

Examine with close textual reference the literary factors which make Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* an effective piece of social commentary.

Down and Out in Paris and London is George Orwell's personal account of living in poverty in both cities. It begins in Paris, where Orwell lived for two years surviving by giving English lessons and contributing reviews and articles to various periodicals. Two years later, Orwell moved to London, where, along with writing and tutoring, he worked as a bookshop assistant, an experience which was to inform his later novel *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. It was first published in 1933. He offered it as a record of experience, organised rather than fictionalised, and as a demonstration of how to destroy prejudice. This was all of a specifically social purpose that he saw in the book, it arose naturally from the facts he described. There is no gulf between fact, observation and message. No secondary or irrelevant interest interferes with the lucid presentation of detail, and the sustained tone of combined intellectual concern, emotional sympathy and unbiased detachment drives his words clearly. This essay will examine what literary factors George Orwell employed to make *Down and Out in Paris and London* a social commentary on Paris and London in the 1930's.

The first part of *Down and Out* is clearly about Orwell's poverty, his jobs, and the people he worked and lived with, in Paris. The second part describes his experiences as a tramp when he returned penniless to England and reluctant to apply to friends for help. *Down and Out* is perhaps the least passionate of Orwell's books. He recounted only of the facts he witnessed, not of their wide implications. Although in the second half he manages to combine, almost unintentionally, a straightforward personal account with a detailed sociological investigation into the circumstances under which tramps and vagrants lived, he appeals to the warmth of common sense rather than the coldness of theory. Later he was to discover that a specifically socialist commitment involved him in tangled strands of allegiance and betrayal that he found exasperating, dishonest and destructive as reflected in his works *Animal Farm* and *1984*. However in *Down and Out* his social outlook here is unclouded and attractively simple, although his view of human nature is acute and not optimistic.

It takes Orwell a single page to describe the essence of a 'representative Paris slum'. Noise and smells predominate. Quarrels, fights and drunkenness were what gave colour to an otherwise drab level of life. Orwell makes us feel that anger and disgust are the only responses that are worth making the

effort to express, and so their expression becomes a daily necessity, taken for granted. Just because life is so confined, the details dull and unvaried, after the necessities of food, drink and sleep, little is worth noticing. And as the noise and filth increase the area of interest shrinks. Orwell describes his hotel room,

'Sometimes when the bugs got too bad one used to burn sulphur and drive them into the next room... It was a dirty place, but homelike, for Madame F. and her husband were good sorts. The rent of the room varied between thirty and fifty francs a week'. (Orwell, 1933, page 6.)

Orwell deliberately avoids drawing attention to himself. He does not intrude. He becomes 'one', a generalised being whom he is regarding along with other details. It is a personal experience viewed with thorough detachment. The result of this detachment is that when Orwell comes to make a subjective statement we accept it without thought. We accept the statement that the hotel was 'homelike' and Madame F. a 'good sort' in spite of what our own reactions might have been. This is most important achievement of the social commentator, to prevent his reader from accepting some facts while questioning others. Orwell does this by not emphasising the particularly shocking or the particularly unusual any more than he emphasis the trivial or the questionable. Here it is not of fundamental importance in itself whether the hotel was indeed 'homelike', but the fact that Orwell does not allow us to disbelieve it is at the very basis of his success as a social commentator.

Orwell shows how demoralising poverty is, and how subjectively damaging. It shrinks a man to 'only a belly with a few accessory organs' and the more limited means of existence the less able a man becomes to resist or fight against circumstances. This has two effects. It deprives one of the necessity of being responsible, of paying attention to anything apart from the avoidance of starvation, and it cuts one off from that vast area of worry and concern that is a part of daily life, leaving one with the single problem of pretending to have money when one has none. This situation can be comforting:

'You discover boredom and mean complications and the beginnings of hunger, but you also discover the great redeeming feature of poverty: the fact that it annihilates the future. Within certain limits it is actually true that the less money you have, the less you worry... You are bored, but you are not afraid.' (Orwell, 1933, page 20.)

Orwell is deliberately unromantic and unsophisticated in his descriptions of tramping. He moves from a generalised description of his own experiences to detailed observation of a companion on the roads

to moral and social judgement. He describes Paddy, who, although he *'had the regular character of a tramp – abject, envious, a jackal's character'* was *'a good fellow, generous by nature and capable of sharing his last crust with a friend; indeed he did literally share his last crust with me more than once'* (Orwell, 1933, page 153).

If Orwell uses a well-worn phrase, such as 'sharing his last crust', he uses it literally, and does not allow it to become a means of short-circuiting communication. Here Orwell reveals significantly his attitude to many of the people with whom he came into contact. It is an attitude of combined sympathy and disgust. He cannot pretend that he likes Paddy, although he appreciates his personality. Yet the more he experiences of the details of Paddy's life the greater is the understanding rather than pity, he feels for him. It is the subjective detachment and the unromantic way in which he uses ordinary words that gives a profoundly moral tone to his work.

In *Down and Out* Orwell uses no literary devices such as metaphor or simile. When it is necessary he explains what he is doing without pretence because there is a minimum of substance between experience and language. Orwell's carefully employed banal vocabulary eliminates interference. His balanced and colloquial sentences grow out of his common sense and his attempts to identify with a happy, decent medium. Orwell appeals to his readers' sense of decency. He does not have to add a message to his descriptions; the message is present in the language and the story itself. Though, at the end of *Down and Out* he gives us a brief, matter-of-fact chapter consolidating his material and offering some suggestions as to what could be done to help vagrants. He moves out of his role as observer with no change of tone. Far from our being disturbed by his blunt, *"I want to set down some general remarks about tramps"* (Orwell, 1933, page 203) it adds force to what he has to say, for he already established his credibility.

Orwell's *Down and Out*, while not being the first book of its kind, was something of a phenomenon. Even when social commentary was at its height in Britain there was little that was genuinely muckraking in the sense that the author decided to investigate and write up a situation by becoming involved in it. Those, who did joined armies and causes, they did not, usually, join miners and factory workers, still less those on the dole. Orwell by gritting his teeth, and it is fairly clear that he did not enjoy living on bread and margarine or his stay at the spikes, battered his way, inevitably a little

blindly, into foreign situations. While some admired him for it, others resented the fact that he had courage as well as conviction.

Bibliography

- Orwell, G. (1933), 'Down and Out in Paris and London', *Penguin Classics*, Victoria, Australia.
- <http://www.wikipedia.org>, 'George Orwell' and 'Down and Out in Paris and London', site visited on 25.10.2005.