

PROBLEMS OF ENGLISH SOCIETY  
AS DEPICTED IN THE NOVELS OF GEORGE GISSING

by

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## INTRODUCTION

George Robert Gissing grew to manhood during the time that Dickens and Trollope were the reigning models for the novel. Gissing was one of a group of novelists who emerged from the school of ideas as set forth by these writers. He accepted for the most part the elaborate properties and conventions, because he was clever and docile, but in trying to fit himself into the yoke of Dickens he failed. In temperament and vitality he is inferior to the masters of the novel whom he revered with cordial admiration and envy. While he does not belong to the first series of English Men of Letters and by his limitations is barred from a great popular success, he will always remain dear to the heart of the recluse and to a certain number of enthusiasts who began reading him at first and have followed his work. He has a quiet sense of power in producing living characters and this secures him his place in literature.

Some critics have said that Gissing borrowed from Dickens and Zola. It is true that he was devoted to Dickens and read more than once all that Zola wrote. Morley Roberts, who was an intimate friend of Gissing, said that if he drew his literary inspiration from anything but his own nature, it is to Russia that he owed most. What appealed

to Gissing in the Russians was that they were real representatives of the Russian spirit and that therefore in a literary sense their work was 'true.' Perhaps the reason that his work has never been as popular as it should be is that he was never able to represent, as Dickens did, anything like the true spirit of England.

As one reads criticism of Gissing and as many of his novels as are available, he feels that the novelist has never been fairly estimated. He loses if judged by one book or even by the books of one period of his life. If we were to read only his early work, we would come to the conclusion that he was always gloomy and saw only the dirty, perspiring humanity in the poorest districts of London. But if we read also "Henry Rycroft" and "Will Warburton," written during his last years, we find that the writer has become serene and philosophical and able to enjoy life. Then, if we read also his diary and "Letters to Members of His Family," we understand the pathetic struggle of the man who loved beauty and nature, but for months must live in garrets and cellars, breaking his health in an effort to make a miserable living. We sense also his joy when it seems that one of his books promises success.

In this thesis we shall be concerned with Gissing, the man and the novelist, as revealed in fourteen of his twenty-

eight books.

### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

George Robert Gissing was born in Wakefield, England, on November 22, 1857, the son of Thomas Waller Gissing, a chemist, who was also an enthusiastic botanist. Up to the time that he was thirteen his father was like a load star to him. He had such a deep devotion for him that he looked to him for guidance in all matters. He felt that his father was the only one who understood him, the only one worth listening to, the only one whose learning he could trust to guide him. The tones of his father's voice and his gestures never left the boy, and when he read, especially poetry, it was almost as if his father had returned. About the time of his father's death, Gissing was sent to the Lindow Grove boarding school at Alderley Edge. In his younger days he possessed great physical strength, sufficient to enable him to endure hardships, as was proved later. For his physical well being he should have taken a great amount of exercise, been much in the fresh air and engaged in games, but he withdrew from all this and worked with tremendous effort, delighting only in his studies and in rambles about the country. Many at the school called him a prig, but his knowledge was not an affectation.

In 1872, before he was fifteen, Gieseing won the junior exhibition granted by Owens College to the candidates most distinguished in the Oxford and Cambridge Local Examinations. Here he continued the fierce work he had done at Alderley, but did much walking and shunned the companionship of the other boys. He continued also his scholastic record by winning Professor Ward's English Poem Prize and a special prize and exhibition for classics. In 1874, when he was only seventeen, he matriculated with high honore in the University of London and in the next year won the first place in the first class with the University Exhibition in both Latin and English. He also won the Shakespeare scholarship. But with this his formal scholastic achievements ended, and he left Owens without his degree and with impaired health. The reason for his withdrawal from school was brought about by the first of his unfortunate associations with women. He made the acquaintance of a young woman and when his own resources were exhausted in order to continue helping her, he took money from the other students' coats. He was imprisoned and later sent to America by his friends. Upon his return to England he married the girl, but was never able to persuade her to give up her evil ways.

His American experience gave Gieseing some very valuable literary material of which he quite often made use in his novels. He taught the classics in Boston, went to Chicago,

where he had some literary success, in that he wrote stories for the Saturday supplement of the Chicago Tribune, and returned to Troy, New York, where he was reduced to the basest lodging and a diet of peanuts. After his bitterest experience of hardship, he returned to Europe on money sent by friends. This time he went to Germany, and there in the quiet of a university town taught and studied. He returned to England with a mind full of ideas, but the next years were full of misery when he lived in garret and cellar. His one pleasure at this time was going to the British Museum Reading Room. Here he spent all the time that he could spare from his teaching and writing. In 1880 a legacy of one hundred pounds enabled him to publish "Workers in the Dawn," and although the sale was small, a copy sent to Mr. Frederic Harrison produced good results in that Mr. Harrison engaged Gissing to tutor his two older sons. Through him, also, he secured other pupils, and living became easier.

He had no discernment in choosing his friends, and consequently made two unhappy marriages. As long as his first wife lived, he sent her a part of his small earnings. After her death, he made a second marriage, which was little happier than the first. Of this marriage two sons were born, about whose welfare their father was always anxious. Letters to his sister reveal his concern that the boys grow robust in happy surroundings, and that, if it were possible,



they should be spared that strain on nerve and brain, which love of learning and want of relaxation had brought upon himself, and from which he had suffered so much. Still unschooled by his two disastrous marriages, he made a third alliance with a woman, with whom he was living, not too happily, at the time of his death on December 28, 1903.

His years of struggle produced a lasting effect on Gissing's health, his lungs particularly being affected, so that he spent the last years of his life searching for a place where he could live comfortably. At the time of his death he was living at St. Jean de Luz in France, and it is there in the English Cemetery that he was buried.

#### GISSING'S ATTITUDE TOWARD POVERTY

The field in which Gissing did his best work was in depicting the heartaches and struggles of the poor people. He had lived among them and knew what it meant to have a piece of hard bread and nothing else to eat and no money with which to buy anything. Life was very difficult for him, and if he became pessimistic he could hardly be blamed. He had lived in a front cellar, where his only light came through a grating in the street above. The extra sixpence which a back bedroom on the top floor cost would have meant the sacrifice of a couple of meals.

"Thyrza" was the first book in which he pictured the London working-class. He said it was a book which no one else could write and contains the very spirit of working-class life. The story is laid in the slums of Lambeth, and to this part of London Giesing moved so as to be able to get the atmosphere for his story. When he had the plan in his mind only, and before a word of it was written, he wrote his sister that it was to be a stronger and more profound book than "Demos." He wrote the story "with fever and delight," but the scene became so realistic to him and the characters so dearly loved that he often cried as he wrote, and said, "Poor Thyrza will die, alas!"

He is most sympathetic in his treatment of the two girls, Thyrza and Lydia Trent, two work girls of Lambeth who made their meager living working as trimmers in a hat factory. The girls were orphans, their mother having died years before, and their father having been killed in an explosion. Thyrza was not yet eighteen, and Lydia was a year or two older. They lived in an attic room on Walnut Tree Walk in the same house where Gilbert Grail and his mother lived. It was very sparsely furnished. A bed stood in one corner and a small washstand in another. Between them was a low chest of drawers with a looking glass upon it. As the room was just under the roof, it was very warm from the sun.

Many times Thyrsa, never a very strong girl, sat at the window trying to get a breath of fresh air. Gissing knew what it meant to be cooped up in a little room in the city month after month and speaks again and again in his letters of his desire to get out into the country or to the ocean where he can breathe. His privations and living in such unhealthy places undermined his health and produced an affection of the lungs which made him more than ever appreciative of the hardships of the poor who never have an opportunity to escape the city.

One Saturday night Lydia and Thyrsa went out to have Lydia's shoes mended and to buy food. This gives Gissing a wonderful opportunity to describe the market of Lambeth, and he does it most graphically. On the outer edges of the pavement, in front of the shops, were rows of booths and stalls where meats, vegetables, fish, and all sorts of household needs were for sale, the vendors vying with one another in crying their wares. Besides the food, umbrellas, clothing, and quack medicine were sold. Market night was the only out-of-door amusement that the working people of Lambeth had regularly at hand, the only thing for which they showed any real capacity. Everywhere there was laughter and good fellowship. The women went the length of the street and back for the pleasure of picking out the best and cheap-

est bundle of rhubarb, or the biggest and hardest head of cabbage. There was also the smell of frying fish and of potatoes cooking in hot grease. Many of the people bought and ate their supper right there, while others took it home wrapped in newspapers. People of all kinds were there, respectable working people, children of the gutter, work girls whose self respect was proof against all the squalor and filthiness surrounding them. Wives, hardly more than children themselves, carried babies. Little girls of nine and ten went about marketing, with all the assurance and care in selection of an adult who had only a few pence to spend and must make the most of them. Public houses were full and men, women, and even children could be seen through the gaping doors, drinking at the bar or waiting to have their mugs filled.

Later Gissing describes the place where Mrs. Ormonde found Thyra after she had left home to avoid marrying Gilbert Grail and had become so desperately ill that Mrs. Gandle, for whom she was working, had written to Mrs. Ormonde. "Beyond the space assigned to the public was a partition of wood, four feet high, with a door in the middle; this concealed the kitchen whence came clouds of steam, and the sound of frying and odors manifold. It was a room ten feet square, insufferably hot, very dirty, a factory for the pro-

duction of human fodder. On a side table stood a great red dripping mass, whence Mrs. Gandle served portions to be supplied as roast beef. Vessels on the range held a green substance which was called cabbage, and yellow lumps doled forth as potatoes. Before the fire bacon and sausages were frizzling; above it was sputtering a beefsteak. On a sink in one corner were piled eating utensils which awaited the wipe of a very loathsome rag hanging hard by. Other objects lay about in indescribable confusion."

Above this horrible place Mrs. Ormonds found the frail, beautiful Thyrsa, whom Gissing has idealized as an angel of the slums.

Here working men came, ate ravenously and left to make room for more of the same class. It would seem as if Gissing could hardly help showing strong aversion for such scenes and would make his readers disgusted that such things could be. On the contrary there is no bitterness here, only a sort of sadness that people should have to live and die and never know anything of the beauty of the country. The book, he said, had come out of his heart and it has as much of him at his best, when he is most kindly and pitiful, as anything he ever wrote. For all the sadness in the story, Gissing was as near happiness when it was being written as he ever reached. In other novels, particularly in "The

Nether World," he had nothing but contempt for the pleasures of the masses, but here he had pity and compassion.

The work of Lydia and Thyrsa as trimmers in the hat factory was very respectable and paid as much as a pound a week in busy seasons when they could both work. Often Thyrsa was ill, and it fell to Lydia alone to make their living. Gissing seldom pictures a happy family life, but the home of these two orphan girls is almost idyllic in spite of their poverty. When Thyrsa ran away, the one regret she had was that her disappearance would worry Lydia.

Aside from their Saturday night market the young people of Lambeth had another place where they went for pleasure. The affair was called a "friendly lead" and was held in a public house. On the evening when Lydia and Thyrsa went to have Lydia's shoes mended, they met Totty Hancarrow, another orphan of about nineteen who lived alone. With her Thyrsa went for the first time to a "friendly lead," in spite of the fact that she knew Lydia would not approve. They passed through a bar and up to a room on the first floor, where people were gathering. Down the middle of the room was a long table with benches beside it and at the end sat a chairman with a soup-plate in front of him in which each person dropped a coin as he entered. Men, women, and girls sat on the benches and in front of each was a pewter or

glass. They drank some, though their reason for being there was not to drink but to entertain and be entertained. Anyone who could sing or speak did his part to please the others. There was nothing in the songs or talk to make Thyrza ashamed to be there, though she did feel conscience stricken because of what she knew Lydia would think. "Plebeian good humor does not often degenerate into brutality at meetings of this kind until a late hour of the evening," Gissing explains. The girls with glasses before them were wage earners of factory and work shop and were well able to make themselves respected. If they lacked refinement, it was not their fault; work was behind them and before them; their hours of rest were very few; suffering and lack of bread might at any moment come upon them. They were young and must have some pleasure. They had thrown their hard-earned pence into the soup-plate gladly. Now they wanted to forget their misery and enjoy themselves. One after another they sang or played and as there came a lull in the entertainment, Totty insisted that Thyrza sing. Finally she did sing in a rare, sweet voice full of power. Gissing could easily have made this a rough, boisterous affair, but as in the whole story, he is kindly, gentle, understanding of the feelings of youth.

Gissing had a desire to entertain and enlighten the poor by giving a series of lectures. He wrote his brother that he would begin with something simple and then gradually work up to something more difficult. In "Thyrza" Walter Egremont does the thing Gissing had planned for himself. Egremont is an Oxford graduate and an idealist, the only son of a man who had made a fortune by manufacturing oilcloth. The father had established extensive works in Lambeth, and when Walter was still a young man, he was left without relatives, but with ample means of independence. He retained an interest in the business, but had no intention of devoting himself to a commercial life. He traveled much but was always restless, and finally decided to give a series of lectures to the working men of Lambeth. Through him Gissing says: "With the mud at the bottom of society we can do practically nothing; only the vast changes to be wrought by time will change that foulness, by destroying the monstrous wrong that produces it. What I should like to attempt would be the spiritual education of the upper artisan and mechanic class." His plan was to take a handful of intelligent fellows who lived with no conscious aim except that of keeping their families in comfort, fellows who had no religion as a matter of course, who talked constantly of politics because they knew nothing better. He believed that



these men were far above the gross multitude and would have a great part to play in social development - that they might become the great social reformers, working on those above them, the froth of society, no less than on those below. He wished to take these men and inspire them with a moral ideal. He felt that they had the instinct of decency and he thought he could use the tendency of association which is strong among them. They had benefit clubs and stood together in time of need to help each other and to exact terms from their employers. Why, then, should they not be banded together for moral and intellectual purposes?

When Luke Ackroyd heard of Egremont's lectures, he said, 'Sops to the dog that's beginning to show his teeth! It shows you what's coming. The capitalists are beginning to look about and ask what they can do to keep people quiet. Lectures on literature! Fools! as if that wasn't just the way to remind us of what we've missed in the way of education.'

Gissing had lived among these people, talked with them and knew how they felt toward those who had more money, more leisure, and more education than they. To him books, reading, education meant more than anything else and it seemed to him if he could just lecture to them, giving them some of value of his education, that he would be doing them a great

service. However, when he had Egremont try the experiment, it failed. Only a few men would come and some of them were uninterested and sullen. He gained little except their ill will and succeeded only in making them jealous of him and his advantages and more dissatisfied with their own condition than they had been.

Talking with Grail after the lecture one evening, about lending him some books, Egremont asked him if he did not think it would be a good thing to establish a library in Lambeth. At this point the author says that Grail might have answered that it would be an excellent thing if those disposed to use such an institution had time granted them to do so. Instead he replied that he thought it would be a fine thing, and with this encouragement, Egremont began to plan a free library with a good reading room. This had been for a long time one of Gissing's own pet schemes. Egremont felt that it would prepare the ground upon which he and his adherents might work. He knew that there were thousands of the poorest for whom there was no possibility of a life guided by thought and feeling of a higher kind until they were lifted out of the mire. He felt that all he could do at that time was to plant the seed, and that maybe these men's children's children would get the benefit. But there was another class of working people who could be lifted far

above that state of mind which then contented them. His idea was to stir these men to effort and produce social progress through them. One of the main reasons for his lectures was that the first thing men of his class had to do was to counteract the tendency of the education of the poorer men and make them value other attainments than those which helped them to earn higher wages. The library, although a place had been secured and arranged and the books were on the shelves, was never opened, not because there was no longer need but because of the triangular romantic entanglement of Thyra, Grail, and Egremont.

Not everyone, even of the upper class, was in sympathy with Egremont in his desire to uplift the uneducated with lectures and a library. Mr. Dalmaine was one of these. He had gained a seat in Vauxhall at the election of 1874 and was interested in all that concerned the industrial population of Great Britain. He applied himself to politics as a profession and meant to link his name with factory acts, education acts, and acts for the better housing of women. With all this apparent interest, the only working man for whom he cared one jot was Mr. James Dalmaine. He knew all that went on in the workmen's clubs, in their places of amusement, in the market streets. He also kept his eye on Lambeth and through his secretary, Tasker, heard

of the proposed free public library and of Egremont's lectures. He cared nothing for the factory workers but if by aiding them he could advance himself, he was willing to do it. He said that he wouldn't give the people anything that they could win for themselves "with a little wholesome exertion." He would have them make use of the Free Library Act and tax themselves, and then they would really appreciate a library. One day in conversation with Mrs. Tyrrell about Mr. Egremont's gift to the working men he said, "Sincerely, I believe Mr. Egremont will do more harm than good. We must avoid anything that tends to pauperize the working classes." A little later during the same conversation when the talk had turned to the lectures, he said that he believed Egremont was doing wrong to give them free. "It's an axiom in all dealing with the working classes," he told Mrs. Tyrrell, "that they will never value anything that they don't pay for. All social reform must be undertaken on strictly commercial principles."

Gissing was absolutely opposed to all such principles. He was most democratic and as for ability in handling money himself, he had none. He speaks repeatedly in his letters of taking a trip, of buying books, of seeing a play, when the carrying out of any one of these desires would have left him almost penniless. He never had much money and it is

doubtful if he ever made more on a book than the two hundred fifty pounds he got for "New Grub Street." The publishers advanced two hundred pounds on "The Nether World," but it was not a prosperous speculation. When, therefore, he speaks of peuperizing the working classes and of taxing them for a library, his irony is evident.

"The Nether World" contains Gissing's most convincing indictment of poverty, and expresses his sense of revolt against the ugliness and cruelty of life in the slums. In "Thyrza" the horror of poverty is glossed over and it is made only sad and rather tragic, but in the later book he pictures it in all its stark reality. The people, their homes, their streets, everything fairly shrieked poverty. There is scarcely a pleasant scene, a happy person, a single humorous situation in the whole novel. He described the home of Mrs. Candy, or rather the place where she could sometimes be found when she had drunk too much to move, as a room containing no article of furniture. In one corner lay a pile of rags and on the mantle-piece stood a tin tea-pot, two cups and a plate. There was no fire, but a few pieces of wood lay near the hearth, and at the bottom of the open cupboard there was a very small supply of coals. A candle made fast in the neck of a bottle was the source of light. Mrs. Candy lay on the floor in a drunken sleep.

To this kind of home Stephen Candy, a hard working, temperate young fellow, returned from his work. He tried to keep a decent home for his mother, but when he gave her money to pay the rent, she spent it for gin, and the landlord had come and taken everything to make up the sum they owed him. Here Gissing pauses to remark, "Yee, they can take everything. How foolish of Stephen Candy and his tribe not to be born of the class of landlords! The inconvenience of having no foothold on the earth's surface is manifest."

Gissing knew landlords in London, knew them well, and in his later books is very bitter toward them, especially the women whose sharp tongues and loud speech had made his life miserable. He moved often, sometimes the smoke or dampness making him so sick that he would have to make a change, sometimes the distances from the homes of his pupils making it imperative that he be nearer if he was to have any time for writing.

Sidney Kirkwood, who with Jane Snowden was put into the torture chamber of the underworld as Gissing saw it, was a man of good education and high ideals. He married Clara Hewett after her face was terribly disfigured, and after that lived a most drab and narrow existence, giving up practically everything in which he had formerly been interested. His interests shriveled until they included

nothing but the cares of his family, the cost of house, food, and fuel. Before his marriage he had preached a high ideal of existence for the poor, but that was easy when he had considerably more each week than his expenses. He had rebuked men and women who tried to forget themselves in gin house, but that, too, was natural as long as he had his reading and other intellectual interests to occupy him. After he and Clara were married, he grew to understand how men could go mad under pressure of household cares. He realized, too, the horrible temptation which has made men turn from the road that leads them home and let those dependent ones shift for themselves.

Only a pessimist could have written "The Nether World." It is a severe denunciation of the economic world and even of life itself. At the time Gissing wrote "The Nether World" he was very gloomy and felt that nothing could be done about the misery he represented and he did not wish to do it. He could not believe that the uneducated poor were happy as he understood happiness unless they were practically intoxicated either by alcohol or by some rare day of freedom in which they could give rein to their lower instincts. He could not conceive of the fact that hard work, even when unskilled, was often a real pleasure.

One of the most distressing and terrible scenes in the

story is the one where Mad Jack tells of a vision he has had. He said an angel spoke to him and told him that he and all the poor among whom he lived were passing through a state of punishment. They had once been rich people with every opportunity of happiness in themselves and of making others happy, but because they had made ill use of their wealth, because they were selfish, hard-hearted, oppressive, and sinful, they received the reward of the wicked. "This life you are living," he concludes, "is that of the damned; this place to which you are confined is Hell! There is no escape for you. From poor you shall become poorer; the older you grow the lower you shall sink in want and misery; at the end there is waiting for you, one and all, a death in abandonment and despair. This is Hell - Hell - Hell!"

If this was all that Gissing saw when he lived among the poor and studied them, surely he did not understand them or was very much biased in his views. He could not seem to understand that there is a curious humor, and even joy, that prevents the poorest people from losing heart. Gissing was afraid of poverty. The squalor, poor food, and noise were revolting to him. He did not realize that people could become used to noise, and to dirt, and could even joke about it.

Poverty! poverty! Gissing's early books abound in it.



Even in the novels in which he intended primarily to deal with other subjects, the miseries of the very poor creep in. "Demos," a story of English socialism, has scene after scene descriptive of the life and homes of those whose lives are one long struggle just to live. The Mutimer family play a large part in the story and consequently Gissing describes in detail Wilton Square, where they lived. The canal divided two neighborhoods. On the south was Hoxton, a region of vile smelling market streets, of factories, of grimy warehouses, of alleys, of filthy courts and passages leading into pestilential gloom. Everywhere there was toil in its most degrading forms. The streets were crowded with working people of the coarsest type; the corners showed destitution at its ugliest. On the north side of this canal was Wilton Square. Here there were dwelling houses only, almost every window of which bore a card advertising lodgings. In some places there was even a small patch of garden and possibly even pillars and a balcony. The change was from a mere struggle for subsistence to a mean sort of leisure. Here the better paid of the great slave army retreated to eat and sleep. Gissing says, "The heart is crushed by the uniformity of decent squalor." To walk about the streets was a dreary sort of exercise for him, because he knew that each of these dead, gloomy places, often even

each window, represented a 'home.'

Naturally among people who had so little enjoyment, there was much drinking and other vice. The author, however, does not blame them for their misdeeds. If they were driven to drink, he says it was because of the poisonous air of the garrets and cellars in which they lived, because of excessive toil and lack of healthy recreation, because of defects of education, because of diseased bodies which they had inherited from overworked parents. Who could blame them if they drank themselves into unconsciousness every time they got a sixpence? But, he says, they did not always do that. More often in some vile hole they dragged on lives far worse than those of the horses in the west end. Men, women, even children drank. One of the ugliest pictures Gissing paints is of Mrs. Candy when her son comes from his work and finds her lying insensible on a pile of rags in the room from which all their furniture, even the bedding, had been taken to pay the rent.

#### HIS ATTITUDE TOWARD LIFE AS SHOWN IN HIS CHARACTERS

The genius of Gissing was narrow, for in one sense his great subject was himself. Since Gissing the man and the author were one, he could not keep himself out of his books. His novels are not of that autobiographical sort where the

main character re-enacts the life of the author. On the other hand, in a Gissing story several characters may have traits, characteristics, or lives like the author. "New Grub Street" is an excellent example of this method of writing, as in Edwin Reardon Gissing drew himself not without self-pity and yet as an artist pitilessly. Of Reardon he says: "He lived with painful economy. The strangest life, of almost absolute loneliness. From a certain place in Tottenham Court Road there is visible a certain garret window in a certain street which runs parallel with that thoroughfare: for the greater part of these four years the garret in question was Reardon's home. He paid only three-and-six pence a week for living there; his food cost him about a shilling a day; on clothing and other unavoidable expenses he laid out some five pounds yearly. Then he bought books - volumes which cost anything between two pence and two shillings; further than that he durst not go. A strange time, I assure you."<sup>1</sup>

If this were a page from the biography of Gissing, it could hardly give a more accurate picture of his life during the years of his terrible struggle with poverty. For ten years he was hampered by the sternest poverty and for

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<sup>1</sup>Gissing, George, "New Grub Street," page 49.

nearly ten years more by the sad, illusive optimism of a man affected by lung trouble. Like Reardon he began to write under appalling conditions in garrets, in cellars, and often ate in places a tramp would scorn. His breakfast consisted often of "a slice of bread and a drink of water. Four-and-six pence a week paid for his lodging. A meal that cost more than six pence was a feast." An extended reading of Gissing's novels convinces one that although there are traits of the author recognizable in some of the characters in almost every novel, no one of them is so nearly a parallel of Gissing as Reardon. Gissing, like Reardon, was always trying to satisfy his artistic conscience. Like Reardon, also, he would begin a novel over and over again, tearing up earlier chapters because he felt that it was impossible for him to go on. Before his wife and child left him, Reardon would sit for hours with paper before him, knowing that he must do something in order to make money enough to buy food for them, but unable to put a word on paper. The agony he endured was terrible, but was no more than Gissing himself suffered in his earlier years. He realized that the artist ought to make material out of his own sufferings, even while the suffering is still at its height. It was out of these sufferings that he did eventually create "New Grub Street," the most constructive and

perhaps the most successful of all his work.

Jasper Milvain, talking to his sisters, Dora and Maud, gives a good picture of Reardon and of Gissing and rather artfully tells his opinion of literary men who cater to popular taste: "He is the old type of unpractical artist; I am the literary man of 1882. He won't make occasions, or rather can't make them; he can't supply the market . . . Literature nowadays is a trade. Putting aside men of genius who may succeed by mere economic force, your successful man of letters is your skilful tradesman. He thinks first and foremost of the markets; when one kind of goods begins to go slackly, he is ready with something new and appetizing. He knows perfectly all the possible sources of income. Whatever he has to sell he'll get payment for it from all sorts of various quarters; none of your impractical selling for a lump sum to a middle man who will make six distinct profits. Now, look you, if I had been in Reardon's place, I'd have made four hundred out of "The Optimist"; I should have gone shrewdly to work with magazines and newspapers and foreign publishers and - all sorts of things . . . . Reardon can't do that kind of thing; he's behind his age; he sells a manuscript as if he lived in Sam Johnson's Grub Street. But our Grub Street of today is quite a different place; it is supplied with telegraphic communication; it

knows what literary fare is in demand in every part of the world. Its inhabitants are men of business, however seedy.<sup>1</sup>

Gissing never showed resentment, but his portrait of Milvain shows clearly what he thought of those who always looked to the public for orders. He envied while he scorned the man, because he knew how to give people what they want - and Gissing was never able to do that. There are many Jasper Milvains who meant to succeed and have succeeded. They feed the multitude the food that it wants. Reardon was the kind of man who cannot struggle against adverse conditions, but whom prosperity raises to the height of his powers. Reardon's misery when overworked, discouraged and yet endeavoring to write, was Gissing's misery. He struggled and wrote when he knew that much of what he wrote was worthless. In spite of his discouragements he felt that writing was his proper field. Again and again in his letters to his brothers and sisters Gissing tells of his failure to find a publisher to take his work, but almost invariably he closes by saying that he knows well this alone is his true work, and he will not sacrifice it to anything, no matter how pressing the demand. Except teaching there was not other work that he could do. A few pupils were a perfect boon to him because the few shillings he earned from

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<sup>1</sup>Gissing, George, "New Grub Street," page 4.

teaching them supplied him with food enough to keep him alive and able to work on his novels. At one time one of his pupils lived on the opposite side of London from where he had his poor lodgings and he arose every morning before five o'clock in order to reach the home of his pupil by seven. Finally, we find in one of his letters, he moved to other lodgings because the walk took so much of his time and because he was wearing out a pair of boots every three weeks.

George Gissing was a writer who with the least encouragement could work feverishly and well. He describes Edwin Reardon when he was younger as hurrying home to his garret in a state of delightful fever and scribbling notes furiously before going to bed. But that was when he had some money and did not have to be thinking constantly of what he should get for a book. The work was done for its own sake, with no hurry to finish it. If he did not feel equal to doing good work, he would walk or go to the British Museum until a better mood returned. Reardon was seven months writing his first novel, "On Neutral Ground," but later tried to write three volumes in nine weeks "with the lash stinging on my back if I miss a day." Gissing's letters to members of his family reveal that here, too, he was describing his own experiences.

He sent his first novel, "Workers in the Dawn," to one

publisher after another, but each time it was returned with unfavorable criticism - criticism that he felt was foolish. Finally, he signed an agreement with Messrs. Remington and Company under which he was to pay them one hundred pounds in three installments during the course of the printing of the book, and after publication receive two-thirds of the profits of sale. The tragic part of the bargain was that in spite of the efforts of Mr. Harrison in recommending the book to influential and literary men of his acquaintance, only a few copies were sold. His second book, "Mrs. Grundy's Enemies," was accepted by Messrs. Bently who agreed to pay fifty pounds for it. They began the printing of it and Gissing read the proofs, but for some reason it was never published. After writing ecstatically to Algernon on the day after Christmas of Bently's offer, he makes but one more reference to it, when in February he tells of reading of a good batch of proofs. No further mention is made of it and it is spoken of nowhere except in his letters.

Reardon felt that somewhere in London there must be some rich man who had read one or two of his books with enough interest that if he knew of the cursed state he was in, would help him to some way of earning a couple of pounds a week. Gissing found such a man in Mr. Frederic Harrison, who engaged the young writer to tutor his own sons, procured



other pupils for him, and eventually wrote to a number of influential men in London, interesting them in his novels.

Harold Biffen, also in the novel, "New Grub Street," is all the way through a certain phase of Gissing's earlier self. Reardon meets him in a library when he hears him ask if they have anything by Edwin Reardon. Biffen introduces himself as an author in a small way and a teacher whenever he can get any pupils. The two men, each a phase of the author, become friends. Biffen was always in dire poverty and lived in the oddest places. The kind of teaching he did was quite unknown to respectable tutors. In those days of examinations, numbers of men in poor position - clerks, chiefly - conceived a hope that by 'passing' this, that, or the other test, they could discover a new career. Often their ambitions were preposterous. Warehouse clerks would privately prepare for a call to the bar; a draper's assistant might 'go in' for the preliminary examination of the college of surgeons; many untaught men would try to procure enough show of education to be eligible for a curacy. Candidates of this stamp often advertised in the newspapers for cheap tuition or answered advertisements intended to appeal to them. They would pay sixpence or a little more an hour. Occasionally, Biffen would have three or four such pupils. Gissing did some of this kind of tutoring, but most of his

teaching was in the homes of the wealthier class like that of Mr. Harrison. However, what he did among such men gave him some extraordinary stories, some of which he later used in his novels.

Biffen's story, "Mr. Bailey, Grover," was a caricature of Gissing's own work and method. Although Gissing was not a humorist and seldom introduces anything which by the farthest stretch of the imagination could be called funny, still there is much that is amusing in Biffen. It seems strange after almost losing his life in the fire when he rescued his novel that he would be so weak as to take his own life. Gissing told Morley Roberts, his very intimate friend, that he enjoyed painting Biffen when he was laboring over "Mr. Bailey, Grover" as much as any work he ever did.

Still another character in "New Grub Street" is reminiscent of the author, and this time it is a woman, Marian Yule. One day she sat at a table in the British Museum with books before her, but by no effort could she fix her attention upon them. She kept asking herself what was the use and purpose of such a life as she was condemned to lead. When the world was already full of more literature than anyone could read, why should she spend her life manufacturing printed stuff which no one pretended to be more

than just material for the day's market. Gissing, like Marian, was very fond of reading and coveted his card for the British Museum as he did few other things, except his books. But hack writing, rehashing material for magazines, he detested. He wrote articles for the Pall Mall Gazette and the Fortnightly, and although he despised journalistic work, he agreed to write for them in order to eke out his very small income. He also wrote articles on the political, social, and literary affairs of England which were contracted for by a periodical in St. Petersburg. In his letters he speaks with delight of the work, delight not because he enjoyed it, but because each article brought in eight pounds and gave him that much more opportunity to do the thing he enjoyed. On January 13, 1881, he wrote to his brother Algernon: "On Monday next I send my article to St. Petersburg, and shall rejoice to have it off my hands. It has cost me immense trouble."<sup>1</sup>

A year later he wrote to his sister Margaret: "I am on the point of beginning my series of quarterly labour, the article which I write for the Russian Journal. It is always a tremendous toil. I sit down with much loathing, and rise from it - it takes me a fortnight - with infinite sat-

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<sup>1</sup>Gissing, George, "Letters to Members of His Family," page 88.

isfaction. But it brings me thirty-two pounds a year, so I suppose I mustn't grumble about it." As time went on, he grew to dislike the work more and more and in October, 1882, wrote his brother, "I wish I could get a whiff of Oceanus through the morning easement, and 'hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn' in the breakers at the castle-foot. Instead of that I am struggling bitterly with the old foe, the Russian article." Later in the same letter he speaks of having other things to do as soon as the "bread-article" clears away.

Creative, original work he thoroughly enjoyed, as one cannot fail to notice in the letters to his family. As soon as one novel had gone to the publishers, he was hard at work on another. Several times he speaks of having a plot for a play all worked out and asks for his brother's advice and criticism, but none of these seems ever to have been completed.

Gilbert Grail in "Thyrza" is yet another George Gissing. Grail was passionately fond of literature, and the humble rooms in which he lived with his mother contained many well-selected books. The most prominent object in their parlor was a bookcase, six feet high, quite full of books, most of them rather shabby. Gilbert had bought them when he could spare a few pence at second hand book stalls during

the past fifteen years. They covered a variety of subjects and showed the liberal intelligence of their owner. History and biography predominated, but there was some poetry and fiction as well as translations by Swedenborg and religious productions put out by the church of the New Jerusalem.

He worked in a large candle and soap factory, where he had been for twenty years but was still only a trustworthy mechanic, because his heart was not in his work. He could not live as his fellow workmen did, coming home to satisfy his hunger, and spend a couple of hours in recreation before getting some sleep. Every minute of freedom he held precious. He could not yield to sleep when books lay before him, and knowledge, whom he almost worshiped, promised him so much. He, like his creator, Gissing, sat late into the night reading, devouring, fairly adoring the works of the great writers. To him the printed page was as the fountain of life and he longed to know the history of man's mind through the ages. His reading was not of the desultory kind but planned to reach a certain end. In this he was much different from the not uncommon working man who pursues, really zealously, some chosen branch of study. Such men ordinarily take up subjects of practical worth, something in line with their work, or if they study history, it is from the point of view of current politics. A taste for

literature pure and simple is rare among those who have got their education through their own efforts. But Gilbert Grail was just this sort of working man. He was a candle maker because he must support his mother and himself, but he only really lived when lost in some literary masterpiece. Like Gissing, too, he was a lonely man, who had no friends outside his own home, and even there he was often silent for days. Long ago he had given up smoking so that he might use the money to buy books. Many of Gissing's characters deny themselves pleasures and even necessary food in order to buy a coveted edition of a book.

"Thyrza" contains a very pretty romance in the love of Gilbert for Thyrza. Here again books play their part. At last Gilbert was to do work that he enjoyed. Mr. Egremont had established a library for the working classes and Gilbert was to be the librarian. He was to give up his hateful job and live at last. He was happy, as deliriously happy as Gissing was when he could give up his teaching and hack writing for magazines and devote his time to his own creative writing and reading. But the author was a realist and did not let Gilbert do the thing he so longed to do. The library was abandoned. Thyrza became ill and died, and Gilbert returned to his hated work.

Books with Gissing were a passion. He even had Thyrza,

his beautiful, frail, idealized working girl, read as she tried to recover from her illness. She bought books at a second hand book-shop, but with no one to guide her, she made queer purchases: Tyler's "Universal History," "Annals of Greece and Rome," and an English dictionary. The choice sounds much more like that of George Gissing than it does of a poor, uneducated working girl, who had worked in a millinery shop making hats since she was big enough to sew.

And so we see that Gissing's men are created out of himself; they are pessimists with the chill of poverty in their very bones. Their tragedy is not to be frustrated and die, but to be frustrated and live. All of them from Gilbert Grail in "Thyrza" to Henry Ryecroft in "The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft" are idealists where women are concerned.

#### HIS ATTITUDE TOWARD WOMEN, CHILDREN, AND FAMILY LIFE

Of the characters in Gissing's novels, those which stand out most clearly afterwards are the women. They are of various types. Thyrza is certainly the most exquisite portrait. She is a fragile, charming girl, reminiscent of some of Dickens' more charming women. Lydia, her sister, is the best, most honest, most loyal girl imaginable.

Any Reardon is very human but not a woman whom we can

admire. She was dissatisfied with the meager life she had to lead while her husband was trying to get a start as a writer. When comfort failed, she failed. She was a commonplace, beautiful woman who demanded the place she thought due to her. When Reardon failed to provide for her, she went to her mother, and "with satisfaction lay down to sleep in a comfortable, solitary bed." It is as if in this last phrase Gissing sums up her utter selfishness and failure in all high essentials.

Amy's mother, the author says, is typical of the majority of London people. She occupied a house the rent of which was more than she could afford to pay. London landlords appreciate this weakness and turn it to good account. She might have lived in modest comfort but she preferred to keep two servants and try to conceal her squalid background from her friends and neighbors. She overworked her servants and paid them so poorly that they rarely stayed more than two or three months. Her speech was seldom ungrammatical, but her accent was that of the London poor, and although she had associated with educated people for years, she could not lose the effects of her childhood training. In her actions, too, she never was able to bear herself as a lady. Gissing again comments in regard to such women that the London work girl is rarely capable of raising herself or of being



raised to a place in life above that to which she was born. She cannot learn to stand and sit and move like a woman bred to refinement any more than she can speak in graceful language.

"New Grub Street" is a picture of individuals. Marian Yule is an admirable character. As has been mentioned, she was Gissing, the literary hack, who spent hours in the British Museum reading in order to write articles which nobody wanted to read. She is a good contrast to Amy Beardon, and reveals herself in touching loyalty, though she has been unpleasantly jilted by Jasper Milvain.

Gissing has created a whole gallery of women. They are usually carefully drawn, but occasionally they have no intrinsic interest and consequently the story drags. In "The Nether World" Pennyloaf Candy, Bob Hewett's squalid wife, is admirably studied. She is based on first-hand information. One of the most pathetic scenes in any of the novels is one in which Pennyloaf is the central character. She had two children. A third child mercifully had died at birth. They lived in one wretched room and Pennyloaf, like all women of her class, was utterly ignorant and helpless in the matter of preparing food. She made no attempt to cook, but spent her few pence daily on whatever happened to tempt her in a shop when meal time came around. She often bought dough

pudding or pease pudding for herself and the children. All day she kept a pot of tea on the table and kept adding hot water. The room was dirty, the babies ill kempt, the furnishings were wretched, Bob was drunk much of the time, and Pennyloaf had no courage to try to do more than just exist. One day the younger child was sick and Pennyloaf decided to take it to the hospital. Gissing's treatment of child characters is usually very perfunctory, more as if they were stage properties. Here, however, he is very sympathetic. Pennyloaf let the fire go out, locked the older child in, and started for the hospital with the baby. She had to wait a long time in the rain for a bus to take her to the hospital, and after she arrived she had another long wait. Just as her opportunity to see the doctor arrived, a movement in the bundle on her lap made her look at the child's face - it had ceased to live.

Another character for whom Gissing has sympathy is Emma, Mutimer's discarded sweetheart. Like so many of his women characters she bore in silence the jilting by the man she loved. She sewed for a living and tried to take care of her sister's two children. And here again Gissing brings in some little half-starved children to color his picture and give it a tragic touch. Among all the results of her poverty the bitterest to Emma was when she found her-

self hoping that the children would not eat much. She feared to ask them if they were hungry lest the supply of bread should fail. It hurt her to give them a half slice of bread and tell them they could have no more. That week she had earned three shillings; the rent was four.

Mrs. Mutimer is considered by Swinerton quite the best of Gissing's portraits of women. She is one of the best character-studies of the poor to be found either in Gissing's books or outside of them. She distrusts her son's newly acquired wealth and will not go to his house even for a visit; she is loyal to Emma after Mutimer has discarded her and married a girl above him socially; she is uncomfortable in any home except the one to which she is accustomed; she insists on doing all her own housework and will have no servant about - all these things make her a real, living person, easily visualized in our minds. She is much more realistic than many of his characters.

Gissing's unattractive, virtuous girls like Adela Waltham and Stella Westlake in "Demos," Emily Hood in "A Life's Morning," Jane Snowden in "The Nether World" are too good. Their virtue is too apparent, and they are too lifeless to be interesting. Gissing was so sternly unromantic himself that he often made thrusts at his women characters for the romanticism which he says is inherent in women.

Not satisfied with being merely ironic, at times he becomes bitterly sarcastic.

In spite of his thrusts at marriage, which are not to be wondered at, considering his three unsuccessful unions, he nevertheless had an ideal constantly in mind. After all his years of solitude and more or less discomfort he wanted a home, an ideal home of burnished fenders and spotless linen, of the pleasant smell of inoffensive cooking, with blinds drawn, fires lighted, lamps giving a soft light on cold, wet November evenings. Love and peace and quiet, a gentle woman on the opposite side of the fireplace, comfort, contentment - these are the things for which he longed but never fully realized. Henry Rycroft in "The Private Papers of Henry Rycroft" comes nearer realizing Gissing's ideal than any of the other characters. This story, considered a very thinly veiled autobiography, was well received, probably because of the very obvious personal note. Rycroft was living the kind of life that Gissing held to be ideal. He had become a recluse, had given up the life that made so many demands on him and had returned to his books after years of struggle. He sang the joys of silence and of solitude after his years spent in noise and among crowds. The woman who kept his house was not his wife but a housekeeper whom he almost never saw, but who kept his house running

smoothly with almost no noise. We get some idea of what home meant to him in this quotation from "Ryecroft": "To me this little book-room is beautiful, and chiefly because it is home. Through the greater part of life I was homeless. Many places have I inhabited, some which my soul loathed, and some which pleased me well; but never till now with that sense of security which makes a home."<sup>1</sup>

Most of Gissing's feminine figures are women "in exile." Emily in "A Life's Morning" is one of these. As he first wrote the story, Emily died, but James Payn would not take the novel with that ending and he had to rewrite the close. She was a graceful, dignified girl whose broad brow, pure eyes, and refined, sweet mouth made her a perfect type of spiritual beauty. There are numerous indications that the author intended that she should die. At one time she put her hand to her heart and complained of the pain. By this the reader knows that heart failure is inevitable, for it was the accepted method of preparing for the death of the heroine. Gissing makes her so very good that she seems hardly real. When her mother collapsed after Emily began to recover from her illness, the girl was almost superhuman in her patience, never speaking a word except of perfect gentle-

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<sup>1</sup> Gissing, George, "The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft," page 5.

nese. Her bitterest misery made her the more devoted. She realised to the uttermost Wilfrid's ideal of womanhood. "He dressed her in queenly garments and worshiped at her feet." Apparently she was the type of wife he thought ideal and theirs the quiet, secluded life that Gissing would have liked to live. Emily had some of the traits of her creator. She had a passionate love of learning and read histories of Greece and Rome, translations of old classics, the Koran, and all the poetry she could lay her hands on.

Mrs. Hood, Emily's mother, was almost the exact opposite of her daughter. She was selfish and inconsiderate. Although her husband was a good, hard working man, he never sat down to a freshly cooked meal. The reason was that Mrs. Hood always ate at one o'clock. She would cook the meat, cut off some slices and put them with some vegetables in the oven. That was the kind of meal he ate day after day.

The family life of Gissing's father seems to have been pleasant. He adored his father and was heartbroken when he died. He was devoted to his mother and brothers and sisters if one can judge by the letters that he wrote to them. But in his novels he almost never pictures a happy family. The nearest to it is the life of Wilfrid and Emily in "A Life's Morning" and that is too idyllic to seem real. It is almost as if Emily had been resurrected from the grave to

marry Wilfrid. Emily's parents were unhappy. In "New Grub Street" Amy left Reardon because he did not make sufficient money. All the marriages in "Demos" and "The Wether World" were almost unendurable. Gissing's theory was that if a man married out of his own sphere, either above or below, disaster was almost sure to follow. Hubert Mutimer married Adela Waltham, a girl of good education and good family, while he was from the Wilton Square district. They were never happy and after he was killed in a riot, she married Hubert Eldon, a man of her own level. Probably Gissing's own miserable failures in marriage played a large part in making him the pessimist he was about marriage. He was sternly unromantic himself and seemed to take delight in making thrusts at the inveterate romanticism of women.

By his second marriage Gissing had two children and again referring to letters to his sisters we see how much he loved them and how much thought he gave to their welfare. However, when he puts children into his novels, they are mere puppets without life or realism. In "Thyrza," "Demos," "The Wether World," "New Grub Street," "In the Year of Jubilee," and "The Whirlpool" he introduces children, but they are absolutely without character. The statements that he makes about children are strong enough to arouse the ire of a humanitarian. Of the married life of Wilfrid and Emily

in "A Life's Morning" he says that "it seemed no child would be born of her to trouble the exclusiveness of their love." And again in the same story he tells of the life of the Hoodes and says of two of their children, "Fate was kind to them, and neither of them survived infancy." Richard Dagworthy's marriage was another of the marital failures that he records. He had played with the baby and seemed very fond of it until Emily refused to marry him. From then on the nurse did not dare to bring the baby near to him, but kept it in a distant part of the house. One day he heard it cry and that made him so insanely angry that he told the nurse if she could not keep that noise still, he would send the baby away, dismiss them all, and close the house.

It seems to have been Gissing's idea that parents should have little to do with their children until they were ten or twelve years old. It made him indignant that people would cry over the deaths of babies. He saw nothing to cry about, since if babies died, they probably ought to in order that the strongest might live. Sometimes he puts a child into a novel and has it become very sick or die in order to bring about a certain state of mind in the parents. Willie, the Reardons' child in "New Grub Street," serves just such a purpose. The parents are separated and in order to bring them together, Willie has a terrible fever and dies. The



parents are reunited, but Reardon dies only a short time after the child.

Concerning the education of children Gissing is very bitter and on this subject exclaims in "The Whirlpool": "For the teaching of children after they can read and write, there seems to be no method at all. The old classical education was fairly consistent, but it exists no longer. Nothing has taken its place. Muddle, experiment, and waste of lives - too awful to think about. We're savages yet in the matter of education. Somebody said to me once: 'Well, but look at the results; they're not so bad.' Great heavens! Not so bad - when the supreme concern of mankind is to perfect their instruments of slaughter! Not so bad - when the goal and the gallows are taken as a matter of course! Not so bad - when filthy cities are packed with multitudes who have no escape from toil and hunger but in a wretched death! Not so bad - when all but every man's life is one long blunder, the result of ignorance and unruled passions."<sup>1</sup>

#### HIS ATTITUDE TOWARD DEMOCRACY

George Gissing was a socialist, but not a social demo-

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<sup>1</sup> Gissing, George, "The Whirlpool," page 366.

orat, he declares, speaking through the character of Lashman in "Our Friend, the Charlatan." He goes on to say that he looked upon democracy as an absurdity condemned by all the teachings of modern science. He was a socialist, because he believed that the principle of association is the only principle of progress. The true socialist has to remember the principle of justice in the balance of rights and duties between the few who lead and the multitude who follow. So far the ruling classes have tyrannized and the multitude has had less than its share. During his own time the multitude was beginning to roar and if they get what they want, the others had better look out for themselves. Gissing had seen for a long time that there were potential leaders among the working men and his idea in giving a series of lectures and in establishing a free public library was that in this way he could help educate these men to be the right kind of leaders. The great thing that he felt they needed in England was reform in education. He felt that they were teaching the people too much and too little. He believed then, as we believe now, that the duty of the state was to educate citizens.

Gissing explains his own mature feeling in "Henry Ryecroft." "I am no friend of the people," he says. "As a force they inspire me with distrust, with fear; as a visible

multitude they make me shrink aloof, and often move me to abhorrence. For the greater part of my life, the people signified to me the London crowd, and no phrase of temperate meaning would utter my thoughts of them under that aspect. . . . Every instinct of my being is anti-democratization, and I dread to think of what our England may become when Demos rules irresistibly.<sup>1</sup>

Here it is very plain to be seen that he regarded the lower class as threatening culture in its best sense. Possibly he understood the working man as an individual, but as a class in the mass he had no real knowledge of them. He lived in the present and feared the future; he feared progress. For him the word progress had but one meaning, and that was disturbance. As a young man he feared universal education, because if you educate a man, you put him on a higher social level than that to which he is accustomed, and he will be miserable and "in exile." Later in life, as is seen in "Ryecroft," he had overcome that fear of education.

The years 1864, 1865, and 1866 saw some very stormy days in London, with riots in Trafalgar Square. The whole general feeling got hold of Gissing even before the riots, and for the first time he sat down to write a book which should have some popular appeal. The result of this was

<sup>1</sup>Gissing, George, "The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft," page 39.

"Demos," his novel of English Socialism, which shows various attitudes of the author toward democracy. The story probably would never have been begun but for economic reasons - the author needed money badly. The book was about two-thirds finished at the time of the Trafalgar Square riot. The very next day he rushed down to the publishers, told them how apropos the book was to the situation, and left the first two volumes with them. A day later they sent word that they would undertake to publish the book if they could have the remainder at once. He did this in two weeks, a rapidity of workmanship which he never reached again.

In the character of Mrs. Eldon he introduces an educated woman of the higher class who, of course, looked at the situation from her own level. She asked her son what this class distinction was upon which they prided themselves. It seemed to her that it ought to give them opportunities to see truths to which the poor and ignorant are blind. People said there was nothing in their pride of birth and station. She was broad minded and pointed out the marvelous good that a friend of theirs had done. He was a man without education, but he had made a great success commercially. However, in his respect for Mrs. Eldon he showed that she had from nature what was lacking to him and what no money could buy.

Most of the characters in "Demos", however, were of the opposite type of Mrs. Eldon, people of a lower social rank, who were fighting capitalism. One group of them met in a room behind a coffee shop, where the walls were decorated with advertisements of non-alcoholic beverages, and there the leaders harangued all they could get to listen, until often they were worked up into a regular frenzy. At one of these meetings Mr. Kitchaw in a speech painted a fancy picture of a country still in the hands of the aborigines and as yet not taken by the capitalists, a country where the people did not even know the meaning of the word "exploit." He begged them to imagine such a happy land where "developing the resources of the country" had never been heard of, where there were no manufacturers of luxurious skirts, and ulsters by the exploited classes, for there were no exploited classes. They were all equal.

Richard Mutimer, a man from the poor class who inherited money enough to start New Wanley, a sociological project, expressed his idea of the wage earner and the capitalist. The man who lived on wages was never free, because he had sold himself body and soul to his employers. Constantly staring at him and his family was destitution and that terrible nightmare, the work house. Even religion for him was a luxury - and the working man had no luxuries. The

whole principle of the capitalist system, he declared, was to discover how long a man could be made to work without making him incapable of beginning again on the day following. They also had calculated how little a man could live upon, and based their wages on that. "If the workman returned home with strength to spare, employers would soon find it out, and the work shop legislation would be revised - because of course it's the capitalists that make the laws. The principle is that a man shall have no strength left for himself. It's all paid for, every scrap of it, bought with wages at each week end. What religion can such men have? Religion, I suppose, means thankfulness for life and its pleasures - at all events, that's a great part of it - and what has a wage-earner to be thankful for?"<sup>1</sup>

These feelings were probably not Gissing's, but rather intended to be characteristic of Mutimer. Hubert Eldon as a representative of the well-to-do class voiced another view. Socialism, he said, was infused with the spirit of shop keeping; it appealed to the vulgarest of minds; it kept one eye on personal safety and the other on the capitalist's strong box. It was stamped commonplace, like everything else originating with the English lower classes.

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<sup>1</sup>Gissing, George, "Depos," page 96.

Gissing said that he himself had known revolt against the privilege of wealth, but even then he had not felt on a level with the poor among whom he lived. He knew them too well and knew that their aims were not his. He wanted emancipation, but it must be emancipation from dogma. Democracy in power, it seemed to him, could only bring destruction of natural beauties. In the New Wanley project in "Demos" a beautiful valley is ruined in order to make a place for the homes of the workers and to carry on the project. When the socialistic attempt failed, everything was torn down, trees replanted, and in a few years the valley was again a joy to the people.

Almost without exception Gissing lays his stories in the very poor east section of London. Lambeth, Tottenham Court Road, Wilton Square, Foston, Islington, Camberwell become very familiar to the reader of his novels. Occasionally he lays a story in a better neighborhood and among a more educated and better class of people than this part of London affords, but he invariably fails. The few times that he did break away from the poorer sections, he realized that he was out of his sphere, and returned to it. In one of his letters he remarks that critics have said that he had not learned enough about the upper class to write well of them. On the contrary, he says, they were the ones he

knew, and the poor were the people he had to study.

#### THE INFLUENCE OF TRAVEL AND HIS AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

All his life Gissing had a great desire to travel. He had done such a vast amount of reading that the desire to see the places of which he read became an obsession with him. An unfortunate occurrence when he was twenty made it necessary for him to leave school, and his friends sent him to America. For a time he lived on the money he had brought with him; later he taught the classics in Boston, but again, with his money almost exhausted, he faced a crisis. He bought an emigrant ticket to Chicago, reaching there with only a few dollars, but with the hope of making his living by his pen. The story of his struggle is told in "New Grub Street," where it is placed in the mouth of Whelpdale, a London hack. The reason he gives Whelpdale for coming to America was that he was having such poor success making a living writing for magazines that he conceived the idea of crossing the Atlantic in the hope that he might find valuable literary material at the Centennial Exhibition which was then in progress in Philadelphia. Whelpdale, like Gissing, went to Chicago, and wrote stories for the Chicago Tribune. Things went well with him for a few months, but at length his inspiration was checked. He



seemed to have written himself out. By this time he was homesick for England and returned to New York but without money enough to pay for a passage home. Seeing one of his stories in a Troy newspaper, he went there, thinking that maybe he could sell them more, but the editor refused, and with only a dollar in his pocket he was reduced to living on peanuts for several days. Eventually, after an experience as a demonstrator of some gas fittings, money arrived from friends in England, and he returned. The incident as Whelpdale tells it is almost exactly as it happened to Gissing.

Aside from this use of it in "New Grub Street" he also uses his American experience in other stories in which a character travels abroad. Walter Egremont in "Thyrza" visited this country as a well-to-do young man traveling for pleasure. His experiences are told in letters to Mrs. Ormonde. In one of them he wrote that he had just happened upon the works of Walt Whitman and was sending her a copy of "Leaves of Grass" which he says he "can affirm is a book out of the writer's heart. It has as much of him at his best, when he is most kindly and pitiful, as anything he ever wrote."

An interesting incident in this connection is that Morley Roberts brought "Leaves of Grass" to Gissing, who took

the book with visible distaste, but allowed Roberts to read some if he insisted. When he stopped after ten minutes, Giesing asked him to leave the book with him.

From a letter to one of his brothers it would seem that Giesing contemplated making a second journey to America. He was having difficulty finding a publisher for his novels and wrote that he thought of coming here and trying journalistic work again.

An interesting outcome of his stay in America was the publication in Chicago in 1924 of "The Sins of the Fathers and Other Tales." The edition was limited to five hundred fifty numbered copies, of which five hundred were offered for sale. The four tales published for the first time in book form are all that have been discovered of Giesing's work of that period. They were all published in the Saturday supplement of the Chicago Tribune and were probably all that he did for that journal. Two of them were unsigned and the other two were signed "G. R. G."

For years admirers of his work had wondered about these tales. It was known that he had written some stories for the Tribune, but not even the names were known. Several attempts were made to discover them, and one attempt was made by Bert Lester Taylor ("B. L. T.") when he was conducting a column in the Tribune. All attempts failed until Mr. Christopher Hagerup took up the search. He and Vincent

Starrett were admirers and collectors of Gissing's "first editions," and each, unknown to the other, was searching the files of the Tribune to find the lost stories. Hagerup found them, recognized the two unsigned ones by their style and content. He copied them, but decided that they were not important enough for publication. Starrett later found them, determined that they should be published, and when Pascal Govici went into the publishing business, he had them printed.

#### HIS LOVE OF NATURE

Gissing had a great love for the country, although few scenes in his stories are laid there. Quiet, peace, solitude - these were the things for which he longed and for which his characters wished, especially those who were ill and for whom the heat of the city was almost unbearable. Mrs. Ormonde in "Thyrza" remodeled a part of her house in the country by the sea so that she could take poor children from the city and after some weeks of fresh, salt air, healthful food, and good care return them much benefited to their parents. Thyrza was sent to the country to recuperate from her illness. Gissing describes her love of the sound of the sea, and her walk over the sand of the beach to a high place where she could look far off and dream.

"Too Dearly Bought," one of the stories he wrote for

the Chicago Tribune, shows what a man will do to get a child out of the heat and confusion of the city. Tim was a cobbler whose daughter had died, leaving a little girl. As the child sat beside him while he worked, he told her of the country and she begged him to take her there. In the confinement of his basement cobbler's shop Lucy became so frail that her grandfather finally stole some money and took her to the country, where for a while she seemed to grow stronger, but finally drooped and died. Gissing's description of the old man and the child wandering about over the downs, picking flowers, happy just to be out of doors, is quite idyllic.

For himself Gissing longed to make money enough that he could leave the city, its crowds and its squalor, and live quietly in the country. "Henry Ryecroft" was one of the last books that he wrote and it is, although not the best, at least the most restful of his works. Here he is no longer the pessimist of "The Nether World" or the satirist of working-class aims and capacities that he was in "Demos." He seldom describes the country but can do so beautifully as is evidenced by his description of the heath in "A Life's Morning." He delighted in colors, but because his stories dealt mainly with sordid and ugly scenes, few people know that he appreciated nature. The

sky at sunset had a peculiar attraction for him and he wrote countless vivid descriptions of it. The sight of beautiful skies sank deep into his mind and left a lasting impression on him.

#### THE INFLUENCE OF CLASSICAL AND ACCEPTED LITERATURE

Gissing was a scholar of exceptional ability. His one desire was to pursue all kinds of learning, and consequently he let no day slip by without some close reading which would add to his store of knowledge. Teaching he did not like but did much of in the form of tutoring, since for a long time it seemed to be the only way he had of earning even a meager living. It is interesting to follow in his letters his directions to his sister as to a course of reading. She had lost a teacher to whom she was particularly attached, and after that her brother guided her in her reading, starting her out with an etymology and telling her to read much English poetry, but not to skip from Chaucer to Tennyson and from Shakespeare to Crabbe, but to read all the principal authors of one period. After this he advised her to take up Early English, then German. He said that a girl's education should be of a very general and liberal character, adapted rather to expand the intelligence than to give a very thorough knowledge on any subject. And so over

a period of years he told her of his own reading, which included anything from a history of the universe to Burns' poetry. Gissing himself was a real student and would have delighted to spend his life in study. In his younger days he judged a person by his intellectual power and attainment. He could see no charm where there was no learning, but as he grew older he learned to distinguish between two forms of intelligence, that of the brain and that of the heart and came to regard the second as by far the more important.

He had admiration amounting almost to reverence for Greek and thought that a person should be able to read Greek at least as well as German, considering what a vast influence the Greeks have exerted upon literary artists. He thought little of a person who did not know some Greek or at least desire to know it. All who were not aware of "the minuter differences between dochmiacs and antipasts" were very unfortunate. Biffen, the poor tutor and novelist of "New Grub Street," though he had lost everything else, kept a small volume of Greek poetry which he carried in his pocket. Often he would stop at Reardon's lodgings and the two friends would enjoy an hour or two reading and scanning classic verse, forgetting for the time their miserable condition. Gissing could not conceive of anyone even pretend-

ing to be educated and not knowing Greek.

He made a very long and careful study of Roman history, with the idea of writing a novel whose setting should be Rome. From the time when he first read Gibbon, whose history he received as a prize, Giesing was filled with Roman lore. Greek literature attracted him, but it was the history of Rome that absorbed him. Although after years of longing, Giesing was finally financially able to visit both Greece and Rome, Greece never meant quite so much to him as Rome. In "Ryecroft" he sums up his ideas of it: "Our heritage of Greek literature and art are priceless; the example of Greek life possesses for us not the slightest value." "By the Ionian Sea," his one travel book, is a brief, sincere, and unpretentious account of a ramble in southern Italy. It is very personal and gives the impression of conversation, as if the author were talking to the reader, telling him of the hotels, the people, the journeys, the difficulties he had with a donkey. The book is probably not a masterpiece, but it is very delightful reading. His diary and letters written in 1888, when he made his first visit to Italy, naturally give the same kind of intimate pictures and personal reaction of the country about which he had dreamed for so many years. At the time of his death in 1903 he had written more than two-thirds of "Veranilda,"

preparation for which he had spent many years. The story is laid in Rome in the sixth century and recreates the air of the times, but does not attempt a striking plot.

As a literary critic Gissing shows keen understanding and appreciation of the work of other writers, particularly that of Dickens, Thackeray, Hugo, and Balzac, whom he revered with admiration and envy. There is hardly one of his letters but contains some reference to his reading, advice to his sister as to what to read, or a comment on something she had already read. Heine, George Sand, Charlotte Bronte, Dante, Virgil, Shakespeare, Keats, Gibbon, Scott, Cervantes - he had read them all and memorized pages from their work so that his criticism is pungent and keen. But of all the writers whose work he knew and loved Dickens was his heart's idol. Dickens the writer, Dickens the hero of older England, Dickens the humorist, Dickens the leader of men, Dickens the friend of the poor - such were the headings under which he discussed the work of the great English novelist in "Charles Dickens, a Critical Study." His admiration for Dickens began when as a child of eight or nine "Our Mutual Friend" came to his home in serial form and he could remember the smile of welcome with which it was received. In their dining room was a handsomely framed portrait of the author which the boy Gissing almost idolized. He tells



us that his love for Dickens began when at ten years he read "The Old Curiosity Shop," and it lasted to the end of his life. The influence of Dickens predominates in "Thyrza," his first really notable and artistic book. Thyrza herself is a typical Dickens madonna of the slum. Gissing's sympathy was as great as Dickens'. Mr. Boddy, the grandfather of Thyrza and Lydia, is a typical Dickens character. The scene in "Thyrza" where Thyrza and Lydia give Mr. Boddy a coat is one of the most touching in the story and sounds much like the older author in the tenderness in which it is told. However, these imitations are few in Gissing's work. Pathos of this sort, although rare in Gissing's novels, is abundant in this one. There is another superb piece of imaginative prose in the novel in the description of the children dancing to a street organ. Although Gissing does seem imitative here, still he does not handle many of the scenes as Dickens probably would have. He saw only the gloomy, somber side of it all, but one can imagine Dickens describing the children and the dancing so as to bring out their joy and abandon. He probably would have discovered in the crowd some queer person with an oddly suitable name, through whom he could have introduced some humor, and the reader would be undecided whether to cry over the pathos of the children or to laugh at the grotesque figure.

This matter of humor brings out one of the greatest differences between the two writers. Gissing could understand the fun in Dickens, but he could not imitate it. In a letter to Margaret in 1879 he tells her of a new one-volume edition of Forster's "Dickens" which had just come out and closes his letter with: "Dickens could not even write the shortest note without some admirable fun in it. What a man he was!"<sup>1</sup>

In "Charles Dickens" he speaks of the same thing when he is discussing Dickens' efforts to bring about reform in the matter of child labor. "Dickens had a weapon more efficacious than mere honest zeal. He could make people laugh; and if once the crowd has laughed with you, it will not object to cry a little - nay, it will make good resolves, and sometimes carry them out."<sup>2</sup>

Gissing's similarity to Dickens lies in his pathos rather than in his prose. In some respects he was a disciple of Dickens, though he could not, like the master, turn vulgarity to merriment and discover types of a rich and lovable humanity in the lowest circles of street life. Had Dickens followed Pennyloaf Candy and Bob Hewett to the Crystal Palace on their wedding day, he would have seen

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<sup>1</sup>Gissing, George, "Letters to Members of His Family," page 55.

<sup>2</sup>Gissing, George, "Charles Dickens," page 9.

something besides the perspiring waiters carrying out piles of dirty dishes, and would have heard more than the deafening uproar. But George Gissing was himself and could write only as things appeared to him.

### HIS LITERARY THEORIES AND METHODS

Writing for Gissing was a slow and tedious task. In one letter he mentions sitting for three hours over twelve lines. A few pages a day were usually all he could accomplish. Since he had to teach in order to secure money enough for bare expenses, he had little time for writing, and since any period of composition had to be preceded by a period of mental and bodily peace, one can understand why his work progressed so slowly. Often he would write for a number of days and then tear up his work because it failed to please him. He never wrote to please the popular taste; for that matter, he had nothing but contempt for anyone who would so demean his work. His method of writing is well summed up in his own words: "I think it is better to tell a story precisely as one does in real life, hinting, surmising, telling in detail what can be so told and no more."<sup>1</sup>

At another time he said, "If my own ideas are to be found anywhere, it is in the practical course of events in

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<sup>1</sup>Gissing, George, "Letters to Members of His Family," page 166.

the story; my characters must speak as they would actually, and I cannot be responsible for what they say."<sup>1</sup>

It was often necessary to introduce into his stories descriptions of public celebrations or gatherings of people for different purposes. When this was necessary, he visited the place so that he could get the scenes and the people in their correct setting. In one letter he says that the next day was Bank Holiday and he must spend it in the street, because there was always so much to be picked up on such days. In "The Nether World" he has a very vivid, and one would imagine a very accurate picture of Bank Holiday. Much more than Dickens he was careful that details of such a description were accurate. Again in "Demos" he attended socialist and radical meetings so that he could write authoritatively of these movements.

Novel writing for Gissing was exhausting work. He said that a few hours' imaginative work takes more out of one than is commonly suspected, and much recreation is required in order to keep it up. While he was working on "The Nether World," he recorded in his diary that he had written from 3:30 to 6:00 and had done two pages. The capture of Bob Hewett and the excitement of it all made him so ill that he could do no more. At another time as he finished a scene

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<sup>1</sup>Gissing, George, "Letters to Members of His Family," page 141.

in "Thy ze" he wrote to his brother that he was in tears and said that surely there must be some good in it if it affected him that way. Like his master, Charles Dickens, Gissing lived the lives of the characters of his creation. Through all his struggle to make himself a recognized novelist, he had the hardihood to remain an artist, laboriously perfecting his style and never willing to condescend to journalistic writing.

#### CONCLUSION

As we look back over our study of fourteen of George Gissing's novels, having read some books from each period of his literary life, certain things stand out in our memory. Gissing was in many ways a frustrate man. He pretended to care little for what people thought of him and would have lowered himself in his own esteem had he pandered to popular taste; nevertheless he was elated when he sold a book to a publisher and crushed if it had little sale.

In spite of the many hardships that he had to endure, there were some bright spots in his life. He knew the satisfaction of work well done when leisure could be obtained; he knew the comfort of a few solid friendships; toward the end of his life he enjoyed a partial recognition among those who counted; he finally made money enough to afford

him the opportunity for travel.

Although the work of Gissing lacks humor, is deficient in mystery, is remote from actual life, has little emotional power, and lacks dramatic qualities, nevertheless, we are always sure of smooth writing, conscientious workmanship, scholarly style, and a genuine spirit of sadness. He was a man of artistic temperament whose miserable circumstances made him revolt against the poor start in life he as an educated man received. But these same circumstances made of him a prolific writer, producing at least one volume a year and often more. He shrank from the restraints and humiliations to which he as a poor and shabbily dressed private tutor was exposed, but revealed his feelings with much persuasion in "New Grub Street" and "Henry Ryecroft."

Gissing was saved from utter misery by two qualities: a sense of individual responsibility and a passionate love of the classics. Summing up his experience at the end of his life he says: "Within my nature there seemed to be no faculty of rational self-guidance. Boy and man, I blundered into every ditch and bog which lay within sight of my way . . . Something, obviously, I lacked from the beginning, some balancing principle granted to most men in one or another degree."

At least Gissing did not cast the burden of responsi-

bility on society or destiny or some other external power. Through all the difficulties of his life he kept his sense of responsibility and never permitted the stress of poverty or hack work to rob him of his great literary heritage. He might pawn his coat for a dinner, but his few chosen classics - Shakespeare, Milton, Gibbon, Homer, Virgil, Cicero - went with him from cellar to garret.

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