George Gissing's

The Nether World: A Picture of a Sordid Slum Life

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The intention of this research is to show the degrading effects of poverty and its consequences on the characters of George Gissing's novel

,The Nether World .Poverty ,as a matter of fact, is one of the social evils and diseases that the British society and more particularly the working class has to face during the nineteenth century that witnesses the Industrial Revolution which has changed the world drastically and brought about the idea of class division ,the very idea Gissing and many of the nineteenth century authors try their best to attack .

George Gissing'sThe Nether World was written in 1889. As the title suggests, it shows the 'other side' of life. The world, the novel describes, was that drab and horrible underworld of poor Victorian London in which one could only find grinding poverty, starvation, degradation, disease, injustice, misery, and frustration.[1] The book's title also reflects how George Gissing(1857-1903) was deeply preoccupied with the problems of the poor of which he was a member. His investigations into, and personal experience of the lowest stratum of working class life and the social problems that afflicted his society during the late nineteenth century supplied him with raw materials for his slum novels , the last of which is The Nether World.[2]

To highlight this horrible and bleak picture, Gissing opens his novel with these words: "In the troubled twilight of a March evening.... (NW, Part 1, Ch.1,p.1)[3] These words, that set the typical temporal location ,are intended by the author to show this feeling of being trapped in time already between day and night. The figure of the traveller, with whom the novel opens, who moves across an urban landscape is intentionally not identified. This feeling of being trapped both in time and space is one of the novel's main themes.

In a similar memorable and characteristic passage this slow, ruthless, but still human movement is detected against the circumscribing landscape:

> The burial-ground by which he had paused was as little restful to the eye as are most of those discoverable in the byways of London. The small trees that grow about it shivered in their leaflessness; the rank grass was wan under the failing day; most of the stones leaned this way or that, emblems of neglect (they were very white at the top, and darkened downwards till the damp soil made them black), ... And on every side was the rumble of traffic, the voiceful evidence of toil and of poverty hawkers were crying their goods ; the inevitable organ was clanging before a public-house hard by; the crumpet-man was hastening along, with monotonous ringing of his bell and hoarse rhythmic wail.
>
> (NW. Part 1, Ch.1, p.2)

The prevailing atmosphere of the passage above is that of death and suffering, the two ultimate states of reification towards which man is directed by either 'fate' or 'society'.[4] The whole atmosphere suggests death, poverty and disease for there is no sign of life, energy, activity, or sense of richness.

Acutely conscious of the issues of his time, Gissing wrote to describe the true conditions of the poor and to show the sickness and the injustice of his industrial society. In an attempt to defend his novel and its end, Gissing stated that it was written "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 shed light upon the plan of altering it, and above all, to preach an enthusiasm for high ideals in this of unmitigated egotism and 'shop'. I shall never write a book which does not keep these ends in view".[5]

Intensely affected by Emile Zola, the father of French Naturalism, Gissing did his best to lay the economic forces that determine the aspirations and the expectations of those born to a life of hard work or labour.[6] He stood with the naturalist in conveying the effects of the social or economic environment upon characters and in his depiction of corruption.[7] In fact, all the characters portrayed in the novel are unable to transcend the harsh environment within which they are born and by which they are nurtured. They find themselves imprisoned in an uncongenial world, a world of inadequate signs that have very little

connection with their distant objects of expectations and ambitions .[8]

Starting with the Hewetts, who are introduced in a chapter entitled 'A Superfluous Family', John Hewett, the father, is superfluous in the sense that he is unemployed. He feels that he is trapped in time and space. He, getting very old, thinks that the opportunity for him to find a regular job and payment is slowly eaten away.[9] He is one of many victims of hard times. Deeply immersed in misery, he can't get out of the prison-like slum he finds himself in. He, on the other hand, can hardly tolerate the burden of four superfluous, weak and ill-conditioned children.

In The Nether World, the ill will of the universal order is embodied in the operation of economy, in the deadening and poisonous organization of industry and in the oppressive social and domestic institutions. The economic system, though devised by man, is used against him. Thus, man is the immediate victim of such a system. This nether world is the world of indifference, of ruthless competition in which the strong live and the weak die and where might not right rules.[10]

Commenting on the insecurity of the working man, Friedrich Engels(1820-1895), a German socialist and political philosopher and a close associate of Karl Marx, states:

> Everything that the proletarian can do to improve his position is but a drop in the ocean compared with the floods of varying chances to which he is exposed, over which he has not the slightest control.[11]

Similarly, Clara Hewett, John's daughter, refuses to be contained by the social stratifications of the nether world. Inheriting her father's temperament, she defies and goes against her father's wishes by leaving the house. To break free from her life of drudgery, Clara joins

the world of the theatre which proves to be but another version of the old forms of competition.[12]

For Clara, life is a battle that ought to be fought. When she gets the leading role at which she has aimed, she does not apologize to Grace Danver, the actress whose place she has taken . Clara's aim in life is to survive whatever the means is. Social frustration forces her to adopt the only philosophy open to her: "we have to fight, to fight for everything, and the weak get beaten. That's what life has taught me" (NW, Part 3, Ch.XXIII, p.170). However, her attempts at escape and of upward mobility fail. The escape that she desires through a career on the stage is but temporary. Disfigured, she returns home to live with her father in a barrack-like tenement building, a prison from which there can be no escape. This vicious circle of poverty has a great psychological effect upon Clara that she is driven to thoughts of suicide.

As for Bob Hewett, Clara's brother, he is also fated to be defeated by self-destruction. In explaining why Bob turns to counterfeiting, Gissing says:

> Genuine respect for law is the result of possessing something which the law exerts itself to guard. Should it happen that you possess nothing, and that your education in metaphysics has been grievously neglected, the strong probability is, that your mind will reduce the principle of society to its naked formula: Get by whatever means, so long as with impunity.
>
> (NW, Part 3, Ch. XXIV, p.178)

In the quotation above, Gissing clearly states the economic reality underlying his thesis. Bob, like most of the characters depicted in the novel, acts according to this formula. He is driven to this tragic fate by his own selfishness. Following this 'naked formula', Bob is unable to combat the inexorable power of the slum for 'poverty makes a crime of every indulgence'. (NW, Part 4 Ch. XXXII, p. 244). It is his life of penury that moves him downward into crime. Bob's end is the inevitable result of the bitter and miserable plight that he seeks to escape. For him, the

burden of supporting his wife and children with sufficient money is too great. From the very beginning, his life with Pennyloaf Candy, his wife, is very wretched .Unable to pay for the expenses of their wedding day, Bob and his wife are compelled, the next morning, to pawn their wedding ring. This incident shows how brutal the effect of poverty is and how difficult it is for a working-class family to maintain permanently a property.[13]

Rejected by Bob's parents because he has 'married beneath him', the couple spend their honeymoon day at the Crystal Palace, described in the often quoted chapter 'Io Saturnalia'. In this chapter, Gissing sheds light on the vulgarity of the impoverished working-class people, who engage themselves in dancing, drinking and violence. It is a panoramic and a striking picture of the brutality and vulgarity of the pleasures experienced by the poor.[14]

Reflecting on the horror of this episode that describes a bank holiday spent at the Crystal Palace, Dean Farrar says that "it is one of the least painful"[15]. In it ,"there is more than simple contempt "as Jacob Korg puts it, if contempt can ever be simple. [16] The narrator of the novel can clearly sense the 'naked human response to sudden arbitrary and temporary release from slaveray",[17] a sense that he himself detests. The narrator's aversion of this kind of feelings felt by the poor is obviously shown in the following passage:

> Throw wide the doors of the temple of Alcohol! Behold, we come in our thousands, jingling the coin that shall purchase us this one day of tragical mirth. Before us is the dark and dreary autumn; it is a far cry to the foggy joys of Christmas. Io Saturnalia!
>
> (NW, Part 2, Ch.XII, p.85)

As a matter of fact, this chapter very well captures Gissing's peculiar mixture of scorn and sympathy for the masses. Gissing's attitude towards the poor, whose lives he minutely examines, is very complicated. He is ambivalent in the sense that he both feels

sympathetic and disdainful of them. He, indeed, has no real love for the poor nor deep interest in them. This is freely admitted by him as he, in The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft, says that "Every instinct of my being is anti-democratic".[18]

Though critical of social injustice, he goes on to add ,"I am no friend of the people. As a force...they inspire me with distrust, with fear; as a visible multitude, they make me shrink aloof." [19] Although he writes about the working class people, he is never, even imaginatively, able to identify himself with them.[20] He is very keen on cutting off his past and this is evident in an entry in his diary, made during a trip to Paris in 1888, in which he says :

> I experience at present a profound dislike for everything that concerns the life of the people.... All my interest in such things I have left behind in London. On crossing the Channel, I have become a poet, pure and simple, or perhaps it would be better to say an idealist student of art.[21]

Gissing's personal life is, until the last few years, mostly unhappy. The series of events, that he passes through, that starts with his expulsion from Owen's college for being caught stealing money from his college roommate to support his alcoholic wife which culminates in the publication of his first novel, Workers in the Dawn , four years later, turn him into a social outcast, a position that he is uncertain whether to glorify or lament.[22] He is very conscious of the hardships suffered by the working classes who are confronted with wretched conditions and abject poverty, for he himself has suffered the burden of living in various squalid parts of London.

Gissing's knowledge of the lives of the working class people comes from his experience as a lodger and a reporter, a fact that does not escape Frank Swinnerton, Gissing's biographer:

> Very few educated people have lived among the poor for any reason but that of benefiting them or 'studying' them. Gissing both lived among the poor and 'studied' them; but he lived among them by

> reason of the most lamentable necessity and he studied them without ever learning their spiritual language. He was always a stranger, homeless and miserable. Is it any wonder that what he saw was as lugubrious as his own mood?[23]

All that Gissing saw and experienced goes far to explain the deadening misery of some of his painful scenes and the pessimistic tone with which he writes what is known as his slum novels.

Gissing is very aware of the brutishness and the coarseness of the degenerate masses which are directly connected with the ugliness that constantly surrounds them. He lingers with fascinated repulsion over the "animal" nature of the poor and considers the changes requires to "humanize the multitude" (NW, Part 2, Ch. XII, p. 89). This element of animalism is prominently distinguished in the character of Clem Peckover who is continuously called "brutal". Gissing pictures Clem's consuming animality through her continuous fearful attacks on her young little slave, Jane Snowdon. To her pleasure, Clem uses her power and strength to hurt and frighten this feeble ,miserable servant. She becomes joyous when she catches the sight of Jane quivering "with the sound of dreadful voices ringing about her, and blackness before her eyes" (NW, Part 1, Ch. 1, p.7). Once she laughs, Clem becomes "a model for an artist, an embodiment of fierce life independent of mortality"(NW, Part 1, Ch. 1, p. 7). Her qualities can take her to no society other than that of the slums for " ...one would have compared her, not to some piece of exuberant normal vegetation, but rather to a rank, evilly-fostered growth. The putrid soil of that nether world yields other forms besides the obviously blighted and sapless" (NW, Part, 1, Ch. 1, p. 7).

Like Clara Hewett, Clem also believes that the law of the jungle can alone be of meaning in this disgusting world of slums. Life's battles are more deadly in the nether world and this explains Clem's desire to deal with "some one who showed fight.. Some one with whom she

could try savage issue in real tooth-and-claw conflict" (NW, Part 1, Ch. 1, p.7).

Clem's violence and lust for bloodshed is also shown in her subsequent assault on Pennyloaf Candy, her rival in her affection for Bob Hewett, at the Crystal Palace. The struggle, over Bob Hewett, between Clem Peckover and Pennyloaf Candy ends with the latter's "pretty face" all covered with "blood and dirt".

For economic reasons, Clem traps Joseph Snowdon, Jane's father and the heir of the benevolent rich old man, Michael Snowdon, into marrying her. As their marriage fails to bring her the financial gain she longs for, she returns to Bob Hewett, motivating him to help steal and kill her husband and to "starve[his helpless wife] and her brats half to death " (NW, Part 4, Ch. XXIX, p. 216). Commenting on Clem's influence upon Bob, the narrator says:

> Bob would not have come to this pass... at all events not so soon.. if he had been left to the dictates of his own nature; he was infected by the savagery of the woman who had taken possession of him. Her lust of cruelty crept upon him like a disease, the progress of which was hastened by all the circumstances of his disorderly life.... Corruption was eating to his heart; from every interview with Clem he came away a feebler and a baser being.
>
> (NW,Part 5 ,Ch .xxxIv ,p .280)

It is Bob's renewed contact with Clem that brings about his final destruction. Had he not met her, he would not have come to this end very soon. His crime discovered, Bob is finally cornered in 'The Court of Shooter's Gardens, the dreary and the hellish slum, where Bob and his wife live. In the following passage, Gissing gives a very vivid description of the dismal room occupied by this impoverished couple:

> The room contained no article of furniture. In one corner lay some rags, and on the mantle-piece stood a tin-teapot, two cups, and a plate. There was no fire, but a few pieces of wood lay near the hearth, and at the bottom of the open cupboard remained a very small supply of coals. A candle made fast in the neck of bottle was the source of light.

(NW,Part 5,Ch .xxxvμ ,P.285)

Seriously injured, Bob can only escape this hell through death. His death comes to symbolize the plight of every working-class character in the novel. Crushed and sapless, surrounded by the drunkard Mrs. Candy, his wife's mother, his idiot child and poverty, Bob dies with only the sound of Mad Jack's meaningless religious Sermon in his ears. [24] The idiot Mad Jack, before the arrest of Bob, is heard relating a visitation from an angel who says to him:

> You are passing through a state of punishment .... Because you made an ill use of your wealth ... therefore after death you received the reward of wickedness. This life you are now leading is that of the damned; this place to which you are confined is Hell! There is no escape for you. From poor you shall become poorer; the older you grow the lower shall you sink in want and misery; at the end there is waiting for you, one and all, a death in abandonment and despair. This is Hell.. Hell.. Hell!"

(NW, Part 5, Ch. XXXVII, p. 290)

Gissing, through this visionary metaphor, tries to emphasize the fact that escape in its various forms, physical, emotional and intellectual whether in dreams, religion, hope or ambition is ruthlessly impossible.

The possibility of escape from this harsh world is here viewed with bitter scepticism. The fact, that Gissing emphasizes, that escape is only possible through drunkenness, madness, and death reflects grim determinism. [25]

In such a world, there is no space for the desires and hopes that can create a future and if ever there be, they are suppressed in Shooteer's Gardens. Death, here, is not the release that everyone seeks for after death, another death still awaits them.[26] This sense, that there is no future for those who live in this world, is very close to that which opens chapter XIV entitled "A Welcome Guest", in which the bells of St. James's, Clerkwell, ring out a hymn of no serious significance for the inhabitants imprisoned in the House of Detention.

The hymn, that may offer a kind of solace in the hope of a better world in the future, instead, "makes too great a demand upon the imagination to soothe amid instant miseries" (NW, Part 2, Ch. XIV, p.98). The future, for them, can offer nothing other than the 'instant miseries' of the present. This clearly explains to what extent people in the nether world are trapped both in time and space.

Even for Jane, the only noble character depicted in this novel beside Sidney Kirkwood, the future is just an extension of the miserable present because she can see no hope in it. Sent by Mrs. Peckover, her mistress, to fetch Sidney, Jane, whom Gissing first introduced as the 'thrall of thralls', to Sidney's conventional and comforting remark "keep a good heart, Jane. Things'll be better someday, no doubt' ", answers with a naivety close to the narrator's skepticism," 'Do you think so, sir?' " (NW, Part 1, Ch. II, p.12).

This is very true of her case for though she has become the heiress of her philanthropist grandfather, Mr. Michael Snowdon, she is unable to marry the man whom she loves, Sidney Kirkwood. This prospect that she will be the lawful heiress of Mr. Michael Snowdon, complicates and impedes Sidney's marriage to Jane and here lies the irony. Gissing, through this novel ,wants to say that both philanthropy and idealism can offer no or little hope in the nether world. Michael's idealism destroys Jane's love for Sidney and makes their marriage almost impossible. [27] The grandfather's good intention, to help the poor in the nether world, is viewed as a curse upon Jane, the poor girl whom Gissing observes has not the "face of a stern heroine" (NW, Part 4, Ch. XXXIII, p. 256).

The failure of Michael Snowdon's idealism lies in the fact that the money which is intended to support or back the poor goes, almost accidentally, to Joseph, Michael's son, who in return loses it in business speculation. [28] Nevertheless, Jane, due to her own goodness,

manages to indulge herself in personal charity. She tries to relieve her poor friend, Pennyloaf Candy and Mrs. Byass, the owner of the lodging house or room, where Jane lives, who is about to lose her husband. [29] To her own disappointment, Jane is and has always been at home in the nether world.

Much like Jane, Sidney, in an attempt to save and pull together what remains of the Hewett family, marries Clara. He marries her out of duty for he feels that he, economically speaking ,is in charge of supporting this family. He, as a friend to the Hewetts, feels that he is obliged to help them and carry their burden of making a living. Due to his nobility, he stands beside them in their hardships and never betrays them. His sense of duty toward the members of the Hewett family is not new for he, from the very beginning, urges and struggles vainly to persuade them to change their place and move to more comfortable lodgings but "it was like contending with some hostile force of nature" (NW, Part 1, Ch. VII, p. 52).

Because of this sense of determinism, that rules Gissing's fictional universe, all of the slum dwellers fail to escape their destiny. They act and live according to the law of the survival of the fittest and the fittest, in The Nether World, are those who are true to self, those who nurture the best qualities of which they are capable while those who actively encourage the vicious qualities and evil , deeply inherent in them , are destroyed. They are destroyed because they have made a hell of their surrounding with their drunkenness, violence, cruelty, criminality and dishonesty. [30]

This very idea has something to do with the epigraph that Gissing takes from the French critic Ernest Renan(1823-1892) to open his book with. It reads as follows:

> La Peinture d'un fumier peut être justifiée pourvu qúily pousse une belle fleur; Sans Cela, le fumier nést que repoussant. [31]
>
> [The painting of the dung can be justified as it helps to produce a beautiful flower otherwise it will remain something disgusting]*

Gissing has used this epigraph, as it seems, to refer to the noble self sacrificial lives of both Jane Snowdon and Sidney Kirkwood who alone in the dung-heap of the nether world remain pure and uncorrupted by greed, rage or selfish desires. [32] In spite of the fact that they are unable to get rid of the miserable condition they live in, they keep to the last their moral nobleness. Through these two characters, Gissing's moral lesson , that he points at the close of the book, is given:

> In each life little for congratulation. He with the ambitions of his youth frustrated; neither an artist, nor a leader of men in the battle for justice. She, no saviour of society by the force of a superb example; no daughter of the people, holding wealth in trust for the people's needs. Yet, to both was their work given. Unmarked, unencouraged save by their love of uprightness and mercy, they stood to the side of those more hapless, brought some comfort to hearts less courageous than their own. Where they abode it was not all dark.
>
> (NW, Part 5, Ch. XL, p. 330)

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* My translation of Renan's epigraph .

Sidney aspires to be an artist but finding himself in a world of inadequate signs, he has to wok as a jeweller, a cruel parodic substitute job for his desire

and talent to be an artist. [33] Despite his sense of complete hopelessness, he can not surrender to what Gissing terms "the brute forces of society". (NW, Part 5, Ch. XL, p.330)

In Jane and Sidney, Gissing's moral message of the need for heroic fortitude is found . Gissing ends the novel with some signs of a hope in humanity, for though Jane and Sidney face sorrow and probable defeat even in their "humble aims", "their lives would remain a protest

against those brute forces of society ,which fill with wreck the abysses of the nether world " (NW,part5,ch.XL,p.330).

Conclusion

Reading George Gissing's novel ,The Nether World , one comes to conclude that one must not succumb to his or her fate . The idea that he tries to project is that though destructive the forces of poverty may be ,one can survive in such a hellish world as the nether world through his or her faith ,meekness , and fortitude ; otherwise he would fall a victim to the forces of nature that would ultimately ruin him .In spite of the horrible and terrifying scenes it pictures ,the novel gives a sense of hope that the future would be better and more encouraging than the present . This is

clearly shown through both Sidney Kirkwood and Jane Snowdon who remain uncontaminated in this drub and corrupt world .

Notes

[1]"Unsigned review" in Gissing: The Critical Heritage ,ed. Pierre Coustillas (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1972) p. 136.

[2] Peter Morton, "George Gissing: a biographical Sketch", URL: http:// www. victorianweb.org/authors/gissing/bio.htm.4/4/2007.

[3] George Gissing, , The Nether World.1889.23/2/2007.< URL: http:// www.lang-nagoya-u.ac.jp/- matsnoka/GG-Nether.html> .Subsequent references will appear in the text.

[4] Adrian Poole, Gissing in Context (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1975) p. 89.

[5] Cited in anonymous, "The Nether World Outline".nd.23/2/2007. <URL: http:// www.uweb.ucsb.edu/-Christyc/nether-world-outline-htm>.

[6] Anonymous , "The Nether World".A Book Review.1996-2007.23/2/2007.< URL:// http://www. Amazon.co.uk/Nether-world-oxford-worlds-classics/dp> .

[7] Raymond Chapman, The Victorian Debate: English Literature and Society (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968) p. 301.

[8] Poole, p. 90.

[9] P.J. Keating, The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971) p. 90.

[10] "Edward Bertz on Gissing" in Gissing :The Critical Heritage, pp. 153,154.

[11] Cited in Jacob Korg "George Gissing: A Critical Biography.1963.23/2/2007.< "URL: http:// www. lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/-matsuoka/GG-Korg-GG.html>.

[12] Poole, p.90.

[13] Keating, p.86.

[14] Herbert J. Muller, Modern Fiction: A Study of Values (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973) p.191.

[15] Cited in F.W. Farrar, a Contemporary Review in Gissing: The Critical Heritage, p.144.

[16] Cited in Adrian Poole Gissing in Context, p.100.

[17] Poole, p.100.

[18] Cited in Herbert J. Muller, p. 190.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Muller, p. 190.

[21] Cited in P. J. Keating, p.54.

[22] Keating, p. 53.

[23] Cited in P.J. Keating, p. 57.

[24] Keating, p. 90.

[25] Michael Wheeler, English Fiction of the Victorian Period 1830-1890 (London: Longman Group Limited, 1985) p.171.

[26]Poole, p.92.

[27] Keating, p.91.

[28] Ibid., p.90.

[29]Poole, p.99.

[30] Jacob Korg, "George Gissing. Dictionary of Literary Biography18.nd.23/2/2007. <URL: http://www.lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/-matsuoka/ GG. DLB.html>.

[31] Cited in Nigel Messenger "The Dung-Heap and the Flower :Gissing's Nether world" .2004.4/4/2007. < URL:http://www. mfo . ac.uk –publication/ actes1/Messenger. htm> .

[32] Messenger .

[33]Poole,

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