obey it; they have to, but they don't believe in it.



It's the women who keep it going. The women and their Putney villas and their fur coats and their babies and their aspidistras!...if I had a decent income you'd go to bed with me tomorrow...What does any woman want except a safe income and two babies and semi-detached villa in Putney with an aspidistra in window?"(114)

Ironically however, Rosemary does not at all fit the description of the above cursed woman with "her right hand itch for a castrating knife" (Orwell 115). Described by Orwell instead as an "extraordinarily good natured" (114) woman who is in love with Comstock despite his "nonsense [and] perverse jokes"(114), Rosemary is in fact the only woman in the novel who does *not* prescribe to the desired ideals of the Capitalist phallus. However, it is not unusual, according to the Lacanian model, for the woman to serve as "'symptom' for the man [where]...lack is projected" (Rose 48). The type of woman described however, does bear a strong resemblance to Comstock's mother who is earlier depicted as longing for a "safe income" and who, coincidentally, has "two babies" and a "villa" with an "aspidistra." Accusing Rosemary of refusing to have sex with him because of his income thus really represents Comstock's primordial inability "to be the exclusive desire of the mother"(Rose 38). As interpreted by Comstock, the exclusive desire of his mother was phallic signifier of money and in turn he projects the same onto Rosemary.

Serving as object substitute for the unattainable phallus, Rosemary is largely identified by Comstock for her refusal to provide for him what she is not able to give in the first place. Of this type of attempt, Rose contends "As negative to the man, woman becomes a total object of fantasy (or an object of total fantasy), elevated into the place of the Other and made to stand for its truth" (50). By refusing her body in a way earlier projected onto the girl in the advertisement, Rosemary seemingly refuses a "truth" that is only definable by the original loss of the mother.

The false parallel made between the desires of his mother and of Rosemary is linked earlier as well with regard to the exchange of letters between the two. Upon his receipt of a rejection letter for one of his poems, Comstock sifts through the mail as Orwell writes:

He must not go to bed with that rejection slip as the last thing in his mind. He thought of Rosemary. It was five days since she had written. If there had been a letter from her this evening even the rap over the knuckles from the *Primrose Quarterly* would have mattered less. She declared that she loved him and she wouldn't sleep with him, wouldn't even write to him! (78).

That his receipt of the rejection letter itself reemphasizes his original loss is supported by the fact the lack of letter provided by Rosemary does the same. Both forms of rejection strike at the core of Comstock's desire to attain the phallus and to meet an ideal. Within this type of exchange, Rosemary signifies the Other because of her temporary power over her subject's language. Comstock waits, and must accept the loss of non-receipt because it is her turn to write. Rose states that:

Lacan's reference to the woman as Other needs [ ] to be seen as an attempt to hold apart two moments which are in constant danger of collapsing into each other—that which assigns woman to the negative place of its own (phallic) system, and that which asks the question as to whether women might, as a very effect of that assignation, break against and beyond that system itself. For Lacan, that break is always in language. (52)

Rosemary's "holding apart" of her letter represents this "break" in language within their exchange. By withholding fulfillment via language from Comstock, as he sees it, Rosemary functions as the feminine who "breaks against" and in turn, relates this to her refusal to have sex

with him. By doing so, she refuses to situate herself within “the negative place” within the “(phallic) system.”

In his attempt to rectify this loss and invert the power structure constructed by his subjected stance as the waiting receptacle, Comstock decides that he will take on the active role of writer. Orwell writes:

...he would write her an enormous letter, telling her what it felt like to be ignored and insulted, making her see how cruelly she had treated him...but...he was in the defeated mood when even the writing of a letter is too great an effort...he must write something... something to wound her—that was what he most wanted, at this moment...at last he wrote, exactly in the middle of the sheet:

“You have broken my heart.”

(78)

Comstock’s decision to write an “enormous letter” signifies his desire to reclaim the phallus through language. His attempts to infuse her with guilt is representative of his anger for her seeming role in withholding from him, both linguistically and sexually, what can only be achieved symbolically. By taking active control of their exchange, Comstock attempts to deflect the fault of his own lack onto Rosemary. This is exemplified by the term he uses to explain his heart: “broken,” as indicative of the original rupture. Furthermore by placing the words “exactly” at the center, Comstock indicates his contempt for her seeming grasp of both truth and origin.

Rosemary soon does, however, provide Comstock with the chance to fulfill both of their sexual longings through her acceptance of intercourse. Leaving the money-driven confines of London in an escape to the Edenic natural order of the country side, Comstock envisions that his “life would be a different thing when once they were really lovers”(Orwell 139). His belief that

he can attain the ideal through having Rosemary is soon challenged. Kneeling over her naked body in a grassy field Comstock, however, finds himself in “trouble”(Orwell 140). Orwell writes:

It dismayed him to find how little, at this moment, he really wanted her. The money-business still unnerved him. How can you make love when you have only eightpence in your pocket and are thinking about it all the time? ...He moved closer to her. Once again the coins clinked in his pocket. Only eightpence left! Trouble coming presently. But he wouldn't think of it now. Get on with it, that's the great thing, get on it with it and damn the future! (139-140)

Comstock's struggle with impotence in this passage is clearly caused by what he considers to be the distraction of money loss, as he just prior spent more than planned at a local restaurant. The loss of this money represents for him his inability to fulfill the desire of Rosemary, the mother object. Previously prevented from both being the desire of the mother as well as identifying with the one expected to fill it, Comstock accordingly can not, “identify with the ideal type of his sex or answer the needs of his partner in sexual relations without grave risk”(Lacan 575). His inability to perform inhibits his attempt to reach the wholeness that he envisioned could “make life a different thing,” both for Comstock who would theoretically *be* the phallus and for Rosemary, who would theoretically *have* it. For as Mitchell asserts is always the case “...the girl will desire to have the phallus and the boy will struggle to represent it...this is the insoluble desire of their lives...”(7). Furthermore, however, according to Lacan both “‘identity’ and ‘wholeness’ remain precisely [and only] at the level of fantasy” (Rose 32).

In addition to the “grave risk” of attempting to fulfill the longing of desire through Rosemary as Other and as the representative mother substitute, Comstock also suffers at this

moment with a further reemphasis on his inability to “much less appropriately meet the needs of the child who may be produced thereby” (Lacan 575). Realizing he has taken no precautionary steps against pregnancy, Rosemary terminates Comstock’s already futile attempts by pushing him “violently back” and yelling, “No, Gordon, no! No, no, no!... You mustn’t! *No!*... I can’t have a baby, can I?”(141-2). Surprised by her sudden shift in desire, Comstock is symbolically castrated both by his impotence as well as by her sudden forcing of him away. Orwell writes “It was terrible to feel her push him away at such a moment”(141). The instance represents a traumatic reenactment of the equally traumatic primordial moment; such is the moment in which he was marked as something other than “the object of the mother’s desire [and] forbidden (the castration complex)” (Mitchell 7).

Blaming money, the object replacing him as his mother’s desire, Comstock states in response to the situation, ““Money again, you see!””(Orwell 142). Exasperated, Rosemary cries, “What’s *money* go to do with it?” (Orwell 142). To this he asserts:

I tell you it’d never even enter your head to worry about a baby if it wasn’t for the money. You’d *want* a baby if it wasn’t for that. You say you ‘can’t’ have a baby. What do you mean you ‘can’t’ have a baby? You mean you daren’t; because... I’ve got no money and all of us would starve. This birth-control business! (142)

Prevented in his attempt to restore the phallus, Comstock blames the construction of money as it functions as symbol for the mother’s desire. His own failings, both to perform restoration, as well as to provide for the possible outcome of the restoration, clearly parallel the “functioning knot” of the unconscious castration complex.

When, moments later, Rosemary exhibits guilt for her fulfillment of the role of the castrating female and agrees to “risk it”(Orwell 145), Comstock feels a “weak desire raise...itself

in him and die...away at once”(Orwell 145) for he knows her concession is of guilt, and “not because, at this moment, she really wanted to be made love to” (Orwell 145). His fleeting desire thus further proves that his longing for intercourse with her is not based on physical needs, but of the psychological longing to restore the wholeness he believes he can attain through the object of her body.

Knowing now that she, like the mother she represents, does not desire him in this moment defeats the entire purpose of the act. Thus he answers, “I can’t make love to you when I’ve only eightpence in my pocket. At least when you know I’ve only eightpence in my pocket. I just can’t do it. It’s physically impossible”(Orwell 146). Transferring her lack of desire due to his lack of money, the desired object of his mother, Comstock still remains impotent despite Rosemary’s willingness. Apologetic, he states to her as they leave for the train back to London “...one isn’t a full human being—one doesn’t *feel* a human being—unless one’s got money...”(146). Referring to his castrated and in turn fractured self, Comstock unconsciously associates money, the object he claims to despise, with the unobtainable link to a wholeness provided by a phallus that does not exist. This idea of a “full human being” is linked to the fully functioning “ideal-I,” that which exists only in the period prior to the original separation attained during the mirror stage (Lacan “Mirror” 76).

Comstock soon learns, however, that money is in fact *not* the cause of his sexual disturbance when, upon receiving a large check for a poem published in California, he attempts to rectify his sexual frustration with a prostitute. In an attempt to reclaim the manhood lost during the original castration from his mother, Comstock adheres to the Lacanian claim that:

...his own desire for the phallus will make its signifier emerge in its residual divergence toward “another woman” who may signify this phallus in various

ways, either as virgin or as prostitute. There results from the centrifugal tendency of the genital drive in the sphere of love, which makes impotence much harder for him to bear, while the *Verdrangung* [repression] inherent in his desire is greater.

(Lacan 583)

Seeking “another woman” as object substitute for the mother, Comstock accordingly displays his desire for the phallus through both prescribed significations of it. Failing first in his attempts with Rosemary, the “virgin,” Comstock, in a drunken frenzy, attempts with Dora, the “prostitute.” Orwell writes with regard to this second attempt:

So here we are. A mean, dreadful room...And, by Jove! on the bamboo table by the window, positively an aspidistra! Hast thou found me, O mine enemy? But come here Dora...Never mind that now. To work! Come here! Not a bad mouth. Come here. Come closer. Ah! No. No use. Impossible. The will but not the way. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Try again. No. The booze, it must be. ...One last try. No, no use. Not this evening, I'm afraid. All right, Dora, don't you worry. You'll get your two quid all right. We aren't paying by results. (176)

Through the perspective of inner dialogue and an exchange indicative of a fragmented self, Comstock is yet again castrated by his own impotence. This time, however, he *does* in fact have money in his pocket as is emphasized by his ability to even pay for his woman-object's presence. Furthermore, his ability to pay is based on his position as published “writer.” Yet, his sexual dysfunction still persists and in his fractured depiction of both his “flesh” and “spirit,” Comstock yet again exemplifies, as earlier confessed, a man who “isn't a whole human being”(Orwell 46). Thus, the symbol of the haunting aspidistra shifts from its association with the longing for actual money to its abstract representation of the unobtainable phallus itself.

Comstock's realization that money itself is not to blame for his failure to represent the phallus makes both his literal and figurative "impotence much harder for him to bear" (Lacan, "Phallus" 583). After spending the night in jail for public drunkenness, Comstock accordingly loses his job and consequently his living quarters and from then on descends into extreme depression and isolation. This time, Orwell asserts that, "...in his heart... [he] didn't want to be helped. He only wanted to be left alone. He was headed for the gutter... underground! Down into the safe soft womb of the earth, where there is no getting of jobs or losing of jobs, no relatives or friends..." (191, 5). His refusal to find a new job or home displays Comstock's final attempt at removal from his castration complex through surrender. Longing to return to the "womb," Comstock instead displays a nostalgia to return to the moments prior to his castration.

The womb, as the "point of origin," Rose asserts, "is the maternal body, an undifferentiated space" (54). As a space that exists prior to language, it is imperative to mention that during this period Comstock refuses to find a new job and, perhaps more importantly, refuses to write poetry. Orwell writes, "The whole concept of poetry was meaningless to him now" (218). This evokes a time before Comstock's entrance into a Capitalist society and more specifically, a time before he experienced the need for language due to maternal loss. During this time, Orwell writes that "Gordon hated getting letters nowadays. They were a link with that other world from which he was trying escape" (209). The "world" that Comstock longs to escape is the phase marked by Lacan as the imaginary, his entrance upon which forever thrust him within the realm of loss, and which required his original need for language as displayed through the poetry and letters which he now finds lack "meaning."

Hence, during this time of isolation, Comstock completely surrenders both objects previously used in the attempt to fulfill his loss: woman and language. In this newfound lack of



desire Comstock spends his days like a child: sleeping and dependent upon Ravelston, the paternal figure, for his needs. Orwell writes, “He [Comstock] liked to think that beneath the world of money there is that great sluttish underworld where failure and success have no meaning...that was where he wished to be, down in the ghost-kingdom, *below* ambition” (203). Comstock’s nostalgia and longing for a place where the binaries that have marked his concept of ideal as having “no meaning” is a statement directly related to his desire to return to the moments that exist pre-language.

Accordingly, this “space” marks the period prior also to the irresistible “ambition” to claim the unattainable phallus. Comstock no longer desires Rosemary at this point, nor does he care about Julia’s disappointment because his regression to the “womb” provides the illusion that he is no longer a subject defined by separation from the mother. Of this pre-mirror stage retreat, Lacan contends that “...hysterical repression and its returns at a more archaic stage than obsessive inversion and its isolating processes, situate[ ] the latter as prior to the paranoid alienation that dates back to the time at which the specular *I* turns into the social *I*” (Lacan, “Mirror” 79). Comstock’s self-imposed “alienation” regresses or “dates back to the time” when his identification as “I” switched to an identity defined by lack.

This regression period describes Comstock’s final attempts to escape the responsibility of the functioning adult in the symbolic stage. Describing Comstock in such a state, lying amidst his few possessions, Orwell writes: “The aspidistra had died a week ago and was withering upright in its pot”(219). The alleged death of this symbol represents Comstock’s surrender to loss and his retreat to the moments prior. Rose accordingly states that the “...refusal of the phallus turns out once again to be a refusal of the symbolic” (56). The image of the dead plant

thus parallels Comstock's perception of the death of the phallus, a happening that, like its attainment, is impossible.

His capitulation to this loss, however, subsequently affects the abandoned Rosemary, who, feeling "all the impotence, [and] the resentment of a young woman who sees an abstract idea triumphing over common sense..."(Orwell 195) embarks on her own quest. Surely, this "triumphing abstract idea" is that of the phallus and of Comstock's acceptance of its loss. Refusing to similarly accept this same loss, Rosemary responds to Comstock's passivity by taking on the role of the active in order to fulfill her own longing for the "organ that is endowed with this signifying function" of the phallus (Lacan 583). She in turn seeks him out in his cold garret room in order to have intercourse with him.

Crawling beneath him, Rosemary states, "I don't care whether you marry me or not...I wish I'd done [this] years ago. Yes. Yes!" in her attempt to "have" the phallus Comstock now withholds from her (Orwell 221). In opposition to her previously declared "no's," Rosemary's initiation of sex this time results in the actual act. Having abandoned his quest to restore the phallus, Comstock is this time able to perform. His ability however, means nothing to him now as he has hypothetically retreated to his pre-Oedipal self. When they are finished "...at last, without much pleasure," Orwell describes Rosemary as feeling "dismayed, disappointed, and very cold" (221).

Simultaneously, however, she is described as "After all...too much for him"(Orwell 221). This signals the Lacanian, "*Jouissance* (literally 'orgasm')...the drive outside any register of need and beyond the economy of pleasure [as well as] the area of excess (it is 'too much')...[and] can refer to something more than pleasure which can easily tip into its opposite" (Rose 34). Comstock's sexual experience with Rosemary, who is literally described in the text

as “too much” (Orwell 221), experiences this “opposite” of pleasure. The same holds true for Rosemary as well despite the indication that she, too, described by the Lacanian phrase for the feminine orgasm as ““too much,”” has achieved orgasm. The “disappointed” Rosemary thus learns through this experience, as Comstock has already, that the phallus is an unobtainable fantasy.

Subsequently, however, Orwell signifies a twist of fate soon after depicting the impossibility of giving up the phallus. He writes “The aspidistra, it turned out, had not died after all; the withered leaves had dropped off, but it was putting forth a couple of dull green shoots near its base”(223). Its new life foreshadows the paradoxically complicating and comforting news that Rosemary is pregnant. After Comstock’s initial dismay, Orwell writes:

The words “a baby” took on a new significance. They meant of bud of flesh a bit of himself, down there in her belly, alive and growing...His eyes met hers. They had a strange moment of sympathy such as they had never had before. For a moment he did feel that in some mysterious way they were one flesh. Though they were feet apart he felt as though they were joined together—as though some invisible living cord stretched from her entrails to his...(226)

This passage illustrates a shift in Comstock’s unconscious castration complex. While the actual act of sex does nothing to shift those effects, the result of the act does, despite its function as symbolic. Creating a child shifts Comstock’s role as subject to father through his part in shifting Rosemary from object to mother. Though imaginary, Comstock thus relives and reconstructs the previous mother-child separation through his new maternal figure.

As a result of his new role as the father he was previously unable to identify with, Comstock returns to the moments before castration when mother and child were whole, or “one

flesh,” “joined” with the “invisible” umbilical cord as an, according to Lacan, “internal object” (577). Through the creation of a child, Comstock thus returns to the mother as origin and is able to seemingly relive his unconscious complex. Though fractured, “a bit of himself” is returned to the body and the compromise is enough to enable Comstock to shift to the symbolic phase. As Mitchell states, “Together with the organizing role of the Oedipus complex in relation to desire, the castration complex governs the position of each person in the triangle of father, mother and child; in the way it does this, it embodies the law that founds the human order itself”(14), that of the father and of the longing for the phallus that he represents. Thus Comstock reestablishes his longing to represent the phallus and to provide Rosemary with its attainment, within even the Capitalist “order itself” as indicated upon Comstock’s decisions to marry Rosemary and to return to his advertising job at New Albion.

He thus returns to his longing for the phallus as defined by the Capitalist construction of manhood in his attempt both to give it to Rosemary as well as to represent it himself in order to reinforce the law for the child he will soon produce. His acceptance of loss, however, is represented when he abandons his previous attempts to harness language through poetry, both burning his poems and submerging them in water. Orwell writes of his destruction of *London Pleasures* “The sole fruit of his exile, a two year’s foetus which would never be born. Well he had finished with all of that”(239). His abortion of one “foetus” in order to “meet the needs” of the other serves to represent Comstock’s concrete movement into the symbolic. Quite comically, however, in doing so Comstock mocks poetry in a way similar to the earlier way in which he mocked money. Upon his decision to deconstruct his “ideal-I” image as poet, Comstock sarcastically and quite seriously shouts “Poetry! *Poetry*, indeed!” (239).

Furthering this comic reversal is Comstock's insistence that he and Rosemary buy an aspidistra for the front window of their new flat before the baby is born. His acceptance of the plant surely provides for the ambiguous conclusion often discussed as further supported by Comstock's realization that "The aspidistra is the tree of life"(Orwell 239). For Comstock's new role as man through the role of father, according to Lacan, "revolve[s] around a being and a having which, since they refer to a signifier, the phallus, have contradictory effects"(582). This contradiction is displayed by Comstock's willingness to enter into a manhood defined by the Capitalist exploitation of man's loss and desire. Orwell writes of this entrance that "He [Comstock] was thirty and there was grey in his hair, yet he had a queer feeling that he had only just grown up. It occurred to him that he was merely repeating the destiny of every human being"(238). Though he has "grown up," positioning himself within the symbolic phase, this "destiny of every human being" is rooted within the Lacanian claim. For the inevitable role of the phallus is marked eternally by both its presence and absence.

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