Morrison’s Vital Misogyny

In the early 1890s a stark vision of life in the East End emerges from the pens of two writers with a close acquaintance with life there: Arthur Morrison and George Gissing. Morrison was born in Poplar in 1863, the son of an engine fitter who worked on the docks. His father died of consumption when Arthur was a boy, and his mother raised the three children by running a haberdasher’s shop in Grundy Street. Arthur himself took a job early as office boy in the architect’s department of the School Board of London at a weekly salary of seven shillings, and moved up to junior and then “third class” clerk in 1886, when he left to become secretary of the Beaumont Trust, which administered Besant’s People’s Palace. There he started a Dickensian kind of journalistic ascent, publishing pieces on the East End in the Palace Journal, honing his journalistic skills at the evening Globe, and finally attracting attention, like Boz, with the publication in Macmillan’s Magazine (October 1891) of his sketch of “A Street in the East End.”

Morrison underwent, as his brief biography might suggest, an embourgeoisement that takes him beyond his East End roots, and the dialogue that his writings create is with a middle class reading audience. But he saw himself as an authentic voice of the urban slum experience, and his early works provide such a strikingly different version of the East End that they immediately created a small critical sensation. They are unlike the representations of the poor that had dominated the literature for half a century; Morrison rejects the sentimental and the melodramatic for a laconic, unmodulated prose that rarely
rises to a dramatic climax. He portrays a world of gratuitous violence and enervating degradation which offers up no meaning to the middle class reader; it cannot be integrated into the systems of value, psychology, or material relations of the middle class. Morrison’s world seems to be of a different order altogether.

The bourgeois feminine sensibility, which we had seen to be the site of affective connection between the middle class and the urban underclass, through the discourse of sentimentality and abjection, no longer provides a focal point around which to construct even the effect of subjectivity. In “Lizerunt,” the most famous story in Morrison’s first book, *Tales of Mean Streets* (1894), the protagonist, Elizabeth Hunt, differs significantly from the pure and “unexpressive” young women who became the channels for middle class ethical projection. As the corruption of her name to “Lizerunt” signifies, she has scarcely any chance to assert her own integrity and separate identity. Her time as a saucy young flirt, playing the boys off against each other, proves short; she attaches herself to Billy Chope in spite of his viciousness, and descends quickly into a life of steadily increasing degradation, in which she becomes coarsened. Morrison graphically renders the relationships of East End existence that are missing from the earlier journalistic and sociological accounts. They are not uplifting.

... Billy, rising at ten with a bad mouth, resolved to stand no nonsense, and demanded two shillings.

“Two bob? Wot for?” Lizer asked.

“Cos I want it. None o’ yer lip.”

“Ain’t got it,” said Lizer sulkily.

“That’s a bleedin’ lie.”

“Lie yerself.”

“I’ll break y’in ’arves, ye blasted ’eifer!” He ran at her throat and forced her back over a chair. “I’ll pull yer face auf! If y’ don’t give me the money, gawblimy, I’ll do for you!”

Lizer strained and squalled. “Le’ go! You’ll kill me an’ the kid too!” she grunted hoarsely. Billy’s mother ran in and threw her arms about him, dragging him away. “Don’t Billy,” she said, in terror. “Don’t Billy; not now! You’ll get in trouble. Come away! She might go auf, an’ you’d get in trouble!”

Billy Chope flung his wife over and turned to his mother. “Take yer ’ands auf me,” he said: “go on, or I’ll gi’ ye somethin’ for yerself.” And he punched her in the breast by way of illustration. (*Mean Streets* 37–38)
Billy later tries to abuse Lizer within hours after she has given birth to their unwanted baby, and he has to be thrown out of the house by the attending medical student, who is then roundly attacked by both Lizer and Billy’s mother for interfering. The medical student is an outsider who clearly does not understand the code of East End life, which follows its own brutal logic. When Billy’s mother dies from overwork, too poor for a decent burial because he has stolen all her savings, Lizer then feels the full brunt of his meanness. And the story ends with his forcing her into prostitution:

It was more than Billy could bear: so that, “‘Ere,” he said one night, “I’ve ‘ad enough o’ this. You go and get some money; go on.”

“Go an’ git it?” replied Lizer. “O yus. That’s easy, ain’t it? ‘Go an’ git it,’ says you. ‘Ow?”

“Any’ow—I don’t care. Go on.”

“Wy,” replied Lizer, looking up with wide eyes, “d’ye think I can go an’ pick it up in the street?”

“Course you can. Plenty others does, don’t they?”

“Gawd, Billy . . . wot d’ye mean?”

“Wot I say; plenty others does it. Go on—you ain’t so bleed’n’ innocent as all that. Go an’ see Sam Cardew. Go on—’ook it.”

. . . He pushed her into the passage. “Go on—you git me some money, if ye don’t want yer bleed’n’ ead knocked auf.”

There was a scuffle in the dark passage, with certain blows, a few broken words, and a sob. Then, the door slammed and Lizer Chope was in the windy street. (47)

“Lizerunt” follows Rudyard Kipling’s remarkable story, “The Record of Badalia Herodsfoot,” in detailing the “creed and law” that governs slum life. Badalia is recruited into service by the local curate to help distribute alms because she is streetwise enough to spot a fraudulent claim, and because she is not above smashing the face of any woman who tries to steal food or money meant for those in need. The story tells of her struggle between maintaining the trust that has been placed in her, and her adherence to the slum code of womanhood that says she will be faithful to her drunken husband to the end. The struggle proves fatal; her husband beats her mercilessly in an attempt to get the alms-money out of her. Yet even on her deathbed she refuses to accuse him—thus keeping both “trusts.”

Morrison and Kipling sketch out an East End that is more complexly—and fatalistically—coded than that of earlier accounts. It is no
longer a land of shadows cast by the projections of middle class subjectivity, no longer a terra incognita to be read in line with the dominant class anxieties and desires. It constitutes its own social order: a subsystem of gender relations that exert a power within their own domain that cannot be interpolated into bourgeois categories of self-agency. The slums of Morrison and Kipling acquire a density of customs and personal patterns that had rarely been observed in earlier accounts, as if, in Morrison’s case especially, there were an effort to say that the East End is not simply an object of upper class anxiety or domination, but an entity in and of itself. At the same time that he suggests this, Morrison also insists upon the enclosed, immobilizing fatality of that world; its immersion in violence, its deadened submission to poverty, its constricting social containment. The vicious circularity of the poor is symptomized by the frequent set pieces of Amazonian brawls between women, such as this one from a later Morrison work:

Down the middle of Old Jago Street came Sally Green: red-faced, stripped to the waist, dancing, hoarse and triumphant. Nail-scores wide as the finger striped her back, her face, and her throat, and she had a black eye; but in one great hand she dangled a long bunch of clotted hair, as she whooped defiance to the Jago. It was a trophy newly rent from the scalp of Norah Walsh, champion of the Rann womenkind, who had crawled away to hide her blighted head, and be restored with gin. (Jago 64)

For all the efforts of social services to confirm the woman as the ethical center of lower class life, she turns out, in many of these stories, to be as uncontrollable as the men, at her worst, or too passive to resist her own victimization, at her best. Morrison always insisted that the code of respectability was strong among the lower orders, yet his writings often show it to be a fragile creed. In the haunting tale in Mean Streets entitled “Behind the Shade,” a woman and her daughter try to maintain a respectable life in the East End slums, keeping a neat, private little house, symbolically set off from its neighbors by the well-dusted shade of fruit in the front window. “They are known at once for well-to-do, and are regarded with the admixture of spite and respect that is proper to the circumstances. They are also watched” (75). The two women offer piano lessons, but no one signs on, and gradually, ineluctably, they sink down the social scale, taking in cheap shirts for sewing, then sneaking out in the dark of night to pawn their belongings, spied on and resented all the while by the vengeful neighborhood.
Finally, they are not seen to emerge from the neat little house at all, and dust begins to accumulate on the shade of fruit. When the landlord comes to collect the rent he finds that “in the front room with the striped blind and the short curtain there was a bed of rags and old newspapers; also a wooden box, and on each of these was a dead woman. Both deaths, the doctor found, were from syncope, the result of inanition; and the better-nourished woman—she on the bed—had died the sooner; perhaps by a day or two. The other case was rather curious; it exhibited a degree of shrinkage in the digestive organs unprecedented in his experience” (81–82).

In a state of economic stagnation and social isolation such as Morrison’s East End there is no larger economic and social context in which to project their aspirations or into which they can integrate their activities. All the economic forms available to them, such as rent gouging, fencing of stolen goods, counterfeiting of coin, and prostitution, are unproductive, and almost parodic of generative commercial and capitalistic activity. They are, in fact, in only a tangential and marginal relationship to the dominant economy of the city, serving to keep slum dwellers out of any paths for economic or social improvement, caught instead in the circularity of exploitation of themselves and others. Counterfeiting, one of the most lucrative of slum activities during this period, is symbolic of the incapacity of the lower orders to introduce themselves into the real, larger market and labor economy; they can only create false coin. Hence the urban poor do not have any referentiality with respect to the middle and upper classes. It is interesting to compare Morrison’s accounts of life in the East End in the 1880s and 1890s (and, as we shall see, the similar account by another denizen of the worst of these slums, Arthur Harding) with Robert Roberts’ recollections of life in the Manchester slum of Salford in the twentieth century, recounted in The Classic Slum. Roberts, who grew up in poverty, depicts the subculture as one with certain petit bourgeois characteristics, particularly a closely bonded home life—a kind of lower class privatization—that integrates their experience into middle class norms in ways that are absent in Mean Streets. Richard Hoggart’s portrayal of twentieth century lower class life in The Uses of Literacy also reflects a substantially greater involvement in the material preoccupations of the upper classes, almost a kind of measuring of slum life by the standards of middle class life, in a well-defined “us” and “them” mentality.

The conditions of Morrison’s East End not only diminish the capacity of women to act as ethical forces in family and neighborhood; the economic isolation of the slums also eliminates the woman as a figure
of commodity desire. Ironically, the objectifying in the upper classes of women into fetishes of style, beauty, even spiritual worth, transposes them into symbols of social and economic status and advancement. Clearly this is a form of dehumanization, but it has the effect of masking or finessing whatever subjection of the women that is occurring. In a subsociety, such as Morrison’s urban slums, in which women cannot be conceived as icons of aesthetic or ethical value because there is no role for such values in the social order—no possibilities for women to be the means of financial or social improvement, no function for them to fulfill as the conservers of money and ideals—their status will be severely reduced. They lack especially the openness to emotional experience which grounds their relative moral superiority to males, according to the complementary gender codes constructed for the middle class household (Tosh 44).

Correspondingly, the diminishment of women refigures the literary form, for the heroine as the register of morality, and as the focal point at which aesthetic and social ideals were brought together, had been essential to the mainstream English novel itself. The great experiment in the naturalist novel of the lower classes—Emile Zola’s L’Assomoir, Edmond and Jules de Goncourt’s Germinie Lacerteux, and George Moore’s Esther Waters—had been to dramatize the moral and emotional issues of poverty and struggle through women whose victimization, and in some cases, personal weaknesses, stripped them of much of the aural power of the conventional heroine. Moore, in particular, compensated by sentimentalizing his heroine, and it is telling that the prominent English example relies on the bourgeois ethos of feeling to sustain a measure of attraction to his protagonist. Morrison will have none of that, and, as a consequence, his writing in Mean Streets has different rhetorical rhythms; it resembles in many respects the uninflected, neutral style of Margaret Harkness’ A City Girl.

The circumstances of life in the slums affect the possibilities for writing a traditional masculine text as well. The wave of optimism that prevailed at the beginning of the Victorian period, and which allowed the writers of Mayhew’s generation to balance all their misgivings about the rapaciousness of the new competitive order and the loss of scope for mythicized action in men’s lives against the excitement of change and social mobility (some of it based directly on those new competitive possibilities), has disappeared from the scene of lower class London. The dynamism that converts the somewhat puerile fantasy of masculine adventure and power into a vibrant, if often bizarre, scene of small entrepreneurialism and vivid sensory impressions, is
gone. In its place is misogyny. The lower classes had always been depicted as misogynist, and we are quite aware how poverty leads to abuse and the self-hatred that goes with it, but the East End of Morrison’s and Kipling’s streets is the logical deterioration of the propensities of the illusory, gender-fixed compensations of the 1840s and 1850s representations of an alternative underworld. The failure—or perhaps the word is reluctance—of the male imagination to bring into play any ethicizing spirit to its imaginative penetrations of the urban depths leaves its later versions bereft, Morrison shows us, of means to reconceive the relationships of the poor. The misogynist social texts that we get of the slums thus also undermine any attempt to construct a generative male subjectivity. Morrison’s male protagonists are to a man unfulfilled, fated to frustration. Economic and social conditions force this upon them, but the inchoate natures of all the characters indicate that a full, mutually interdependent code of subject construction is absent.

A system such as that of the middle class, in which a female ethical subject balances and validates the agency that is granted to the male, is missing in the nether world. This is, after all, the primary reason that the myth of a realm of primarily male adventure and “freedom” cannot be represented except in the hermetic form of the boys’ adventure story, in which the protagonist never has to come of age. There is something of the same limitation in Morrison’s novels about the slums, all of which focus on boyhood and young adolescence. It is only natural, in a way, that Morrison should turn to some form of the Bildungsroman for his accounts of life in the East End, since the likely course that the slum culture would take would be to imitate the middle class in its effort to establish for itself a masculine-based, if not patriarchal, order. The Bildungsroman is the form that epitomizes that effort, and we can surmise that Arthur Morrison had in mind, as a kind of model, the century’s best known book about poverty, Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*. Morrison’s most famous and most compelling book on East End life, *The Child of the Jago* (1896), and his later novels touching on the urban slums, *To London Town* (1899) and *The Hole in the Wall* (1902), focus, therefore, on the issue of the formation of the male in the slums: the classic patriarchal story. Tellingly enough, the protagonist in each of these novels is a boy, as if to indicate that mature or “full” subjectivity is either never attained or difficult to imagine in lower urban existence. Morrison selected as his setting for *A Child of the Jago* one of the most anarchic and violent quarters of the East End, the Old Nichol area in Bethnal Green, a nest of streets just to the East of what is now
Shoreditch High Street (about ten blocks north of Liverpool Station). The Old Nichol (which Morrison calls “The Jago”) was known as the warren of some of the most impoverished and depraved wretches in London, a pocket of narrow streets and courts that was on the verge of being demolished by the London County Council in the 1890s. Morrison spent 18 months there, gathering impressions under the tutelage of the Reverend Arthur Osborne Jay, a well regarded and intrepid slum minister. In a later interview with The Daily News, Morrison contended that the “majority of the Jago people are semi-criminal, and an ordinary respectable working man would quickly be hounded out . . .” (“The Children” 6).

Morrison’s Jago denizens eke out an existence in robbery, burglary, picking pockets, or “coshing” unwary strangers (a “cosh” is an iron bar); the women survive by making match boxes or through other marginal activities. The men and women entertain themselves with massive and bloody brawls between rival gangs, and A Child of the Jago has several unforgettable accounts of the pitched battles between the Ranns and the Learys, which rage back and forth throughout the novel, including one titanic boxing match involving the protagonist’s father, Josh Perrott. There is no quarter given to delicate Victorian sensibilities in Jago and the popularity of the novel was only matched by the critical outrage over its alleged grossness. Yet the violence is so spectacular, and so emblematic of the ferocity that comes out of lives of depravity and idleness, that the pathology becomes symbolic. The opening chapter establishes an atmosphere in which the specific details—of the restlessness in the Jago on a typical night, as a victim is coshed and robbed—are transposed into a symbolic setting: “Old Jago Street lay black and close under the quivering red sky: and slinking forms, as of great rats, followed one another quickly between the posts in the gut by the High Street, and scattered over the Jago” (45). Even the violated human body auratically conveys a social pathology:

Out in the Jago the pale dawn brought a cooler air and the chance of sleep. From the paving of Old Jago Street sad grey faces, open-mouthed, looked upward as from the Valley of Dry Bones. Down by Jago Row the coshed subject, with the blood dry on his face, felt the colder air, and moved a leg. (52)

The ostensible protagonist of the story is the Child of the Jago, Dickie Perrott, who roams its streets, participating in its random violence, its crime, and its occasional play. He is a lad of strong familial
instincts, attached to his younger sister, but he shares some of the
community’s meanness, especially toward a crippled boy, Bobby Roper,
who becomes Dickie’s nemesis and stands for the perverse crippling of
Dickie’s own conscience. Under the influence of Father Sturt (modeled
after Arthur Osborne Jay), Dickie makes one effort to go straight and
work his way out of the Jago, but it is condemned to failure. Indeed,
any effort to get out of the Jago, by virtuous work or by crime, is
doomed, and the “moral” of the story is intoned by “old Beveridge,
regarded . . . as a trifle ‘balmy,’ though anything but a fool,” who
points to a gathering of the super-criminals, the High Mobsmen, and
tells Dickie,

“Now, Dickie Perrott, you Jago whelp, look at them—look hard. Some
day, if you’re clever—cleverer than anyone in the Jago now—if you’re
only scoundrel enough, and brazen enough, and lucky enough—one of
a thousand—maybe you’ll be like them: bursting with high living,
drunk when you like, red and pimply. There it is—that’s your aim in
life—there’s your pattern. Learn to read and write, learn all you can,
learn cunning, spare nobody and stop at nothing, and perhaps—It’s
the best the world has for you, for the Jago’s got you, and that’s the
only way out, except gaol and the gallows. So do your devilmost, or
God help you, Dicky Perrott, though He won’t: for the Jago’s got you!”
(95–96)

If the only way out of the Jago is to emulate the High Mobsmen, it
is a route through a parodic Jago-vision of the “better world” of money
and power. “Those of the High Mob were the flourishing practitioners
of burglary, the mag, the mace, and the broads, with an outer fringe of
such dippers—such pickpockets—as could dress well, welshers, and
snidesmen. These, the grandees of rascality, lived in places far from the
Jago, and some drove in gigs and pony traps” (95). The Mobsmen and
their circle mimic and exaggerate upper class clothing and upper class
airs—those with their gigs and pony traps—and parade before their
inferiors a bizarre parody of privilege and grand manners. Their affectations transmit the felt presence of upper class power—they play out
a crude image of another realm of life—but they have the upper class
codes all wrong. Such mimicry attests to the force of upper class cul-
tural expression, but it does not connect with it, surely, in the ways that
Besant and his fellow “improvers” had in mind. For its exaggeration
spectacularizes the styles and practices of the dominant social order. In
the twentieth century such mimicry will, in the hands of some lower
class groups, provide an oblique means of resistance, for it will denature the higher culture and continuously pull it down into the realms of popular culture, which is itself spectacularized and often split free from any authentic social and psychic context. In Morrison’s Jago, however, mimicry only confirms the inaccessibility of the upper class life. The best the poor can do is parrot it (hence the name Perrott) without comprehending it. The life of the classes above cannot be imaginatively grasped in its reality; emulation of it in such terms only produces a travesty.

Here, once again, the absence of a vital counterdiscourse through which to contextualize the urban slum dweller’s sensibility is telling. Jean-Paul Sartre describes the process by which the middle class in France initially used reflection and then mimicry to set themselves literally apart from the upper classes. Bourgeois figures attached to the Court and the nobility in the seventeenth century began with a body of literature, Sartre says, that served essentially as a flattering mirror for their patrons in the aristocracy. Seeing themselves rendered positively, however, compelled the upper class to stand “outside” themselves, and even the bourgeois “writer, though completely assimilated by the oppressing class, is by no means its accomplice; his work is unquestionably a liberator since its effect, within this class, is to free man from himself” (Sartre 91). Middle class court writing evolved over the course of the next century from a reflective and complimentary art to a form of mimicry and then of satire, developing into a powerful tool for the assertion of bourgeois consciousness and its resistance to aristocratic forms. That evolution took place, however, in the broader context of developing middle class moralism, and of the complex social discourse that we call the formation of the middle class, with its own values, social and economic relations, and philosophy. Mimicry served as a means of appropriating the manners and exercises of power into bourgeois discourse, and it opened up a literary space within which a subordinate class could insinuate its critiques and could assert its differences.

Morrison is uncompromising in rejecting these possibilities for the urban poor. The “mind” of the East Ender, Morrison wrote in Mean Streets, “is unfavourable to the ideal” (28). Its capacity for imaginative projection is distorted by its paranoia toward the upper classes and by the restricted mentality of slum existence. Father Sturt, as a man from that outer world, is regarded as something of a “toff,” and thus as a man of awesome power. He embodies the force of the hostile upper class social order. “[I]t was the way of the Jago that its mean cunning
saw a mystery and a terror where simple intelligence saw there was none” (83). Swept up in the centrifugal vortex of its ignorance and self-violence, the Jago denizen cannot conceive of the alternative world in a way that would allow him or her discursive access to it. It is as if the two spheres—the urban slums and the social world above it—are sealed off from each other, psychologically, socially, and economically.

Nor has the Jago male the experiential dimension to allow him to transcend the limitations of his own existence in the world of Morrison. Josh Perrott, desperate to make a “click”—a good robbery—takes a train out to the northern suburbs in order to find choicer prospects. It is a hapless adventure, for Josh cannot “read” this alien territory; it is uninterpretable. Tired and footsore from tramping about strange neighborhoods, he breaks into a suburban house, slugs the old man who lives there and steals a watch. The heavy hand of irony slams down upon him, for his victim is the highest of the Mob, a man who has clothed himself in respectability but actually finances much of London crime. The word goes out to every dealer in the City to be on the lookout for the stolen watch, and Josh is nabbed the minute he tries to fence it. The poor fellow could not even spot an arch-criminal among the suburban fauna; he is totally unable to interpret the society that lies outside his own narrow realm. Again and again we witness the inability of the slum dweller to understand the outside world, and this deprives him of the knowing quality, and of the capacity for irony, that would turn his mimicry of that other world into something other than parody.

Josh himself can be seen as a projection of Dickie; he is the grown Child of the Jago, a living illustration of the futile impotence of masculinity within the nether world. After serving time for the theft of the watch, Josh takes vengeance on the man who betrayed him, the conniving Jago fence for stolen goods, Aaron Weech. Josh slits Weech’s throat and takes almost no care to do it quietly, so he is cornered by police and vengeful citizens, chased through the maze of back alleys and darkened streets, and hunted down at last in an excavation where part of the Jago is being torn down for Council buildings. His hallucinatory efforts to find his way in the confusion of the Jago landscape, being hemmed in on all sides by pursuers, is further emblematic of the inability to “escape” the Jago, as the text dissolves into nightmare in order to communicate that the entrapment is psychological as much as physical. There is no way to get out of the Jago, as the crazy Beveridge warned, except through death, and Dickie Perrott falls soon afterward by flinging himself suicidally into a gang fight where he is stabbed from behind by his alter-ego, the hunchback Bobby Roper. The sym-
bolic image of the inward torque of the Jago—and by extension the vast realm of the urban underworld—is manifest.

In addition, the nether world is spun around—tempted and betrayed by the regressive economic forms of the consumer economy. Josh Perrott is tried and sentenced to death by hanging for the murder of Aaron Weech, but his last days are all mental confusion for him, during which he finds himself curiously detached from his circumstances. As he sits in the courtroom at his trial,

The judge stopped a witness to speak of a draught from a window. Josh Perrott watched the shutting of the window—they did it with a cord. He had not noticed a draught himself. But pigeons were flying outside the panes and resting on the chimney-stacks. Pud Palmer tried to keep pigeons in Jago Row, but one morning the trap was found empty. A poulterer gave fourpence each for them. They were ticketed at eighteenpence a pair in the shop, and that was fivepence profit apiece for the poulterer. Ten-pence a pair profit on eleven pairs was nearly ten shillings—ten shillings all but tenpence. They wouldn’t have given any more in Club Row. A man had a four-legged linnet in Club Row, but there was a show in Bethnal Green Road with a two-headed sheep. It was outside there that Ginger Stagg was pinched for lob-crawling. And so on, and so on, till his head buzzed again. (194–95)

Josh’s head buzzes with the financial complexities of the pricing of stolen birds: the profit of the fence who resells the pigeons for a vastly greater sum, the implicit swindling of the thief who takes all the risks, and so on, and so on. For the economic order of the Jago revolves among the trapping of an animal (a bird, whose connection with Perrott is of course clear), the theft of it, the fencing of it, the reselling of it at an exorbitant mark-up. There is no production in this system; it is a round of exploitation. Nothing is created or enhanced in such an economic order, for fencing and pawning, the chief resources of the lowest margins of humanity, involve a kind of complicity in the exploitation of one’s self, the paying out of one’s economic entrails. The apparently illogical association of the story of the pigeons with the displaying of two freaks, a four-legged linnet and a two-headed sheep, in the “upper class” Club Row connects the economically abasing order of slum existence to its parodic conception of the outside world. The relation of the Jago to the dominant order is that of a freak show.

As can be seen, a world such as that of the Jago can only be represented symbolically. It cannot be accommodated to the middle class
program of representation of the urban slums because it presents us with a subsociety that is almost totally alienated from the mores that underlie that representation. Morrison’s Jago is not a part of the cultural continuum proposed by middle class observers such as Besant and the settlement movement reformers; the denizens of the East End are almost to an individual cut off from the possibilities of the transformation of one’s status that is central to the ideal of acculturation. Similarly, they do not share the ethicizing ethos that informs English middle class practice, for that ethical conviction is directly related to the possibilities of economic security and advancement—possibilities largely denied the poor. Bourgeois ethics presume the potential for self-improvement, and they are calibrated in Victorian society to the exercise of power, both as the mediating element determining the appropriate (and just) exercise of power, and as the hegemonic discourse that instructs those who are powerless in ways that make them orderly and content with their lot. When, as is the case with the Jago, the economic order produces no transformative (and potentially ameliorating) effects, when it exists only in a self-reflexive, regressively parodic version of itself, then the impulse to ethicize one’s relation to it is minimal. The Jago, then, proves intractable to the programs of upper class “reform.”

A social formation so detached from the prevalent order can, however, be conceived symbolically. This was, as it turned out, the very thing that Morrison’s middle class reviewers refused to allow him to do. The minute they read the disquieting book, they called it a “realistic” novel. And by “realism” they meant the English literary establishment’s conception of “naturalism,” a literature that dealt with lower social orders, with distasteful and debasing material, and that was characterized by graphic detail, violence, and physicality.  

Emile Zola’s philosophy of naturalism, after all, had been predicated upon the inscription of the lower classes into the prevalent economic order, even if the working classes and the marginal poor were to fail to succeed in that order. “Man is not alone; he lives in society, in a social condition,” Zola insists in his seminal essay, “The Experimental Novel.” “And this is what constitutes the experimental [naturalist] novel: . . . finally to exhibit man living in social conditions produced by himself, which he modifies daily, and in the heart of which he himself experiences a continual transformation.” The Rougon Macquart series depicted lower class individuals in a wide range of factory and lower commercial work of the modern industrial society, and was designed to interpret
“scientifically” the relationship of the lower spheres to the upper. In his conviction that “in this way we shall construct a practical sociology, and our work will be a help to political and economical sciences,” Zola clearly facilitates the appropriation (and thus the hegemonizing) of the lower classes by the middle class. He gives the novel a “use value,” as it were. “The social circulus is identical with the vital circulus; in society, as in human beings, a solidarity exists which unites the different members and the different organisms in such a way that if one organ becomes rotten many others are tainted and a very complicated disease results” (Zola 12, 15, 16). Arthur Morrison may share that aspiration to some extent in unfolding the traumatized condition of the worst urban slums, but he confronts his audience with a society that cannot be readily appropriated within the conventional ethical schemes; the voice of the slums is disturbingly alienated; its economy cut off from the larger economy; its denizens geographically isolated.

The late nineteenth century English debate over realism and naturalism, then, involves much more than literary taste and style: it embodies the effort by the cultural establishment to assure that all depiction and expression of lower class life will be kept within the power of the middle class to assimilate it and represent it. One of the major pitched battles occurred between Morrison and the prominent literary critic H. D. Traill, and it is worth pursuing briefly because it focuses the issues at stake. Remarkably enough, Traill perceives at some level that Jago is a symbolic text, and it makes him so uneasy that he rushes to dismiss the possibility. He acknowledges that what “has most astonished” him “is the impression of extraordinary unreality which, taken as a whole, [the novel] leaves behind it. To a critic opposed to the theories and methods of so-called realism, this is naturally rather disconcerting.” Girded to show that the realism of Jago has sacrificed art for a false and exaggerated naturalism, Traill “comes out from the Jago with the feelings, not, as he had expected, of a man who has just paid a visit to the actual district under the protection of the police, but of one who has just awakened from the dream of a prolonged sojourn in some fairyland of horror. This, to be sure, may be the effect which Mr. Morrison desired to produce: it is certainly not difficult, I think, to show that his methods are distinctly calculated to produce it; but then those methods cannot be exactly the methods which the realist professes to employ, nor that effect at which he is commonly supposed to aim” (“The New Fiction” 9–10). Traill insists that Morrison’s work be treated as realism, that it be measured by representational fidelity, and
be shown to be untrue to actuality. “But I will make bold to say that as described by Mr. Morrison—described, that is to say as a place of which, with [a] half-dozen exceptions . . . every single inhabitant out of ‘swarming thousands’ is either a thief, or a harlot, or a ‘cosher’ or a decoy, or a ‘fence,’ or a professional mendicant—it never did and never could exist . . . If it is not what you would have actually found in exploring the Jago, it is no doubt what you might have found if all London had happened to pour its manifold streams of corruption into that particular sentina” (“The New Fiction” 13–14).

Several things bother Traill here. First, he rejects Morrison’s premise that the urban slums constitute a fully fleshed out subsociety, with its own set of codes antithetical to bourgeois norms for the lower classes. Second, he recoils from the notion that there might be a place where people live who cannot be reached and redeemed by either sentiment or economic “logic.” Realism for Traill (and others of his time) means that characters will always stand in for human subjects, and by this he means figures whose sensibilities are registered on terms readily associated with middle class values: who desire what we desire. And finally, Traill’s determination to categorize Morrison as a “realist” will assure that Morrison’s vision will always be grounded in material terms. An apparent paradox exists here, for we would assume that any literature so graphic and mired in gross physical details as Morrison’s is, would be materialistic. Yet we have observed his insistence on a symbolic register for works such as A Child of the Jago. What he is resisting is an absorption of the nether world into the specific materialistic program of middle class representation. For we have seen that the dominant class can, in its scheme of representation, categorize and organize the urban poor through material criteria, specifically spatialized criteria. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the slums were being dealt with primarily through demolition of their neighborhoods, installation of their inhabitants in Council housing, and regimentation of their places of habitation (see Wohl 92–108). While Dickens tried to create a nexus between rich and poor on emotional terms, his successors did it through their insistence that the poorer classes will improve only if they live like their betters, in clean, well lighted rooms, in cheaper versions of middle class space. Within those spaces they should then begin to accumulate furniture and goods that will introduce them into the material consumer system. As the lower classes share those material desires, they will enter into the prevalent value system.¹

Morrison’s Jago is not accessible to that scheme. The physical
details in his novel attest, paradoxically, to the estrangement of the lower classes. Amy Kaplan has noted this in American realist works, saying that they “often assume a world which lacks solidity, and the weightiness of descriptive detail—one of the most common characteristics of the realistic text—often appears in inverse proportion to a sense of insubstantiality, as though description could pin down the objects of an unfamiliar world to make it real” (Kaplan 9). The spareness of Morrison’s prose, its starkness—held in place only by a half-Dickensian ironic narrative commentary—constitute not realism, at least as the English and French middle class literary culture knew it, but a symbolic text. So disturbing is his version of slum existence, so alien, so intractable is it to middle class representation and hegemonizing, that he has to contend with the charges that what he describes isn’t there.

Consequently, an almost absurd exchange took place between Morrison and his supporters and Traill and his. The publication of Traill’s essay on Morrison in his book, The New Fiction, was accompanied by a letter from a Mr. Woodland Erlebach, “who speaks from a thirty years’ acquaintance with the district (Mr. Morrison’s Jago),” and who writes, “I boldly say that the district, though bad enough, was not even thirty years ago so hopelessly bad and vile as this book paints it.” Traill then appends the names and addresses of eight other people who had written letters protesting Morrison’s picture of the East End (Traill 25–26). Morrison, for his part, rallied Arthur Osborne Jay to his defense, and argued his bona fides in The Daily News interview. In a separate article titled “What is a Realist?” in the New Review, he summed up all the strategies used against him:

There is a story current in the East End of London, of a distracted lady who, assailed with a request for the loan of a saucepan, defended herself in these words:—“Tell yer mother I can’t lend ’er the saucepan, conseknife o’ ’avin lent it to Mrs. Brown, besides which I’m a-usin’ of it meself, an’ moreover it’s gone to be mended, and what’s more I ain’t got one.” In a like spirit of lavish objection it has been proclaimed in a breath that I transgress:—because in the first place I should not have written about the Jago in its nakedness; next, that my description is not in the least like; moreover, that it is exaggerated; further, that though it may be true, it was quite unnecessary, because the Jago was already quite familiar, and everybody knew all about it; beyond this, that the Jago houses have been pulled down; and finally that there never was any such place as the Jago.5
Ironically, one of the strongest testimonies to Morrison’s accuracy in representing the Old Nichol and the East End appeared in print a few years ago, when the historian Raphael Samuel published *East End Underworld: Chapters in the Life of Arthur Harding*, described as a first hand account by the “last man alive to have been brought up in the ‘Jago.’” The volume grows out of a series of interviews with Harding, told in his own voice. Harding confirms that “the Nichol was something like a ghetto. . . . The whole district bore an evil reputation and was regarded by the working-class people of Bethnal Green as so disreputable that they avoided contact with the people who lived in the Nichol.” His family could have fitted easily into a *Mean Streets* sketch, for his mother was crippled with a hip injury and was for a long time an alcoholic; his father, sometimes known as “Flash Harry,” was generally shiftless, a ladies’ man, picking up odd jobs. “Victorian husbands of the working class were very ignorant and brutal in their treatment of their women, and during my early years I often saw the results of a row upon my mother’s face” (21). Early childhood was a time of petty mischief and of shameless begging: “The writers of that period, even Dickens never made proper use of children—how clever children are. Some children are born actors, there’s no argument about it, they can cry at will. All they had to do was see someone well-dressed coming along and they’d turn the tap on: ‘I’ve had nothing to eat all day’” (47). Harding himself graduated quickly to crime, moving from pick-pocketing to armed hold-ups, protection rackets, and territorial wars. He served a good deal of time in prison, and Samuel quotes a 1907 report of the Royal Commission on the Metropolitan Police describing him “as the ‘king’ or ‘captain’ of the Brick Lane van-draggers—‘a most slippery and dangerous criminal’ (according to the testimony of a local police inspector)” (vii). One of his later haunts, Brick Lane (now a flourishing Bangladeshi restaurant district), is possessed by all the horrors of Morrison’s Jago: “In the back alleys there was garroting—some of the brides [prostitutes] would lumber a seaman while he was drunk and then he would be dropped—‘stringing someone up’ was the slang phrase for it” (107). “May I say that [two men he knew] were more like animals—and wild animals at that—than human beings. They inflicted terrible injuries on each other. China Bob had many scars and half-healed cuts upon his body, he smelt of decaying flesh.” Even Sally Green lives again:

Another character who haunted Brick Lane at that time was Biddy the Chiver. She and China Bob were natural enemies—he inflicted injuries
upon her with his little hatchet what he carried about in his inside pocket. Biddy would have a go at anything, ‘lumbering’ a man and all the rest of it. . . . She’d terrorise all them people who got a living from lumbering sailors and that kind of thing. Men as well as women were afraid of her. With her, you couldn’t be sure you would get away with superficial wounds. (107)

Harding survives into the late twentieth century because he is ultimately able to penetrate the world outside the slums. Although his excursions into respectable neighborhoods are often repelled, as Josh Perrott’s venture was, Harding thrives over the long stretch of time by his wits, unscrupulousness, and a certain wily caution, becoming a figure recognizable to readers of cockney working class fare. He emerges in Samuel’s record as something of a “colorful character,” in contrast to the fatally depressed lot of Morrison’s *Mean Streets* and *Jago*. In part this reflects the evolution of the East End itself in the twentieth century: the First World War not only absorbed the surplus of lower class young men—decimating that class in the trenches—but it also brought home a brief wave of prosperity through soldier’s salaries. That prosperity was to end with the hungry ’thirties, but it was enough to set up Harding as a wardrobe dealer and later a gold and silver dealer. The journalist Clarence Rook tried to follow in the line of Arthur Morrison in his book *The Hooligan Nights* (1899), a reputedly first hand account of the life of a young criminal named Alf, from the slums of South London. Rook seemed prepared for some of the same objections to his “realism,” for he stresses in the Preface that “This is neither a novel, nor in any sense a work of imagination. Whatever value or interest the following chapters possess must come from the fact that their hero has a real existence. . . .” Rook goes on, however, to paint a picture of a slum career with a romance to it that is a long way from Dickie Perrott’s existence:

When the *Daily Chronicle* published portions of the history of young Alf early in the year the editor received numerous complaints from well-meaning people who protested that I had painted the life of a criminal in alluring colours. They forgot, I presume, that young Alf was a study in reality, and that in real life the villain does not invariably come to grief before he has come of age. Poetic justice demands that young Alf should be very unhappy; as a matter of fact, he is nothing of the sort. And when you come to think of it, he has had a livelier time than the average clerk on a limited number of shillings a week. He
does not know what it is to be bored. Every day has its interests, and every day has its possibility of the unexpected, which is just what the steady honest worker misses. (Rook vi–vii)

Young Alf is something of an original: he was trained as a boy by an acrobat to be able to creep about in absolutely complete silence; he modeled himself after South London’s Patrick Hooligan, with whom, “as with the lives of Buddha and of Mahomet, legend has been at work” (14); and he apprenticed himself to the celebrated Billy the Snide, the most accomplished passer of false coin of his time. He lives a life along the undersides of society that often approaches, in Peter Keating’s term, the “pastoral” in its freedom from moral self-doubt and in its removal from the harsh realities of the economic system. Alf glides in and out of Rook’s view at times like a phantom, losing himself in back alleys, stairways, and the crowded stalls of the South London slums. He insinuates himself upon victims through his charm, and eludes capture by the same means: in one bold house burglary he saves a baby from choking to death on its nightdress, and is toasted with wine by its grateful parents, the burglary victims. The Artful Dodger lives again.

A similar romanticism creeps into another Morrison-inspired novel, W. Somerset Maugham’s early work *Liza of Lambeth*. Liza, though a product of the margins of the slums and the lower working classes, charms the reader in ways that no denizen of the urban depths had done before her:

It was a young girl of about eighteen, with dark eyes, and an enormous fringe, puffed-out and curled and frizzed, covering her whole forehead from side to side, and coming down to meet her eyebrows. She was dressed in brilliant violet, with great lappets of velvet, and she had on her head an enormous black hat covered with feathers. . . .

Liza had been so intent on her new dress and the comment it was exciting that she had not noticed the organ.

“Oo, I say, let’s ‘ave some dancin,” she said as soon as she saw it.

“Come on, Sally,” she added, to one of the girls, “you an’ me’l dance togerther. Grind away, old cock!” (Maugham 8, 9)

Spirited, genial, fun-loving, engagingly flamboyant in dress and gesture, Liza is perhaps the most affecting figure in late nineteenth century representations of the poor. Yet the dark futility of the slums quickly casts its shadow upon her. She proves vulnerable to the charms of a
married man, who will not leave his family to marry her, and she is
turned into a pariah among the Lambeth lower working class. Caught
up in an awful determinism, she slips into social ruin, finally beaten so
severely by her lover’s wife, in one of those celebrated fights among
women which seemed to have become staples of the novel of the lower
classes after Zola and Morrison, that she miscarries the child she is car-
yring, and dies of the attendant complications. The paradigm is similar
to that of a Mean Streets story, but the difference is that a winsome, vital
figure emerges briefly in the portrait of Liza. A personality is created,
and possibilities for self-definition are suggested, as if in an effort to
open up a space for a gentler, happier experience among the lowest of
the working classes and the urban poor. Liza has time to dream, to fall
in love, to play cricket in the streets with the neighborhood children, to
go off with her boyfriend on a lively, pleasurable bank holiday excur-
sion. Maugham, who observed many of the conditions of Lambeth
poverty during his years there as a medical student and clerk to physi-
cians, shared some of Morrison’s pessimism about the bridging of
social spheres—and Liza’s death symbolizes the futility of it—yet the
tenor of Liza of Lambeth differs greatly from that of “Lizerunt.” A new
element has been infused into the line of slum novels so dramatically
begun by Morrison. Just as Alf’s joie de vivre absolves us from the
depressing fatality of poverty and petty criminality, so we can find
solace in Liza’s sharing of the same desires that any lower middle class
girl might. Her instinctive good-heartedness can pass for a lower class
version of ethics; she is potentially redeemable, transformable within
the system. The fact that she cannot rise above her blighted circum-
stances may make her, in an odd way, more comforting to the reader,
for she enacts the myth that the lower classes share bourgeois English
traits and are resigned to exercise them in even the most unpromising
of circumstances.  

Rook’s and Maugham’s novels belong to the line of late-nineteenth-
century literature that Peter Keating categorizes as the cockney school of
novel. These novels generally dealt with the urban lower working class,
and only occasionally with the hard core poor, but they proved to have
a greater influence on the nature of the fiction of the lower class than
Morrison’s graphic accounts, largely because they provide a means of
constructing lower class life in formulas recognizable to the upper stra-
ta. The writers of the cockney school, such as Henry Nevinson and
Edwin Pugh, created an individual subject that could be brought with-
in the hegemonizing of middle class English culture. “Because of [the
cockney’s] determination to remain free,” Keating writes, “he has
developed the ability to take whatever life has to offer without complaint; take it wittily, cheerfully or philosophically. Such a man is of inestimable use to a democratic society. So long as his wit, drunkenness, violence, sentimentality and love of freedom are expressed in individual terms, he is socially harmless; so long as these qualities are viewed from a distance he is even attractive and picturesque” (Working Classes 221). He epitomizes, in Regenia Gagnier’s words, the optimistic liberal view that the lower class individual is “an apparently autonomous and universal human spirit.” The cockney is typecast as the English “common man”: individualistic, spirited, jingoistic, hard-playing, blunt, beef-eating, beer-drinking, and for all that, ultimately law abiding. Certainly the portrait has its truth value—all the visitors to the working class areas in the East End attest to its vital popular culture and to the remarkable resilience of the people—but one is reminded of the critique by the Frankfurt school that mass culture transforms originally realistic accounts into representations that one can read as repetitive diversions which present no danger to the dominant system. More recently we have seen further evidence of how the jingoism of the turn of the century working class was produced through careful stage-management by middle class writers, editors, and political leaders. In her recent book on the Boer War, Paula Krebs discusses how the arrival of news of the relief of Mafeking precipitated a carefully stage-managed jingoistic celebration designed to confirm the existence of the very thing it was held to be a spontaneous symptom of—mindless working class patriotism. As Krebs puts it, “In the events of Mafeking Night we see the emergence of a British public that observers had been assuming existed all the while that they were creating it” (Krebs 4).

The separation of depictions of the lower orders of London that we noted before thus takes place. On the one hand, the cockney novel reiterates the redeemable nature of the working class. While the culturalist programs of Besant and the settlement house workers sought to absorb working class popular culture into a more refined expression, the cockney novel makes use of the rawer versions of that culture to achieve the same ideological objectives. On the other hand, Morrison’s Jago and Mean Streets, Harkness’ depiction of a desolate East End, and George Gissing’s The Nether World confront the reader with an essentially alienated domain. To a certain extent, this division is strategic, as we have noted; it carves off the salvageable working class from the residuum.

Yet it does not entirely banish the lowest of the poor from the bourgeois imagination, nor end their role in the ideological construction of
the middle class. Morrison’s refusal to ameliorate his graphic picture, nor to make it possible for the dominant social order to reach down in material ways to the Jago, tells us that there are limits to cultural appropriation. The deepest slums in London stand outside the hege-
monizing imagination, but as his symbolic rendition of their life insists, they speak to us of a severe, almost untranslatable alienation. They are like voices from an entirely different cultural order. And they speak also of a disarray of gendered energies that is highly disturbing. For the social workers deeply committed to a mission among these people, the desolation of the scene becomes an affect of their own repression. Beatrice Webb, Margaret Harkness, and the women Webb describes all lose themselves at times and split off from themselves at others. For the men, the slum life unleashes a scenario of misogyny, often abusive, that is symptomatic of their erratic efforts to find focal points in action and in self-expression for energies that the perversely operating economic order and the closure of experiential outreach has created.

Gissing’s Emotionally Constricted Male and the Cultural Externality of the Nether World

George Gissing’s powerful novel of the London slums, *The Nether World* (1889), directly confronts the insidious integration of the London poor into the social discourses of popular culture, and like Morrison’s work, it resists the easy representation of slum life that facilitates such an appropriation. Indeed, as we shall see, Gissing resists the absorption of the “experience” of the East End into any of the forms of culture—high or low—that we have seen to have been the social strategy of the 1880s. Gissing himself came to the slums from a lower middle class background, driven into poverty by a dishonorable act and by his tortured fidelity to Nell Harrison, a prostitute and an alcoholic, whom he married in order to save, and who added to the misery of years of a dreary existence in wretched rented rooms in lower class London neighborhoods. *The Nether World* is the greatest of a set of four novels Gissing wrote about the working classes and the slums, and it appears to confirm Morrison’s abiding sense of the futility of the struggles of the underprivileged to rise out of their circumstances. The protagonist of the novel, Sidney Kirkwood, marries a woman who has been ruined in looks and spirit, and who burdens him with her near suicidal despair and her self-spiteful selfishness. The young woman he
should have married, Jane Snowdon, resigns herself to celibacy and poverty, and when they come together in a scene at the close of the book, the narrator can find hope only in their courage and determination: “Sorrow certainly awaited them, perchance defeat in even the humble aims that they had set themselves; but at least their lives would remain a protest against those brute forces of society which fill with wretchedness the abysses of the nether world” (Nether World 392).

Long before then, however, the reader has learned that there is no passage from the nether world to the spheres above it. To move across it in a train is to travel “over the pest-stricken regions of East London, sweltering in sunshine which served only to reveal the intimacies of abomination; across miles of a city of the damned, such as thought never conceived before this age of ours; above streets swarming with a nameless populace, cruelly exposed by the unwonted light of heaven . . .” (164). A place called Shooter’s Gardens epitomizes the heart of the nether world, and the narrator snarls that it is “needless to burden description with further detail; the slum was like any other slum; filth, rottenness, evil odours, possessed these dens of superfluous mankind and made them gruesome to the peering imagination. The inhabitants of course felt nothing . . . here was . . . the liberty to be as vile as they pleased. How they came to love vileness, well that is quite another matter, and shall not for the present concern us” (74). Charity cannot redeem such creatures: “of all forms of insolence there is none more flagrant than that of the degraded poor receiving charity which they have come to regard as a right” (253). Indeed, none of the apparatuses of the social order have any effectiveness in this dismal land. The novel seems for awhile to turn upon the device of charity, for Jane Snowdon’s grandfather, having come into wealth, and haunted with guilt for his past omissions, concocts a scheme to turn Jane into an angel of mercy; since she grew up as a poor, abused servant girl in the slums she would be, he thinks, the ideal figure to administer a charitable project. This would be no visiting lady from the upper classes come to pass out alms, but a woman who knows the true contours of need. Unfortunately, the scheme is as impracticable as any of the others, and it is thwarted in the plot of the novel, as if Gissing were bent on exposing the fecklessness of the entire concept of such wish-fulfilling, guilt-dispelling interventions. It is thwarted because the grandfather’s desire for reform is traced by the contradictions that are, in Gissing’s view, unresolvable: one cannot make people “better” without exercising a kind of manipulative power over them that constitutes a well-meaning tyranny, but tyranny nonetheless. The very desire to escape
such tyranny is valorized as heroic individualism; here it is at war with the desire to make people better.

The settlement house movement had already been ridiculed in an earlier novel, *Thyrza*. As John Goode has pointed out, the London of Gissing has become a territory of sealed-off zones, across which classes cannot move. “The social space of the city, insofar as it is created space (which is more and more true as the city stops serving the country and becomes an end in itself, enclosing its own production and consumption), is partly organised to keep class relationships to an abstraction—suburbs, ghettos, thoroughfares are all ways of keeping the possibilities of direct confrontation at bay” (*George Gissing* 100). Mobility through acculturation is illusory; the conditions of life in the slums and lower working class districts grind the inhabitants into a fatalistic struggle to survive. In turn, the vision of the observer adjusts itself to the discrete separation of social groups, and adopts the naturalistic devices of classification and categorization by activity and social position that only intensifies the reification that it is trying to describe (Jameson 190). Gissing’s later literary works will, in fact, focus on specialized groups and figures, such as the hack writers in *New Grub Street*, who seem to be defined more by their particular functions or social positions than as free-moving agents in an open continuum.

Yet in *The Nether World*, the isolation of the lower classes seems to provide for an integrity of experience that Gissing values. In his rejection of all the efforts of philanthropy, social intervention, and acculturation of the poor and marginal workers, Gissing asserts—albeit ambivalently—the authenticity of the qualities of suffering, struggle, and anger that he has discovered among the disenfranchised. This integrity of experience is embodied in Jane Snowden and Clara Hewett, the two women whom Sidney Kirkwood loves.

We first encounter Jane when she is an abused servant girl: pale, thin, constitutionally weak, intimidated by her cruel employers, slavishly attached to Sidney, the only man who is kind to her. Her grandfather liberates her, and gradually we see her develop into a quiet figure of determined compassion, with a muted but solid sense of social justice. As she comes upon the poor, “With wide, pitiful eyes, Jane looked at each group she passed. Three years ago she would have seen nothing but the ordinary and the inevitable in such spectacles, but since then her moral and intellectual being had grown on rare nourishment; there was indignation as well as heartache in the feeling with which she had learnt to regard the world of her familiarity” (130). But for all the philosophy Jane imbibes, and all the strength of character she
acquires, she is still indelibly marked—indeed debilitated—by her ear-
lier suffering:

Two effects of the time of her bondage were, however, clearly to be dis-
tinguished. Though nature had endowed her with a good intelligence,
she could only with extreme labour acquire that elementary book-
knowledge which vulgar children get easily enough; it seemed as if the
bodily overstrain at a critical period of life had affected her memory,
and her power of mental application generally. . . . The second point in
which she had suffered harm was of more serious nature. She was sub-
ject to fits of hysteria, preceded and followed by the most painful col-
lapse of that buoyant courage which was her supreme charm and the
source of her influence. Without warning, an inexplicable terror would
fall upon her; like the weakest child, she craved protection from a
dread inspired solely by her imagination, and solace from an anguish of
wretchedness to which she could give no form in words. (135–36)

As we shall see again, the body, as a site of material being, asserts itself
to complicate the ideological solutions of the text. In Jane, it recalls the
fear of past wretchedness, the inexplicable terror of abuse, and it dis-
figures the rational consciousness indelibly. Jane signifies the real suf-
ferring, the psychic injury of poverty, the humbling that precludes
rebellion. Hers has been an experience that provides its own probity,
which depends in large part upon her being a witness to the social
injustices of the nether world. And it assures that, for all her improve-
ment in learning and manners, she will never be assimilable into the
higher culture of the middle and upper classes. She cannot be appro-
priated into her grandfather’s charitable project—her mind and body
rebel against it whenever he demands it of her. She cannot be philan-
thropized. Although in many respects she is the idealized, cheerful,
industrious little worker among the poor that brighten many popular
cultural accounts of life in the lower classes, she cannot be commodi-
fied. She is damaged goods. In almost perverse terms, she represents
the nether world’s message of social inequality and political failure.

Sidney Kirkwood recognizes this significance in her. When he is
deeply attracted to her, the narrator recounts, “of a sudden he experi-
enced a kind of shame, the result of comparison between himself and
the simple girl who stood before him; she was so young, and the mem-
ory of passions from which he had suffered years ago affected him
with a sense of unworthiness, almost of impurity” (168). While the
specific, conscious impulses of his sense of shame are the comparisons
of his own worldly desires with her innocence, he unconsciously associates Jane with the social suffering of the nether world, for the text has so deeply implicated her in the conditions of her class that she has come to represent the essentiality of that experience to her being—and to those whose lives she represents. For him to love Jane, and to be a party to elevating her out of the slums, would be in some way to break faith with his mission—really Gissing’s mission—which is to assert the integrity of the message of that suffering. The logic of the book, as well as the logic of the social conditions it depicts, dictates that Jane will remain as the troubled victim and consciousness of the nether world.

While Gissing respects the endurance of the lower classes, he is scarcely an unqualified admirer of the life that they live. He can be as unsparing as Morrison in sketching the meanness, the wanton brutality, and shiftlessness of slum dwellers and the lower working classes. His account of the leisure activities of such people seethes with contempt. Several of the characters take a bank holiday excursion to the Crystal Palace, the emblem of popular diversions:

How they gape, what listless eyes most of them have! The stoop in the shoulders so universal among them merely means over-toil in the workroom. Not one in a thousand shows the elements of taste in dress; vulgarity and worse glares in all but every costume. . . . Mark the men in their turn; four in every six have visages so deformed by ill-health that they excite disgust; their hair is cut down to within half an inch of the scalp; their legs are twisted out of shape by evil conditions of life from birth upwards. (109)

Gissing is no more disposed toward the cockney novel hegemonizing of the lower orders than Morrison is. Although he perceives the growing separation of the classes in London that was taking place late in the century, he is conscious that they are mediated through the discourse of consumerism, leisure, and nationalism that is subsumed under popular culture, and he deplores the kind of identity that is being constructed among the lower working classes. Furthermore, long years of semiobsccurity scribbling for little recompense had hardened Gissing against the mercenary nature of writing in a popular vein for a mass audience. Not only is the popular culture vision of the working classes and poor untrue to their conditions, but it is actively implicated in the propagation of a mindless, animalistic hedonism symbolized in the Crystal Palace itself.
Gissing’s antagonism to the consumerist aspects of both popular culture and the literary marketplace explains as well the particular nature of his own relationship to culture, a relationship that in a sense governs Kirkwood’s characterization in The Nether World, and the animus that book contains toward the programs of acculturation of the lower classes taking place in England. Clearly the confluence of the Arnoldian “high culture” movement and the rise of consumerism produced among Gissing’s generation a certain amount of uneasiness. Since the very notion of higher culture was to establish a body of thought, art work, and activities uncontaminated by commercialism, a conscious effort was made to reconceive culture as a discourse that lay outside the marketplace. Culture was made to reside in the realm of the sumptuary, outside use and exchange value. Needless to say, this realm is one that has been traditionally occupied by the upper reaches of the middle class and by the aristocracy, for it requires a certain degree of immunity from the exigencies of a market economy in order to assign arbitrary worth to objects of art and to a cultured style of living. Gissing confirms this in his own writing and thinking, for the realm of art for him was explicitly associated with a higher class, all the more intensely because of his resignation to the fact that he would never inhabit that world (although he frequently visited it). This defines him in his concept of himself as an exile, as a man who is of the “unclassed.”

For Gissing, as well as others of his generation and social position, the symbolic registers of high culture are the classics and philosophy. In the former, in particular, he was a relatively learned man, supporting himself, in fact, in his twenties as a tutor of Latin and Greek. Sidney Kirkwood, although a lower class artisan, enjoys a certain immunity from the effects of near-poverty because of his reading and his philosophy. When Jane’s grandfather attempts to “educate” her out of her sphere, into the class position from which she can exercise philanthropy, he does so through readings in philosophy and classical ethics. “[In spite of the humble powers of her mind and her narrow experience, she had learned to think on matters which are wholly strange to girls of her station, to regard the life of the world and the individual in a light of idealism and with a freedom from ignoble association rare enough in any class” (226–27). Specific texts or bodies of thought are not identified, for that very obscurity connotes the detachment of mind that a classical education embodies.\footnote{11}

Gissing shares with other artists and intellectuals of his generation—Samuel Butler, W. H. Mallock, A. E. Housman, Thomas
Hardy—a kind of modern day Epicureanism in their determination to strike a philosophical attitude toward the pains and sufferings of social struggle and their withdrawal into positions of artistic passivity. It accounts for Gissing’s attraction to the work of Arthur Schopenhauer, whom he invokes in an essay “The Hope of Pessimism,” written in 1882. The essay marked his intellectual rejection of positivism, which he called “agnostic optimism,” and its faith in the power of the social sciences to ameliorate the human condition. Such optimistic faith, embodied as well in modern Protestantism, encourages “the spirit of egotism,” whose “latest outcome is the predominance of commercial competition.” Instead, “there is, in truth,” he argues, “only one kind of worldly optimism which justifies itself in the light of reason, and that is the optimism of the artist. The artistic mind, as Schopenhauer demonstrates, is . . . the subject contemplating the object without disturbing consciousness of self. In the mood of artistic contemplation the will is destroyed, self is eliminated, the world of phenomena resolves itself into pictures of absolute significance, and the heart rejoices itself before images of pure beauty” (George Gissing 96, 95).

John Goode warns us that Gissing is not a systematic thinker, and that it is unwise to attach too much importance to expressions of this sort, that Gissing was guided as much by material concerns as by ideational ones. “Instead we have a series of attitudes derivative from and in defence against other possibilities. The stress on calmness is not simply a bit of eclectic philosophy. It is seen to rely on circumstances which have to be exploited and to be enjoyed, and . . . it depends on the recognition of privilege.” Goode argues, nonetheless, that “Gissing’s particular culturalism, his slightly arriviste snobbery . . . that shallow structure of desire . . . supplies a specific focus” to his perception of society (George Gissing 44, 47–48). While this may be so, it provides a focus that in a work like The Nether World obscures the social and economic dynamics of the urban condition he is attempting to analyze, and baffles the reader. And it relegates Gissing—and Butler et al.—to a position in which high culture stands in their lives for retreatism, Epicureanism, a kind of aestheticized passivity. The pessimism that Gissing takes on as almost a philosophical stance, and that, as David Daiches and John Lester have pointed out, permeates the mood of the last decades of the century among certain artists and intellectuals, is an expression of a sterile culturalism. As we had charted in the previous chapter, the new social mastertext of the last decades of the nineteenth century in England is culturalism—both in the sense of the effort to appropriate the middle and lower classes into a continuum of culture,
but also in the newly popular anthropological meaning to the term: the lower classes as primitive or underdeveloped or alien. Although Gissing held out little hope for the inclusion of the lower working class in culture, his own culturalism of hellenistic studies, gentrified country retreats, and muted passions reflected his curiously conservative notions of that discourse.

Fredric Jameson suggests that what we have here is a sign or trace of the ideologeme of Nietzschean ressentiment, where, among victimized groups (and those who think themselves victimized), the only way of reaction—that of deeds—is unavailable to them, so it is replaced by an imaginary vengeance. The primary effect is the revolutionary activity of the underclasses, but a secondary effect is seen in those dissatisfied intellectuals who foment imaginary violence as well, but now against the putative revolutionaries, rather than against established power (Jameson 201–2). Gissing thus appreciates the antagonism of the lower classes toward their social conditions—even shares at some level their resentment of the arrogance and indifference of privilege—and yet believes that the poor and lower working classes must keep in their place. While an “exile” from the comforts and assurances of upper class society, Gissing nonetheless disavows any sympathetic identification with the underclasses. We can now supplement Jameson’s insight by factoring in the specific social configuration in which this all takes place: the culturalism of the late century, and Gissing’s own particular relation to it.13

Indeed, just as Gissing could not comfortably be a part of the acculturation process of his time and class, he also presents (as does Morrison) an image of the nether world that seems to remove it from the discourse of the cultural altogether. To understand this image, we need to examine the affect of a novel such as The Nether World, and also focus for a moment on the other major female character, Clara Hewett. The affective responses generated by the novel are particularly vexing because they consist both of a deadening, despondent fatalism and of surges of intense melodrama. Sidney Kirkwood epitomizes the former, for at every stage he seems to repress both his desire and his anger. We are told that he originally aspired to be an artist, and showed some talent at it, but unfortunately his father suffered severe economic reverses, and, troubled by Sidney’s lack of direction, apprenticed him to a jeweler. The narrator ironically remarks that this saved Sidney from sowing his wild oats, and as the novel progresses, we watch him ossify into a kind of stoic, acting out of a severe personal morality, a man
“reckless of the pain he gave to others so long as his own self-torture was made sufficiently acute” (235). Circumstances, but also something in his own nature, make Kirkwood into a figure of deflected desire, whose passion for Clara, and then for Jane, is kept in check—the presence of the male body always obscured.

Clara Hewett, on the other hand, unleashes desire with melodramatic force. Born into poverty, but born stunningly beautiful and quick of mind, “many a time had she sobbed out to herself, ‘I wish I could neither read nor write! I wish I had never been told that there is anything better than to work with one’s hands and earn daily bread!’” (82). She has no friends, except for Sidney, whose love she disdains, largely from her determination to spite herself and others in every way. She burns—and, as we shall see, the feverish language carries special connotations—with desire to rise above the nether world, and she risks everything to do so by becoming an actress: one of the least honorable of careers for a woman but the one that fits creatures who can be no better than imposters in the world above their own. “Self-assertion; to be no longer an unregarded atom in the mass of those who are born only to labour for others; to find play for the strength and the passion which, by no choice of her own, distinguished her from the tame slave. Sometimes in the silence of night she suffered from a dreadful need of crying aloud, of uttering her anguish in a scream like that of insanity” (86).

Clara Hewett constitutes, then, for Gissing, a site of class desire, of political resistance to the injustices of society. As often as the narrator describes Clara’s self-ruinous, haughty, spiteful nature—her essential selfishness—in melodramatic expositions, he attempts to lay the blame for it upon the “social forces” that have condemned her to poverty. “Suppose she’d been the daughter of a rich man, then everything we now call a fault in her would either have been of no account or actually a virtue” (102). Her rejection of Sidney’s apparently disinterested love is described as a “fierce, unscrupulous rebellion” (86). “The access of self-pity” in her “was followed, as always by a persistent sense of intolerable wrong, and that again by a fierce desire to plunge herself into ruin, as though by such an act she could satiate her instincts of defiance. It is a phase of exasperated egotism common enough in original natures frustrated by circumstance—never so pronounced as in those who suffer from the social disease” (94).

The correlation between “social disease” and the passionate destructive urges of Clara has to be taken on faith. Withheld from the
story of Clara Hewett is the description of the process through which she became so alienated—the indignities and sufferings of growing up poor and of being intelligent and sensitive enough to perceive them—and absent, also, are accounts of the workings of the larger social order (the economic and political conditions) that create such circumstances. For Gissing the causes of Clara’s misery almost have to be extrapolated:

Natures such as hers are as little to be judged by that which is conventionally the highest standard as by that which is the lowest. The tendencies which we agree to call good and bad became in her merely directions of a native force which was at all times in revolt against circumstance. Character thus moulded may go far in achievement, but can never pass beyond the bounds of suffering. . . . As often as our conventions give us the opportunity, we crush them out of being; they are noxious, they threaten the frame of society. Oftest the crushing is done in such a way that the hapless creatures seem to have brought about their own destruction. (295)

Such ruminations expose as much as they seem to dissemble, for such a passage reveals some of the uneasiness with which the observing consciousness confronts this site of rebellion—a site so melodramatically cast as female sexuality. Once again in the Victorian period the sexually vital woman has been cross-coded with class desire; not, as in Dickens, with the middle class male’s ambivalence toward competitiveness, but now with the bitterness and potential dangerousness of the underclasses.

Neil Hertz has analyzed this as “male hysteria,” a moment in texts when political dangers are represented as sexual dangers, deriving, in the Freudian economy, from the fear of castration that arises upon viewing the female, the castrated other. All the psychic energies that are being employed to hold the male self together (and correspondingly to hold the patriarchal social order together) are concentrated on the moment when the threat of the woman manifests itself as a threat to the political order as well (Hertz 27). Hertz argues that the specter of the dangerous woman is evoked only to be overcome, symbolically through the suppression or the destruction of the woman. Thus a site of subjective meaning is raised and then canceled, obliterated before our eyes. In Gissing’s novel, Clara joins a traveling acting troupe as an understudy, and when the female star walks out on the show, she is invited to fill in as the lead in a melodrama. The episode is sexually charged, for it is clear that the manager of the company wants Clara as
a mistress. On the night when Clara is to act in her first great part, however, a jealous fellow actress dashes vitriol into her face, scarring her horribly. What follows is one of the most melodramatic meetings in all of literature, when Sidney visits Clara after the incident. She wears a veil to prevent him from seeing her. Not only is she faceless—and thus unrepresentable—but she has almost lost the power of speech: “yet it was with difficulty that she commanded utterance . . . her voice failed again . . . her faltering voice sank lower and lower . . .” (283–84). Almost at the point of erasure, Clara makes a final effort to assert herself, in an uncanny scene:

There came a marvellous change—a change such as it needed either exquisite feeling or the genius of simulation to express by means so simple. Unable to show him by a smile, by a light in her eyes, what mood had come upon her . . . by her mere movement as she stepped lightly towards him, by the carriage of her head . . . she prepared him for what she was about to say. . . . He knew that she smiled, though nothing of her face was visible; he knew that her look was one of diffident, half-blushing pleasure. (287)

At one level, this attempts to reassert the primacy of the male observer, for Clara can be read and articulated only by Sidney. The dangers that Clara represents—of sexuality, resentment, and social resistance—are subordinated to the interpretive male gaze. Yet the passage tells of Clara’s ability to communicate through the movements of her body. Later, in fact, the text will insist on the continued allure of her graceful, willowy frame, and the felt presence of this faceless, almost inarticulate body. In addition, the narrative persistently refers to the feverish state in which she is often gripped: “the fever that then sustained her was much the same as she used to know before she had thoroughly accustomed herself to appearing in front of an audience. . . . With burning temples, with feverish lips, she moved about her little room like an animal in a cage” (291–92, 293). A similarly febrile quality characterizes Gissing’s prose and plotting. The melodrama of the novel, its bursts of anger (as in the description of the lower classes in the Crystal Palace); its absence of exposition and its impatience with the development of character or situation; its continual, agitated domination over its material; its confused critical and philosophical position—all lend it a feverish character.

Fever, of course, is a symptom of real bodily illness. It is more than an impression; it is a pathological characteristic. Some quality beyond
the representation of emotion thus intrudes itself into Gissing’s text; the body makes its presence felt. On the symbolic level, Gissing negates the rebellion of the lower orders—signified in Clara’s female sexuality—by making its face unrecognizable, unrepresentable, and yet allows it to manifest itself, as the body is manifested by fever. Lower class resentment acquires palpability and intensity.

The condition of the nether world in Gissing (and in Morrison) is represented as pathology: not a cultural phenomenon but a condition represented through symptoms of the body. As *The Nether World* says, there is something called “a social disease.” This is less a medicalization of the social vision (although the disease metaphor of the 1840s has a persisting attraction) than an effort to convey, in a physiological metaphor, a particular sensation of social experience. It is ironic that the effort is made in *The Nether World* to read those symptoms through the female body (as you recall, Jane, too, was at the mercy of the almost autonomous rebellions of her body), for the male body cannot be made the register. It is still able to suppress the fever; it is still inviolate in some way, as rigorous as Sidney Kirkwood is in self-repression. Yet the slums and the world of the underclasses had entered the Victorian discourse as a sphere for the registering of male energies and fantasies. And it is clear from a reading of Morrison’s slum novel that it is male experience that has gone awry. The intensification of misogynistic brutality illustrates an inability to establish any coherence to masculine desires and rebellions. The frustration and anger manifests itself, in its clinically repressed form, all the way up from the Jago through Sidney Kirkwood to George Gissing and those who think like him—frustration and anger over social inequality, the futility of revolution, the diminution of passion, the sterility of cultural experience. And it is all the more tightly bound because the male body cannot be allowed to register the symptoms. Having become, through the pathology of the representation of the lower orders in the 1880s and 1890s, the emblem of this malaise, the body, and especially the male body, must seek new forms in which it is able to express that ill.