George Orwell’s *Keep The Aspidistra Flying* narrates the story of Gordon Comstock, an English former copywriter turned struggling poet, the shift in career being a byproduct of his “war on money”. Throughout the novel, Gordon refers consistently to the “money-god”, which is used as a catch-all for the negative effects of capitalism: materialism, an obsession with status, and a lack of individualism, among others. Orwell uses Gordon’s journey to criticise capitalism for forcing the individual to choose between the conformity that comes from living within a capitalistic society, which leads to one giving up their ability to have meaningful relationships and creative pursuits, or choosing to possess their individuality and follow their own moral code, and then uses the futility of this dichotomy to advocate for democratic socialism.

Gordon views himself, in his war against the money-god, as incredibly individualistic. Defining his views, he claims that there are two ways to live: to be rich or to consciously refuse to be. He says that the "one fatal thing is to worship money and fail to get it" (44). In Gordon’s expressing this statement, it is clear to the reader that the ultimate goal of his war on money is simply to live outside the pulls of capitalism and not fall victim to the endlessly cyclical status-gathering society that it creates. Some argue that it’s a war on the physical accumulation of money; however, when Gordon critiques his lower-middle-class relatives for "accept[ing] the money-code... never hav[ing] the sense to lash out and just live, money or no money" (44) it’s clear that he has no philosophical issue with the rich, only with the lifestyles it causes in those who tirelessly attempt to accumulate and flaunt it. Therefore it is not the act of earning money that Gordon judges but the way people behave about its accumulation. Gordon believes that by declaring war on money he is freeing himself to “live” in a way that is unencumbered by the tenets of capitalism--materialism, status, and a lack of individuality specifically--therefore having a better, freer, and more vivid life than those around him. Importantly, he believes at this point that “just living” is as equally possible with or without money. These sentiments come right at the beginning of his
financial independence, when he is working as a copywriter. However, in an effort to escape the money-god, Gordon quits his job and goes to work in a bookstore while writing poetry on the side, claiming that he wants a job that will “keep his body without buying his soul”. Here, Gordon equates engaging in capitalism to losing his very humanness. Gordon’s firm moral stance against capitalism raises its head; he truly believes that he cannot be wholly satisfied with doing anything that contributes to what he calls the money-god.

It’s at this point that I argue Orwell begins to use Gordon’s predicament to discuss existentialism. I argue that Gordon’s strong individualism is actually derived from an existential outlook on life. As shown by his desire to have a job that won’t “buy his soul” and his overall vehement refusal to fit into a society with values that he does not believe in, he is presenting wholly self-obtained morals and choosing a lifestyle that is independent of the norm; therefore, he is creating his own meaning and purpose, a response to the existentialist condition of universal meaninglessness. This specific response to existentialism is at constant odds with the rest of society, because it is so ingrained in capitalism, which leads to emotional and creative isolation caused by Gordon’s chosen poverty--referred to by Nicholas Guild as a “spiritual death”. Gordon’s relationship with his semi-girlfriend, Rosemary, is consistently marred by the disconnect between Gordon’s way of life and society as a whole. Gordon feels as though he is not allowed to fully “claim” Rosemary (in the sense of a monogamous sexual relationship) because the lifestyle he leads is one of poverty, and he states that “it’s the women who really believe in the money-code…[Rosemary] won’t sleep with me, simply and solely because I’ve got no money…What does any woman want except a safe income and two babies and a semi-detached villa in Putney with an aspidistra in the window?” (114-115). Importantly, the conflict here is not Gordon’s different world-view--it is the fact that he is not rich enough to hold the view while simultaneously providing for the basic desires of others who do not conform to it. Gordon’s anti-capitalist existentialism is not inherently an issue; it is the fact that in his relationships others are forced to be privy to his poverty resulting from his desire to be free of capitalism that causes isolation. Gordon also faces
isolation creatively in his occupation as a poet, claiming that “the first effect of poverty is that it kills thought” (49). Gordon finds himself able to be creative less and less frequently, which he attributes both to his poverty and his loneliness: “Lack of money means discomfort, means squalid worries, means shortage of tobacco, means ever-present consciousness of failure--above all, it means loneliness...and in loneliness no decent book was ever written.” (31).

This is the main conflict in the novel: Gordon’s desire for meaningful relationships warring with his desire to be free of the evils of capitalism. Gordon eventually becomes so aggressive in his desire to evade capitalism that he ends up viewing even ambition as sinful due to its close ties with capital gain, and resigns himself to giving up his creativity and his desire to write because “after all, was that not too a species of ambition?” (219). Ironically, his individualism, partially expressed by creativity, is stifled because of his crusade against ambition caused by his extreme desire to free himself wholly of anything that he deems to be capitalist. This conflict comes to a climax when Rosemary eventually sleeps with him (once, out of pity), and finds herself pregnant. Gordon fully believes himself to be in love with her, and after talking it through and deciding abortion is no longer a viable option, Gordon is forced to decide between reassimilating into society and ensuring that the woman he loves has a life she enjoys, or depriving himself of love and continuing to stick to his morals but exist in isolation. Gordon weighs the choice, with an acquaintance of his telling him that he can’t expect to truly live outside the system--a reasonable critique, given that Gordon’s individualism is now being destroyed in an effort to do anything that could align itself with capitalism because of capitalism’s pervasiveness. Gordon eventually decides, in part due to futility and in part due to his love for Rosemary, to reenter society and take his former job as a copywriter. He and Rosemary start a life together, the kind of life that Gordon had spent his whole life scorning, and the book ends.

I argue that, knowing Orwell’s background and his thoughts about economic policy, this book’s ultimate purpose is to serve as a case for democratic socialism, which he largely supported. By highlighting Gordon’s poverty as a result of his anti-capitalist mode of life and the subsequent loneliness
that poverty caused, Orwell argues that it is necessary to eliminate poverty to allow everyone to exist in a state of individualism where they are still able to live a life which they feel is meaningful and pursue their moral values without sacrificing themselves to conformity in the form of the omnipresent money-god.