

THE GISSING NEWSLETTER

“More than most men am I dependent on sympathy to bring out the best that is in me.”

– George Gissing’s *Commonplace Book*.

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Denzil Quarrier and the Woman Question

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The importance of the woman question in Gissing’s work is undisputed. Scholars generally agree that Gissing had much to say about the subject in *The Emancipated*, *The Odd Women*, *In the Year of the Jubilee*, and *The Whirlpool*. Yet one other novel – of paramount importance in this connection – seems to have been overlooked. That novel is *Denzil Quarrier* (1892). It has more on the woman question than any of Gissing’s previous novels, and it presents for the first time an utterance that later becomes the informing idea of *The Odd Women* (1893). Denzil Quarrier’s address to the Polterham voters, entitled “Woman: Her Place in Modern Life,” is that part of the novel where Gissing’s views are most accurately reflected.

In the town of Polterham even a passing mention of the woman question is enough to bring heated discussion. When the townsmen hear that Quarrier is the radical candidate for membership in Parliament, one of them asks “whether Mr. Quarrier is disposed to support the Female Suffrage movement.” Another retorts that if such be the case, “he mustn’t expect *my* vote and interest. We’ve seen enough in Polterham lately of the Female question” (first edition, ch. IV, p. 47). Then, commenting as author, Gissing adds: “The Woman question was rather a dangerous one in Polterham just now; that period of Revivalism (in which the women made fools of themselves), and the subsequent campaign of Mrs. Hitchin (who spoke only to women audiences on “Purity”), had left a sore feeling in not a few of the townfolk” (VII, 79). Many of the older women look upon the woman question as not quite “proper,” and most of them are dead-set against Mrs. Wade, the town’s only genuine feminist. Since Quarrier’s position has not

yet been revealed, the whole community turns out to hear his speech.

In the best classical manner he opens the address with an amusing anecdote. It seems that a certain “enlightened young lady” gave a lecture once “to advance the theory that woman’s intellect suffered from the habit of allowing her hair to grow so long” (VII, 82). Having made his audience more receptive, his tone becomes serious: “But, the fact that so many women were nowadays lifting up their voices in a demand for various degrees of emancipation seemed to show that the long tresses and the flowing garb had really, by process of civilization, come to symbolize certain traditions of inferiority which weighed upon the general female consciousness” (VII, 83). The reference is to a rather important issue of the women’s movement, the cumbersome dress of women and the need to do something about it. Also referred to is a

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favourite target of feminist criticism, the “long tresses” of Victorian women. By the end of the century any woman proclaiming herself emancipated had trimmed her hair.

Another important issue touched on in Quarrier’s speech is female education and its relation to marriage. The ordinary girl, he declares, is sent forth into life with a mind scarcely

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more developed than that of a child. The practice is shoddy preparation for marriage, for with little ability to judge, girls often make “monstrous errors” when accepting men as husbands. There is no scheme for rendering marriages universally happy, but judicious training can at least put young girls on their guard when selecting a mate. “It is possible,” Quarrier suggests, “to put them on something like an equality in knowledge of life with the young men of corresponding social station” (VII, 84-85). To this the conservatives in the audience murmur, “Oh, shameful! Shocking!” But Quarrier continues: “They must be treated, not like ornaments under glass-cases, but like human beings who, physiologists assures us, are born with mental apparatus, even as men are” (VII, 85). In other words, young women must be given an education scarcely different from that of young men. Quarrier’s views on this subject directly coincide with Gissing’s own.

In fact the whole speech, reported in part rather than fully dramatized, could have been delivered by Gissing himself. He had strong opinions on the topic brought up by Quarrier, and whatever the radical candidate has said is essentially Gissing’s own. When Quarrier speaks about England’s superfluous women, he touches upon the subject of Gissing’s next novel. A brief utterance, delivered without elaboration, becomes the informing idea of *The Odd Women*: “let women who have no family of their own devote themselves, whenever possible, to the

generous and high task of training the new female generation..." (VII, 86). Only in this way can women become truly emancipated.

When the meeting breaks up, the people gather in "little groups to discuss the speech. One of the more outspoken is Mr. Chown. "Close at hand, a circle of men had formed about Mr. Chown, who was haranguing on the Woman question. What he wanted was to emancipate the female mind from the yoke of superstition and priestcraft. Time enough to talk about giving women votes when they were no longer the slaves of an obstructive religion" (VII, 90). This freeing of women from the bondage of "an obstructive religion" was a dominant theme of *The Emancipated* (1890). At that time, as in 1892 when he published *Denzil Quarrier*, Gissing was in agreement with Mr. Chown. By 1894, with the publication of *In the Year of Jubilee*, his thoughts on the subject had changed. Ada Peachey was demonic because she had no authority to guide her in moral matters, no religion. The misery of the Peachey household, and thousands like it, "could generously be traced to wives who had no sense of responsibility, no understanding of household duties, no love of simple pleasure, no religion" (first edition, Pt. IV, Ch. IV, p. 243).

In another group Mrs. Wade, the feminist, is holding forth. "Speaking for myself, I cannot pretend to agree with the whole of Mr. Quarrier's address; I think his views are frequently timid" – laughter and hushing – "frequently timid, and occasionally quite too masculine... I should prefer to entitle Mr. Quarrier's lecture, 'Woman from a Male Point of View.' However, it was certainly well-meaning, undoubtedly eloquent, and on the whole, in this time of small mercies, something for which a member of the struggling sex may reasonably be grateful" (VII, 87). She tells Quarrier that the best part of his lecture consisted of those remarks about young girls being trapped into monstrous marriages. In making the remarks Quarrier was thinking of his mistress Lilian Northway, the victim of such a marriage. And it may be that Mrs. Wade has endured a similar experience; she is strongly attracted to men but is bitter in a way that seems very personal.

She goes on to say that the position of women in Western society has changed little since

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the time of the Greeks. "Woman is still enslaved, though men nowadays think it necessary to disguise it" (VIII, 98). Unwilling to argue the point, Quarrier asks whether she really attaches much importance to the right of voting. Her reply: "I attach all importance to a state of things which takes for granted that women stand on a level with children.... I insist on the franchise, because it symbolizes full citizenship. I won't aim at any thing less than that. Women must be taught to keep their eyes on that, as the irreducible minimum of their demands" (VIII, 98).

Though approaching the militant in her feminism, Mrs. Wade is chiefly a suffragette. Since the action of the novel takes place before the Third Reform Bill of 1884, her work would seem to be part of the suffragist agitation defeated in that year.

Later, in conversation with Lilian, Mrs. Wade brings up the subject of female dress. Pausing beside a lake, she remembers having witnessed “a splendid sight” on that spot. When a little girl fell off the bank into deep water, a young man, fully clothed, dived in to rescue her. The scene moved the woman to delight. “If we could swim well, and had no foolish petticoats, we should jump in just as readily. It was the power over circumstances that I admired and envied” (XIV, 166). Mrs. Wade is saying that the cumbersome dress of women, a form of bondage in itself, has for many years rendered them helpless in those incidents of life demanding action. In *The Odd Women* a very similar discussion takes place between Everard Barfoot and Rhoda Nunn (Ch. XXV). Concentrated commentary of this sort eventually sparked a revolution in women’s dress.

Rhoda, it should be noted, is perhaps Gissing’s most dedicated feminist. She is the leading female character in *The Odd Women*, the book that most thoroughly explores the woman question. But as already suggested, the idea at the center of theme and subject in that novel is discovered in Denzil Quarrier’s speech to the Polterham voters. There Quarrier spoke of the nation’s superfluous women and the need for the more intelligent of those women to train the rest. At that point, whether he knew it then or not, Gissing had discovered the master idea of his next novel. In *The Odd Women* he would develop the idea to great length, for it suggested to him a dramatic, moving, and more important aspect of the woman question.

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Gissing’s Characterisation

II. Environment

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(This is the second installment of the three-part article begun in our April issue. It is reprinted, in slightly altered form, from the July, 1962 number of *The Literary Half-Yearly*, published at the University of Mysore, India. The concluding installment, “Temperament,” will appear in our next issue.)

This example (i.e., that of Mrs. Mutimer in *Demos*) introduces us to the second division

of Realistic psychological theory, the influence of environment; and in doing so presents a problem that must be considered shortly. The interest in environment arises from the deterministic theory that actions follow necessarily on motives; a theory expressed in set terms by Waymark in *The Unclassed*, and more emotionally by Reuben Elgar, who wishes to decline responsibility for his actions:

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“I tell you I am conscious of no sins. Of follies, of ignorances, of miseries – as many as you please. And to what account should they all go? Was I so admirably guided in childhood and boyhood that my subsequent life is not to be explained?” (*The Emancipated*, Ch. IV)

Of course determinism is divorced from ordinary morality, as it rejects free will; but we must not be led by Elgar’s excusing the satisfaction of impulses, or by Zola and the Naturalists’ emphasis on “Le mécanisme humain,” into thinking that this doctrine of necessity holds that men act only according to the influences of the moment. Clearly, under “motives” must be included the things of the mind, moral tendencies, prejudices, as well as purely material motives. The psychology of the Realists, I have pointed out, was a complication, not a simplification of character study. Consequently, one cannot illustrate the doctrine of necessity in itself from Gissing’s analysis of motives, since those motives will be the same whether such things as moral instincts are regarded as being spiritually imparted or acquired through upbringing. Only, Gissing (while retaining a moral point of reference) tends not to condemn or approve, on the whole, which indicates a feeling that men are not really responsible for their actions.

However, if free choice is denied, it becomes obvious that not only must a preponderance of, for instance, reprehensible motives overcome a commendable motive in one instance, but also that a frequent repetition of the same situation will lead to the commendable motive losing power and significance in the mind of the man concerned. This brings us to the theory of the influence of environment: the circumstances in which a man lives will gradually influence his mental make-up, by constantly presenting to him motives in accord with the necessities of his life. Thus arises the antithesis between the romantic novelist, who believes, for instance, that virtue will always triumph over adversity, and the realist who believes that constant adversity will eventually diminish virtue.

The influence of circumstances is, of course, on the character’s outlook; to use Schopenhauer’s terms, on the knowing faculty; they do not affect his basic character, which has to do with the will. The examples of consistency of character which I have given are all

variations on strength of will and the sense of self-importance.

The influence of environment is the particular aspect of the doctrine of necessity that the Realists set themselves to illustrate. They emphasize the effects of upbringing, as in the case of Reuben Elgar, and his sister Miriam Baske. Moral and religious adherence, it is implied, are not matters of character but only of knowledge, being acquired. So, Miriam becomes a strict religious observer, aided by her character trait of strength of will; in a different environment she loses this outlook, but retains the will. Reuben, in addition to his trait of weak-willed indolence, has strong passions, and the effect of this repressive upbringing is to make him rebel. There is of course no simplification here; the same motives do not produce the same effects, because the characters are different.

More noticeable a subject than the effect of education in Gissing, as in most Realists, is the special effect of poverty (though he showed himself always interested in educational problems). The effects of poverty are his major theme; there is hardly need to demonstrate his studies of ignorance and degradation amongst the lower classes. But it is worth while to observe the case of educated people.

His general theme was the depressing and disabling effect of poverty: of Reardon, he says:

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“He was the kind of man who cannot struggle against adverse conditions, but whom prosperity warns to the exercise of his powers.” (*New Grub Street*, Vol. I, Ch. V)

This situation in various forms arises again and again. Poverty not only cramps the abilities and distracts from concentration, but it develops in a man his less admirable qualities – avarice, cunning, ruthlessness – even though he may have been originally a man of integrity and altruism. This happens to most of the characters in *New Grub Street*. Amy Reardon is unwilling to face poverty; it constricts her love for her husband, and brings her to leave him to his own devices rather than to support him. It makes her think first of money, and only afterwards of artistic integrity and reputation. Her tendency to selfishness and to ungenerous instincts is developed. Reardon too suffers in becoming surly and querulous.

“A little money, and he could have rested secure in her love, for then he would have been able to keep ever before her the best qualities of his heart and brain. Upon him, too, penury had its debasing effect; as he now presented himself he was not a man to be admired or loved.” (*New Grub Street*, Vol. I, Ch. XVII)

Alfred Yule's bitterness and vindictiveness is the result of the defeats he has received in the struggle for existence:

"I am all but certain that, if he became rich, he would be a very much kinder man, a better man in every way. It is poverty that has made him worse than he naturally is; it has that effect on almost everybody. Money does harm, too, sometimes...." (*New Grub Street*, Vol. II, Ch. IX)

Cunning and ruthlessness are more natural to the "villain" of the book, Milvain – but even in him they are emphasized by poverty, as he claims:

"Selfishness – that's one of my faults.... If I were rich, I should be a generous and good man; I know I should. So would many another poor fellow whose worst features come out under hardship." (*New Grub Street*, Vol. I, Ch. VIII)

To all these people the same thing is happening: the constant presentation among their motives of the need to get money, at any cost, gradually blunts and renders impotent the motives of generosity, fairness, integrity and the like. It is worth noting that the aspirations of many characters become concentrated on some material object. Peak, like Dagworthy, lets his ambitions turn to acquiring a wife of refinement; Yule lowers his aims from literary success to the editorship of a magazine whence he can avenge himself on his critics.

"Money does harm, too, sometimes...." Though most concerned with poverty, Gissing does not omit to give an example of damage done by wealth. Mutimer, the local leader and socialist speaker in *Demos*, has all the appearance of an honest and sincere man; and by virtue of these qualities, bids fair to achieve the power and eminence he is led to desire by his character trait of ambition. When he comes into money, the character trait remains, but his behaviour alters in obedience to the change in motives. As he becomes aware of the possibilities that lie before him, he ceases to wish to be a representative of the people and to share their

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conditions. He retains enough of his social enthusiasm to wish to be benefactor, and institutes an ideal manufacturing company; but in doing so he shows a growing tendency towards the autocratic methods of the employer. He sets out to acquire a gentlewoman for a wife, and acts

unfeelingly towards his former friends.

When a will is discovered that takes away his money, he shows actual dishonesty in attempting to conceal it. Although it is unlikely that he has analysed his own motives, he is betraying that the quest for power is his ruling passion; when success depended on integrity, he found it easy to be honest; now that it depends on the possession of wealth, he is dishonest. As soon as he has lost the money, he takes up again his former character of the honest man. This is a clear case of actions responding to motives, given the basic urge to power.

The problem raised by the case of Mrs. Mutimer, his mother, is this: if actions are decided by environment, why does not Mrs. Mutimer adapt herself to the conditions of wealth as her son does? We must begin by admitting that Gissing's irrational prejudice against the lower classes complicates his application of the theory of environment. He is ready enough to show them degraded by poverty; ready to show that such a man as Mutimer would be worse when in possession of wealth; but not to admit that a working-class person has possibilities of improvement. Lady Ogram in *Our Friend the Charlatan* is "an exception to the rule that low-born English girls cannot rise above their native condition" (*Our Friend the Charlatan* [London, 1901] Chapter VIII). This prejudice has some part in the presentation of Mrs. Mutimer. Mutimer's brother and sister are depraved by wealth, as he is; Mrs. Mutimer is included as another aspect of the thesis that the lower classes cannot rise in the world. Nevertheless, she has the ring of truth; and I think she can reasonably be explained. Her children, whose strength of will, even in Richard, is not strongly developed in the direction of maintenance of principles, react rapidly to the change of circumstance. Mrs. Mutimer's integrity is strong, and her habits of life deeply ingrained with age, so that, within the period of the story during which she is possessed of wealth, she shows no change. It is not that the new circumstances have no effect upon her; they have the effect of making her cling more strongly to her principles. Had Gissing a different purpose in mind, might one reasonably suppose he would have shown us Mrs. Mutimer slowly adapting to the new conditions? His study is usually of the gradual effect of environment; for example, Miriam Baske, equally strong-willed but much younger, does not break away from her narrow intellectual habits until she has for some time been exposed to a freer atmosphere.

Miriam Baske represents the good effects of an improved environment, and reminds us that Gissing does not deal entirely with adverse circumstances. Of course, his essential pessimism predisposed him to descriptions of misery; his own experiences gave him special sympathy with the depressed intellectual, so common a figure in realistic novels of the age, and especially amongst Russian realists of the school of Gogol. The feeling of his books is the tortured suffering of Dostoievsky, whom he admired; his characters also were the oppressed and

despairing, the “insulted and injured,” those who suffered not only material but also social and spiritual harm from their circumstances. Yet he did not intend to convey that the effect of circumstances on character was invariably adverse. He gives full credit to the significance of inborn character (as when the same education has opposite results on Reuben Elgar and Miriam Baske). He does not over-simplify the theory of environmental influences, but he makes full allowance for it in his psychology.

Nor is his handling of the theory so mechanical as this discussion might suggest; he did not write an “experimental novel,” but sees his characters as inseparable parts of their

environments. The wish expressed by one of Gissing’s readers, that he give his characters more money, emphasized this point (Letter to Morley Roberts, *Bookman*, [London], Jan. 1915, p. 123). We too sometimes wish that Gissing was a little less oppressively pessimistic; but we realize that not only does the struggle against circumstances form the subject and theme of most of his books, so that without it they would not exist, but also that the characters as they are presented would not exist if they were richer. They would be different men. They might be recognizably similar, but they would have changed in most respects. Gissing does create a few educated protagonists – Mallard (*The Emancipated*), Rolfe (*The Whirlpool*), Langley (*Sleeping Fires*) – who are not poverty-stricken; apart from their individual qualities, they are in general different men from the sufferers. In their personal relationships they are more capable, more balanced; all their faculties and interests are more harmoniously and soundly developed. In short, they have not suffered from the cramping of abilities and the confusing distractions of poverty. Gissing sees his characters in relation to their circumstances, not as separate entities. Poverty is the essence of his poverty-stricken characters.

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On Gissing in Calabria

Mr. Francesco Badolato reports that on October 20th of last year, Professor Filippo Donini, Director of the Italian Institute in London, gave a lecture before the British-Italian Society at the English-Speaking Union on the subject, “Viaggiatori Inglesi in Calabria.” His subjects were Edward Lear, Norman Douglas and Gissing. His remarks on Gissing, as reported

by *Rivista*, the journal of the British-Italian Society, in its issue of November-December 1966, were as follows:

“Gissing’s Calabrian journey was less a search for scenic beauties than for traces of Magna Grecia’s past: ‘The world of the Greeks and Romans is my land of romance.... In Magna Grecia the waters of two fountains mingle and flow together; how exquisite will be the draught!’ So he went out from Naples in 1897 amid protests about his hardiness in undertaking a solitary journey through the wild South. The story of the journey is told in his *By the Ionian Sea* (published in 1901). He visited Cosenza and sought for Alaric’s grave, took the train along the Ionian coast to Taranto and back through Metaponto, seeking the Galeso river beloved by Horace and the Neto sung by Theocritus, and finally landing disastrously at Cotrone (the Crotona of today) where a bout of malaria compelled him to spend several uncomfortable and disillusioning days in the Concordia inn. But even there he found compensation: landlady, doctor, and newspaper-boy all conspired to look after him, and just as he was ‘thinking ill of

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Cotrone and its inhabitants’ the sound of a street organ and singing made him reproach himself for his ingratitude. ‘All the faults of the Italian people are whelmed in forgiveness as soon as their music sounds under the Italian sky.’

So, still only half-cured and despite his doctor’s protests, he went on to Catanzaro, ‘one of the healthiest spots in Southern Italy,’ and there rejoiced in local society – ‘these people have an innate respect for things of the spirit ... the café seemed a place of assembly for wits and philosophers.’”

Professor Donini concluded by saying that if his three travellers were to go back to Calabria now they would find much changed – the “auto-strada del Sole” approaching completion, a “zona industriale” at Crotona, hydro-electric schemes with their artificial lakes on the Sila, greater political maturity among the people; yet the general character remains the same.

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- Gissing, G. *George Gissing's Commonplace Book*. A Manuscript in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library. Edited by Jacob Korg. sm 4to, orig. wrappers, New York, 1962. 22/6 (\$3.15)
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A Gissing Phrase Appears

By Jacob Korg

Gissing was not a maker of phrases, and is rarely quotable. It is striking, therefore, to find a term of his invention appearing without acknowledgement, as if it were in common usage. In his excellent study of Joyce's *Ulysses, Surface and Symbol* (New York, 1962) Robert M. Adams says: "Bloom celebrates in Dignam a death which is, in every sense of the word, common; Joyce celebrates in both of them the lot of the ignobly decent, the universality of the unmemorable." Readers of *New Grub Street* will recognize in "ignobly decent" Harold Biffen's ironic term for the "ordinary vulgar life" which is the setting of his novel, *Mr. Bailey, Grocer*: "What I really aim at," says Biffen, "is an absolute realism in the sphere of the ignobly decent"

(*New Grub Street*, Ch. X). Mr. Adams' borrowing, which seems, paradoxically, both perceptive and unconscious, makes us realize that in coining the term Gissing hit upon a subtle and indispensable way of expressing a particular modulation of realism.

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