GEORGE GISSING *THE UNCLASSED*: AN ARTISTIC DELINEATION OF A SOCIAL PROBLEM

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ABSTRACT

This paper sheds light on *The Unclassed* as an autobiography in which George Gissing wrote a great deal about himself. It traces Gissing's personal relationship with and marriage to Marianne Helen Harrison, a Manchester street-walker, and then looks at his artistic delineation of Lotty Starr and her daughter Ida in the book.

It tries also to show that in taking up this subject, Gissing is looking back at previous writers and implicitly chiding the stereotyped treatment of the problem, and, out of clinical observation, he endeavours to correct the public misconception and the misinformed prejudice against this character in real life.

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The Unclassed has a very special relationship with the life of its creator which makes a combined biographical and textual study of the work quite rewarding. In this novel, Gissing leans heavily on the experience he gained both theoretically and practically from his relationship with Marianne Helen Harrison, a young Manchester street-walker.

Gissing met and fell in love with "Nell" as he always called her, at the age of eighteen while still a student at Owens College. Sensitive and idealistic as he was, he considered her a victim of society, and with a mixture of idealism, naiveté and infatuation, he took it upon himself to redeem her. He gave her money, gifts, and at one time a sewing machine as a means by which she might earn a living. However, he himself was desperately poor and could not provide enough for her needs. In his endeavour to help her and because of fear that necessity might push her back into her old trade, he stole from the common room at the college, was found out and consequently expelled and sent to prison for one month. His expulsion from college put an end to his hope of a respectable career, or even the possibility of a comfortable income that such a career would have provided, and he was doomed to spend his days striving hard to support himself. Upon his release, he went to America, but only to experience greater hardships. Returning to England in the autumn of 1877, after about a year in America, Gissing, with characteristic idealistic gusto, sought out and found the girl for whom he had sacrificed his academic prospects. He lived with her for a while in London, and finally married her in October 1879. Extreme poverty and Nell's ill-health were among the factors that made life very hard for them both, and the marriage proved to be a total fiasco. Nell had frequently to spend some time in hospital. She became an alcoholic, and on that account, could not free herself from bad companions who encouraged her in all her weaknesses. Repeatedly she left him and then returned, and on at least one occasion she became involved with the Police.[1] Nell's shameful habits, as testified by Morley Roberts, his closest friend and the author of a disguised biography of Gassing himself, were perpetually:

> compelling him to move from one house to another ... they were turned out of one lodging after another, for even the poorest places, it seems, could hardly stand, a woman of her character in the house[2].

At one time Gissing had taken steps towards obtaining a divorce but he let the matter drop and continued with an arrangement by which he paid her an allowance of one pound per week and allowed her to go her own way. When she died in February 1888, Gissing recalled not having seen her for three years[3].

In these circumstances Gissing wrote *The Unclassed*. The book tells the story of Lotty Starr, a street-walker, and her daughter Ida who follows in her mother's footsteps, but later gives up her calling and redeems herself. Lotty's story is dealt with briefly and her death is reported on page 36, while the rest of the book tells of Ida's fall and redemption.

Until she is ten years old, Ida Starr enjoys a comfortable childhood, unaware that her mother is a prostitute. Deception, cruelty and deprivation seem to have forced Lotty--the mother--to the streets and despite her infamous career, she preserves an air of respectability in which she tries to raise her daughter. Lotty keeps her secret from her daughter and tries to give the child a good education and to guard her against the evil world. A peevish schoolmate taunts Ida that her mother is a woman of the street, and in a fit of assionate anger Ida strikes her on the head with a slate and the girl falls on the floor bleeding and unconscious.

Dismissal from school follows, but it is only a secondary trouble. Ida's mother lies ill in her room and does not recover. Shortly before her death, Lotty sends Ida to make peace with her grandfather, a wealthy hard-hearted capitalist. Mr. Woodstock, the grandfather, offers Ida a home on condition that she will put herself in his "hands and never see [her mother] again;[4] a condition which she impetuously refuses.

Orphaned at the age of eleven and left to face the world on her own, Ida follows her mother's steps on the road of suffering and temptation. She starts as a child-drudge in an eating-house, then as a servant in wretched places where she is starved and bullied. At last, worn out, she responds to the desire of escaping in any way from her misery and becomes the mistress of a young man, her employer's son. At the time of her meeting with Waymark, a liberal-minded young school-teacher, she has broken off with her protector.

Fully aware of her physical charms, Ida employs them to the effect of eliciting a response from Waymark, and she succeeds. Waymark who is already engaged to Maud Enderby, a religious and puritanically brought up girl, starts to oscillate between the two, weighing the prospects of marriage with each. In an effort to gain Waymark's respect and love, Ida leaves off her career and endures the hardship of toiling hard in a laundry to earn an honest living, while Maud, his fiancée, after a long struggle requests a release from the engagement. This release allows Waymark to request Ida's hand and provides an opportunity for the unclassed hero and heroine to unite.

In his preface to the 1895 edition of the book, Gissing explains the title by syaing: "Male and female, all the prominent persons of the story, dwell in a limbo external to society. They refuse the statistic badge"(p.vi). Significantly enough, Gissing himself was discontented with his own sphere and dwelt in a limbo external to society. He lived among the poor and ill-educated but was not one of them[5].

He was sensitive, highly intelligent, and educated, but isolated from congenial company and excluded from circles where he might have found companionship, Gissing put a great deal of himself into his books, and his image of life tended to be shaped by personal grievance. The scenes of bestial poverty and vicious inhumanity that he describes in *The Unclassed* were rarely free from personal associations, and many of them were drawn from his own immediate experiences with Nell.

Nell's influence is most markedly felt in the novel. Many aspects of her story appear through Harriet Smales, a minor figure of only secondary importance, but because she is so closely associated with Nell, Gissing gives more prominence to her story than it is artistically desirable. Harriet represents Nell's sluttish personality and scrofulous condition, two factors which convinced Gissing of her irreversible degradation. Many bad aspects of womankind are shown through her, and the narrator's attitude towards her is characterized by a contempt which almost amounts to hatred.

While Harriet represents a sad reality, Ida is "a vision of what he had once thought [Nell] might have become under his tutelage."[6] He took an artistic revenge upon his wife, not only by displaying her faults in detail, but also contrasting them with her idealized opposite. Ida's quiet and resolute abandonment of her life of prostitution is Gissing's artistic expression of the dead hope he has had for Nell who distracted him with her "vain and violent efforts to reform, generally after some long debauch."[7]

In relating Lotty's story, Gissing surpasses in candidness and understanding the attempts of Dickens, Gaskell and other early writers to portray a fallen woman sympathetically and to direct the reader's attention to the plight of unsupported women who turn to prostitution in order to survive, Lotty is not presented as a harsh and degraded outcast, so much as an unfortunate girl of the "better" sort, a victim of harsh circumstances. Motherless from an early age, Lofty left school to become her father's house-keeper. She made an acquaintance which led to secret intimacy and inevitable disaster. To avoid facing her father, she left home to join her seducer but after a child (Ida) was born she was abandoned and took to the streets and to a way of life which led from abject poverty and suffering to illness. When the story opens, the child is a young girl of ten. Lofty, full of self-pity and self-contempt, tells her daughter:

> "Some day you'll wish to forget all about me, and you'll never come to see where I'm buried, and you'll get rid of everything that could remind you of me," (1,2:30).

She expresses a sincere wish to give up the degrading way in which whe earns her living: "if I get over this, I'll give it up-God help me, I will! I'll get my living honest, if there's any way" (1,2:34). Lotty's hope of leading an honest life is not fulfilled. Her illness becomes worse and later she dies in a pauper's hospital.

In an attempt to secure the reader's sympathy for Lotty, Gissing enters the story in his own person to praise her and to make the point that:

> In the profession [Lotty] had chosen there are, a-s in all professions, grades and differences, Lotty was by no means a vicious girl -- please learn to make these not unimportant distinctions, good madam; -she had no love of riot for its own sake; she would greatly have preferred a decent mode if life, had such been practicable (1,3:56),

Here Gissing is either looking back at previous writers and implicitly chiding their stereotyped treatment of this character/or criticizing his readers because of their misinformed prejudice against the character in real life. In either case, he reveals his self-conscious awareness of a prostitute's individuality and of the error in falsely relegating her to a narrow type. His objective is to "dig deeper" than Dickens who:

> felt this, but ...had not the courage to face his subjects; his monthly numbers had to lie on the family tea-table (11,2:33).

In 1884 Gissing felt that the time had come for "the novel of every-day life" to look beneath the surface and to "get to untouched social strata" (11, 2:33).

Although Lotty is a minor figure, her brief story and sketchy presentation form a picture of the shabby and disreputable world of shifty land-ladies, dirty streets and public houses, which is more convincing than that which emerges from the fuller treatment of Ida. As Lofty does not exist to illustrate a hope or to embody a wish, there is no conflict in her portrayal between the "realistic" demands and Gissing's "idealistic" vision. In his presentation of Ida, however, there is such a conflict, and it is the apparent "truth to life" which is sacrificed.

Among the characters of the book, Ida is the least convincing. There is nothing of the prostitute about her, and she is no more than a dream. In creating her, Gissing resolutely ignored what he must have known to be the facts, and her primary function in the book is largely governed by his desire to give expression to an ideal. She is presented throughout the novel as a "refined" girl who exists in a context of her own—warm, homely room; a much-loved car; an open-hearted friend to share them with her. All these factors remove her from other settings and characters in the novel, and place her in "a limbo" not only" external to society", but also external to the novel-world itself. The degradation of a street-walker's life is hardly known to her. She is neither enslaved by vice, nor consumed by remorse. She does not pity herself, and like Shaw's Mrs. Warren, she considers herself neither a tragic nor a pathetic figure because of her occupation. She tells Waymark that she has read his copy of The Vicar of Wakefield and adds that she "can't understand all this talk about shame and disgrace" (111, 1:10).

Ida is portrayed as beautiful, lively, intelligent and idealized to an extent which not only fails to permit the slightest fault in her, but also extends to her companion in prostitution.[8] Waymark prefers her to Maud Enderby, his virtuous fiancée, and at the end of the book, she is transformed into an "angel" of mercy (3:183) for the poor children of the slums.

By deliberately avoiding any discussion of the "degradation" involved in Ida's life of prostitution, and by insisting on demonstrating her spontaneous goodness of heart and "nobility" of nature, Gissing fails to portray a convincing picture of his fallen heroine, and to show an ability, as yet, to embody abstract ideas in a realistic character. Ida does not become a "noble" prostitute maintaining, on the dangerous edge of things, a nice balance between "nobility" and degradation, but rather a distressed refined woman who has no conception of what prostitution means, and the total effect of the novel as a work of art is thus weakened.

The other obvious weakness of the book is its failure to adopt a coherent attitude towards social problems. The two main characters (Waymark and Ida), who rebel against society's conventions, detach themselves from their controversial views and attitudes and slip back into a conventional society to enjoy the comforts of Woodstock's large fortune which they inherit. The novel also fails to suggest a solution to the fallen woman's plight. As for the horrors of slum life, it offers "no better remedy"[9] than "the private philanthropies of Ida Starr ". One possible reason for this failure, as some critics tend to believe, is "the revision Meredith insisted upon",[10] yet it seems that Gissing's interest in society was theoretical rather than practical. His task, as it becomes obvious from his letter to his brother Algernon, was to analyze and comment upon the world but not to reform it. In his letter of June 12, 1884 he wrote:

> Human life has little interest to me, on thewhole - save as material for artistic presentation, I can get savage over social iniquities, but even them my rage at once takes the direction of planning revenge in artistic work.[11]

In another letter on June, 1884 he wrote:

> I repeat it [The Unclassed] is not a social essay, but a study of a certain group of human beings. Of

> course I am responsible for the selection, but for nothing more.[12]

As his letters show, Gissing was were interested in the intellectual and artistic strength of his work than in its capacity to inspire social reform.

Though the book had established Gissing's name as a writer who had the ability and courage to deal with difficult subjects outside other people's range, it met a cold and, in most cases, hostile reception, A contemporary critic described it as "a tale of lower middle-class life in London in the manner of Mr Zola and his disciples".[13] The Athenaeum concluded a brief and shallow review of it by asking whether "the disagreeable subjects with which Mr. Gissing's novel deals were "proper material for literature".[14] After publication, the book sank into oblivion until ten years later, when Lawrence and Bullen proposed to republish it. Gissing then revised it, making the narrative more swift and direct, and toned down the note of social protest. As a result, in 1895 The Unclassed, in its revised form, was on the market again.

Gissing's handling of the theme reflects his sympathetic vision. His fallen heroine is not only presented as "noble", but repeatedly described as a "pure woman" and is left, at the end of the book/to enjoy the secure and happy haven of matrimony with an idealistic lover.

NOTES

1- Gissing was called in when a policeman had to break up a brawl involving has wife and a couple of drunken women. See Michael Collie. *George Gissing A Biography* (Folkestone, 1977), p 54.

2- When Gissing's literary executors refused Merely Roberts's permission to write a biography of Gissing, he circumvented their decision by writing. *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, a fictional biography based upon recollection and not upon the surviving documents.

3- Merely Roberts, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland: A Portrait of George Gissing*, ed. Morchard Bishop, (London, 1958), pp 40-41.

4- George Gissing, *The Unclassed* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1884), p. 42. All subsequent references appear in the text.

5- Towards the end of 1884, Gissing became a regular guest at dinner parties, private concerts and musical Sundays, and even went to the extent of having some dress suits made. His new upper-class friendships were at first a welcome change from his loneliness, but they troubled him too. He was too poor to be more than an inferior in the homes where he dined and had to tell acquaintances who wanted to know him better that he had no address. Ultimately, after a period of gregariousness, he found polite social intercourse tiresome and refused all invitations, returning to his old solitude. See J. Korg. *George Gissing: A Critical Biography* (Seattle, 1963), pp.68-72,

6- Jacob Korg, "*Introduction*" to *The Unclassed*, hassocks: The Harvester Press, 1976),p. XVI,

7- Roberts, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, p.41.

8- Sally, a young street-walker who is featured very briefly as Ida's companion who lives with her and goes into the Strand at night, is portrayed as a nice, warm-hearted and refined prostitute who later in the book marries a worthy young Irishman and proves to be an excellent wife.

9- Jacob Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, p, 67.

10-Korg writes that "it would have been very like Gissing to end by showing the lovers (Ida Waymark) separated, their lives plighted by destructive social forces", but upon the recommendations of Meredith, who was the reader for Chapman and Hall, Gissing changed to the happy ending. See Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, pp. 67 & 78.

11 - *The Letters of George Gissing to his Family*, ed. Algernon & Ellen Gissing, pp. 138-139.

12" *The Letters of George Gissing to His Family*, p. 141.

13- Arthur R.R. Baker, "Nez Novels", *Academy*, 25 (1884), 454.

14- *Athenaeum*, 288 June 1884, p. 820.

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