This book is about the intersection of gender and class. More specifically, our contention in this book has been that the interests of a predominately male professional class, which was in the process of formation throughout the nineteenth century, strongly influenced, indeed determined, the ways in which the Victorians represented poverty in the city of London. London was in the process of unprecedentedly rapid growth in the nineteenth century, and this rapid growth entailed many painful social adjustments. Although London was not the center of the First Industrial Revolution (the northern cities were), it was the center of British trade, the hub of its new transportation infrastructure, the focus of its banking activities, the center of its political life: in many respects, a large stage on which the developing middle classes could play out their relationship with the rest of British society while seeking a new and expanded role within that social order. The puzzling growth of abject poverty, which seemed to accompany the growing prosperity and political power of the Victorian middle class, could be noted in London, its social effects observed and discussed, and solutions proposed and carried out. Indeed, as we have argued, the seeming growth of abject poverty stimulated the process of middle class self-definition, as middle class professionals rose to answer the ethical challenge of poverty in the midst of plenty, offering solutions which drew on scientific expertise, which required the mediating role of the reporter, and which charged middle class life with a an enlarged ethical mission to alleviate suffering,
whether it took the form of philanthropic efforts in the slums or heartrending novelistic exhortation over which any good soul could cry.

While most of the writers we examine here are male, the issue of gender is more complicated than a simple biological model would seem to suggest. Indeed, it is our contention that a broader notion of gender is essential to understanding how this discourse on urban poverty operated. We discern, in this writing, the operation of certain class- and gender-based anxieties which derive as much from middle class male experience as from the observed reality of urban poverty. Fear about competition, to take one example, a fear that is constitutive of the Victorian male professional imaginary, inflects the representations of the poor from the early Victorian period, encouraging the construction of an “East End” which takes on the metaphorical clothing of a threatening labyrinth, in which the identity of the middle class subject is under constant threat by a feminine abject. The “threat” here is to the integrity of the middle class male self, and it is forestalled in a variety of ways which we have discussed. Although they took many different and complicated forms, we contend that attempts to forestall the collapse of defining boundaries served to shore up a middle class male subjectivity coming under threat by a variety of social phenomena. Moreover, that “threat” also opened up new possibilities for the professional class, as the discovery of poverty in the midst of plenty created opportunities to exercise ethical impulses in the public sphere, as the representation of the poor created new material for reporters to feed to a hungry public, as the descent into the abyss served the purpose of heroicizing the act of representation itself.

The discourse of the “abyss” which we have examined in chapter 4 marks a final change in the Victorian middle class’s assertion of its right to interpret the reality of life for the urban lower classes. It would be wrong, of course, for us to suggest that this discourse constitutes anything like the “final word” on the subject in the Victorian age. Writers like Wells, London, and Masterman were themselves involved in a very fraught relationship with contending discourses on poverty at the time: the “sentimental” tradition, the “culturalist” or the settlement movement, the COS, Booth’s emergent “sociological” tradition. These discourses overlap in their interests even if they construct their object—the urban poor—often in rather different ways, as we have already seen. Moreover, one could argue that the latter were more politically “effective” in the long run, as Britain, especially in the aftermath of World War I, took tentative steps in the long process of building a modern welfare state dedicated to diminishing class antagonism.
and raising the poor up to a minimal standard of humane life. Surely, the latter movement, however one measures its success or failure, was influenced and shaped more directly by the political achievements of Fabian “permeation,” the success of the unionization movements, and—perhaps most importantly—the experience of social solidarity enforced during two punishing world wars in the twentieth century than by the arguments of impassioned intellectuals with a bleak view of the prospects for interclass understanding.

What is striking, though, about what we are calling the discourse of the “abyss” is, finally, its awareness of its own self-enclosure: to follow Masterman in pursuit of “the hooligan” and “John Smith” does not even require a trip to East London. We have been, to some extent, pursuing a tale of the gradual imposition of ideological hegemony, achieved finally at the end of the century, and symptomatized by the self-enclosure of this discourse. The “otherness” of the urban poor passes, in Masterman’s writing, into a kind of sameness, as writing about the East End devolves into a critical complaint about the limited structures of value and significance available to the middle class writer who wishes to awaken his readers to the reality of social problems in their midst. In that sense, some of this writing becomes a kind of second-order writing on urban poverty in relation to the need for self-assertion of the middle class male writer. While we have attended throughout this study to the self-consciousness of these discourses, their writers’ winking awareness that they are addressing a middle class audience in the terms familiar to the middle class, a tendency evident in Dickens and Greenwood no less than in Gissing, London, and Masterman, we must nonetheless acknowledge, at the end, the ability of some of this writing to register an alien sensibility and alien possibilities that signify beyond what they seem to. There is a sense in which the achievement of hegemony marks the moment of its contestation: the possibilities glimpsed beyond the veil of conventionalized representation strategies are themselves signs opening into a different universe of understanding, as yet, in the pre-War era, still powerless to be born.