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The purpose of my thesis is to prove in what ways George Gissing is a representative novelist of the transitional period between the Victorian and modern eras, and to examine and evaluate critically New Grub Street, his best work. The conditions and characteristics of the late nineteenth century are surveyed especially as they relate to Gissing's novelistic methods in New Grub Street. A sketch of Gissing's life shows both how his experiences molded his artistic vision and practice, and how he incorporated many of his attitudes and experiences into this novel, without allowing it to become merely fictionalized autobiography. A criticism of New Grub Street as a work of art places emphasis on the novel's transitional characteristics and the manner in which they affect its aesthetic merit. Of moment in the consideration of New Grub Street as a transitional novel is the way in which Gissing, who was to a degree influenced by traditional and contemporary novelists, shaped these influences to suit his own purposes. His purpose in New Grub Street was to write, with fidelity to his personal view of life, a serious, realistic, and objective novel rich in psychological analysis. This aim is modern and marks Gissing as a novelist who moved beyond his inherited literary tradition.

A STUDY OF GEORGE GISSING'S NEW GRUB STREET AS A TRANSITIONAL NOVEL

by

Elizabeth Wright Kearns

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Approved by

Randolph Bulgin
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APPROVAL SHEET

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INTRODUCTION

New Grub Street is not a complex novel, and it does not work toward a single effect. Since it has no thesis, it is difficult to formulate a thesis concerning it. The novel does, however, hold several kinds of interest which my various chapters illustrate. Since New Grub Street is a fragmented work with no clear-cut direction, I, too, am forced to veer in several directions. Much of what I say in these pages will of necessity be tentative, but in several cases I will offer evidence that commonly held critical opinions are distortions of the truth.

George Gissing wrote New Grub Street during the period between the Victorian era and the modern age. Chapter I is a general survey of the factors which contributed to the transitional character of the late nineteenth century. I felt it advisable to go over this familiar ground (with references to how Gissing reacted, in his early novels and in New Grub Street, to the pressures of the time) because an awareness of these elements is necessary when reading my later chapters in order to understand why and how Gissing is a transitional novelist, and why and how New Grub Street is a transitional novel.

Chapter II is a biography of Gissing which should have some intrinsic interest. If one keeps in mind the

general outline of his milieu as described in Chapter I, the events of his life implicitly suggest the reasons why he became the kind of transitional novelist he did become.

New Grub Street is not primarily an autobiographical novel (though many critics think it is), and my references to it in Chapter II are intended to prove that the novel relates to Gissing's life subjectively more than factually. These references point up the tendency, beginning in Gissing's time and becoming increasingly common in the twentieth century, for novelists to record their own subjective experiences of life--which may or may not include specific autobiographical detail--in their fiction.

Chapter III is a criticism, both historical and aesthetic, as a transitional novel and as a work of art.

Chapter IV is a discussion of literary trends and authors which are usually cited as having influenced Gissing in writing the novel. Rather than emphasizing his debt to others, I think the significant fact is how he shaped these sources to his own use. This chapter shows how he differed from Dickens and Eliot, the principle Victorian influences upon his work, how he assimilated some--but only some--characteristics of the fiction currently being written by continental writers, and how he eventually arrived at his own theory about the art of fiction.

Chapter V is a final brief evaluation of New Grub Street.

CHAPTER I: BACKGROUND

An admittedly second-rank novel such as George Gissing's New Grub Street can be interesting when considered solely on its artistic merits; however, an investigation of its place in the overall scheme of the novel's history immeasurably increases its interest. From the genre's inception in the eighteenth century, there is a steady pattern of progress--a perfecting of a craft--which culminates in the Great Victorian novel. Then, after a period of transition, the modern or twentieth-century novel develops in all its bewildering complexity and diversity. New Grub Street is a fine example of what appeared between the Victorian novel with its analysis of social problems, its broad appeal, and its rigid conventions, and the modern novel, which is more personal in viewpoint, limited in appeal, and varied in form. Before analyzing this transitional work, I want to survey briefly the high Victorian novel and the general conditions of its period, since change becomes understandable only as its causes are understood.

The full force of the industrial revolution was felt in England in the first third of the nineteenth century, and the entire hundred years reflects its impact. The Victorian Age roughly parallels Victoria's reign from 1837 to

1901, although 1832 is a more accurate beginning date, since the Reform Bill of that year gave political power to the middle class. This era was one of unprecedented growth in material prosperity, expansion of trade, industry, education, modes of transportation and communication, progress in science, extension of empire, gradual social reform, and flourishing arts. "Progress" was the diety of the age and the capitalists its high priests. But the rate of progress was too rapid not to have dangerous side effects. The prevailing mood of optimism became increasingly uneasy as stubborn sores appeared on the body politic. This uneasiness was often masked by an almost fanatic adherence to conformity and decorum in thought and manners--especially among the burgeoning middle class, the class most affected by all this change. It is a truism that materialism must take its toll of idealism in life and art, and the attack upon this adoration of Mammon took widely varying forms, such as reformatory Chartism or reactionary Neo-paganism, in widely divergent areas of life.

The shift from an agricultural to an industrial society, and increasing mobility precipitated a too hasty urbanization, with its attendant poverty, crime, and general rootlessness. The frantic pace of industrial activity led to execrable working conditions and water and air pollution. Most Englishmen quieted their social consciences by accepting a comfortable if vague compromise between utilitarianism

and evangelicism. The lassiez-faire theory of economics was applied in all areas of life to make the guiding principle "the greatest good for the greatest number." If this system created misfortune for a minority, they could be ministered to by those of the evangelical persuasion who practised personal piety, good will, and good works.

A certain amount of hypocrisy in religion is probably inevitable in any age, and the compatibility of evangelicism and utilitarianism made it more palatable in this era, but Darwin's scientific theories (Origin of the Species, 1859) shook the very foundations of orthodox Christianity. If man is merely a cog in the machine of nature, wherein lies his individuality?--and certainly the worth of the individual was a belief dear to the heart of Protestant, nearly democratic England. What happens to transcendentalism, a popular philosophy, if man's actions are explainable in terms of heredity and environment, and what does determinism do to the concept of a God who is actively involved in human affairs?

The best of the writers of the last two decades of the century were acutely aware of these problems and paradoxes. They attacked these difficulties with a vigor and forthrightness even stronger than those they had inherited from their predecessors, the "Great Victorian" novelists. By mid-century the novel had become, in great measure owing

to Sir Walter Scott's and Dickens' work, the most popular and influential literary form. Because of the increase in literacy, Dickens, Eliot, and Thackery had a mass audience. This huge audience, liberally peopled with "Mrs. Grundys," was largely middle-class, and asked certain things of its novelists, many of whom were extravagantly revered. The readers wished to be entertained and they wished to be edified; they wished to be assured that their values were sound and their optimism justified. Realism, that is stories about "real" people with "real" problems, was in demand, for people hoped it could help them deal with the bewildering complexities of life. They begged for a didacticism which would still their vague disquiet without disturbing the _status quo_. Thus, the writer had to compromise between his artistic vision and the demands of a public which had forced him into a position of responsibility.

Actually, most of the literary giants were reasonably content to operate within the established framework of their society; they were more interested in improvement and reform than in radical change. They explored ethical, social, and psychological problems in a manner neither wholly realistic nor wholly romantic. They might raise moral questions and pose social problems, but one recognizes an implicit acceptance of the worth of empire, race and country, and social stratification. They were not

genuinely democratic in attitude, for while they sympathized with the poor working man's plight, they often felt he should not forcefully act to better himself, but should wait to be helped by enlightened members of the upper classes. W. C. Frierson thinks that representative novels show a "preoccupation with spiritual values and free will, and a tendency to look on the sunny side of doubt as well as life."[1] Abel Chevalley has rather shrewdly, if uncharitably, assessed the high Victorian novel as having a "predominance of a moral point of view; regard for respectability; the union of fiction and edification; the divorce of the realities that are 'beneficent' from those that are not; an abundance that was sometimes soggy, disregard of truth in itself and for itself; show-window sensibility, and _gemüthlichkeit_ flowers in every exhibit."[2] Dickens is the glaring exception to these general statements concerning the bulk of Victorian fiction. However, the ultra-radical views implicit in his work were unobserved by the majority of his huge audience. In contrast, Gissing did perceive what the earlier writer was about and, especially in his own early proletarian novels, sought to follow in Dickens' direction, but in a more simplistic manner, by stripping

[1]William C. Frierson, _The English Novel in Transition, 1885-1940_ (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1942), p. 4.

[2]Abel Chevalley, _The Modern English Novel_, trans. Ben Ray Redman (New York, 1925), p. 73.

away all camouflaging devices such as humor, picturesqueness, sentimentality, and symbolism.

Most Victorian novels were not, in the first instance, subjective, but had, in Fielding's tradition, a wide social scope, as in Thackeray's and Trollope's work, though Dickens and Eliot were capable of close, penetrating psychological analysis. Jane Austen's kind of realistic novel of manners evolved into the serious novel of purpose, of which Eliot was the leading exponent. Her example was of inestimable value to many post-Victorians such as Galsworthy and Gissing who wrote "problem novels." Lionel Stevenson sees Eliot's Middlemarch as a "microcosm of the Victorian age, showing the disturbing encroachment of unorthodox new ideas upon doctrines and ways of life that seemed impregnable."[3] This clear-sighted awareness, her moral earnestness, and her unerring psychological insight prove her a harbinger of things to come, but she was no hot-eyed revolutionary. The legacy she bequeathed was indirectly diffused in the last quarter of the century; Thomas Hardy and George Meredith were the first overt and public iconoclasts among the great English novelists.

Hardy was willing to forego felicity of style in his eagerness to present his pessimistic, deterministic view of life. The structure of his novels is conventionally

[3]Lionel Stevenson, The English Novel: a Panorama (Boston, 1960), p. 382.

Victorian, but the stark realism with which he illustrated his fatalistic philosophy is distinctly modern. Meredith, too, rejected traditional religious and social values, but maintained a firm faith that an educated intellect could put man in harmony with Nature, the wisest arbiter. His style is brilliant, esoteric, experimental, and unique, but not, probably for these very reasons, widely influential. What is important, and becomes steadily more so, is that he was the first English novelist to proclaim publically that he took his work seriously, both morally and aesthetically, as art; he discarded the concept of the novel as merely a vehicle for entertainment or the dissemination of ideas. Naturally, Hardy and Meredith did not win instant public acclaim, in fact the result was the reverse, but the crop of young writers emerging in the eighties looked upon them with great esteem as courageous innovators. The new writers might not follow directly in their footsteps, but they recognized that these two had invaded virgin territory and cleared new paths.[4]

When discussing the birth or death of literary trends, dates are necessarily arbitrary. The traditional Victorian novel did not abruptly cease to exist in 1880,

[4]Gissing particularly admired Meredith, but the two novels most influenced by the older man (Isabel Clarendon, 1886, and A Life's Morning, 1888) are not very good because he lacked the graceful style to make them charming and the knowledge of upper-class country life to make them convincing.

but from that time on, change, much of it already incipient as we have seen, becomes ever more rapid, drastic, and obvious. Harold Williams thinks that the major changes are an improvement in technique, mainly derived from foreign movements, and the fact that the authors take themselves and their work seriously.[5] But this is only part of the picture and deals too narrowly with literature as a craft; he omits a study of ideological concerns. These last two decades of the century are characterized, both in life and literature, by a lack of accepted social verities and a search for new ones. Many of the writers of the time exemplify this by their impatience with corrective measures; they wish to raze and then to rebuild without restraints of any kind.

There were many factors, some acute, some chronic, which contributed to the demise of the old convictions, manners, and methods. Economic setbacks in the eighties shook the belief of many that capitalism had "been ordained by God."[6] The grumblings of working men grew louder despite the efforts of "do-gooders" to help them as individuals. Established precepts were crumbling; for example, scientific

[5]Harold Williams, Modern English Writers: Being a Study of Imaginative Literature, 1890-1914, 3rd ed. (London, 1925), p. 291.

[6]Granville Hicks, Figures of Transition (New York, 1939), p. 66.

findings forced a reassessment of religion. The doubt of the mid-century had trickled further down into the lower orders.

One factor, so obvious it is often overlooked, is that the major Victorian novelists had died or were virtually silent; the young men who replaced them had new problems to face, or tackled old ones with new perspectives. Their youth, of course, contributed to their rebelliousness and sharpened their desire to venture into new areas; this attitude was also abetted by the example of continental writers who were doing some startling things. The Compulsory Education Law of 1870 had so enlarged the reading audience and created so many semi-literates that no one writer could hope to appeal to everyone. In 1850 there was _one_ audience for novels, in 1880 _several_. If a novelist were ignored by most readers, he must justify his efforts in some way. He began to see himself as a dedicated artist doing purposeful work, and this lent some glory to his alienation from the mainstream of society. Like Meredith, he might consciously choose to write for a limited audience. This was the beginning of the real split between the artist and society, at least so far as the novelist is concerned.

As the reasons precipitating change were many and varied, so the change itself resulted in a confusion and profusion of types, forms, aims, attitudes, and movements

in literature. Some broad currents in thought and literature can be pointed out, but it must be remembered that they were interdependent, interrelated, and overlapping in the novel as well as in other types of literature and other forms of art. First was the obsession with ideas, as in William Morris and Shaw. Frierson notes that authors found themselves involved with ideas concerning "material details of human enterprise, the influence of circumstances upon individuals and classes, the mixture of qualities which make personality, the problem of fulfillment."[7] The "problem novel" was the natural mode of expression for all this, and "it reflected the ever-expanding controversies over religious belief, the bases of morality, the status of women, and other fundamental matters, wherein accepted axioms were being challenged and overturned. Earnest authors depicted equally earnest characters making momentous decisions over their creeds."[8] George Gissing, Samuel Butler, and their contemporaries balked at slavish submission to the middle-class ethic; they refused to close their eyes to the realities of poverty, sex, hypocrisy, science--indeed, to any area of life--and they insisted on the right to be realistic in their writing.

Second, the most extreme reaction to the decorum of

[7]Frierson, p. 15.

[8]Stevenson, p. 397.

Victorianism found expression in the decadent or "art for art's sake" movement whose typical representatives were Aubrey Beardsley in art and Oscar Wilde in fiction. These sophisticated fin-de-siècle artists were tired of political and social controversies, and Wilde's novel, The Picture of Dorian Grey, illustrates what Chevalley calls the sterile attitude of cynical, elegant, and falsely superior detachment"[9] which they adopted. While admittedly over-refined and superficial, their outlook is valuable when juxtaposed with others. This strict concern for beauty is balanced by the opinion and practice of writers like H. G. Wells, who predicted that fiction, and in particular the novel, would eventually exist solely for propaganda purposes.[10] Akin to the aesthetic movement, but more serious, was the idea, begun with Meredith and reaching its acme in Henry James, that the novel is a valid art form and its perfection as such should be striven for. This search for aesthetic perfection led to writings which dealt for the first time exclusively with the critical theory on the novel.

Finally, there was the foreign influence upon English literature. The example of Scandinavian drama, as in Ibsen's plays about marriage, quickened interest in

[9]Chevalley, p. 77-78.

[10]Harold Williams, p. 294.

social problems. The Russian novelists, particularly Dostoievsky and Turgeniev, also had an awareness that scrutinized the entire social framework, and they strengthened the idea that novelists were not mere entertainers.

About mid-century, Flaubert, the French genius, combined the traditions of Balzac and Dumas to produce his masterpiece, Madame Bovary (1857), which united realism, superb artistic form, and important ideas.[11] His later followers, particularly Zola, de Maupassant, and the de Goncourt brothers, developed his realism (though they often unfortunately ignored his insistence on beauty of style) into Naturalism. This movement had an immediate and spectacular effect on English literature which I will discuss more fully in Chapter IV since this trend did have an influence on Gissing.

British writers envied the French their freedom in expression and in choice of subject matter, yet only one novelist, George Moore, was a faithful and exact follower of French naturalistic practice. The other English authors deviated from the French mode in diverse ways for diverse reasons. The late Victorian reading public simply would not tolerate certain forbidden subjects no matter how discreetly described. In 1885 Gissing was blasted in a grossly unfair editorial in Punch for even hinting that

[11] Stevenson, p. 335.

Thackeray, a national institution, might have compromised his artistic integrity by bowing to "Mrs. Grundy's" demand for decorum. Gissing's early novels were risky ventures for publishers, since they were criticized for dealing with unpleasant subjects, frankly discussed. Henry Vizetelly was fined in 1888 and actually imprisoned in 1889 for publishing translations of Zola's work. Hardy's Tess (1891) outraged thousands because of the author's "subversive" views about the universe and sex.

The hindrance of free expression was regretable. Though the situation gradually improved, the temperament and aims of most English writers would have dictated modification of the French manner anyway. The grounds for disapproval and disagreement with the strict naturalists ranged, depending on the author, from their brutality of language and moral indifference to their insistence on the artist's detachment. However, the English did appreciate the discarding of taboos and the fact that everyday life could be interesting even when viewed objectively and honestly. Naturalism, says Frierson, "established the importance of a logical sequence of events, even while it revealed to its partisans the limits of a dogmatic determinism."[12]

English writers did not care to be mere recorders of data, and by natural inclination they leaned toward

[12] Frierson, p. xiii.

realism rather than toward naturalism. They wished to be true to the laws of nature and of dramatic necessity in the portion of life they chose to picture, but this is not the same kind of truth which a scientific study demands. Still, according to Frierson, however it was altered, the French movement did help form "new standards of critical judgment; it focused attention upon the moral and social framework of contemporary society; it stimulated interest in a critical examination of human nature and suggested a wide and fresh range of human experience as subject for investigation."[13]

Gissing's early novels are a virtual sounding board for many of the forces, literary and social, that were at work in his environment. The crowding of so many ideas, impressions, and opinions into his work is at the expense of craftmanship, and not until he wrote New Grub Street had he matured enough to put art above thesis. But putting aside aesthetic judgments, it is interesting to note a few of the trends, issues, and influences which these early novels reflect.

Workers in the Dawn (1880), Gissing's first novel, is a poor imitation of Dickens in humor, character, and plot, but its unsparing picture of London slum life is naturalistic rather than picturesque. The five proletarian

[13] Ibid., p. 47.

novels written before New Grub Street all share this unstinting depiction of the lower classes, of eternally stunted men hopeless in their poverty. Though, in the French naturalistic manner, he viewed the slum dwellers themselves as dispassionately as a scientist does his specimens, Gissing unmistakably indicted the industrial society that allowed the growth of hideous slums. One of these novels, Demos, about the evils resulting from too rapid urbanization, created a stir because it appeared in 1886, the same year that riots occured in London.

Unlike most of his Victorian predecessors, Gissing had enough first-hand knowledge of the consequences of a materialistic society to reject any attempts to reform society from within. In his novels he scoffed at ideas of humanitarian reform, at schemes to educate the masses (particularly in Thyrza, 1887), and at religious "do-gooders." (It is consistent that Gissing did not believe in a personal god; in fact, Christianity has no place in his writing at all.) He even became skeptical of socialism as a remedy because he felt, as Jacob Korg puts it, that "poverty of the poor debases them beyond remedy and makes them incapable of the self-rule that democratic socialism proposes to grant them."[14] As early as The Unclassed (1883), Gissing advocated personal self-exile from society

[14]Jacob Korg, George Gissing: A Critical Biography (Seattle, Wash., 1963), p. 84.

instead of attempts to reform it. He said over and over through his idealized heroes that an artistic, highly-principled man could maintain his idealism only by divorcing himself from the mainstream of a commercial society.

Gissing despised the hypocritical conventionality of the middle class. He sympathized with the battle of Wilde's group of aesthetes against censorship and decorum (and incidentally approved their enthusiasm for Art and Beauty), although he thought their writing and manner of life precious. In Gissing's own novel The Emancipated (1889), H. G. Wells noted "the more or less complete release from religious and moral restraints of a number of typical characters."[15]

Many of these same topics appear in New Grub Street, but whereas the previous novels suffered from overt didacticism and a tone of personal bitterness, Gissing here achieves his effect alternately by implication and by objectivity. There are comments on many phases of English life, such as the status of women, the condition of city slums, the attitude toward divorce, the results of semi-literacy, or the problems of marriage, but usually these comments seem a natural outgrowth of a given character's

[15] H. G. Wells, "The Novels of Mr. George Gissing," Contemporary Review, August 1897, printed as Appendix C in George Gissing and H. G. Wells, ed. Royal A. Gettman (Urbana, Ill., 1961), p. 246. Hereafter referred to as Wells, Appendix C, "The Novels."

personality, experience, or situation. More importantly, New Grub Street is a culmination both in power and style of presentation, of the two major themes running throughout Gissing's work. The first is the effect of the lack of money or the desire for money in an urban, industrial, materialistic society. The second is the relationship of an idealistic, educated, fairly-bred but penniless young man or woman--usually an artist--to this same pitiless society. Such a character is forced into a conflict between integrity and expediency and must make great sacrifices if he is to retain his individuality. These themes did not appear in fiction before Gissing's time because such problems hardly existed. It is his realistic presentation of this conflict which marks Gissing as a man of his time, and as a man ahead of his time.

CHAPTER II: BIOGRAPHY

Virginia Woolf criticized George Gissing for being "one of those imperfect novelists through whose books one sees the life of the author faintly covered by the lives of the fictitious people. With such writers we establish a personal rather than an artistic relationship. We approach them through their lives as much as through their work."[1] The most common criticism leveled at Gissing is that his work is too autobiographical; so astute a critic as Virginia Woolf would hardly have condemned him without good reason. The criticism is particularly applicable to his earlier work in which intelligent, well-educated, but poor heroes, like Waymark in The Unclassed, struggle against their heartless environment. Events in Gissing's own life are only thinly disguised, and the author too often intrudes to pontificate on various subjects such as the education of the masses or the status of women. Gissing could not attain proper distance; the novels are blighted by an obvious sympathy for, or identification with, these idealized young men coupled with an intensely personal bitterness toward society at large.

[1]Virginia Woolf, The Second Common Reader (New York, 1932), p. 238.

Even if his autobiographical penchant mars these books aesthetically, it is interesting as an example of a phenomenon which appeared in the late nineteenth century and remained evident in the next century. As the artist found himself increasingly at odds with his milieu, he relied more and more on his individual consciousness as a guide rather than upon society's values. A preoccupation with one's own perceptions, one's own physical and mental experiences is apparent in such important novels as Samuel Butler's The Way of All Flesh, Somerset Maugham's Of Human Bondage, and D. H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers.

By the time Gissing wrote New Grub Street he had matured as an artist and this book is not flawed by the autobiographical references, for he had learned to integrate his own experience with imagination. The characters have fully realized identities of their own and the personality of the author is not overly obtrusive. I have included references to the novel in this review of his life because they are interesting and illuminating, and because they reveal the way in which he shaped his own experience for fictional use.

Granted that the novel is not a fictionalized account of Gissing's life, it would still be helpful for the reader, in order to appreciate fully the quoted material from the book, to know the broad lines of similarity between Gissing and Edmund Reardon, the protagonist of New Grub

Street. Like Gissing, Reardon is an erudite and talented young novelist. A combination of marital woes, poverty, lack of public recognition, and poor health turn them both into embittered men. The details and the outcomes of the fictional and the real situations are different--sometimes radically so--but the motives, reactions, and personalities of Gissing and Reardon are much alike. To a lesser degree, some other characters, like the querulous, bookish Yule, reflect facets of Gissing's nature, but it is the kinship with Reardon which is most fully delineated, and the one which I will most often allude to in the following biographical sketch.

New Grub Street is, of course, unique in detail, but it contains general transitional characteristics which serve to illustrate the overall transitional kind of novel. Similarly, Gissing's life, while the incidents were unique, contained experiences and resultant attitudes which at least implicitly typify many of his contemporaries in the literary world. If one keeps in mind the environment in which the late nineteenth-century novelists found themselves, the following account of how one of them reacted to his milieu should lead to a better understanding of others among them, such as George Moore and H. G. Wells.

George Gissing occupies a solid position in the second rank of nineteenth-century novelists. This qualified success was achieved only after he had spoiled an

auspicious beginning which promised a brilliant career as a scholar and teacher. Success came too late to prevent his change from a zealous young student and social rebel to an embittered, alienated, and prematurely old man by the time of his death at forty-six.

As did H. G. Wells, modern psychologists would probably attribute much of the ill-luck which constantly plagued him to his early family environment.[2] "The truth was that nature had endowed them [his family] with a larger share of brains than was common in their circle, and had added that touch of pride which harmonised so ill with the restrictions of poverty." (33)[3] Gissing's father, Thomas Waller Gissing, was a pharmaceutical chemist in Wakefield in Yorkshire. Although a tradesman who lodged his family in rooms above the shop, the elder Gissing had intellectual pretensions which made him scornful of his peers. He was an accomplished amateur botanist, and accumulated an unusually good library for one in his position. Dickens and Hogarth held the rank of major household gods, and, later, their influence was

[2]H. G. Wells, "George Gissing: An Impression," Monthly Review, August 1904, printed as Appendix D in George Gissing and H. G. Wells, ed. Royal A. Gettman (Urbana, Ill., 1961), p. 261-64. Hereafter referred to as Wells, Appendix D, "An Impression."

[3]All numbers in parentheses in my text refer to page numbers in: George Gissing, New Grub Street, ed. with introduction by Irving Howe (Boston: Riverside Press, 1962).

strong on Gissing's work. As his own education progressed along solid classical lines, it may be that the boy realized that his beloved and respected father was not really so learned and that his parent's knowledge was superficial. The family's lower middle-class status was a fact not to be changed by any pretense or rationalization. Whatever feelings of disappointment in his father he may have felt were quickly smothered, but they must have left their mark on a nature given to ambivalent feelings.

These same conflicting emotions were present in his attitude toward his mother, who held herself aloof from her neighbors. She was a shallow, rather stupid woman, and he later in his works came to despise and decry her outlook, though he was unable to obliterate its traces from his own mind. George remained a dutiful son, though he saw as little of her as possible after he once left home.

Thomas Gissing died in 1870 before his three sons and two daughters had really begun their schooling. George, thirteen and the eldest child, realized with terrifying clarity the truth of his father's dictum that only through education could he better his position. And now he must do it alone. Mabel Donnelly considers these four qualities the most important legacy Thomas Gissing left his son: ambition, a love of learning, a "fervent distrust of the mass of men," and a strict moral judgment not based on

religion.[4]

George was sent to Lindow Grove, a Quaker school, where he threw all his energy into scholarship. According to Wells, he was soon acknowledged a prodigy, and so strenuous was his labor that he had little time left for his schoolmates.[5] In 1872 he won a first in the local Oxford examinations, which entitled him to an exhibition (that is, free tuition for three sessions) at Owens College in Manchester.

At Owens, his efforts were so rigorous that they damaged his health and precluded almost any contact with his fellows, though he won many prizes and honors. It was generally agreed that Gissing would move through Oxford to a fine career as a classical scholar and teacher. Instead, in 1876, he utterly destroyed his prospects by being caught stealing from the common room at college.

He had met Marianne Helen Harrison, a sixteen-year-old Manchester girl who had been driven to prostitution by poverty. After having spent what little money he had for her benefit, Gissing resorted to petty theft in order to keep her off the streets. In later years, his critics and friends either glossed over this incident or dismissed it

[4]Mabel C. Donnelly, George Gissing: Grave Comedian (Cambridge, Mass., 1954), p. 17.

[5]Wells, Appendix D, "An Impression," p. 263.

as a youthful indiscretion, but surely his motives bear some scrutiny because they point up essential aspects of his character.

As is often the case when one commits a violently uncharacteristic act, there were probably several contributing factors. First of all, he was only a boy of seventeen who lived alone in the large bustling commercial city of Manchester; the college seemed to take no interest in its students outside the classroom. Young George seriously overworked himself, but was still beset by loneliness and had only a few scattered friends to whom to turn. Certainly, there was no older and wiser guide, such as a father, to counsel him about awakening and compelling sexual urges. He was increasingly aware that he lived in a rigid society which condemned him to the lower middle-class, despite learning and temperament which might entitle him to better things. This was the same brutal, indifferent, materialistic system which victimized his beauteous "Nell" Harrison. Ignoring the indications in her personality of an actual liking for prostitution, he determined to save Nell from the gutter--and to the devil with society's hypocrisies. Several critics have pointed out the similarity of the misguided idealism and self-interest of Gissing's crime to Raskolnikov's, and Morley Roberts, the only friend both at the time and later to leave any record of the incident,

attests to the fact that Gissing felt no remorse for the actual crime.[6] The novelist himself left no written comment on the matter, but Wells says that it was the beginning of a pattern of "practical incapacity, that curious inability to do the sane, secure thing."[7]

Apparently Gissing served a short prison term, but a sum of money collected by a few sympathizers enabled him to sail to America in that same year. During a year spent in the United States, he held various odd jobs, traveled throughout the northeast and as far west as Chicago, almost starved, began his career as a writer by contributing several mediocre short stories to a Chicago newspaper, and grew gradually disillusioned with the quality of the democracy and culture he had at first so enthusiastically trumpeted in his letters home. The poor author, Whelpdale, in _New Grub Street_, faithfully recounts Gissing's adventures as his own, even to the five days in Troy, New York during which he lived entirely on peanuts (323-326).

Returning to England in the fall of 1877, he settled in London, the Mecca for the outcast, and resolved upon a literary career. During the next fourteen years, before _New Grub Street_ brought him some public recognition, Gissing

[6]Morley Roberts, _The Private Life of Henry Maitland_, ed. with introduction by Morchard Bishop (London, 1958), p. 121.

[7]Wells, Appendix D, "An Impression," p. 264.

was enmeshed in a dreary round of poverty, loneliness, domestic discord, and poor health which might have driven a less tenacious man to suicide.

In this period, lasting until the early nineties, Gissing showed a positive genius for becoming entangled with unsuitable women. Helen, the girl for whom he had stolen, came to live with him shortly after he arrived in London, and he married her in 1879. Her serious illnesses and her frequent lapses into alcoholism and streetwalking were a drain on his emotional and financial resources. He finally left her in 1883, but continued to pay her ten shillings a week--a meaningful sum in those days of his penury--until her death in 1888. On that occasion Gissing showed his characteristic ambivalent feelings. Roberts hints that he felt relief at regaining his freedom, but was plagued by an obviously undeserved guilt for her wasted life.[8] Only two years later, his inability to endure the life of a celibate led him to court Edith Underwood, an unattractive, uneducated girl of the lower working class, whose shrewishness later amounted almost to insanity. He married her in 1891 and remained with her until 1897, staying that long only for the sake of his two sons. Jacob Korg maintains that it was because of a masochistic impulse composed of "self-pity and resentment" that Gissing entered

[8]Roberts, p. 56.

into what he knew was a disastrous union.[9] This is possible, but only a surmise. Roberts, again the only first-hand observer, and Gissing's own letters give a less complicated reason. He simply wanted a warm body in the house--one to serve his sexual and housekeeping needs and to act as a buffer against the incredible loneliness he endured. Though at first he convinced himself that she was passable enough and wrote New Grub Street easily and rapidly during the early stages of their courtship, Edith was clearly no ideal mate.[10] His comments to Roberts and letters to Eduard Bertz reveal the real reason that he dared not set his sights higher. According to Roberts he lived in continual

[9]Korg, Critical Biography, p. 153.

[10]Though a happily infatuated man when he wrote the book, there is this startling passage in New Grub Street. One can only guess if this uncanny presage of the pattern his own marriage was to take was conscious or not. Biffen is replying to Reardon's optimistic view of a struggling author's marriage to a nice "work-girl."

> Let me sketch the true issue of such a marriage. To begin with, the girl would have married you in firm persuasion that you were a 'gentleman' in temporary difficulties, and that before long you would have plenty of money to dispose of. Disappointed in this hope, she would have grown sharp-tempered, querulous, selfish. All your endeavors to make her understand you would only have resulted in widening the impassable gulf. She would have misconstrued your every sentence, found food for suspicion in every harmless joke, tormented you with the vulgarest forms of jealousy. The effect upon your nature would have been degrading. In the end, you must have abandoned every effort to raise her to your own level, and either have sunk to hers or make a rupture. (304)

dread that his past would be exposed, and he could neither confess to a lady nor think of submitting her to the disgrace of exposure.[11] As he wrote to Bertz, "marriage, in the best sense, is impossible, owing to my insufficient income; educated English girls _will_ not face poverty in marriage. . .I know that my danger, if I become connected with a tolerable girl of low position is very great: I am weak in these matters."[12] One hears echoes of these unhappy affairs in _New Grub Street_ and many of the other novels, especially those written before the mid-nineties. His vivid sketches of unpleasant and unhappy women bear the stamp of painful first-hand knowledge, while some of his idealized "good" women represent a type Gissing thought _must_ exist but did not feel himself worthy of searching out.

He continued his early habits of overwork (voluntary) and undereating (involuntary) which undermined his health. Wells and Roberts hint that he had a tendency toward hypochondria. A sensitivity which allowed weather changes, unexpected visitors, or petty quarrels with landlords to interfere seriously with work suggests the egocentric, morbid, and failure-fearing nature that tends toward hypochondria. Like Reardon, "the slightest interruption of the

[11]Roberts, p. 121.

[12]George Gissing, _The Letters of George Gissing to Eduard Bertz, 1887-1903_, ed. Arthur C. Young (New Brunswick, N.J., 1961), p. 112.

order for the time being put him out of gear" (103). Still, most of his poor health was real enough. Again like Reardon, he suffered some bad seasons. "March winds made an invalid of him; at one time he was threatened with bronchitis, and for several days had to abandon even the effort to work. In previous winters he had been wont to undergo a good deal of martyrdom from the London climate, but never in such a degree as now; mental illness seemed to have enfeebled his body" (157). His two friends also report that Gissing had a naturally fine physique that he treated unfairly by leading a purely sedentary life. Indeed, he was a handsome man with fine features, light blue eyes, a flourishing moustache, and long reddish-brown hair (of which he was rather vain) combed straight back from a high forehead.

If these years were full of personal discomfort and unhappiness, they nevertheless form the most fruitful part of the author's life in other aspects. It was a period of intellectual growth and change resulting in the crystallization of certain ideas and attitudes that thereafter changed little during the remainder of his life. He gradually broadened his pitifully small group of acquaintances; the most lasting of these friendships were in literary circles. The nine novels he wrote before 1892 are considered his finest work; among his later efforts, only _The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft_, a rambling, largely autobiograph-

ical essay, By the Ionian Sea, a series of charming travel sketches, and a critical work on Dickens, have won much acclaim.

For several years after his return from America, Gissing lived in utter destitution. He roamed the slums of London, and his observations left him forever convinced that the degrading effect of poverty on all its victims was inevitable and inexorable. He was often genuinely hungry, and we may be sure that Biffen's meals of pease pudding or bread and drippings (176) were sometimes Gissing's own fare. Wells notes that he often spoke disparagingly of those authors who had never starved.[13] He once lived in sight of Marylebone workhouse and could never escape the fear of ending up there. Reardon remarked to Biffen, as Gissing often did to Roberts, "I have a horror of the workhouse. Remember the clock at Marylebone I used to tell you about" (314).

When George turned twenty-one, he received a £500 legacy (of which he realized about £300) left by his father. Most of it was spent on the publication of his first novel, Workers in the Dawn, which came out in 1880 and brought him no money and little fame, but did call him to the attention of John Morley, a magazine editor, and of Frederic Harrison, a lawyer and liberal reformer.

[13]Wells, Appendix D, "An Impression," p. 265.

During 1878 and 1879, Gissing, who had working-class relatives in London, had frequented a workingmen's club in Paddington. The lectures he heard there interested him in social issues. Already an agnostic, he was quite attracted to Auguste Comte's Positivism, or "religion of humanity," that sought to develop a social theory based exclusively on secular and scientific sanctions. The reflection of these views in that first rather crude novel, Workers in the Dawn, won the approval of Harrison, an ardent and well-to-do Positivist. Gissing was engaged to tutor his sons, and was sometimes invited to his home as a guest.

Morley sent a few journalistic assignments his way, and this profession offered him a livelihood, but he declined, feeling it unworthy of a dedicated artist. Reardon defends this same principle to his wife Amy. "...it isn't only for the sake of reputation that one tries to do uncommon work. There's the shrinking from conscious insincerity of workmanship" (45). Also, Gissing soon began to accept only a few pupils whose fees were enough simply to keep him alive. He preferred to write, or to read in the British Museum. Like Reardon,

> his intellectual temper was that of the student, the scholar, but strongly blended with a love of independence which had always made him think with distaste of a teacher's life...What a blessed refuge it was, there under the great dome, when he must else have sat in his windy garret with the mere pretence of a fire! The Reading-room was his true home; its warmth enwrapped him kindly; the

> peculiar odour of its atmosphere--at first a cause of headache--grew dear and delightful to him. (50)

Writing was an arduous task because he wished to be a meticulous craftsman and doggedly worked, and re-worked, and often destroyed whole volumes he considered second-rate, even though they might be "good enough for the market" (41) --which Amy insists should be good enough for the perfectionist Reardon.

In 1884, Mrs. Gaussen, a wealthy and literary lady, introduced him into her impressive circle. Gissing was attracted to the good life, and desperately wanted ease and graciousness in his own, but the stark contrast of his existence with that of his relatively affluent friends made him eventually give them up. His fragmented relationships with several different worlds--none of them compatible--were more than he could bear, for "he was not so fierce a fire as to burn all kinds of fuel."[14] Retreat into near isolation was the only path he could take, for circumstances had done their damage on his prideful but weak nature. He lived with his dilemma because "his disposition was the reverse of democratic, and he could not make acquaintances below his own intellectual level" (50). Though alienated from his embarrassingly low-class London relatives, he felt inferior in many social situations because of his

[14]Roberts, p. 152.

birth, his poverty, his early crime, and, at different times, both his wives; yet he yearned to "belong." (It seems strange, but quite English, that one who had such a low opinion of others should care so much about what they thought of him.) Gissing was afraid of being patronized and of having his past exposed, and while he knew that success would nullify all his faults, he was unable "to make the compromises with principle necessary for achieving popularity."[15]

The failure of his novels and his loss of any reforming zeal probably dictated the change of his attitude toward his work. His personal bias, and the effects of continued poverty he witnessed on himself and others, made him reject Positivism or other perfectionist theories as hopelessly inadequate. The ideal of art became his ultimate goal, and he turned into the lonely, misunderstood, unappreciated, but noble and sensitive artist, like many of the protagonists in his novels. Certainly there is an element of self-pity in this role, but Gissing was like a rubber band that had been stretched too many times. Amy's evaluation of Reardon applies equally to their creator: "Difficulties crush you, instead of rousing you to struggle" (42). This once enthusiastic champion of social rebellion felt that he no longer had the vigor to enter the

[15]Korg, p. 71.

lists. He must remain detached and remote in his life and work.

Comments from some of the letters to his family during the mid-eighties indicate that he was attempting to build a protective wall between himself and the rest of humanity. "When I am able to summon any enthusiasm at all, it is only for Art--how I laughed the other day on recalling your amazement at my theories of Art for Art's sake! Well, I cannot get beyond it. Human life has little interest to me, on the whole--save as material for artistic presentation. I can get savage over social iniquities, but even then my rage at once takes the direction of planning revenge in artistic work" (June 12, 1884). "Keep apart, keep apart, and preserve one's soul alive--that is the teaching for the day. It is ill to have been born in these times, but one can make a world within the world" (September 22, 1885). "But the majority of mankind have to seek their comfort in forgetfulness rather than in any positive good" (August 25, 1887).[16]

It is misleading, however, to imply that Gissing existed in a perpetual state of unmitigated misery; rather, the pattern of his life was cyclical. His behavior consisted of "exhilaration followed by depression, gregarious-

[16]George Gissing, Letters of George Gissing to Members of His Family, collected and arranged by Algernon and Ellen Gissing (London, 1931), p. 139, , and p. 199.

ness followed by scorn of the herd."[17] Wells felt that as a writer, "periods of far too intense literary activity would alternate with phases of exhaustion."[18] Reardon's plight mirrors his own. "Sometimes the three hours' labour of a morning resulted in half a dozen lines, corrected into illegibility. His brain would not work; he could not recall the simplest synonyms; intolerable faults of composition drove him mad" (103).

A Freudian psychologist might conclude that this man showed the tendencies of a hypochondriac, a manic-depressive, and a masochist. Total and unrelieved wretchedness can make a man an inhuman monster; Gissing's happiness in a few simple pleasures make him almost painfully human. For example, he was quite close to his brothers and sisters and always felt responsible for them. He delighted in the joys of fatherhood. His pleasure in books was nearly as sensuous as that in good food (probably because he could rarely afford either).

Also, while never a popular novelist, Gissing did earn a solid reputation among a limited group and achieved firm friendships with such men as George Meredith and H. G. Wells. Morley Roberts was a fast friend from boyhood and remained so until his death, as did the German, Eduard

[17] Donnelly, p. 21.

[18] Wells, Appendix D, "An Impression," p. 268.

Bertz, whom he met in 1880. (His correspondence with Bertz is the frankest record which Gissing left of his life and thought.) The sums paid by publishers for his books gradually increased, though his financial position, like his health, was never robust.

His earnings did enable him to take occasional trips to the Continent from 1889 on. These trips, while a source of great delight in themselves, served to deepen Gissing's dissatisfaction with the state of things in England. (The same thing happened to Reardon.) His broadened horizons and changing perspective made a continuance of his preoccupation with the lower class impossible; he was bored with it, he had all but exhausted the subject. In the following novels, he turned to the middle class, and while he often touched on social issues, such as the status of women, it was with a milder, more worldly tone than his former fiery and bitter one.

The novelist's devotion to the classics was the one enduring pleasure of his life. The Sunday evenings Biffen and Reardon spend reading and scanning Greek poetry (118) exactly correspond to those shared by Gissing and Roberts during the days of their meanest poverty. His abiding love of the past allowed him to purify the Graeco-Roman period of all dross; he thought of it as a time of reasonableness, stability, and artistic glory. Roberts

characterized him as a "child of books" who would have been perfectly happy as a classics teacher.[19] Veranilda was to be the crowning achievement of his life, but he died before this historical novel could be completed. It is not particularly good fiction, but the wealth and accuracy of its details show a real scholar's knowledge and love of the classical Roman period.

In 1898, Gissing met Gabrielle Fleury, a beautiful, well-born and educated Frenchwoman. A divorce from Edith could not be obtained, so in 1899, they moved to France and pretended to be man and wife. His letters to Bertz about this happy union prove that at last he had chosen wisely. In 1901 the couple moved to the south of France, where he died in 1903 of a respiratory illness. Although it was too late for him to be other than a rather querulous, sickly, and pessimistic man, Gissing did achieve a reasonable measure of contentment in those last years.

[19] Roberts, p. 106.

CHAPTER III: CRITICISM

New Grub Street is uniquely suited to represent the changing novel of the late Victorian period because, in a skillful fusion of style and theme, Gissing has written a novel which is transitional in structure and is at the same time about the changing milieu. The structure of the book shows the novelist in transition because, while Gissing's plot construction is traditional, his attitudes and methods of character portrayal look beyond his own time. The subject of *New Grub Street* is the change in the literary and publishing world and how those involved in this world are affected by it.

When writing *New Grub Street*, Gissing was confronted with the same problem as the book's protagonist, a struggling novelist: how to string his story out into the three volumes necessary for its publication. The man largely responsible for this "three-decker" system was Charles Edward Mudie, who developed the network of circulating libraries which all but controlled publishing from the eighteen-fifties to the mid-nineties. Publishers kept the price of books high, so that only the lending libraries (which charged borrowers a fee) could generally afford them. The publishers would rather sell a large quantity

of books at a discount to a library than risk a few at a time to individual sellers. Naturally, the libraries were chary of unknown authors or of works which might offend the tender sensibilities of the mass audience. If the author were lucky enough to be published, he was paid little and given only a small percentage of any profits. (This situation did not apply to popular writers such as Scott, Thackeray, or Trollope who could command much better terms.) One should also consider the time necessary to complete a work of well over 400 pages. With terrible injury to his health and insult to his artistry, Reardon, Gissing's protagonist in New Grub Street, works feverishly for four months to complete a three-decker for which he is paid only £75. Ironically, Gissing, an established if not popular novelist, was paid only £150 for New Grub Street.[1]

In structure, New Grub Street conforms to the

[1] Roberts, p. 129. Roberts suggests that Gissing could have gotten better terms for his novels, but settled for small sums because he was afraid the books would fail and he would get nothing. From what Milvain says, it is obvious that Gissing did at least know how one might successfully approach the publishers, but like Reardon, he was unable to do so. "Whatever he has to sell he'll get payment for it from all sorts of various quarters; none of your unpractical selling for a lump sum to a middleman who will make six distinct profits. Now, look you: if I had been in Reardon's place, I'd have made four hundred at least out of 'The Optimist'; I should have gone shrewdly to work with magazines and newspapers and foreign publishers, and--all sorts of people. 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" (8).

exigencies of the three volume system and therefore is like the traditional Victorian novel. There are digressions and evidence of padding. Similarly, the second volume of poor Reardon's last novel consists "almost entirely of laborious padding" (109). Ideas and themes are leisurely explored and incidents minutely described. Decorum of expression is strictly observed. There are several groups of characters related by blood and social proximity. The plot strands involving these characters run concurrently, but the transition from one group to another is not always smooth. Because of sheer length, a series of minor climaxes is necessary to hold the readers' interest. While Gissing does not comment in his own person from the wings like Thackeray, the author <u>is</u> intrusive; he steps in to explain motivations, reactions, and so on when he considers it necessary.

Although he himself was never able to discard the habits of this tradition, Gissing clearly saw its evils, aesthetic as well as practical. In a letter he wrote to his brother in August of 1885, he said,

> It is fine to see how the old three-volume tradition is being broken through. One volume is becoming commonest of all. It is the new school, due to continental influence. Thackeray and Dickens wrote at enormous length, and with profusion of detail; their plan is to tell everything, and leave nothing to be divined. Far more artistic, I think, is the later method, of merely suggesting; of dealing with episodes, instead of writing biographies. The old novelist was

> omniscient; 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. In fact, it approximates to the dramatic mode of presentment.[2]

The plot of _New Grub Street_ is conventional enough, and its bare bones could form the skeleton of any "ladies magazine" novel.[3] Jasper Milvain, who has repaired to London to seek his fortune, is visiting his mother and sisters, Maud and Dora, in Wattleborough. In the same neighborhood lives John Yule, a wealthy, childless widower. Among his possible heirs are his brother's widow, Mrs. Edmund Yule, who lives in London with her children, Amy and John. Also in London lives his brother, Alfred Yule, with his low-born wife and daughter Marian.

Amy, through her friend Milvain, meets Edwin Reardon soon after the publication of his first novel, _The Optimist_, when his prospects are bright. They fall deliciously in love and are shortly married. The marriage starts well, but Reardon begins to have trouble writing and selling what he does write. Neither Amy's devotion nor her appreciation of his talents is strong enough to withstand the onus of extended penny-pinching; the marriage deteriorates as rapidly as Reardon's bank account. The

[2] _Letters to His Family_, p. 166.

[3] Because of the large number of characters and incidents, a very brief summary of the main action may well serve the interests of clarity.

final break comes when Reardon takes a job as a clerk in order to feed them and their young son. Amy cannot face the humiliation of being married to a salaried person, and goes home to mother. (Gissing explains Amy's embarrassment very nicely, but I fear that an American must find it difficult if not impossible to understand these class feelings.)

Reardon's heart and will are broken, and the amount he insists on paying Amy monthly reduces his own standard of living to the bare subsistance level. There are still tender feelings on both sides, but pride keeps them apart. Finally, Amy calls him to her because their son is dying of diptheria, but Reardon is hardly in the house when he himself collapses and is rushed to the hospital. In good Victorian fashion, there is a heart-warming reconciliation scene, but Reardon's illness has been gathering force for months and he dies shortly after. Meanwhile, Jasper Milvain embarks on a thriving career as an editor and essayist. He establishes his sisters in London so that they, too, may write, and through them he begins to see much of Marian Yule. He feels genuine admiration and affection for her, and proposes to her after she inherits some of her uncle's property. However, because of one obstacle or another (mainly the loss of the legacy), the engagement never becomes a marriage. Finally, Milvain must admit to

himself and his sister that a union with Marian will not serve his best interests; she has no money and he needs capital to achieve the degree of success he desires. His tactful but shabby dismissal of her is painful for both of them, but Milvain's ambition will not be gainsaid. Happily, his path crosses that of the widow Mrs. Reardon who had inherited a solid £10,000 from that same uncle. It does not take them long to realize they are in love, and the ensuing marriage promises to be a glorious success.

Marian, in the meantime, goes back to her life of drudgery; she spends her days in the British Museum doing research and writing essays on such subjects as "French Authoresses of the Seventeenth Century." Her father also writes for magazines and periodicals, but is embittered by the lack of any solid success, which he fails to realize is due as much to his own pedantic and quarrelsome nature as to ill-luck. Marian is rejected by Milvain, her legacy disappears, and her father's eyesight fails so that she must support the tyrannous old man and her mother until their deaths. She goes to work as a librarian in a provincial town, and her future is bleak indeed.

New Grub Street had a cold reception from the popular press and ordinary readers; it was labeled "dreary" and "depressing." It made all but a small, special audience uneasy, and it is small wonder if one looks below

its surface. The plot seems conventional and melodramatic, until one looks carefully at the characters and then at the end of the book. The end is not contrived so that all ends happily with the just getting their deserts. It does not matter whether the characters are good or bad (although none are wholly either), attractive or unattractive, or engage our sympathies, or not; what does matter is their strength and adaptibility. The strong, those who can seize the main chance, will survive and flourish; the weak will falter and fail when confronted with the difficulties of urban society. This is a distinctly modern view, and one which must be kept in mind when discussing the major themes of the book.

Obviously the novel would be weak indeed if its only unifying element were the tenuous bonds between the characters. H. G. Wells suggested that Gissing usually started with a specific "social influence" and then used his plot and characters to illustrate that influence.[4] In the case of New Grub Street, this is only partly true because it is not a "thesis" novel. Gissing is not trying to prove a point, but to record an experience of life. Still, the social implications of money provide a common frame of reference for all the characters. The involvement of all of them in the literary establishment in London also

[4]Wells, Appendix C, "The Novels," p. 244.

provides continuity and interrelationship.

Certainly money is an ancient topic, but Gissing brings it up to date. He is concerned with the effect of the lack of money on certain individuals and with just what these same individuals are willing to do to get it. Utter and irreparable poverty is not the subject, as is the case in some of his earlier novels, such as Workers in the Dawn (1880) and Demos (1886). True, Reardon, Biffen, and Whelpdale at times reach the point of starvation, but they are not the indigenous slum-dwellers of the laboring class. They still belong to the middle class, and it is the effect of poverty on this group which Gissing examines.

There were many people in late Victorian England like the Milvain sisters who had received "an intellectual training wholly incompatible with the material conditions of their life. To the relatively poor (who are so much worse off than the poor absolutely) education is in most cases a mocking cruelty" (34). Also, like Amy, Reardon's wife, they had enough pride to be concerned with appearances. There is no mistaking what poverty does to them, and the attitude of each character is manifest in both words and deeds. For example, Milvain says, "Poverty is the root of all social ills; its existence accounts even for the ills that arise from wealth. The poor man is a

man labouring in fetters. I declare there is no word in our language which sounds so hideous to me as 'Poverty'." And Amy: "But I know the value of money better now. I know it is the most powerful thing in the world. If I had to choose between a glorious reputation with poverty and a contemptible popularity with wealth, I should choose the latter" (44). But it is Reardon's suffering which is the most terrible. "He knew what poverty means. The chilling of brain and heart, the unnerving of the hands, the slow gathering about one of fear and shame and impotent wrath, the dread feeling of helplessness, of the world's base indifference" (56).

What these people are willing to do for money is a more interesting subject and divides the weak from the strong. Milvain probably would not steal, but he is capable of any moral crime from the rankest opportunism to character assassination. That he is honest with Marian about his determination to gain money and fame is only momentarily disarming; the fact remains that even while engaged to Marian he proposes to (and is refused by) a Miss Rupert, whose only attraction is her money. His sister, Maud, marries an insensitive clod to avoid the necessity of penning contributions to such publishing ventures as "A Child's History of the English Parliament." To Amy, pride and money are inseparable, and she cannot do without either--

even love cannot exist without them. When she leaves Reardon, her going is not a desperate only alternative; rather she senses that he is an anchor which would always prevent her from attaining the life of comfort and refinement she so passionately desires. She is her mother's own daughter, for Mrs. Yule takes heartless advantage of anyone beneath her in order to maintain a façade of respectable ease. Whelpdale, who cannot even get his own work published, sets himself up as a "literary advisor" to aspiring writers. Though the business is not illegal, his "advice" is certainly worthless to those who pay for it.

The final result is that those who equate money with success, do succeed, while those who want money, but who suspect it has no intrinsic value and who will not compromise their principles for success, do not succeed.[5] The idealist has no chance for worldly success against the pragmatist. One must adapt to circumstances and always take the expedient path.

Reardon wants money as much as anyone else, and for two very good reasons. He has the natural desire to be a good provider for his family, and he also realizes that

[5]True, it is chance that gives Amy the valuable legacy while Marian's proves worthless, but this, too, is consistent. For those who have a strong will and assert it, things seem to fall into place--it is a version of the cliché about "the rich get richer--."

Amy does not have the endurance to stand steadfast by him, come what may. Also, "he was the kind of man who cannot struggle against adverse conditions, but whom prosperity warms to the exercise of his powers. Anything like the cares of responsibility would sooner or later harass him into unproductiveness" (53). He simply cannot turn out a commercially successful pot-boiler no matter how he tries; the insult to his artistic principles renders his mind impotent in spite of himself. He cannot put aside this integrity, though he can only partially defend it. Most of his fellow writers say, "'It's good enough for the market'; that satisfies them. And perhaps they are justified. I can't pretend that I rule my life by absolute ideals; I admit that everything is relative. There is no such thing as goodness or badness, in the absolute sense, of course. Perhaps I am absurdly inconsistent when--though knowing my work can't be first-rate--I strive to make it as good as possible" (45).

In the sometimes appealing figure of Reardon, Gissing points out that money and success are not unworthy goals _per se_; it is rather the hunger for them that can be dangerous. Reardon's character is not meant to be the ideal alternative to Milvain's, for he is too weak. He is unable to fight and lets himself be drawn into paralyzing helplessness. Obviously, he has much of Gissing's sympathy

and many of his traits, but he is nevertheless presented objectively.

In his own way, John Yule yearns for success as hungrily as Milvain. Instead of courting acquaintances who could help him toward the editorship of a prestigious journal, he continually alienates himself from them because of his cantankerous, pedantic personality. Moreover,

> had Yule been content to manufacture a novel or a play with due disregard for literary honour, he might perchance have made a mercantile success; but the poor fellow had not pliancy enough for this. He took his efforts _au grand sérieux_; thought he was producing works of art; pursued his ambition in a spirit of fierce conscientiousness. In spite of all, he remained only a journeyman. The kind of work he did best was poorly paid, and could bring no fame (81).

Yule's particular weakness is that he is blind to his own weaknesses. He entertains an almost paranoid belief that his "enemies sit in triumph and scorn" (262) over him. It is they and the consequences of his unfortunate marriage which hold him back. "My nature is framed for authority," (263) he says. Surely, there is ironic symbolism in the fact that it is an actual physical blindness which brings about his final downfall.

Marian is another of those whose dreams are never realized because she cannot seize the initiative and try to control her own fate. She knows the wonders of money, for she has seen what the lack of it has done to her father, and to his friends. Now Marian is an admirable young lady

in many ways. In spite of an impressive catalog of virtues, such as dependability and loyalty, she even has a rather pleasing personality. One must excuse the lapse of taste when she falls in love with Milvain, for he is, after all, the only young man to enter her secluded life--she just is not so lucky as Miranda. Perhaps she is also attracted by his vitality and zest for life's skirmishes, qualities which she herself lacks.

When Marian thinks that her inheritance from her uncle will be a respectable sum of money, Gissing makes it clear that she is one of those who could use it well.

> Money is a great fortifier of self-respect. Since she had become really conscious of her position as the owner of five thousand pounds, Marian spoke with a steadier voice, walked with firmer step; mentally she felt herself altogether a less dependent being. She might have confessed this lukewarmness towards literary enterprise in the anger which her father excited eight or nine days ago, but at that time she could not have uttered her opinion calmly, deliberately, as now (260).

Gissing's skillful use of setting makes these conflicts all the more intense and emphasizes the physical as well as mental effects of poverty. The characters do not enjoy genteel poverty in bucolic surroundings, rather they are beset by all the pressures of an industrial, urban society. Biffen is always cold and usually hungry. Amy's mother spends most of her time browbeating tradespeople and servants in order to maintain her establishment in the expensive city. Reardon's fatal lung disease is caused by

the evil London climate: "The flickering light grew fainter; he understood at length that this was caused by fog that had begun to descend. The fog was his enemy; it would be wise to purchase a respirator if this hideous weather continued, for sometimes his throat burned, and there was a rasping in his chest which gave disagreeable admonition" (316). The proximity of his wife's Cockney relatives is a source of violent bitterness to Marian's father, who unfairly blames his marriage, which he unwisely entered into when he was young and penniless (the same circumstances as Gissing's own marriage to Edith), for his troubles.

In discussing an idea out of context, there is always the danger that it will assume undue importance. It would seem that the subject of money would become wearisome to the reader and that these characters must be monstrously twisted to dwell so on it. However, with the possible exception of Milvain and a few minor characters, these people are not extraordinarily selfish or greedy. Many of them are petty, but then so is much of mankind. Gissing's theory of the insidious effects of poverty is depressing, but not necessarily invalid. He repeatedly substantiates his case with truths which we, who live in an even more materialistic society, are bound to recognize. In this way, he is a realist looking ahead of his time; he considers things as they are, not as they should be.

My objections to the heavy emphasis on money have to do with Gissing's treatment of this theme. Too often, the characters are merely mouthpieces for the novelist; their observations on poverty all sound alike. The author is so obsessed with this idea, that he cannot write dialogue in the characters' own idiom. Oddly enough, it is Biffen, a figure straight out of Dickens, who comes off best. He does not <u>talk</u> about how poor he is; he merely keeps on his overcoat because he has pawned his jacket, or cheerfully enjoys his meal of bread and drippings, or looks with respectful adoration at the divine Mrs. Reardon. Evidently, Gissing's friend Eduard Bertz raised a similar objection to the treatment of the subject of money, for Gissing replied to him in a letter of April 26, 1891, "Your objection to the consensus among my characters on the subject of money is quite just. The fault arises from my own bitterness. As for the truth of the point of view itself, I know decidedly that a man has to be of much native strength if he can arrive at anything like development of his powers in the shadow of poverty. Happily, the strength is sometimes given."[6]

The other subject, along with money, which serves to unify <u>New Grub Street</u>, is the literary milieu of London in the 1880's. All but the most minor characters are (or

[6] <u>Letters to Bertz</u>, p. 121-122.

wish to be) intimately connected with the literary Establishment. Almost every literary type, from editor to hack writer, is present on the stage while the figures of the few others, the really giant publishers and novelists, are glimpsed in the wings.

Any thorough understanding of Gissing's achievement in New Grub Street must be grounded upon a knowledge of the literary world of the 1880's, for that world provides the book's background. After the abolition of the newspaper tax in 1850, the price of newspapers drastically declined, and many new journals appeared. The daily papers still catered generally to the upper and middle classes, while those in the lower class preferred the Sunday papers, until the mid-nineties and the appearance of the Daily Mail.[7] The increase in daily newspapers was accompanied by a proliferation of cheaper weekly papers and periodicals whose contents appealed to all sorts of tastes. Some of these were decent publications, which sought the educated, but not affluent, middle-class reader. Milvain and Alfred Yule usually wrote for this type of paper, though with vastly different attitudes. Milvain says, "I shall write for the upper middle-class of intellect, the people who like to feel that what they are reading has some special cleverness,

[7] Richard D. Altick, The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public (Chicago, Ill., 1957), p. 355.

but who can't distinguish between stories and paste" (12). Instead of bowing to the taste of the reader, Yule wishes to change that taste so it will appreciate the serious and bookish tone of his knowledgeable, but often boring or esoteric articles.

"Family" and "religious" publications aimed at the semi-literates were exceedingly popular. In encouraging his sisters to enter the literary field, Milvain suggests that they "get together half a dozen fair specimens of the Sunday-school prize [a book, usually pious, given as an award for Sunday-school attendance]; study them; discover the essential points of such composition; hit upon new attractions; then go to work methodically, so many pages a day. There's no question of the divine afflatus; that belongs to another sphere of life. We talk of literature as a trade" (12).

Eventually, the lines of difference between various publications faded. Most of them tried to have something for everyone--book reviews, gossip columns, essays on cosmetics, cookery, general information, illustrations. As Yule complains, there is a "demand for essays, descriptive articles, fragments of criticism, out of all proportion to the supply of even tolerable work. The men who have an aptitude for turning out this kind of thing in vast quantities are enlisted by every new periodical, with the result

that their productions are ultimately watered down into worthlessness" (31-2).

How to succeed in this dizzying world prompts fascinating schemes and methods. Milvain, the ultimate pragmatist, knows what it is all about.

> Literature nowadays is a trade. Putting aside men of genius, who may succeed by mere cosmic force, your successful man of letters is your skillful tradesman. He thinks first and foremost of the markets; when one kind of goods begins to go off slackly, he is ready with something new and appetising. He knows perfectly all the possible sources of income. . .our Grub Street of to-day 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 (8).

His plans also include getting money which will enable him to cultivate useful and influential friends who will refer to his works "in leaders, in magazine articles, in speeches, in sermons" (25).

Yule and his friends selfishly want to use Marian's money to found a monthly review dealing only with good, solid literature in an effort to combat the current periodicals which are "a confused mass of politics and economics and general clap-trap" (257). Yule's archenemy, the notorious editor Clement Fadge, takes still another tack--flippancy. "His monthly comments on publications were already looked for with eagerness by that growing class of readers who care for nothing but what can be made

matter of ridicule. . . To assail an author without increasing the number of his readers is the perfection of journalistic skill" (139).

But it is Whelpdale who carries the whole subject of journalism to the point of logical absurdity with his proposal for a paper to be called Chit-Chat. "No article in the paper is to measure more than two inches in length, and every inch must be broken into at least two paragraphs . . . I would have the paper address itself to the quarter-educated; that is to say, the great new generation that is being turned out by the Board Schools, the young men and women who can just read, but are incapable of sustained attention" (379). In New Grub Street, the venture is a huge success, and its format only a slight exaggeration of one actually used in 1880 by George Newness in his popular Tit-Bits.[8]

Reardon is well aware that the novelist must, above all else, possess this commodity of saleability. Biffen tries to comfort him with the fact that at least his failures are artistic failures. "You are a psychological realist in the sphere of culture. . .the best things you have done are altogether in conflict with novelistic conventionalities" (120-121).

Reardon knows that he cannot and will not be a pop-

[8] Ibid., p. 363.

ular writer, though he has tried with Margaret Home, and that he has not the money or contacts to promote his more worthy efforts. Over the years, as his prospects fade, his bitterness against the "system" grows.

Harold Biffen is even less successful and more unlucky than Reardon. He just manages to feed himself by tutoring candidates for various civil examinations, all the while working on his novel, Mr. Bailey, Grocer, a lengthy realistic work about the life of "the ignobly decent." As might be suspected, this book has a less than smashing reception, although Milvain generously gives it good notice in two magazines. The kind of work that Biffen and Reardon do is doomed to obscurity, as Jasper points out. "We know that a really good book will more likely than not receive fair treatment from two or three reviewers; yes, but also more likely than not it will be swamped in the flood of literature that pours forth week after week, and won't have attention fixed long enough upon it to establish its repute" (376).

There are minor characters who give us further insight into the busy London literary circle. Jedwood marries the popular novelist, Miss Wilkes, and a gamble with her money on new authors and one-volume works promises to be astonishingly successful. Mrs. Boston Wright is the editor of The English Girl and has "evenings" at which one

can hear and pass on all the gossip and news of intellectual society. Then there are those like Amy and her friends, the Carters, who, while not writers themselves, have lively minds and strongly wish to surround themselves with clever, intellectual people.

It is significant that only Reardon and Biffen enjoy a true love of literature simply as art. Marian neatly sums up the attitude of most of the inhabitants of new Grub Street.

> When already there was more good literature in the world than any mortal could cope with in his lifetime, here was she exhausting herself in the manufacture of printed stuff which no one even pretended to be more than a commodity for the day's market. What unspeakable folly! To write--was not that the joy and privilege of one who had an urgent message for the world? Her father, she knew well, had no such message; he had abandoned all thought of original production, and only wrote about writing (89).

This juxtaposition of attitudes and types of people adds another level of complexity to the novel because it occurs in several patterns. It is rather like a kaleidoscope in which the same pieces can occur with infinite variation in an ever-changing picture. Gissing moves his characters, like bits of glass, in such a dazzling array of patterns that one is unaware of, or willing to ignore, any incongruity.

There is, for example, an odd mixture of kinds of characterization. Milvain, Reardon, and Biffen are different

types of characters. Gissing uses them not only to people his novel but as vehicles for literary criticism. The author expresses through each of them evaluation of his species of writer and his style of writing. Milvain is the man of mode. He is the epitome of the fashionable, mannered young man who could have come straight from the pages of the "silver fork" novels which were enormously popular in the 1840's. (The "silver fork" novels, as exemplified by Bulwer-Lytton's work, recorded the "doings" of witty, glossy people in high society, chiefly for the benefit of ladies in slightly lower stations who read them with breathless fascination.) Milvain is a modernized version; he is amiable, polished--and heartless. His work has the same qualities as his personality. What he writes is fashionable and popular, but its value is ephemeral. Gissing allows Milvain to pass judgment on his own work, and the novelist certainly concurs with him. When asked the literary merit of what he writes, Milvain answers that it is "equal to that of the contents of a mouldy nut. . . It's rubbish, but rubbish of a very special kind, of fine quality" (150).

Biffen's characterization is executed in a different manner; he is almost a grotesque in the style of Dickens. He is a flat, but brightly painted character who commands interest but no empathy from the reader. Gissing implies that naturalism, which is Biffen's stock-in-trade, evokes

much the same reaction—that in aiming at the scientific, naturalism only achieves the absurd. Reardon, on the other hand, is a wholly realized character, and is always presented in depth and treated with the utmost seriousness. He is the subject of a good deal of earnest psychological analysis in the manner of George Eliot. He is also a conscientious artist committed to writing conscientious novels about worthwhile subjects. Gissing makes it clear that he is the only writer in _New Grub Street_ whose work has any lasting value: "strong characterization was within his scope, and an intellectual fervour, appetising to a small section of refined readers, marked all his best pages" (52-53). Each of these men, besides having a well-defined role within the context of _New Grub Street itself_, could be a character in his own work.

In another pattern, one sees that the characters as literary men represent the conflicts which Gissing feels confront humanity in general. Milvain and Reardon are obviously foils and embody the opposing sides of the conflict between art and commercialism, integrity and expedience, idealism and pragmatism. Gissing suggests no workable compromise, for Yule, who attempts one, fails as miserably as Reardon, and it is not clear whether it is the system or his own failings which defeat him. This brings up the even larger (and distinctly modern) problem of free will and

determinism, which Gissing solves in this way: the strong and successful are those who can exercise free will, if they are remorseless and relentless in its use. The weak, those who cannot conform to society's dictates, will eventually be beaten by the system, no matter how deserving or good they are--their only defense is isolation. It seems doubtful that luck is ever good; it must be made good.

Milvain exercises his will and makes sure he will get the lucky breaks. He takes care to meet the right people, and scruples about using anyone in any way will never deter him. He confides to Reardon how well-laid his plans are.

> Most people would imagine I had been wasting my time these last few years, just sauntering about, reading nothing but periodicals, making acquaintance with loafers of every description. The truth is, I have been collecting ideas, and ideas that are convertible into coin of the realm, my boy; I have the special faculty of an extempore writer. Never in my life shall I do anything of solid literary value; I shall always despise the people I write for. But my path will be that of success. I have always said it, and now I'm sure of it (62).

Reardon, on the other hand, will not get out in the world and fight for the recognition of his talent. It is not that he doesn't wish to soil his hands; he simply has not the equipment (or will) for the battle. He realizes that his doom is inevitable, and he yields to it. His fate is already determined; his inaction merely confirms it.

In some ways, Yule is the most interesting example of Gissing's version of the problem of the literary life, for Darwin's theory is applicable to him. He is willing to fight for survival, but he makes all the wrong choices. He is like a fish with lungs instead of gills, who tries to live underwater. After a number of unhappy choices, such as marrying beneath himself, writing unpopular articles, or being in the wrong literary coterie, his luck begins to run bad altogether, and he is finally reduced to blindness and dependence on his daughter.

Thus Gissing implies that the fittest (not necessarially the finest) will survive by the use of a fierce free will; the unhealthy specimens by definition cannot exercise their wills in the right direction, and it is therefore preordained that they shall fail. This is a rather inconsistant and muddled compromise between free will and determinism, and I do not suggest that it operates as a conscious philosophic thesis in New Grub Street, because Gissing was not writing primarily about ideas but about life.

Finally, in Reardon and Whelpdale there is an indication of the pattern the future will take. Whelpdale, with his ridiculous Chit-Chat, is the forerunner of all the "yellow" journalists of the 90's whose tribe is still increasing today. Reardon is one of the first of the

non-heroes who, from Prufrock to Willy Loman, are so much in evidence. As the artist in society, Reardon represents those who, for one reason or another, either cannot function within the mainstream of society or are rejected by it and must alienate themselves from it. "He saw himself in the position of one sickly and all but destitute man against a relentless world, and every blow directed against him appeared dastardly" (171). The beginnings of the "alienated artist" syndrome, either in the form of passionate protest or resigned isolation, took place in Gissing's era. He was one of the first and foreshadowed many, such as D. H. Lawrence and Joyce, in the next generation.

Before leaving these matters, a word should be said about two of the women. There is nothing overtly shocking about either Marian or Amy; both are presented with traditional decorum. However, they are drawn more realistically than the typical ladies in most novels of Gissing's day. There is a strong undercurrent of sexuality in both of them; Marian is attracted by Milvain's animal spirits, and after circumstances kill their physical love, Amy and Reardon find little in common. Marian has enough education and intellect to realize that she was framed for better things, but she is securely caught in the vise of the woman's "place" in society. She simply is not able to act as a free agent. There is a rather long passage outlining Amy's

intellectual development which I think important because nothing like it had been or could have been written before Gissing's time. And again it shows the link between Gissing's character portrayal and literary criticism.

> After a few weeks of *désoeuvrement* she obeyed the impulse to occupy herself with a kind of reading alien to Reardon's sympathies. The solid periodicals attracted her, especially those articles which dealt with themes of social science. Anything that savoured of newness and boldness in philosophic thought had a charm for her palate. She read a good deal of that kind of literature which may be defined as specialism popularised; writing which addresses itself to educated, but not strictly studious, persons, and which forms the reservoir of conversation for society above the sphere of turf and west-endism. Thus, for instance, though she could not undertake the volumes of Herbert Spencer, she was intelligently acquainted with the tenor of their contents; and though she had never opened one of Darwin's books, her knowledge of his main theories and illustrations was respectable. She was becoming a typical woman of the new time, the woman who has developed concurrently with journalistic enterprise (298).

CHAPTER IV: INFLUENCES

Pointing out the influences of certain writers on others is a tricky and often futile business. Gissing has been dead only about fifty years and already critical opinion runs the gamut from pointing out his immense and conscious debt to George Eliot (Korg, p. 259-61) to proving his spiritual oneness with Joseph Conrad (Donnelly, p. 198). There is possible truth in many of these assertions, for Gissing was a voracious reader who lived during a time of exciting exchange in ideas, but there is little explicit and external evidence to support these views. My Chapter I traces the general trends--whose sources were traditional, current, and foreign--of which he was undoubtedly aware and by which he was touched. Still, it is too easy and often misleading to draw broad, vague parallels. My purpose here is to point out any _obvious_ influences, mainly upon _New Grub Street_, and, more importantly, to show how they were modified by Gissing's personal vision and style. His remarks in letters and conversations, and statements in his critical writings, also shed some light on the subject. I have included an unusually long section on realism from one of his critical essays because his view of realism is significantly like that held by the

finest twentieth-century English novelists.

Charles Dickens is the novelist usually cited as the strongest influence on Gissing, who always read him with admiration and delight, and who wrote a brilliant volume of essays on his work, Charles Dickens, A Critical Study (1898). Five of Gissing's eight novels written before New Grub Street deal with low-class or London slum life and are violent polemics against the horrors of such a life. They bear a marked resemblance to Dicken's novels in structure and technique, especially in the use of intricate strands of plot and character, although Gissing had not the imaginative skill to match Dickens' rich complexity or to sustain interest and balance as did his master. However, Gissing did not intend merely to follow in the greater novelist's footsteps; he reports that reading his work "stirred me not to imitate Dickens as a Novelist, but to follow afar off his example as a worker."[1] From the beginning, he knew he would go in a different direction, and he points out this direction in a letter to his brother.

> Certainly I have struck out a path for myself in fiction, for one cannot, of course, compare my methods and aims with those of Dickens. I mean to bring home to people the ghastly condition (material, mental, and moral) of our poor classes, to show the hideous injustice of our whole system of society, to give light upon the plan of

[1] George Gissing, "Dickens in Memory," The Critic (January, 1902), p. 51, as quoted in Donnelly, p. 202.

> altering it, and, above all, to preach an enthusiasm for just and high ideals in this age of unmitigated egotism and 'shop.' I shall never write a book which does not keep all these ends in view.[2]

He did, of course, forfeit some of these "ends," but that has nothing to do with Dickens.

In his study of Dickens, Gissing held that the other novelist's aim was usually idealistic rather than realistic in the sense that he wished to present the "essence" of a character or thing, rather than its actuality. That is, Dickens was unlike a Hogarth who "gives us life--and we cannot bear it."[3] Gissing intended to be, and was more like Hogarth, in the use of "irony and exactness of detail."[4] May Yates suggests that Gissing's reaction to slum scenes was to see hopeless misery intensified by his own sensitivity. Dickens, on the other hand, could be "diverted" by bizarre trifles, humor, and the like.[5] Dickens could see poverty as a picturesque and fertile ground for some exotic flowers of "sentimental idiosyncrasy," whereas Gissing saw only the desolation and despair of a wasteful commercial society. He was not especially concerned with

[2]Letters to His Family, p. 83. To Algernon on Nov. 3, 1880.

[3]George Gissing, Charles Dickens: A Critical Study (New York, 1924), p. 103.

[4]Korg, p. 9.

[5]May Yates, George Gissing: An Appreciation (Manchester, Eng., 1922), p. 36.

cause and remedy, but with painting the terrible picture with no redeeming beauty, as he saw it.[6]

By the time Gissing reached the height of his powers in New Grub Street, the only echoes one notes of Dickens are in style and characterization. These passages have a vividness which do tribute to the teacher and yet represent Gissing at his best.

Consider, for instance, the physical description of characters such as Yule's friend, Mr. Quarmby.

> The speaker was a man of sixty, short, stout, tonsured by the hand of time. He had a broad, flabby face, the colour of an ancient turnip, save where one of the cheeks was marked with a mulberry stain; his eyes, grey-orbed in a yellow setting, glared with good-humoured inquisitiveness, and his mouth was that of the confirmed gossip. For eyebrows he had two little patches of reddish stubble; for moustache, what looked like a bit of discoloured tow, and scraps of similar material hanging beneath his creasy chin represented a beard. His garb must have seen a great deal of Museum service; it consisted of a jacket, something between brown and blue, hanging in a capacious shapelessness, a waistcoat half open for lack of buttons and with one of the pockets coming unsewn, a pair of bronze-hued trousers which had all run to knee. Necktie he had none, and his linen made distinct appeal to the laundress (68).

Perhaps the most imaginatively drawn character in the whole novel is Biffen.

> His name was Harold Biffen, and, to judge from his appearance, he did not belong to the race of common mortals. His excessive meagreness would all but

[6]W.T. Young, "George Meredith, Samuel Butler, George Gissing," chap. 14 in Cambridge History of English Literature, Vol. XIII: The Nineteenth Century, ed. Sir A.W. Ward and A.R. Walker (Cambridge, Eng., 1922), p. 458.

> have qualified him to enter an exhibition in the capacity of living skeleton, and the garments which hung upon this framework would perhaps have sold for three and sixpence at an old clothes dealer's (117).

Biffen's wild adventures in the slums of London and his pitiful suicide remind us of numerous similar scenes in Dickens. But if Biffen is like a Dickens character in appearance and manner, his literary project proves him to be a man of the future, and incidently reveals something of Gissing's attitude toward Dickens and his own knowledge of Continental Naturalism.

> What I really aim at is an absolute realism in the sphere of the ignobly decent. The field, as I understand it is a new one; I don't know any writer who has treated ordinary vulgar life with fidelity and seriousness. Zola writes deliberate tragedies; his vilest figures become heroic from the place they will fill in a strongly imagined drama. I want to deal with the essentially unheroic, with the day-to-day life of that vast majority of people who are at the mercy of paltry circumstance. Dickens understood the possibility of such work, but his tendency to melodrama on the one hand, and his humour on the other, prevented him from thinking of it. . . The result will be something unutterably tedious. Precisely. That is the stamp of the ignobly decent life. If it were anything but tedious it would be untrue. I speak, of course, of its effect upon the ordinary reader (119-120).

Like Dickens, Gissing is expert at using weather and setting to enhance the mood of a given scene.

> The thick black fog penetrated every corner of the house. It could be smelt and tasted. Such an atmosphere produces low-spirited languor even in the vigorous and hopeful; to those wasted by suffering it is the very reek of the bottomless pit, poisoning the soul. Her face colourless as

> the pillow, Marian lay neither sleeping nor awake, in blank extremity of woe. . . (349)

When Biffen walks to the place where, to gain peace and oblivion, he will commit suicide, the setting underscores his contented state of mind.

> The sun was just setting; he paused a few moments on the bridge, watching the river with a quiet smile, and enjoying the splendour of the sky. . . An exclamation escaped his lips, for there before him was the new-risen moon, a perfect globe, vast and red. He gazed at it for a long time. . . When the daylight had entirely passed, he went forward on to the heath, and rambled, as if idly, to a secluded part, where trees and brushes made a deep shadow under the full moon. It was still quite warm, and scarcely a breath of air moved among the reddening leaves. . . The moon was now hidden from him, but by looking upward he could see its light upon a long, faint cloud, and the blue of the placid sky. His mood was one of ineffable peace. (407)

Such scenes make it clear that Gissing owed much to Dickens, but his indebtedness was something less than absolute. There are still other passages in New Grub Street which depart from their Dickensian models, and this divergence points up the contrasts in attitude and aim between the two novelists. One example is Reardon's death scene, which is so fearfully sentimental and melodramatic (and six pages long) as to rival Little Nell's. In the midst of all the sighs and sobs, however, Gissing keeps a firm grip on realistic character analysis. With admirable consistency, he makes sure that Amy's rather cold personality remains convincing.

> Hers was the kind of penitence which is forced by sheer stress of circumstances on a nature which resents any form of humiliation; she could not abandon herself to unreserved grief for what she had done or omitted, and the sense of this defect made a great part of her affliction. When her husband lay in mute lethargey, she thought only of her dead child, and mourned the loss; but his delirious utterances constrained her to break from that bitter-sweet preoccupation, to confuse her mourning with self-approach and with fears (372).

There is fine irony in the fact that when Biffen comes to see the stricken Reardon, Amy feels relief "that he presented a far more conventional appearance than in the old days" (373). Gissing has moved past Dickens toward Galsworthy and Bennett in the direction of turn-of-the-century realism.

But in the final analysis, Gissing's style is of his own making; he cannot turn Dickens' marvelous gift of versatility to his own advantage. That style is often graceless and pedantic, but it does suit Gissing's subject. It is often dreary and depressing, but so are his characters and the incidents involving them. If it was a deliberate attempt on his part to match style to content, then he was indeed ahead of his time, for only recently did the idea gain credence that bad writing might more effectively complement a given subject than fine writing.

Gissing is wordy, but then he was trying to fill three volumes. The tone is too often labored (". . .its brevity, and the fact that nothing more was aimed at than

an concatenation of brisk events, made it not unreadable" p. 171) or pretentious ("Oh, to go forth and labour with one's hand, to do any poorest, commonest work of which the world had truly need!" p. 89). W. T. Young protests that "The dialogue is apt to be bookish, and though admirably representative of character, it often fails to create illusion," even if it can at times attain pathos.[7] The conversations between Reardon and his wife are sometimes stilted, but they show the lack of communication between the two with chilling clarity.

The novelist's use of irony, both in situation and tone, is masterful. Consider the last scene in the book. Amy and Milvain are relaxing after an elegant dinner party for important guests in their little gem of a home. Reardon and Biffen and Yule are mercifully dead, and Marian is banished to some obscure country town. As Amy sits down at the piano, Milvain says, "'Happiness is the nurse of virtue.'"

"'And independence the root of happiness,'" she replies.

"'. . . Ha! isn't the world a glorious place?'"

"'For rich people.'"

"'Yes, for rich people. . .Play anything.'"

"So Amy first played, and then sang, and Jasper

[7] _Ibid._, pp. 462-3.

lay back in dreamy bliss" (425).

Henry James summed it all up when he admired Gissing's sense of the "general grey grim comedy."[8]

I do not agree with Jacob Korg that George Eliot had a profound influence on Gissing, except in a general sense, as she was part of that particular line of writers, stretching from Jane Austen through Henry James and Joseph Conrad, who wrote serious novels for intelligent readers. In more specific ways, the two are obviously dissimilar. Korg says that they both gave much "attention to the intellectual and emotional development of mature characters"[9] by using detailed psychological analysis. But Gissing's characters do not mature and develop; they are already what they are. The use of close analysis is not to show change, but to allow the characters self-revelation through introspection. Gissing's aim, though the methods differ, is more like that of twentieth-century novelists, such as Joyce, in that he wishes to describe the process by which his characters attain self-knowledge. Rectifying character flaws is not in his province.

George Eliot is ultimately interested in how men _should_ act, proving the dignity of life; Gissing is inter-

[8]Henry James, _Notes on Novelists_ (New York, 1916), p. 443.

[9]Korg, p. 259.

ested in how men do act, denying the dignity of life. Also, as Korg admits,[10] Eliot's sequential view of human existence--the importance of cause and effect--postulates an underlying order and justice in the universe, whereas Gissing admits cause and effect in the scheme of life principally as evidence of determinism. These differences put Gissing squarely in a modern context.

The single most exciting, though not ultimately the most influential, thing happening in Gissing's literary world was the flowering of naturalism on the Continent, particularly as practised by Zola and the de Goncourt brothers. It is evident from Gissing's letters to his family and to Bertz that he was extremely well-read in European literature and knew exactly what these writers were doing.

The naturalists were heavily indebted to science for outlook, subject matter, and form. They were interested in the manner as well as the matter of life. Like experimental scientists, they made a clinical effort to reveal life as it actually is, through documentation and research rather than through psychological analysis. Even in a "slice of life," some selection of material is inevitable. Though the naturalists strove for the impersonality and detachment which preclude judgment, not even the scientist

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 260.

can be purely objective. They were probably sympathetic to humanity, but were against the conventions of society, because those conventions are a false representation of things as they truly are. They were convinced of the illogicality or irrationality of life. Still, the French characteristic of logic was maintained in the form of their works, which stressed cause and effect as determined by environment and heredity, as well as by character. This outlook moved eventually toward behaviourism, which views action simply as a response to stimuli. In particular, the naturalists stressed the importance of sex in behaviour, "the negation of spiritual values, opposition to conventional religion, determinism, fatalism, internationalism, brutality, frankness, and a disregard for the sanctity of institutions, conventions, and womanhood."[11]

From the first, Gissing was sympathetic with the naturalists' overall aim. "Combative it was from the first: Realism, Naturalism, and so on, signified an attitude of revolt against insincerity in the art of fiction. Let us have done with the conventional, that is to say, with mere tricks for pleasing the ignorant and the prejudiced."[12] In 1886, he wrote to his sister, Margaret: "The writers

[11]Frierson, p. 36.

[12]George Gissing, "Realism in Fiction," Humanitarian (July, 1895). Quoted in Donnelly, p. 208.

who help me most are French and Russian; I have not much sympathy with English points of view."[13] His early proletarian novels owe an immense debt to the naturalists in their savage depiction of slum life. However, while they are naturalistic in detail, they are somewhat romantic in that they contain protagonists who would be exceptional members of any society. Gissing cannot restrict himself to unbiased clinical reporting. He must voice his shrill "resentment against conditions for making people what they are, and against people for being so."[14]

Other of Gissing's letters reveal that it was not the strict naturalists for whom he had most admiration (he accused the Goncourts of "narrow [bitterly narrow] modernism"),[15] but other European writers such as Flaubert, Daudet, Doestoievsky, and Tolstoy. By the time he wrote his novel about the state of literature in England, _New Grub Street_, only one of the writers in the book is a naturalist. Biffen enunciates his literary creed: "I want among other things, to insist upon the fateful power of trivial incidents. . . I want to take no sides at all; simply to say, 'Look, this is the kind of thing that happens. . .

[13]Gissing, _Letters to Family_, p. 183.

[14]Robert Morss Lovett and Helen Sard Hughes, _The History of the Novel in England_ (Cambridge, Mass., 1932), p. 363.

[15]Gissing, _Letters to Bertz_, p. 193.

let us copy life. . . Show the numberless repulsive features of common decent life. Seriously, coldly; not a hint of facetiousness, or the thing becomes different" (120-121). Gissing could not put this theory into practice.

He voiced his true preference in a letter to Bertz in 1889. "What psychology! What Realism! On the whole, I am deeply in sympathy with Dostoievsky."[16] And certainly there are reasons for rapport between him and the great Russian. Although unlike Gissing, Dostoievsky is less concerned with deliberate art--how something is said--than with the worth of whatever is actually said, his "novel of ideas" is both subjective and personal. Instead of attempting to be detached, both authors give their views of life, and there are autobiographical passages in many of their works.[17]

This outlook allows a treatment of character which is not possible in naturalistic works, and Gissing, like most English writers, cares more for analysis of character than presentation of fact. Walter Allen explains the English viewpoint by contrasting it with the French. The English "tend to work from the highly individual, the highly idiosyncratic, to the general type; the French tend to work from the general type to the individual. . . For

[16] _Ibid._, p. 79.

[17] Frierson, p. xiii-xiv.

the English, there is always a tendency for character to be an end in itself, valuable in its own right; the French are interested in a character as the instance of a general law or because a general law may be deduced from it."[18]

Gissing, therefore, chooses realism over naturalism. But what exactly does he mean by realism? The answer is significant because the most important English novelists (in terms of the aesthetic merit and later influence on others of their work) of the next generation--Lawrence, Joyce, Conrad,--are in this tradition. The crux of the matter is contained in an execrable combination of two clichés: "Say it like it is, but to thine own self be true." Gissing states his theory much more eloquently.

> It seems to me that no novel can possess the slightest value which has not been conceived, fashioned, elaborated, with a view to depicting some portion of human life as candidly and vividly as is in the author's power.
> . . . what the artist sees is to him only a part of the actual; its complement is an emotional effect. Thus it comes about that every novelist beholds a world of his own, and the supreme endeavour of his art must be to body forth that world as it exists for him. The novelist works, and must work subjectively. A demand for objectivity in fiction is worse than meaningless, for apart from the personality of the workman no literary art can exist. The cry arose, of course, in protest against the imperfect method of certain novelists, who came forward in their own pages, and spoke as showmen; but what can be more absurd than to talk about the "objectivity" of such an author as Flaubert, who triumphs by his extraordinary power of presenting life as he, and no other man, beheld

[18]Allen, p. 356.

> it. There is no science of fiction.
> Process belongs to the workshop; the critic of the completed work has only to decide as to its truth, that is to say, to judge the spirit in which it was conceived, and the technical merit of its execution.
>
> Realism, then, signifies nothing more than artistic sincerity in the portrayal of contemporary life. . . For my own part, I believe that he (the novelist) must recognize limits in every direction; that he will constantly reject materials unsuitable to the purposes of art; and that many features of life are so completely beyond his province that he cannot dream of representing them. At the same time I joyfully compare the novelist's freedom in England today with his bondage of only ten or twelve years ago. . . The great thing is, that public opinion no longer constrains a novelist to be false to himself.[19]

[19] Gissing, "Realism in Fiction." Quoted in Donnelly, pp. 208-09.

CHAPTER V: EVALUATION

After having published eight novels whose reception had been lukewarm, Gissing must have been pleased to write his friend Eduard Bertz about a critical notice which appeared in the Saturday Review on May 9, 1891. Gissing reported that the reviewer of New Grub Street praised "the complexity of the characters and the terrible realism, and said Gissing 'had produced a very powerful book. He is full of clever touches on literary and social matters, and estimates to a nicety the literary pabulum which the general public enjoys'."[1] These observations prove that critics are not always as near-sighted as they are believed to be, because they sum up the three claims New Grub Street has on our interest and attention. The book affords a unique opportunity to study the literary world of the 1880's. It is a good, if not great, novel. It has an honorable place in literary history.

New Grub Street is the first English novel about authors and literature; it studies writers practising their craft and describes their environment, and as Q. D. Leavis points out, the literary world as we know it began in

[1] Q. D. Leavis, "Gissing and the English Novel," Scrutiny, VII, no. 1 (June, 1938), 75.

Gissing's day.[2] Also prompting the subject of the book was Gissing's "passionate concern for the state of literature" --a concern little in evidence before this period when more authors began taking their craft seriously as an art, especially in reaction to those (like Milvain) who cheapened it.

Walter Allen observes that the book is valuable because "it takes us back to actuality, to the flux of raw material from which literary history as we know it is in some ways a violent abstraction." This picture of the 1880's, "including the life of the literary underworld," is different from what one would expect. It is not always the greatest authors, by whose work a period is later known, who are the most important and influential figures. They might instead be a clever agent, a rich publisher, and a writer of sensational adventure stories who actually wield the most power. _New Grub Street_ is a true account of what was actually going on. "Everything is there, the rise of the literary agent, the effects on writers of the new mass-circulation periodicals, the clash of literary ideologies, the gossip."[3]

[2]_Ibid._, p. 79.

[3]Quotations and ideas in this paragraph from Walter Allen, "Some Names from Yesterday," _New York Times Book Reviews_, January 14, 1968. (Review of Alec Waugh's _My Brother Evelyn_.)

As a minor landmark in literary history, New Grub Street is also the true account, both in how it is written and what it is written about, of what was actually going on in the confusing literary transition of the late nineteenth century. It was above all a time of flux, in literature and in society. The book includes more typical "transitional" attitudes and features than probably any other single novel. Gissing gradually freed himself from the most onerous of the traditional structural habits, such as improbable coincidence or melodramatic intrigue, though he always retained traces of the old conventional plots. He progressed from _The Unclassed_ (1884), in which all the action revolves around the idealized hero, and _The Nether World_ (1889), which is dreadfully "plottesque," to _New Grub Street_, which H. G. Wells praised as being a synthesis of English and continental trends, with a deliberate attempt "to present in typical groupings distinct phases of our social order."[4]

The example of the naturalists bolstered his courage to insist on freedom in expression and in choice of subject, and to reject those of society's values he found false or hypocritical. Though, like most English writers, he rejected the naturalists' strict determinism, he did point out "the dominion of external factors [such as money

[4]Wells, Appendix C, "The Novels," p. 245.

and social position] over the individual."[5]

Gissing continued the honorable English tradition of the novel of purpose and expanded its use of psychological analysis to implement that purpose. While he persisted in the use of realistic physical detail, he followed the lead of the Russians and indicated the path of future realistic writers by concentrating on psychological analysis which "abandons the traditional consistancy of characterization and shows the individual as a complex of incongruous urges."[6]

The author's protagonists, like Reardon (and Gissing himself), are the beginning of a tribe of artists committed to fulfilling their own personal visions, usually at the cost of alienating themselves from society. "The very restriction of his material to his own experience, the preponderance in it of the personal and the autobiographical, the intense egoism and consciousness of frustration, the partiality for characters bordering on neuroticism--especially the artist type--are more characteristic of fiction today than of that which was contemporary to him."[7] The change in Gissing's attitude from his first radical novels through New Grub Street, the high point of his work, presages in one man's thought the shift in

[5]Lovett and Hughes, p. 367.

[6]*Ibid.*, p. 366.

[7]*Ibid.*, p. 369.

attitude which Walter Allen finds in the literary world in general from about 1910 on. There is a "shift from the Naturalistic point of view of man, as we find it in Moore and Bennett, in which the great shaping force on the individual is environment, and the related Socialist point of view, which dominated Wells, that a change in the ordering of society would of itself change the men and women who live in it," to an emphasis on "the individual human being, the individual sensibility, the individual reaction" --to Joyce and Lawrence.[8]

New Grub Street has many flaws. It is too long; what action there is revolves around a rather simplistic plot in which there are several irrelevant incidents (like the long chapter about Mrs. Yule's Cockney relatives).

It is, then, a good novel, and some things that appear at first to be flaws, like the dreary atmosphere and wordy dialogue, are really consistent with the subject and characterization. In an article in the Times, December 29, 1903, written shortly after Gissing's death, an anonymous reviewer, though over-generously comparing him to Balzac, did make a fair assessment of his talent. ". . .like Balzac, he wished to picture the truth of life, and, like Balzac, he achieved his end by the patient enumeration of small and accurate details, noting them down in a style that

[8]Allen, The English Novel, p. 411.

rarely aimed at beauty and was distinguished only by the lucidity of his thought, and an occasional sharpness of expression, achieving his effects rather by a cumulative method, as it were, of proof than by any dramatic moments, any moments of exaltation, or any appeal to the pity or charity of his readers."[9]

I am sure that Gissing would be the first to admit that he did not have the breadth of vision--or genius--of Balzac. He did, however, follow his own credo as set forth in his essay, "Realism in Fiction." In _New Grub Street_, he was sincerely presented an experience of life as he saw it. This experience is limited, but the London literary world becomes a microcosm of life, and some universal problems of human nature are examined nonetheless. These problems--what values should one adopt, or what freedom, even, does one have to choose values of any kind--are not solved. But Gissing did have the sensitivity and integrity to ask the right questions, and few of us do. Gissing develops no consistent view of human existence; instead he recognizes the ambiguity, ambivalence, and conflict in life and character. Though he does judge the "system," though his books are an "arraignment of society,"[10] he does not in _New Grub Street_ judge the individuals who make up society.

[9] Gissing, _Letters to Family_, p. 401.

[10] _Ibid._, p. 168.

Still, his attitude toward his characters is not detached, but curiously tolerant, in light of his earlier works which usually pitted a "good" man against everyone else. Just when we are prepared to judge a character, Gissing, by means of dialogue, interior monologue, and sometimes authorial intrusion, explains motives and behavior with such straightforward objectivity (one can be objective without being detached) that we must suspend judgment even if we cannot sympathize.

Whatever the cause of Gissing's refusal to judge values or persons, the result is that he engages the reader by _forcing_ him to think and to try to understand, and to ponder the questions raised. I would agree with Q. D. Leavis that _New Grub Street_ secures a place for Gissing in the fine tradition of Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, in that it is a book "which an adult can read at his utmost stretch--as attent-itively, that is, as good poetry demands to be read--instead of having to make allowances for its being only a novel or written for a certain public or a certain purpose."[11]

[11]Leavis, p. 80.

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