

George Gissing's Manifesto: *The Odd Women* and *The Unclassed*

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<1>Jacob Korg, in *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, contends that, although the economic circumstances of the Madden sisters, focal characters of *The Odd Women*, constitute severe challenges to their survival, “[...] Gissing perceives that the most desperate element of their plight is the loneliness and barrenness of lives in which an invitation to tea or a slice of roast beef are events of supreme importance” (188). The sisters long for activities appropriate to their claim to membership in the genteel middle class. Nonetheless, it is the Madden’s poverty that accounts for the social sterility Korg so correctly identifies. Their desire to eat competes with their desire for class inclusion. Consequently, although the book focuses on issues such as marriage, friendship, and kinship, these affiliations are brokered in an economic system in which everything has, quite literally, a price. George Gissing’s *The Odd Women*, a novel so often seen in terms of its feministic depiction of the “woman problem,”⁽¹⁾ reduces virtually every human relationship to the level of an economic transaction of some sort. Certainly, Gissing does not render every relationship in exclusively economic terms, nor does he stipulate that women or men are economic entities and nothing else. However, the deprived condition endured by the characters regulates many of the decisions, conversations, and commentary in the novel, resulting in discussions which often suggest, explicitly or implicitly, a business deal of some kind. Because of this reality, Gissing frequently injects the terminology of capitalist exchange into the narrative. Capital and class are not identical, but in this novel, capital does affect one’s ability to participate in class-appropriate roles. *The Odd Women* does not stand alone, of course, in demonstrating Gissing’s technique of implanting suggestive economic language in the text. Although somewhat less obviously, *The Unclassed*, Gissing’s second published novel, also utilizes this method to underscore Gissing’s obsession with issues of the devaluation of labor, the treatment of the poor, and the nearly inescapable nature of economic necessity for both genders. In some ways, this novel conveys even more poignantly the iron grip of imprisonment to dependence upon money than does *The Odd Women*, since the sympathetic characters of *The Unclassed*, irrespective of gender and class, try deliberately to live apart from that constraint. Ida Starr, Osmund Waymark, and others struggle valiantly to order their lives according to ideals other than those dictated by monetary compulsion. Unless they obtain money, and regardless of the class to which they belong or aspire to belong, they fail. On the other hand, the detestable or equivocal characters, such as Harriet Smales, Abraham Woodstock, and Slimey, see life exclusively in economic, and hence degraded, terms. For each character, issues pertaining to money facilitate the diminution of experience and existence. This diminishment finds expression in deeds, but perhaps even more pointedly, in words. Embedded, then, in the very language

utilized by the characters and even in the authorial vocabulary of *The Odd Women* and *The Unclassed*, deliberations about capital, interest, labor conditions, salary, and the like dominate nearly every personal, emotional, and social situation and conversation, particularly, though not exclusively, as these conditions pertain to women. Gender and class distinctions sometimes temper the effect of this ubiquitous state of affairs. More often, however, money determines class standing and enables or prevents class mobility. In effect, no one escapes from the continual pressure of the requirements of life under the primary forces of economic necessity that dictate the actions and utterances, those statements which reveal the preoccupations of the characters' conscious and unconscious lives.

<2>Critics have long noted Gissing's concern with the economic plight of women, with his attitude toward the underclass as a whole, and with his ambivalence towards many aspects of the capitalist system, particularly as it pertains to these unfortunates.⁽²⁾ Lise Shapiro Sanders, for one, addresses the pervasiveness and centrality of Gissing's fixation on the ubiquity of capitalist exchange, the palimpsest that underlies well-nigh every human connection in *The Odd Women*. She categorizes Gissing's portrayal of Monica Madden and her shop-girl acquaintances as a reduction of them to objects of sale in the capitalist scheme. These workers, Sanders notes, become "[...] elements in the display of goods for sale [...]" (190). The behavior of these women, Sanders observes, cannot always be distinguished symbolically, or even literally, from that of prostitutes (197). In similar fashion, Rachel Bowlby, in *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing, and Zola*, points out that women became both commodities and consumers in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, Bowlby recognizes, as does Sanders, that "[...] the very imagery used of the relation between commodities and buyers is one of seduction and rape [...]" in the works with which she is concerned (27). Perhaps Bowlby and Sanders overstate the connection between capitalist commerce and prostitution, but one clearly discerns that *The Odd Women* and *The Unclassed* never entirely separate these activities. As we shall see, many characters from these novels, male and female, fail to distinguish between the self as discrete entity and self as product or participant in the economic scheme. John Vernon notes significantly, in *Money and Fiction*, that in Gissing, "[...] most social relations center on the workplace" (81). More to the point, Vernon recognizes the urgency with which Gissing and other novelists of his period regard problems with money, problems that become in many situations an overriding obsession (110). At the minimum, Gissing's novels provide constant reminders that economic considerations very nearly determine, and at the very least color, the nature of human conduct. Indeed, one can argue that, on an even more fundamental level, these matters pervade communication itself.

<3>From the opening chapter, *The Odd Women* announces rather plainly the centrality of its preoccupation with economic matters. Dr. Madden's pronouncements on this subject establish immediately the nagging fear that individuals, particularly women, are themselves defined by their value as monetary objects. In other words, they exist as laborers, guardians of capital, investments, objects, and even products in the commercial arrangements of society. Dr. Madden holds to the traditional view of women as of people existing outside of the economic arena. In fact, we are told, he "[...] had never been known to speak in the domestic circle" that is to say, to his daughters, "about his pecuniary affairs" (1). One notices the early reference to speech specifically as a mechanism tied to economic subjects. For one thing, his failure to speak of these things to his daughters points to the withholding of power over their financial status. In some

sense, too, his refusal to speak of economic necessity signifies an attempt to deprive it of reality. In any case, his plan to leave his daughters with enough money to live upon so that they would never “ [...] have to distress themselves about money matters,” goes profoundly awry (1). He fails to take into account, not only his own mortality, which prevents him from realizing his plan (6), but also the changing economic reality that becomes so apparent throughout subsequent events in the narrative. He educates his daughters to be properly refined, middle-class ladies who can resort, if all else fails, to teaching, an economic activity ironically tied to speaking, by the way (3). This scheme suffers from two deficiencies: his daughters’ personal ineptitudes and the surplus of overqualified teachers, facts directly recognized and lamented by Virginia (14-15). Gissing clearly positions Dr. Madden, who suffers from his own irrelevant education in classical literature (presumably a form of expression free from the taint of monetary concerns) and from his equally irrelevant faith in Providence, as a representative of the ineffective social constructs that prevented women from preparing for a viable career through means outside of marriage, inherited leisure, or a few other very restricted endeavors. The doctor also represents the futility of attempting to expunge references to “money matters” from verbal acknowledgement.

<4>Throughout *The Odd Women*, social interaction is often mediated by references to financial terms and transactions. Examples of the saturation of language with economic jargon abound in the novel. Certain passages, however, demonstrate unequivocally the centrality of this concern. Many of these passages involve Monica Madden in particular and her sisters in general. In fact, to her sisters, Monica constitutes a sort of investment, since she is the only remaining marriageable sister among the Maddens. As she relates her excitement over the possibilities offered by a relationship to her “valuable friend,” (3) Rhoda Nunn, Virginia emphasizes both the primacy with which she and Alice regard Monica and the necessity of seeing her married: “Let us first put *you* in comfort and security; that is the immediate need” (32). After her “need” is met, Monica will assist the sisters in meeting theirs. In essence, she is a product, a marketable item.

Monica, if her promise were fulfilled, would be by far the best looking, as well as the sprightliest of the family. She must marry; of course she must marry! Her sisters gladdened at the thought. (12)

The sisters love Monica, and they obviously want her to marry for her own good. However, since this quotation occurs in the context of a discussion of the prospects currently in view for Virginia and Alice, it references the precarious financial standing of the Maddens. As he does in other parts of the novel, Gissing uses vocabulary linked directly to economic activity in order to underscore this motif. In the section under consideration, consisting of two pages, words such as “property,” “apprenticed,” “serve,” “employment,” “dependent,” “careers,” “business,” “position,” “working,” “livelihood,” “profitless,” “worked,” “reduced,” “income,” “capital,” “buy,” “procure,” “spend,” “domestic occupations,” and “appropriated” serve as a constant reminder to the reader that behind everything that occurs in the novel lies the incessant demand of fiscal necessity (12-13). Gissing’s word choice becomes increasingly subliminal and insistent. (4)

<5>Gissing makes it absolutely clear that Monica herself accepts marriage as an economic transaction. Her rejection of Mr. Bullivant illustrates this point. “How would it be possible,”

she asks him, “for you to support a wife?” His attempts to justify his hopes for his future fail to move her: “Mr. Bullivant, I think you ought to wait until you really have prospects” (30). Monica appraises Widdowson differently. In the pivotal series of the narrative in which Widdowson meets and courts her, Monica never entertains another interpretation of their encounter than that of monetary analysis. That he belongs to the right class helps, assuredly, but his money closes the deal, as we shall see. Monica may indeed be a commodity, but she evaluates Widdowson and Bullivant as she might evaluate a buyer of her wares or services. In this sense, a rough equality exists between the genders in their shared tendency to calculate human worth in pecuniary terms. Widdowson, Monica notices, has desirable traits that outweigh his unattractiveness as a purely erotic partner. He is not too old, he seems educated and well dressed, and he appears healthy (35-36). When she meets him again, Monica refines and confirms this initial assessment of him, an assessment that appraises traits that make him a valuable resource, if not a lover. He is not “ill-featured” or touched “[...] by any sign of advanced life [...]” (43). His “[...] teeth were white and regular [...],” a description that reminds one of horse trading (43). Never does Monica see Widdowson as a romantic partner: “Emotional interest in him she had none” (42). The reader notices again the ambivalent use of the word “interest,” a term which denotes both curiosity and accumulation from capital. Monica’s interest consists of the extent to which Widdowson can provide for her. Widdowson has traits that Monica admires, but these traits are inseparable from pecuniary implications, although they also evoke her class-conscious sense of genteel snobbishness:

After all, he was not a companion to be ashamed of. She looked with pleasure at his white hairy hands with their firm grip; then at his boots – very good boots indeed. He had gold links in his white shirt-cuffs, and a gold watch-guard chosen with a gentleman’s taste. (44).

We cannot say of this courtship that Widdowson never takes Monica’s breath away, though we see clearly that he does not overwhelm her through his gallantry or eloquence. When he tells her that he has “[...] only about six hundred a year,” she “[...] drew in her breath silently [...]” (49). Obviously, these two unstricken lovers are negotiating a contract. We discern the basic terms of that contract as follows: Widdowson, as a well-to-do male, will rescue Monica, an all but helpless female, from her existence as a shop girl. Widdowson notes her distaste for this life on the occasion of their first date, so to speak: “I don’t think [...] you are very well contented with your life in that house of business” (46). He makes it clear just what he proposes to give her for marrying him. In turn, Monica will accept life without passion, but she will, paradoxically, exchange one “house of business” for the marital enterprise presided over by her husband, a man who has enough money and who also has the added value of some level of class consequence.

It seemed that he had really fallen in love with her; he might prove a devoted husband. She felt no love in return; but between the prospect of a marriage of esteem and that of no marriage at all there was no hesitation. The chances were that she might never again receive an offer from a man whose social standing she could respect. (76)

Lise Shapiro Sanders thinks that Monica’s marriage simply transfers her from one form of slavery to another (207). Slavery, as a negotiated marriage, is just a more emphatic word for occupation. Monica’s job title will simply be “wife.”

<6>The reduction of Monica to commodity finds attenuation after her marriage when she attempts to assert a level of volition that resists Widdowson's controlling concept of women. However, Monica never entirely escapes her objectified status, and Gissing ensures that we understand that Monica and Edmund Widdowson never achieve a marriage that transcends the initial mercantile quality of their paltry and vitiated courtship. In the scene wherein Monica goes with Widdowson for a ride on the river, Gissing employs imagery and vocabulary that render our impression of their relationship indelible. The conversation and thoughts of these two persons remain banal, tied to details that revolve mostly around Widdowson's career. Aside from the rare clumsy attempt to express his pleasure at Monica's company, Widdowson talks only of how he acquired his money and how he began work at an early age (47). Significantly, Monica, to Widdowson, is a "treat" that has been "provided" for his birthday (46). As if to confirm this offhand and unconscious characterization of her as an item to be consumed for his enjoyment, Monica gives him a present, a "brown paper parcel" that contains the copy of "The Christian Year" given to her by her sisters (46). We know that Monica gives little thought to religion, that "[...] she had fallen into neglect of public worship [...]" because of the example of her shop-girl companions (33). Religion has no intrinsic value for her. Therefore, in giving Widdowson the book, she essentially gives him a symbol of her emptiness, of her spiritual bankruptcy. To look at it another way, Monica gives him nothing that really belongs to her in any intimate sense. Originally, when her sisters had given her the book for her birthday, she accepted it without enthusiasm, merely equating it reductionistically with its monetary value and with the sacrifice that its expenditure represented. On that occasion, she says, "[...] you oughtn't to have spent money on me [...]," though she offers a half-hearted promise to read "[...] some of it now and then" (31). After giving Widdowson the book, Monica relates the narrative of her life from "Sunday to Sunday(5) [...]" as if the subject had no great *interest* (italics mine) for her"(6) (47). That brown parcel represents, more than any other symbol in the novel, the objectification of Monica's existence. In giving to him an item to which she ascribes nothing beyond its cost, Monica fails to give anything of herself of any consequence to her future husband. Perhaps she thereby signals her real evaluation of the worth of her union. David Grylls, in "Determinism and Determination in Gissing," comments that "Weakness of will, then, brings about marriages, but it also brings about their breakdown [...]" (69). In this case, Monica's will has nothing to do with the situation. She simply has nothing to contribute other than her consent. The parcel was worth something, but only in terms of what it cost. Aptly, Widdowson's articulation of his expectations of her reverberate with associations involving employment: she must behave with "exactitude" and "in unvarying sequence," and he becomes angry if she neglects "[...] any most trivial detail of daily custom [...]" (176). "Custom," of course, suggests both habit and trade, providing the reader with another example of Gissing's pregnant use of diction. To her credit, Monica does not act, after her marriage, like a spousal employee hired to perform certain tasks. She resists Widdowson's efforts to restrict her activity to the predictable behavior of a shopkeeper, since this role violates her view of what a respectable middle class wife should expect to experience. Despite her efforts, her limited range of choices result in interpersonal alienation.

<7>Other characters in *The Odd Women*, especially in their choices of vocabulary, underscore Gissing's depiction of all human interaction as predominantly economic in nature. In the episode wherein Monica and Everard Barfoot meet to discuss his affection for Rhoda Nunn, Gissing's word selection continues to echo with economic significance. Barfoot is perhaps the character least dominated by economic pressures in the novel, but Gissing nonetheless employs language

that brings such concerns to mind. When Barfoot and Monica talk about Rhoda, they do so with “mutual confidence and interest” (221). Barfoot wishes to meet Monica again without her husband present, so that “he could judge of the terms on which they stood” (221). The phrase, seemingly innocuous, nonetheless reminds the reader that Widdowson and Monica stand on “terms” that are more economic than romantic. Indeed, the word “term” denotes, as the *OED* defines it, both a “limit in space or duration” (*OED*, sb. I) and, though archaically, “a set or appointed time or date, esp. for payment of money due” (sb. II, 3a). In effect, Gissing suggests, Barfoot evaluates Monica’s marriage with Widdowson on an economic level. As if to reinforce this monetary allusion, Gissing tells us that Monica has “[...] no fear whatever of her conceiving an undue interest in Barfoot [...]” but that his “[...] confidences [...] afforded such a fruitful subject for speculation, that she could not obey the prompting of prudence” (222). Oddly but perhaps significantly enough, “confidence,” used twice in this passage, was used to mean as recently as 1872 “a contract by which an ecclesiastic receives a benefice on condition of paying the emoluments, or part of them, to a third person” (*OED*, sb. 9, b). Obviously, this word conveys the idea of monetary exchange for position. Furthermore, it forms part of the phrase, known since 1849, of “confidence trick” or “confidence man,” a construction meant to imply dishonest “swindling” of another’s “money or other valuables” (*OED*, sb. 10). “Speculation,” of course, also suggests “engagement in any business enterprise or transaction of a venturesome and risky nature,” a perfect definition in this novel for marriage (*OED*, sb. 8). Monica and her husband may differ as to the “terms” of their “speculations” or “confidences,” but they both envision the gaining of some “interest,” monetary, class, or otherwise. One can hardly dismiss the multiplicity of intention in Gissing’s use of such terms.

<8>Another episode that illustrates Gissing’s use of a multi-layered vocabulary connected to trade involves, once again, Monica, now estranged from her husband, and Widdowson. To all appearances, Monica has conducted an affair with the insipid Bevis, a man who fails to live up to her expectations of illicit passion. Strictly speaking, however, Monica has not violated her vows. Accordingly, she speaks of the situation as though she were discussing merely the technicalities of a contract:

Listen to me, Alice. If I were guilty I should not be living here at his [Edmund’s] expense. I only consented to do that when I knew what my condition was. But for this thing I should have refused to accept another penny from him. I should have drawn upon my own money until I was able to earn my own living again. (354)

Under the circumstances as she understands them, Monica is justified in continuing to accept money from Edmund. Although she claims that she left Widdowson for having “[...] lost every trace of affection [...]” for him, Monica still feels entitled to a measure of his support. In fact, she feels that she has been generous, having relinquished the right, in this case an overtly fiscal one, to calculate “[...] the most profitable course” (354). She continues to negotiate, by proxy, with him for future arrangements: “I am willing to make an agreement” (355). Again and again, Gissing uses words, here and elsewhere, such as “profit,” “interest,” “affairs,” “account,” and “charge” in suggestive and equivocal ways: “My interest in Mr. Barfoot was only on your account” Monica explains to Rhoda (359). Rhoda, just prior to that declaration, had declared ““Your affairs don’t really concern me, Mrs. Widdowson [...]” and then adds “[...] is there any

profit in our talking of these things” (357)? Monica’s and Rhoda’s thinking, as well as that of other characters in the novel, automatically resorts to terminology that arguably has double implications, as they do in the following passage [italics mine]:

She had determined on making a confession to Rhoda; but would she *benefit* by it? Was Rhoda generous enough to *appreciate* her motives? It did not matter much. She would have *discharged a duty* at the *expense* of such shame, and this fact alone might strengthen her to face the miseries beyond. (356)

In describing Monica’s anxiety in trying to explain her behavior to Rhoda Nunn, Gissing uses vocabulary that refers, respectively, to profit, the accumulation of interest, the legal actions associated with the enforcement of a will, taxation, and expenditure. Here, as elsewhere, Gissing invests (pun intended) the most intimate of human situations with the language of business. Near the end of the novel, when Widdowson contemplates the possibility that he may be the father of Monica’s child after all, Gissing tells us that “it must be very long before he could regard it with a shadow of paternal interest” (381). “Interest,” whether this means the accumulation of profit or the arousal of intellectual curiosity, does not seem appropriate. Why not “affection?” As is often the case in Gissing’s novels, both parental and gendered relationships find spoken expression through financial rather than amatory terminology.

<9>As I have already noted, one indication that the language of *The Odd Women* strengthens the conception of individuals as, alternately, products or instruments of the economic system lies in Gissing’s treatment of Mary Barfoot and Rhoda Nunn. Monica conceptualizes, how astutely she may not fully recognize, the establishment these women run as “[...] an old-maid factory [...]” (55). Rhoda, a woman who fully embraces capitalism, had earlier described her business as one which produces from a “great reserve” of raw materials a specific product: “hard-hearted women laborers” (40-41). She willingly consigns unsuitable material, women who are unable to fend for themselves in any fashion, to what she terms “[...] that ragged regiment” (57). They are useless despite any class connections they may or may not have. Mary Barfoot, though somewhat more charitable, shares Rhoda’s basic agenda: “Her aim was to draw from the overstocked profession of teaching as many capable young women as she could lay hands on, and to fit them for certain of the pursuits nowadays thrown open to their sex” (60). She and Rhoda see these women in terms of supply and demand. Rhoda, the more radical of the two, bases her reluctance to assist the fallen Miss Royston on the fact that she “[...] represents the profitless average [...],” women who cannot be employed in any capacity (63-4). Both Rhoda and Mary fear, as any good capitalist would, the “waste” of their product/commodity in either marriage or “endless follies” (65). Karl Marx identified the basic elements of the labor process in capitalism in terms Rhoda and Mary themselves no doubt recognize and, though in a slightly altered version, employ: “Our present business is with the production of commodities [...]” (Marx 179). In this process, Rhoda and Mary, classically capitalist, have no use for non-productivity. Their language involving profit and employment confirms Marx’s analysis of the capitalist agenda. Not only, Marx points out, does the entrepreneur want to produce a commodity, he/she wants to produce “surplus value in addition” (Marx 197). There is no value in the “profitless average” (*The Odd Women* 63-64).

<10>Because it so pointedly addresses the efforts of its major characters to manipulate or escape the economic consequences of the capitalist reality in which they live, *The Unclassed* provides another excellent example of Gissing's attempts to reflect that relentless reality through his use of connotative idiom. Another compelling reason to include this novel in a discussion of Gissing's allusive constructions lies in the fact that it is, as Robert Selig has pointed out in *George Gissing*, a "hybrid novel," combining romance and realism and depicting characters who derive from a class slightly lower than the middle class characters of *The Odd Women* (25). These personages, some of whom are poised, like Leonard Bast of Forster's later *Howard's End*, on the edge of the irreclaimable social abyss, and some of whom are already immersed in that category, comprise elements of British society directly effected by the vagaries of *laissez-faire* capitalism, a force that rendered class distinctions fluid by making money the new arbiter of class standing. At least one character belongs to the worst stereotype of capitalist rapacity, the slumlord Abraham Woodstock. Also, because *The Unclassed* is Gissing's second novel, it shows the early tendency in Gissing's novels to reflect a concern with the economic ramifications of relationships through editorial or conversational means. Ironically, the more they struggle to evade a life controlled by the dictates of a relentless economic system, the more evident it becomes that Gissing's characters cannot win such a contest. In addition, money, whether in its absence or in its abundance, poisons human relationships and renders even those who possess it incapable of experiencing freedom or authentic love. This imperative affects both the privileged and the deprived of each gender. Although Gissing uses this technique on a more muted scale than he does in *The Odd Women*, he nevertheless employs both narrative and dialogue to remind the reader of the ubiquitous demands and influence of money. Constance Harsh, in an article about *The Unclassed*, remarks that "[...] its focus on the condition of unclassment anticipates the insights of later work such as *The Odd Women* [...]" (912). Although Harsh's interest lies in narrative restrictions, her remarks nonetheless link these works and others in ways that definitely bear upon Gissing's ongoing dissection of the capitalist programme and its infiltration of behavior and speech.⁽⁸⁾ I believe, in addition, that Gissing takes pains to suggest the growing fragility of class brought about by the instability of economic status within this system. The very title of this novel underlines this fact. Class, for Gissing, can no longer be fixed by inheritance or family. Rather, it is arbitrated, annihilated, and reconstructed by money.

<11>None of the characters in the novel, as I have stated, escape from the limitations or corruptions inherent in the economic system. Jacob Korg, in his *Introduction* to the novel, believes that these characters experience "their central problems" as a result of "their emotional entanglements" rather than from "the social system" (xii). I would point out however, that, in many cases, the emotional entanglements to which Korg refers either find their origin or undergo exacerbation because of financial considerations. One crucial example of the inability of characters to transcend their economic conditions involves Ida Starr and her grandfather, Abraham Woodstock, the wealthy owner of pestilential tenement houses. Woodstock, who will not hesitate to evict bodily a tenant whose rent is in arrears, subscribes literally to the extreme capitalist dictum that one may charge what the market (the consumer) will bear (98-100). If the consumer does not like this arrangement, he or she can go elsewhere to obtain the services in question (100). Having been estranged from Ida's mother, Woodstock approaches Ida as a businessman with a proposition. He identifies himself only as an acquaintance of her mother, and tells her brusquely that she can either come with him and be cared for or stay in her present circumstances (38). When the child refuses him because she does not know his real identity and

because she ascertains that he had refused to assist her mother in her final illness, he abandons her. Gissing informs us that “Woodstock was incapable as yet of understanding that love must and will be its own reward” (39). This seemingly ingenuous declaration manages to portray the degradation of human affection by considerations of “reward,” or of profit and loss. After all, Woodstock reflects, “What was the child to him, or he to her” (38-39)? Although the situation changes later in the novel, the answer to the question at this point of the narration is an implicit “nothing.” In his *Introduction*, Jacob Korg, as I have noted earlier, states his belief that “social evils are not really integral to the novel’s structure” (xii). At the same time, he does allow that the efforts of the characters to find “places on the sidelines” of the evils of the system “generate personal difficulties which form the backbone of the story” (xii). While I agree that Gissing’s characters act out of various and complex emotional motivations, I nonetheless believe that encounters such as the one just under discussion make it clear that even biological ties become tainted by the underlying preoccupation with financial benefit and that the language of the text underscores the psychology of this obsession.

<12>Near the end of the novel, a reconciliation occurs between Woodstock and his granddaughter, in which the old man, by a series of coincidences, rescues her from a life of poverty and prostitution. In almost Dickensian fashion, Woodstock attempts reform. He establishes Ida in his home, indulges her whims of philanthropy, and even embarks on a mission, at her encouragement, of improving the wretched conditions he has long imposed on the denizens of his slums. Of course, the powerful entrepreneur male can afford to pamper the granddaughter he rescues, thereby patronizing her “feminine” impulses. When examined closely, however, their reunion takes place under conditions that, however they may seem, take on the essential elements of a transaction. Ida had arranged for Waymark to meet her at the prison on the day of her release from a sentence resulting from a false conviction for robbery. Waymark, who worked for Woodstock as a rent collector, had been instrumental in making the old man aware of his granddaughter’s existence (more coincidence). However, Slimey, one of Woodstock’s tenants to whom we shall later return, abducts Waymark and prevents him from making the appointment. As a result, Woodstock, having located Ida’s whereabouts, visits her in her room (244). At this juncture, since she knows him only as the employer of Waymark, he reveals himself as her grandfather. Ida reminds him of his cruel treatment of her mother and refuses, at first, his renewed offer of protection and patronage. In admitting that he acted wrongly, Gissing says of Woodstock, “Ida could not know what it cost him to utter these abrupt sentences” (245). Of course, Woodstock would naturally think in the nomenclature of “cost.” He offers to treat her as his child and appeals to his “right” to her, a right that she repudiates (246). Obviously, a key element of the capitalist system involves the concept of “rights,” especially property rights, and Woodstock tries automatically to apply this argument in his appeal to his granddaughter. The reader admires her for striving to maintain her hard-won independence and for insisting on her innocence of the robbery. In inquiring about Waymark, Ida becomes anxious about his absence and begs her grandfather to help find him. He promises to enlist the assistance of the police, and, in her “agitated” state, she agrees impulsively to live with Woodstock and be his “child” (247). Both Ida and Woodstock manifest tenderness in this episode, behaving as long-separated kin might be expected to behave. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the undeniably emotional component of this reconciliation, it takes place only after Woodstock has taken great pains to assure himself of Ida’s technical innocence, her reclamation from prostitution, and the possibility of union with Waymark, whom Woodstock regards not only as a member of his own

class, but as a right-thinking member of the same.⁽⁹⁾ On her part, Ida's agreement to Woodstock's proposal takes place in the context of assuring that steps will be taken to locate and rescue Waymark. To some extent, then, Ida has effectively struck a deal with her grandfather, a deal confirmed later on both sides. Incidentally, her "agitated" state may well evoke capitalist fears of labor agitation, which, in this case, Woodstock manages to quell by negotiation and by bringing in the police. Woodstock has bought for himself "[...] the attractions of domesticity" (251). Ida, understandably, begins to enjoy the delights of luxury, education, and philanthropy that he can provide, and she learns to live with the knowledge that he obtains "[...] money from such a source [...]" as the slums (256). In this regard she resembles the worker reconciled to the concessions occasionally made by management. Her happiness is marred, however, by "[...] the old sense of the world's injustice [...]" in which "[...] chance alone befriended her [...]" and which dictated that there persisted "[...] numberless struggling creatures to whom such happy fortune could never come [...]" (255). In this passage, coincidence functions as something more than a convenient Victorian device. Ida recognizes intuitively the role that coincidence, which she calls "chance," plays in capitalistic success. The reader knows that Abraham Woodstock is one of those legendary self-made men made famous in capitalist mythology. His history, Gissing informs us, corresponds to the familiar capitalist tale of a man who possesses "a powerful will," "shrewd intelligence," "physical power," "self-assertion," and "ferociousness," traits that enable him to take advantage of circumstances, to acquire capital, and to use his "commercial genius" to take "the road to fortune" (20-21). As we have seen, it also enables him to purchase his granddaughter from the marketplace of prostitution.⁽¹⁰⁾ Though his attributes enable him to rise as he does, these attributes clearly originate from inherited character, which, someone has said, is destiny. Furthermore, the word "fortune" means both "wealth" (*OED*, sb. 6) and "Chance, hap or luck" (*OED*, sb. 1), a duality that, in my view, Gissing would not have us forget. On a very basic level, Gissing's word selection in *The Unclassed* allows us to contemplate the array of possible interactions between the rigid instinctual constructs of human motivation and the equally smothering superstructure of profit motive conditioned onto the psyche (and into the vocabulary of the psyche) by decades, perhaps centuries, of evolving mercantile consciousness.

<13>Fittingly, it remains for us to consider characters in *The Unclassed* which, for Gissing, exemplify a baseline for evaluation as reductionistic economic entities. Both of these characters represent naked, class-defined and class-immobilized specimens motivated entirely by calculations of economic gain. Neither of these characters can conceive of human life in terms other than those of the most primitive Darwinistic capitalism. In their view, economic existence concerns two relationships only: predator and prey. The narrator presents the first of these personages, Harriet Smales (a name suggestive of associations such as "harrying/harried" and, "small/smell") in an incident wherein her schoolmate Ida has felled her with a slate tablet for referring to Ida's mother as someone who "got her living in the streets" (5). Obviously, Harriet's mentality conceives the most basic of all economic transactions, that of the offering of one's very flesh for sale, as of the essence of participation in the marketplace. When asked why she would have said such a thing about another child's mother, Harriet replies "'It's only what she is'" (7). This viewpoint, which Gissing so cunningly insinuates into her language, and which is consistent with subsequent revelations of her character, essentially states that human beings are, in fact, what they sell. Harriet cannot distinguish human personality from economic activity. As an adult, Harriet employs this insight in trapping the artistic Julian Casti into marriage. Julian had agreed

with her father, before his death, to look after Harriet, his cousin. He attempts to comply with this wish out of kindness, but Harriet sees the situation differently. After a visit to Julian's new lodgings, the covetous Harriet, having "[...] saturated her mind with the fiction of penny weeklies [...]," entices Julian to a visit to her own rooms on some trifling pretext (102-103). By pre-arrangement, another lodger discovers the pair alone together, a circumstance that Harriet magnifies as a terrible compromise to her maiden character (103-104). Predictably, Harriet makes use of her virginity in the only manner she understands; she barter it, or at least she barter the idea of this article. She renders her recognition of its economic value categorical, pointing out the loss she will suffer in her ability to get "a reference" (104). Like any shrewd person of business, Harriet regards Julian's "complexities of conscience" as items of which she can make "practical use," particularly where her "[...] affections and interest were concerned [...]" (105). To Harriet, no distinction exists between her affections and her interests (this word "accumulates" throughout Gissing's fiction, so to speak). Her manipulation of Julian arises out of her desire to live in lodgings like his and to avoid work. When she allegedly loses her "place" due to this manufactured scandal, Julian cannot imagine the "far more palpable fraud" she perpetrates upon him, merely for economic gain (106). Her actions, of course, are consistent with her perception of herself as object of sale, and like many a successful and unscrupulous capitalist, she manages to find a buyer through verbal deceit and misrepresentation. That she derives her strategy from those penny weeklies in order to counterfeit the language that enables her to peddle herself to Julian points once again to Gissing's connection of language to the pervasiveness of economic concerns. To Harriet, life is, more or less, a cheap fiction, the words of which either enable one to make a profit from someone else or which enable others to victimize oneself. Expressing herself "[...] in phrases of the most absurdly high-flown kind [...]" and getting "[...] into the habit of heaving profound sighs between her sentences [...]," Harriet's language shows once again that Gissing wishes us to be aware of the correlation between the words characters use and the entrepreneurial agenda that informs these expressions (102). In Gissing's novels, words are often a form of coin.

<14>The other baseline representative of class fixity and of the economic forces that often prevent class movement, is Slimy, the degraded member of the underclass who emerges progressively and linguistically as the spokesperson of that category. Slimy, interestingly enough, shares space with Harriet Smales on the moral, and ultimately the social, scale that Gissing portrays in the novel. These two characters sink to an almost bestial status, an indication of the leveling power poverty has on gender and on the mutability of class standing. When the reader first encounters Slimy, Gissing distinguishes him through animalistic imagery and through emphasis upon his virtual incoherence:

Leaning on the counter, in one of the compartments, was something which a philanthropist might perhaps have had the courage to claim as a human being; a very tall creature, with bent shoulders, and head seeming to grow straight out of its chest; thick, grizzled hair hiding almost every vestige of feature, with the exception of one dreadful red eye, its fellow being dead and sightless. He had laid on the counter, with palms downward as if concealing something, two huge hairy paws. (66)

Significantly, this “[...] creature spoke, in hoarse, jumbled words, not easy to catch [...]” (66). After all, Slimy, whose very name reminds the reader of dehumanizing degradation, elicits associations of the Darwinian slime from which primeval life emerged. Gissing may have two things in mind here. Like other Victorians and Edwardians, Gissing sometimes regarded the very poor as irreclaimable and somehow to blame for their own plight. This attitude existed simultaneously with the recognition that the very poor had no voice of their own. They were, in contemporary consciousness, like Slimy: nameless, inarticulate, and brutal. When Gissing later gives this character a voice, the idea of a connection in much of his fiction between language, money, and class gains credibility. On this occasion, Slimy has money, but the manager of the bar will not make change for him. Clearly, other characters place Slimy almost outside of the circle of economic activity and, hence, of humanity. This prejudice situates him beyond discourse itself, a fact emphasized by the fact that others silence him: “Hold your noise,” he is told (66). This silencing continues in other passages. For instance, Woodstock, in collecting rent from Slimy, an act he performs to train Waymark to take over this function, says merely, “Rent, Slimy” (100). To this minimalist command, Slimy merely points “[...] where the pieces of money were found to be lying [...]” (100). In the room Slimy inhabits, Waymark notices rudimentary indications of Slimy’s participation in economic life, such as collections of junk and, ominously, “[...] a knife-grinding instrument, adapted for wheeling about the streets” (100). Again, communication from Slimy remains negligible. When Woodstock asks him how “trade in general” is proceeding for him, Slimy responds ““There never was sich times since old Scratch died, ... No chance for an honest man [...]” (101). Slimy’s comparison of trade to diabolical activity, which surfaces later to significant effect, finds support in the fact that the walls of his room “[...] were all scribbled over with obscene words and drawings [...]” (101). Slimy sees the world of trade through one eye, but his seemingly insignificant declarations at this point, consisting of negations and unspoken profanities, comprise in themselves a commentary on the capitalistic system that has consigned him to what Gissing calls in another novel “the nether world.”⁽¹¹⁾ His attempts to rise from that hell through expression ultimately fail. For instance, Slimy, at one point, makes a noisy spectacle of himself in order to fund his alcoholism. Standing on his head outside of a bar and “[...] drawling out what was meant for a song [...],” Slimy provides entertainment while simultaneously trying to find remuneration through this comical and inverted idiom (186). Unfortunately, this pathetic attempt at profitable communication ends when someone stuffs mud into Slimy’s mouth, silencing him once again (186). Speech should signify money and status, but Slimy, at this juncture, acquires neither of these.

<15> Slimy finally attains substantial, and temporarily profitable, utterance in *The Unclassed*, but he does so through an act of transgression. As the collector for Woodstock, Waymark interacts with Slimy, inasmuch as he occasionally sits with the outcast in Slimy’s room. Waymark regards Slimy explicitly as “some repulsive animal” of whom he is afraid (229). During the event under consideration, Slimy overcomes his incoherence in order to explain to Waymark that he intends to confine and rob the rent collector, gag him, and spend the resulting loot on drink (230–232). As Slimy chains Waymark to the floor and, in an unexpected reversal, renders the rent collector speechless, Waymark “observed with astonishment” Slimy’s sudden “impressive” and “deliberate” statements, all the more remarkable for their contrast to his “previous intercourse” of “barely articulate” “grunts and snarls” (232). Slimy has become the voice of the underclass at its worst. An end-stage alcoholic whose increasing consumption of liquor has led to hallucinations, he has nevertheless decided that his problem lies in the fact that he cannot afford

to buy enough of his friends Brandy, Whisky, Rum, and Gin, because of his lack of money (233). He devotes his sudden eloquence to a skewed analysis of economic deprivation, and his solution to his situation is suicide through drink.

My four friends ain't what they used for to be, an' 'cos I ain't got enough of 'em. It's unsatisfaction, that's what it is, as brings the burnin' i' th'inside, an' the devils in the 'ead. Now I've got money, an' for wunst in my life I'll be satisfied an' 'appy. And then I'll go where there's *real* burnin', an' *real* devils – an' let 'em make the most o' Slimy! (233)

This reference to making the most of oneself forms another of the instances wherein Gissing comments indirectly upon the nature of the unregulated capitalist system through concepts embedded in the novel's language. Even in hell, Slimy will be subject to the exigencies of use by a set of exploitative devils other than Abraham Woodstock and his agent. In fact, destructive consumption is of the essence of Slimy's language in this quotation: the consumption of liquor, produced by entrepreneurs and used as a mechanism of suppression, perhaps elimination, of the underclass; the consumption of self as epitomized by Slimy's burning insides, achieving his implicit cooperation with his own destruction; and most importantly, the idea of consumption as the goal of existence and of money as the means of attaining this goal. Slimy's spoken illustration of the rationale behind his crime falls into line with the reigning rationale of capitalism itself. Ironically, even though Slimy tries to escape his miserable existence on the margins of society, and although he gains a voice, he essentially endorses his own annihilation as both an instrument and a product of capitalist resource depletion. He becomes, not a rebel fighting against economic oppression, but a robber baron whose industry is self-immolation.

<16>Instances in *The Odd Women* and *The Unclassed* of the semantic pervasiveness of what may be termed “capitalist consciousness,” which inevitably and increasingly informs and determines class consciousness in its characters, abound in Gissing's novels. A professor of mine once called *The Odd Women* “a smart book.”(12) One aspect of this smartness, I contend, extends to *The Unclassed* and to other Gissing novels as well. It consists of Gissing's ability to utilize connotative duality and, simultaneously, to infuse the awareness of ineluctable economic reality into the very language of his characters. For most of the individuals in these novels, gender, class, and other differences, though they exist, are virtually subsumed and transmuted under this single reality, one which results in the manifestation of Slimy's conception of it: “unsatisfaction” indeed (*Unclassed* 233).

Endnotes

(1)Wendy Lesser, in “Even Handed Oddness: George Gissing's *The Odd Women*, while assuredly not the first critic to associate the novel with feminism, states flatly that it “is one of the best portrayals of the women's movement, old or new” (210). Lesser's main contention, that Gissing

“[...] hovers between the roles of a man dressed in woman’s clothing and a woman enclosed in a man’s body [...]” grants Gissing Lesser’s stamp of approval as a *bona fide* feminist. Somewhat more recently, Patricia Comitini, in “A Feminist Fantasy: Conflicting Ideologies in *The Odd Women*,” discusses the “kinds of feminism presented” within the historical context of the novel (530). Gissing, Comitini argues, creates an “ideological fantasy” that creates feminist “[...] possibility as well as its condition of impossibility” (530). In writing about another novel, Molly Youngkin, in “‘All She Knew Was, That She Wished to Live’: Late-Victorian Realism, Liberal-Feminist Ideals, and George Gissings *In the Year of the Jubilee*,” traces Gissing’s attempts to depict the female protagonist as possessing “[...] a certain degree of agency, if not as much as liberal-feminist critics of the 1890s would have liked” (72). Initial contemporary reactions to Gissing as feminist are well-documented. Comitini’s article focuses on the different versions of feminism addressed in *The Odd Women* current at the time of its publication (542).(^)

(2) Critics have uniformly recognized the obvious fact that economic matters inform *The Odd Women* and many of Gissing’s other novels. One early critic, Harold Frederick, in reviewing Gissing’s work in an 1895 article in the *New York Times*, refers to the Maddens’s struggles in the context of their economic plight (*Gissing: The Critical Heritage* 258). Other reviewers of the novel, such as Kate Woodbridge Michaelis, writing for *The Boston Evening Transcript* in 1896, almost casually acknowledge the importance of economic status in Gissing’s work. Michaelis characterizes *The Odd Women* as “[...] a grave and earnest study of the existing lives of a certain class and set of women, and is inspired by a heartfelt desire to aid them in reaching a better plane of life” (*Heritage* 273). In other words, it is inspired by a desire to better them economically. The problem of poverty in general and its amelioration constituted possibly the most pervasive and significant element of Victorian and Edwardian consciousness, dating from at least the hungry forties, when, as Standish Meacham points out in *A Life Apart: the English Working Class 1890-1914*, Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell took on the brutalities of working class and underclass life (8). Very few novels, essays, or commentaries of the period fail to deal to some degree, directly or otherwise, with the exigencies and contingencies of economic inequity. C. F. G. Mastermann, in *From the Abyss*, and even Americans like Jack London, in *The People of the Abyss*, wrote very powerful descriptive indictments of the threatening and paralyzing economic conditions that created this category of humanity. London’s book describes a working class that benefits little from belonging to the greatest empire, in terms of extent and influence, that has ever existed. The question of what to do about this situation dominated Victorian and Edwardian literature. Even the narrator in works like E. M. Forster’s *Howard’s End*, who tries to dismiss certain elements of the very poor as “unthinkable,” nonetheless thinks long and hard about these denizens of the abyss (38). In fact, the characters endlessly discuss what measures should be taken to remedy economic disparity. Margaret Schlegel’s solution is the most memorable and reductionistic: “Give them money” (108). Zarema Aslami, in “The Space of Optimism: Space Fantasy and the Case of *The Odd Women*,” interprets *The Odd Women* and other Gissing novels as examples of works which imply the literary existence of a “state fantasy,” in which the author assumes that the government somehow can and should intervene to eradicate poverty (56). This assumption, naturally enough, flows from and reinforces the validity of the extensive pattern of reform legislation of the nineteenth century (Aslami 60).(^)

(3) I need note here only that words like “valuable” in this passage offer proof for my contention that Gissing’s diction points constantly to the novel’s fixation on economic matters even in the

context, as here, of social relationships like friendship. I will often trust to the reader the duty of recognizing the obvious allusions to fiduciary implications in many of my citations from Gissing's works.(^)

(4)This topic, in and of itself, could form the basis of a conference-length paper. Again, I have chosen to omit most tedious citations of definitions for each of these terms because the connotations I have in mind are so obvious, even to someone as uninformed as I am in the area of economic jargon. Therefore, I only resort to the *OED* when Gissing uses a word with a more esoteric link to economic activity than common knowledge (defined, admittedly, as knowledge I myself possess) might provide.(^)

(5)Gissing connects the narration of Monica's empty life to her lack of interest in religion, not because he had any confidence in religion but because he wants to emphasize the soulless quality of life Monica has experienced as a shop girl. Gissing embraced agnosticism and seemed to believe that, in Korg's words, "man is doomed to loneliness in a harsh and inexplicable universe" (243-244). Nonetheless, at times, Gissing's novels express some ambivalence about religious faith. Gissing's authentically religious characters do not often exhibit the rampant hypocrisy of an Alec D'Urberville, for instance. At worst, as he does in the case of the Vicar Mr. Wyvern in *Demos*, Gissing portrays religious characters as sincere if somewhat ineffective and befuddled. Exceptions to this rule do exist in Gissing's novels. At least one character, Godwin Peak, in *Born in Exile*, feigns orthodoxy in order to climb socially. Nevertheless, Gissing seems to have believed that a certain amount of religiosity might be of benefit in reducing the destructive habits of the poor, such as drinking. On the other hand, religious fervor cripples poor Maud Enderby in *The Unclassed*, rendering her unable to enjoy human affection to its fullest extent. She inherits from her aunt, Miss Bygrave, the belief that "fondness for the world, enjoyment of what we call pleasure" is sin (34). Thus, although she inherits a certain amount of money, she cannot enjoy the freedom it might have given her.(^)

(6)"Interest" is one of those words to which Gissing resorts with impressive frequency. As I demonstrate later in the paper, he even uses this word in connection to the most primal of human relationships: parent and child. However, the word recurs so frequently that I do not comment on it in every instance. Be it known that the word nearly always means more than "intellectual curiosity."(^)

(7)Bella Royston's uselessness has been effected largely by her novel reading, according to Rhoda Nunn (64). Reading, which involves discourse, often stands for the cheapened quality of life under the economic *status quo*. My observations about Harriet Smales and her appropriation of the emotional point of view of the "penny dreadfuls" has relevance in this regard as well.(^)

(8)Constance D. Harsh, in "Gissing's *The Unclassed* and the Perils of Naturalism," argues, for example, that Waymark interprets Maud and Ida "[...] as the two sides of his ideal (92): the respectable middle class woman and the sensual woman of the people [...]" (922). Does not this observation support one aspect of my thesis; namely, that Gissing's characters are frequently appraised on what amounts to economic distinctions, and that this appraisal infuses itself into language and narrative commentary? One might more correctly claim that "class distinctions"

fits better here, except that Ida's class affiliation effectually changes from decidedly lower middle to upper middle class when she comes into money. This distinction may seem a trivial one, but lower middle class teeters precariously on the edge of that famous abyss. (^)

(9) Quite possibly, I am open to criticism in that I sometimes blur the distinction between class and capital. However, one of the things I have noticed in Gissing is that he often does the same thing. Very often, he comes close to saying that one's perceived class can change with money or with the lack thereof. As Robert L. Selig points out, Gissing himself "hovered in social limbo, at home neither in low nor in high society" (10). Mostly, though admittedly not entirely, this uncertain social identification resulted from lack of money. At the very least, in Gissing's novels, money usually affects one's desire and ability to affiliate with a higher class, as readings of *Demos* and *New Grub Street* readily demonstrate. In *The Unclassed*, Waymark had formerly been, at the outset of the novel, a radical in his social views. He quit his job as teacher, suffered a period of unemployment, and then, without much of a struggle with conscience, became a rent collector for Woodstock, whom he had known since childhood as an acquaintance of his father. In their discussions of social class, money, and government, Waymark and Woodstock often differ in theory. In fact, however, Waymark becomes a paid functionary of Woodstock's unscrupulous capitalistic endeavors. He is able to maintain his level of class identification only by making sufficient amounts of money. Ida, up to this point, has acted in a very genteel manner, as her enlightened conversations with Waymark illustrate. Nonetheless, she has been a prostitute, and prostitutes generally only rise in social standing if they stop being prostitutes, either by marrying up the ladder, making enough money to retire from their profession, or by reconciling with their long-lost rich and respectable grandfathers. As we see in Ida's reconciliation to Woodstock, her prostitution is a marker of her unacceptability for admission to his niche. She must divest herself of this marker in order to make the step up to Woodstock's class position. (^)

(10) When we speak of a woman "selling herself," we normally mean that she is a prostitute. When we refer to a man "selling himself," we mean that he is putting forth his best qualities so that he can gain legitimate employment in the economic arena. I do not think that Gissing's juxtaposition of Ida's overt prostitution with Waymark's status as an employee of Woodstock is accidental, nor is it without irony. Both of these individuals are essentially whores. Ida simply displays more honesty about what she does. Of course, the different applications given to the meaning of phrases of this kind bear directly on my contention about the intrusion of economic terminology into the dialogue of the novel. (^)

(11) *The Nether World* would bear discussion within the context of this paper, as would *Demos*, *New Grub Street* and others. In these works, Gissing directly examines the working poor, that class existing precariously in the anteroom of the Abyss. These characters generally live from week to week, making just enough money to subsist. If, in Jack London's famous and frequently cited words, "the thing" should occur, that is, an accident, an illness, a legal disaster, or a change in rent or prices, these characters fall directly into the workhouse, the lunatic asylum, the hospital, the grave, or jail (London 109). The genteel poor certainly exist. However, if they stay poor too long or become so poor as to fall into the abyss of the lower orders, they are no longer genteel. (^)

(12) LeeAnne Richardson, who has written on the literature of the “period of transition” and who frequently teaches a course in this subject at Georgia State University, made this remark to a group of her students on February 22, 2005. She meant, I think, that Gissing’s work exceeds the middling appraisal that critics have sometimes ascribed to him. Constance D. Harsh mentions this “undervaluation” of Gissing in “Gissing’s *The Unclassed* and the Perils of Naturalism” (913). With a few notable exceptions, so-called “naturalist” authors get targeted more often than others for the kind of dismissive language Harsh cites. We do not like, Harsh claims, a writer who “ambiguously signals his own allegiances” (913).(^)

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