

George Gissing's Problems with Women

[George Gissing and the Woman Question: Convention and Dissent](#). Edited by Christine Huguet and Simon J. James. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2013. 215pp.

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<1>The body of scholarship on the work of George Gissing continues to grow apace with this collection adding an important component. It brings together many of the insightful scholars working on Gissing's fiction today: M. D. Allen, Maria Teresa Chialant, David Grylls, Constance D. Harsh, Rosemary Jann, Emma Liggins, and Diana Maltz are all contributors to this volume and are all respected names in Gissing studies. These scholars continue to excite interest in this prolific writer and, consequently bring others to the study of his work. Christine Huguet and Simon J. James, editors of this volume, are also well-known Gissing scholars and with this volume are helping to expand the range of Gissing scholarship.

<2>As the title of this volume suggests, these essays expand Gissing scholarship by teasing out of Gissing's complicated relationship with women – in his life and in his fiction. As the introduction points out, Gissing “repeatedly chose to write about ‘the woman question,’ and in particular about the nature of the changing opportunities for late-Victorian women” (1). And yet it is difficult to pin down Gissing's view of the New Woman, and of the new behaviors and attitudes caused by these “changing opportunities” (1). Huguet and James argue in their introduction that Gissing's “conflicted” and at times “self-contradictory” fictional depictions of these “historical shifts,” are the result of his “commitment to a form of literary realism that obliges the novelist to report on aspects of experience as they perceive it (rather than on, say, the imagined ideal world of romance)” (1). They note that Gissing obviously found features of modern life “repellent,” yet felt duty-bound to paint it faithfully, nevertheless. He always claimed to do so, though, as an artist, not as an activist. As Huguet and James claim in their introduction, “The complexity of Gissing's negotiations of themes of modernity has ... resulted in a sometimes rather inchoate critical response to his representation of sexual difference” (2), a situation that isn't exactly remedied in this volume. For as Constance Harsh notes in Chapter Two, “to study the work of Gissing is always to be involved in complexity and paradox” (31). This collection of essays does, nonetheless, in examining Gissing's most important novels and a

selection of his short fiction, begin to produce a more holistic picture of the author's portrayals of women and the "woman question," without attempting to diminish the complexity or to ignore the variety of those portrayals.

<3>The collection is divided into two sections: the first, "Gissing's Complex Discourse of (New) Womanhood," contains seven essays that examine the major novels and some short fiction with attention not only to Gissing's depictions of prostitution, female violence, domesticity and the spinster figure, but also – in the case of Tara MacDonald's essay – to his negotiations of the figure of the New Man, a concept necessarily created by the New Woman. David Grylls, always an astute reader of Gissing, focuses on prostitution, examining *Workers in the Dawn* (1880) and *The Unclassed* (1884) and noting that Gissing's attitude towards prostitution changed over time. Grylls marshals evidence from contemporary companions of the author who claim to have heard Gissing's invective against such women and who report Gissing's nicety in not being one to employ vulgar language. Yet, as Grylls points out, these earlier novels demonstrate Gissing's "pioneering boldness" (19) in depicting such figures. And, interestingly, as Huguet and James comment in their introduction, "For all his disquiet about Mrs. Grundy, Gissing is again and again allowed to benefit from the exciting aura of transgression surrounding his time – the volatile *fin de siècle*" (8).

<4>Constance D. Harsh focuses on four novels of the 1890s, *The Emancipated* (1890), *The Odd Women* (1893), *In the Year of Jubilee* (1894), and *New Grub Street* (1891), for, as Harsh argues, "the feminist movement, which began to influence Gissing at the end of the 1880s, gave him certain creative openings in the 1890s of which he took great advantage" (31). In *The Odd Women*, for example, she remarks on the "emptiness of Ruskinian notions of masculine authority in the hands of ... a clumsy patriarch," commenting that such a "critical analysis of patriarchal power opens up a space for female protagonists who exemplify those human qualities overlooked or suppressed by tyranny" (35).

<5>In her chapter, Rosemary Jann examines a sampling of Gissing's short fiction with regard to what she describes as his "obsessive chronicling of the nuances of middle-class identity," and "the ways in which he uses domestic order and aptitude to construct and to police the internal boundaries that segmented middle-class status" (85). She wryly notes at the end of her essay that Gissing "might fantasize about female companions who could read Sophocles, but still expected them to boil those potatoes and to scrub floors" (99), again emphasizing Gissing's complicated attitude to the problem of writing women in those changing times.

<6>Anthony Patterson's essay is a particularly interesting analysis of *The Nether World* (1891), in which he foregrounds female violence. He writes, "Reading representations of class and gender in *The Nether World* through a refinement/violence binary challenges reductive notions of Gissing as driven by either class resentment or misogyny and allows for a consideration of

how the novel functions within broader ideological paradigms and specific economic, cultural and social conditions” (104). He sees Clem Peckover – a particularly violent woman in this novel – as a figure who is not simply in opposition to middle-class refinement, “but also as the antithesis of a particular idealization of middle-class female behaviour and, as such, an embodiment of male anxieties about women’s potential for anarchic and violent behaviour” (110). He also points out that, while violent, Clem has a certain “exotic appeal” (113), so that although she may embody the menace of the nether world for middle-class readers, “she also appears as a perverse and dangerous alternative to the conventions and restrictions of middle-class culture” (114).

<7>The second section of the collection, “Gissing’s Voice: A Comparatist Assessment,” expands, in a much needed way, the range of Gissing studies by contextualizing Gissing within the sphere of the writers of his time. A prolific reader and a writer who reflected deeply on his craft, Gissing wrote his most successful novels at a time when so many others writers were coming to grips with the kind of gritty realism Gissing felt it his obligation to write. Paul Bouget, Ella Hepworth Dixon, May Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, Émile Zola all make an appearance in these pages, debunking the image of Gissing, sometimes evoked by critics, and to some extent by Gissing himself in *New Grub Street*, of a lovelorn, starving writer battling on alone in his garret, an aria from *La bohème* perhaps heard faintly in the background. The Gissing shown here is an author in conversation with – literarily, if not always in person – the important writers of his time.

<8>One disappointing aspect of this collection might be the mention of Gissing’s biography brought into many of these essays, even if casually and in passing. While admittedly it is hard to avoid a sense of the interesting and sometimes tragic events of Gissing’s life shadowing his fiction, in many instances in this collection, these nods to biography are not essential to the perceptive analyses contributors present. One standout essay, though, that deals entirely with Gissing’s first wife, Nell Harrison, brings to light, through a close reading of Gissing’s letters, an attitude towards Nell on the part of Gissing and his brothers that attempts to debunk previous views of her as a failed social experiment, a “lower-class” woman Gissing intended to train up to be a middle-class lady, but whose predilection for drink got in the way. Much of Roger Milbrandt’s evidence is in the form of absence of evidence; he notes, “Almost everywhere one cares to look for Nell Harrison, she is both vivid and elusive” (61). He points out that since Morley Roberts published *The Private Life of Henry Maitland* in 1912, a novel based on the life of George Gissing, many have taken Roberts’s portrait of Nell as fact. Whereas by looking closely at the letters, Milbrandt argues that “we are likely to find that Gissing’s first significant other was significantly other than the Nell Harrison with whom we are familiar” (67).

<9>One last point to be made about this collection is the liberal use of illustration throughout. It is perhaps Gissing's handsome mustachioed face peering out from portraits and photographs that entices contributors to think about his relationship to women in association with his fiction, but I enjoyed these illustrations all the same – including those of the new women who had befriended Gissing. And the *Punch* cartoons satirizing the notion of the New Woman, add piquancy to these perceptive and helpful essays.