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“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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-- 1 --

Feminine Portraiture in *Born in Exile*

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[The following essay is an extract from a study of *Born in Exile* written in 1971 by Mrs. Hude as a fourth-year student at the University of Lille. – P. C.]

The emancipation of women was very much in Gissing’s thoughts when he was writing *Born in Exile*, and *The Odd Women*, published a year later in 1893, has the new woman as its theme. The word “emancipated” is a convenient generalisation as Gissing realised, for, in *Born in Exile*, he portrays the subtle differences which this pulsating movement for feminine enlightenment could

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-- 2 --

produce in different personalities. All the more interesting characters are upper middle-class women, who are intelligently concerned about the questions of their day.

At the bottom of the scale is Miss Walworth, who shows considerable aptitude for sculpture, but who is perfectly comfortable in the conventional world of drawing-rooms and tea. She is probably the only woman happily integrated into society, except for the youthful Mrs. Gale who, intelligent, vivacious and charming, has found her correct role in the forward-looking, convention-defying surroundings of her husband, the professor of science. Janet Moxey, in a modest, unassuming fashion, shows the feminine potential by becoming a doctor. She has found her vocation but is unable to practise because of weak health, and we feel she will only find complete

fulfilment and happiness in her marriage to Christian. Sidwell Warricombe slowly but surely comes to accept the liberal ideas which have been gradually fermenting in her mind, but they conflict with the conventional, provincial traditions, which, in spite of herself, she holds dear. She is alienated from them only for a moment and finally realises that she cannot take the huge step which breaking away from this society would mean. Sidwell's friend, Sylvia Moorhouse, much more a new woman, is intelligent, forward-looking, shrewd and independent; and it is perhaps significant that she refuses Buckland Warricombe's offer of marriage. Marcella Moxey is a vigorous portrait of the intellectual woman of her time. Extremely intelligent, she scorns conventions and admires the intellect. Powerful and scathing in her criticisms, she is also capable of the same depth of emotion. She, too, is an unhappy exile from society; unappreciated, her talents are wasted.

In the depiction of these educated women who were striving to come to terms with themselves and the world at a time when scientific knowledge was leading to a complete reassessment of the value of hitherto accepted social and family ties, Gissing was at his best. He recognised the waste and tragedy of most women's lives and he could sympathise with them. Morley Roberts wrote that he made women just as unhappy as they were, and he created "women whom women themselves actually regard as feminine" (*Novel Review*, May 1892, pp. 97-103).

-- 3 --

Two portraits of women stand out in *Born in Exile*: that of Marcella Moxey and that of Sidwell Warricombe, although the appeal of the two women to the reader is slightly different. Sidwell Warricombe is charming and conventional and we feel for her in her dilemma, but our feelings never rise above that. She is so very real, so very moderate, so unheroic; in fact so very much like ninety per cent of women in her reactions. If Sidwell appeals to us intellectually as a realistic portrait, Marcella is depicted more emotionally. She is the one who is capable of heroic actions. Though she is completely disliked by the hero of the story and possibly only half approved of by the author, there is nevertheless a warmth in her depiction, which, while probably less satisfactory as a realistic picture, is more appealing to the reader.

When Peak first catches sight of Sidwell, the impression she leaves is quite clear. Sidwell is a lady. This term to Peak represents dignity combined with sweetness, modesty, gracefulness, and unsurpassable delicacy of mind which is reflected in the mature self-possession of her speech. She has a slight languor in her movements and a cold complexion which is not a sign of exuberant health. Could there be a more conventional portrait of the perfect, upper middle-class young lady? Moreover Sidwell does not overstep the bounds laid down by society for a young lady's intellectual curiosity. Not of a studious disposition she "dips" into books, and "of continuous application she seems incapable," (*Born in Exile*, London, Gollancz, 1970, p. 220) but she keeps herself informed of the religious and scientific problems of the time and enjoys learned conversation. She has "a subtle if not an acute intelligence." Her social tact is perfect and she has an "unfailing sincerity of moral judgment." Peak realises that Sidwell will never reach the intellectual heights of some intelligent women, but to him this is not even desirable.

Gissing displays his acute sensitivity as he depicts the change in Sidwell's personality brought about by her exposure to liberal and, at the time, daring philosophical influences. We see her personality maturing and expanding, yet all is within the bounds of plausibility and veracity.

-- 4 --

In a letter to Sylvia Moorhouse, Sidwell examines the influence which her stay in London has exercised on her. She has become fiercely aristocratic as she sees how morality has declined

through decay of religious beliefs and how radicalism is overthrowing social distinction, and yet she now recognises that certain individuals can be supported by moral forms alone and do not need religious forms. This tolerance towards individuals of differing religious beliefs is a great step towards liberalism for Sidwell.

The change in her personality brought about by contact with such women as Marcella Moxey is quite credible, but Gissing very aptly shows us how unconsciously Sidwell is coming round to Peak's point of view and sympathising with him by her undesigned reiteration of his very own words. The expression "fiercely aristocratic" (p. 314) strikes a chord in the reader's mind and we begin to realise the course which events will follow.

Once in sympathy with Peak's views, to fall in love with him seems quite natural, especially when he declares himself to be in love with her, and how normal is her reaction after the brutal exposure of his deception! Her humiliation at the thought of Peak's deliberate intentions of using her as a means of entering middle-class society she dismisses at once, but she forces herself to recognise that the man she loved was a dream, an ideal. The confused agitation of her emotions and her desperate attempts to conceal them make her at once more sympathetic and very real. Sidwell springs to life when Gissing describes the conflicting impulses of her reasonableness and her emotions. "As a reasoning woman, she did her utmost to remember that Peak was on his defence before her. . . As a woman in love, she would fain have obscured the moral issue by indulgence of her heart's desire" (p. 380).

Up to this point, we have only had glimpses of the true personality of Sidwell; just enough to make this sudden revelation of her as a woman with a woman's instincts seem natural and credible. Sidwell's change of heart with regard to religious matters is also handled with psychological adroitness. It needed this crisis to make Sidwell avow her change of mind. New beliefs had been

-- 5 --

fermenting in her brain, although she was not conscious of what was taking place. "For it was only since the shock of this disaster that she had clearly recognised the change in her own mind." (p. 382).

The gradual humanising of the hitherto almost too perfect Sidwell is continued as her jealousy of Marcella Moxey comes to the surface. This is portrayed very subtly in the following lines: "He saw that she was moved with strong feelings. The low tone in which she answered had peculiar significance. 'Did you speak of me to Miss Moxey?'" (p. 385). As Gissing analyses the effect of time on Sidwell's love for Peak, Sidwell gradually becomes a woman among many others, a prey to those eternal truths, which to have escaped would have necessitated an extraordinary force of character; a force of which few women are capable.

Gradually lowered from the pedestal of idealism, Sidwell becomes more and more an ordinary woman. Her weaknesses make her more credible and human. Peak is the only man who ever professed his love to her, and Sidwell is happy to keep alive this romance, among the emotional barrenness of her life. She keeps his letter under her pillow, and she reflects that the few hundred pounds left to her in a will would at least provide furniture if they married without parental approval. Yet at the same time, she realises she is deluding herself. She herself is fanning the flames of her love in which she needs to believe, but all the time the cold wind of reason makes her apprehend the course which love must inevitably follow. She reflects:

The very fact that her love (again, if love it were) must be indulged in defiance of universal opinion tended to keep emotion alive. . . If Godwin's passion were steadfast, the day would come when she must decide either to cast her lot with

his, or to bid him be free. And could she imagine herself going forth into exile?  
(p. 443)

Sidwell prepares her escape when replying to Godwin's letter, and when his strictly formal response arrives, she experiences bitter distress and humiliation at her own betrayal of sentiment. She rebels against the humiliating laws of love.

On receipt of Peak's ultimatum, Sidwell's self-command gains the upper hand, and she attempts to analyse her position. She realises that she has not the force of will to free herself from

-- 6 --

her traditional links, and that in this respect she is a coward, as she was when she sustained Peak's hopes, knowing that she could still retreat. The whole crux of her problem is contained in these lines: "You see, I cannot think and act simply as a woman, as a human being. I am bound to a certain sphere of life. The fact that I have outgrown it, counts for nothing. I cannot free myself without injury to people I love" (p. 471).

This conclusion is not arrived at without great effort of will. In front of her father, Sidwell can no longer contain her emotions, and "tears had their free course" (p. 475). Sidwell cannot cast aside those inherited duties towards the society to which she belongs. Her decision is eminently reasonable, and she has acted in accordance with her character. Peak is of another world, and Sidwell is no pioneer. After all, she will probably find a sort of tranquil contentment, if not a burning happiness, in looking after the comforts of those around her. Peak's assessment of Sidwell is fairly just. At heart, she is only a woman like many others. "A woman, like most women, of cool blood, temperate fancies. A domestic woman; the ornament of a typical English home" (p. 460).

The conclusion of *Born in Exile* is an eminently realistic one. Sidwell's deep-rooted adherence to her social class makes her not a passionate heroine, only the portrait of an intelligent girl of the upper-middle class, who experiences the frustrations and emotional upheavals caused by the liberal influences of the spirit of the age. This does not mean that her emotions are shallow. Her world is restricted but her suffering is poignant. She restrains her passion, yet she has a quivering sensitivity which looks for sympathetic appreciation. Sidwell would blossom into happy perfection with the love of the right man, but Gissing is too much of a realist to allow this to happen. The exquisitely feminine and delicate Sidwell is wasted, as were many girls of her time.

The portrait of Sidwell ripens as her love declares itself. Seen first of all from the outside, with detailed physical description, there is little warmth to animate her. As Gissing delicately

-- 7 --

reveals her developing emotions by such subtle hints as her lack of response to her male suitors in London, she becomes more human and more feminine. Her responses are psychologically plausible and natural. She has an aura of femininity in all her reactions. In Sidwell, Gissing proves his ability to paint a realistic yet delicate portrait of a woman.

Marcella Moxey provides a definite contrast to the quiet, subtle, discreet person of Sidwell Warricombe. Marcella, the girl of seventeen, foreshadows the woman she is to become. She is carelessly attractive, but the grace of girls of her age is replaced by a haughty reserve, and already she regards Peak with "furtive interest" (p. 75). Marcella seems conceited and repellent to her school-friends, and she affects singularity in all things. She already delights in shocking her conservative listeners with deliberately "impious," revolutionary statements, and, as a woman, pretends to scorn the beliefs and habits of her own sex, while still drawing back from conversation

with the other. She leads a lonely life, unable to compromise and be tolerant, and Gissing shows insight into the position of this type of zealous woman intellectual, when he remarks that her alternatives are either loneliness or adherence to a group of aggressive militants. "The emancipated woman has fewer opportunities of relieving her mind than a man in corresponding position" (p. 278). Because of her love for Peak, Marcella does not make the effort to contact sympathetic woman friends.

At first, this love is hinted at rather than stated. When Peak asks her why she cannot take life cheerfully, her response is symptomatic. "Marcella's eyes fell; a moment after there was a suspicion of colour in her cheeks" (p. 118). Later her love is made quite explicit: Godwin Peak is "the man to whom her heart went forth with every kind of fervour" (p. 278).

Marcella is a tragic figure. She sustains her brother in his grim combat against alcoholism and yet can find nothing to relieve the torment of her own innermost desires. She has "but slender support against a grim temptation already beckoning her in nights of sleeplessness" (p. 279), and her love is a "desire with which every impulse of her being had identified itself" (p. 279). This violent, consuming passion of Marcella's brings into relief the very mild interest with which

-- 8 --

Sidwell regards Peak at this point.

That Marcella's love is a tragic one is emphasised by the fact that, at odd moments, Gissing reminds us of her rather powerful beauty. Her brother, Christian, reflects that a stranger would have thought her a beautiful woman. "Her masses of tawny hair, her arms and hands, the pose and outline of her figure, certainly suggested a countenance of corresponding charm, and the ornate richness of her attire aided such an impression" (p. 281).

Once again, Gissing emphasises the irony of the waste of this passionate woman, whose love will never be reciprocated.

Her particular kind of love is well defined by the author. It is passion with intellect on its side; a love which is more easily endured than blind passion, and yet which lasts much longer. She can reflect calmly on the man she loves, yet he is never out of her thoughts. To Marcella's proud nature, jealousy is a vulgar emotion, and, finding it in herself she attempts to disguise the humiliating discovery by calling it such names as "concern" and "indignation." Hers is such a powerful emotion that not even her own pride and Peak's evident indifference can prevent her from humiliating herself to the extent of seeking him out by underhand means.

Marcella's personality takes on a softer hue and becomes decidedly more sympathetic towards the end of the story, when she makes Peak an offer of nearly all her fortune. For a moment, she burns with an inner radiance. Her eyes are brilliant, her face has a bright warmth, her speech is panting. She seems almost a happy person. Even Peak is forced to admit the magnitude of her ardour. Yet when this marvellous act of generosity is refused, the lineaments of her face harden and she sinks back into cool, stern dignity. What a terribly cruel world it seems when such a propensity for love and happiness is wasted!

Marcella's final sacrifice only corroborates this. She dies, after months of suffering from a kick given by a horse, when she was attempting to stop the cruelty of its master. Courageously faithful to her agnostic principles and ever keeping her clear intellectual faculties, her last wish is to do Peak a kindness, by willing her money to him. What an irony that her love is thrown away on such a man as Peak, and that even her money did not bring him happiness!

Gissing's analysis of the love and personality of such a woman is very fine. He sees how tragic life can be for women of this type, of whom there must have been many at the turn of the century. She is the woman of startling intelligence with an intellect so developed that most men are frightened away. By putting herself on equal intellectual terms with men, she finds no response to those womanly emotions which intellect cannot replace. She is the bold, dark-eyed, handsome heroine of Wilkie Collins and the forerunner of Rhoda Nunn, in Gissing's *The Odd Women*. To Gissing, these partly emancipated women never find total happiness. Their tragedy is to feel like women, and yet to lose much of their femininity.

It is interesting to see how the portrait of Marcella Moxey seems to alternate between sympathy and antipathy, according to the eyes of the beholder. To Peak, her lack of femininity is always uppermost. He explains this to Earwaker. "Miss Moxey is intolerable.... I can't quite say why I dislike her so, but she grows more antipathetic to me the better I know her. She has not a single feminine charm – not one. I often feel very sorry for her, but dislike her all the same" (p. 121).

Later he adds that he cannot think of her emotionally and that he is distinctly repelled by the thought of any more intimate relations with her than intellectual sympathy. This absence of female charms makes her almost repulsive to Peak.

But this repellent quality does not exist for the person who knows Marcella best and most intimately – her brother, Christian. To him, she is all that is beautiful, generous and courageous. At one point, when he reflects on this and on her loneliness, "his eyes, always so gentle softened to a tender compassion" (p. 282). After her death, he says to Peak that she was a priceless companion, "the one woman in ten thousand – at once strong and gentle: a fine intellect, and a heart of rare tenderness. But because she had not the kind of face that –" (p. 454).

So here we have the dual reaction to the emancipated woman: Peak's repulsion and Christian's tender admiration. But forever before our eyes is the absence of that indefinable sexual attraction which she has forfeited.

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Another variation of the emancipated woman in the novel is Sylvia Moorhouse. Of her physical appearance all we know is that she is a "lady" and "mature in the beauty of youth" (p. 144). What is more telling is her personality, although we are given no direct description of this either. She says very little but is often in the background. Her character is portrayed through her reactions and those she provokes in others. We realise that she is of a scientific bent, has a subtle intellect, that she is different from most women, but also that she has a philosophical outlook which enables her to be relatively happy. During a carriage drive in Exeter, she says: "My capacity for enjoyment is unlimited" and to Buckland's comment that she excels in making the best of things she retorts: "I deny it! No one is more copious in railing against circumstances." When Fanny objects that she turns everything into a joke, Sylvia replies: "That's my profound pessimism. I am misunderstood. No one expects irony from a woman" (p. 158).

In her rather witty way, Sylvia is suggesting that beneath the apparent outwardly calm countenance, there is spiritual rebellion. She interests Peak in that he often feels her critical gaze upon him, but typical of all "unorthodox spirits" (p. 158) she rouses no personal emotions in him. It is significant that Sylvia shows no surprise when told of Peak's deception.

Buckland Warricombe, at one point, accuses Sylvia of cowardice in not stating more boldly the antipathy of her views on religion, but we learn later that his vehemence is accounted for by her rejection of his offer of marriage. Sylvia explains her position as regards love and marriage by a metaphor, in a letter to Sidwell. Like the ants who develop wings just for a brief moment of courtship and marriage, so some human beings, she implies, can soar with powerful emotions when in love, but then, just as the wings wither away, so idealism eventually fades. This faculty of love she, herself, is incapable of, and, while never condemning it in others, she says “there will be an increasing number of female human creatures who from their birth are content with *walking*” (p. 313).

-- 11 --

Although herself capable of inspiring sexual love, Sylvia feels that in her own life she could never aspire to this. To her and other emancipated women, love could never be the one uplifting, culminating experience of life. She is contributing to the sexual anarchy which Gissing foretold in his correspondence with Bertz.

This does not, however, make her an unsympathetic character. A less vehement and violent woman than Marcella, she remains a true friend of Sidwell's; ready to help with her calm discernment and strong will, intelligently leading her own life in her own way and discreetly refusing to influence Sidwell in her dilemma. She is the provincial, more balanced and less militant counterpart of Marcella Moxey.

A minor character, but nevertheless a woman who has well earned her place in the ranks of the emancipated is Janet Moxey, of whom Gissing paints a delightful picture. In two short passages, Gissing combines description of her physical features with intimations of her personality. Neither handsome nor pretty, she has a pleasing face, and “eyes of remarkable intelligence, something like Marcella's but milder, more benevolent. Her lips were softly firm; they would not readily part in laughter; their frequent smile meant more than that of the woman who sets herself to be engaging” (p. 397).

Janet has studied at the Women's Medical School in London and has been in practice for nearly four years. Intellectually the equal of Christian Moxey, she has the qualities to bring out and develop the manly virtues of her cousin. In turn, Christian knows that by loving her he will complete her imperfect life. In some respects, Janet, happily married, is the complete woman. Intelligent without aggressiveness, she is capable of loving Christian for years, until bereft of his imaginary ideals, he can perceive the solid qualities before his eyes.

In Mrs. Warricombe we have an easily recognisable picture of a provincial upper-middle class mother of restricted intelligence. Her placid husband comes to accept the fact that she is “hopelessly illogical and at heart indifferent to everything but the small graces and substantial comforts of provincial existence” (p. 219). Her illogicality is shown in her petty annoyance when Peak goes up first to receive the first prize he shares with Buckland Warricombe, simply because

-- 12 --

his initial comes first in the alphabet. The necessity of conversing with her husband's scientific friends leads Mrs. Warricombe to acquaint herself with the bare essentials of such subjects as fossils and geological time, and Gissing humorously describes the result. “The intellectual result was chaotic, and Mrs. Warricombe settled at last into a comfortable private opinion that though the record of geology might be trustworthy that of the Bible was more so” (p. 219).

The spirit of the time and the influence of her very modern and, according to Mrs.

Warricombe, “depraved” children slowly have their effects on her old hereditary habits of mind. Becoming a little more tolerant, she learns to smile at what would once have shocked her, and much of her humanisation is due to Sidwell’s delicate social tact. To a certain extent, Mrs. Warricombe is capable of a little self-improvement. Yet she is still narrow-minded and bases her opinions on rigid social convention and tradition. She can never bring herself to like Peak, because he is symptomatic of the lower classes to her, but, on the other hand, she considers Bruno Chilvers the ideal match for her daughter. His cunning obsequiousness and pretension entirely passes her by.

Sidwell’s mother is typical of the traditional woman of good provincial family, with her restricted views and inherent prejudices. Doing little harm generally she is near to becoming a nonentity in her home. We feel she is the last scion of the dying race which Jane Austen painted so well.

American womanhood is represented in *Born in Exile* in the person of Mrs. Gale, who is sketched in just a few lines. She is married to the former geological professor of Whitelaw College. Young and beautiful, no heiress but a former school teacher, she has developed remarkable aptitudes since her arrival in England. In fact, Mrs. Gale is all that is most attractive in the American woman. That she is an independent thinker regardless of convention is revealed in the fact that “she avowed her indifference to all religious dogmas, yet was singularly tolerant and displayed a moral fervour which Sidwell had believed inseparable from Christian faith” (p. 307); an emancipated woman without a doubt.

The other minor characters are also more representative of a type than individual portraits. Peak’s mother is the hard-put-to but well-meaning widow, whose support is her religion, and Peak’s

-- 13 --

sister, Charlotte, is the puritanical, restricted woman with the trenchant tongue. Mrs. Jacox is a caricature of the fussy, shallow, overpoweringly loquacious lower middle-class mother, with an eye for marriage for herself and her daughters. Constance Palmer serves to show the folly of Christian’s ridiculous idealisation of her. She is a gay, vain, flirtatious, frivolous woman, with bad taste and few feelings.

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A review of the female characters would not be complete without an account of those views on women, love and marriage which are expressed in the novel. They are of vital importance for the understanding of Peak’s unconventional conduct. Expounded by the hero, Earwaker and other characters they often reflect the author’s own feelings.

A typical Gissing sentiment which is expressed with suitable vehement exaggeration by Godwin Peak, is that of the loss of feminine qualities going hand in hand with the intellectual emancipation of women. Godwin shows his conservative frame of mind when he says to Earwaker: “Women ought neither to be enlightened nor dogmatic. They ought to be sexual” (p. 121), and we learn later that “the truly emancipated woman – it was Godwin’s conviction – is almost always asexual” (p. 240). Godwin pessimistically sees little chance, in the near future, of the possibility of combining feminine appeal with a developed intellect.

If not an emancipated girl who, then, does Godwin Peak aim at marrying? He bluntly puts his case before Earwaker: “My own supreme desire is to marry a perfectly refined woman. Put it in the correct term: I am a plebeian and I aim at marrying a lady” (p. 140). The charm of upper-middle class girls for Peak has already shown itself at the prize-giving ceremony when the conversation of the two girls behind him attracted his attention by its grace, purity and sweetness. When Peak finds



his “lady” in Sidwell Warricombe, he compares her first with an average, emancipated girl and then with a working-class girl and decides: “How unsatisfying was the former; the latter how repulsive! Here one had the exquisite mean.... A being of marvelous delicacy, of purest instincts, of unsurpassable sweetness” (p. 168). Godwin is constantly occupied with thoughts of sexual attachments, and it is impossible for him to imagine anything of this kind if the object of his

-- 14 --

attachment has no beauty of feature. Although Janet Moxey as a girl was not lovely, she was attractive with a pleasant personality, but Godwin was “revolted by the idea of love for Janet Moxey” (p. 76).

Godwin’s imaginary picture of his wife does not at all coincide with the reality of Gissing’s experience, for, while writing *Born in Exile*, Gissing had married Edith Underwood, a working sculptor’s daughter. Yet Godwin’s view that emancipated women have little sexual attraction can be partly attributed to Gissing. The author was a strong advocate of a liberal education for women, but he disliked the strident radical-minded type, for he realised that they would suffer an inevitable loss of femininity. He probably modified his views later when he met Gabrielle Fleury, who combined feminine charm with a well developed intellect.

A very telling phrase which must have echoed Gissing’s own thoughts at the time is that uttered by Peak on idealism. Sidwell is the girl whom he wishes to marry and yet he recognises that she is not his ideal. He is aware of her deficiencies, and reflects: “Who could not detail her limitations, obvious and, in certain moods, irritating enough? These were nothing to the point, unless one would roam the world a hungry idealist; and Godwin was weary of the famined pilgrimage” (pp. 168-69).

Later he recognises that something of kindly condescension would always mingle with his love for Sidwell, since his ideal woman would be the woman who had Sidwell’s social virtues and “bowed to no authority but that of the supreme human mind” (p. 240). Idealisation of woman is ridiculed in Christian Moxey’s idealisation of Constance, a completely worthless woman, and in his almost ruining his own life and talents for a perfectly imaginary fantasy. Gissing, too, must have had little idealism left when he began to experience Edith’s insulting, quarrelsome nature and must have regretted the moment when he had hoped to find a companion in a decent working-class girl.

Several pages in *Born in Exile* are dedicated to the discussion of women and marriage. As we might expect, marriage is not idealised. Even Godwin’s enthusiasm cannot put aside the gloomier aspects of marriage. In one of his moments of self-criticism he reflects: “Nature provides the hallucination which flings a lover at his mistress’s feet. For the chill which follows she cares

-- 15 --

nothing.... Even with a wife such as Sidwell the process of disillusion would doubtless have to be faced” (p. 240).

Another intellectual, Sylvia Moorhouse, must have had this in mind when she wrote the metaphor of the ants to explain her refusal of Buckland. “Do not men and women also soar and flutter – at a certain time? And don’t their wings manifestly drop off as soon as the end of that skyward movement has been achieved?” (p. 312).

A person with very sceptical views of the joys of marriage is Earwaker. He believes that all kinds of obstinacies and irrationalities, inherent in the female sex, would drive him to take violent reprisals. He foresees a terrible possibility – that he might beat his wife (p. 139). He decides never to marry, since woman “despises every ambition that has not a material end” (p. 139). We hear not

only Earwaker's but Gissing's voice in these words. His two experiences of marriage had given him more than enough material from which to draw, and it is not unlikely that he, too, had seen the possibility of violent retaliation to Edith's insults. Yet it is Peak's belief, not Earwaker's, that these so called inherent irrationalities in women are not the exclusive property of the weaker sex but of all uneducated persons, which comes close to Gissing's own view. Peak declares: "The defect of the female mind? It is my belief that this is nothing more nor less than the defect of the uneducated human mind" (p. 138).

On the question of social status and marriage, however, Earwaker represents Gissing more than Peak does. Earwaker could have been expressing Gissing's thoughts, as he contemplates marriage to a working-class girl in the following lines: "A man's wife may be his superior in whatever you like, *except* social position. That is precisely the distinction that no woman can forget or forgive" (p. 139). This echoes the Amy Reardon theme in *New Grub Street*.

In *In the Year of Jubilee*, Tarrant suggests that man and wife live under two different roofs and only come together when the spirit drives them; thereby stressing the need to be alone, even when married. This suggestion would, of course, necessitate a fairly large income. The utilitarian notion that financial ease, permitting occasional isolation is an essential of happy married life is also

-- 16 --

stated in *Born in Exile*, when Gissing is describing the Warricombe household: "One of the advantages of wealth is that it allows husband and wife to keep a great deal apart without any show of mutual unkindness, a condition essential to happiness in marriage" (p. 219).

If some very sceptical views are expressed on the subject of marriage, there are passages of penetrating analysis of love which are sometimes very beautiful. We have already seen the reactions of Sidwell and Marcella to the discovery of jealousy in themselves and Peak's analysis of his reactions when he realises that he is passionately loved by Marcella, is equally profound. He is now aware that he had easily convinced himself that she did not really love him, simply because he did not want her to, and his modesty could not credit that anyone could be passionately devoted to himself. Also he could not perceive the extent of Marcella's love because he, himself, was incapable of pure devotion. Now, the fact that he is loved by one woman, makes Sidwell's affection all the more credible.

Peak did not love Sidwell at first. It is quite natural, therefore, that he should analyse the nature of his later feelings towards her. Peak had experienced no frenzies of youth to serve as a standard in these matters, and Gissing adds that only primitive natures feel the passionate love which controls the movements of heart and mind. A complex and introspective character like Peak is incapable of loving with such vehemence. There follows a beautiful sentence in which Peak expresses the quality of his love: "If desire and tenderness, if frequency of dreaming rapture, if the calmest approval of the mind and the heart's most exquisite, most painful throbbing, constitute love, – then assuredly I love Sidwell" (p. 238).

Similarly, when Godwin, forgetting his scepticism abandons himself to his dreams, he paints a sensuous and sensual picture of their marriage:

Oh heaven! to see the smile softened by rosy warmth which would confess that she had given her heart – to feel her supple fingers intertwined with his that clasped them – to hear the words in which a mind so admirable, instincts so delicate, would make expression of their tenderness! To live with Sidwell – to

breathe the fragrance of that flower of womanhood in wedded intimacy – to prove the devotion of a nature so profoundly chaste! (p. 240-41).

In his love passages, Gissing extracts what is most beautiful and poetic from his artistic imagination, and yet his description of physical love is rarely bolder than this. While condemning the unwritten laws of literary decorum imposed by the publishers and circulating libraries, he never dared to violate them.

Gissing was most certainly a man of his time in his treatment of women, love and marriage in his novels. Throughout his works, one can find portraits of women from all classes of society, although *Born in Exile* concentrates mainly on the problems of the woman who is struggling to be emancipated, yet who is held down by the bonds of her social class. It also deals with marriage between two people of different social class. The reality of Gissing's portraits can be traced back to his disgust with idealism after his second marriage, as can the sceptical views offered on this subject in the novel. Close parallels can be drawn between love and marriage in Gissing's life and in his fiction; the progressive yet conservative author being echoed in the different characters in the book. Women, love and marriage are analysed sceptically and presented with reality. The tone of the novel is not happy, woman's life being generally unfulfilled and rather sad; yet occasional lyrical passages on love do exist, when Gissing momentarily puts aside his aims as a realist. Above all, Gissing excels in his female portraiture, and Sidwell and Marcella are not characters to be easily forgotten. As Morley Roberts said, his women are feminine and true to life, even when judged by women themselves.

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New Comment on Gissing  
A Brief Report

Jacob Korg  
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In his recent book, *The English Novel from Dickens to Hardy* (Oxford University Press, 1970), Raymond Williams adds a few observations to the brief but useful discussion of Gissing he

wrote some years ago in *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (London & New York, 1959). In his earlier book, Mr. Williams included Gissing among a handful of writers who stood between Victorian and modern ways of dealing with cultural problems. He acknowledged the accuracy of Gissing's analysis of the commercialization of literature in *New Grub Street*, and this constitutes an important tribute from a critic who has specialized in the relations between literature and society. He accepted the description of Gissing as a "spokesman of despair," and specified two sources for the despair: Gissing's reaction to social conditions, and his disillusionment with the potentialities of reform. Mr. Williams also put forward the familiar objection that Gissing's emphasis on graceless lower-class speech and manners is an expression of class prejudice.

In his earlier discussion, Mr. Williams coined the useful term, "negative identification" to

cover Gissing's youthful sympathy with the poor. In this phenomenon, the social outcast, motivated by his feelings and his imagination rather than reality, appropriates for his own emotional purposes a mission belonging to another group – in Gissing's case, the poor. Ultimately, the mission turns out to be uncongenial, disillusionment sets in, and the reformer is likely to become a bitter enemy of those whom he took to be his allies. The faults he sees in them, which would be accepted by someone who knows the reality as it is, are generalized and applied to the whole, just as the original "negative identification" was directed, not toward particular real people, but toward an imaginary mass.

In his new book, Mr. Williams augments this sketch of Gissing's position by briefly but cogently characterizing a later stage of his sensibility – his reaction, as an observer trained in the humanities, to the spectacle of the industrial city. Gissing, like Blake and Wordsworth, who are mentioned in this connection, was one who saw the city from the outside, and was able to refer his observations to standards that originated elsewhere. But he also encountered the urban scene as a personal experience, capable of arousing such emotions as fear and revulsion. Hence, he saw the city in two different ways. "Gissing is important," says Mr. Williams, "because these very different responses are almost equally strong in his work. He is the humane observer, describing the urban landscape and its social experience, trying to individualise beyond it. He is also the man who enacts in himself the alienation he is witnessing; who sees in the despair of others not only his own despair

-- 19 --

but the shapes of recoil: the drawing back, do-not-touch-me kind of exile." Unlike Dickens, Gissing, according to Mr. Williams, felt neither sympathy for nor identification with the victims of city life, but adopted the stance of "the separated, frustrated life-carrying individual" whose consciousness of the urban poor included an attitude of antagonism toward them.

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*New Grub Street on the Air*

P. Coustillas

*New Grub Street* was dramatised in three one-hour episodes on the BBC Radio 4, on August 13, 20 and 27, in the 2.30 Afternoon Theatre Slot. The three parts, adapted for radio by Gabriel Woolf, were entitled respectively *Ambitions*, *Failure and Success*, and *Rewards*. The cast was as follows: Jasper Milvain, Robert Powell (last seen on television as Shelley); Maud, Kate Binchy; Mrs. Milvain, Betty Baskcomb; Dora, Joanna David; Alfred Yule, John Bryans; Marian, Valerie Sarruf; Edwin Reardon, David Collings; Amy, Caroline John; Carter, Brian Haines; Biffen, Hugh Dickson; Mrs. Alfred Yule, Katherine Parr; Whelpdale, Michael Graham Cox. The producer was Jane Graham.

This dramatisation struck the various listeners who wrote to me about it as, on the whole, very faithful to Gissing's text. Perhaps the main impression during the first instalment was one of considerable speed contrasting with the leisurely pace of the novel. One also had some difficulty at the start in identifying some of the characters, and this despite a thorough knowledge of the novel. The dialogue sounded very convincing, and the voice and intonation of an actor like John Bryans, for instance, perfectly suited the character of Alfred Yule. Some changes in the dialogue were certainly clever enough. Witness this extract:

Jasper: "... Happiness is the nurse of virtue."  
Amy: "And independence is the root of happiness."  
Jasper: "And money is the root of everything. Isn't the world a glorious place?"  
Amy: "For rich people."

Another example of considerable change was Biffen's escape from the fire. Of course, direct repre-

-- 20 --

sentation of it was better for radio than Biffen's account of it as a report after the event. But many details, such as the loss and rescue of his jacket, were altered for no apparent reason.

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#### Notes and News

A revised version of Shigeru Koike's essay "The Education of George Gissing," which originally appeared in the English number of *Studies in English Literature* (March 1966), can be found in *English Criticism in Japan*, edited by Earl Miner, which consists of a collection of essays by younger Japanese scholars on English and American literature. The publisher is the University of Tokyo Press (1972).

The next few weeks and months will see the reissue of a number of Gissing's works and the publication of several volumes of correspondence and criticism. Among the former category should be mentioned a critical edition of *Demos*, with an introduction, notes and a study of the manuscript by the editor of the *Newsletter*. The Harvester Press hope to have this volume ready in October. They will shortly afterwards publish a critical edition of *The Nether World*, with an introduction and notes by John Spiers. Both volumes will be part of the series entitled "Society and the Victorians," in which *Isabel Clarendon* was followed by *The Heart of the Empire* (C. F. G. Masterman) and *The Radical Programme* (Joseph Chamberlain). A critical edition of *Thyrza* will very likely be added to the series in 1973.

A reissue of *Sleeping Fires*, one of the scarcest Gissing titles, is to be among the first publications of the Owl-in-the-Oak Press, High Trees, 42 Woodland Drive, Hove, Sussex.

*Gissing: The Critical Heritage*, edited by P. Coustillas and Colin Partridge, will appear simultaneously in London and Boston in early November. The volume contains 191 articles and reviews which were originally printed in the English, American, German and Australian press. Among the authors of signed contributions are Eduard Bertz, Morley Roberts, H. G. Wells, Edward Garnett, Arthur Waugh, W. L. Courtney, Allan Monkhouse and Virginia Woolf.

The Enitharmon Press will publish *Henry Hick's Recollections of George Gissing, Together with Gissing's letters to Hick* later this year and this will be followed early in 1973 by the volume of Gissing's letters to Edward Clodd.