"Bringing off a Successful Swindle": The Educational Climate and Its Capitalist Discontents in Orwell's "A Clergyman's Daughter"

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Abstract. Compared to George Orwell's best-known works, *1984* (1949) and *Animal Farm* (1945), his earlier fiction has attracted significantly less critical attention. Yet, these novels deserve attention for the way Orwell draws on his own life, lending them some autobiographical quality, and for their exploration of many of the same socio-political concerns that preoccupied him as a journalist and essayist. One such concern is his representation of the lower tier of the private school system—an interest shaped by his experience as a private school teacher. This essay examines how Orwell's second novel, *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935), reflects the capitalist ethos that was present in the educational climate of fourth-rate schools. By tracing the milestones of the protagonist Dorothy's teaching career, I argue that her failure to reform the curriculum and her powerless resistance to Mrs Creevy, the proprietress of Ringwood House Academy, expose deeper structural flaws within the educational institutions of suburban London in the 1930s.

Keywords: Orwell, A Clergyman's Daughter, education, capitalism, suburban London, 1930s

Unlike *1984* (1949) and *Animal Farm* (1945), George Orwell's best-known works, his early fiction has received less attention from critics. As Orwell biographer Bernard Crick points out, in the case of *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935), Orwell's second novel, this can be attributed to the belief that *Clergyman* "has some good parts but, overall, is embarrassingly bad" (Crick 2019, xxi), an opinion held by Orwell himself (Orwell 1990, v; cf. 1968, 141), who did not want it translated or reprinted after his death (Crick 2019, 214). The

argument presented in this essay is based on the conviction that Orwell's early fiction is just as worthy of attention as his later, more widely read novels (cf. Smyer 1975, 36). The interest of these early fictional works lies in how Orwell drew inspiration from his own life, making them autobiographical to some degree, and how he explored many of the same socio-political issues that he was preoccupied with as a journalist and essayist[1]. Among them, I shall focus on Orwell's representation of the lower segment of the private school system, through a close reading of the fourth chapter of *Clergyman*, which is based on Orwell's experience as a private school teacher (Crick 2019, 215; cf. Pearce 1992, 383). In 1932–33, he taught at two all-boys' schools in west London and began writing the novel after the end of his short-lived teaching career. The main character, Dorothy Hare, having experienced an attack of amnesia followed by a series of tribulations, takes up a job at a fourth-rate all-girls private school. It is here that Dorothy "begins to feel that at last she has found a career that will give some meaning and direction to her life" (Smyer, 1975, 31). As Richard I. Smyer also points out, the undercurrent to Dorothy's life story is that "modern civilisation […] is now committed to a worship of money which divides and alienates men from their fellows" (1975, 31; cf. 1975, 37). Following this line of thought, the present essay shall examine how this novel depicts the capitalist sentiments pervading the educational climate of fourth-rate schools. Through the examination of the milestones of Dorothy's teaching career, I argue that her failure to reform the curriculum and her futile opposition against Mrs Creevy, Ringwood House Academy's proprietress, exposes the fundamental institutional flaws in the educational system of suburban London during the 1930s.

While she comes to grow into her role as schoolmistress, initially Dorothy is reluctant to take the offer of what is to be her first proper job since having regained her consciousness on New Kent Road. When her cousin Sir Thomas announces that he has secured the position, she points out that "[t]here isn't a single subject [she] can teach. […] You have to be properly qualified to be a teacher"

(Orwell 1990, 196). Sir Thomas, however, dismisses her worries, saying that "[t]eaching's the easiest job in the world. Good thick ruler—rap 'em over the knuckles. They'll be glad enough to get hold of a decently brought up young woman to teach the youngsters their ABC" (*Idem*). He trusts Dorothy's ability to handle the job, both due to her middle-class upbringing and because he knows that the school she is to teach at is a fourth-rate one, not a prestigious institution concerned with the maintenance of high educational standards. The narrator's remark is a clear indication of how, despite Sir Thomas' assertion, or perhaps because of it, Dorothy remains distrustful: "what kind of school it could be that would take on a total stranger, and unqualified at that, in the middle of the term, Dorothy could hardly imagine" (1990, 196).

Ringwood House Academy for Girls is located on Brough Road, in Southbridge, "a repellent suburb ten or a dozen miles from London" (1990, 197)[2], which is "pullulated with small private schools" (1990, 198). Upon her arrival, Dorothy's initial suspicions are confirmed: her heart sinks at the sight of the "mean, gloomy house" (1990, 198), and she is dismayed to meet the proprietress, the gaunt-looking and taciturn Mrs Creevy, "a person who would make use of you and then throw you aside with no more compunction than if you had been a worn-out scrubbing brush" (1990, 199)—this description might be seen as foreshadowing the brevity of Dorothy's employment. It soon becomes apparent that Mrs Creevy attributes great importance to keeping up appearances. For example, she likes to employ degree holders because, according to her, although most parents probably do not know what "BA" stands for, the presence of "a few letters" after the teachers' names makes the prospectus more appealing (1990, 200). Mrs Creevy's cold mannerisms and commanding presence also manifest themselves in her philosophy of running the school. She lectures Dorothy on how it is "the moral side" that counts most with the parents and suggests that Dorothy will not get on well with the girls if she has "a weak nature" (1990, 200).

Even more important is the capitalist logic that is behind Mrs

Creevy's methods, and which the narrator describes in detail. Mrs Creevy lives in fear that the smallest incident might threaten the future of her institution: for her, the school functions as a business venture[3], which, although twenty years have passed, is still in line with Orwell's own recollection of the way schools were run in the 1910s, when he was a child (*See* Pearce 1992, 378)[4]. In *Clergyman*, the narrator states that Mrs Creevy's profit-oriented mindset is common—she "merely [says] aloud what most people in her position think but never say" (Orwell 1990, 239). Mrs Creevy explains the logic behind her educational philosophy as follows: "There's only one thing that matters on a school, and that's the fees. […] It's the fees I'm after, not *developing the children's minds*. […] The fees come first, and everything comes afterwards. […] [I]t's the parents that pay the fees, and it's the parents you've got to think about. Do what the parents want—that's our rule here" (1990, 235—italics in the original). While some lower-rate private schools offer education that is reasonable for their tuition fee (1990, 240), as the narrator remarks, "there is the same fundamental evil in all of them; that is, they have ultimately no purpose except to make money" (1990, 239). Although Mrs Creevy is proud that she has never finished a book in her life (1990, 215), her attitude is only symptomatic of how anyone is able to open a school without prior qualification as an educator (1990, 239–40), due to the lack of government regulation and inspection of schools that are not "recognised" (1990, 241)[5]. From a structural point of view, the capitalist microcosm of these schools entails that the parents are customers, whose "puritanical suspiciousness" (Smyer 1975, 33) of the quality of education has to be navigated between each paycheck, especially considering how, as the narrator remarks, "the parents of children at fourth-rate private schools are utterly impossible" (Orwell 1990, 226). The parents themselves are heavily implicated in the capitalist economy of the school system—"they look on 'schooling' exactly as they look on a butcher's bill or a grocer's bill" (1990, 226). The education provided at Mrs Creevy's institution is superficial at best, and useless at worst: the production of appealing

handwriting (1990, 210), "the parroting of read-made French phrases" (1990, 210), and the decoration of homework with "applauding comments" (1990, 223)[6] are all "cheap and easy ways" of impressing the parents, who are "willing to swallow an almost unlimited amount" of lies (1990, 223). That "everything that the girls had been taught was in reality aimed at the parents" (1990, 210; cf. 1990, 223) takes Dorothy only a few days to realise. The importance attributed to the parents also manifests itself in how the daughters of those who Mrs Creevy has categorised as "'good payers'" receive better treatment at dinner (1990, 213), resulting in unequal treatment among the students. Finally, as the narrator remarks, in third-rate and fourth-rate private schools, there is "a sort of privacy going on" (1990, 263): as in capitalist economy at large, teachers are constantly competing with one another, aiming to convince parents and, in this way, "steal" students from rival schools (1990, 263). Thus, in the capitalist world of fourth-rate private schools, if the parents are the customers, the children are the products.

Dorothy is put to work immediately after her arrival, teaching a class of twenty-one girls of various ages, capabilities, and backgrounds. "[C]atching and holding attention starts when a teacher first meets a class" (Dennis 2007, 63), therefore her first task consists of winning over the girls, who are well-behaved but prejudiced towards their new teacher. Dorothy begins with assessing the girls' knowledge in various school subjects, discovering that although she feels herself underqualified—like an "impostor" (Orwell 1990, 207; cf. 1990, 214)—she does possess knowledge of everyday facts that she can teach the girls (1990, 207–208). To her despair, the girls "knew nothing, absolutely nothing" (1990, 208), and "were so unused to being questioned that it was often difficult to get answers out of them at all. It was obvious that whatever they knew they had learned in an entirely mechanical manner, and they could only gape in a sort of dull bewilderment when asked to think for themselves" (1990, 209). The key to her success as a teacher appears to be how she realises that all these girls have ever known are "the mind-deadening pedagogic rituals" (Smyer 1975, 32–33)

favoured by Mrs Creevy, which, similarly to the methods that have been already in use during Orwell's childhood, are based on rote learning (Pearce 1992, 378). As Dorothy also realises, the only subjects that have been seriously taught are handwriting and arithmetic, the former practised via "a dreadful routine called 'copies'—copying things out of text-books or off the blackboard" (Orwell 1990, 210). The result is that some of the girls "seemed barely able to read and write", and one of them "could not even count" (1990, 210), which makes Dorothy "amazed and horrified" and feel as if she had "stepped back into the mid-nineteenth century" (1990, 211). At the end of Dorothy's first day as a teacher, the children express their appreciation by putting together their money to buy her a flower bouquet (1990, 213), making "a feeling of loyalty and affection" spring up in her heart (1990, 214): "This school was *her* school; she would work for it and be proud of it, and make every effort to turn it from a place of bondage into a place human and decent. […] [S]he would do her best; she would do whatever willingness and energy could do to rescue these children from the horrible darkness in which they had been kept" (1990, 214—italics in the original). While Dorothy's efforts are genuine, at this point she still regards the children as a personal project that can give her purpose after having been forbidden to return home.

Mrs Creevy's educational approach is not uncommon for the time the novel is set in. It is, however, somewhat ambiguous, considering how, beginning in the 1920s, there were reform attempts in English and Welsh educational policies, led by Sir Henry Hadow. The 1931 Hadow Report urged for education conceptualised "in terms of activity and experience, rather than of knowledge to be acquired and facts to be stored" (Hadow 1931, 139) alongside "an adequate amount of 'drill' in reading, writing and arithmetic" (140). Dorothy's approach is in many ways similar to the methods proposed by the Hadow Report—she "[breaks the girls] in to the habit of thinking for themselves" (Orwell 1990, 220), and feels that it is her job to provide her students with the kind of education that would be more applicable later in life. In fact, she

appears to be a natural teacher: she discovers project-based teaching on her own when she gives the task of creating a map of Europe in plasticine (1990, 220), a project so popular with the children that there is talk of creating a map of the world using papier mâché (1990, 222), and she also has them create a chart of historical events by hand (1990, 222). All of these projects are possibly inspired by her previous costume-making endeavours in her home village (1990, 58). Soon afterwards, Dorothy begins to identify with her teaching job: "This was more than a mere job; it was—so it seemed to her—*a mission, a life-purpose*. Trying to awaken the dulled minds of these children, trying to undo the swindle that had been worked upon them in the name of education—that, surely, was something to which you could give yourself heart and soul" (1990, 226—italics mine). For Smyer, this is the defining moment of Dorothy's teaching career: "the children's eagerness to come to grips with history, the enthusiasm they feel in making history, as it were, instead of merely learning about it in a superficial, mindless way, is matched by Dorothy's readiness to embrace teaching as a life-long career" (1975, 32; cf. 36). Her commitment to providing the girls with a proper education is also visible in how she spends her own meagre salary to acquire textbooks (Orwell 1990, 219; cf. 1990, 222), which, she feels, are better suited than those 19th-century, outdated books that are approved by Mrs Creevy (1990, 211–12)[7]. Finally, Dorothy is so absorbed in teaching that she is ready to ignore Mrs Creevy and the unfavourable circumstances of her life as a whole: "She saw quite clearly that Mrs Creevy was an odious woman and that her own position was virtually that of a slave; but it did not greatly worry her. Her work was too absorbing, too all-important. In comparison with it, her own comfort and even her future hardly seemed to matter" (1990, 218–19).

Dorothy's teaching philosophy might be interpreted in yet another gender-oriented way. A board on the front of Ringwood House Academy advertises that "music and dancing [are] taught", as opposed to the nearby boys' school that specialises in "book-keeping and commercial arithmetic" (1990, 198). The gendered

nature of the curriculum is typical of the period the novel is set in, the 1930s. Despite having achieved suffrage, women's opportunities were still in many ways limited when it came to education and participating in public affairs. In light of this, Dorothy might be seen as a feminist figure: she wishes to prepare the girls for life outside of school by providing them with an education that falls outside of the scope of what at the time was believed to be the only useful knowledge for young girls—the knowledge of music, dancing, and French. Key parts of Ringwood House Academy's curriculum, all these subjects are seen as useful for when, after school, the life goal of many lower-class girls is to entice potential—financially better-off—husbands, and, once married, entertain them at dinner parties[8]. In this way, Dorothy might be seen as embodying another aspect of the educational system imagined by the Hadow Committee, who already in their first 1923 report argued for the improvement of the education of science subjects in girls' schools and of English in boys' schools (see Gillard 1998; cf. Hadow 1923).

Although Dorothy "finds teaching to be an emotionally rewarding way of life" (Smyer 1975, 32) and would prefer to remain at Ringwood House Academy, Mrs Creevy finds her methods unsatisfactory: "From now on I'm going to have things done *my* way, not *your* way. […] I dare say you and me can get on all right if you'll drop these newfangled ideas of yours" (Orwell 1990, 235—italics in the original). The main reason Mrs Creevy has Dorothy return to the original curriculum is that Dorothy's efforts run counter to the school's capitalist, profit-oriented model. Religion also plays a central role in shaping the school's climate. This becomes especially evident when Dorothy is reprimanded by Mrs Creevy in front of a group of nonconformist parents, who are offended that she read aloud a passage from *Macbeth* in class containing the word "womb". Gerald Gould, Chief Reader of Victor Gollancz, the publisher of several of Orwell's works, found the school scenes "quite ludicrous as a representation of what could possibly go on today" (Gould qtd. in Crick 2019, 212), which, as Crick writes, Orwell "was firmly to deny" (2019, 212). If, as Crick

implies, Orwell did not intend his work to be a caricature, it might be argued that through the figure of Mrs Creevy he provides a powerful critique of the lower segment of the private school system. Importantly, as in the world of the novel, Mrs Creevy is the figurehead of these institutions, and Dorothy's attempt to implement innovative teaching methods might be seen as going beyond a professional and personal conflict. Rather, the conflict should be seen as the clash of two different, seemingly irreconcilable ideologies, in terms of teaching, capitalist sentiment, and religion. Additionally, in a Dickensian vein, Dorothy could also be seen as embodying basic human qualities in the face of adversity. The clash comes to a symbolic end via the return to the pre-Dorothy state of affairs—"the reassertion of Mrs Creevy's authoritarian and reactionary control over Dorothy's classroom" (Smyer 1975, 36)—even while Dorothy is still employed at the school. The irreconcilable nature of the conflict is formulated in explicit terms once Dorothy—who is already in a precarious position due to being employed without a written contract—is fired without notice (Orwell 1990, 226).

While Dorothy accomplishes a temporary breakthrough at Ringwood House Academy through the adoption of more child-friendly, practical skills-oriented, and project-based teaching practices, she is unable to make any lasting changes on the scale of the whole system. Due to Mrs Creevy's influence, Dorothy's anti-capitalist and potentially feminist reforms go unappreciated by parents, who desire frivolous results instead of the acquisition of more versatile knowledge. The fact that this chapter of *Clergyman* closes on a bleak note might also be seen in light of the themes of Orwell's next novel, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936), a work that is highly critical of the worship of the "Money God" and the advertising industry. It appears that, at the time of publishing these two novels, in 1935–36, Orwell did not expect capitalism-permeated English society to take a turn for the better.

NOTES

1. "Underlying Orwell's continuous attacks on specific examples of economic exploitation, journalistic lying, and political bullying is a suspicion, which gradually hardens into certitude, that Western civilisation has for some time been moving toward moral and social calamity" (Smyer 1975, 33; cf. 1975, 36).
2. Orwell had trouble publishing Clergyman due to his publisher's fear of libel. One of the schools Orwell taught at, Frays College in Uxbridge, fit the description of the location of Dorothy's school (Crick 2019, 212).
3. Although it is beyond the scope of the present essay to examine the wider implications of the novel's critique of capitalism, it should be noted that it is possible to interpret Mrs Creevy as a distorted mother-figure for Dorothy. Alternatively, she can be regarded as the counterpart of Dorothy's capitalistic father, "whose concern for his own investments and material comforts blinds him to his parishioners' spiritual needs" (Smyer 1975, 37), just like how the stingy Mrs Creevy ignores her students' educational needs.
4. Orwell wrote about his childhood memories, including the time spent at St. Cyprians, a preparatory school, in his extended autobiographical essay titled "Such, Such Were the Joys" (1952). According to Robert Pearce, Orwell's resentment towards St. Cyprians, and possibly towards private schools in general (1992, 384), might have been one of the motivating factors behind this work. In fact, "[t]he venom of his animosity against the school is written into almost every line of his memoir" (1992, 383). This might be viewed in a wider context: as Nel Noddings points out, Orwell is one intellectual figure among many who "found school boring and unsupportive of their creativity" (2003, 216).
5. "Only the tiny minority of 'recognised' schools—less than one in ten—are officially tested to decide whether they keep up a reasonable educational standard. As for the others, they are free to teach or not teach exactly as they choose. No one controls or inspects them except the children's parents—the blind leading the blind" (Orwell 1990, 241). The end of the quote refers to how the parents of children attending fourth-rate private schools "have only the dimmest idea of what is meant by education" (1990, 226). The aforementioned parts of the text might be viewed as examples of *Clergyman*'s "journalistic passages", where "it's difficult to distinguish between Dorothy and Orwell himself" (Halliburton, 2012).
6. As Rachel Halliburton writes, *Clergyman* "comes back to social comedy" in the chapter about Dorothy's time as a teacher. One example is when the narrator remarks that "[a]ll the children in the school, apparently, were forever 'making great strides'; in what direction they were striding was not stated" (Orwell 1990, 223). The quote might also recall the style of Charles

Dickens, in whose works depictions of schools in literature often find their origin.

7. The children buying flowers for Dorothy and Dorothy buying textbooks for the children are moments which are significant also in that they fit into the wider capitalist economy that is present in the narrative.
8. This future-orientedness might also be viewed as a kind of "aims-talk". As Nel Noddings writes in her 2003 book, "[u]ntil quite recently, aims-talk figured prominently in educational theory, and most education systems prefaced their curriculum documents with statements of their aims" (2003, 74). Ringwood House Academy is such an institution, as visible in the care with which Mrs Creevy compiles the prospectus: "there's a whole lot of subjects that we can't actually teach, but we have to advertise them all the same. […] It all looks well on the prospectus" (Orwell 1990, 237; cf. 1990, 200).

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