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**Gissing's *New Grub Street* and the Wider Concerns of Impoverishment**

Trying to survive on an irregular income, Harold Biffen, educated and impoverished author, pawns his belongings four times in the course of *New Grub Street*. Edwin Reardon, writer and self-declared part of a class of “casual wage-earners,” sells books and furniture to second-hand dealers to supplement his earnings.<sup>1</sup> Major and minor characters often feel the pang of hunger: Reardon spends time in “semi-starvation,” Biffen is described as a man of “excessive meagreness [that] would all but have qualified him to enter an exhibition in the capacity of living skeleton,” a “hunger-bitten clerk” is seen scribbling job applications, and an unemployed surgeon, Victor, begs for coffee and food at Camden Town Railway Station.<sup>2</sup> Much attention has been paid to how *New Grub Street* represents the failures and successes of late-Victorian writers competing in the literary market of the 1880s.<sup>3</sup> As Simon James has shown, the conditions of literary work pervade the characters’ social relationships and their attempts to sustain themselves: “Writing, the body, clothing are all translated through the cash nexus; buying a book means going without a meal; writing a book can mean prolonged starvation.”<sup>4</sup> Such analyses clearly reveal Gissing’s critique of the commercialisation of literature, and his sympathy for the precarious employment and poverty of authors whose opportunities to publish and earn a living depended on the mass appeal and hence profitability of their writing. But these interpretations do not take account of *New Grub Street*’s participation in much wider contemporary concerns and fears about impoverishment, particularly those generated from a growing worry about rising unemployment.

This article aims to address that gap by considering how *New Grub Street* responds to the discourse of men’s unemployment and under-employment that comprised two main versions of the causes of worklessness and its resultant poverty. Sometimes competing, and at

other times overlapping, one version read and articulated destitution as a blameless effect of economic fluctuations in the labour market, the other as a failing of moral character.<sup>5</sup>

Significantly, these two strands were underpinned by an emerging recognition that bouts of unemployment were not only experienced by the working class, who were already often limited to seasonal work and short-term engagements, but also by those with the background and wherewithal to earn an income commensurate with middle-class status. Assessments of the working-class poor that connected individuals' unemployment with unsound moral character were moderated by a possibility that the middle-class unemployed could be measured by the same standards. But accounts that explained enforced idleness as a product of economic slumps threatened to undermine moral judgments about the poor, which were central to charitable and state relief of those in distress, and crucial to a culture that encouraged self-improvement. I argue that *New Grub Street* exploits this ideological fault line to demonstrate that social inequities lay at the heart of unemployment and impoverishment, and to unsettle assumptions about their causes.

Before proceeding to an analysis of *New Grub Street*, it is useful to provide a more detailed overview of the debates about unemployment through which I locate my reading of the novel. Throughout the 1880s, there was a developing understanding, derived from social investigations, economic statistics, and local government reports of pauperism, that casual labour – or underemployment – produced chronic poverty.<sup>6</sup> Discussing the 1886 reports of English regional Poor Law inspectors, Hugh Tregarthen, contributor to *The National Review*, expresses a fear that while “absolute destitution” can be addressed by the “Local Government Board” and its Guardians, a continuing trade depression and prospect of a harsh winter likely means that “small householders,” “petty traders,” “casual labours” and any “class of person whose income is precarious” will begin to “seek relief.”<sup>7</sup> The range of possible applicants for future relief imagined by Tregarthen, and the Poor law inspectors' reports from which he

draws freely, stretch not just beyond the unemployed but also the working class, until the group includes those “who have to pay augmented rates out of greatly diminished profits.”<sup>8</sup>

Several commentators noted how economic cycles impacted upon the waged-class to the extent that precarious work, already common for working-class women, unskilled, agricultural, and industrial workers such as Dockers, was beginning to more rapidly shape the labour market. The “respectable out-of-work population” include not just the “upper-class artisan,”<sup>9</sup> but also “skilled artisans, mechanics, shop assistants and clerks”<sup>10</sup> who can be now be found looking for food and shelter alongside the “unseen poor,” including authors unable to find “regular work.”<sup>11</sup> *Longmans’ Magazine*, which asked readers to donate money to the running of the Donor, a truck run by the Sisters of Charity that doled out or sold cheap food to the employed and unemployed, reports alleged conversations between volunteers and those whom they fed:

‘You have not been used to outdoor work, I fancy?’ the sister said to one poor guest.

‘How do you guess that ma’am? But it’s true.’

‘By your hands.’ They were long, thin hands – not roughened by outdoor labour.

‘I was a draper, ma’am. I had a nice little business at one time; I never thought to come to this.’

‘How did you lose ground, then?’

‘[...] I worked hard, too, but my health went; and it’s a ruin to trust altogether to an assistant. So I just got lowered and lower and more out of heart and pocket, till I had to put up the shutters altogether. When I got better I tried for work in my line, but it was no good. There were hundreds of stronger and likelier men in the field before me; no one would have me.’<sup>12</sup>

The *Longman’s* article dramatises the fall towards pauperism for a range of men and women, constructing a narrative that emphasises the economic impact on respectable men who struggled to find employment in a range of occupations and trades.

The more unemployment came to be considered as an economic condition that potentially affected all workers, the more commentators worried that this condition threatened to demoralise both the respectable working class and other social strata. One essayist imagines, for example, a “sinking class” of people that need “tender and respectful treatment” before market forces edge them towards becoming part of a “sunken” class.<sup>13</sup> In particular, precarious work and income were thought to prohibit the nurturing of habits that distinguished the respectable worker from the disreputable one. As part of a larger rhetoric of middle-class self-reliance and working-class improvement, commentators in the periodical press, and philanthropic organisations such as the Charity Organisation Society (COS), which co-ordinated outdoor relief for the destitute and used case work assessors and home visitors to do so, were keen to sustain the concept of the deserving and undeserving poor. The undeserving poor were categorised as those whose lack of moral character could be discerned through behaviour such as intemperance, slovenly appearance, a refusal to budget responsibly and be thrifty, and a tendency to live off the proceeds of pawned items and charitable hand-outs. The deserving poor were those capable but unable to work and who showed good moral character.<sup>14</sup> Changing understandings of the economic causes of unemployment complicated the COS’s accounts of moral character precisely because unemployment, however temporary, prevented the habits they espoused. Canon Samuel Barnett, a founding member of the COS, makes the point that temporary employment causes hardship, suggesting that if those “who employ people... would think, they would no longer content themselves with phrases about thrift as almighty for good.”<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, the notion that the unemployed were morally culpable for their own circumstances still had influence, and a central question that haunted the discourse of unemployment was this: how could the moral character of those in the “sinking class” be evaluated? This question is taken up in *New Grub Street*. Like other novelists of the period,

Gissing was influenced by the case material of philanthropic organizations. But his novels also helped to shape some of that case work. As Ruth Livesey has shown, the COS's studies of the poor were informed by social investigator Clara Collet's reading of Gissing's descriptions of working class character in *The Nether World* and *Thyrza*.<sup>16</sup> Yet, Dianne Maltz points out that by the mid-1890s Gissing had become "disenchanted with the rhetoric of the Charity Organisation Society."<sup>17</sup> The discussion that follows argues that *New Grub Street* also registers a deep unease with assumptions about the link between impoverishment and lack of moral character. The novel's "sinking class" of writers have habits, homes and appearances which frequently register a risk of demoralisation. But Gissing refuses to allow his readers to make easy moral judgments about this "sinking class." In doing so, Gissing not only exposes how middle-class prejudices are implicit in readings of moral character, he also suggests that new understandings of the economic causes of unemployment make those readings difficult to justify and sustain.

Lamenting the case of Sykes, a man of letters whose alcoholism and lack of regular earnings go hand-in-hand, Biffen and Reardon wonder about the cause and effects of his poverty and inebriation. It is not made clear which came first for Sykes, his drinking or failure to publish. Sykes is apparently so shocked at earning money that this event culminates in his arrest for being "drunk and disorderly." Biffen tells Reardon that Sykes's Court fine of five shillings was easily met by the defendant: "He's writing a London Letter for some provincial daily, and the first payment had thrown him off his balance." Biffen also admits to Reardon that he had "deliberately spent a certain proportion of the money that ought to have gone for food in the cheapest kind of strong liquor," but stopped short of addiction. The motive behind Biffen's decision to only sometimes quell hunger with liquor is encapsulated by both Reardon's musings on the topic, who remarks that both he and his companion are "respectable creatures," and the tale of Sykes. Reardon wonders if the vice of alcohol is

worth the danger to reputation and a man's ability to work given its capacity to produce forgetfulness, while Sykes's downward spiral, or sinking, towards possible pauperism stands, Biffen says, as "a warning" about the perils of alcohol.<sup>18</sup> *New Grub Street* opens up two possibilities: that drinking is a cause of impoverishment or one of its effects.

Such possibilities fuelled debates about the destitute and unemployed in late-Victorian Britain. One strand of the argument linked drinking to bad character which, in turn, meant that no charitable interventions could rescue individuals from their lot. As one observer typically puts it: "whenever you cross the line between the honest, deserving poor, and the careless, ill-behaved, intemperate poor...the best-intentioned efforts prove fruitless."<sup>19</sup> Such presumptions were likewise embodied in the Charity Organisation Society's assessments of the poor and unemployed; the visitors undertaking case work were advised to have watchful eyes and keep up persistent questioning of an individual's habits to determine whether they lived sober lives.<sup>20</sup> Others were less convinced. Even though Andrew Mearns's influential pamphlet *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* measures the misery of the honest poor against that of the "filthy and abominable," it nonetheless notes that gin palaces allow a "temporary forgetfulness of misery" for those who want an escape from over-crowded housing into a "comparative heaven" of "brightness."<sup>21</sup> In his *Problems of a Great City*, a text from which Gissing had gleaned "some ideas,"<sup>22</sup> radical Right journalist, Arnold White, summarises the problem: "Temperance people hold drink to be the cause of the distress, though it is laid down by others that distress is the cause of the drink."<sup>23</sup> Though White quickly moves to castigating the residuum as unfit savages who should be sterilised,<sup>24</sup> his revulsion at the poor does not fully displace the uncertainty about cause and effect.

Similar uncertainty crept into accounts that echoed White's sentiments, so that even commentators who sought to alert readers to assumed "morally unfit" masses also argued that casual employment turned out onto the streets a "class of temperate and would-be industrious

folks.”<sup>25</sup> Though Samuel Barnett suggests that in some cases drinking might be due to the “weakness of human nature,” a lack of “regular” income for men leads them to seek relief, and impoverishment alone – and nothing else – is the only sign that can be accurately read.<sup>26</sup> If Barnett ensures moral character is not easily determined, then Gissing ensures the same for Sykes. He lives in some “undiscoverable hole,” is destined to “soak himself unconscious” and then die in the workhouse. But the narrator notes that his face “had nothing repulsive in its lineaments and expression; on the contrary, it was pleasing, amiable, and rather quaint. At this moment no one would have doubted his sobriety.”<sup>27</sup> *New Grub Street*, as the example of Sykes begins to show, confounds any possibility that the moral character of the poor is easily evaluated.

The histories and current circumstances of other characters are similarly plotted and constructed. Jasper Milvain, *New Grub Street*'s most commercially successful author, provides a counter-point to the idea that moral character can be read through a person's habits. The opening chapter of *New Grub Street* depicts a thrifty household. Milvain, his mother and two sisters, Dora and Maud, sit in a room “furnished with old-fashioned comfort.” The two younger women are dressed “like ladies, but simply,” while their brother wears clothes made of “expensive material” but ones that “had seen a good deal of service.” Milvain's mother, the widow of a veterinary surgeon, manages her money carefully, using her “annuity of two hundred and forty pounds, terminable with her life”<sup>28</sup> to support her family, particularly her son. Mrs Milvain's house-keeping and budgeting chimes with the principles of self-reliance set out in Samuel Smiles's influential book *Thrift*, which stresses the need for habits of “individual action, economy, and self-denial” for the middle and working class. In *Thrift*, Smiles places the responsibility for a well-maintained but modest home on women, noting that it is “comfort, then, that is the soul of the home,” brought about by a woman's “domestic government,” for it is she who “regulates the order of the



household,” and her discerning “taste” that enables a “material comfort” shaped by “order, arrangement, grace, and refinement.”<sup>29</sup> But Mrs Milvain’s thriftiness enables her son to be dependent, not self-reliant. Jasper Milvain is able to learn the business of publishing in London, build literary contacts, purchase or service decent clothing, and survive on precarious wages because of his dependency; a state of affairs that Maud protests about from the start of the narrative. Maud claims that familial support is allowing her brother to learn “idleness” rather than self-sufficiency, saying “It’s the truest kindness to him to compel him to earn a living. He gets more and more incapable of it.” Mrs Milvain insists that refusing Jasper would be “cruel,” while Maud contends that he is not living “economically enough,” adding that the “people who support him might starve meanwhile.”<sup>30</sup>

Regardless of Maud’s exaggeration about possible starvation, Jasper Milvain exhibits feckless behaviour and actions. While Jasper appears to be sorry that the end of his mother’s life was “made unhappy” because of his own habit of “spending” her money, and “more than was strictly necessary,” all of his romantic attachments are plotted to ensure material gain for himself. His declaration that his dependency on his mother was to prepare himself for “remunerative work”<sup>31</sup> only has truth in it as far as family hand-outs bridge his income and thus allow him to overcome the economic precariousness of literary labour until he is able to marry into *more* money. His final securing of an editorial post, with a regular income, is brought about not by his own thrift, but by his use of other people’s money to operate successfully in the commercial market.

But Jasper Milvain’s journey from hack to editor eschews moral absolutes. He might exploit every financial, social and work opportunity that arises, and profits materially from his family’s thrift while displaying no sign of genuine commitment to that virtue, yet his actions prevent him from slipping towards the kind of poverty – and even pauperism – that other characters in the novel experience or imagine. Marylebone Workhouse appears in the

novel as a reminder of what might happen to those who fail to earn a regular income. Phantom-like, the sound of its clock haunts Reardon throughout the novel, leaving him with a “horror of the workhouse.” The clock has “a thin, querulous voice” that strikes as he imagines “fearful hazards of the future” and chimes as his wife, Amy, becomes anxious that Reardon might “sink down to the position of a poor clerk in some office” and thus tarnish her middle-class respectability. We are told that Hinks and his wife “were kept out of from the workhouse only by charity,” and even at the start of the novel Jasper Milvain speculates that Alfred Yule would rather see Reardon and Amy in “Marylebone Workhouse than advance them a sixpence.”<sup>32</sup>

Milvain is also quick to point out that one of Reardon’s errors of judgment was assuming novel-writing would supply steady earnings: “He got a hundred pounds for ‘On Neutral Ground,’ and at once counted on a continuance of payments in geometrical proportion. I hinted to him that he couldn’t keep it up, and he smiled with tolerance, no doubt thinking ‘He judges me by himself.’ But I didn’t do anything of the kind.”<sup>33</sup> Milvain’s success might well be built upon habits of dependency, but he is fully aware of the economics of casual employment and its impact upon middle-class respectability, which Reardon first fails to understand.

Before his marriage, Reardon sells his books and considers selling his clothes, and although is able to apply for “only humble” regular work, such is the “state of his wardrobe”, decides he cannot “beg for assistance” from his grandfather.<sup>34</sup> After his marriage, Reardon attempts to live as thriftily as possible, trying to balance a lack of money with the need for a respectable appearance. Amy’s parental home exudes ornamental showiness with its “gauzy and fluffy and varnish little drawing room,” her mother keen to keep up the “gloss of easy circumstances” despite a “small income.”<sup>35</sup> But Amy’s living arrangements with Reardon signal how an irregular income provides only a limited capacity for respectability:

A sitting-room, a bedroom, a kitchen. But the kitchen was called dining-room, or even parlour at need; for the cooking-range lent itself to concealment behind an ornamental screen, the walls displayed pictures and bookcases, and a tiny scullery which lay apart sufficed for the coarser domestic operations. This was Amy's territory during the hours when her husband was working, or endeavouring to work. Of necessity, Edwin Reardon used the front room as his study. His writing-table stood against the window; each wall had its shelves of serried literature; vases, busts, engravings (all of the inexpensive kind) served for ornaments.<sup>36</sup>

For late-Victorian families such as the Reardons, a lack of a good and regular income could mean a loss of spatial privacy, but a display of inexpensive portable property, such as pictures and vases, could demonstrate modest and thrifty housekeeping.<sup>37</sup> There was, however, a fine line between thrifty domestic habits and a loss of respectability caused by inadequate living standards, a condition anxiously imagined in contemporary accounts of the disreputable sunken poor and sinking class of the unemployed.

Recounting a conversation with a home visitor from the COS, an essayist remarks that the “undeserving poor” could usually be identified through domestic economy and organisation: a “teapot” used to hoard “pawn tickets” and the sticky marks of a child’s “muddy boots” in the home showed a family was unsuitable for outdoor relief.<sup>38</sup> In contrast, the respectable unemployed are too ashamed to reveal the extent of their “extreme” poverty, concealing their deprivation by maintain a neat and tidy, “decent home” regardless of its bareness.<sup>39</sup> In “Misery in Great Cities,” the boundaries between these two groups are imagined as gradually dissolving, threatening a demoralisation of the respectable householder. Away from the “gutter-byways” of the “most inveterate idleness” is “some quiet little street” where the “common decencies of life may be going on in every other house.” A lack of regular work means the “break-up of the home” and the sale or reluctant pawning of a man’s personal effects, such as the “watch of which he was so proud, and then the birthday brooch that was his wife’s delight.” Even in the suburbs, the working man not of the “labouring class” struggles to live thriftily while avoiding food, home or clothing that

resembles those served or serviced by the most “prosperous housewife amongst the working classes.”<sup>40</sup> The breakdown of the Reardons’ marriage reproduces some of the concerns seen in such reports. Edwin Reardon considers how much his belongings are worth to second-hand dealers, his clothing and books imagined as “a couple of sovereigns.” Unable to pay for his Islington flat, even after taking the waged position of a part-time clerk, Reardon proposes that he and Amy move to the more “sordid conditions” of “still narrower lodgings,” a change in accommodation that his wife is unable to accept. For her, Reardon is unwilling and probably unable to try one more time to establish himself as professional man of letters; he has allowed himself to “sink down,” ensuring further humiliation.<sup>41</sup>

But if Amy gestures towards an innate “moral weakness” on her husband’s part, telling him that he prefers to drag them “down into a lower rank of life,”<sup>42</sup> *New Grub Street* produces a more sceptical response to alignments of moral character with class origins or destination. Alfred Yule resents his wife, who is described as an “untaught woman,” due to her class origins. Their daughter, Marian, is sent to a Fulham boarding school, in order to avoid her becoming “infected with her mother's faults of speech and behaviour.”<sup>43</sup> Yule’s attempts to build distance between mother and daughter rest on his perception of class origins and character, further amplified by his response to his wife’s relatives. Mrs Goby, the wife of an “aberdasher,” visits the Yules to complain about their niece, Annie Rudd, who Mrs Goby had employed as a servant. Noting that she assumed Mrs Yule to be “respectable,” Mrs Goby is furious to discover that Mrs Yules’ family, the Rudds, reside in “Olloway” [Holloway], an area of London known then for overcrowding and pockets of squalor. Imagining what it would be like to take “Mrs Goby by the shoulders and throw her out,” Alfred Yule grows increasingly incensed by his visitor’s appearance and is “driven to frenzy by the mention of his wife's humble family.”<sup>44</sup> The exchange between Mrs Goby and Yule reveals the man of letter’s anxious response to crossing of familial and spatial class boundaries. Goby’s entry to

the house reminds Yule of his fear of the working class, a group he sees as a contagion ready to infect “tongue and manners.”<sup>45</sup> But the scene’s emphasis on the vulgar serves to also ridicule and unsettle relations between respectability and class status.<sup>46</sup> Mrs Goby’s reading of the Rudds’ home as inferior to her place of residence confirms her own sense of respectability, and her reaction to Alfred Yule’s brusque and unwelcoming treatment of her leads the visitor to remark that “I see you're pretty much like your relations in the way of behaving to people, though you do wear better clothes, and—I s'pose—call yourself a gentleman.” Later, Yule tells Marian that Annie Rudd must be a “girl of bad character” introduced by his wife to another “vulgar woman.”<sup>47</sup> His niece’s assumed “bad character” could just as easily be Yule’s, for his willingness to speculate Marian’s possible legacy on a publishing venture and his violent temper resemble thriftlessness and behaviour associated with the undeserving poor.

The difficulty of reading “bad character” is underscored by the novel’s repeated return to the question of whether economic circumstances produce particular types of behaviour. After a visit to Holloway, Mrs Yule tells her daughter that while her family are “all getting ragged,” one of the family’s breadwinners, Tom, “hasn’t brought home ten shillings the last month.” Complaining that her gift of half a crown was met with ungratefulness and demands for more money, and noting that her family thinks she is “rich,” Mrs Yule eventually concedes to Marian’s suggestion that the Rudds’ suffering makes them unjust and unkind.” “You never said anything truer,” Mrs Yule replies, “poverty will make the best people bad, if it gets hard enough.”<sup>48</sup> Amy complains that poverty “brings out all the worst things” in her, Edwin Reardon notes that “kindness can be embittered by misfortune,” and Jasper Milvain suggests that impoverishment does not allow any feelings of “compassion.” Reardon muses that Amy and her relatives read his “character” through the “distorting medium” of material comfort and any attempt to explain his feelings to them “would be equivalent to addressing

them in alien tongues.”<sup>49</sup> Reardon’s embarrassment at the distance between himself and his wife’s family is tied to material circumstances that shape – but are also shaped by – bourgeois values of respectability.<sup>50</sup> Although *New Grub Street* recognises that many of its characters’ poverty is relative, the narrator wryly noting that those who worry about financial means are “relatively poor (who are so much worse off than the poor absolutely),”<sup>51</sup> the novel emphasises that unemployment might well produce particular actions and attitudes, or feelings of humiliation, shame and embarrassment that cannot be traced to innate character.

This emphasis is seen most clearly in Harold Biffen’s failure to survive. Unable to afford decent clothing, Biffen’s appearance is shabby throughout the novel, and he mainly sustains himself on bread and dripping, pease pudding and faggots, a staple diet of the poor in the period.<sup>52</sup> As he attempts to finish his realist novel, “Mr Baily: the Grocer,” his income shrinks, his hunger grows, and he pawns or sells his many of his possessions, keeping, however, one item of clothing, a second-hand overcoat. Biffen’s lack of a formal undercoat is a source of embarrassment. Visiting the Reardons, Biffen refuses to take off his overcoat, the narrator noting that for anyone “to have referred to this fact would have been indelicate.” After Biffen leaves, Edwin Reardon explains to his wife that Biffen had kept his overcoat because either it was warmer than his under-coat or less likely to yield much money at the pawnbrokers or clothes dealer.<sup>53</sup> Yet, the unsold, second-hand overcoat marks more than financial practicality for Biffen. Rather, one of its functions in the plot is save the author’s manuscript from a house fire.

After finishing “Mr Bailey: Grocer,” Biffen ventures outside of his lodgings to take a walk. On his return he hears calls of “fire” near to his quarters and, with dismay, finds the building in flames. In desperation, Biffen battles billowing smoke to climb to the stairs to his room, planning to rescue his work and then use a trapdoor to clamber onto the rooftop. Although he is terrorised by a “horrible vision of furnace fury” and imagines his neighbour,

Mr Briggs, “already stifled,” Biffen risks his life to grab his manuscript off the table and finally exit the building as planned. Standing on the roof, Biffen surveys the streets below:

His life was still in danger; the increasing volumes of smoke warned him that in a few minutes the uppermost storey might be in flames. He took off his overcoat to allow himself more freedom of action; the manuscript, now an encumbrance, must precede him over the chimney-stack, and there was only one way of effecting that. With care he stowed the papers into the pockets of the coat; then he rolled the garment together, tied it up in its own sleeves, took a deliberate aim—and the bundle was for the present in safety.<sup>54</sup>

Although Biffen worries that the coat will be stolen from the street where it now lay, it is returned to him intact. Relieved, Biffen “unrolled the garment, felt to make sure that 'Mr Bailey' was safe, and finally put it on.”<sup>55</sup> If Biffen’s coat rescues the manuscript from a fiery grave, it also begins to fall apart shortly afterwards. As the author wraps his manuscript in brown paper, preparing to deliver it to a publishers, the narrator notes that the coat’s “recent experiences had brought it one stage nearer to that dissolution which must very soon be its fate. “ With little clothing left, and running out of money, Biffen purchases small doses of medicine from “two or three chemists’ shops,” then walks to the top of Putney Hill and takes his own life.<sup>56</sup> And it is the function of Biffen’s coat in the plot, and its status as a second-hand item of clothing, which are important.

In spite of the increased availability of modern, cheap clothing in the late-Victorian period, the very poor relied upon second-hand clothing, garments which served to separate them from the respectable working class.<sup>57</sup> While to characters such as Amy Milvain, who imagines Biffen as a “poor devil who often had to pawn his coat,”<sup>58</sup> the struggling author’s second-hand garment might suggest his decline into the sinking class and the danger of demoralisation, it also draws attention to the economic causes of unemployment. The narrator’s description of Biffen’s coat as “venerable,”<sup>59</sup> an adjective that suggests it is wise and worthy of respect, correlates with the part it plays in saving its owner’s manuscript. Yet once Biffen’s novel is printed, circulated and fails to accrue any critical or economic value,

the coat, worn-out after its use as clothing and protector of Biffen's unpaid labour, exits the plot. Peter Stallybrass has shown that the clothing of the poor carried an exchange value to be traded in, for example, at the pawn shop, but was also a store of personal and familial history:

In the language of nineteenth-century clothes makers and repairers, the wrinkles in the elbows of a jacket or sleeve were called 'memories.' Those wrinkles recorded the body that inhabited the clothing. They memorized the interaction or mutual constitution of person and thing. But from the perspective of commercial exchange, every wrinkle or 'memory' was a devaluation of the commodity.<sup>60</sup>

Already carrying "memories" of previous owners, Biffen's coat records its owner's history. The more time Biffen spends on producing "Mr Baily, Grocer," the poorer he becomes, and his personal appearance, particularly his shabby, second-hand coat, potentially associates him with the very poor who were likely assumed to be of bad character.

Just as the coat is devalued as a commodity the more that Biffen wears it, the nearer his manuscript comes to being at the mercy of market forces. As Aaron Matz suggests, Jasper Milvain's two reviews of Mr Bailey, Grocer, "a favorable one for the *West End*" and a more "guarded appraisal for *The Current*," expose the "lie behind most critical opinion."<sup>61</sup> Milvain, adept at formulating his writing to suit different editors and their audiences, suggests that even if Biffen's novel receives "fair treatment from two or three reviewers...it will be swamped in the flood of literature that pours forth week after week."<sup>62</sup> While readers of *New Grub Street* do not know the contents of "Mr Bailey, Grocer," Milvain's actions and comments make it clear that economic and critical success are fully bound together and hence success or failure are dependent upon the workings of the market. *New Grub Street* – and the venerability of Biffen's coat – make clear that the personal value of mutually constituted things and people (in this case, Biffen, the coat and his manuscript, which all expire or fail at around the same time) cannot be ascertained or measured, only converted into abstract exchange values, whether they are commodified objects or paid labour. Biffen's under-employment, poverty, and his novel's failure are caused by economics, not individual



flagrancy; Biffen's struggle to live carefully and honestly, and Milvain's financial and personal manoeuvrings, do not result in one man of letters being more or less moral or deserving than the other.

If economics establish Biffen and Milvain's circumstances, then in a direct address to *New Grub Street's* readers, the narrator's discussion of Biffen and Reardon explicitly problematises the notion of moral character:

But try to imagine a personality wholly unfitted for the rough and tumble of the world's labour-market. From the familiar point of view these men were worthless; view them in possible relation to a humane order of Society, and they are admirable citizens...

Gifted with independent means, each of them would have taken quite a different aspect in your eyes. The sum of their faults was their inability to earn money; but, indeed, that inability does not call for unmingled disdain.<sup>63</sup>

After readers are asked to "imagine" someone "unfitted" for the "world's labour market," the passage quickly shifts to noting "the familiar point of view" makes "men worthless," then calls for a different and "humane view." Such a view means acknowledging that the possession of money produces a "different aspect" or reading of worthiness, even as "the familiar viewpoint" blames men for their inability to earn money.

Aaron Matz argues that the passage quoted above can be read as an "apologia," designed to ask readers not to "overestimate the satirical intent behind characterisations" of Gissing's failing authors.<sup>64</sup> But it also makes sense as a narrative intervention that illuminates how the discourse of unemployment accommodates middle-class perceptions of moral character, while also revealing the precariousness of that accommodation. Once economics are acknowledged as possible cause of the condition of the middle-class "unseen poor," including those writers who face "disappointment despair, and starvation,"<sup>65</sup> then any suspension of judgement about this class must be accompanied by the same for the working-class poor.

*New Grub Street* enables such a suspension of judgment. Critics have rightly claimed that Gissing's novels often demonstrate an ambivalent attitude towards the poor, at once demonstrating sympathy for their condition and revulsion at their vulgarity.<sup>66</sup> If *New Grub Street* sometimes shows a similar response, it also registers a scepticism about how moral character can be read, ascertained or aligned with class positions. Rather, the novel negotiates shifting understandings of unemployment, alerting its readers to its economic causes and the ideological tussles that underpin debates about the deserving and undeserving poor. Gissing wrote that, "I can get savage over social iniquities, but even then my rage at once takes the direction of planning revenge in artistic revenge."<sup>67</sup> In its articulation of how "social iniquities" can be affirmed and challenged through narrative constructions, *New Grub Street* attests to Gissing's statement.

#### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> George Gissing, *New Grub Street* (1891; London: Penguin, 1985), 290.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 92, 171, 414, 441-2.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Danahay, *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art and Masculinity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 143-156, John Goode, *George Gissing: Ideology and Fiction* (London, Vision Press, 1978), Lewis D. Moore, *The Fiction of George Gissing: A Critical Analysis* (London: McFarland, 2008), Adrian Poole, *Gissing in Context* (London, Macmillan, 1975), Joshua Taft, "New Grub Street and the Survival of Realism," *English Literature in Transition*, 54.3 (2011), 362-381.

<sup>4</sup> Simon James. *Unsettled Accounts: Money and Narrative in the Novels of George Gissing* (London: Anthem Press, 2003), 96.

<sup>5</sup> See John Burnett, *Idle Hands: The Experience of Unemployment, 1790-1990* (London: Routledge, 1994), Barry Eichengreen and T.J. Hatton, "The Emergence of the Problem," in *Interwar Unemployment in International Perspective*, Barry Eichengreen and T.J. Hatton, eds. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), 3-5, Gareth Stedman-Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship Between Classes in Victorian Britain* (1971; London: Verso, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> See William Walters, *Unemployment and Government: Genealogies of the Social* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 12-35.

<sup>7</sup> Hugh Tregarthen, "Pauperism, Distress, and the Coming Winter," *The National Review*, 10 (November 1887), 382-4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 383.

<sup>9</sup> Lizzie Alridge., "Glimpses of Out-of-Work London I," *London Society*, 49 (April 1886), 408.

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- <sup>10</sup> Annie Besant, "The Unemployed," *Our Corner* (September 1887), 155.
- <sup>11</sup> Anon., "The Unseen Poor," *All the Year Round*, (November 22, 1884), 151.
- <sup>12</sup> Anon., "The Unemployed and the 'Donor' in 1888," *Longmans' Magazine*, 13 (January 1889), 298.
- <sup>13</sup> C.H. Bromby, "The Sinking and the Sunken," *The National Review*, 12 (December 1888), 446.
- <sup>14</sup> See Ruth Livesey, "Reading for Character: Women Social Reformers and Narratives of the Urban Poor in Late Victorian and Edwardian London," *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 9 (2004), Stedman-Jones, *Outcast London*, 256-9.
- <sup>15</sup> Samuel Barnett, "Distress in East London," *The Nineteenth Century*, 20 (November 1886), 681.
- <sup>16</sup> Livesey, 43-4.
- <sup>17</sup> Diana Maltz, "Blatherwicks and Busybodies: Gissing on the Culture of Philanthropic Slumming," in *George Gissing: Voices of the Unclassed*, Martin Ryle and Jenny Bourne Taylor, eds. (London: Ashgate, 2005), 16.
- <sup>18</sup> Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 410, 403.
- <sup>19</sup> William Mitchell, "Twelve Years Dealing with Neglected Children," *Good Words*, 26 (December 1885), 392.
- <sup>20</sup> See Livesey.
- <sup>21</sup> Andrew Mearns, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: an Inquiry into the Conditions of the Abject Poor* (London: James Clark and Co, 1883), 14.
- <sup>22</sup> George Gissing, *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian London: The Diary of George Gissing, Novelist*, Pierre Coustillas, ed. (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978), 24.
- <sup>23</sup> Arnold White, *The Problems of a Great City* (London: Remington and Co., 1886), 16.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.
- <sup>25</sup> Anon., "The Nomad Poor of London," *The Contemporary Review*, 47 (May 1885), 715.
- <sup>26</sup> Barnett, 681.
- <sup>27</sup> Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 413, 414.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 36, 35, 40.
- <sup>29</sup> Samuel Smiles, *Thrift* (1875; London: John Murray, 1892), Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14418/14418.txt> (accessed May 30th 2016).
- <sup>30</sup> Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 41.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 416, 151, 229, 542, 37.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-77.
- <sup>37</sup> For a discussion of these issues, see Thad Logan, *The Victorian Parlour: A Cultural Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
- <sup>38</sup> Lizzie Alridge, "Glimpses of Out-of- Work London II," *London Society*, 49 (May 1886), 483.
- <sup>39</sup> Lizzie Alridge, "Glimpses of Out-of-Work London I," 416.
- <sup>40</sup> Frederick Greenwood, "Misery in Great Cities," *The Nineteenth Century*, 25 (May 1889), 744.
- <sup>41</sup> Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 225, 279, 229.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 239, 262.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 124, 125.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 312, 313.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>46</sup> For a discussion of Gissing, class and vulgarity, see Rosemary Jann, "Breeding, Education, and Vulgarity: George Gissing and the Lower-Middle Classes," in *Victorian Vulgarity: Taste in Verbal and Visual Culture* (London: Ashgate, 2009) eds., Susan David Bernstein and Elsie Browning Michie, 85-100.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 312, 317.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 117, 118.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 230, 418, 76, 286.

<sup>50</sup> I draw here on Pamela Fox, *Shame and Resistance in the British Working-Class novel, 1890-1940* (London: Duke University Press, 1994).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>52</sup> See Sally Mitchell, *Everyday Life in Victorian Britain* (London: Greenwood, 1996), 123.

<sup>53</sup> Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 172, 178.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 466, 467.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 469.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 471, 528.

<sup>57</sup> Vivienne Richmond, *Clothing the Poor in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 91.

<sup>58</sup> Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 524.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 412.

<sup>60</sup> Peter Stallybrass, "Marx's Coat," in *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*, Patricia Spyer, ed. (London: Routledge, 1998), 196.

<sup>61</sup> Aaron Matz, "George Gissing's Ambivalent Realism," *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 59.2 (2004), 232, 493.

<sup>62</sup> Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 493.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 462.

<sup>64</sup> Matz, 233.

<sup>65</sup> Anon., "The Unseen Poor," 152.

<sup>66</sup> See for example Paul Delany, *George Gissing: A Life* (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 2008), 379, Robert I. Selig, *George Gissing* (Boston: Twayne Publishing, 1983), 34, Inna Volkova, "George Gissing's *Demos*: Public Discourse and the 'Many-Headed Monster' of Socialism," *Victorian Review*, 39.1 (2013), 142.

<sup>67</sup> George Gissing, *The Collected Letters of George Gissing* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1990), Paul Mattheisen, Arthur C. Young, and Pierre Coustillas, eds., 223-4.