CHAPTER – II
GEORGE GISSING’S MILIEU

In its value-neutral use, Victorian simply identifies the historical era in England roughly coincident with the reign of Queen Victoria, 1837-1901. The beginning of the Victorian Period is frequently dated 1830, or alternatively 1832 (the passage of the first Reform Bill), and sometimes 1837 (the accession of Queen Victoria); it extends to the death of Victoria in 1901. Historians often subdivide the long period into three phases: Early Victorian (to 1848), Mid-Victorian (1848-70), and Late Victorian (1870-1901). Much writing of the period, whether imaginative or didactic, in verse or in prose, dealt with or reflected the pressing social, economic, religious, and intellectual issues and problems of that era.

It was a time of rapid and wrenching economic and social changes that had no parallel in earlier history—changes that made England, in the course of the nineteenth century, the leading industrial power, with an empire that occupied more than a quarter of the earth’s surface. The pace and depth of such developments, while they fostered a mood of nationalist pride and optimism about future progress, also produced social stresses, turbulence, and widespread anxiety about the ability of the nation and the individual to cope, socially, politically, and psychologically, with the cumulative problems of the age.

England was the first nation to exploit the technological possibilities of steam power and steel, but its unregulated industrialization, while it produced great wealth for an expanding middle class, led also to the deterioration of rural England, a mushroom growth
of often shoddy urbanization, and massive poverty concentrated in slum neighborhoods. Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution (*On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859), together with the extension into all intellectual areas of positivism i.e. the view that all valid knowledge must be based on the methods of empirical investigation established by the natural sciences, engendered sectarian controversy, doubts about the truth of religious beliefs, and in some instances, a reversion to strict biblical fundamentalism. Contributing to the social and political unrest was labeled the woman question; that is, the early *feminist* agitation for equal status and rights.

The Victorian age, for all its conflicts and anxieties, was one of immense, variegated, and often self-critical intellectual and literary activities. In our time, the term Victorian, and still more Victorianism, is frequently used in a derogatory way, to connote narrow-mindedness, sexual priggishness, the determination to maintain feminine innocence (that is, sexual ignorance), narrow-mindedness, and an emphasis on social respectability. Such views have a valid basis in attitudes and values expressed (and sometimes exemplified) by many members of the expanding middle class, with its roots in Puritanism and its insecurity about its newly won status. Later criticism of such Victorian attitudes, however, merely echoes the vigorous attacks and devastating ridicule mounted by a number of thinkers and literary writers in the Victorian age itself.

Among the notable poets were Alfred Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Matthew Arnold, and Gerard Manley Hopkins. The most prominent essayists were Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Arnold, and Walter Pater; the most distinguished of many excellent novelists (this was a great age of English
prose fiction) were Charlotte and Emily Bronte, Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, George Meredith, Anthony Trollope, Thomas Hardy, George Gissing and Samuel Butler.’ During this period some movements also took place, which left their indelible impression on the canvass of English Literature.

Aestheticism, or the Aesthetic Movement, was a European phenomenon during the latter nineteenth century that had its chief headquarters in France. In opposition to the dominance of scientific thinking, and in defiance of the widespread indifference or hostility of the middle-class society of their time to any art that was not useful or did not teach moral values, French writers developed the view that a work of art is the supreme value among human products precisely because it is self-sufficient and has no use or moral aim outside its own being. The end of a work of art is simply to exist in its formal perfection; that is, to be beautiful and to be contemplated as an end in itself. A rallying cry of Aestheticism became the phrase-art for art’s sake.

The historical roots of Aestheticism are in the views proposed by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant in his Critique of Judgment (1790) that the pure aesthetic experience consists of a disinterested contemplation of an object that pleases for its own sake, without reference to reality or to the external ends of utility or morality. As a self-conscious movement, however, French Aestheticism is often said to date from Theophile Gautier’s witty defense of his assertion that art is useless (preface to Mademoiselle de Maupin, 1835). Aestheticism was developed by Baudelaire, who was greatly influenced by Edgar Allan Poe’s claim (in “The Poetic Principle,” 1850) that the supreme work is a “poem per se,” a “poem
written solely for the poem’s sake”; it was later taken up by Flaubert, Mallarme, and many other writers. In its extreme form, the aesthetic doctrine of art for art’s sake veered into the moral and quasi-religious doctrine of life for art’s sake, with the artist represented as a priest who renounces the practical concerns of ordinary existence in the service of what Flaubert and others called “the religion of beauty.”

The views of French Aestheticism were introduced into Victorian England by Walter Pater, with his emphasis on high artifice and stylistic subtlety, his recommendation to crowd one’s life with exquisite sensations, and his advocacy of the supreme value of beauty and of “the love of art for its own sake.” (His Conclusion to The Renaissance, 1873.) The artistic and moral views of Aestheticism were also expressed by Algernon Charles Swinburne and by English writers of the 1890s such as Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons, and Lionel Johnson, as well as by the artists J. M. Whistler and Aubrey Beardsley.

The influence of ideas stressed in Aestheticism—especially the view of the autonomy (self-sufficiency) of a work of art, the emphasis on craft and artistry, and the concept of a poem or novel as an end in itself and as invested with intrinsic values—has been important in the writings of prominent twentieth-century authors such as W. B. Yeats, T. E. Hulme, and T. S. Eliot, as well as in the literary theory of the New Critics.

In the latter nineteenth-century, some French proponents of the doctrines of Aestheticism, especially Charles Baudelaire, also espoused views and values that developed into a movement called the Decadence. The term was based on qualities attributed to the literature of Hellenistic Greece in the last three centuries B.C., and to Roman literature after the death of the Emperor Augustus in 14 A.D. These literatures were said to
possess the high refinement and subtle beauties of a culture and art that have passed their vigorous prime, but manifest a special savor of incipient decay. Such was also held to be the state of European civilization, especially in France, as it approached the end of the nineteenth century.

Many of the precepts of the Decadence were voiced by Theophile Gautier in the “Notice,” describing Baudelaire’s poetry, which he prefixed to an edition of Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal* ("Flowers of Evil") in 1868. Central to the Decadent movement was the view that art is totally opposed to nature, in the sense both of biological nature and of the standard, or “natural,” norms of morality and sexual behavior. The thoroughgoing Decadent writer cultivates high artifice in his style and, often, the bizarre in his subject matter, recoils from the fecundity and exuberance of the organic and instinctual life of nature, prefers elaborate dress over the living human form and cosmetics over the natural hue, and sometimes sets out to violate what is commonly held to be “natural” in human experience by resorting to drugs, deviancy from standard norms of behavior, and sexual experimentation, in the attempt to achieve the systematic derangement of all the senses. The movement reached its height in the last two decades of the century; extreme products were the novel *A Rebours* (Against the Grain), written by J. K. Huysmans 1884, and some of the paintings of Gustave Moreau. This period is also known as the fin de siècle (end of the century); the phrase connotes the lassitude, satiety, and ennui expressed by many writers of the Decadence.

In England the ideas, moods, and behavior of Decadence were manifested, beginning in the 1860s, in the poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne, and in the 1890s by writers such as Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons, Ernest Dowson, and Lionel Johnson; the notable artist of the English Decadence was Aubrey Beardsley. In the search for strange
sensations, a number of English Decadents of the 1890s experimented with drugs and espoused illicit, or what were conventionally held to be extra-natural, modes of sexual experience; several of them died young. Representative literary productions are Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), his play *Salome* (1893), and many of the poems of Ernest Dowson.

The emphases of the Decadence on drugged perception, sexual experimentation and the deliberate inversion of conventional moral, Social, and artistic norms reappeared, with modern variations, in the Beat poets and novelists of the 1950s and in the counterculture of the decades that followed.

In 1848 a group of English artists, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, and John Millais, organized the “Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.” Their aim was to replace the reigning academic style of painting by a return to the truthfulness, simplicity, and spirit of devotion which they attributed to Italian painting before the time of Raphael (1483-1520) and the high Italian Renaissance. The ideals of this group of painters were taken over by a literary movement which included Dante Gabriel Rossetti himself, who was a poet as well as a painter, his sister Christina Rossetti, William Morris, and Algernon Swinburne. Rossetti’s poem “The Blessed Damozel” typifies the medievalism, the pictorial realism with Symbolic overtones, and the union of flesh and spirit, sensuousness and religiousness, associated with the earlier writings of this school.

George Robert Gissing was born on 22 November 1857 at Thompson’s Yard, Yorkshire, England. His father Thomas Waller Gissing (1829–1870), was a chemist from a family of Suffolk shoemakers
died when he was thirteen, and his mother was Margaret Bedford (1832–1913). Gissing had four siblings; William, Algernon, Margaret, and Ellen.

Young George was an avid reader and took advantage of the extensive family library. Though genial and bookish he was well-liked and had many friends while attending Back Lane School, Wakefield. Early on he won prizes for his poetry. He had a relatively stable childhood until his father died in 1870; he lost his main guiding force in his intellectual development. This, the first number of unfortunate circumstances, would have a profound and negative effect on George and his outlook on life.

In the first of his many achievements to come, 1872 saw Gissing place twelfth in the kingdom in the Oxford local examinations. He won a scholarship to Owens College (now the University of Manchester). In 1874 he took his BA exam at the University of London where he placed first in England for both English and Latin and graduated in 1876.

Gissing was destined for further scholarly success but met with disgrace when, whether naïve, lonely or both, in 1875 he fell in love with a woman of ill-repute, Marianne Helen Harrison, “Nell”. (1858–1888) He embarked on what some say was a self-defeating pattern, trying to support her financially though he could ill-afford to do so and was caught stealing money from other students for this purpose. The sentence for him was one month hard labor at Bellevue Prison in Manchester. Expelled from Owens and humiliated, his confidence in himself and hopes in ever achieving happiness were dashed. With letters of recommendation in hand Gissing’s mother sent him to the United States to start anew. It was a difficult period of adjustment, one of impoverishment, hard work and misery, so often reflected in his novels. In Chicago, Gissing was barely
able to support himself with his writing. His first fiction *The Sins of the Fathers* was published in the Chicago Tribune in 1877.

In 1877 Gissing was back in England and again met Nell whereupon they married on 27 October 1879. They would only stay together for five years while his private tutoring provided a meagre income. Gissing usually spent Sundays with one of the few long time friends he’d made, Morley Roberts, whom he’d met at Owens. In 1880 Gissing’s brother William died of consumption. Gissing’s first published novel, *Workers in the Dawn* (1880) described lower-class London life as seen by a young déclassé idealist. *The Unclassed* was published in 1884. Gissing achieved some success with *Demos: A Story of English Socialism* (1886). *Isabel Clarendon* (1886) and *A Life’s Morning* (1888) followed. Though *Workers in the Dawn* and *Thyrza* were published in 1887 and his darkest work *The Nether World* came out in 1889, these were grim and lonely days for Gissing, who had so little confidence in himself. “On my way home at night an anguish of suffering in the thought that I can never hope to have an intellectual companion at home.” In his often sordid depictions of the social issues of the day including poverty and industrialization, Gissing belonged to the school of naturalism. *New Grub Street* predicted that the commercialization of culture would produce charlatans. In 1884 he met Miss Gaussen and tutored her son.

On 29 February 1888 Nell Harrison met her early demise in Lambeth slum whereupon Gissing was summoned to identify her body. Soon after this Gissing travelled to Italy, then France, Naples and Greece. On 25 February 1891 he married another uneducated young woman, Edith Alice Underwood, (1867–1917) a stonemason’s daughter. They had a son, Walter, on 10 December. Gissing would write of the social and political problems of England in *The Emancipated*. (1890) *Born in Exile*
was published in 1892 and *The Odd Women* in 1893. *A Victim of Circumstances, Lou and Liz*, and *The Day of Silence* were all published in 1893, *In the Year of Jubilee* and *Comrades in Arms* in 1894. Following up were *The Paying Guest* (1895) and *The Whirlpool* (1897). Gissing would become acquainted with Clara Collet who would become a dear friend and supporter for many years.

In 1896 George and Edith had another son, Alfred, born 20 January 1896. Gissing had again either made a poor judgment of character, trying to be a father figure or had more bad luck as Edith descended into madness. A year after their son was born Gissing suffered a serious bout of lung illness and he left his wife for a six-month trip to Italy for a cure. It was inspiration for his travel book *By the Ionian Sea*. (1901) while in Rome he wrote *Veranilda*. (1904). Gissing wrote some prefaces for Charles Dickens’s works including *The Pickwick Papers*, *Bleak House* and *Oliver Twist* and also wrote his own work *Charles Dickens: a Critical Study*. Gissing’s semi-fictional memoirs *Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* were published in 1903.

In 1898 Gissing met the young author Gabrielle Marie Edith Fleury (1868–1954) who wanted to translate his *New Grub Street*. Gissing’s friend Roberts provided a model for the character Whelpdale. Having been estranged from Edith, who was committed to an insane asylum in 1902, Gissing moved to France with Gabrielle. *The Crown of Life* (1899) is partly inspired by his love for Gabrielle. In 1901, on the advice of a doctor in England, he had a stay of six weeks in the new East Anglian Sanatorium at Nayland, Suffolk. While that was the last time he would visit England, his personal correspondence attests to his nostalgia for his native country. Gissing’s semi-auto-biographical *The Private Papers Of Henry Ryecroft* was published first in 1903.
George Gissing died at his villa in Ispoure, St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port, France on 3 December 1903. His friend H.G. Wells had visited him just prior. Like his father, a consistent agnostic to the end, there was still some speculation as to whether he had undergone conversion on the eve of his death. Out of respect to Gissing’s remaining family an Anglican funeral service was held at the church in St. Jean-de-Luz on the Bay of Biscay. He was finally laid to rest on 30 December. In 1912, a controversial semi-biography of Gissing was published, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, by Morley Roberts.

George Gissing is one of the most powerful novelists of transition from Victorian to the modern age. Gissing in his novels presents the most perturbing socio-economic, cultural and political situations. He also presents the changes, which had been taking place in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Hence, Gissing’s novels serve as a bridge between Victorian and modern literature. Frederic Harrison wrote to him in 1880:

There can be no doubt as to the power of your book. It will take rank amongst the works of great rank..... There are scenes I am sure which can hold their ground with the first things in modern fiction. (Letters, 1927, 77-78).

Gissing is essentially a clear-eyed realist and a humanist. He is a critic of Victorian manners and the social, economic and of political conditions of that age. He charged the battery of his satire against existing social and moral values, commercialization of art and materialistic culture. Gissing’s denunciation of social inequalities, economic exploitation, and the low standard of cultural achievements and the subjection of women express his resentment with the conventional Victorian values. Pierre Coustillas an astute critic and prolific scholar of Gissing wrote in a letter:
To me it is clear that Gissing was indeed a moralist, an apostle for a new morality. His criticism of the Victorian way of life, of Victorian manners and education is an index to his ideals in all fields of existence political, social, economic, and cultural. (A letter to C.S. Dubey, March 29, 1989, i).

Gissing’s earlier thinking (1880s) was shaped by his reading of Comte under the influence of Richard Congreve (1818-1899), a philosopher, and a disciple of Comte. The positivistic thinking, the effect of which is vivid in Gissing’s novels of early eighties may be substantiated with Gissing’s own words. In a letter (8 June, 1880) to his brother Algernon Gissing wrote:

First and foremost, I attack the criminal negligence of governments which spend their time over matters of relatively no importance, to the neglect of the terrible social evils which should have been long since sternly grappled with. Herein I am a mouthpiece of the Advanced Radical Party. (Letters, 1927, 73-4)

Gissing was profoundly influenced by contemporary intellectual milieu. Comte’s positivistic influence on England, the clash between agnosticism and established religion had a deep impact on young Gissing. As Jacob Korg sees it:

As a thoughtful youth and a wide reader, Gissing was aware that established ethical doctrines were deeply probed by the blade of scientific inquiry, and science seemed to suggest the possibility of a sympathetic code of morality based on its own principles. (Biography, 1965, 13)
Victorian age encouraged inquiry into and examination of traditional, religious and moral attitudes. A vigorous rationalism championed by such agnostics as Leslie Stephen, Thomas Henry Huxley, John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer clashed with intuitive religion. They attacked its three most crucial doctrines—the existence of God, the literal accuracy of the Bible and immortality of the soul. All the old spiritual convictions seemed open to question and subject to revision. Throughout Victorian literature the crumbling of religious belief was a common subject.

Gissing’s dogmatism was as much a product of his aversion to dogmatic Christianity as of his attachment to scientific thoughts. The dilemma created by old religious faiths was questioned by scientific thoughts. Positivism was one way of thinking which provided an answer to such doubts. Positivism confines itself to the data of experience and excludes prior metaphysical speculations. The new Encyclopedia Britannica defines it as: “Positivists have usually held that theological and metaphysical questions arise but cannot infect the answer by any method available to men” (Vo1.9, 1985, 636).

Gissing shared Comte’s views that religious impulse would survive the delay of revealed religion and it ought to have an object. He agreed with Comte that human thought had passed inevitably a logical stage into a positive or scientific stage. Comte’s Religion and Humanity became popular among educated youth.

Attitudinal changes among the educated youth had been brought by more scientifically written literatures on religion. Windwood Read’s Martyrdom of Man (1872) a quasi-scientific history of religion won great popularity. It declared:
Those who desire to worship the creator must worship him through mankind. Such, it is plain in the scheme of nature.... To develop to the utmost our genius and our love, that is only true religion.... to cherish the divinity within us to be faithful to intellect, to educate those powers which have been entrusted to our charge and to employ them in service of humanity, that is all we can do. (479-89)

Expressing another typical agnostic view of morality, Hence Maudslay wrote in “Materialism and its Lesson” (1879) that moral laws were not handed down by divine revelation but were products of social evolution. Such views expressed in the magazines and newspapers influenced young and educated man like Gissing.

Gissing’s adherence to agnostic principles came as early as his school and college days (1870-80) and he held to them with some modifications until death. Born in Exile (1892) may be read as an expression of his agnosticism. Peak, the hero of the novel represents this crisis of the age. Gissing had reason to know these well as these once formed part of his thought. Peak, he wrote, to a friend is “myself-one phase of myself” (Letters to Eduard Bertz, 1961, 78). Gissing’s Criticism of social values, moral crisis and “that long set of sentimental hypocrisies known as Victorians”( Decker, 27) has been candid like his precursors.

It is the curious paradox of the Victorian age that the great Victorians were strenuously anti-Victorian. The period that they created, particularly in literature, was one of fertile achievement and vigorous protest against materialism and complacency, against aesthetic and moral blindness. The period produced a brilliant galaxy of figures such as Carlyle, Tennyson, Dickens, George Eliot, John Stuart Mill, Thackeray, Matthew Arnold, Ruskin, Darwin, Spencer, Morris etc. Gissing imbibed some of his ideas on social, moral, and political questions of his day from
these thinkers and philosophers who wielded comprehensive influence on the age.

Thomas Carlyle (1795 - 1881) was another strong influence on Gissing. Gissing admired Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* (1837) as “one of the most important books of the century .... One of the world’s eternal volumes,” (*Letters to Eduard Bertz*, 1961, 37). *Sartor Resartus* (Carlyle, 126-36) sought to construct fresh ethics rather than galvanizing old metaphysics which was another force of the Victorian age. Carlyle advocated a just society. He was a champion of the poor, a despiser of Franchise and a keen advocate of organization of labor. Gissing was influenced by Carlyle’s sarcastic gibes on liberty and Franchise. Carlyle’s condemnation of the drones of modern life had a profound influence on Gissing. His insistence on the necessity of organization of labor, his perception that the privilege to vote is empty unless the demos be educated to use this privilege were shared by Gissing. Carlyle’s view on cash-nexus that binds men together under modern capitalism was another great influence on Gissing. On all such questions Carlyle spoke like a seer to his generation. Undoubtedly, writing on working class, the need for educating them, to use the right to vote and proper distribution of wealth were ideas which Gissing owed to Carlyle (*Letters*, 1961, 23, 38, 69).

John Ruskin (1819-1900) was a great Victorian whom Gissing admired for his ideas on economy, art and literature. He wrote to Bertz describing Ruskin, “the last of England’s really great men”, “a prophetic force ... (whose) spirit cannot he too highly esteemed. And as a writer of prose, he stands in the very front of English literature.” (*Letter*, 1961, 46).

Ruskin’s Economic ideas were attractive to Gissing. Ruskin in his writing on *economic* issues (*Unto this Last*, 1862, *Time and Tide*, 1867)
postulated that with problems of production and distribution, human and spiritual values ought to take precedence over mere volumes of goods. He attacked the orthodox conception of values. Mill said that the measure of a product’s value was its utility, and Ricardo equated value with the labor of production. Ruskin drawing upon experiences as an art critic pointed out that the materialistic standards failed to measure the value of art. The end of production should be serving human beings. Even prices said Ruskin is subject to the operation of human values for they depend partly on a purchaser’s desire for the article on sale.

Gissing did not approve of the practical suggestions for workshops, government schools, unemployment relief, and other social measure set forth in unto this Last. Ruskin’s attempt to humanize the most established principles of a materialistic age, his distrust of democracy and egalitarianism, his insistence that social advances could only come through individual improvement were all attractive to Gissing.

In particular he sympathized with Ruskin’s view that art and art values deserved a central position in society. He wrote, “His worship of Beauty I look upon as essentially valuable.” (23 May 1883). He further continued in the same letter “.... I am growing to feel, that the only thing known to us of absolute value is artistic perfection. The ravings of fanaticism justifiable or not pass away but the works of artist, work in what material he will remain, sources of health to the world.’ (Letters, 1927, 132)

Ruskin’s influence on Gissing was mainly in the domain of art but to John Stuart Mill (1806-1876) he owned some of his ideas on social equality, women question and exercise of liberty. Mill’s Liberty (1859) proclaimed: “No society in which liberties are not on the whole respected, is farce.”(Cohen, 198) He further argued that a man without reasonable
amount of liberty is like a ‘Cog in a machine’. These ideas coupled with Mill’s theory of equality between men and women appealed to Gissing. Gissing through his works persisted to define his deal that ‘females are no inferior to their male counterparts.’ (The Diary of George Gissing, 1978, 17)

The ideological and philosophical streams which sprang from the philosophers, writers, poets led to the soul stirring music on art, religion, society, economy and polity of the age. These ideas were further strengthened by the cult of science.

Darwin, the Victorian apostle of the scientific movement that traced its ancestry back to Aristotle, Newton, and Locks, affected the entire social and intellectual life of the last half of century. *The Origin of species* (1859) was acknowledged by the Victorians themselves as perhaps the most influential book. Despite the prolonged battle between evolution and orthodox theology, Darwinism proved to be more popular. It created a flood that had been long in the forming and that drew from many tributaries. Spencer, Huxley, and others were popularizing evolution, constructed new systems of ethics, politics, aesthetics and philosophy. The problems such as the nature of the state, the relation of man to man, the connection between art, religion, and life were much discussed. The realism was provided with scientific blades of enquiry. Clarence R. Decker Observes: “Nineteenth century realism was dominated by science. The discovery of fresh facts about the universe, of man’s new relation to a vastly expanded and complicated world, gave me to a mechanical exploration of the origin, developments and movements of people and civilization.” *(The Victorian, 1952, 17)* This scientific bent of realism paved the way for Naturalism.
The Realistic and Naturalistic movement was an expression of faith in a new form of an old instrument - the instrument of science as a means of discovering truth. In literature, as in other fields, naturalism implied the acceptance of facts apparent only to the senses. It relied on a scientific - empirical method of research, and it sought to eliminate sentiment, imagination, poetic idealism, and all deductive moral purpose as irrelevant to the essential purpose of the artist. “A novelist has no right to invent”, (Guy de, 99) declares Flaubert in a letter to Zola in which he has congratulated him on the scientific objectivity of his work. (Essays and Papers, 1924, 32). Thus the Naturalism of Goncourt, Zola, Maupassant, Ibsen and Tolstoy seeks to achieve the objectivity of science. The influence of this new spirit on Gissing is conspicuous in his novels of eighties. Needless to say, the scientific, atheistic tenets of naturalism appealed to Gissing but he had been never very far from his novelists must be true to their artistic conscience, and the public taste will come round.’ (Letters, 1927, 151)

Undoubtedly the influence of his age on Gissing was profound. Nevertheless in the crucible of his mind different ideas kept on confronting in different stages. At times we see that he was unable to resolve the conflicting views. Gissing was strongly concerned with the cultural gap between the classes and the challenge that materialistic thoughts had posed to the cultural (social/moral values). He hated hypocrisy and he had no belief in the dogmas of religion’. ‘Positivism’, he wrote “Spared the struggle of freeing myself from the bondage of creeds.” (Letters, 1927, 74)

To Gissing “Positivism” was not a means of resolving the religious dilemma but he emphasized its intellectual aspects too. He thought that much of the world’s sufferings were due to frenzied industrial
competition caused by the materialistic culture. To him this cutthroat competition was due to people’s undue importance to money: “All the world’s “fork all that is really necessary for the health and comfort and even luxury of mankind could be performed in there or three hours of each day”. (Letter, 1927, 116) One can see through his letters and novels his disillusionment with the existing political system and his dissatisfaction from materialism of his age.

The political and parliamentary reforms were the outcome of a prolonged campaign. These were well exemplified in the reform Act of 1832 which aimed at institutional changes. This reform was brought on the pressures of working classes eager for fundamental constitutional changes. (Trevelyan, 582) The door of parliamentary reform which was opened in 1832 was thrown open with a rush, a generation or so later. George Eliot reiterated her doubts about the desirability of a radical extension of working class franchise. The developments that followed were rather swift.

In 1872 the introduction of the secret ballot virtually eliminated intimidation of voters by social or political superiors. In 1883 strict control was instituted to check corruption and excess electoral expenditures. 1884 marked further extension to male suffrage and in this year agricultural working class was given right to vote. These developments had enormous effects on the political system. The cabinet system continued to be dominated by aristocratic people and even reform of 1888 could hardly remove this domination. Gissing attacked the weaknesses generated by such developments in his works. He was disgusted with socialism which he considered to be a means of ‘political propaganda to get the voting edge.’ (Letters, 1927, 167)
Of the political movements for change in the Victorian age; socialism occupies the most significant place. By 1880s socialism was revived as a creed in England. In consequence of it, a number of socialist societies came into existence. The social democratic Federation, Fabian society, William Morris’s sodalist League are some of the important socialist organizations. (Supple, 105-06) Membership of all these groups was small and mainly came from the middle class. In spite of inner conflicts, and conflicts with other society’s socialism achieved a large amount of publicity indeed notoriety in 1886. The year was one of severe depression. Against such a background Gissing wrote Demos (1886). Gissing was motivated to write Demos by socialist movements which seemed to him to be based upon the ignorance of the facts of working class life and character.

Gissing was a keen observer of Victorian social, political changes that had been taking place and he depicted these in his novels. Though his social and moral values slightly differed in his career but he remained true to himself defining his ideals. Between the coronation and the Diamond Jubilee, Victorian life had passed from an ‘agricultural to an industrial economy, from aristocratic to a middle-class, Proletariat society. It shifted from a fixed and static science to evolutionary science. As Clarence R. Decker observes “it changed from a dogmatic to an experimental spirit.” (Victorian, 1952, 175) There were also remarkable changes in the Victorian notion about women. Gissing’s later novels show the shifting values in the above spheres.

The Victorian notion about women was rather conservative till sixties of the centuries. They were treated as inferior to men. The conventional image of women was that they were required to be ‘angels at home’. Carol Dyehouse writes:
A life of considerable hardship undoubtedly awaited many of the middle class women in Victorian times that needed to earn a living. Women educated for dependency might suddenly find themselves without support the opportunities for remunerative employment were simply not there. (‘The Role of Women from self-sacrifice to self-awareness, 1978, 176).

Carol Dyehouse’s comments on women of the Victorian age show how vulnerable they were to the evils of inequality of sex. In the last three decades there was a shift in the images of women due to an awakening of consciousness among them. A group of middle-class feminists generally known as Langham Palace Circle on account of their headquarters, the Ladies Institute of Langham Palace, began an energetic campaign to widen the scope of employment. This group was very active for educational reforms and campaigning for wider employment opportunities for the women. From 1860s onwards a growing number of middle class women worked energetically to promote the various kinds of organizations which they believed would enable working woman to learn the strategies of self-defense. (Lawrence Lerner (ed), The Victorians, 1967, 238-41)

The Women’s Trade Union League (originally the Women’s Protective Provident League) had been founded by Emma Paterson in 1874. In 1889, its character was more democratized. The growth of the Women’s co-operative guild, founded in 1883 pointed to a new self awareness and self assertion among women of this kind. By 1890s its branches expanded in a network of more than hundred branches.

The Victorian discussion over the nature of women’s role in the society reached its height in 1890s a decade in which most newspapers,
magazines and respectable monthly journals featured articles on ‘The fictions has been shaped by his personal experience as well as his conscious attachment with the age.’ (John Halperin, 1982, 262). Gissing was not an activist for the cause of feminism but he was sympathetic towards feministic movements of the day in general. He was deeply concerned with their woes and problems. His attitude to women in his own self experiences (Coustillas, 316) but their objectivities remains unquestioned.

A critical survey of Gissing’s criticism may open numerous facets of his works. A serious study of his letters,’ diaries and other private papers lead one to two illuminating discoveries. First, throughout his career Gissing remained true to himself trying to define his own ideals. Secondly, criticism contemporary to Gissing which largely dwelt on biographical evidences for evaluation of his novels seem to be biased and inauthentic with the publication of his private papers.

Most of the contemporary criticism (Coustillas and Patridge, 534) on Gissing appeared in the form of reviews of his novels. These cast him as ‘gloomy’ and ‘dry’. More succinctly, these were rather impressionistic i.e. first hand evaluation of his work. However, reviewers’ assessments were profound on the readers. The editors of Gissing: The Critical Heritage put it in these words: “Throughout his life Gissing’s relationships with professional critics were at all times uneasy and his posthumous work baffling in its variety did nothing to lessen their ambiguity.” From his first novel he was aware of the gulf that lay between interests in the serious social questions he treated. Dickens’ humor was universally recognized but Gissing was almost feeling alone that it contained thought as well as wit. In his study of Charles Dickens he wrote:
The humorist ... implies more than he can possibly have thought out, and therefore, it is that we find the best humor exhaustible, ever fresh when we return to it, ever as our knowledge of life increases, more suggestive of wisdom. (Dickens, Charles. A Critical Study, 1924, 202)

Gissing’s reactions to a review of his novel Workers in the Dawn (Unsigned Review, Spectator, Sept. 25, 1880, 1, V. iii. 1226-27) show how he was sensitive to the criticism of his works:

The spectator was unjust in many respects most outrageously so, however, in saying that in describing the life of Mrs. Gresham, Mr. Norman, Mr. Waghorn, and the well to do people. I was describing something I had seen. All the reviewers take me for a working man, I fancy, though a careful reading of my book would show such supposition to be grossly absurd. (Letters, 1927, 81)

One of the reasons of impressionistic approach to the study of Gissing was ‘personal explicit frame of reference’ i.e. personal prejudices, biases of the critics. Pierre Coustillas writes:

A personal impressionistic approach with personal explicit frame of reference was the rule, sympathy with or antipathy against the author’s view of life dictated or at least coloured the reviewer’s judgment. The degree of artistic consciousness on the part of the critic, his own respectability as a genre also affected his assessment. (Gissing: The Critical Heritage. Introduction, 1985, 8)

One of the reasons of the hostile attitudes of contemporary reviewers to Gissing’s works lies in the popular Victorian concept of fictional readership. The Victorian critics of 1880s expected the novel to
offer intellectual entertainment, stimulate reader’s imagination and yet
direct its ideas into morally acceptable paths. A novelist’s respectability
was thus inevitably restricted, if he was to please his judges, he had to
avoid Issues which might transform moral compartments into free
thinking. Royal A. Gateman’s “A Victorian publisher” (Gissing
Newsletter, July 1960, 18-20) In reviewing Gissing’s transactions with
the firm Bentley and company shows how the moral restrictions imposed
upon writers compelled Gissing to revise his works. Lawrence and Bullen
also wrote to Gissing for writing less gloomy and dark novels.

Gissing incurred the disfavor of reviewers because of his problem
novels. The genre is being deemed an improper vehicle for the discussion
of current political, social, religious and philosophical issues. Novelists
thought differently and the public, piqued by curiosity, disregarded the
critic’s dictum. James Pyn in his capacity as Smith Elder’s reader took a
strong stand against the novel with a purpose. He pressed Gissing to write
less serious novels and repeatedly objected to his pessimism. To quote
John Spiers and Pierre Coustillas: “Gissing relying on his growing
reputation and tired of being catechized tried his chance with more liberal
publishers.” (The Rediscovery of George Gissing, 1971, 81)

Some critics appreciated Gissing’s realism. Edith Sichel (Two
Philanthropic Novelists”, Murray’s Magazine, April 1880, 506) and
Frederick Dolman (“The Novels of George Gissing”, National Review,
Oct 1897, XXX, 258-66) recognize that Gissing’s portrayal of social
conditions is authentic. Arnold Bennett in “Mr. George Gissing: An
inquiry” (Academy, Dec 16, 1899, I, vii, 724-26) underlines that Gissing
sees the world not in ‘fragments or isolation but as a whole’. He defends
Gissing against charges of pessimism and recognizes his social realism
and sincere delineation of authentic situations.
Jane H. Find later, in his article “The Slum Movement in Fiction”, (National Review, May 1900, 447-54) related Gissing to modern problems. Find later himself a novelist and critic appreciating Gissing’s realism he says: “Gissing has treated the slums and slum dwellers in atleast five different ways as a moral lesson, as a social problem, as an object of pity and terror, as an amusing study.” (449) He also sees Gissing in terms with Dickens, Kipling, Arthur Morrison 12, Somerset Maugham and Pettridge.

Besides thematic approach the most revealing approach to the study of Gissing update has been biographical approach. A book length evaluation of the whole range of Gissing appeared as early as 1912 by Frank Swinnerton (George Gissing: A Critical Study, London, 1912). The biographical chapter of this book is both inaccurate as well as incomplete. Armed with distorted information and half- backed truths, he jumps to hostile conclusions. Similar faults are found in Miss Yates’ (George Gissing: An’ Appreciation, Manchester: 1922) that Gissing was an artist formed by the circumstances.

The biographical approach to the study of Gissing’s books has been rather in vogue in the early period, though never irrelevant. ‘The Story of Gissing’, wrote Russell Kirk in 1950 “is better than any of his novel.” The opposite view was expressed by Walter Allen in 1948: “the novels of Gissing, one suspect, have been obscured by the legend of Gissing the man.” (Collected Articles on George Gissing, 1965, 5, 43) Despite their different judgments what both writers recognized was the dominance in Gissing’s Studies of biographical tradition.

Needless to say, the domination of biographical tradition to the study of Gissing’s works is not irrelevant but these should not be the sole criterion for judging Gissing.
Michael Collie in *George Gissing: A Bibliography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975, 12-18) expressed opposition to “the heavy biographical approach to Gissing’s work” - the fact that the novelist was at the mercy of people more interested in wives than in his work.” (12) Few critics of Gissing would wish to assert the absolute irrelevance of his life to his work, yet the sheer persistence of the biographical perspective requires explanation and analysis.

Morley Roberts’ *The Private Life of Henry Maitland* (London, 1923) published in 1912 focuses on Gissing the man, whom he regards fascinating but flawed, rather than on Gissing’s fiction which he sees as misguided and marginal. The sole interest of Gissing’s fiction, for Roberts is its autobiographical significance, which he constantly identified. Roberts, though for all his prejudices, creates a picture of Gissing’s character that is complex, possessive and unignorable. As David Grylls comments: “Vividly, digressively, Roberts builds up an impasto portrait of Gissing’s value and ideals, as well as his obsessions and perversities.” (ELT, V: 32, NA, 1989, 459)

*George Gissing: A Grave Comedian* by Mabel C Donelley (Cambridge: 1954) makes use of extensive unpublished material to tell the full story of Gissing’s life for the first time. Donnelly’s tendency to filter Gissing’s work through his life provides an insight into his works too. Employing a form of lay Freudianism, she plays up the influence of Gissing’s mother. She has been figured as superego looming over most of Gissing’s life but also confusingly, providing a model for his two unhappy marriages. (25-27, 99)

work in the context of his life, but also in a more encompassing context of Victorian cultural history. Gissing he says, “Wrote about rootless young intellectuals, not merely to plead his own case, but to present instances of the problem they represented” (263).

John Halperin’s *George Gissing: A Life in Books* (Oxford, 1982) is neglectful of social history, Halperin’s extreme view that Gissing has merit because his biography is untenable. He states bluntly that Gissing’s novels are “written directly from life”, and are “extracts from the facts of his life.” (60) Halperin’s work as biographer has been often sharply criticized as inaccurate and derivative.11

Numerous articles and essays have continued to appear regularly depicting Gissing in different perspectives. Pierre Coustillas has made significant contribution to the study of Gissing and his criticism. Coustillas like David Grylls maintains that there are other approaches to the study of Gissing-sociological, ideological, besides the biographical approach.

There are a few works studying the psychological and behavioral aspects of Gissing’s novels. Michael Ballard’s article on Born in Exile is of some significance. Ballard in his article “Born in Exile as an organic study in Behavior Motivation” (*English Studies*, Aug. 1977, 102-7) has examined Peak’s inner conflicts and psyche as his character development. Virginia Woolf was first to point out the psychological dimension of Gissing’s characters.

Virginia Woolf whose ‘The novels of George Gissing” (*The Times Literary Supplement*, Jan 1912, 9-10) is significant so far as it explores the psychological treatment of situations and characters in his novels. She emphatically adds that Gissing did not write for art’s sake but he created some of “the living and thinking” characters. She further adds that his
novels have both the essential qualities of a great work viz life and completeness. And when a novel has “this quality it can never perish.”

*The Odd Women* continued to be seen predominantly from feminist angle in Anton Weber’s “George Gissing dies Sizeable Frag” (Leipzig, 1932). Wendy Lesser’s “The Even Handed Oddness of the odd women” (Hudson Review, N.37, 1984, 234-41), Diedre David’s essay “Ideologies of Patriarchy Feminism and Fiction In the odd women” (Feminist Studies, Spring 1984, 212-18). Alice B. Markow’s article “George Gissing: Advocate or provocateur of women’s movement” (*English Literature in Transition*, V. 25, N. 2, 1982, 304-10) and Merryn Williams’s *Women in English Novel* (1800-1900), (London: 1984) are fine studies of Gissing’s feminism.

Though there is paucity of works on Gissing’s technical aspects of the novel but these are not totally absent. Henry Jame’s “Notes on Novelists with some other notes” (Harper Weekly, July 31, 189, 754) grants Gissing the merit of ‘Saturated’ that is, through knowledge of the lower middle-class milieu but expresses strong reservations about his technical and organizational powers.

Articles, 1968, 6-7), adds that Gissing’s prose style is restrained and discriminatory.

Critics have tried to prove him in the larger European tradition which brings him in close affinity, with French and Russian novelists. Patricia Alden’s Social Mobility in the English bildungsroman, Gissing, Hardy, Bennett, Lawrence (An Arbor: UMI, Research press, 1986) provides historical and literary study with Marxist approach. She further adds “these novelists recorded their subjective experience of “soul searching problems involved in upward mobility.” (69)

John Sloan’s ‘The Literary Affinity of George Gissing and Dostoevsky: Revising Dickens” (English Literature in Transition, V.32, NA, 1989, 441-53) examines the bond of affinity between Gissing and Dostoevsky and Dickens’s influence on them. In a letter to Eduard Bertz, Gissing wrote: “I am deeply in sympathy with Dostoevsky .... He appeals to me more distinctly than another Russian and more perhaps than any other modern novelists.” (Letter, 1961, 79)

Gissing Newsletter and Gissing Journal have reprinted a number of articles which had first appeared in their earlier volumes. A critical survey of Gissing’s criticism shows that prejudices have died and a change in the tone of the critics is seen. In 1895 Gissing wrote to Roberts: “I want to enlist that if people think it worthwhile to write at length about my books, they must take the trouble to study them seriously.” (Letter, 1961, 236) To Gissing’s warning Pierre Coustillas rightly adds:

Gissing being taken more and more seriously, as he deserves to be ... from 1890s to his death he was commonly regarded, together with George Meredith, Thomas Hardy as one of the best living English novelists. In retrospect the opinion would seem to have been not only promoted by
friendship as was the case when expressed by man such as Henry Norman and A.H. Bullen, but inspired by reason and sole artistic judgment. Gissing’s status in history of English novel is now secure enough as we can look ahead confidently.” (“Recent works and close prospects in Gissing studies” ELT, V32, N.4, 1989, 416-17) Gissing indeed stands in the gallery of one of the greatest English novelists.

As far as this study is concerned despite its loud pronouncements that science is the remorseless enemy of mankind and it will destroy ‘all simplicity and gentleness of life’ that it will restore ‘barbarism under a mask of civilization’ and that it will also ‘whelm all the laborious advances of mankind in blood-drenched chaos’, George Gissing loved to think that his was a scientific art, an art based on science, such as George Moore had described it. Notwithstanding the fact that he regarded science as a darkening force to contaminate man’s vision and to harden his heart, a vicious factor to bring a time of vast conflicts, which will pale into insignificance ‘the thousand wars of the old’, he was never averse to the truth reckoned by scientific inquiry and curiosity; and in this respect, he even excels Mark Rutherford and George Moore.

Writing in an age of scientific theories, George Gissing fully recognized the impact of Darwinism and its varied implications: the theory of Uniformitarianism and also the genetic theory made him believe the scientific existence of mankind. To his scientific knowledge, the influences of Zola, Balzac, Flaubert, the Goncourts and Maupassant added a kaleidoscopic vision and depth of life, often resembling those of Dostoevsky’s and Dante’s. His view of determinism as the law of existence is that of Schopenhauer, where he intrudes in his studies of the conscience at bay, to elucidate the thoughts and half-conscious motives,
to trace the process of causation determining issues, even in the most trivial and sordid shapes.

Gissing’s *Workers in the Dawn* (1880) and *The Unclassed* (1884) tell the story of determinism along the scientific lines of Darwin, Strauss and Schopenhauer. *Demos, a story of English Socialism* (1886) and *Isabel Clarendon* (1886) are a scintillating debate between atheism and agnosticism on the scientific lines of Freud and Darwin: his *Thyrza* (1887) and *A life’s Morning* (1888) present the fullest predicament of the working class with the Ruskinian teachings; his *Nether World* (1889) which is a gloomy Panorama of misery, squalor and savagery of the lower classes of Clerkenwell, is a prototype of Victor Hugo’s Les Miserables. His *New Grub Street* (1891) sets forth new layers of psychological truths exposed to critical study; Reardons, Milvains, Amys and Marians – all are good psychological studies ever conceived before on sound scientific theories. In *Born in Exile* (1893), Gissing intellectually discusses conundrums involving science, social ethics, religious problems and other discursive subjects. In *The Emancipated* (1890), Gissing marshaled for scientific inspection a miscellaneous crowd of free-livers, self-questioners and others of both sexes who had repudiated the ordinary restraints of morals and religion. In *Denzil Quarrier* (1892), he has selected a special case for scientific study- the woman who leaves a husband convicted of felony and enters into an irregular union with the man she loves. In *The Odd Women* (1893), the real causes of an unfortunate matrimonial alliance have scientifically been studied.

In the *Year of Jubilee* (1894) and in *Eve’s Ransom* (1895), Gissing scientifically satirizes the vulgarity and essential barbarism of the middle class, or rather stripes them naked with the Dickesonian British
Philistinism. In *The Whirlpool* (1897), he has renewed his old strength and clear-sightedness in solving moral complications on scientific lines as in *New Grub Street* and *Born in Exile*. In *Human Odds and Ends* (1897) and *The Town Traveler* (1898), Gissing satirizes the sham of the polished life with Cockney humours. In *The Crown of Life* (1899), *Our Friend the Charlaton* (1901) and *Will Warburton* (1905), he exposes the squalor and drudgery of the mechanized life, where the merchants had only the commodities to sell and no heart to feel.

The scientific impact is clearly visible in George Gissing’s novels, so in artistic techniques involving language, style, dialogues, narratives and settings also. His novels have been largely influenced by scientific thought. Like Mark Rutherford and George Moore, his language and style have been considerably influenced by scientific impact. Further chapters of this study will deal with this theme in his early and middle novels. In his later novels Gissing did not deal with the same theme.
Works Cited


