A Study of George Gissing's *New Grub Street* with Emphasis on the Contrast between the Practical and the Impractical

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Irving Howe mentions that Gissing was subject to a temptation few nineteenth-century novelists could resist: that of crowding his pages with an excess of figures and incidents which would simulate the bustle.[1] There are many figures and incidents in *New Grub Street*(1891) as in most of his novels. But this is his greatest masterpiece along with *The Private Papers of Henry Rycroft*(1903). Both works are very popular among modern readers, though his other works are relatively unknown. The story of *New Grup Street* is complicated, but it has such a solid shape that it is easy to understand.

Edwin Reardon, a novelist who has a lot of Gissing's autobiograhical elements, marries Amy, a daughter of Edmund Yule. Edmund has two brothers. The eldest is John, a practical man in the business world. The second eldest is Alfred, a writer who lives on Grub Street. Alfred has a daughter named Marian who works as his ghost-writer. Edwin can not write any successful novel in spite of Amy's encouragement or pressure. She leaves him because she can not stand his decision to work as a hospital clerk. He becomes ill and dies. Jasper Milvain, an ambitious and practical novelist, proposes marriage to Marian Yule mainly for her uncle John's legacy which he expects that she will inherit a large portion of. But, after he knows that she can not inherit so much as Amy, he begins to hesitate about the marriage, and their engagement breaks up in the end. Jasper and Amy begin to be attracted by each other because of their very similar temperaments and sense of values. The story ends with their marriage.

This is quite a simple outline of the novel with a focus on the

leading figures. When I read it for the first time in my early twenties, I felt a sympathy with Edwin and a repulsion towards Jasper and Amy. I agreed entirely with Q. D. Leavis that "when any nineteenth-century novelist names a character Jasper, I think we may safely conclude that that charact is intended to be the villain."[2] Edwin seemed to me much more sincere and earnest both as a novelist and as a man. Jasper and Amy seemed to me only dishonest, mean and evil. I might have been innocent and emotional at that young age. But, when I read this novel again at the age of thirty, I had to change some (or many) of my views. In a word, Edwin can not always be sympathized with, and Jasper and Amy are never perfect villains. I now agree with Bernard Bergonzi that Jasper Milvain is not presented as emphatically villainous.[3]
I support his view of Amy without argument, too.

> Gissing makes it apparent that she could have made a good wife for a successful novelist, and her inability to share Edwin's ideals and sacrifice herself with him is as much a hall-mark of her class and upbringing as a personal fault.[4]

If she married Jasper instead of Edwin, she could make him a good wife. Likewise, if Edwin married "some simple, kind-hearted work-girl",[5] he would become happier, *at least* more so than if he married Amy. However, even if he married such a work-girl, that match might result in failure because of his "sensitive and fastidious temperament",[6] as Gissing's second marriage with a work-girl, Edith Underwood, proved to be disastrous.

Many critics like John Good point out that Gissing is influenced to a great extent by the Darwinist idea of "the survival of the fittest". This novel not only conveys the idea but also emphasizes the importance of choosing the fittest partner or the idea of "the right man with the right woman", which is a modification of "the right man in the right place".

Lewis D. Moore states that the struggle for existence does not lead to progress, especially in the lives of creative artists, but rather to a leveling process in which the independent artist is defeated and the mediocre triumphs.[8] In this case, "the independent artist" means Edwin and "the mediocre" means Jasper. Certainly, the former is defeated and the lattter triumphs. But, it looks as if Edwin gave up the struggle from the beginning because of his pessimism and "morbid conscientiousness", to borrow Amy Reardon's own words. Edwin tells her that he has done enough to make much more than three volumes in mere writing but has destroyed all of them. Then, she says to him, "(It is) because of your morbid conscientiousness."[9] This is the very word that expresses Edwin's temperament most plainly. Though she adds that his writing is all good enough for the market, his response is, "Don't use that word, Amy. I hate it."[10] Writing novels is his vocation. If he does not care about the market, what does he live on? Does this imply that he has given up the struggle from the beginning?

Let me cite several examples of Edwin's morbid conscientiousness to prove that he can not always be sympathized with. He shows symptoms of it a week before the marriage. He wakes up in the early morning, terror-stricken:

> Suppose I should not succeed henceforth? Suppose I could never get more than this poor hundred pounds for one of the long books which cost me so much labour? I shall perhaps have children to support; and Amy—how would Amy bear poverty?[11]

He can not get back to sleep, his eyes being filled with tears, and in his solitude he calls upon Amy with pitiful entreaty: "Do not forsake me! I love you!"[12]

He admits without any objection that it is his fault when Amy tells him that he is much weaker than she has imagined and

is being crushed by difficulties instead of rousing himself to struggle. Her words "instead of rousing himself to struggle" may indicate that he has given up the struggle for existence from the beginning.

He appreciates her patience and quickly admits again the contemptibleness of his behaviour when she complains about their poverty.

In spite of Amy's offer to help correct the proofs of his novel, which are called "his shame"[13] by Gissing, he prefers to keep them to himself as long as possible, and dismisses sheet after sheet with a hurried reading. What is worse, he declines Jasper Milvain's kind offer to review that novel in a column of "Books of the Month" of a literary magazine *The Current* which is edited by a Mr. Fadge:

> I strongly advise you to let it take its chance. The book isn't worth special notice, and whoever undertook to review it for Fadge would either have to lie, or stultify the magazine.[14]

His morbid conscientiousness can be observed most obviously in the following two affairs. Amy leaves him for her parents' home with her son Willie because she can not endure his decision to work as a clerk again in Carter's hospital. He goes on sending half of his salary to her every week though she says that she can not accept it.

When Amy knows that she can inherit a legacy from her uncle John, she writes Edwin a letter of proposal to share it and live together again. But he writes her an answer of refusal:

> You have written because it seemed your duty to do so. But, indeed, a sense of duty such as this is a mistaken one. You have no love for me, and where there is no love there is no mutual obligation in marriage. Perhaps you think that regard for social conventions will necessitate your living with me again. But have more courage; refuse to act falsehoods; tell society it is base and brutal, and that you prefer to live an honest life.[15]

He should be pitied rather than sympathized with in many aspects. It may be a good idea to refer to Harold Biffen here as a factor to make Edwin's morbid conscientiousness and pitifulness more conspicuous. He makes his first appearance as quite a miserable figure:

> His excessive meagreness would all but have qualified him to enter an exhibition in the capacity of living skelton, and the garments which hung upon this framework would perhaps have sold for three and sixpence at an old-clothes dealer's.[16]

He is a private tutor and writer suffering from sheer poverty, and shares with Edwin almost the same literary tastes. He also dislikes the art for trade. He says, "Whatever a man writes *for effect* is wrong and bad."[17] He is more pitiful than Edwin. Gissing mentions that he has seen harder trials than even Reardon himself. He manages to rescue the manuscript of his novel "Mr. Bailey, Grocer" from a fire. But this laborious work results in complete failure. Reviewers give such harsh or pitiless comments as "Let Mr. Biffen bear in mind that a novelist's first duty is to tell a story." or "It is never interesting, never profitable."[18]

He loves Amy, not knowing that she views him only as a poor devil who often has to pawn his coat, or as a friend to be thought of kindly because her dead husband has valued him. He takes seriously her praise of "Mr. Bailey, Grocer", and yields to the temptation of visiting her, probably to declare his love. But he must be deeply ashamed of himself when the other guests gaze at his shabby attire with suspicion. This incident not only makes him decide never to see her again, but also leads him to commit suicide.

Irving Howe declares that "Gissing is master of place, weather, atmosphere. No English novelist except Dickens so fully captures the greyness of a London winter, the greyness of lives spent under its pall, the greyness of the people who wander its streets."[19]

His description of place, weather and atmosphere has a great effect and emphasizes the gloomy mood and the pitifulness of Edwin, as is apparent in the following long paragraph:

> One evening he sat at his desk with a slip of manuscript paper before him. It was the hour of sunset. His outlook was upon the backs of certain large houses skirting Regent's Park, and lights had begun to show here and there in the windows: in one room a man was discoverable dressing for dinner, he had not thought it worth while to lower the blind; in another, some people were playing billiards. The higher windows reflected a rich glow from the western sky.
>
> For two or three hours Reardon had been seated in much the same attitude. Occasionally he dipped his pen into the ink, and seemed about to write: but each time the effort was abortive. At the head of the paper was inscribed 'Chapter III', but that was all. And now the sky was dusking over; darkness would soon fall.[20]

The evening scene is very symbolic of his gloomy mood. The more the darkness of the sky deepens, the more gloomy he becomes. After this, the colours fade from the sky, and the night comes quickly. Then he gives up writing completely, lets his head fall forward, and remains so as if he were asleep.

Another example is the sound of a clock striking the hour in the middle of the night. It is symbolic of his increasing terror at having to resume his work in the morning:

> After lying awake for a while he would hear quarters sounding; if they ceased before the fourth he was glad, for he feared to know what time it was. If the hour was complete, he waited anxiously for its number. Two, three, even four, were grateful; there was still a long time before he need rise and face the dreaded task, the horrible four blank slips of paper that had to be filled ere he might sleep again. But such restfulness was only for a moment; no sooner had the workhouse bell become silent than he began to toil in his weary imagination, or else, incapable of that, to vision fearful hazards of

the future.[21]

Jasper Milvain and Amy Reardon present a striking contrast to Edwin Reardon and Harold Biffen in their temperaments and sense of values. In a word, the former couple are practical and the latter are impractical. Jasper is basically dishonest and vulgar, but he can not be hated completely, because he has positive or admirable aspects, too. Irving Howe says, "Jasper Milvain is finally odious, yet he displays touches of consideration for those about him."[22] He makes his first appearance as a seemingly odious figure. He comments on a man being hanged that morning with a cheerful tone and expresses his delight at eating an excellent breakfast:

> It just happened that I saw the thing in a light of consolation. Things are bad with me, but not so bad as that. I might be going out between Jack Ketch and the Chaplain to be hanged; instead of that, I am eating a really fresh egg, and very excellent buttered toast, with coffee as good as can be reasonably expected in this part of the world.[23]

He makes a fool of Edwin's conscience and speaks out the difference between them emphasizing how practical he is:

> He is the old type of unpractical artist; I am the literary man of 1882. He won't make concessions, or rather, he can't make them; he can't supply the market. I — well, you may say that at present I do nothing; but that's a great mistake. I am learning my business. Literature nowadays is a trade. Putting aside men of genius, who may succeed by mere cosmic force, your successful man of letters is your skilful tradesman.[24]

Here, at the beginning of the novel, he may give an innocent or emotional reader like me in my early twenties a decisive impression of being nothing but a villain. But, a careful and farther reading will show

that he is well conscious of the realities, the literary conditions of the late-Victorian period. Another evidence of his sharp awareness of them is that he knows the importance of having money:

> To have money is becoming of more and more importance in a literary career; principally because to have money is to have friends. Year by year, such influence grows of more account.[25]

Jasper writes for *The Current,* a literary magazine of rising fame, though he dislikes its editor Fadge. He says to Marian, "I shouldn't like to think that you regard me as a Fadge-like individual, a natural Fadgeite."[26] His writings begin to draw public attention, and he steadily climbs up the steps towards literary success while Edwin suffers from fruitless labor. He tries to help the suffering Edwin with advice on the titles of his novels or with an offer to review "Margaret Home".[27] He is certainly dishonest but kind and admirable at the same time because of this kind of "consideration for those about him".

Jasper proposes marriage to Marian Yule because he believes that she will inherit a large portion of her uncle's legacy. She is attracted by him, too, for he is the first man who has approached her with display of feeling, energy and youthful self-confidence. To a girl who must confine herself to a boring labor as her father's ghost-writer, Jasper, who is seeking the joys of life with frank energy looks quite human. And his vivacity, courage and determination to succeed impresses her very much.[28] Here, Gissing shows Jasper's charm as a man exactly as it is. No hint of irony is felt. It is unlikely that Gissing makes such a positive description of Jasper if he intends him to be a perfect villain.

Marian Yule, who stands in the middle between the practical Jasper and the impractical Edwin, plays a role in making the former's practicality more conspicuous. Jasper tells her that they should marry at once if she gets twenty or thirty thousand pounds, but adds

that to marry without enough money will be a gross absurdity, simply spoiling his career, and leading to all sorts of discontents. So he is quite embarrassed when he knows that Marian will get only five thousand pounds while Amy will be able to get ten thousand pounds. His embarrassment increases when he is told that she may not be able to get a penny. Though she can finally get fifteen hundred pounds, he hesitates to marry her at once because of the fear that he may have to support her almost blind father and uneducated mother with that small money.

As he loses interest in her, he begins to be attracted by Amy Reardon after receiving her letter expressing appreciation of his review of her dead husband's novel. He is struck by her beauty when he visits her after receiving another letter from her telling of the suicide of Harold Biffen.

How much Jasper is obsessed with money is clearly shown in his proposal to the wealthy but not beautiful Miss Rupert while he continues to see Marian. This is without doubt a villainous act of which he must be accused. Therefore, Robert L. Selig's assertion that Jasper is no villain looks a little bit too bold, though it is true that he is not a perfect villain. After being accused of this contemptible act by his sister Dora and receiving Miss Rupert's letter of polite refusal, he is discouraged and decides to marry Marian at once, but only out of duty. When he meets her to declare his decision, however, he feels disgust at Marian's coarseness compared with Amy's refinement. This time, Marian hesitates to marry at once because she begins to doubt his love and her father who dislikes Jasper is in a critical condition.

The following is an account of Jasper's words to her.[30] "Will your father consent to receive an allowance from a person whose name is Mrs Milvain?", "There is the very serious doubt whether your father would accept money from you when you are my wife.", "If you can't find means of assuring his support as my wife, you

must remain Marian Yule.", "The difficulties almost seem insurmountable.", "I can trust your faith, but I can't trust my own. I will marry you now, but – years hence – how can I tell what may happen? I don't trust myself." Those words increase Marian's doubt of his love and make her decide to break off their engagement. They may be considered Jasper's cunning tricks to cut off his contact with her. But it can not be affirmed that they are so because Dora recognizes genuine suffering in his tones and aspect when he gets home. It is very hard to say whether he is accused of dishonesty in his love of Marian, because he seems sometimes very genuine, as is shown in the following paragraph:

> Her touch, the perfume of her passion, had their exalting effect upon him. He felt in all sincerity that to forsake her would be a baseness, revenged by the loss of such a wife.[31]

It is partly because of Jasper's sister Dora that he and Amy look quite dishonest and villainous to the reader. She is at the age of twenty and as innocent and emotional as I was in my early twenties. She sympathizes with Edwin by saying, "Whoever my husband was, I would stand by him, if I starved to death."[32] She dislikes Amy and even her brother. She regards Amy's conduct as "cowardly, faithless, unwomanly",[33] and declares that she killed Edwin. She echoes my opinion in my early twenties:

> She is a cold, cruel, unprincipled creature! Jasper makes himself more than ever contemptible by marrying her.[34]

But, now, I do not think that she is such a villainous lady. I agree with Irving Howe that she is presented not as a female monster but as a woman of mixed qualities and motives.[35]

It is often said that a woman is more practical than a man. It seems quite natural for a woman to be concerned about a man's

financial ability if she thinks of marriage with him, and especially if she is going to become a housewife like Amy who does not work outside. A man does not need to care about a woman's financial ability so much that he can be more idealistic or unrealistic about marriage. Edwin's mother and Marian, as well as Amy, are practical. As I mentioned before that Marian, stands in the middle between the practical Jasper and the impractical Edwin, she is appropriately practical. Jasper says to her, "Women are so desperately matter-of-fact; it comes out even in their love-talk." [36]

Edwin's mother is more practical than her husband. He, who is a photographer in a provincial town, is a man of whims and idealism, while she has a strong vein of worldly ambition and always expresses her desire to go and live in London, which she expects may give them a fortune. His son Edwin is more impractical, for he becomes a novelist. Gissing introduces Amy Reardon into the novel as an active and attractive lady:

> As for her dress, it was unpretending in fashion and colour, but of admirable fit. Every detail of her appearance denoted scrupulous personal refinement. She walked well; you saw that the foot, however gently, was firmly planted. When she seated herself, her posture was instantly graceful, and that of one who is indifferent about the support for the back.[37]

This gives a hint of how practical she is and how unfit she is to be the wife of such a man as Edwin. She chooses him because she has believed that he would become a successful novelist. As the story proceeds, she reveals a more practical temperament. She advises Edwin that art must be practised as a trade. If she finds a successful novel, she reads it through in a very practical spirit and explains to him why it has achieved success. She points out some merit or defect in his novels which common readers can not notice.

Though she is well aware of the importance of having money like Jasper, she is never too luxurious or extravagant, as is shown in the following paragraph:

> Even yet, it needed but a little money to redeem all. Amy had no extravagant aspirations; a home of simple refinement and freedom from anxiety would restore her to her nobler self. How could he find fault with her? [38]

This is one of the reasons why she can not be a villain. She is only realistic or practical. Her literary taste is practical, too. She says:

> Best or worst, novels are all the same. Nothing but love, love, love; what silly nonsesse it is! Why don't people write about the really important things of life? Some of the French novelists do; several of Balzac's, for instance. I have just been reading his "Cousin Pons", a terrible book, but I enjoyed it ever so much because it was nothing like a love story. What rubbish is printed about love! [39]

When they become almost penniless, Amy suggests to Edwin that he should ask the publisher for advance payment of a royalty. But he rejects it for the reason that his poor novel is not worth it. When she gives him another suggestion that he should send one of his writings to *The Current* instead of *The Wayside* because the former pays much better, he rejects it again for the same reason. Those two incidents are typical evidence of how practical Amy is, how morbid Edwin is, and how absolutely different their temperaments are. Therefore, it is no surprise or no wonder that she accepts Jasper's proposal without hesitation after the death of her husband. He loves her genuinely. Gissing says, "Indeed it became clear to all his intimates that this marriage would be by no means one of mere interest; the man was in love at last, if he had never been before."[40]

She loves him genuinely, too. They are happy together because they have the same practical temperaments and the same sense of values and they each firmly believe that the other is the fittest partner Let me foretell their future by paraphrasing Gissing's description of this happy couple at the end of the novel. Jasper will be tender, softer, firmer, confident, independent, generous, triumphant and rich. Amy will be matchless as a wife, beautiful, graceful, queenly, favored, amiable and perfect. Gissing's choice of these adjectives shows the fact that he is never cynical about them. They are never hollow or lonely as one critic points out.[41] Amy will help her new husband to literary success with unsparing dedication, and he will surely achieve it.

The above-mentioned contrast between the practical figures and the impractical presents the difficulty in telling who can be liked or sympathized with best. Edwin Reardon can be sympathized with in some aspects. He has a lot of autobiographical elements of Gissing. They both love literature all the more genuinely because they are morbid, sensitive, sentimental, idealistic, feeble and impractical. Moreover Edwin, like Gissing, has a tendecy to regard a woman as supreme or sacred. His love of Amy before the marriage is extremely genuine. Her declaration of "I love you." leads him to rapture and ecstacy:

> And the words sang about him, filled the air with a mad pulsing of intolerable joy, made him desire to fling himself in passionate humanity at her feet, to weep hot tears, to cry to her in insane worship. He thought her beautiful beyond anything his heart had imagined; her warm gold hair was the rapture of his eyes and of his reverent hand.[42]

This may be evidence of the popular notion that a man is more idealistic about marriage and loves more genuinely. Edwin appeals to a modern reader who is sensitive, loves literature genuinely and feels

timid in today's world which is, with unrelenting speed, becoming more commercialized, materialistic, urbanized, dehumanized, sophisticated and complicated.

Irving Howe mentions that "Amy is to be judged, she is often detestable, yet she too is human – it takes considerable vanity or self-assurance not to see in oneself at least a trace of Amyism." [43] No matter how noble one may be, he can not say that he has little interest in money or fame. These human interests are embodied with a great exaggeration in Jasper Milvain and to a lesser extent in her. One can not absolutely criticize Jasper for his dishonesty in leaving Marian, for one can not guarantee his love if he falls into the situation in which he must support his lover's parents. All the figures in this novel including Edwin, Jasper and Amy are very human and very modern.

As Bernard Bergonzi claims, *New Grub Street* is far more directly informative in a social-historical way than most Victorian novels.[44] This novel is worthy as a social document of the late-Victorian England. With considerable faith, it portrays the dehumanizing aspects of London, the literary conditions and Grub Street scenes in those days. *Saturday Review* on 9 May 1891 comments that "the book is almost terrible in its realism, and gives a picture, cruelly precise in every detail, of this commercial age." [45] *Spectator* on 30 May of the same year makes a similar comment that "there is not in the whole book a single page which lacks the force of a relentless realism." [45] At the same time, Gissing can be called a predictor of today's world if we reflect on it where art is becoming more commercialized and marriage, more realistic.

This novel is very interesting in a paradoxical way: that is, it is very late-Victorian and very modern. It is this paradoxical element that makes *New Grub Street* one of the greatest novels of the Victorian period as well as Gissing's representative novel. As Q. D. Leavis remarks, it is his only great novel,[47] and it is true that his

other novels are not so widely read. But, as a Gissing fan, I want to emphasize that every work of his has its own particular interest.

Notes

1. Irving Howe, "George Gissing: Poet of Fatigue," "Pierre Coustillas, ed., *Collected Articles on George Gissing* (London: Frank Cass, 1968), p. 121.
2. Bernard Bergonzi, "Introduction," George Gissing, *New Grub Street* (1891, rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 19.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, p. 404.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
7. Refer to John Good, *George Gissing: Ideology and Fiction* (London: Vision, 1978)
8. Lewis D. Moore, "The Triumph of Mediocrity: George Gissing's *New Grup Street*," *The Gissnig Newsletter*, January, 1987, p. 2.
9. *New Grub Street*, p. 79.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 191.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 418.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 522.
19. Irving Howe, p. 121.
20. *New Grub Street*. p. 77.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 151－152.

22. Howe, p. 123.
23. *Neu Grub Street*, p. 35.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
27. Refer to 14.
28. *New Grub Street*, p. 219.
29. Robert L. Selig, "Two Major Achievements: *New Grub Street* and *Born in Exile*", *George Gissing* (Boston: Twayne, 1983), p. 54.
30. *New Grub Street*, pp. 536－537.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 453.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 500.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid*, p. 546.
35. Howe, p. 124.
36. *New Grub Street*, p. 453.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 396.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 547.
41. Masanobu Oda, *George Gissing* (1933, rpt. Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1980) This was published as no. 67 of *Ei-Bei Bungaku Hyoden Sosho (A Series of Critical Biographies of English and American Literature)*. This work is excellent as a biography of Gissing and valuable as his introduction into Japan. But I do not agree with Prof. Oda in his following view:

> When Jasper expresses his delight to Amy, a hollowness lies behind his happiness because he has forced himself to secure it. Amy's singing voice implies the loneliness of a winner in the human world, which can be slightly soothed. That is the very merit which makes this work valuable. (p. 70.)

42. *New Grub Street,* p. 95.
43. Howe, p. 124.
44. Bernard Bergonzi, "Introduction," p. 10.
45. "Unsigned review, *Saturday Review* 9 May 1891, lxxi, 551," Pierre Coustillas and Colin Patridge, ed., *Gissing: The Critical Heritage* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 177.
46. "Unsigned review, *Spectator* 30 May 1891, lxvi, 764," *Ibid.*, p. 179.
47. Jacop Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography* (1963, rpt. Washington: University of Washington, 1979), p. 154.

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