

The pong of poverty: George Orwell on the problem of olfactory classism

BY ALLY LOUKS

Throughout his fiction and non-fiction, George Orwell incorporated references to olfaction to invoke strong reactions in his readers. For example, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the protagonist Winston describes “the pleasant smell of [Julia’s] hair”. Orwell emphasises the invasiveness and emotional force of olfactory experience: the scent “seemed to have got inside of him” and “become a physical necessity”. Orwell’s biographers, Peter Stansky and William Abrahams, have argued that there is “no doubt that his sense of smell was abnormally keen”.

Primarily, however, the odours Orwell refers to are unpleasant, often meant to emphasise an unpleasant situation and reinforce negative responses in the reader. For Orwell, smell is a constant source of emotional intensity and ethical concern. Orwell critic and biographer, John Sutherland, suggests that the “odour of morality” resonates “through everything he wrote”.

This is most evident in the Orwell’s sociological text, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, published in 1937. Although Orwell’s broad aim was to get beyond thinking of the working class as “symbolic victims of injustice”, he also admitted to feeling “an immense weight of guilt that [he] had got to expiate” for being “part of an oppressive system” of imperialism while working as a police officer in Burma for five years.

By subjecting himself to a kind of sanative exposure, then, Orwell attempted to rid himself of both his ignorance about working-class conditions in Britain and his “bad conscience”. Orwell argues that “it is a kind of duty to see and smell such places now and again, especially smell them, lest you should forget that they exist”.

While to some extent, then, Orwell records the sensorial conditions of those living in poverty, his focus is as much on the responses and preconceptions of middle- and upper-class people like himself – his readers, the ‘you’ he addresses.

In a much-quoted (though less often contextualised) passage, Orwell posits that “the real secret of class distinctions in the West” can be “summed up in four frightful words which people nowadays are chary of uttering [...] The words were: ‘The lower classes smell’”.

Orwell not only acknowledges that this idea is pervasive, he also recognises that it is essentially tacit and unspoken, making it particularly impenetrable to analysis. Orwell argues that “the harm is done” when people are taught that the lower classes are “somehow inherently dirty”, diagnosing the problem that olfactory stereotypes can fuel disgust even when actual bodies are clean, which still holds relevance in modern-day prejudices.

“For Orwell, smell is a constant source of emotional intensity and ethical concern”



A gardener smelling a flower; representing the sense of smell. Etching by T. Kitchen after D. Teniers. Source: Wellcome Collection.

References:

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