Representing Culture and Class: An Exploration of Narrative Containment Strategies in Henry Mayhew and George Gissing

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REPRESENTING CULTURE AND CLASS:
AN EXPLORATION OF NARRATIVE CONTAINMENT STRATEGIES
IN HENRY MAYHEW AND GEORGE GISSING

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Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
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In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Lona Catherine Carwile
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Master of Arts

Lona Catherine Carwile

Approved, July 2000

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ABSTRACT

During the course of the nineteenth century, as the Industrial Revolution gained momentum and the national population soared, boundaries between social classes in England experienced a gradual breakdown. Changes in industry and labor requirements, as well as social reforms ostensibly designed to improve living conditions, led to unprecedented opportunities for social mobility that comprehensively redefined the structure of social class. These changes are marked in literature by radical changes in the fictional representations of the working classes, who go from being figured at mid-century as a displaced and pathetic group to, during the latter half of the century, an encroaching and threatening mass that must be contained. The emerging middle class played a key role in creating and disseminating these representations; their development as a distinct group depended on their ability to define the Otherness of the working class. Class representations in three interrelated discourses—journalist Henry Mayhew’s classifications of the laboring poor at mid-century and George Gissing’s literary reaction to the development of mass culture in the 1880s, along with the social ideologies behind the Great Exhibition of 1851 (which was a crucial landmark for both writers)—illustrate types of narrative responses to issues raised by social mobility. These representations serve as containment strategies, helping (either deliberately or unconsciously) to define hegemonic relationships and establish the boundaries between social classes.

As the representations offered by Mayhew and Gissing, as well as those generated by the Great Exhibition, demonstrate, the ideological function of these works, and consequently the solutions to the problem of class mobility they envision, is not always clear, perhaps because there was no simple response to social changes that were both welcomed and feared. The irony of the gradual democratization that took place during the Victorian era was that it stressed the acquisition of culture and education as solutions to the problems that social mobility and an increasing populace posed to the dominant classes. Unfortunately, many intellectuals perceived industrial and democratic progress as a breakdown of the established social order; universal education and acculturation were often seen as the problem rather than the solution—increasingly so in the concluding decades of the century. An appropriate construction of culture had to be extended to the lower stratum of society if social problems were to be remedied, and yet what would result from this, it was felt, could only be a new (and tainted) mass culture that would renew, rather than resolve, those problems. Thus the democratic utopia hopefully, if condescendingly, envisioned by writers such as Mayhew and the founders of the Great Exhibition, and painfully revisited in the early novels of Gissing, was undermined by a coexisting concern over the leveling effect that these social changes might have. By the end of the century, solutions which had seemed plausible enough in the mid-Victorian period were no longer convincing; an equilibrium between the delicate balance of progress and tradition, of textual solution and social problem, could no longer be imagined in good faith.
REPRESENTING CULTURE AND CLASS:
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IN HENRY MAYHEW AND GEORGE GISSING
INTRODUCTION

During the course of the nineteenth century, the titled and genteel upper classes of Britain moved from a level of prestige and power that was essentially unrivaled to a less authoritative position; the effects of this change on their concepts of social hierarchy were far-reaching, and soon created a yearning on the part of the dominant classes to establish some sense of control. Their fall from grace was not sudden or straightforward. The English had no decisive uprising (such as the French Revolution) to blame, but instead a lengthy series of industrial and social developments which sparked a series of reforms and ultimately led to a new view of social hierarchies. As David Cannadine explains in *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (1992), “the upper classes took an unconscionable time a-dying” (25). There was no single moment of death for traditional social regimes, but there was, clearly, a definitive apogee to the Industrial Revolution at mid-century, followed by a corresponding social collapse in the late 1880s. Not surprisingly, the division and definition of classes took on a new importance during this era of change. The crest of industrial achievement, and the trough that followed it, are marked in literature by a change in fictional representations of the Victorian working classes, who go from being figured as a displaced and piteous group to an encroaching and threatening mass that must be contained. The emerging middle class played a role as well; their development as a distinct group depended on their ability to define the Otherness of the working class. Consequently, the definition of the working class
experienced a radical evolution, changing from a collection of distinctly defined skilled
groups at the beginning of the century to a more general and all-inclusive laboring class,
which in turn emerged by century’s end as a dense and aggregate mass. This thesis traces
the narrative and political strategies that accompanied these changes in social mobility
through an exploration of class representations in three interrelated discourses: the first
chapter discusses Henry Mayhew’s mid-century classifications of the laboring poor,
while the last moves forward to the end of the Victorian age to examine novelist George
Gissing’s literary reaction to the development of mass culture in the 1880s; the middle
chapter, by way of segue from Mayhew to Gissing, deals briefly with the social
ideologies behind the Great Exhibition of 1851, which was a crucial historical landmark
for both writers. Each discourse illustrates the types of solutions offered by the dominant
classes to address the many social concerns that accompanied an unprecedented surge in
population, strategies which helped (either deliberately or unconsciously) define
hegemonic relationships and establish the boundaries between social classes. Taking its
cue from Fredric Jameson’s concept of narrative as a political construct (The Political
Unconscious, 1981), this thesis will explore the containment strategies that arose as
consequences of increased social mobility and a converging national culture, with the
understanding that culture plays a dual (and paradoxical) role as both a reflection of
hegemonic relationships and a body of practices and processes that produces these power
relationships. Hence, the function of social solutions offered in these works is not always
clear, perhaps because the resolution envisioned by the dominant classes was not clear—
there was no simple response to changes that were both welcomed and feared.
Additionally, solutions that appeared to be effective to a mid-century writer like Mayhew were rendered obsolete by the continued growth and transformation of culture. George Gissing’s works explore the precarious nature of these mid-century boundaries as authority over society and culture breaks down, creating a new concern: urban mass society.

The mid-century position of the working classes was closely linked to their role in the Industrial Revolution. A number of novelists traced the development of the working classes and the industrial towns that sprung up across England. Of equal interest, however, were the working classes in London, particularly those residing in the East End slums. They, too, were profoundly affected by the economic growth of the country, though unlike the residents of Sheffield or Manchester or Birmingham, these urban working classes could not be so neatly categorized by occupation or earnings. In a much greater sense, they embodied (for the middle and upper classes) the real threat of the proletariat class: urban chaos that was almost impossible to define, much less control, and the underlying threat that the displaced lower class residing in the East End would turn the tables on their upper and middle class London neighbors, displacing them.

By mid-century, the slums of London had become a locale worthy of exploration, with the hope that a positive spin could be put upon the problem, or that the process of exploration could somehow de-mystify the class whose existence, with its geographical proximity and yet sociological distance, had become increasingly threatening to the higher classes. In the 1850s, the East End workers still lacked definition; their position within the city was much like that of a foreign nation, and their neighborhood as little
understood as the heart of Africa. The process of exploration in the East End is exemplified by the journalistic works of Henry Mayhew, whose mid-century quest to define the urban poor in sociological terms resulted in a gallery of street-characters and a statistical quantification of their lifestyle. His most notable work in this respect is *London Labour and the London Poor*, described in 1862 by an anonymous reviewer as a work which “comprises an amount of information upon the London poor, their histories and habits, which is now becoming so common, the literature not of common life only, but the commonest, oddest, and most out of the way” (quoted in Keating 36). Mayhew’s exploration of the exotic East End worker removed some of the sense of alienation and danger inherent in the unknown. In a style not far removed from Dickens, he made the tragic become comic, and where it could not be made comical, he drew upon the reader’s sympathies, utilizing an age-old containment strategy: that which is laughable or pitiful is rarely dangerous.

The potential danger of the East End working class was a serious issue for mid-century Londoners. So serious, in fact, that their existence (and the existence of a growing working class throughout England) necessitated political containment—a desire on the part of the dominant classes that can be traced back to the last decade of the previous century when the country had, it was widely felt, experienced a rather close brush with revolution during the uprisings in France. In a pro-active move, the Great Exhibition of 1851 was proposed as a solution to several interrelated problems. On one hand, the Industrial Revolution had pushed England to the economic forefront as a nation; on the other hand, this development had radically changed the structure of
society. One could be proud of England’s accomplishments, or one could lament the changes that industrial development had caused. The Great Exhibition of 1851 wholeheartedly emphasized the positive, glorifying economic success to the point of excess. However wretched one’s role in the manufacturing process, one could take heart in the fact that one lived in the nation that, economically speaking, ruled the world. This unifying notion of the nation-state was designed to help align the working class with, rather than against, the higher classes, and its successful implantation explains the widespread support for imperial expansion during the last decades of the century amongst the very people who might have been expected to show more support for the downtrodden in other parts of the world. One goal of the Great Exhibition was to instill within the workers a sense of pride in their role in industry that would render their position as mere cogs in the wheel of production more palatable. The message of the Exhibition was quite clear—the end product justified its means of production so completely that the laborers and their problems with this new way of life were rendered irrelevant.

There were, of course, inadequacies in the mid-century containment strategies, and eventually the veneer began to wear thin. By the 1880s, the glorification process was nearing its end, and England had reached a point of despondency over the issues of labor and industry. While the working class had never fully developed the fervor for revolution, neither had it settled satisfactorily into a new way of life. The “Condition of England” problem of the 1850s had spread horizontally across social classes, as social reforms created a sort of glass ceiling for those who rose through class ranks. As the
class structure eroded, everyone seemed to be falling into a sort of social limbo, which was particularly problematic for a nation which had rarely considered movement between classes possible a century before. As a product of this transitional society, novelist George Gissing produced a series of what have come to be known as working class novels during the 1880s. Gissing’s novels explore the problems created by this sense of social limbo. They focus on a developing social stratification with both advantages and handicaps that Gissing experienced first-hand. The working class series is Gissing’s attempt to resolve, or at least define, the problems that a changing class structure wrought. They offer a purportedly omniscient exploration of ways in which the supposed achievements of the century became its downfalls. And though none of the 1880s novels succeeds in solving a century-long problem, the process of writing them did, on a personal level, help Gissing clarify his own position in a precarious class system. Each of Gissing’s working class novels brings him one step closer to personal and literary resolution, culminating with The Nether World (1889), which marks the end of his working class series, and is his most definitive explanation of the urban social crisis.

The Condition of England problem, which surfaces in the middle decades of the century, is at the heart of the texts I am examining in this thesis, so a few words of explanation about how it arose are in order here. It was due as much to economic as socio-political changes. The despondency that accompanied this phase of the Industrial Revolution had broad causes. The first was rooted in the development of the modern free market economy, which had given rise to industrial advances in the early 1800s. By the nineteenth century, the mercantile capitalism which had dominated the previous century
had evolved into a modern free market philosophy in full swing—lauded for the improvements in production and exchange that brought England to the forefront as an industrial super power, but criticized for the buffeting market forces that could just as quickly dry up the need for a particular industry as create one. The development of a market system brought much more to England than freedom and opportunity. It also introduced a new way of life—one that broke the hold of tradition and essentially destroyed a centuries-old social underpinning. The traditional economic system, with roots that stretched back to feudalism, had provided a modicum of economic security even with all its cruelties and injustices: as the economist Robert Heilbroner notes, “however mean a serf’s life, at least he knew that in bad times he was guaranteed a small dole from his lord’s granary...however exploited a journeyman, he knew that he could not be summarily thrown out of work under the rules of his master’s guild” (16). The economic freedom of modern capitalism came as a double-edged sword—on the one hand, the poorest classes were able to rise from a station in life from which, in earlier times, there would have been no exit. But economic freedom also had a harsher side, eliminating the rudimentary sense of security that, for better or for worse, characterized an earlier age; along with new opportunities came “the necessity to stay afloat by one’s own efforts in rough waters where all were struggling to survive. Many a merchant and many, many a jobless worker simply disappeared from view” (Heilbroner 17).

The laboring classes discovered that age-old occupations, skills acquired over a lifetime, could be rendered worthless by the appearance of technological change. To workers whose livelihoods were destroyed by industrial advancements, productive
machinery appeared as the enemy, rather than the ally, of humankind. For example, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the textile weavers, whose cottage industry was destroyed gradually by competition from the mills, often came together to burn down the hated factory looms that had displaced them. Resistance was often underground, and strongly unified; as E.P. Thompson writes in The Making of the English Working Class (1963), "new institutions, new attitudes, new community patterns were emerging, which were, consciously and unconsciously, designed to resist the intrusion" of the employer or his informers (487). This hostility against the employer and his higher social class produced a sense of solidarity in the working class, providing unity and camaraderie when, thanks to changes in manufacturing methods, workers had become much more isolated. The work experience had become more fragmented, monotonous, and alienating. The division of labor made industries more productive, but it curtailed the self-sufficiency of individual workers as the products of work became "ever smaller pieces of the total jigsaw puzzle" (Heilbroner 22). By the mid-nineteenth century, all levels of society lamented the changes wrought by capitalism as often as they exalted them. There was a strong desire to preserve tradition, if not in actual practice, then in a literary prototype.

Another cause of the mid-century malaise was the decisive collapse of the agricultural base of the economy, partly due to trade—a "massive influx of cheap foreign goods from North and South America" (Cannadine 26)—and partly due to growth in industrial sectors. By mid-century, factory towns had developed into massive industrial hot spots, "fully fledged, large scale, and highly concentrated" (Cannadine 26). As the
rural base became economically depressed by industrial development, the gentrified upper classes became increasingly marginalized: ironically enough, they came to occupy a sidelined position which lower classes had held in previous centuries (and of course, which the lowest classes also continued to hold throughout the nineteenth century). From the fortunes of industry a newly prosperous and assertive middle class emerged, demanding an education and political equality. At the same time, agricultural prices and rentals collapsed, causing a depression which led to a multitude of reform proposals which consolidated as the Chartist movement. Urban and industrial growth spawned strikes and riots, socialists and anarchists; though these small movements did not always achieve their aims, ultimately many improvements in living and working conditions took place. “In the future, it would be numbers and people and organization that would matter, rather than nobles and patricians and patronage” (Cannadine 26); demands for extensions of the franchise and the emergence of a strong working class redistributed the balance of political power, and provoked the sort of narrative containment strategies that I will be looking at in Mayhew and representations of the Crystal Palace.

If the 1850s mark the point where new class hierarchies—or representations of ideal hierarchies—which underscore the primacy of the middle class and defuse the potential threat of the lower classes are finally established, then the 1880s mark the point where this structural hierarchy is undone by urban massification, as Gissing’s novels relentlessly demonstrate: by century’s end, the Age of the Masses would supersede the Age of the Classes. Matthew Arnold had warned in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) that the process of industrial development would erode national culture and authority as the trend towards
mass society, where the “multitude is perpetually swelling” continued (43), and his prognosis—reactionary as it may be—has a good deal of truth to it. This lack of a definite center of authority threatened to push the nation into social disorder, if not outright anarchy, and to destroy the mid-century compromises through which consensus had been achieved (or at least was represented as having been achieved). Mayhew’s mid-century sociological work and the discourses surrounding the creation of the Great Exhibition of 1851 rise to the surface in Gissing’s late-century fiction: the glories of the nineteenth century, England’s Golden Age, were inseparable from an inglorious exploitation of vast sectors of the populace who could only be made to fit in the newly dominant bourgeois vision of the world through acts of discursive manipulation that, by century’s end, were no longer convincing anybody—not even the manipulators.
CHAPTER I

Mid-Century Narratives: Containing the Threat of the Working Classes

Lord Macaulay, author of *History of England* (the first two volumes of which were published in 1849), was so moved by England’s mid-century developments in science and industry that in the 1850s he proclaimed progress had “lengthened life...mitigated pain...extinguished diseases...multiplied the power of human muscles...accelerated motion, annihilated distance, and, in short, lightened up the night with the splendour of the day” (quoted in Briggs 253). His optimistic proclamations were in many ways justified, and his enthusiasm was representative of the age. In a similar vein, to Robert Kerr, Royal Architect and coordinator of the Great Exhibition of 1851, the mid-century signified not the culminating zenith we recognize with over a century of historical hindsight, but rather a simple starting-point in Britain’s ascent to world-wide power. “Not only” he contended, “does it divide incidentally one half of this nineteenth century from the other, but it happens to separate a quite old-fashioned half-century from one of an entirely new character—the old half the fag-end of a listless past, the new half the commencement of a reanimated future” (quoted in French 35). Given the achievements of the age, this temporal myopia probably was warranted, in spite of the fact that it caused many to overlook, as least temporarily, the serious social concerns that accompanied England’s economic ascent. The mid-century years were a respite from the
threat of Chartist rebellion that culminated in the 1840s, and, though no one knew it at the time, a hiatus before the panic engendered by Socialism in the 1870s and 80s; industrial achievements gave substance to the claim that England had finally reached her golden age.

At the time Macaulay and Kerr were writing, England was the richest country in the world, with a per capita income fifty percent higher than that of France and almost three times the per capita income of Germany (Briggs 253). The title page of the Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of 1851 triumphantly proclaimed British industry “the Compass” of the world (Ellis, quoted in The Great Exhibition 1). Even the structural engineering of the revolutionary glass and iron Crystal Palace which housed the Great Exhibition was said to illustrate the national conviction that “the courage, the energy, and the strength represented by its construction” should be regarded “with emotions conducive to some yet higher manifestations of national capability” (Wyatt, quoted in The Great Exhibition 81). In other words, the mid-Victorians were happy to flaunt their superiority.

Unfortunately, there is always another side to the coin. While the middle decades of the century were undoubtedly a time of economic progress, social stability, and cultural diversity, there was much that remained in the shadows of these “splendoured” days. Poverty and hardship were present in a large part of mid-Victorian society. However, in keeping with the notion of a reanimated future, they were frequently kept out of view because they were “debasing and not elevating” (Briggs 254). Writers (and their readers) often helped maintain this separation through strategies of narrative
exclusion or manipulation: Charles Dickens anticipated his readers' shock over everything that deviated from the accepted perception of this golden age, characterizing his pontificating Mr. Podsnap's prejudice in *Our Mutual Friend* with the phrase: "I don't want to know about it; I don't choose to discuss it; I won't admit it" (Dickens 128). Accordingly, when many mid-century novelists dealt with the plight of the working classes, they obligingly cloaked the undesirable side of England’s industrial revolution in a peremptory mantle of sentimental or melodramatic literary convention. Renowned social reform novelists like Dickens, Disraeli, and Gaskell were the exceptions, but even they developed a set of conventions designed to contain class conflicts and appeal to their readers’ mores. Undoubtedly this set of literary protocols for representing those on the economic margins of the flourishing mid-century society developed (and deviated from earlier conventions) as a response to the changes taking place in mid-nineteenth century society; in no time these conventions had solidified into a sort of social inventory that helped categorize not only literary characters but also real members of Victorian society.

Two such conventions that particularly exemplify literature’s capacity to contain social classes and maintain the status quo are the “marriage plot” and the “plight of the fallen woman”—both were closely connected with the moralizing narrative paradigm, the “angel of the hearth,” which was proposed as a sort of Victorian feminine ideal. The mid-Victorian marriage plot involves seduction, romance, wooing, the proposal, and ultimately (after many suggestions that the proposal may never reach fruition) a marriage binding two members of a social class so that they can live happily ever after. In the marriage plot, living happily ever after entails producing offspring, thereby ensuring
succession of class position, inheritance, and the family line. Innumerable Victorian novels were dedicated to setting the stage for marriage and ensuring that it came off properly. Match-making grew from being the ultimate romantic fantasy for early nineteenth-century characters such as Austen's Emma Woodhouse into a seemingly inescapable literary convention; by mid-century it was enabling novelists to write at length about a variety of more complex social issues while following the relatively simple thread of the marriage plot.

There was, however, a deeper significance to the marriage plot: it was often the case that social unification ran parallel to the marriage union. Members of differing social classes might fall in love, but their union was discouraged. In the event that a marriage between two separate classes did occur, it was typically the woman who rose to the higher status of her husband's class. The heroine's transition in such a case was key; she moved from guidance in her parents' house to the better replacement—husband as teacher. Thus social differences often could be converted into socially appropriate similarities through marriage.

Another such convention in nineteenth-century literature involved the "plight of the fallen woman." This convention typically involved a virtuous young woman whose fall is caused by circumstances beyond her control. Perhaps she is seduced by a corrupt stranger who throws her off when it suits him. She must then survive as an outcast, living on charity and inevitably becoming a prostitute. Unlike the "fleshy celebration of sexual, picaresque life found in the eighteenth-century novel," the Victorian fallen woman has a noble and innocent nature (Watt 9). Dickens' Nancy in *Oliver Twist* is one
example; good-hearted as she was, Nancy could never escape her place in the London underworld. Her lot is irreversible. As George Watt points out in his 1984 study of the fallen woman convention, "from the twentieth-century perspective there is a difference between a prostitute and a girl who makes one mistake"; mid-Victorian literature did not typically allow for such a distinction (9). Once a harlot, always a harlot.

This literary process of categorizing people—who is fit to rise and who is not—became a way of declaring that one's social status is immutable. As such, it was a direct challenge to the changes going on in social classes at that time. It seemed to imply that the better classes of society would do best to avoid co-mingling with inferior classes. It also served as a warning: the lower classes are a danger—they will contaminate society if they are allowed to surface—and see, they are much happier in their pre-ordained places.

Reality, however, cannot always be forced into a mold by literary convention. The working classes that had become such an important engine of English prosperity by mid-century could not wholly be contained by narrative strategies of exclusion and stereotyping. The deplorable living conditions that arose during the Industrial Revolution, and the consolidation of a new middle class that not only threatened but partially succeeded in uprooting the upper classes, were cultural conditions too significant to be contained. Yet, if literature could not halt change, there still existed a hope that it could direct and control the transformation. Many writers attempted, either consciously or unconsciously, to exert control over the changes in class structure that were taking place. Their texts played a hegemonic role, a concept explained by the
Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci: “The intellectuals sympathetic to the dominant class have an organization function: to articulate the world view of the class, thereby giving it a unity and consciousness of its aims; to help structure social institutions in accordance with these aims; and to foster an environment of consent to the ideas of class” (see “Hegemony, Intellectuals, and the State” in Storey 210-216). This narrative function would intensify as the working class population continued to soar.

Realistically, urban growth and industrial expansion, embraced for their contributions to national progress and applauded in forms such as the Great Exhibition, were more than partly to blame for the horrifically impoverished condition of the working classes. And a more latent effect of industrialism, perhaps equally horrifying to the higher classes, was the permanent alteration of social stratification. Industrial growth had been accompanied by a surge in urban population, and the size of the new working class caused tremendous anxieties over space, privacy, and identity among the upper and middle classes. While the Great Exhibition helped to temper fears by promising prosperity and opportunity for all, unprecedented growth in urban centers made the aristocracy and bourgeoisie eager to retain their own sense of superiority and separateness under the guise of social development. For better or worse, the industrial, scientific, and economic advances that mid-Victorians extolled dissolved centuries of solid class boundaries, and the increasing population of unclassed masses became impossible to categorize or contain through acts of representation.

From the sixth century up to 1800, the population in Europe never exceeded 180 million. But from 1800 to 1914, it rose from 180 to 460 million. (By 1880, when
Gissing writes, these numbers would rise to 6.5 million in London alone (Bradbury 144). For conservative-minded thinkers, this demographic change was perceived as a threat to cultural and intellectual development: In a span of no more than three generations, Europe grew into what the Spanish cultural critic José Ortega y Gasset would (a decade after the Russian Revolution) vilify as "a gigantic mass of humanity which, launched like a torrent over the historic area, has inundated it" (Ortega y Gasset 54). England particularly felt the effects of social expansion. Because the surge in population went hand in hand with unprecedented industrial growth, phenomenally large masses of lower and middle class populations were forced to relocate, moving from the countryside to hastily formed cities. Manchester, for example, had a population of 72,000 in 1801; by 1850 its population had more than tripled.

As John Carey points out in The Intellectuals and the Masses (1992), the population increase had devastating consequences, among them overcrowding: "everywhere is full of people—trains, hotels, cafes, parks, theaters, doctors' consulting rooms, beaches" (3). Henry Mayhew's 1870 novel, The Adventures of Mr. And Mrs. Cursty Sandboys, reacts to the crowding problem in a humorous London scene where a dignified establishment for young ladies is crammed with visiting Frenchmen, resulting in a series of mishaps and much hilarity. The unspoken threat is strongly sexual, implying a loss of control (the failure of outmoded containment strategies) that is perfectly attuned to the fears that this surge in population caused. In the extreme, this was not merely overcrowding, it was intrusion: "The crowd has taken possession of places which were created by civilization for the best people" (Carey 3). The end result
was ultimately what Carey describes (in admittedly extreme language) as “the dictatorship of the masses [and the] accession of the masses to complete social power” (3). This apocalyptic scenario had been present from the very beginnings of the century, and had been voiced by thinkers of all political stripes, from radical utopians such as Karl Marx to conservative doomsayers such as Thomas Malthus. By 1889, when Gissing’s *The Nether World* replays the over-crowding threat in a tightly packed train ride to the Crystal Palace, Mayhew’s hilarity would be replaced by, in Gissing’s words, “tragical mirth”:

> A rush, a tumble, blows, laughter, screams of pain—and we are in a carriage. Pennyloaf has to be dragged up from under the seat, and all of her indignation cannot free her from the jovial embrace of a man that insists there is plenty of room on his knee. Off we go!...We smoke and sing at the same time; we quarrel and make love—the latter in somewhat primitive fashion; we roll about with the rolling train; we nod into hoggish sleep. (Gissing 112)

The ideological representation of crowdedness would further evolve as the fear of working-class intrusion escalated: what merely threatened at mid-century, would be depicted by century’s end as a typical, and in its frequency, “tragically” commonplace way of life (as Gissing seems to signal in this passage by allowing his omniscient narrator briefly to be incorporated into to the degraded, massified “we”).

In mid-century, by contrast, while this menace was already present, or at least perceived as being present, the dissolution of class hierarchies was successfully conjured...
away—rather than consolidated—in the hegemonic representations through which the middle and upper classes were forced to redefine their place in the social hierarchy after witnessing (and withstanding) a series of threats to the established class hierarchy during the 1830s and 40s, when economic depression, crop failures, and widespread poverty prompted a harrowing series of riots, marches, and political demands. Chartist politics and the obtrusively degrading conditions of workers had spurred minor reforms designed to appease, as well as feed and clothe, the lower classes. For the mid-Victorian aristocracy and bourgeoisie, the solution seemed to lie in sizable reform efforts that would re-define class boundaries, re-creating structures that would stabilize society and hold the emerging masses in their place.

In London, however, the problem was not limited to angry masses, nor were impoverished conditions simply attributed to unreasonable factory owners, though the miserable predicament of the lower classes was in many ways the same as in other parts of the country. London workers held a variety of menial positions in society, from cross-sweepers to costermongers to clerks. There were so many different types of labor in London that the different occupations (some amounting to little more than begging) were almost impossible to categorize. Because of this very variety in London, “the residents of the metropolis had a harder time comprehending the situation of the lower classes at any given moment than did the observer of northern industrial towns” (Humpherys 18). Like the northern industrial novelists who ingeniously used literature to divide the working class into manageable groups, mid-century writers who covered the London slums focused on individuals or small sections of the working class, organizing them in
divisible units in an attempt to impose order on lower class chaos. So while the industrial and London workers threatened the hegemonic classes in very different ways, the solutions were quite similar. One prime example of a Londoner’s efforts to solve the working-class problem can be found in the writings of Henry Mayhew. His journalistic investigations into the London slums gave him an opportunity to define and thus conquer the divide between heretofore alienated classes. In this role, journalism manages, or contains, the problem of social intrusion in part by objectifying—and then commodifying—the lower classes; the social disorder created by imprecise class boundaries is refigured in a clearly defined and organized form. In Mayhew’s case, his meticulous research on the laboring class took a relatively objective and seemingly scientific view of the lower class, though there is often no clear division between his scientific “discovery” of the poor and his more picturesque descriptions of their daily life.

Henry Mayhew’s work as a chronicler of London poverty is one of the most salient examples of literature about the working classes. Mayhew began a series of articles covering the plight of the London lower classes in September 1849. His efforts were truly a bridge over an uncrossed chasm, starting out as a bare facts investigation into the sanitary conditions of London’s worst cholera districts and culminating in the four-volume study, *London Labour and the London Poor*. In 1849, living conditions were a serious concern for public and government alike. During the cholera epidemic of 1848-49, some 14,000 people died in London, and deaths totaled over 53,000 throughout the nation. At the time, there was no real understanding of how the disease spread (by infected water), although “many people believed it had something to do with bad vapors
and that these vapors were linked somehow to the filth, over-crowding, and neglect in the slums” (Humpherys 16). Henry Mayhew had the good fortune to be asked by London’s Registrar General to investigate the problem. His reports appeared in the Morning Chronicle, where they were eagerly perused by a large audience. After the cholera problem subsided, Mayhew remained on the journal’s staff, writing about conditions in the poorest districts of London. Mayhew completed his study in 1861; in between lie seventy-six letters for the Chronicle, each consisting of about 3,500 words, which would later be combined to form London Labour and the London Poor. The series received rave reviews, boosting the circulation of the paper and setting Mayhew, who had declared bankruptcy in 1847, back on his feet again.

Mayhew’s exposé of the lower class situation was a product as well as an indictment of the mid-century dilemma. While purporting to introduce the West End to their East End neighbors, it also commodified the living conditions of the lower class, in much the same way that the Great Exhibition would make a commodity of the workers’ labor by transforming it into spectacle. Unlike government reports (which had paved the way for Mayhew’s studies), the role of London Labour and the London Poor was to make money, and to Mayhew, in spite of what he may have claimed in the articles themselves, that was its most redeeming feature. While at its height of popularity, the series single-handedly carried the circulation of the Morning Chronicle, where again the emphasis was on profits, even if selling papers sometimes meant altering stories. Mayhew was happy to capitalize on his readers’ taste for the baser elements of the London slums.
With the Chronicle editors at his back, Mayhew quickly learned how to take advantage of public trends and popular tastes, producing "outright propaganda for middle-class prejudices" (Humpherys 14). Mayhew, himself a member of the upper-middle class, showed an "extraordinary awareness of the needs of his readers, an awareness he exploited from one decade to the next" (Bradley 42). As the final section of London Labour and the London Poor demonstrates, Mayhew's focus gradually moved from sympathetic characterizations of the children of the slums to an exposé of "those who lived entirely outside the law" (quoted in Humpherys 14). This final section was so popular with his readers that Mayhew supplied the public's demand with an enlarged and republished volume on these characters. Later, he would go on to publish a second volume of social criticism, The Criminal Prisons of London and Scenes of Prison Life (1862).

Though Mayhew became a proclaimed expert on the lower classes and considered himself the voice of the poor on social issues, even during the early years of his bankruptcy he operated as a member of the social elite; he always viewed himself as a more worldly outsider who had essentially toured and studied the lower classes. However fluid their status might be, the residents of the slums were never permitted by Mayhew to encroach upon those of higher rank. Mayhew's perspective as a sociological observer aided him in this effort. His interpretations of the lower class experience released a rhetorical charge on behalf of the ranking classes that appeared politically neutral, but as voyeurs of the urban poor, Mayhew and his readers were able to master the lower classes. For example, there is a great difference between Mayhew's published
series in the *Morning Chronicle* and his private notes; verbatim accounts by the proletariat were touched up by stenographers or blended into Mayhew’s narration. The end result seems surprisingly like pure, first-hand reporting, and yet it is sometimes difficult to separate Mayhew’s leading questions from his subject’s prompted answers. What would today be considered a blatant example of bad journalism was highly lauded by the Chronicle readers; reviews of his work indicate that Mayhew’s liberal inferences and falsified interviews were perceived by his readers as being just as truthful as a direct quotation, perhaps because of their common belief that the London poor were incapable of coherent or rational thoughts on their own. Mayhew’s writings functioned as a sort of published voyeurism, a “privileged gaze, betokening possession and distance” that transformed the experiences and suffering of the working classes into a consumer product (Walkowitz 16). In her 1992 analysis of urban spectatorship, Judith Walkowitz describes Mayhew as one “who tried to read the ‘illegible’ city, transforming what appeared to be a chaotic, haphazard environment into a social text that was integrated, knowable, and ordered. [His] travel narratives incorporated a mixture of fact and fancy: a mélange of moralized and religious sentiment, imperialist rhetoric, dramatized characterization, graphic descriptions of poverty, and statistics culled from Parliamentary Blue Books” (18). This depiction of the world of the poor appealed to Mayhew’s bourgeois readers because it helped to widen the perceived gulf between classes, ideologically distancing readers from life in the streets while simultaneously allowing them to experience this life vicariously in narrative form.
The London labor series caught the attention of its audience because it exposed a previously unexplored and potentially dangerous nether world, but it kept their attention by making street life seem as innocuous as fiction. Mayhew’s work cast him in the role of the explorer, documenting the exotic allure of complete destitution and revealing, for his readers’ amusement and instruction, the voices, habits, and environment of their strange neighbors. His role as a journalist was decidedly two-sided: on one hand, “it was dangerous to allow the working classes to gather together in dark, little known areas...there was something tribal, primitive, and unchristian about it” (Mayhew 33); yet it was equally important to make the working class problem seem non-threatening, even humorous. Hence we have Mayhew exploring the penny gaff, and declaring that this working-class version of theater exhibits “the cruelest debauchery...filth and obscenity...almost perfect in its wickedness” (Mayhew 37), but we also have on record a laborer’s earnest description of his first taste of an upper-class delicacy: “it tasted like stewed tripe with a little glue” (Mayhew 90). Mayhew’s contrasts between the tastes of the rich and the poor act as a carrier for an important ideological message. The lower classes, the text assures us, cannot threaten our dominant status because the poor cannot possibly understand our superior mannerisms; their attempts at mimicry are easily exposed as counterfeit.

In a report on the “Literature of the Costermongers,” Mayhew demonstrated, using the words of the costers themselves, that even the more literate members of the working class were not likely to encroach on the upper classes:
Another time I read part of one of Lloyd’s numbers to them—but they like something spicier. One article—here it is—finishes in this way: ‘The social habits and costumes of the Magyar noblesse have almost all the characteristics of the corresponding classes in Ireland…’ “I can’t tumble to that barrikin,” said a clever young fellow: “it’s a jaw breaker.” “Noblesse,” said a man that’s considered a clever fellow, from having once learned his letters… “Noblesse! Blessed if I know what he’s up to!”

Here was a regular laugh. (Mayhew 27)

Mayhew’s use of conversation in representing this lower class group evolves from an account of their interests and interactions into a power relationship. The conversation that takes place among Mayhew’s subjects demonstrates that their knowledge is controlled by the higher classes. Implicitly, without an interpreter like Mayhew to introduce and explain new words and concepts, working class literacy poses no great threat to the upper classes and their “noblesse.”

Mayhew was also fond of contrasting the lower orders with the upper classes by using a popular metaphor, namely that London is comprised of two nations, the rich and the poor. As Mayhew described it in the preface, his task was “supplying information concerning a large body of persons, of whom the public had less knowledge than of the most distant tribes on earth” (Mayhew iii). By separating the workers as one unit (itself divisible into a seeming infinity of sub-units), Mayhew creates a manageable system through which their otherness and its accompanying threat can be contained. The East End of London, where so many of the workers reside, is textually set apart by clear
boundaries so that the lower classes cannot figuratively immigrate into another social
class. Viewed as inhabitants of a separate nation, the London poor became a group that
the upper and middle classes could explore, or even colonize. And like Britain’s real
colonies, this new nation was uncharted and exotic to the outside observer:

    Human life so wonderful, so awful, so piteous and pathetic, so exciting
and terrible, that readers of romances own they never read anything like it;
and that the grief, struggles, strange adventures depicted here exceed
anything that any of us could imagine. Of such wondrous and
complicated misery as this you confess you had no idea? No. How
should you?—You and I—We are of the upper classes; we have hitherto
had no community with the poor. (Punch Vol. 60: 9 March, 1850)

The reader’s task is to civilize the savage slums, but the audience is not rebuked for
having done nothing in that direction sooner, or for supporting political and economic
policies that may have contributed to their problems.

    Mayhew’s ability to manipulate content kept him from offending his readers, but
equally valuable was his ability to manipulate language and context. His rendering of the
Cockney dialect kept his accounts lively, and appealed to his readers’ sense of humor.
The workers’ unvarnished language played a dual role; Mayhew’s replication of street
dialect made his interviews seem reliable as social science, but he also quoted his
subjects in order to achieve the opposite effect—that of social satire. Yet when the
reading public is introduced to a worker whose circumstances make her worthy of
sympathy, Mayhew drops the comic dialect. Hence the forlorn flower girl is quoted “not
at all garrulously” as saying “I sell primroses, when they’re in, and wallflowers, and stocks, and roses of different sorts...and violets again at this time of year, for we get them both in spring and summer. They are forced in hot houses for winter sale, I may remark” (Mayhew 63). In contrast, when transcribing an interview with a less deserving costermonger—one who dares compare himself to the upper ranks—Mayhew replicates comic Cockney speech patterns: “We are the haristocracy of the streets...we live like you, yourself, sir, by the hexercise of our interllects” (Mayhew 101). By varying his stylistic approach, Mayhew was able to avoid the common trap of didacticism, letting his working class subjects, by their accents, suggest the appropriate moral.

This is not to say that Mayhew introduced sympathetic characters like the flower girl simply as a contrast to the immorality of her fellow workers. Many of Mayhew’s descriptions demonstrate his deep compassion for what he designated as deserving members of the working class. Like the industrial reform novelists, Mayhew was drawn to the problems of the lower classes because he hoped to resolve them, and because he believed that social reform—on some level—was possible. Unlike philanthropists or politicians, however, Mayhew did not devote his greatest energy to financial or political solutions. Instead he advocated an informational resolution. Mayhew believed, as did many Victorians, that dreadful living conditions could be statistically quantified, and that once enough information was collected, social theorists could understand the “laws” which govern society. As the editorial in the Morning Chronicle that announced the “Labour and the Poor” series declares,
In the course of our earnest endeavors to solve or settle the great social problems of our day, and to ascertain whether any (and what) legislative measures can be adopted to improve the moral and physical conditions of the poor, we have been invariably stopped, embarrassed, thrown out, or compelled to pause and turn aside, by the want of trustworthy information as to the facts. (18 October, 1849)

Knowing these facts would, at least in theory, enable individuals and governments to make informed decisions and to take appropriate action. The problem, perhaps more easily seen today than it was by Mayhew’s contemporaries, is that mid-Victorian statisticians did not only seek information about material progress, which could usually be quantified, but they also, according to one critic, “tried to solve problems which could never be reduced to numbers, such as the numerical relations of demography to social class, to economic structure, or to moral behavior” (Humpherys 34). As Asa Briggs has noted, many of these early statisticians “were anxious not merely to present information but to propound a message, sometimes a gospel” (84). Mayhew’s work, while considered objective by Victorian standards, was often blind to this pitfall.

Before becoming a journalist, Mayhew dreamed of being a research chemist. Though he never fulfilled that dream, it affected his outlook as a social historian. London Labour and the London Poor begins by noting that “the street people may all be arranged under six different genera” and retains its scientific leaning through the text. In a letter to the Chronicle editors in February 1850, Mayhew writes:
I made up my mind to deal with human nature as a natural philosopher or a chemist deals with any material object; and, as a man who had devoted some little of his time to physical and metaphysical science, I must say I did most heartily rejoice that it should have been left to me to apply the laws of the inductive philosophy...to the abstract questions of political economy. ("Report of the Speech" 6)

Mayhew believed, for instance, that he could measure filth in the London streets by multiplying the number of horses by the number of streets. He applied this mode of reasoning to his studies of people as well, calculating the number of sellers in a particular market or the difference between their earnings and the cost of living. Much of his numerical data was useful; he exposed fraudulent practices in London’s tailoring sweatshops, changing the way many Londoners thought about ready-made clothing, and he used trade reports to show how underpaid dock-workers’ yearly earnings were comprised of other employment during the off-season. The combination of numerical data with commentary made Mayhew’s text seem objective. Numbers never lie; to his readers it followed that Mayhew’s view of the working classes was completely credible—in fact, Douglass Jerrold said in 1850 that Mayhew’s reports had never been surpassed “for comprehensiveness and minuteness of detail” (quoted in “Henry Mayhew” 4). Nevertheless, Mayhew’s opinions obviously demonstrate an unconscious bias, as do the reform actions that his articles generated. For example, when Mayhew exposed degrading conditions in the competitive garment industry, and added that, statistically, there were twice as many women as men residing in London, enterprising philanthropists
responded with an emigration scheme by which excess needle-women could be bundled off to Australian colonies where they would have a better chance of finding a job and a husband. This solution conveniently dealt with the problem of over-population, but failed to take into account the plans or wishes of the women involved, many of whom had no desire to emigrate to the colonies. Broad generalizations based on raw figures are not uncommon in Mayhew’s writings; they are yet another way in which he was able, even unconsciously, to maintain the distinction between the rich and the poor, containing the latter within what was determined as their proper sphere and defusing through such narrative strategies the “problem” they posed to society as a whole.

If Mayhew’s writings propounded as gospel the discrete separation of classes in London, the Great Exhibition of 1851 extended this revelation to the working classes throughout England. Ironically, however, the Exhibition achieved this separation in part by emphasizing equalities rather than boundaries, and thereby manufacturing the sort of consent on the part of the dominated to the power of the ruling classes that Gramsci would draw attention to in his analysis of hegemony—a consent that was, to be sure, ultimately grounded in the sort of coercive thinking to which Nietzsche would give open expression as the century drew to a close: “Declaration of war on the masses by higher men is needed... everywhere the mediocre are combining in order to make themselves master” (Will to Power 77, 382).
CHAPTER II

A “Re-Animated Future”: Commodifying the Threat of the Working Classes

Industrial progress and scientific achievements had proven that under the banner of progress all things were possible. Progress now indicated that it was both possible and expedient to re-negotiate spaces for all classes within a new and compelling national identity. The Great Exhibition was designed to accomplish this feat, concurrently emphasizing the importance of peace between all nations and, purportedly, between British citizens of all social ranks.

With this in mind, mid-Victorians launched a powerful campaign to begin their glorious and “re-animated future” (Robert Kerr, quoted in The Great Exhibition 35). The Great Exhibition of 1851 would be their cornerstone. The Exhibition was a collective enterprise, designed to belong to everyone. Its slogan, “The Earth is the Lord’s and all that therein is,” encompassed the collective products of over forty-three nations from Europe, America, Africa, and the Far East. The Great Exhibition had at its root a single conception: “that all human life and cultural endeavor could be fully represented by exhibiting manufactured articles” (Richards 17); it brought together “a host of rare and exclusive things and promised…that each and every one of them would one day be available to anyone and everyone” (Richards 32). The Crystal Palace was supposed to be a place where everyone in England could rub shoulders democratically, yet like its committee of upper-class founders which included Prince Albert, several members of
Parliament, Sir Joseph Paxton and Robert Kerr (the Palace’s celebrated architects), the spectacle was anything but democratic. Virtually all that went into the creation of the Great Exhibition subtly emphasized the boundaries between the working class and the classes above them.

Punch had tremendous fun with the affair, satirically pondering the difficulty of integrating the lower classes during the Exhibition. The magazine’s portrayals of upper and lower classes meeting or the description of the Queen surrounded by “Horrible Conspirators and Assassins” from the working classes rankled because they touched on what were, to the founders of the Exhibition, realistic concerns (Punch May, 1851). However much they were encouraged to attend the spectacle, the crush of working classes seemed out of place in the Crystal Palace. Editorials predicted that their behavior would be uncontrollable. It seemed unlikely that the lower classes could exhibit proper decorum; there was even greater doubt that they could appreciate the value of the artistry on display. The working classes confirmed expectations, appearing (at least through the representational gauze of hegemonic discourse) sadly out of place.

The Exhibition committee was unable to achieve a sense of national pride in industry among the working classes, perhaps because these workers had carried on their backs the Industrial Revolution which had produced the Great Exhibition. Henry Mayhew reported during his London Chronicle forays that he had found among the proletariat no trace of euphoria over the event their hands had helped forge; their plight remained the same regardless, and as one worker was summarily quoted, “the Great Exhibition can’t be any difference to me” (Mayhew 72). The Exhibition presented an
alarmingly middle-class notion of equality; everything about it pointed to gains extended during the rise of capitalism: “[It displayed] abundance achieved by middle-class means, sanctioned by middle-class representatives, and aimed at a middle-class end: the continuing extension and ultimate consolidation of the capitalist system in England” (Richards 5). The middle-class vision of the industrial revolution was viewed quite differently by the workers, who felt they had not shared in the profits made by their economic and social superiors. To them, progress in the shape of free trade was decidedly one-sided.

For the working classes, the introduction of commodity culture as represented by the Great Exhibition was designed to be deceptively inviting. Enclosed in a glass hall one-third of a mile long, one hundred yards wide, three stories high, and covering over fourteen acres, the Exhibition resembled an elite shopping mall, where anyone could peek through the windows but few could afford to enter. But there was a major difference between the Exhibition display and the windows of Selfridges—the exhibition committee made sure that nothing had a price tag, and sales were forbidden for the duration of the show. W.B. Adams was one of many who applauded this decision; in the Westminster Review he declared: “The object of the Exhibition is the display of articles intended to be exhibited, and not the transaction of commercial business; and the Commissioners can therefore give no facilities for the sale of the articles, or the transaction of business connected therewith” (Adams 97). A price tag would have been detrimental to the underlying message presented by the Exhibition—that objects on display could be had by anyone. In reality, many of the articles were truly priceless, often one-of-a-kind, and
much too valuable for all but the wealthiest consumer. The founders implied that the objects themselves would serve as a pleasant diversion, a distraction that would ultimately divert the viewers' minds away from the manufacturing process; the emphasis was redirected from producers' experience to the consumers' experience. Walter Benjamin would explore the effect this process had on the workers who were an integral part of the production line in his study of the 1857 Paris Exhibition: “World exhibitions glorify the exchange value of commodity. They create a framework in which its use value becomes secondary. They are a school in which the masses, forcibly excluded from consumption, are imbued with the exchange value of commodities to the point of identifying with it” (Benjamin 18). The Great Exhibition of 1851 was setting up the ideological structure that would define the laborer as a human capital and yet at the same time mask this definition from him through the insidious and seductive pleasures of commodity fetishism.

One inevitable result of the absent price tags was an emphasis on speculative value: almost every account of the Exhibition contained a passage speculating on costs and sale values. The authors of these accounts seemed to ignore the fact that working class visitors had no practical use for most of the objects on display, and very little interest in the more luxurious items. To the surprise of the Exhibition planning committee, the working classes generally flocked around exhibits related to labor, such as they were. Railway engineers took great interest in the locomotive displays; workers from Sheffield first headed to the cutlery exhibit that their labor produced—but paid little attention to the case containing the “sportsman’s knife,” an eighty-blade pocketknife with
gold inlaying. As Thomas Richards points out, the Exhibition rarely confronted the reality of class difference:

It advanced a Utopian vision. This vision was not so much of a classless society as of a society in which everyone was equal in the sight of things. Commodities provided a common ground for everyone. It did not matter whether or not people had them, because now the [false] assumption was that they all wanted exactly the same articles. (Richards 61)

Middle-class visitors probably had no difficulty buying into this notion. Once a product enters the marketplace, it becomes an icon, leaving its origins of manufacture behind. But the working class was surely aware of the fallacies of equality on this scale. The Utopian vision was never meant to include everyone—it existed to emphasize the impassable lines of demarcation between haves and have nots—at the same time as it appeared to be erasing those lines. The very nature of capitalism and free trade precluded equality.

Even the Exhibition catalogues were a testimony to the appearance of capitalism’s rising success. The booklets were printed in various versions, the largest being four volumes long and much too cumbersome to carry through the exhibits, though it was in itself a remarkable example of glorified excess, and the mid-century sense that economic depression was a thing of the past. The Crystal Palace was also a testimony to the perpetual springtime of consumer and seller relations; with its regulated temperature, indoor groves and ever-flowing fountains, one got the sense that saving pennies was pointless because there would never be another economic rainy day.
All that was left was to encourage the lower classes to take part in the festivities, and for that the planning committee had ingeniously created Shilling Days, during which the working classes could witness the spectacle at one-fifth the usual price. (Paxton’s deviant suggestion that no admission be charged at any time, which he had printed in the London Times, was rejected outright. It would have, in effect, made every day as raucous as Shilling Days were expected to be, an outcome the committee was eager to avoid.) What the committee hoped to achieve through Shilling Days is open to critical speculation. Undoubtedly, they saw the move as a humanitarian gesture, although Thomas Richards now suggests that the effort sucked working-class consumers into the vortex of a master-slave dialectic (7). Certainly it channeled working-class visitors into pre-selected touring dates, and this restriction on the conditions under which the Exhibition was to be “represented” reveals an underlying desire to stratify rather than unify social classes.

In spite of fears that the introduction of working class rowdiness would shake the iron and “crystal” structure to pieces, precautionary efforts like the marked increase in security on the first Shilling Day proved unnecessary. The Illustrated London News describes that day as unremarkable, with an “utter absence of anything like rude crushing, or confused and disorderly thronging round particular points of interest” (501). The Koh-I-Noor diamond that was supposed to be placed at such great risk on Shilling Day was generally treated like any other lump of coal by the proletariats—hard to come by, but unspectacular. The Illustrated London News reported that “the gay, glancing, fluttering tide of bonnets and ribbons, and silks, and satins, and velvets, had vanished, and the
blank was filled up by no adequate substitute of meaner, or coarser, or more commonplace material” (quoted in Richards 501). Colonel Lloyd had generously come forward to propose himself as a candidate for the “self-appointed post of Commissioner’s Representative for the Protection of the Lower Classes,” but fortunately his efforts were not required as protector of either the lower or upper classes (French 118).

Astonishingly, perhaps to the satisfaction of the higher classes, the attempt to produce national equality succeeded in proving that while the lower classes might not dress in the same degree of finery, they could behave as properly as the middle classes. Their good behavior was highlighted, perhaps in part because it hinted that the proletariat could be transformed, at least temporarily, into a source of national pride that could be juxtaposed against the savagery of non-European Others. Of course, the archetypal “hard-working Englishman” retained his subordinated position among the higher classes of British citizens, but was allowed to exist externally as a national hero for the purposes of imperial rhetoric. To keep their working classes submissive as social Others from a strictly internal British perspective, the dominant classes simultaneously issued reminders that this change in status was only temporary, and could easily be done away with.

Mr. Doldrums, a satiric creation by Punch, declared that the novelty of Shilling Day ceased to be novel as soon as the crowds arrived. Punch further predicted that any intellectual or social benefits derived from the effort would be short-lived:

I visited the Crystal Palace,

And there I saw a crowd as great

As ever gathered round a gallows;
Thought I,—This multitude immense
Seems full of happiness and glee;
Yes, but in two or three years hence
I wonder where or how they'll be!

(Punch Vol. 60: June 1851, lines 1-7)

Over the course of the summer, the novelty wore off for the upper classes, too. In spite of many petitions not to move the Crystal Palace from its post in Hyde Park, the Exhibition had seen its heyday. Sir Joseph Paxton formed a private company to do the job, and the building was re-erected at Sydenham Hill. There it remained as an entertainment center until 1936, often hosting band concerts and fireworks.

Over the final decades of its existence, the Crystal Palace at Sydenham Hill witnessed the fall of the United Kingdom’s international supremacy and came to symbolize the transience of the mid-Victorian utopian vision (and this, as we will see, is one of its primary functions in Gissing’s Nether World.) Not even the structure of the Crystal Palace was impervious to change, as Christopher Hobhouse realized during his visit at the turn of the century:

You entered by a dingy passage beneath the organ. On most occasions, the place was as empty as a tomb...masses of aspidistra had been introduced to give a Latin effect, and seemed positively welcome by the mere fact of being, however furtively, alive...Workmen were hammering away at nothing in particular, for hammer they ever so loudly, the unreality, the impossibility of the place was too great to be
resolved...There were refreshment rooms so long deserted as to impose upon the hungry customer the sensation that he was committing an act of awful impiety, as though he were eating food dedicated to the use of a dead Pharaoh, somewhere in King Solomon’s mines. At the end of the south nave, you would be cheered by the sight of the Crystal Fountain, looking very small in a sad pool of goldfish. (Hobhouse 162-3)

The “dingy” edifice at Sydenham was a long way from the image of enterprise and utopia that the Crystal Palace had presented to the public in 1851. The social possibilities that its mid-Victorian architects had attempted to represent by means of the Exhibition had given way to a sense of the place’s “impossibility”—one that was “too great to be resolved.”

The calculated utopian gesture of opening the doors of the Crystal Palace to the masses clearly seemed, by century’s end, to have failed in its hegemonic mission. Punch’s prophecies when the Exhibition first opened had come true:

The Arts encouraged thus, indeed,
To many must afford employ;
But then to luxury they lead
And that the millions can’t enjoy.
The people’s tastes they may refine;
But, on the other hand, ‘tis clear,
They’ll cause the masses to repine,
And wish to live above their sphere.
Henry Mayhew had suggested in a satiric vein that the Great Exhibition would introduce the lower classes to a new sense of respect for the works their hands had made, and that their elevated sensibilities would notice “for the first time how ploughing might be considered an elevated pursuit, or mining a geological art” (Mayhew and Cruikshank 259). “The Great Exhibition,” declares the protagonist of Mayhew’s 1870s tale of a working-class family’s trip to view the Crystal Palace, “is a higher boon to labour than a general advance of wages. An increase of pay might have brought the working man a larger share of creature comforts, but high feeding, unfortunately, is not high thinking or high feeling” (Mayhew and Cruikshank 132). When the nation opened the doors of the Crystal Palace to exhibit the triumphs of English industrial ingenuity and, along with displays from other nations, to underscore the success of its free trade policies, it inadvertently exposed another side of progress. Textiles, ironworks, and other products of subordinated factory labor could be removed from the scene of exploitation and placed in protective glass cabinets, but labor and commodity remain inextricably linked. Thus the working classes were both included in the common national identity and simultaneously marginalized.
CHAPTER III

The Legacy of Progress: Reconciling the Threat of the Masses

As the Great Exhibition of 1851 demonstrates, flaunting national strengths necessitates the containment of national weaknesses. Urban industrial expansion, educational reforms, and increasing social mobility were the results of unprecedented population growth, but so too were worker exploitation, misacculturation by inadequately educated masses, and oppressive poverty. The plight and the magnitude of the poor threatened to further erode tradition and the potential effects these masses would have on national culture became a growing concern. Many members of the dominant class, particularly intellectuals like George Gissing, developed an ideological view of the masses and their effects on national culture that was decidedly negative. Gissing’s emphasis was on the irredeemable vulgarity of the masses and he explored this view on personal and literary levels. As Gissing’s works would show (along with his own tragic life experiences, which he explores in his fiction), during the latter half of the century, the many problems that accompanied social mobility and population growth had become increasingly difficult to contain using the methods propounded in the middle decades of the century. Literature and its conventions offered temporary narrative solutions at best, and the visions of society offered by reformers such as Henry Mayhew or the founders of the Great Exhibition also had their limitations.
George Gissing’s series of working class novels, particularly The Nether World (1889), illustrate this breakdown of mid-Victorian social and literary convention. The fallacies of early social reform movements are exposed as he attempts to work through the legacies of Victorian progress, particularly the fluidity of the social hierarchy. As a lower-middle class classicist whose own social position was in flux, Gissing was well-suited to explore the disjunction of class identities. As this commendation from Henry James puts it, “the English novel has as a general thing kept so desperately, so nervously clear of [the working classes], whisking back compromised skirts and bumping frantically against obstacles of retreat, that we welcome as the boldest of adventurers a painter who has faced it and survived” (London Notes, 1897). In Gissing’s 1880s novels, the disappearance of a carefully preserved space between classes corresponds with the growing appeal of objectivity in late-century naturalism, and with the realist’s rejection of late-century escapist literature. It was almost as if Gissing’s fear of the impossibility of separating himself from the masses in actual life underscored the impossibility of escape from mass vulgarity in literary worlds; for Gissing, the dream of cultural harmony between classes that Matthew Arnold had proposed in the 1860s in Culture and Anarchy, was now hopelessly unattainable. Gissing’s early reformist visions, which enabled him to experiment with the plight of the working classes, drew to a close as he entered the second phase of his career. In a move that prefigures a similar ideology in modernist thought (as exemplified, say, by Ortega y Gassett), Gissing exposed what he saw as the vulgarity of mass culture, a position that he felt mid-century reformers had failed to
anticipate; by the late 1880s that vulgarity could now only be resolved (if at all) through recourse to unrelentingly negative—even tragic—strategies of representation.

Progress increased opportunities for social mobility, but extending opportunities to the lower classes inevitably encouraged the usurpation of the traditional hierarchy. As the industrial revolution gained momentum, the established order began to break down; social position was increasingly determined “not by birth but by bank account and occupation” (Alden 5). The roots of this change can be traced as far back as the 1832 Reform Bill, which had extended the franchise to most of the middle classes, inaugurating structural and political changes where land-owning gentry were thrown together with advocates of industrial expansion and commercial enterprise. As a result, an elite upper-middle class formed; new professions such as medicine and law gained in esteem, and the universities were encouraged to train and accommodate this rising class. Curricula which focused on industrial-based sciences, economics, and civil service were developed; additional universities were founded in the industrial cities, and Parliament established a commission to review endowments and entrance requirements at the public schools and in some primary and secondary schools. Gissing was among the many pupils who profited from these changes. However, he was also penalized by some of the difficulties that inevitably arose in a society where social position was constantly in flux. Determined, even in his earliest years, to rise through the educational system, Gissing also felt a connection with the working-class society he was leaving behind. This sentiment was shared by other intellectuals of the day, as the historian Patricia Alden explains, “To move up was in some sense to betray the past, the community of one’s
roots, the innocent self. Moreover, to move up was to be tainted, compromised by association with grasping *nouveaux riches*, with *arrivistes*, and with a social transformation [one] deplored” (Alden 4).

Education played a key role in the social rise of many Victorians. However, as Alden notes, egalitarian improvements and educational reforms in many ways widened the gap between the upper classes and their social inferiors: democratic improvements in the education system often acted paradoxically as a “brake on upward mobility” (Alden 6). Educational reforms actually maintained class distinctions by establishing a separate, closed system; differentiated curricula for different ranks kept the “usurping” masses separated from the elite. In addition, scholarships that had been traditionally reserved for the impoverished scholar became more competitive as the sons of the new middle class applied for them, and these better prepared (and typically wealthier) entrants generally won them. In the same way, public schools and even grammar schools, which had formerly had provisions for educating indigent young locals who showed some promise, now began to fill those spaces with members of the rising middle class. Through the medium of educational reform, class distinctions were actually encouraged; even the Board schools, established by the Universal Education Act of 1870, disciplined pupils to accept their secondary place in society rather than encouraging cultural equality.

George Gissing was a product of such educational reforms. On a scholarship, he attended one of the provincial industrial universities founded during the 1850s to accommodate the influx of new students, and he experienced first-hand the social divide associated with upward mobility. He became highly educated, studying Greek and Latin,
but in doing so he broke ties with his merchant-class roots—he became, by virtue of his education, an intellectual snob entrapped by his working class status.

As a result of this personal quandary, one of the greatest questions Gissing tackles in his lifetime of writing is the question of whether the masses could ever be fully educated, and if they could, if the process would alienate them as it had him: "the gulf between the really refined and the masses grows and will grow constantly wider" (quoted in Young 151). In Gissing’s view, improvements in the British education system failed miserably in their efforts to reduce the gap between intellectuals and the masses: ironically, "the pretense of education afforded by our School-board system" has produced a degenerative democracy such that society is being "leveled down" rather than improved (quoted in Young 151). In practice, however, Gissing’s own educational experiences refute many of his arguments against the British system of education.

George Gissing was born into an age that was deeply concerned with class mobility. He grew up in Wakefield, an industrial mill town in Yorkshire. His father, Thomas Waller Gissing, was a self-educated pharmacist-shopkeeper with a passion for literature and a keen interest in social rank. Though Gissing’s father died when George was still young, one of the things he passed on to his son was a love of learning. In young Gissing’s mind, his father’s greatest achievement was the publication of five scholarly works—"three books of verse and two books on botany" (Selig 1). Being a published writer promised an entrance into the upper-middle classes via the intelligentsia, an elite social group which Thomas Gissing longed to join, and which, even to twelve-
year-old Gissing, seemed inaccessible by any means other than birth-rank, wealth, or education.

The Gissings would never have money or social ranking. Gissing’s mother was orphaned as an infant when both of her parents died of cholera. Her father had been a clerk for a Droitwich solicitor; presumably there was no great inheritance to bring to her marriage with Thomas Gissing. Gissing’s paternal grandfather, Robert Foulsham Gissing, had been a mere shoemaker. Not long after his father’s death, George Gissing began to openly shun his paternal relatives out of disdain for their proletarian background. He felt his working-class relations incapable of appreciating intellectual arts (Collected Letters 46). Nevertheless, Gissing clung to his childhood image of his father as a self-made man of letters. In the early years, his father’s legacy of encouragement and scholarship was young Gissing’s strongest lifeline.

As Gissing grew older, he came into his second paternal inheritance: his father’s interest in social position. As the oldest in a family of three brothers and two sisters, Gissing retained the most of his father’s cultural influence. He recognized that his family’s position in society was socially insubstantial, and he noted that his father made little effort to connect with the Wakefield neighbors in their social sphere. George Gissing discerned, even in his teens, a deep sense of his family’s lower-middle class social status:

My childhood was somewhat solitary,—apart from the society of schoolfellows. I think the Hicks were the only family with whom we habitually associated...we never came into contact with the families of
other shopkeepers; so that we hung between two grades of society,--as I have done ever since in practical life. (Commonplace Book 23-4)

This sense of being stranded between classes played a key role in Gissing’s development, both socially and intellectually. It was a source of disillusionment that would plague Gissing throughout life, and at the same time it motivated him to overcome what he perceived as an inherited social handicap. Ironically, Gissing’s life experiences serve as the best rebuttal to his view that the masses could never be integrated among their intellectual betters.

Gissing’s attitude towards education and the masses was complicated by his personal history. He was a solitary child with bookish tastes: Dickens was at the height of his fame during Gissing’s boyhood, and the family library also contained a large volume of Hogarth’s etchings which Gissing imitated in his own childhood drawings. As Jacob Korg notes in his biography of Gissing (1963), “qualities like Hogarth’s irony and exactness of detail are characteristic of Gissing’s fiction, and his curiosity about the poor and their lives may have been stirred for the first time by Hogarth’s art” (9). But alongside Hogarth, Dickens and the usual favorites of the time, Gissing most avidly read the Classics. Nothing seems to have aroused his imagination as strongly as his study of Greek and Latin authors, which he read compulsively (Korg 10). This unusual interest in Classical scholarship served him well. When he sat for the Oxford Local Examination, he received the highest marks in the county, and his strong performance in Greek and Latin won him admittance and free tuition at Owens College in Manchester.
Gissing continued to distinguish himself academically, winning prizes at Owens College which would have allowed him to matriculate at the University of London. Unfortunately, Gissing was suddenly and tragically expelled from Owens College when he was caught stealing from fellow students. This embarrassing dismissal prefigures a series of tragedies which plagued Gissing throughout life. Gissing would replay the choices he made leading up to and following this catastrophe in much of his later fiction.

The cause of his dismissal was Gissing’s professed love for a seventeen-year-old prostitute named Marianne Helen Harrison (‘Nell’), whom he wanted to save from the streets. He apparently regarded Nell as a victim of society, and he undertook the impossible mission of redeeming her (Korg 12). He gave her money and a sewing machine with which to make an honest living, and paid her rent. But he soon found that he could not afford her keep, and took to stealing from the cloakroom at Owens College to cover his expenses.

Nell was addicted to alcohol, and, by some accounts, to prostitution. According to Jacob Korg, “Tyrannized by the fear that Helen [Nell] would revert to her old habits, Gissing gave her whatever he had. When that was gone he turned, in despair, to rifling the common room at Owens” (13). Gissing’s involvement with Nell was a bitter experience that did not end with dismissal from college. He spent a month in prison as part of a suspended sentence and then moved to America for a year and a half of self-imposed exile. He then returned to England and married Nell. They lived near the southern end of Tottenham Court Road “in squalid lodging houses in the poorest London districts, amid vermin, dirt, drunkenness, and violence” (Carey 101). It was soon
apparent that his efforts to redeem Nell were pointless. She continued to drink, had to be sent for a rest cure that failed, and required a paid companion to keep her out of trouble while Gissing worked (Selig 9). Finally, Gissing admitted the hopelessness of ever reforming his wife. They separated, and he admirably continued to support her financially.

In George Gissing Robert Selig speculates that “in addition to his jumble of emotions—physical attachment, love, pity, and guilt—[Gissing] undoubtedly felt that, if he gave up on Nell, he would reduce his own disgrace at Owens to a mere senseless act, a sacrifice for nothing and no one” (9). This pivotal experience as a would-be redeemer for a woman who “stubbornly refused redemption” (Selig 8) crushed any Romantic idealism Gissing may have brought into the relationship.

Something constructive did emerge from his troubled years with Nell, however. Her problems became an integral part of Gissing’s first novel, Workers in the Dawn (1880). In it, Gissing depicts the mismarriage of Arthur Golding to an alcoholic prostitute strongly resembling Nell. And though his first novel is not generally read as an autobiographical depiction of its author, in many ways, the protagonist’s actions play out very real concerns that Gissing had about his social status, his education, and his love life. Gissing’s personal and literary development had led him gradually away from romantic influences and the social improvement novel of the High Victorian era, towards a growing conviction that literature ought to represent the “real,” no matter how banal or distasteful it proved to be. This version of literary realism, the introduction of which is typically associated with Flaubert’s Madame Bovary (1857), would gradually develop
into the scientific objectivity of naturalism, with its corresponding emphasis on fate, and
the indifference of nature to human plights. Certainly, in his own life, Gissing was
beginning to feel that human experience had become unnatural in the sense that it had
lost touch with a sense of natural harmony, but fatalism and determinism were points he
had not yet reached; at least at this early stage in his career, Gissing still hoped he could
find a solution to the working class problem. In this case, Gissing’s first novel, which
strongly prefigures the naturalist style, proposes two solutions to the class crisis: one is
revolution, which the author rejects as leading to incendiary madness; the other is
education, which Gissing ironically endorses, though it plays out un成功fully. The
protagonist, Golding, falls madly in love with a noble and beautiful heroine who
eventually wears herself out giving free lessons in adult literacy, and dies of inherited
consumption. Despondent, Golding carelessly marries a less virtuous and lower class
substitute, and eventually, in spite of his good intentions, succumbs to misfortune and
despair. In The Nether World (1889), Gissing would again draw on his sad marital
experiences to characterize the tumultuous and destructive relationship between
Pennyloaf and Bob Hewett. In bold contrast to the mid-century literary conventions that
had defined marriage as a communion of peace and harmony, Gissing found
incompatibility and anguish. Conventions that once promised an escape from the
century’s woes are overthrown by the 1880s, and supplanted by an anti-utopian and
melancholy substitute. By 1889, Gissing visualized no escape, and his response to the
1880s social environment—pessimistic from the outset—became, to a pathetic extent,
passive and fatalist.
Gissing’s relationship with Nell was an abysmal experience, but there is some evidence that he subjected himself to a degrading life among the working poor intentionally. He earned enough money as a private tutor to raise himself above the poverty level, and could have further supplemented his income by writing for the London newspapers, but refused to “waste time in such ‘trash’” (so a pupil records). He preferred the role of social outcast, regarding himself, by reason of his art, as an ‘aristocrat’ (Carey 101). He chose to distance himself from the squalor around him by keeping a solitary existence, rather than by moving to a better part of the city.

Gissing was apparently indifferent to the discomfort of the various lodgings in which he and Nell lived. The degradation of those around him, however, he noted keenly. Years later, Gissing wrote that working-class London was the site of his most significant, if informal, education: “My early years in London were a time of extraordinary mental growth, of great spiritual activity. There it was that I acquired my intense perception of the characteristics of poor life in London” (quoted in Korb 16).

Gissing gave expression to this “perception” in his novels, writing in an attempt to come to terms with the social realities of an age that he felt was marked by disjointedness and chaos. His own lifestyle and sense of uprootedness made him “sympathetic, as artist if not as human being, to the dislocations and fractures of contemporary existence” (Collie 2). Although he did not always apply this view of the world to himself, Gissing felt that the environment was a key determinant of the shape of one’s life. He wrote about the working classes to chronicle their miseries, but his experiences with Nell taught him a painful lesson—neither love nor pity can redeem a woman in an environment that
surrounds one on all sides with ruin and desolation. The masses who surrounded Gissing in working-class London seemed to him to be heading steadily towards destruction, a belief played out by working class characters in his novels.

By the time Gissing had parted ways with Nell, he had cultivated some valuable literary friendships. The publication of *Workers in the Dawn* helped Gissing make connections with patrons such as Frederic Harrison, a leader of the English Positivist Society; and John Morley, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Fortnightly Review*. At this time Gissing also developed friendships with the German exile, Eduard Bertz, who helped promote Gissing's works in Germany, and with freelance writer Morley Robert, a former classmate from Owens College (Selig 9). Gissing began to live a double life, going from the vulgar lodging house where he lived to weekend parties with the Harrisons and other wealthy intelligentsia. This tendency to waver between a higher social sphere and a more sordid one was not unheard of among late-Victorian intellectuals (for example, it provides the narrative backbone of Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), which deals with the consequences of leading a double life). The movement was partly voyeuristic, as Judith Walkowitz has explained in *City of Dreadful Delight* (1992), and partly a continuing search for an outlet for desires that could not be satisfied in his own social circumstances. Gissing's correspondence with his sister indicates that among his friends, he felt like an impostor; "he yearned to become so famous a writer that no one could presume to question his background" (Selig 10). He existed in social limbo, comfortable nowhere. His dedication to his art left him lonely and frustrated; the women he met in society would not have him. In a letter to Eduard
Bertz, he spoke of a resolve to find “some decent” working girl for a companion (Collected Letters 4:232).

Edith Underwood was his choice. She did not frequent the red-light districts, she drank tea rather than gin, and according to Robert Selig, Gissing’s biographer, she had “conventional, if unrefined, family ties” (Selig 13). She did, however, have what Gissing described as a coarse London accent. He decided to hide her away until he could teach her proper speech patterns and cultivate her intellectually. As a classicist, Gissing would have enjoyed the parallel to Ovid’s Pygmalion and Galatea; but Edith Underwood was not an ivory statue of perfect womanhood, and there was no Venus to bring Gissing’s ideal mate to life. Nor was Gissing’s new wife able to make the desired transformation, as Eliza Doolittle later would in Shaw’s Pygmalion (1913). That Gissing was under the delusion that such a broad transformation could be possible or even desirable illustrates the effect that social mobility had on the Victorian mindset. Gissing’s efforts to educate Edith failed miserably; by his accounts she either would not or could not transcend her “native” class. After less than six years of a strained marriage, Gissing had to admit his second marital failure: “I have no words for the misery I daily endure from her selfish and coarse nature” (Diary 350). In his mind, Edith was no better than Nell had been, and he loved her less.

While the biographers note some inconsistencies in Gissing’s account of his second marriage (Carey 102, Selig 16), his relationship with Edith Underwood influenced Gissing’s view of the working classes. With Edith, as with Nell, Gissing was always somewhat estranged and superior. He maintained a distance between himself and his
working-class wives in much the same way that he kept himself separate from the lower classes he lived among (and in much the same way that he would maintain a distance between the omniscient narrators of his 1880s novels and their working-class protagonists). This distance bordered on contempt: observation of his second wife’s speech defects and failures of logic afforded him many opportunities for reflecting on “the stupidity of the vulgar at large” and “the ignorance of the multitude” (Carey 103, citing Gissing’s Commonplace Book). His personal relationships sustained his perception of a widening gulf between the masses and the intellectuals, in spite of the fact that his own education, and his dogged acquisition of culture would seem to suggest otherwise.

Perhaps the best explanation of Gissing’s early writings is in his own words: “Fiction puts into literary form hopes which are not likely to be realized” (quoted in Tindall, The Born Exile 12). Certainly there are moments in Workers in the Dawn (1880), The Unclassed (1884), Demos (1886), and Thyrza (1887) where Gissing looks for a solution to his own and the nation’s social problems, exploring the viability of reforms such as philanthropy, Positivism, and Socialism. But by 1889, after a decade of writing his way through four novels that began with the best of hopes for an answer to society’s woes, but always failed to bear fruit, Gissing’s The Nether World ultimately concludes that the great divide between classes cannot be bridged, in literature or otherwise.

If Henry Mayhew took a guidebook approach to East End squalor, George Gissing took a more psychological approach. Gissing saw the life of the urban poor as a
cyclical mental hell from which there was no escape. In 1880, Gissing wrote in a letter that he had dedicated his art to:

[Bringing] home to the people the ghastly condition (material, mental, and moral) of our poor classes, to show the hideous injustice of our whole system of society, to give light upon the plan of altering it, and above all, to preach enthusiasm for high ideals in this age of unmitigated egotism and ‘shop.’ (quoted in Gill, “Introduction,” The Nether World ix)

Eight years later, his tone had changed from “I shall never write a book which does not keep these ends in view” (Letter, 3 November 1880) to a more caustic view of “the accursed social order” (Diary, 1 March 1888). By the time he published The Nether World, Gissing had given up looking for a solution to society’s woes; the class transitions which had offered so many possibilities to the working class now represented a failed utopian order for which he could no longer envision solutions. Gissing had begun by writing social problem novels; like Mayhew, he had performed the precursory research in government blue books and statistical inquiries, and pondered the likely success of various reforms. Much of his research and resolutions had been played through in successive working class novels that showed the strong influence of the literature from the earlier stages of the century, particularly Charles Dickens’ works. (Gissing considered Dickens a literary role model, so much so that he published a critical study of Dickens’ works in 1898.) As Fredric Jameson notes in The Political Unconscious (1981), Gissing had inherited from Dickens and others a set of narrative conventions that created imaginary resolutions for the working-class problem (186). But for Gissing, “the early
Dickensian ‘solutions’ turn out to produce fresh problems and contradictions in their turn, for which a new and distinctive solution, that of Gissing’s mature narrative apparatus, must be invented” (Jameson 186). Gissing had learned from his own experiences with Nell that the redemption of a fallen woman is never as simple as a novel depicts it, nor does every woman have a heart of gold. In real life, class boundaries cannot be neatly bridged with a happy ending. He could not earnestly justify conventional solutions in his novels that were unattainable in the world he knew. Thus Gissing became a contributor to the emerging realist tradition, playing out dilemmas in his novels that successively failed to achieve resolution (although, of course, this tragic lack of resolution is, ultimately, itself yet another solution to the problem of the working classes, another strategy of containment). Just as educational reform and the nuptial union were unable to wipe out destitution in Workers in the Dawn, aestheticism, philanthropy, and imposed culture could not purify, placate or upgrade the working classes in The Unclassed, Demos, and Thyrza.

The Nether World presented a different approach: by 1889 the optimistic currents to be found in his earlier novels had ebbed, and his view of the urban poor takes a stance that is completely without hope. In the same vein, Fredric Jameson argues that The Nether World can be read as a testimony to the failure of conventional mid-century paradigms “that might resolve, manage, or repress the evident class anxieties aroused by the existence of an industrial working class and an urban lumpen-proletariat” (Jameson 186). This time around, aestheticism, philanthropy and culture backfire, creating more problems for Gissing’s characters than solutions.
As Stephen Gill points out in his introduction to a 1992 edition of The Nether World, “the novel projects a closed world from which there is no escape” (xiii). Though Gissing’s characters are constantly on the move, they remain centered in one small section of the East End. Even Clara Hewett, who attempts to climb to another level with the circuitous touring theater, returns to her starting point in Clerkenwell Green after being blinded by acid that is thrown into her face by a jealous rival. In spite of the great sacrifices she has made to escape the confines of Clerkenwell, which include the loss of family, degradation of her moral character, and bouts of extreme poverty, her efforts are in vain, underscoring the futility of trying to rise from one’s pre-ordained social sphere. Her short success ends in failure, emphasizing the fact that there is no escape from the urban hell in which Gissing sets the novel.

The most noble character in The Nether World is ultimately Gissing’s most pathetic character: Sidney Kirkwood, like so many of Gissing’s protagonists, seems destined to rise above the fray of the urban slums. His intended partner in this success is supposed to be Clara Hewitt, who throws him off in search of her own fruitless dreams. But in spite of indications that he is better bred and has more potential than Clara Hewitt, Kirkwood fails to rise in the Social Darwinian fashion envisioned by a mid-Victorian thinker like Herbert Spencer. Kirkwood was meant to be an artist, Gissing informs us, “if things went well. Unhappily, things went the reverse of well” (52). His father experiences a financial setback, and childhood visits to the country and sketchbooks are forgotten as Sidney accepts an apprenticeship with a local jeweler. Thus employed “upon the meaningless work which is demanded by the vulgar rich” (57), Kirkwood expends his
aesthetic energies embracing a crude replacement: political Radicalism. The movement from rustic artiste to urban radical is inevitable in the nether world; it is, as Gissing puts it, the obligatory “outcome of a noble heart sheltered by ignorance” (57). The only remnants of Kirkwood’s potential are rough penciled landscapes and a few woodcut prints that suggest possibilities which will never be realized: “To select for one’s chamber a woodcut after Constable or Gainsborough is at all events to give proof of a capacity for civilization” (60). Thus developed, Sidney Kirkwood plays out his role with no promise of any social upturn. To underscore his permanent state of limbo, Gissing places Kirkwood’s residence within view of St. John’s Arch, a former haunt of Samuel Johnson’s, who, like Kirkwood and like Gissing, represents the intellectual and the artist in limbo between two social spheres. A short description of Samuel Johnson’s visits to his publisher at St. John’s Arch appears in The Nether World, depicting Johnson as a journeyman author, “often impransus” (supper-less), who was too unpresentable to eat with his publisher’s more aristocratic guests (51). Unlike Kirkwood, Johnson ultimately achieved success. (Johnson’s mention in the text also anticipates the concerns that Gissing’s next novel, New Grub Street [1891], would address: the focus on production would shift from material goods to writing as a commodity, and the proliferation of publications for the mass reading public would become yet another sore point for members of the intelligentsia lamenting the emergence of a mainstream—and allegedly vulgar—readership.) With a character like Kirkwood, Gissing was able to explore the role that aestheticism would play in the life of a gifted but impoverished worker. He determined that culture would not prevail over one’s social position in Kirkwood’s era as
it had for Johnson, perhaps because there were too few aristocratic mentors to offer food
and respite from the challenges of "the sordid struggle for existence" (51).

Just as aestheticism in this novel is crushed by the day-to-day demands of the
working-class world, so, too, are philanthropic aims overwhelmed by the desolation of its
surroundings. When Michael Snowdon appears on the scene with both the money and
the desire to help the occupants of Clerkenwell, his intentions are cruelly upset by
conniving relatives and his own impractical idealism. He decides to live below his
means, and keeps his grand-daughter, Jane, in the dark about his money while training
her to a philanthropic vocation, "to not regard [money] as wealth, but as the means of
bringing help to the miserable" (177). He hatches a plan to marry Jane to Kirkwood
(who has given up on Clara Hewitt), and in a moment of naïve idealism rekindled by his
own artistic aspirations, Kirkwood agrees to support Snowdon's plan. In an ideal world,
the plan might have worked, but in the working world, the distance between the haves
and the have-nots proves too great to be bridged. Snowdon's plan—to raise Jane in near
poverty so that she can form a connection between her own suffering and the misery of
those she must help—is exalted and visionary, but in practice (or at least within the
representational logic of Gissing's naturalism) it requires a zeal and focus that destroys
more than it saves.

Through a fictionalized version of the philanthropic efforts popular in his day,
Gissing examines the dysfunction of late-century charity: Jane forms a connection with a
philanthropic mentor, Miss Lant, who has already forsaken her own personality and
potential for the sake of service to the poor. In a scene that would be comic if it were not
so wretched, Gissing shows his readers that philanthropy which aims to humanize the masses aims too high; the already too-human masses of urban poor meet Miss Lant’s efforts with disdain and criticism, pouring her soup kitchen concoction on the floor because it does not meet their feigned culinary standards. Gissing uses the scene to admonish philanthropists for their do-gooder solutions to the problems of the urban poor, at the same time noting that the efforts are wasted on what has by now become a brutish mass which cannot be tamed back into civilization by philanthropy: “Can you not perceive that these people of Shooter’s Gardens are poor, besotted, disease-struck creatures, of whom—in the mass—scarcely a human quality is to be expected? Have you still to learn what this nether world has been made by those who belong to the sphere above it?—Gratitude, quotha?—Nay, do you be grateful that these hapless, half-starved women do not turn and rend you” (252). After much to-do, the victims of Miss Lant’s and Jane’s philanthropy finally settle down, but Gissing’s point is made: it is impossible to humanize the masses with philanthropy without ultimately de-humanizing the philanthropist. In his own moment of enlightenment, Sidney Kirkwood recognizes the futility of philanthropic idealism and breaks off his relationship with Jane; soon after, Snowdon’s philanthropic vision crumbles under its own weightiness: “It was a noble vision, that of Michael’s, but too certainly Jane Snowdon was not the person to make it a reality; the fearful danger was, that all the possibilities of her life might be sacrificed to a vain conscientiousness” (233). The conventional solution of philanthropy, even with Snowdon’s unconventional application of it, is doomed to fail.
In stark contrast to Jane’s and Snowdon’s benevolent fantasy, a minor character from Shooter’s Gardens functions as their degraded moral counterpart, underscoring the myopia of utopian visions. Mad Jack, who appears infrequently in the novel, popping up from darkened side streets to offer an occasional profound but misunderstood interpretation of the fate of his neighbors, is a ranting madman. He acts as the town’s prophet, speaking in tongues—a gibberish “which was in truth tolerably good French,” though none of his counterparts have the sophistication to understand him (337).

Functioning much like a Greek chorus (albeit a drunken one), Mad Jack relays his tragic vision of the worker’s predicament to a mass of amused listeners. His message is a dark revelation that distorts Christian salvation into a sort of divine retribution imposed on the Clerkenwell masses:

Then the angel said: “You are passing through a state of punishment. You, and all the poor among whom you live; all those who are suffering of body and darkness of mind, were once rich people, with every blessing the world can bestow, with every opportunity of happiness in yourselves and of making others happy. Because you made an ill use of your wealth, because you were selfish and hard-hearted and oppressive and sinful in every kind of indulgence—therefore after death you received the reward of wickedness. This life you are now leading is that of the damned; this place to which you are confined is Hell! There is no escape for you. From poor you shall become poorer; the older you grow the lower you shall sink in want and misery; at the end there is waiting for you, one and all, a death
in abandonment and despair. This is Hell—Hell—Hell!” (345; my emphasis)

Tempting as Mad Jack’s vision of “confinement” is—that the urban poor exist to serve as a moral lesson for the upper classes—the reality of their situation cannot be so compactly explained. Gissing moves the reader directly from Jack’s vision to a very real and dismal scene in Shooter’s Gardens, where Clara’s brother Bob Hewitt plays out Jack’s dream by dying, in want and misery, as the “whole force of Law and Society” (347) knocks down his door to arrest him. Bob has fled to Shooter’s Gardens after being run over by a workhorse cart while trying to escape from the police. In Dickens’ *Dombey and Son* (1848), a villainous character is crushed by a passing train, and the scene is supposed to suggest that evil is being destroyed by British industrialism. Bob’s death is an 1880s version of that motif, except that this time around, the reader appreciates Bob Hewitt’s unrealized sophistication and artistic potential—for Gissing’s readers, the scene serves as a representation of the way that the laborious life of the nether world destroys one’s chances for a better existence. One cannot help but imagine that Bob’s death is finally an escape from the circuitous hells of the nether world, rather than simply a punishment for his transgressions, and the law-and-order version of morality that the police force represents is as much his oppressor as his savior.

The characterization of Bob Hewitt is in itself a lesson in containment strategies. At the beginning of the novel, Bob seems harmless. Youthful, robust, and atypically intelligent, Bob Hewitt shows the promise, if anyone does, of escaping from the nether world. Like Kirkwood and Clara Hewitt, Bob’s potential lies in his artistic talent. He is
apprenticed to a die-sinker because he shows, at an early age, a capacity for culture. In an introductory passage which borrows its tone from Dickens, Bob Hewitt’s place in society is clearly delineated by his talents and his appreciation for culture, and he is thus classified by his potential for social ascent:

In the social classification of the nether world—a subject which so eminently adapts itself to the sportive and gracefully picturesque mode of treatment—it will be convenient to distinguish broadly, and with reference to males alone, the two great sections of those who do, and those who do not, wear collars...For such attractive disquisition I have, unfortunately, no space; it must suffice that I indicate the two genera...And I was led to do so in thinking of Bob Hewitt. Bob wore a collar. (Gissing 69)

In a parody of the sort of taxonomies that played such an important role in Mayhew, Gissing goes on to explain that different styles of collars place their wearers in the appropriate positions in the class hierarchy; they function as a visual sign of social divisions: “innumerable would be the varieties of texture, of fold, of knot observed in the ranks of unskilled labor...and among those whose higher station is indicated by the linen or paper symbol” (69). Gissing’s narrator describes his treatment of the collars as “sportive” and “gracefully picturesque”: the assessment is intentionally blithe, parodying (but also surreptitiously extending) the dehumanizing mid-century process of classification that aimed to be both scientific and reforming, but was ultimately neither.

In short, because Bob Hewitt shows an appreciation for culture (his father once took him to the British Museum as a child), and innate talent as well, he supposedly has prospects
far beyond those of his nether world peers. Gissing additionally notes that Hewitt is good looking, physically unblemished by his upbringing, and he has “an ear for music, played (nothing else was within his reach) the concertina, sang a lively song with uncommon melodiousness…” (70). Bob Hewitt has been exposed to just enough sophistication to move up a notch in society. George Gissing, in contrast, has been exposed to enough signs of social hierarchy to recognize and make light of the collar’s function as a symbol, with all of the connotations of enclosure and enslavement that accompany it. Bob Hewitt can aspire to greater things, including a wife who counts “among her relatives not one collarless individual” (71). His downfall—perhaps a shortcoming communally shared by artists—is an empathetic heart, coupled with a youthful impulsiveness.

With an act that parallels Gissing’s own marital woes, Bob Hewitt seals his fate: instead of marrying out of the nether world, Bob Hewitt falls for a pitiful waif with no recognizable abilities and a family history of alcoholism. Equally impulsively, he wastes his talent for die-casting by counterfeiting coins, an ironic substitute given his skill as a craftsman. In a comically tragic scene, he nobly marries his pathetic companion and takes her on a bank holiday honeymoon to the Crystal Palace. This episode, which takes on its full meaning only in the light of our earlier discussion of the ideological functions served by the Crystal Palace in 1851, is covered in detail in a chapter Gissing ironically entitles “Io Saturnalia.”

Saturnalia, the Roman festival of Saturn, was traditionally a day of licensed festivity, designed to permit the Roman proletariats their moment of drunken merriment in an otherwise dreary existence. In The Nether World, the August bank holiday serves
as the day when “the slaves of industrialism don the pileus” (104; note the narrator’s ironical use of Latin, which effectively deflates any “carnivalistic” energies, as Mikhail Bakhtin would put it, that might be associated with this temporary reversal of social hierarchies). Bakhtin argues that the carnivalesque is an anti-hegemonic process of destabilizing social power structures. In Gissing’s case, the use of carnivalesque motifs serves hegemonic purposes by demystifying the masses, essentially overthrowing them through parody before they can overthrow the normal social order. Thus the mass exodus to the Crystal Palace functions as a scene of containment, in which the threat posed by the size, rowdiness, and carnivalesque attributes of the bank holiday crowds is both represented and curtailed; by setting the narrator apart, viewing the scene omnisciently, Gissing is indicating that the characters the reader has come to know as individuals are now part of a larger, unknowable and uncontrollable group. The narrator’s separation from the masses signifies control over this group and what Bakhtin would have looked upon favorably as its potential for carnivalesque subversion. Interestingly, Gissing’s narrator does not completely succeed—the “Io Saturnalia” chapter is one point in the novel where Gissing proves sympathetic to the masses, offering not a straight-forward carnivalization, as it were, of the carnivalesque but an ambivalent representation of it that to some extent undermines their potential for being dominated and contained. Thus the narrator’s attempt to subvert the masses through parody inadvertently becomes a subversion of the upper class vision of the Crystal Palace.

On another plane, Gissing examines the emotional effects of his characters’ actions, and the effects of the crowded mass mindset on their individual senses. Bob
Hewitt's parents are furious with his marriage to Pennyloaf, and so is Clem Peckover, his wife's jealous rival. But Bob enters married life feeling magnanimous about his marriage, and his wife Pennyloaf considers herself especially fortunate: "How proud she was of her ring! How she turned it round and round when nobody was looking! Gold, Pennyloaf, real gold! The pawnbroker would lend her seven-and-sixpence on it, any time" (105). Affairs inevitably take a turn for the worse—Bob's magnanimity gradually disintegrates into drunkenness and vulgarity, and Pennyloaf's pleasure turns to weariness and then despair. Merriment becomes jovial recklessness, and then conflict. Only music soothes the masses; in a crowded amphitheatre, the band strikes up and for a moment, the crowd is quiet. Culture, Gissing's narrator tells us, offers a solution to the working class problem:

To humanize the multitude two things are necessary...in the first place, you must effect a change of economic conditions...then you must bring to bear on the order of things the constant influence of music. Does not the prescription recommend itself? It is jesting in earnest...Destroy, sweep away, then prepare the ground; then shall music the holy, music the civiliser, breathe over the renewed earth, and with Orphean magic raise in perfected beauty the towers of the City of Man. (109)

Sadly, however, this multitude would appear to be beyond civilizing. The peace lasts but a moment before the crowd becomes reckless again, and Gissing's readers are left with the realization that acculturation of the masses (in itself a construction that differentiates between those who have it and those who do not) is impossible. The music scene closes
with another pathetic description of the drunken crowd and a glance at the Crystal Palace, which in Gissing’s eyes is representative not of Macaulay’s “re-animated future” but of degraded and commodified spectacle. In this description, Gissing’s temporary adoption of the first person plural narrator “we” has the ironic effect of including both himself and his readers in the hopelessly vulgar multitude, underscoring the effect of massification that has occurred at all levels of society and hinting that even his literate readership has now lost some valued quality it no longer has the ability to name:

> Evening advances; the great ugly building will presently be lighted with innumerable lamps. Away to the west yonder the heavens are afire with sunset, but at that we do not care to look; never in our lives did we regard it. We know not what is meant by beauty and grandeur. Here under the glass roof stand white forms of undraped men and women—casts of antique statues—but we care as little for the glory of art as for that of nature; we have a vague feeling that, for some reason or other, antiquity excuses the indecent, but further than that we do not get. (110)

Wearily, Pennyloaf makes her way back to Clerkenwell, where she is confronted by a vengeful Clem Peckover. By the end of the day, Pennyloaf has fought her rival and lost. She returns home with her wedding-day finery torn to shreds and her husband hopelessly drunk. She realizes with no great surprise that “on the morrow it would be necessary to pawn her wedding-ring” (113) and falls asleep to the sounds of her father brawling with her mother, who has once again broken her sobriety pledge.
The promise of the honeymoon trip to the Crystal Palace— itself a monument to mid-Victorian happy endings, where ordinary glass can be made to look like crystal and an oversize greenhouse like a palace—has been exposed as a testament of deception. In a single image, Gissing reveals romance and culture as pathetically counterfeited—like Bob Hewitt’s coins—by a mass society that is unable to understand or care for the remnants of real feeling or the glory of art. As a result, all of his characters are doomed to inevitable failure: Bob Hewitt will turn up again in the British Museum, using it not as a source of artistic inspiration but rather as a convenient site for a rendezvous with Clem Peckover, Pennyloaf’s rival. Similarly, Gissing uses Clara Hewett (also imbued with an artistic spirit) and her tragic experiences with a touring theater to emphasize what was by that time his firm belief (one shared by much of society) that there was no way out of the nether world for London’s laboring poor. Clara Hewitt returns with her beauty ruined, but more significantly, her drive to escape the circumstances of the urban slums has also been destroyed; thus Clara goes from being the most hopeful and strongest character—the traditional heroine—to being the most miserably degraded character. She loses her chance at a true love match (Sidney eventually marries her out of pity) as well as her chance at fame and fortune. Clara’s antithesis, Clem Peckover, vile as she is, seems to fare rather better in the novel: Clem has no aspirations beyond her position of power within the slums; she is committed to the law of the jungle—survival of the fittest—and tragically, in the East End jungle, morality and intellect are not survival strengths. Clem, who lacks morality or real intellect, is the character most likely to survive in the nether world, regardless of her circumstances. Ultimately, however, her luck runs out, too,
along with the rich husband she has snagged and his falsely obtained wealth. In the end, there are no escapes, no possibilities, no hope.

What gave rise to this pathetic outlook? Although the threat posed by crowds had, at least since the time of the French Revolution, always been a part of representations of the masses, the rapid expansion of mass society in the late-nineteenth century exacerbated the perception of this threat. The late-Victorian reaction to class conflict was coupled with a widening split between “high culture and mass culture, bourgeoisie and working class” that would continue well into the next century, as modernism developed (Brantlinger 14). The scale of transitions that took place from the 1850s onwards seemed to move society beyond reform. The countryside had been reborn as an industrialized cityscape, and London, the very heart of the nation, was inundated with people, to the point that it had grown beyond its productive capacity. The pride that the mid-Victorians felt in the Great Exhibition had become bitter arrogance and would further erode into a desolate humility as the crowds eventually came together one last time to watch it burn down in 1936. Henry Mayhew had chronicled the working class in a style that rendered them exotic, or at least pleasantly comic. But Gissing took this exoticism and made it uncomfortably commonplace; he took this comedy and remade it as tragic, or even perverse. The popular mid-century novels, which focused on the social trials of industrialism, developed into a close examination of urbanization, focusing specifically on the contamination of metropolitan London. The series of mid-century containment strategies meant to solidify class boundaries (Mayhew) and ensure social consensus (the Crystal Palace and the discourses surrounding it) were reworked by
Gissing in a way that pessimistically solidified those boundaries to the point of tragedy without offering the hope of any social consensus ever again being achieved.

For Gissing, from his vantage as a member of the same transitioning social class which he so deeply feared, the best escape from his personal nether world was reached in a close study of older and more venerable civilizations: he eventually submerged himself in Classicism, ironically calmed by its age-old parallels to his own modern predicament. As did his late Victorian literary contemporaries, novelists such as Thomas Hardy and George Moore, Gissing raised unanswered questions about the outcome of mass humanity which would ultimately develop into modernism, with all of its accompanying anxieties over modern and mainstreamed culture. Eventually, the reaction to the intrusion of the masses would be a retreat into the subjective consciousness of the individual artist. The sense of social alienation that developed over the latter half of the nineteenth century did not abate, but escape from it became possible to envisage at the individual (and intellectual) level as the bitter objectivity of realism and the scientific determinism of naturalism were rejected and new literary experiments in modernism developed to take their place.

The rise in productivity that England experienced during the nineteenth century made class-oriented narrative strategies of containment necessary, in part to encourage further strides in the enterprise of empire-building, and in part to soothe concerns among the higher classes that the working populace would soon evict those in power from their positions of authority. The irony of the gradual democratization that took place during the Victorian era was that it stressed the acquisition of culture and education as solutions
to the problems that social mobility and an increasing populace posed to the dominant classes. Unfortunately, many intellectuals perceived industrial and democratic progress as a breakdown of the established social order; universal education and acculturation were often seen as the problem rather than the solution—increasingly so in the concluding decades of the century, after such important steps forward on the path to democracy as the Second Reform Bill (1867) and the Education Act (1870). An appropriate construction of culture had to be extended to the lower stratum of society if social problems were to be remedied, and yet what would result from this, it was felt, could only be a new (and tainted) mass culture that would renew, rather than resolve, those problems. Thus the democratic utopia hopefully, if condescendingly, envisioned by writers such as Mayhew and the founders of the Great Exhibition, and painfully revisited in the early novels of Gissing, was undermined by a coexisting concern (perhaps sometimes a subconscious concern) over the leveling effect that these social changes might have. This ironical co-existence of contradictory social agendas, and the attempt to balance them, is at the heart of the containment strategies that I have been examining in this thesis. As Fredric Jameson explained in the discussion of Gissing that concludes his The Political Unconscious, the culture of a given period is made up of inherited words and concepts—narrative ideologies which, like daydreaming, allow the author to use the text to fulfill wishes or imagine social narratives; “these paradigms offer objective ‘solutions’ (or imaginary resolutions) to equally objective ideological problems confronted by the young writer” (186). The interrelated texts discussed in this thesis offered such imaginary resolutions to the real problems of industrial and social change.
By the end of the century, these solutions to the problem of class inequality—which had seemed plausible enough in the mid-Victorian period—no longer convinced even those who, like Gissing, were still committed to them. The delicate balance of progress and tradition, of textual solution and social problem, could no longer be imagined in good faith. As Gissing himself said, perhaps reflecting on the failed efforts of his age at maintaining this balance, “fiction puts into literary form hopes which are not likely to be realized” (quoted in Tindall 12).
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