

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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Dickens and Gissing as Radical Feminists

Carol Munn

It would have been difficult for any late-Victorian novelist to have escaped reading Dickens and being influenced by him, even though Dickens’ books were largely ignored by critics in the three decades following his death. (1) Fortunately, when John Holland Rose began the revival of Dickens criticism by including him in his “Victorian Era Series” at the end of the century, he chose as author for the volume George Gissing (2), whose comments function in two ways—first, to define a critical attitude towards Dickens at the turn of the century and, second,

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to indicate the basis for his own artistic position. By comparing Gissing's novels with Dickens', using Gissing's critical comments as guide, we can gain insight into the diffuse elements of Dickens' influence upon one later Victorian and, in addition, gain a clearer understanding of Dickens himself.

Gissing's reputation as a Dickensian grew after publication for Rose of *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, (3) and he is still considered among the foremost students of Dickens. In 1898 he was asked to begin a series of introductions for the ill-fated Rochester edition of Dickens' works. He was to write eleven in all, of which only six were published according to the original plan. Two of the others were lost, the remaining nine were published posthumously in separate collections entitled *Critical Studies of the Works of Charles Dickens* (N.Y., 1924) and *The Immortal Dickens* (London, 1925). Both collections include a short essay, "Dickens in Memory." In 1902, Gissing revised *A Critical Study* and published an abridgement of Forster's Life, in addition to an article on Dickens for the *Nottinghamshire Guardian* and two reviews for the *Times Literary Supplement* recently collected and published by Coustillas. (4) Gissing's own published novels are twenty-five in number, published between 1880 and 1905, so there is ample material for comparison.

Dickens' influence on Gissing has long been recognized by critics and was attested to by Gissing himself in "Dickens in Memory," as well as in a number of letters. Almost every student of Gissing has noticed similarities between the two writers; however, they vary in their feelings about the significance of the similarities, and no critic has made a systematic textual comparison of the two novelists. Frank Swinnerton, Gissing's first critical biographer, found textual evidence that Gissing "borrowed" the orthography of Mrs. Gamp's diction for the character of Bill in *Workers in the Dawn* (set in 1870 when, Swinnerton declared, it would no longer have been current). (5) He went on to point out that Gissing as a child had felt great esteem for Dickens and that Dickens' works had been read in the Gissing household. He pointed out a number of "Dickensian" characters and situations to be found in Gissing's works. But he drew

from such comparisons no conclusions about the aesthetic influence of Dickens on Gissing. In fact, he found close comparisons between the works of the two writers "unintelligent," since he felt that Gissing had consciously avoided copying the older author and revealed his admiration only in the critical book, which Swinnerton considered without reference to Gissing's novels (p. 139). Swinnerton's comparisons thus became concessions in his attempt to defend Gissing

against the critics who said he was just a poor imitator of Dickens. Gissing's close friend, Morley Roberts, in his thinly-disguised fictional biography, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, noted certain biographical similarities between Dickens and Gissing. (6) He suggested that the reason for Gissing's extensive treatment of Dickens' women characters in *A Critical Study* lay in the special insight which was Gissing's by virtue of his disastrous relationships with women in his own life (p. 112).

Later critics have been more precise in outlining similarities. Samuel Gapp, in the introduction to his book *George Gissing: Classicist*, finds "some justification" for considering Gissing "first and foremost a follower of Dickens." (p. 2) He points out similarities of plot and technique and especially notes the careful portrayal of scenes of London life. However, Gapp points out that the "cheerful view" of poverty adopted by Dickens contrasts sharply with the "pessimistic" viewpoint of Gissing—a questionable observation reiterated by a number of other scholars (and, interestingly enough, not apparent among students of both Gissing and Dickens). Mabel Collins Donnelly develops the same point more fully in *George Gissing: Grave Comedian*. She notes the similarities in plot structure, comparing *Bleak House* and *Workers in the Dawn* and finding much alike in the two authors' juxtapositions of social classes and social sins. But, she points out (p. 67), Dickens required retribution from his evil characters and saved those who were virtuous, while Gissing carried his book to its logical, pessimistic conclusion.

Russell Kirk finds Dickens among the "models" obviously used by Gissing in his writing, but includes him among several other English novelists influencing Gissing and does not trace the various influences further. (7) Stanley Alden notes the similarity of treatment of social issues between the two writers, but concludes that Gissing moved away from social comment in his

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later works and thus broke with the tradition of social consciousness begun by Dickens. (8) (Although he failed to note that Dickens was also disillusioned about the possibilities of a writer's social influence in his later life.) (9)

Ruth McKay is another scholar who compares the two writers and their treatment of social issues. She makes an interesting observation—that in a sense the two are both tragedians. She suggests that the reader who is not attracted by the deep pessimism of Gissing will not see the tragedy of Dickens, who disguised his feelings under a pleasing style. (10)

A few critics have used the *Critical Study* in their comparisons of Dickens and Gissing. Raymond Williams quotes from it to support his thesis that mood and voice in Gissing are directly related to the earlier writer—that, in fact, Gissing's work was a logical consequence of the work begun by Dickens. (11) Patrick Yarker comes at the problem another way, using the

Critical Study to catalog some of the flaws in Gissing's own work—for instance, using Gissing's insistence that Dickens' use of humor could be excused when viewing him in the context of his times as evidence to support his view of the essential humorlessness of Gissing himself. (12) C. J. Francis uses Gissing's writings on Dickens as evidence to prove his analytical ability and critical acumen as well as to support the idea that Gissing belonged to what Francis calls the "school" of Dickens (although he then limits Dickens' influence to "style"). (13) Sylvère Monod, in his book *Dickens as Novelist*, (14) includes a good critical analysis of *A Critical Study*, but no scholar seems to have compared closely the three collections of works: Dickens' novels, Gissing's criticism, and Gissing's novels, in order to document the subtle influence the older writer may have had on the younger.

Jacob Korg comes closest in his *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*. But it is his belief that a number of other writers influenced Gissing more than Dickens did, and he is more concerned with proving this point than with documenting Dickens' actual influence. He shows that Gissing's reportorial accuracy stems less from Dickens than from the contemporary continental writers, notably Zola (p. 100). He pinpoints clearly Gissing's essential pessimism:

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"In Gissing's novels ... the malevolence of the universal order manifests itself in the works of man" (p. 115). Korg suggests that while preoccupation with the influence of social forces on individuals is a major focus of Dickens' work, it *dominates* Gissing's—and that herein lies the basic difference between the two writers (p. 200). He goes on to document Gissing's contribution to Dickens criticism and the importance of this essential difference in that contribution. Gissing, says Korg, was the first to see the sociological import of Dickens' works, and the first to criticize his novels in a sociological context (p. 215). Also, Gissing, the "humorless" novelist, was among the first to understand and point out the subtle social comment in much of Dickens' humor.

Korg finds in Gissing's appreciation of Dickens as a Victorian novelist the key to much that is flawed in his own work—for the Victorian novel as it was handed down from Dickens, with its complexity of plot and characterization, was not the appropriate vehicle for a writer like Gissing, and his troubles with the form are constantly apparent in his novels (p. 258). Dickens, however, was not the major influence on Gissing, according to Korg. The dominant theme in Gissing's work—"the destruction of human character in the crushing mill of social evils"—was subsidiary in Dickens' works to the motive of entertainment. It was in Eliot and the later Victorians, thinks Korg, that Gissing found his "view of the novel's mission" (p. 261).

Was Gissing derivative Dickens? The critics are divided, but all consider the question.

Certainly Korg was correct in suggesting that a paper of this kind could be written using any of a half dozen English or continental novelists as the earlier figure. But a reading of Dickens and Gissing back-to-back leaves one with the feeling that if Dickens had lived to the end of the century he would have come around to Gissing's social viewpoint.

Any one of a number of areas in the *Critical Study* could be chosen for comparison—Gissing's book is so thorough. He was, as Korg states, the first to put Dickens into sociological perspective. He also considered Dickens carefully from the historical and religious standpoints; these also were foci in his own novels. But it is in another element, the Woman Question, that the two writers are most alike, and that Gissing can be most useful in throwing light on Dickens'

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work. Dickens has not generally been considered a champion of women, and critics have usually considered his female characters in another light altogether. Gissing covered Dickens' women extensively in his book, but only obliquely from the perspective of Dickens as Radical. In his own books, however, Gissing was an avowed supporter of the Women's Cause, and at least four of his books deal directly with the problem. By comparing the two sets of characters, perhaps some evidence can be amassed to support Dickens' place as a commentator on the status of Victorian women and to delineate Gissing's indebtedness to Dickens on the same subject.

Comparison shows that the two writers share two distinct types of female characters: the "little women" and the "women meant to be tragic," as Gissing calls them in his book on Dickens. It has been generally assumed that these similarities arose because of the similarity of experience between the two writers—both were extremely unhappy in their marriages and shared, especially in later life, that unfulfilled restlessness one usually associates with late adolescence.

Consider first the little women—"Dickens' pets," Gissing calls them in the *Critical Study*—"the type of all that Dickens really admired in women." He adds, "Truth to tell, it was no bad ideal" (Blackie, 1898, p. 161). These women share a delicacy of character that was evident at a very young age—the implication is that they were somehow born to be sweet and good, a contradiction of the authors' usual insistence that character is directly influenced by environment—as evidenced by Dickens' pictures of Amy Dorrit and Agnes Wickfield as patient, gentle children. Gissing shows us Helen Norman in *Workers in the Dawn*, "a wonderfully beautiful child"; loved by the dog and the cat and the servants, she "seemed to bear promise of a womanhood fertile in all perfection of female loveliness ... Already (at eleven years old) she was the directing spirit in the household..." (Doubleday, 1935, vol. I, p. 128).

The girls share a similar useless training. Dora Spenslow sings and does flower-painting (*David Copperfield*, Houghton Mifflin, 1894, vol. I, p. 169) and Gissing's Madden girls are trained for "the path... trodden by English ladies of the familiar type..." (*The Odd Women*, Blond, 1968, p. 3). Amy Dorrit's minimal training includes dancing lessons, of all things (*Little Dorrit*,

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Dana, Estes, nd. vol. I, p. 107). None of the girls are trained to make a living in any way. Most of them belong to a class in which earning one's living is not essential—indeed Gissing criticizes Dickens for allowing Lizzie Hexam into the group of those who act like gentlewomen (*Charles Dickens*, p. 77). But he himself offers Ida Starr for our perusal—a prostitute who reforms for the man she loves and ends by doing good works for slum children in a place called Litany Lane which could have been created by Dickens himself. Apparently one can be born sweet and good even in the lower class.

Both Dickens and Gissing suggest that a little woman can surely be identified by her surroundings. Amy Dorrit is able to create something of a bower of loveliness even in the Marshalsea; Agnes Wickfield, Helen Norman, Lucy Venning, Esther Summerson and even Lizzie Hexam are identified by a strong desire to make the nastiest places homelike and fresh, and they do it even in childhood. It is as if the authors see this as the embodiment of the feminine role, and are unable to give it up even if it means accepting a middle-class standard which the rational mind can see is narrow-minded and not always true. Gissing excuses Dickens thus:

Granted that the world must go on very much in the old way, that children must be born and looked after, that dinners must be cooked, that houses must be kept sweet, it is hard to see how [the little woman] can ever be supplanted. [She] is no imbecile—your thoroughly kind-hearted and home-loving woman never will be; with opportunities, she would learn much, even beyond domestic limits, and still would delight in her dainty little aprons, her pastry board and roller...

There are those who surmise that in the far-off time when girls are universally well-taught, when it is the exception to meet, in any class, with the maiden or the wife who deems herself a natural inferior of brother, lover, husband... that it may not be found impossible to turn from a page of Sophocles to the boiling of a potato, or even the scrubbing of a floor... In [Dickens'] pages, [these future women] will see that ancient deformity of

their sex, and will recognize how justly he pointed out the way of safe reform; no startling innovation, no extravagant idealism, but a gentle insistence on the facts of human nature, a kindly glorifying of one humble little woman, who saw her duty, and did it singing the while. (*Charles Dickens*, p. 162).

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It's a charming prediction, but let us examine the actual lives of the little women, who one and all consider themselves the "natural inferiors" of all men who are their social equals. First of all, none are married (except for Dora, whose "fairy marriage" does not seem altogether credible as a mature relationship), although all see in marriage the spiritual culmination of their existence. Their lives are beset with problems: Florence Dombey is made miserable by her father; Agnes Wickfield must stand by and watch her father and David choose paths which she sees harmful; Esther Summerson can change Peepy's pants and arrange Caddy's wedding, but she endures much vicarious suffering through her inability to affect events; Lizzie Hexam and Amy Dorrit are models of feminine submission. Gissing's Emily Hood pines away for a lover she won't admit she loves (shades of Amy Dorrit), Helen Norman and Lucy Venning take up their time in good works and Marian Yule does unappreciated ghost-writing for her scholar-father after her lover leaves her. Dickens is able to give all of his little women fairy-tale-live-happily-ever-after endings, but Gissing cannot predict so rosy a future. His Helen Norman finishes out her days amidst consumption and disillusionment, Emily Hood and Lucy Venning make predictably happy marriages, but the endings of their stories are marred by Gissing's inability to bring off either a believable fairy-tale ending or his usual pessimistic conclusion; and Marian Yule ends by taking a rather cold solace in scholarship. One suspects that their subsequent lives will be devoid of interest—one pictures them spending their later years remembering the triumphs of submission. Indeed, a modern reader is apt to find them cloying—to wonder just how "ideal" they really are.

And then, one inevitably wonders just what their authors really meant them to be. The glass which was half-full (for who can deny that the little women share characteristics which are attractive?), suddenly seems half-empty. The reader asks, is this enough for a woman to be? One cannot imagine any of the little women actually reading Sophocles—or reading anything at all, for that matter. Ida Starr's insistence that she "loves to read" seems insipid, if not moronic, in the light of her character (*The Unclassed*, A. H. Bullen, 1901, p. 90).

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Certainly these are meant to be sympathetic characters—but they are too good—in

comparison everyone else must be a little soiled. Thus, for all their insistence that the world is good, they take on the appearance of Victorian Womanhood exercising superiority from a pedestal. They become what the modern radicals are calling “castrating women”—albeit castrating with a gentle hand. They achieve their character by refusing, under any circumstances, to act. They wait, engaging in only the most timid actions (what would have become of Florence Dombey’s flight, for instance, if a kind man had not been waiting to take her in and protect her?); and then they steal away from their active male counterparts what Maslow calls the “peak experiences” by too readily forgiving and accepting them. Florence cannot allow Dombey’s penitence—she must minimize it—sanctifying herself in the process. Agnes gently scorns to mention David’s gross obtuseness in overlooking her love for six hundred pages; Amy comes running to forgive Arthur his neglect of her and his financial gullibility. Gissing’s women are the same. Ida Starr comes out of prison—what Gissing has portrayed as a hellish experience for her—thinking only of Waymark’s possible danger. Helen Norman accepts Arthur Golding’s confession that he is married (and thus unable to marry her and complete her happiness) with the calm statement that she will continue to love him no matter what, but would prefer to forego seeing him again. One and all, they avoid entering into the passionate relationships of life. Gissing notes that Dickens’ novels are remarkably free of sexual relationships (*Charles Dickens*, p. 157), and although his own books were not known for such restraint, Gissing does keep his own little women very much apart from sensuality. Perhaps they should be called not “little” women, but “demi-women.”

Idealism aside, the two authors exhibit several other types of characters who are remarkably alike. Their views of marriage, like their views of ideal womanhood, are very similar. The most striking similarity is in their view of the rare, good marriage. Dickens gives us dear old Traddles, who waited ten years to marry “the dearest girl in the world.” We see David’s visit to the happy couple (and sisters-in-law), when “Mrs. Traddles, with perfect pleasure and

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composure beaming from her household eyes, having made the tea, then quietly made the toast as she sat in a corner by the fire” (Vol. II, p. 404). Compare Gissing’s Micklethwaites, whose situation is in every way similar to that of Traddles, except that the sister-in-law is blind. When the hero visits their bridal abode, Gissing gives us this picture:

Where the average woman would have displayed pretentious emptiness, Mrs. Micklethwaite had made a home which was in its way beautiful. The dinner, which she herself had cooked, aimed at being no more than a simple, decorous meal, but the guest unfeignedly enjoyed it; even the vegetables and the bread seemed to him to have a daintier flavour than at many a rich table.

(*The Odd Women*, p. 173)

These are gentle, good girls—one hesitates to call them women—who resemble the pure little women. One has the impression of the adolescent's dream—David Copperfield playing at house with the girl he loves.

But mostly Dickens offers us less pleasing views of marriage. There are a whole series of couples who are unsuitably married. David's real life awakening when he has taken his Dora off to be his wife is a rude one. Gissing claims to find Dora unbelievable—"take Dora seriously, and at once you are compelled to ask by what right an author demands your sympathy for such a brainless, nerveless, profitless simpleton" (*Charles Dickens*, p. 159)—and yet who can avoid remembering Dora and Jip (not to mention the pens and account book) when he reads of Arthur Golding's attempts to educate his new wife (*Workers in the Dawn*, vol. II, p. 144 ff.) or the scene in which he attempts to make her appreciate the beauty of a sunset and she exclaims, "It's almost as pretty as the theaytre, isn't it?" (vol. II, p. 390). Gissing's defence for his own verity, of course, would lie in the fact that Carrie Golding is a woman of the lower class, but Carrie's troubles equal Dora's, if her sweetness does not, and both writers are describing scenes which very probably occurred in their own lives. In both cases, the reader is effectively forced to infer that the marriage will not result in a meeting of minds.

Both writers also show other pictures of less-than-happy marriages. Dickens gives us

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Annie Strong and Pet Meagles, whose marriages are more or less for social convenience. Gissing matches them with his very sensitive portrayal of Monica Madden in *The Odd Women*. Both writers also show a number of those lower-middle-class women who are not unfortunate, who are treated kindly by their male kin but whose characteristic, says Gissing, is "acidity of temper and boundless license of querulous or insulting talk" (*Charles Dickens*, p. 133). Gissing's further comments amount to a tirade:

Among the poorer folk, especially in London, such women may be observed today by any inquirer sufficiently courageous... Education has done little as yet to improve the tempers and intellects of women in this rank... Many a woman who...lives in comparative luxury, has brought the arts of ill-temper to high perfection. . . Nowadays these ladies would enjoy a very much larger life, would systematically neglect their children (if they chose to have any), and would soothe their nerves by flinging at the remonstrant husband any domestic object to which they attached no special value. . . As a matter of

fact, these women produced more misery than can be calculated (pp. 134-35).

Mrs. Snagsby and Mrs. Wilfer are the prime examples, of course, and Gissing portrays in his own work a stunning addition to the group—Harriet Smales. In passages of conversation appropriate to Mrs. Snagsby, we see a mean-charactered woman of endless gratuitous ill-temper. Harriet's husband is even more forbearing than Snagsby—his sensitivity is pathetic at times—and yet she persists in suspecting him of infidelities which Gissing makes it plain he could not contemplate (*The Unclassed*, pp. 178, 179, 203 ff.). In one sense, these are caricatures of fishwives. Other writers have done them as well. But in another sense, both Dickens and Gissing seem to be suggesting a larger pattern, in which the ethereal ideal is rare and unattainable while the social reality produces systematically a kind of disillusioning marriage and women who are driven by a taste for violence (if not strong drink, or worse).

Gissing sees in Fanny Dorrit a portrait of the later “shop-girl.” He describes her at great length, and his comments could serve as well to describe his own Monica Madden of *The Odd Women*:

Her first ambition is a paltry and ignorant ambition, of course allied with

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vanity; she is crudely selfish, and has only the elementary scruples of her sex. Withal, there glimmers in her, under favouring circumstances, a vulgar good nature... In a time of social transition, when the womenkind of labourer and office-man tend to intermingle, ... Fanny becomes a *question*. It is not easy to recompense her services... on a scale which makes her free of the temptation ever present to this class. When she marries, her knowledge of domestic duties is found to be on a par with, say, that of a newspaper boy... Dickens did not know how significant was the picture... (*Charles Dickens*, p. 156)

Monica, of course, has a chance to learn typewriting and become a self-supporting member of the “new breed” of women—but poverty and a lack of spiritual wherewithal make it impossible for her to succeed and she makes an unfortunate marriage of convenience. Both she and Fanny have a fine understanding of the kind of women they really are—it is the suggestion of their creators that it is a malevolent social system which makes it impossible for them to be anything

else.

But these are not the only alternatives to the idealized little women. We must not forget those whom Gissing calls “the women meant to be tragic.” He indicates displeasure with the ones Dickens created (*Charles Dickens*, p. 96) and yet his are so similar—what we see is a fine example of the “damned if she does, damned if she doesn’t” dilemma of the Victorian (and modern) woman. If she treads the prescribed path of sweetness and homely virtue, she is only part of a person and, moreover, risks the pedestal fate of the little women; if she insists upon rational thought and reasonable action, she is so constantly thwarted by circumstance and male expectations that she becomes cold and passionless and cruel. In many ways the tragic characters are the mirror images of the little women—the negative portions of the same characters—with the same withdrawn outcome. There is little of human warmth and fulfillment about either kind of woman.

Notice how often both authors, in describing the tragic women, use phrases like “pride and wrath and self-humiliation” (*Dombey and Son*, Dana, Estes, nd, p. 72); “unquenchable passion” (*Little Dorrit*, vol. II, p. 76); “unshaken in her natural and acquired presence” (*Bleak*

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House, Collier & Son, 1911, vol. II, p. 587); the words suggest a withdrawn coldness so implacable that the characters cannot be any more complete than their sweet and good counterparts. Each of the tragic women is presented in some situation in which she acts decisively and spitefully, in which pride and passion are melded into very moving scenes—in the case of both Dickens and Gissing this is some of their best writing. Both show a deep sympathy with these women ruined, and not just defeated, by the Victorian sense of proper womanhood. That they are more than embodiments of evil is shown by both authors in their special attachments to the little women heroines—in all cases they bear a special feeling, love or a kind of backhanded hatred, for the heroines—which presumably could not exist if they were meant to portray simply the evil genius of woman.

In the cases of Miss Wade and Ada Warren, we are given special circumstances from childhood which explain the adult personalities. These passages are enough alike to invite comparison. Miss Wade, in telling her story to Arthur Clennam, emphasizes that from her earliest childhood her intelligence interposed itself between her and other people. Her stark description of herself as a child standing on the staircase listening to others discuss her, and her reiteration of her ability to see through the acts of others to their real motives—always perceived as cruel and unfeeling (*Little Dorrit*, vol. III, p. 177 ff.)—is startlingly similar to Isabel Clarendon’s descriptions of Ada Warren as a child. “Fearful” and “defiant” are Mrs.

Clarendon's words. Gissing tells us that Ada "hated that beautiful lady with a precocious hatred" (*Isabel Clarendon*, Harvester Press, 1969, vol. I, p. 134). And later, when Mrs. Clarendon asks why her unwilling guest refuses to meet company, Ada replies,

"... it is torture, and you might know it. You ask me to meet your friends because you think it, I suppose, a duty to do so; in truth, you are ashamed of me, you had far rather not see me downstairs. I know myself well enough, and I have glasses in my room. I know what these people say and think of me..." (p. 140)

What we have is the idea that a good character cannot be corrupted by adult woes, but that

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childhood afflictions can turn a basically good person into a cold and unfulfilled individual with potential for evil.

Gissing, of course, states clearly that it is society which produces the tragic women, specifically its demoralizing attitude toward their sex. Does he find this same statement in Dickens? And is this what Dickens meant to imply? Of course, the similarity of the characters must serve as the basic evidence that Dickens meant exactly that. Gissing's aforementioned comment about "the way of safe reform" (*Charles Dickens*, p. 162) and his discussion of Dickens as radical (p. 195) suggest that he found in Dickens a strong, if not thoroughly explicated, feeling for the Woman Problem. One last question must be asked, and that is what the two writers suggested for a solution.

Gissing, of course, suggests excellent education and economic equality as basic reforms. But his characters who escape the demoralizing influences of Victorian society are curiously like Dickens'. Each of them present one sensible unmarried Lady (Dickens' Betsey Trotwood and Gissing's Mary Barfoot) who, one suspects, refrains from affiliations with men from a sense of the feminine dilemma and an idea that things are better if one confronts the problem on other than personal levels. Miss Barfoot is a feminist of sorts, certainly not of the militant variety, and Gissing puts in her words his dream of the ultimate "place" for women. She is chiefly anxious that "women in general shall become rational and responsible human beings" (*The Odd Women*, p. 135). Her speech continues:

"...we ourselves are escaping from a hardship that has become intolerable. We are educating ourselves. There must be a new type of woman. . . Of the

old ideal virtues we can retain many, but we have to add to them those which have been thought appropriate only in men. Let a woman be gentle, but at the same time let her be strong; let her be pure of heart, but none the less wise and instructed... Whether woman is the equal of man I neither know nor care. We are not his equal in size, in weight, in muscle, and, for all I can say, we may have less power of brain. That has nothing to do with it. Enough for us to know that our natural growth has been stunted. The mass of women have always been paltry creatures, and their paltriness has proved a curse to men. So, if you like to put it in this way, we are working for the advantage of men as well as for our own.” (p. 136)

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Both Dickens and Gissing present in their later works a new version of the ideal woman, remarkably similar although Gissing’s naturally adheres more closely to Miss Barfoot’s perception of “a new type of woman.” Dickens has his Bella Wilfer—and Gissing suggests that Helena Landless and Rosa Bud may have been intended to represent the new ideal as well (*Charles Dickens*, p. 160)—and Gissing has Bertha Cross and Isabel Clarendon. These women share the good qualities of little women, but added to them is the perception and intelligence of the tragic women—the two halves are melded together in such a way that they operate synergistically, and the reader is given to understand that there will be no tragedy for these women. They are able to act—we see Bella change in the course of the novel into a woman who can act decisively—and interact—none of these women feel a compunction to hold themselves aloof from human relationships. They are perceptive, and they are able to hold up their end of a conversation or a relationship—no feelings of “natural inferiority” for them.

It is significant that these are the products of mature writers. The conclusion is difficult to avoid that these two men—so different in their politics and in their temperaments—discovered in their lives and in their writings the ideas expressed in Miss Barfoot’s speech—that women must take their place as rational and responsible human beings.

Notes

- 1 - K. J. Fielding, “1870-1900: Forster and Reaction,” *The Dickensian*, Centenary Edition (1970), 86.
- 2 - *Ibid*, 98.
- 3 - Pierre Coustillas, *Gissing’s Writings on Dickens* (London: Enitharmon Press, 1969), 5.
- 4 - Sylvère Monod, “1900-1920: The Age of Chesterton,” *The Dickensian*, Centenary Edition

(1970), 102.

5 - Frank Swinnerton, *George Gissing: A Critical Study* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1923), 137.

6 - The Richards Press edition, 1958, 163.

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7 - Russell Kirk, "Who Knows George Gissing?" *Collected Articles on George Gissing*, ed. Pierre Coustillas (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1968), 9.

8 - Stanley Alden, "George Gissing, Humanist," *Collected Articles on George Gissing*, 22.

9 - Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens : His Tragedy and Triumph* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1952), 859.

10 - Ruth Capers McKay, "George Gissing as a Portrayer of Society," *Collected Articles on George Gissing*, 28.

11 - Raymond Williams, *The English Novel From Dickens to Lawrence* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), 160.

12 - Patrick M. Yarker, "Meredith, Hardy and Gissing," *The Victorians*, ed. Arthur Pollard (London: Sphere Books, 1970), 257.

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Book Review

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Enitharmon Press Gissing Series

4. *George Gissing at Alderley Edge*, by Pierre Coustillas, London, 1969, second edition 1971.
5. *Gissing East and West: Four Aspects*, by Shigeru Koike, Giichi Kamo, C. C. Kohler and

P. Coustillas, London, 1970.

6. *My First Rehearsal and My Clerical Rival*, by George Gissing. Edited by P. Coustillas, London, 1970.

With five titles published since its inception in 1968, and three more in preparation, the Enitharmon Press Gissing Series has become a sturdy and significant growth. They are attractive little books, published in uniform hard-covered limited editions, with dust-jackets displaying William Rothenstein's authoritative drawing of Gissing, and offering a varied content. Containing critical and biographical comment, bibliographical information, reprints of scarce texts and most recently, the first publication of Gissing material still in manuscript, the series enriches the Gissing field in a way that no other form of publication could.

The three latest volumes continue the process of illuminating Gissing and his work from different points of view. If they have anything in common besides their subject, it is the personal tone which has entered into their preparation in varying degrees. The writers and editors, Mr. Coustillas, Mr. Kohler, Mr. Koike and the Japanese critics he cites all refer, more or less incidentally, to the particular attraction Gissing has had for them, and sometimes describe the significance which events connected with their research, the discovery of materials and the buying of Gissing books have had in their own lives.

The main concern of the series, however, is adding to what is known about the author and

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his writing, and this mission is carried forward admirably in *George Gissing at Alderley Edge*, Mr. Coustillas' account of Gissing's residence at Lindow Grove School in Cheshire in 1871-72 when he was thirteen and fourteen years old. Little has been known about this time of Gissing's life, for only a few letters dating from it have come to light; Gissing himself left no record of it, and made little use of it in his own work. But Mr. Coustillas has chosen to regard this scarcity of material as a challenge, and by thorough investigation has discovered a reminiscence about his old school written by Gissing many years later, and comments by others which describe Lindow Grove and Gissing himself as a schoolboy.

About three years after Gissing left, the school was moved to a new site and re-named the Dinglewood School, and Mr. Coustillas' most useful single find appears to have been a file of the school periodical of those days, the *Dinglewood Magazine*, which contains Gissing's article and numerous allusions to him as a student and graduate, and also, in its announcements, appeals for funds and correspondence from old boys, conveys something of the atmosphere of the place. Gissing's contribution is reprinted in this volume. Written during his stay in Siena

about the time he was working on his Dickens study, it is a graceful evocation of general atmosphere, which Mr. Coustillas properly relates to the talent for description which Gissing was later to display in *By the Ionian Sea* and *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. He begins by saying that his own pleasant memories of his school days make him unable to understand why others so often complain that the classics were spoiled for them by formal study. He recalls reading in an empty schoolroom in the afternoon, hearing the shouts of the boys from the playing field, a significant anticipation of his later taste for seclusion. Another memory is that of exploring with lighted candles the caves of the “edge” – actually a cliff which is a notable feature of the local landscape. There are also considerate brief tributes to schoolmates and favorite teachers.

Two memoirs of Gissing written shortly after his death by schoolmates from Lindow Grove are also reprinted here. Besides giving information about his life that is now well known (some of it is mis-information, duly corrected in editorial footnotes), they report Gissing’s energetic attention to his studies, his vigorous participation in school theatricals, and his general

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air of isolation. Marvellously characteristic details emerge. At church one Sunday the future agnostic was found to be holding a Latin Grammar instead of the prayer-book. He took part in sports with mad vigour rather than skill. We are told that “Frequently he would take his day’s exercise by standing erect with shoulders set back—but reading, reading, reading.”

One of the pleasures of *George Gissing at Alderley Edge* is that of making the acquaintance, however briefly, of people Gissing knew as a boy. Certainly the two dominant figures of this kind are James Wood, the headmaster of Lindow Grove, who apparently does not figure in Gissing’s writings, and the drillmaster, St-Ruth, who does. The portrait of James Wood is put together from facts gathered by Mr. Coustillas, statements by people at the school, and some of his own actions and writings. He was an ebullient, vigorous, charismatic figure who taught by personal influence as much as by books, and exuded enthusiasm about everything connected with the schools he conducted. He promoted their cause with persistence, but had enough energy left over for an endless variety of outside interests, including service on local committees and elaborate building schemes. He was in the habit of following the careers of boys who were successful in later life, and Gissing accepted an invitation to visit him in the spring of 1896. The necessarily brief sketch of Wood is enough to show that he was a striking personality. If Gissing made any use of him in his writing, he might well have borrowed some of his traits for such self-centered, extroverted characters as Jasper Milvain in *New Grub Street* or Luckworth Crewe of *In the Year of Jubilee*.

St-Ruth is, of course, the drillmaster mentioned in Spring XIX of the *Ryecroft* papers, a passage whose heartfelt anti-militarism has recommended it to several generations of readers. A letter written to *The Dinglewood Magazine* by an army officer, which is reprinted here, inoffensively seeks to defend St-Ruth against Gissing's treatment of him, contending that he was a gentleman, in spite of his severity. Little more is known about St-Ruth directly, but a handful of facts about military men and attitudes toward war help to establish the atmosphere Gissing found so hateful. (to be continued).