

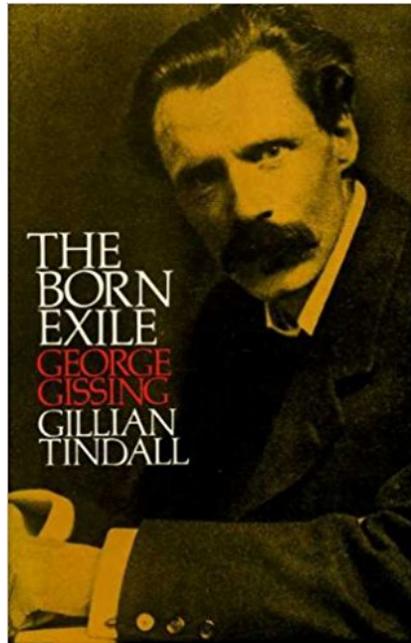
**George Gissing, *New Grub Street* and the Writer's Inner World:
Relevance and Disaster**

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George Gissing 1857- 1903 A Brief Chronology

- 1857** b. Wakefield
- 1876** Owens College, Manchester, personal disgrace
- 1880** *Workers in the Dawn* published at own expense
- 1884** *The Unclassed* published
- 1885-1886** *Demos. A Story of English Socialism*
- 1887** *Thyrza*
- 1888-1889** *The Nether World*
 - Death of 1st wife Helen (Nell) Harrison
 - Visits Mediterranean for the first time
- 1891** *New Grub Street*
 - Meets and marries 2nd wife, Edith Underwood
- 1892** *Born in Exile*
- 1893** *The Odd Women*
- 1894** *In the Year of Jubilee*
- 1897** *The Whirlpool*
- 1897** *Human Odds and Ends: Stories and Sketches*
- 1898** *Charles Dickens. A Critical Study*
 - Meets Gabrielle Fleury
- 1903** *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, 'An Author at Grass' published
 - Dies in France
- 1904** *Veranilda* published posthumously



In 1970, writing of the unhappy poet Edward Thomas, Philip Larkin noted:

“Every so often there emerges a figure whose importance seems not to reside so much in his own talent as in the lesson he embodies from those who succeed him. George Gissing could be instanced in the world of the novel - that unfortunate character, a man of letters, to whom no hardship or humiliation outweighs the romance of scraping a living from the printed word.”

By temperament and ability Gissing was an intellectual, a scholar – he knew Latin, Greek, French, Italian, German – taught himself Spanish to read Cervantes - and should have been a University man. His ideal was the poet Thomas Gray’s Pembroke College -I quote ‘life of Peace’ at Cambridge. His most renowned novel, *New Grub Street*, 1891, is a nod to the world of Dr Johnson, who also should have been a University man. But both were drawn to London, their contemporary world of letters, and prospects - and neither made any money – although both gained a respected reputation – notably for melancholy!

Here is another writer drawn to London. You’ll recognise Henry Wallis’s idealised death of Thomas Chatterton, the teenage Bristol poet. St Pauls in the background. The model here, was a young George Meredith – whose wife, in true Bohemian style, Wallis seduced. Meredith became hugely regarded as a novelist, and sold poorly all his life. He worked as a reader for a publishing house and spotted the young Gissing’s submission *The Unclassed* in 1882. Chapman & Hall published it. It sold very badly. But Gissing was off! He dropped his private tuition work – for Meredith’s selection had confirmed his line. It was his second novel – Gissing had funded his own first, *Workers in the Dawn* – an expensive failure.

The Unclassed failed. Yet it dealt with modern London, contemporary issues, attractive young/ sympathetic writers, had a heroine slum prostitute who read poetry, examined the significance of art and intellect in a dynamic and febrile world. Gissing’s failure – his sense of it, study of it – even satisfaction with it, is at the centre of what this lecture will explore.

In terms of this lecture, I want to review his biography - and his core written work into the late 1890s. These together are remarkable. Born in Wakefield in 1857 – his father was a pharmacist - George was a precocious reader, shy, private. His abilities saw him sent away to Owens' College, Manchester- a prestigious grammar set-up that would see him sitting matriculation for London University. He won awards at the college: books, subscriptions, bursaries – his brilliance meant his future was secured. But it wasn't. Aged 17/18, alone in a teeming city, he found companionship, excitement in girls of the street and pubs, and a world that fascinated, and the antithesis of academia. He became infatuated by Marianne Helen (Nell) Harrison, a teenage alcoholic prostitute – he gave her money, stole when she needed more, was caught at the college filching cash from the cloakroom of fellow students, expelled, briefly imprisoned. An establishment career, security in a university position was over. He was disgraced.

His family put together money and he sailed for the USA. From 1877-78 we rather lose sight of him. In Boston and Chicago he wrote articles, short stories, starved, lived literally on peanuts for a while. He travelled for a photographer, got to California, but was lucky to get back to England in one piece. He was barely 20. Such tales as he wrote are poor melodrama, drownings, adultery, dark villains – that kind of thing.

Back in England, an embarrassment at home, and with no prospects there, he moved to London when a small legacy came his way. 1879-80 saw him funding his own massive 3 decker *Workers in the Dawn*. This barely sold at all, but Frederic Harrison, the freethinker saw it. He offered Gissing tutoring for his family and provided some magazine introductions. Gissing entered Grub Street, a man from the north – as Branwell Bronte had done, as Arnold Bennett would do (with that title) as D.H. Lawrence, as Melvyn Bragg would do – and so many others. The move up to the capital –from Suffolk in his case - was made by another writer, a big enthusiast of Gissing – Eric Blair (George Orwell). Hardy too tried living in (west) London – uncomfortably. Chatterton, of course, had earlier provided the key romantic example of failure in this regard, but Johnson had also noted it in the poet Richard Savage. History is littered with them.

For Gissing now begun a world familiar to many hacks, would- be novelists and those of a literary, studious inclination. Life in attics (houses with the brains at the top was his joke), late night conversations over stewed tea and cheap tobacco – setting the world to rights, listening to gossip, trying for connections, missing meals. Yet Gissing, we will find, was very different from the men on the make that he would often write about...

He was constrained by mordant aspects of his personality. He had this guilty secret, he could not pursue college/academic connections-he was a man without a past. And he felt obligated to Nell Harrison, whom he brought down to London and lived with, man and wife. Obtusely, he felt she could be saved by education, poetry – that the terrible social order kept such rejuvenation away from the poor. Continuing pathologically almost, his classical studies, he read Greek and Latin every day, wrote in French for Turgenev's journal in Paris, befriended a German author Eduard Bertz as penniless as himself. He toured working men's clubs, political demonstrations, mechanics' libraries, the East End, Fabian and Positivist meetings, Socialist gatherings. Fastidious (his favourite word seems to be 'ignoble') he lived in the Lambeth, Hoxton and Islington slums. He would starve for 3 days to afford a cheap set

of Gibbon's *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, send a letter to *The Times* over varieties and contradictions in the pronunciation of Greek metre in Sophocles, eat bread & dripping at a penny a lunch, gaze at saveloys outside chophouses knowing he had fourpence to last the week. Spent days in bed – through fog or flu – or exhaustion. Pin rejection slips to the empty fireplace in his one room.

The aforementioned *Unclassed* notifies this world. I will return to it later, but it continues a thread from the first novel where the 'walk with me reader' (a Johnson, Boswell and Dickens trope) shows a fascination with the nether world, the underclass, the poor, the urban millions. The young Gissing felt that with education, counselling, rational advice that great body could improve its lot, become less coarse, less 'bestly' (an Orwellian term) less drunken. Absurdly, he read Homer and Coleridge to his wife, who only wanted gin and the music halls backstairs. He lectured to wheelwrights, foundry men and dockers on Ruskin, Keats, Morris – believing that an appreciation of beauty was a moral and life- changing energy. This has reflections of Shelley handing out free raw political poetry on the streets of Dublin years earlier.

What was so vital to him, Gissing was slowly but definitively to see, was irrelevant to the people of Whitechapel and Bethnal Green. He wrote "The Hope of Pessimism", a critique influenced by Schopenhauer – he would withdraw into himself, just as he found he had to separate from Nell to keep his sanity.

When life became impossible in London he returned home – to his sisters and a brother Algernon who was also determined to become a novelist. He was to produce dull, soft rural romances which did not sell, and George would forward money every now and again to help him out. Mercifully, he never came south. Gissing had a small success with *Demos* in 1886 which dealt with the London riots that year, but the solution there, as with *The Unclassed*, was withdrawal to the past, let the proletarian and modern urban dynamic go to hell. 'Demos', the people were generally not worth it. He recorded at this time 'I no longer have a spark of social enthusiasm'. Later studies such as *Thyrza* – an East End girl with a sublime classical voice, and *The Nether World* set in the same territory, point to similar disasters – a brutal world of self-destruction, alcoholism, indifference to aesthetic, artistic modes of improvement.

These heavy novels, Dickensian in being urban- London fixated, with a large cast that padded out serialisation into a three decker piece never made money. His poverty meant he had to sell copyright outright for £100 or £150 at best. He could make an additional £15 or so elsewhere, but would immediately have to begin with a new novel. At the time £300p.a. was the level below which anybody fell into the working/ lower-artisan class –below which one could not keep a servant or be a gentleman. Living off a few pounds in one room, he was once asked in a Mayfair *soiree* how he dealt with his butler." I prefer a maid, he replied". With 6 novels published, a number unfinished/ abandoned, at 30, in 1887, Gissing was going nowhere.

He was necessarily living apart from Nell in 1888 when he heard news of her death in Lambeth. He visited her one poor room, littered with pledges to give up drink, a drawer full of crusts, pawn tickets, his letters.

He was in despair, yet his grief led to a realisation he was free. He took his *Nether World* money and travelled to the Mediterranean and saturated himself in Classical and Renaissance culture.

Like Goethe, his desire to visit Italy had been an illness, as he himself admitted. Incidentally, it proved his alibi for the Whitechapel Jack the Ripper murders of that Autumn, when he was a natural suspect because of the environs he inhabited.

On his return his life changed. He cast off the nether world and entered the genteel environment of the society novel. He could not give dinners or stay late, could never entertain, but he was interesting, attractive, unattached and with a small reputation – he was an author after all. He was now to enter into ‘the woman question’ – one which dominated late Victorian life. For him, as with Tennyson and others earlier, how could a cultured man, of modest or insignificant income, marry a woman of his own class - or a woman of his own intellect and interests? For Gissing, so self-conscious, so aware of a duty of care, it was insufficient that there should be a respect or a compatibility – he knew, delighted in, Clara Collett who was attracted to him for years, but he could never go further. Within a few years of Nell’s death he ran into the street in desperation, asked the first woman he met (at Clerkenwell, I believe) to marry him. Edith Underwood consented, gave him a son. You could see how mis-marriage continued as a rich theme with Gissing! Edith was working class, aggressive, suspicious - even violent. This behaviour deteriorated and she was pronounced insane within a few years.

Bad luck eh? The mid-1890s proved a different world for Gissing. He had the financial drag of Edith and son William. With his Wakefield family too, he had to keep up appearances because his reputation – and professional demand - were apparent, but he started to earn some money, he became ‘established’. This was due to *New Grub Street* in 1891. Gissing’s status hangs on this and its quality – really its unique subject matter - was recognised in his time. Again he only made £150 from it, and had to struggle and find a new publisher to get the £200 for his next novel, characteristically titled *Born in Exile* in 1892. But the 3-decker was being phased out, single and paperback editions were developing, and journals and magazines – which dominated aspects of *New Grub Street* - were all vying for articles and especially short stories. Gissing found with good fortune he could turn 3 or 4 off for £20 a time.

Unexceptional as many of these were, he was no longer chained to the desk for dear life every day.

This, indeed, was his story through the 1890s. A mass of short tales and studies, shorter novels and novellas on commission – he was occasionally towards the late 1890s making up to £350- £400 and above.

Yet this was not great money and he had terrible secrets: his criminal past in Manchester and his two marriages to unpresentable, expensive even despicable women. He never had the confidence or inclination to enter into society – was mortified at invites to literary dinners (where writers like Hall Caine, Thomas Hardy, Henry James and Meredith had a lot of time for him). He was never effusive, open, never a communicator. And never a stylist or

a revolutionary. His sensibility, his sense of literature, art, their value was his golden thread, and always recognised. Like Orwell, he died at 46, of tuberculosis complications. The years of poverty, self-neglect, London fog and nervous exhaustion wore him down – like his hero Edwin Reardon in *New Grub Street* back in the fictive 1880s. He was dissatisfied with his shorter novels, potboilers, and often ill, found he got little satisfaction from writing. His subjects changed waywardly or were reiterated *ad infinitum*, without inspiration. He found he admired the cosy upper-middle class world he frequently observed, his novels *In the Year of Jubilee* and *The Whirlpool* becoming social commentaries where the casuistry, snobbery required to succeed and maintain a hold to such a world became a core feature. The women who inhabited such a world were revered, but he would be forever outside their circle – he was paying for Edith's incarceration and absence, he had two young sons to support, he was increasingly ill – and told everyone he had no address and could never receive visitors. He was still living off bread and dripping, strange soups, spending days in bed. Death might be a kind of release. He joked with H.G.Wells (a friend who despaired of his melancholy) that he should disappear, pretend to be dead and work on 'posthumous' novels which would at last sell to the public as sentimental curiosities. Dead, he could finally make a living!

Yet in his final years he approached a kind of febrile ease. Never secure financially – because of his wife and health - he found love in Gabrielle Fleury, a French translator of his work in 1898 and with whom he later lived – when he could get away - in France from the turn of the century. He also produced the popular *Ryecroft Papers*, a fictitious study, a diary really, of a retired 'author at grass'.

Full of nostalgia, English sentiment, pastoral reminiscences and classical referencing it offered a cosy Albion world of rural sequestration – of study, roast shoulder of mutton, country walks, high tea, fine wine and a good library. The gentleman bachelor Henry Ryecroft, a poverty-stricken writer, receiving a bequest from an old friend, retires to a Devon cottage, is cared for by a housekeeper treasure, reads all day and eats well, smokes his pipe and goes for evening walks. There is something hugely elegiac, and also pathetic about this – a retired writer continuing to write; this the journal of any seventy year old ex-academic. Gissing, novelist, was in his early forties when he wrote it. That he could afford such dreamy indulgence says something for his equilibrium by 1900. Henry Ryecroft dies in his sleep, not yet 50 – Gissing died soon after, aged 46.

Ryecroft proved popular, although despite sales it did not make Gissing much money. Perhaps it caught the nostalgic mood immediately post-Victoria. Oddly, the Edwardian period was one where Gissing could have expanded his status and audience before that world was swept away altogether by the 1st World War. Gissing might have become an old buffer before his time perhaps, still in his early sixties by the close of the war. Instead, he will always be seen as a Victorian, just as Sherlock Holmes was, although those stories were written well into the 1920s.

Let us look then at core Gissing, and then consider the nature of our fascination with the man, the writer and his *oeuvre*, his special subject.

New Grub Street presents the collision of the creative impulse with material circumstances. The novel has a set of writers, London based, who each represents a caste of writing 'at the

latter end of the C19'. Central is Edwin Reardon, married to Amy Yule. Reardon has had a minor critical success which encourages him to try to make a living from novel writing. His frenetic attempts to repeat this, his new poverty and self-critical frustration are fully presented in the novel. Before she leaves him (shamed by his taking a clerkship to survive financially) his new, beautiful wife Amy contests that he is wilfully not producing popular fiction, perversely trying for standards that will not sell. Their social circle reduces essentially to a cast of failures: the poor home tutor and idealist Harold Biffen – who aims to write the most tedious novel ever – *Mr Bailey, Grocer* – and lives below the bread-line; there is Sykes the alcoholic and derelict who writes literary, dated hackwork entitled 'London

Experiences', there is the impecunious Whelpdale, a failed opportunist until he invents *Chit-Chat*, an anti-literary newspaper full of unusual, even invented facts, like *Tit-Bits*. Between this set is Alfred Yule, a bitter, later blind specialist journal editor whose failure is engineered by his own viciousness and new irrelevance. He is brutal to his cockney wife, whom he despises. He works his daughter Marian as a 'literary machine' each day, but will not let her sign her work – taking her credit. The novel's only really successful writer is a journalist, the mercurial Jasper Milvain.

He cares nothing for style, only work-rate, and completes successfully scores of different articles, socialises with all, is permanently on the make. He woos Marian indifferently, and when her obscure inheritance is less than anticipated, rejects her coldly, but honestly. He is to marry a delighted Amy Reardon, who inherits from an equally obscure family member when her husband dies of pneumonia and exhaustion. Edwin's child dies, Yule dies, Sykes disappears, Harold Biffen commits suicide. It is ironic, pathetic how Biffen and Yule, men of letters, at different times, both go, through the fog, to the British Museum library to look up the nature of their own destructive agent – a poison, and insidious cataract infection. Jasper Milvain pursues 'the sunny way' (as Gissing entitles his chapter) and there are no regrets from his ménage as the new Grub Street becomes entrenched.

New Grub Street is Gissing's inevitable novel. He had observed this world for 12 years or more. It deals with the posturings that surround art and letters, the manoeuvrings for financial success, the 'dumbing down' to use a modern phrase. It looks specifically – in its four essential characters, at kinds of artistic-creative failure in a new world that had mass literacy, but only a half-educated public. In old Grub Street an elite-many impecunious certainly, like Goldsmith, Johnson, Savage, Tyers, Cave, the young Burke (Johnson ironically called them 'stragglers') – produced estimable literature for an elite; new Grub Street caters for a mass public. When Milvain takes over Yule's old journal, uses his great energy, changes its nature and audience – goes 'downmarket' for success and sales, he is then able confidently to win 'the crown of life' – a beautiful wife (and with Amy's money and blessing) to give dinners, live in the West End, take holidays, display his flamboyance, his achievement. Esteem is equated purely with financial success.

Here is Milvain:

"there's no question of the divine afflatus; we talk of literature as a trade, not of Homer, Dante and Shakespeare. If only I could get that into poor Reardon's head... I mean, what on earth is there in typography to make everything it deals with sacred."

He admits to knocking off articles every day, and at all times – a scatter-gun approach that gets him noticed. Reardon and Biffen are fastidious, spending days over paragraphs to perfect every nuance. When Reardon speeds up, he is stalled, writes nonsense. He quotes his own fatuity “He took a book with a look of shock”. He rushes for relief to *The Odyssey*: “That was not written at so many pages a day, a workhouse clock clanging its admonition in the poet’s ear.”

Generally, the text’s foundation is a consideration of the role of literature in ‘the latter part of the nineteenth century’. The writer whose purpose is aesthetic, who emphasises the refining mode of the imagination is destroyed, giving way as an idealist to the man of practical mind, who considers literature as a product, not an art, and whose market has to be selected. Integrity loses out to pragmatism, sensitivity to hard-nosed business ethics. Milvain’s success is parallel to Reardon’s demise, and at his expense. Milvain is actually paid to pen Reardon’s literary obituary, and marries his widow.

Reardon is a mediocre novelist. His “intellectual temper” is that of the scholar – fiction writing becomes a torture to him. He is that familiar Gissing character, the misplaced person. After completing the first volume of his dull novel *Margaret Home* he plunges, in relief, to Homer’s *The Odyssey*, trades references and quotations from the *Greek Fragments* with Biffen over bread and dripping. Amy married what she saw as ‘the coming man’, a professional – society- novelist; his taking the clerkship in Lambeth Hospital – simply to survive - after commercial failure, means he must write, an amateur, in the evenings. She loses aspiration and her *cache* in one moment – for she cannot now move within the mobile, metropolitan upper-middle class world she expected.

There are terrible moments of pathos. Stalled, ill, near penniless and desperate for a few shillings, Reardon the classicist has his article on Pliny returned by the journal, *The Wayside*, receiving the rejection in Islington, at the Angel, a cold and lonely muse.

Marion Yule, still working for her increasingly bitter father, the vitriolic polemicist Alfred Yule, admits to exhaustion, despair in the British Museum reading room – the Valley of the Shadow of Books. It is dawning on her that Jasper Milvain has been using her, has now left her. Her every evening must be a return to a bitter home, where Yule’s sycophantic associates, rejections themselves, the unattractively named Hinks, Quarmby and Fadge court her father, fawn over and patronise her. They anticipate an ultra-academic journal being set up with her small inheritance for which they will write on minor, forgotten figures of the past. The long quotation here is, I believe, an example of Gissing at his best. Note here, incidentally, the influence of Dickens’s Chancery Lane writing from *Bleak House*:

BRITISH MUSEUM READING ROOM QUOTATION

George Gissing : New Grub Street, Ch. 7, pp.137-138

Penguin New English Library Edition, 1968

‘Such profound discouragement possessed her that she could not even maintain the pretence of study; heedless whether anyone observed her, she let her head droop. She kept asking herself what was the use and purpose of such a life as she was condemned to lead. When already there was more good literature in the world than any mortal could cope with

in his lifetime, here was she exhausting herself in the manufacture of printed stuff which no-one even pretended to be more than a commodity for the day's market. What unspeakable folly! To write - was not that the joy and privilege of one who had an urgent message for the world? Her father, she knew well, had no such message; he had abandoned all thought of original production, and only wrote about writing. She herself would throw away her pen with joy but for the need of earning money. And all these people about her, what aim had they save to make new books out of those already existing, that yet newer books might in turn be made out of theirs? This huge library, growing into unwieldiness, threatening to become a trackless desert of print, - how intolerably it weighed upon the spirit! - the paltry pretence of intellectual dignity.

The fog grew thicker; she looked up at the windows beneath the dome and saw that they were a dusky yellow. Then her eye discerned an official walking along the upper gallery, and in pursuance of her grotesque humour, her mocking misery, she likened him to a black, lost soul, doomed to wander in an eternity of vain research along endless shelves. Or, again, the readers who sat here at these radiating lines of desks, what were they but hapless flies caught in a huge web, its nucleus the great circle of the Catalogue? Darker, darker. From the towering wall of volumes seemed to emanate visible motes, intensifying the obscurity; in a moment the book-lined circumference of the room would be but a featureless prison-limit.'

She ends the novel quite forgotten – lucky to get a job in a suburban branch library. This a heavy Gissing irony, of course. Away from this fog, her old lover has moved to 'the sunny way'. Not really a charlatan (another Gissing fascination) but one who has interpreted his priorities correctly. This solecism of his is telling: "You have to become famous before you can secure the attention which would give fame".

Interestingly, Milvain, the coming man, had no time for Shakespeare, while Prospero's final words of *The Tempest* – 'stuff', 'dreams', 'little life' and 'sleep' – are on the lips of both Reardon and Biffen when they die – their deaths a kind of blessed relief for them. Gissing closes the novel ensuring they slip into irrelevance, and the last chapter ends with others' laughter.

A final observation. The likeable Biffen's humiliation. His especially tedious novel (" tedium is the chief characteristic of modern life") is published for a pittance, is critically acclaimed as 'remarkable' and of course does not sell at all. This the manuscript he heroically rescued when his attic room was set on fire – his rescuers thought him deluded. He dreams that Amy (now monied) is attracted to him because of his decency and old friendship with Reardon. When this ridiculous notion becomes patently untrue, he plans his own death. The realisation this was a dream means he cannot return to his old reality. Lonely, in total poverty, he walks over the Thames to Putney one night and kills himself. Tellingly, his last gesture on quitting his attic room is to turn back to tidy a book out of place on his small bookshelf – an action similar to that noted by George Orwell in his essay "The Hanging" where the condemned man avoids a puddle on the way to the gallows. As with Reardon, the romance of being a writer – and its attendant personal dignity – are dissolved with the terrors of failure, of irrelevance.

Failed writers, the temperaments and desires of writers. Would-be writers. Their thin, unhappy biographies, frustrations, successes – with a small s -irrelevance – the world into which they pitch themselves. Such studies are everywhere in Gissing. There are well over 100 short stories; they can, crudely be identified in two areas, which frequently coalesce – the woman question and the loneliness, the inconsequentiality, of the artistic life. They can coalesce again for us as ‘the false muse’.

I will run through a few of these, characteristic of Gissing from his twenties through to his last years. The world of shabby gentility, of ‘the ignobly decent’ is revealed as Gissing’s world with a special pathos.

In his early “The Lady of the Dedication”, a maid is, quote ‘given a new mind’ by the poor novelist Adler (“ I tried to be worthy of him”) – and this, as with Ida Starr, of *The Unclassed*, a rare achievement, and in a way Amy Reardon- and certainly Nell Harrison- was not. We see how poverty can provide an easy rationale of failure in “A Victim of Circumstances”. He can show art as a pose, ultimately a self-delusion in “A Profitable Weakness”, and “Our Learned Fellow Townsman”. The alternative is seen in that tale, and in “The Pig and Whistle” (a kind of *Mr Polly* story), and “The Schoolmaster’s Vision”: accept an ordinary marriage, cakes and ale, comfort, suburban boredom – do not strive, beware temperament, artistic proclivity.

James Joyce read Gissing, although we do not know his opinion, but his “A Painful Case” where the dull, intellectual, snobbish central character of Chapelizod, Dublin – Mr Duffy (appropriate name) - based on Joyce’s brother Stanislaus – retreats from serious commitment of any kind (writing for publication, an affair with a cultured woman) – is seen in Gissing’s “The Foolish Virgin” and “The Pessimist of Plato Road”. These could be more blatant ‘Dubliners’. A failed writer, self-taught cockney who reads Schopenhauer declares “others go to the lakes, the Highlands – I have to be content with Tooting Common.” A sort of dark Tony Hancock/Harold Steptoe figure. His only artistic act is a failed suicide! Gissing notes “sham culture everywhere” had enthused him above his station.

Gissing sees Art as an essential of life –but only for those of ‘noble’ temperament, the scholarly, intellectual soul – with, ideally, money. Otherwise they need energy and, for Gissing, tellingly, a defining / vulgarity like Milvain. He has fun with “The Fate of Humphrey Snell” and “The Pessimist of Plato Road”, ordinary people.

There are some 20 stories which mark Art as a chimera, a deceptive trail for the individual that encourages *naivete*, promotion of loneliness/apartness, manic behaviour, narrow egotism, decrepitude. He came to see, as I believe in one of his lost novels *Mrs Grundy’s Enemies*, as in *The Unclassed*, that one should ‘keep apart’.

Time and again, as in “Nobodies at Home”, “A Poor Gentleman”, “A Man of Leisure”, studies of loneliness, we see figures whose culture has not sustained them – in poverty. The ‘gentleman’ Typerley, an ex- Cambridge graduate who has lost all his money, finds himself lost, forced necessarily to live in a working-class district of “rough jollity”, “contented labour” and “brutal apathy”:

I quote:

"All this time he was of course living in absolute solitude. Poverty is the great secluder – unless one belongs to the rank which is born to it; a sensitive man who no longer finds himself on equal terms with his natural associates, shrinks into loneliness... London is a wilderness abounding in anchorites – voluntary or constrained. As he wandered about the streets and parks, or killed time in museums and galleries (where nothing had to be paid) Tymperley often recognised brethren in seclusion, the furtive glance, marked with understanding sympathy the shabby-genteel apparel."

Pride will just-sustain them, until (I quote) "the hospital or workhouse".

Literature is seen as a grotesquely betraying pursuit. In "Spellbound", lethargic Percy Dunn is obsessed by the opium of print (as any gambling addict), loses his job and marriage. Culture is wasted on him, with no energy for vocation. In "Christopherson", the eponymous bankrupt collector tells his story while opening yet another bookseller's catalogue. In "Two Collectors" (a tale that Somerset Maugham who read Gissing, could have written) the failed poet Arthur Wormald, now a bookseller, is asked for his own poetry book 'Songs of Youth' – but only as a curiosity of a failed publishing house. One thinks of Gordon Comstock's *Mice* poetry collection in Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*.

Some writers have gone populist. The figure in "The Poet's Portmanteau" has rejected his earlier work for successful romantic fiction. In "The House of Cobwebs" the careerist popular novelist Goldthorpe, amused, finds his old attic room venerated as a Grub Street shrine by Spicer, the house's owner, who idealises the old romantic tradition. By contrast, "those with delicate natures are driven to strange extremities": Harold Sansom, a proto-Biffen character, failed serious novelist, commits suicide.

And there is "A Drug on the Market", where the commercial nature of the 1890s damns decent personal artistic development. Culture becomes merely a merchandise in "Topham's Chance", which centres on a tutoring agency – a world of grocers, curates, lodging houses and swindlers, where volumes such as *Success in Life* fulfil Gissing's ironies. Irony seen in his "A Muse of the Halls" and "A Capitalist" where the entrepreneur Ireton sells paintings, Music Halls, text purely as a business.

So why write at all- if like Charles Darwin, Emile Zola, D.H Lawrence, Stephen Hawking, Martin Amis, Will Self – you are going to be misunderstood, or ridiculed. And all the unsuccessful, half- successful writers, novelists who make £500 or less for 2 years' work, people who publish themselves; poets who never deliver their poetry; those successful journalists like Dominic Lawson who declare unashamedly writing is a trade. As Milvain says, what is it about typography that is supposed to make you so important?

It is the platform where you can speak uninterrupted, where you hand over the status of a sentient, wise personality. You have got into print, you have valuation. You are there to be reckoned with, you can display yourself at your best. Orwell's essay 'Why I Write' says all this, categorically, as you will know.

To be interesting, to join a special peer group, to 'have literature', intellectual status in the Johnsonian sense, to claim attention, be a gentleman figure of distinction this was Gissing's understanding of the true regard a writer should possess. He would *ipso facto* be a man of regard, a man of culture. He discovered painfully that this was a fallacy, that a man of letters was really an irrelevance, probably an entertainer or a vulgarian if he was successful – like the despised Kipling, his own Whelpdale, or Dickens. (Gissing never saw Dickens as a thinker, an intellectual.) The Prince of Wales's absence from Tennyson's funeral at Westminster Abbey (he had been a long-time Poet Laureate) Gissing saw as symptomatic of a national philistinism. The future Edward VII had preferred to spend the day at Newmarket races. Gissing loved the work of Tennyson, yet the later cynical condemnation of 'the old man' distressed him. Here was a noble creature (with a similar love for an aristocratic past) proved venal, human, just as Hardy proved peasant-like, ignorant, a poor conversationalist on his visit to Max gate, Dorchester.

Conversely, Gissing liked Hall Caine as a personality, had no time for his fiction. Gissing was often shocked by the actual personalities of writers- his viewpoint was always based on the writing. He delighted in the technical brilliance of George Eliot, Joseph Conrad. Only perhaps Charlotte Bronte – just beyond his orbit - got the double reverence.

He was disgusted when Trollope (whom he quite liked) revealed in his *Autobiography* his mechanical, pecuniary working practice. He was prepared to ignore the personal habits and social patterns of the Classical writers. The printed word was always more important than the personal face, the physical confrontation.

Sequestration. It can drive you mad. But, keep apart! I quote "Preserve your soul alive". The attic, garret a symbol for the writer – where, as in Biffen's analogy with the human body, the brains are at the top.

Failure, then, his special subject regarding the practitioner of Art, but Art was the consoler. His protagonists – novelists, writers, artists – are without money. They die or survive, adapt or disappear. The element within which they work, and how they regard this, is the test of artistic and personal integrity (the 2 are identified together) since the lure of what Gissing came to define as 'the whirlpool' was consistently damaging to the creation of pure Art. Art could only be produced by the election of the intellect, the aristocratic temperament; artistic perfection the only thing known of absolute value: the artist was anti-democratic, civilised, with a subjective value. And he knew and valued the tradition of the past and its achievement.

Artistic/ aesthetic sympathy coloured life. Before he ever went there, Gissing saw London through Dickens's eyes. He noted "we bookish people have consolations for the life we do not lead"- this on Dickens whom he admired and wrote brilliantly on, yet preferring Thackeray for the milieu of his writing (and notably the percipient *Pendennis* and its women). There is a poem by Gissing "On Completing the Perusal of the *Aeneid*" which is clearly influenced by Keats's poem on Chapman's Homer. Gissing writes of "the divine strains which lull but never cloy... that hold me as the memory of a dream."

Unsurprising that he should write 'An Author at Grass' after this (the exhausted horse seen from a railway carriage was an opening symbol in *New Grub Street*.) Unsurprising that he should almost complete his highly personal 6th century Roman novel, *Veranilda*, before his death, where those meditative spirits Decius and Basil 'keep apart' from the chaos of a collapsing Empire. And perhaps a reason why post-war Gissing studies found favour in Japan, that sense of personal courtesy and a separate dignity paramount in a hierarchy that has collapsed.

Gissing was no Steppenwolf. He was not malevolent, nor a sensualist. He was 'a victim of circumstances' (the title of a short story collection) – a phrase which rings through his writing "at the latter end of the nineteenth century" – another phrase which re-appears. This and the cruelty of education, "the half-knowledge which turns life sour" – which must cause disillusion. He despised militarism-a growing force as the century closed -, hated sports, public exuberance and celebrations. And his great "Io Saturnalia" chapter in *The Nether World* crystallises powerfully this special contempt. Loved the Mediterranean (but lonely there) and was oblivious to the poverty of Naples - worse than London. He never settled – Ill in scores of London lodging houses, bored in Exeter and Sussex and back in Wakefield –even growing tired of France. He realised he was a conservative who hated politics, a Classicist stuck in a crass modern Imperial capital. Anti-democratic, suspicious of 'the people', Socialism and demagogues. Frightened of women, he was drawn to them and they were attracted to him. He would have hated today's world- one of Art, Music and popular education for all, so called 'progressive' thinking, mass media, social media, 15 minutes of fame, celebrity culture, dumbing down, anti-elitism - all anathema to him. To have had a dream of early retirement in his late thirties – not only as a fiction – was remarkable for a serious artist. Henry James confessed to having " a persistent taste for Gissing" and it is one shared by any sensitive, cultured, bookish person who has toyed with the business of writing. Gissing found it lonely, often cruel and thankless work. He would recognise the telling paradox of the phrase. But he was determined to continue at it – no teaching or clerkships for him. It drove him to an early grave. He told Gabrielle Fleury "there is something in my books which English people really dislike". What was this? His locations, his Manicheanism (*sic*/ which he recognised) his special personal honesty? Like Balzac, Zola he was fascinated by his subject matter –but his poverty, in truth, never allowed him to transcend his disgust at 'circumstance'.

You always knew where his novels were going. As Henry James also alluded, Gissing was fated to have "what we in fiction writing call 'an unhappy ending'." And so, I end it there.

Thank you.

Some of George Gissing's short stories notified

"The Lady of the Dedication" "A Victim of Circumstances"
"A Profitable Weakness" "Our Learned Fellow Townsman"
"The Pig & Whistle" "The Schoolmaster's Vision"
"The Foolish Virgin" "The Pessimist of Plato Road"
"The Fate of Humphrey Snell" "Nobodies at Home"
"A Poor Gentleman" "A Man of Leisure"
"Spellbound" "Christopherson" "Two Collectors"
"The Poet's Portmanteau" "The House of Cobwebs"
"A Drug on the Market" "Topham's Chance"
"A Muse of the Halls" "A Capitalist"

Some of the other writers mentioned in this lecture

Philip Larkin Dr Samuel Johnson Thomas Chatterton Oliver Goldsmith George Meredith Branwell Bronte Arnold Bennett D.H. Lawrence George Orwell Richard Savage James Boswell Charles Dickens John Ruskin William Morris Algernon Gissing Charlotte Bronte W.M. Thackeray Rudyard Kipling Joseph Conrad George Eliot Clara Collett Melvyn Bragg Thomas Hardy Hall Caine Anthony Trollope Alfred Lord Tennyson Henry James Somerset Maugham James Joyce Charles Darwin Emile Zola Honore de Balzac Martin Amis John Keats Herman Hesse

Some of the major characters in *New Grub Street*

Edwin Reardon/ Amy (Yule) Reardon their baby son
Harold Biffen Sykes Whelpdale Alfred Yule, His cockney wife, his daughter Marian Quarmby, Fadge, Hinks Jasper Milvain and sisters

Principal areas in London mentioned

Gower Street, British Museum, New Oxford Street, Euston Road, Marylebone, Pentonville, Goodge Street, Islington, The Angel, Clerkenwell, the 'West End' and Kensington.