

Gissing's Zolaist determinism and the heroines of *The Nether World*

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Abstract: Zola, in his book *The Experimental Novel*, introduces the aspects of what is now called the naturalistic novel. Later on, Zola's ideas were exported to the English literature and the works of English novelists. George Gissing is one of the English authors who have successfully adopted the premises and the key elements of Zola's naturalistic novel in their work. This paper deals with the naturalistic and Zolaist essence of George Gissing's novel, *The Nether World*. The crucial aspects of Zola's experimental and naturalistic novel are first discussed. Then the idea of determinism and its connection to the novels of Zola and Gissing's *The Nether World* comes to light. Finally, the subject of Gissing's treatment of the presence of women and their entrapment in deterministic webs of life is discussed.

Keywords: determinism, female characters, naturalistic novel, Zola.

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proud man
Dressed in a little brief authority
Most ignorant of what he's most assured—
His glassy essence
(Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, II, ii, pp. 117–20)

Introduction

George Gissing who deliberately had put himself in a state of social isolation, paradoxically, created books that are of immense social intelligence and social insights. His twenty-two novels are all manifestations of the unhappiness of men and women who are born with talent and temperament but lack money and social connections. Almost invariably, all his heroes and heroines suffer from a sense of melancholy and life-long depravation. In his novels, men and women of merit are driven into the emotional crisis that results in their spiritual isolation (Gornic, 2008). The novel *The Nether World* can serve as a suitable example of this spiritual isolation. Gornic (2008, p. 7) in her description of Gissing's novels explains his method of managing the characters in his novels as:

It is this conviction of inescapable outsidersness—stirred from within, fortified from without— that is Gissing's true territory. This is the inner condition he understands down to the bone. It is when he gets right inside the one who feels him or herself a born outsider that Gissing is remarkable.

Auto/biographical forms were newly available for the authors as resources for experiment during the productive period of Gissing (Saunders, 2010). He grasped the chance offered by the emergence of those new formal developments, and started to explore these developments for his fictional experimentation. He introduced new "energies of play and performance into auto/biography" as a modern genre (Saunders, 2010, p. 143). This idea can be explored in the manner of documenting the lives of his characters. He despised the working class (thought them to be savages, devoid of culture), women (who were judged to be inferior in Gissing's terms), and democracy (which put power at the hands of the unworthy masses). He cared only for the sacrifice of some exceptional spirits who had

the power to change the miserable conditions of life (Gornic, 2008). In other words, in his novels, the "spectacle of the individual spirit" was "desolated by the lock-step coldness of respectable society" (Gornic, 2008, p. 8). Gissing, George Orwell tells us, was indeed up against "the fog-bound, gas-lit London of the eighties, a city of drunken puritans, where clothes, architecture and furniture had reached their rock bottom of ugliness, and it was almost normal for a working-class family of ten persons to inhabit a single room" (Gornic, 2008, p. 10).

In gradual abandonment of the realistic paradigm, Gissing adopted the naturalist narrative. In naturalism, the 'idea', 'theme', or 'problem' took the place of the 'event' in realism. While problems or ideas about war, illness, or finance are the themes of Zola's novels, problems such as crowds, feminism and journalism are dealt with in Gissing's novels. *The Nether World* is an excellent example of this naturalistic enterprise (Jameson, 1976) as in it Gissing explores the struggle of woman in an unfair and cruel world.

Gissing is commonly regarded as an English Zola (Bader, 1963). He eyed the physical conditions of the moment with a naturalistic concern (Harsh, 1992). As Gissing is most of the times compared with Zola, we here first briefly discuss Zola's ideas of experimental novel. In this short part, the resemblances between Zola and Gissing are observed and highlighted.

The experimental novel

Zola (1964) claimed that medicine and literature are in such close terms that the word novelist is equal to the word doctor. He desired to be scholarly and exact in his art of novel writing, and admired the physiological/medical approach to human personality (Wilson in Bloom, 2004). The naturalist novel is the novel written based on observation and analysis (Berg as cited in Bloom, 2004). In Zola's scientific method, the society is conceived as an organic and harmonious entity. The criticism of the naturalist novelist, therefore, comes as a struggle against the maladies and diseases that threaten its organic unity (Lukacs, 1978). Zola argued that "The social cycle is identical with the life-cycle: in society as in the human body, there is a solidarity linking the various organs with each other in such a way that if one organ putrefies, the rot spreads to the other organs and results in a very complicated disease" (as cited in in Lukacs 1978). In general, Zola identified

the human body with the human society as both shared similar mechanical features (Lukacs, 1978). Gissing follows Zola's approach in identifying the societal life of man with the body of a human being. As an example, the ninth chapter of his novel, *The Nether World*, in which he introduces the case of Clara Hewett to the reader, is entitled *Pathological* and keeps being like a pathological report.

Zola (1964) favoured the experimental method and believed that this method can lead to both the knowledge of physical life and the knowledge of passionate and intellectual life. "Experiment is but provoked observation" (Zola, 1964, p. 3). The novelist is an observer and experimentalist (Zola, 1964, p. 8). Quoting Claude Bernard, Zola argues that feeling, reason, and experiment are totally interconnected in the experimental method (Zola, 1964, p. 34):

In the experimental method the personality and subjectivity of the observer is absent: The Revolution which the experimental method has caused in science consists mainly in the substitution of a scientific criterion for a personal authority. It is the characteristic of the experimental method to depend only on itself, as it carries within itself its criterion, which is experiment. It recognises no authority but that of facts, and it frees itself from personal authority (Bernard as cited in Zola, 1964, pp. 43-44).

Zola (1964, p. 52) insists on accepting determined facts, and not risking our personal sentiments about facts, as it is ridiculous to build "throughout the territory that science has conquered." Finally, he concludes that "today we feel the necessity of analysing anger and love, of discovering exactly how much passions work in the human being" (Zola, 1964, p. 54). Gissing in *The Nether World* has focused on the human emotions and their sources in a Zolian manner and deals with humanitarian issues in scientific and deterministic terms.

In his preface to *Thérèse Raquin*, Zola introduces his artistic methodology:

I have chosen people completely dominated by their nerves and blood, without free will, drawn into each action of their lives by the inexorable laws of their physical nature. Thérèse and Laurent are

human animals, nothing more. I have endeavoured to follow these animals through the devious working of their passions, the compulsion of their instincts, and the mental unbalance resulting from a nervous crisis. The sexual adventures of my hero and heroine are the satisfaction of a need, ... (as cited in Bloom, 2004, p. 1).

Zola admits that he means to show that human beings are living in the absence of soul (Bloom, 2004), and consequently, they mostly resemble animals in their behaviours. He frequently draws symbols from the animal world in order to generalise his narrative (Wilson as cited in Bloom, 2004). As Thiher (2001, p. 129) notes:

In the naturalist novel the world represented is the physiological and physical world in which suffering animals known as human beings are driven by passions, genetically determined madness, the desire for justice, and the need for a redemption that most likely will occur because of fortunate mutations.

Gissing in many occasions in his novel, *The Nether World*, makes reference to the animalistic and brutal nature of man. In the novel, two characters are mostly compared to animals, namely, Clem Peckover (later Snowdon) and Sam Byass:

The frankness of Clem's brutality went far towards redeeming her character. The exquisite satisfaction with which she viewed Jane's present misery, the broad joviality with which she gloated over the prospect of cruelties shortly to be inflicted, put her at once on a par with the noble savage running wild in woods. Civilization could bring no charge against this young woman; it and she had no common criterion. Who knows but this lust of hers for sanguinary domination was the natural enough issue of the brutalizing serfdom of her predecessors in the family line of the Peckovers? A thrall suddenly endowed with authority will assuredly make bitter work for the luckless creature in the next degree of thralldom. After all, Jane was too poor-spirited a victim to afford long entertainment (2002, p. 9).

And later in the novel, Gissing emphasises "That Clem's no better than a wild-beast tiger" (2002, p. 45). Once again, Clem Peckover and her

animalistic nature is depicted in these words in the novel: "and tending to confirm his view of her as a cunning as well as fierce animal, but the look and tone of subjugation came often enough to make their impression predominant" (2002, p. 94). Even Sidney Kirkwood, the one who is to be the hero of the story is compared to the animals:

The animal in Sidney Kirkwood made it a terrible minute for him as he turned away in silence before this savage injustice. The veins upon his forehead were swollen; his clenched teeth gave an appearance of ferocity to his spirited features. With head bent, and shoulders quivering as if in supreme muscular exertion, he left the room without another word (2002, p. 78).

Moreover, Gissing describes the bad temper of Mr. and Mrs. Byass by these words: "He's a beast! If he doesn't mind I shall go and leave him. I mean it!" (2002, p. 88).

Zola views his novelistic world as a laboratory in which knowledge is gained through objective methods while the prejudices of the scientist/novelist plays no roles in the process of experimentation (Schehr, 2009). Positivist thought is based on the combination of the purely visual and the scientific. Influenced by the Positivist thought of his times, Zola aimed to combine the freshness of vision with a scientific-analytic sophistication to become "experimental" (Berg as cited in Bloom, 2004). The words 'observe', 'vision', 'see', and 'eye' are key terms in Zola's experimental theory for novel (Berg as cited in Bloom, 2004). From Zola's point of view, in literature, the camera lens observation should be synthesised with "the poetic recreation of the artist's temperament" (1964, p. 62).

For Zola the outside world is like a battlefield or theatre, in which the trappings of modern life await for their victims (Lukacs, 1978). As it is expressed by Wilson, "For Zola the crowd and the leading personages were one and the same, each was needed as the expression of the other" (as cited in Bloom, 2004, p. 10). Wilson summarises Zola's art of representing different social classes as such:

Each class of society, each group of characters is shown within its own district, the very buildings and streets of which seem filled with the clashes of will, the frustrations of lust, the hopeless, creeping

decay of the lives within them. For the poor this geographical prison is a symbol not only of their submerged lives but of their ignorance, the isolation to which the prudence of society has consigned them lest their infection should spread (as cited in Bloom, 2004, p. 12).

Referring to Walter Benjamin, Rennie argues that the most proper subject matter for nineteenth-century literature was "the crowds that populate the modern urban landscape". As he points out, the age of mass production was followed by the emergence of the 'crowd' as a new phenomenon. Representing this new phenomenon became one of the major aesthetic tasks of the arts and the artists. Emile Zola fills his pages with the prolific description of this new environment: the modern crowd (as cited in Bloom, 2004, p. 165). Actually, Henri Mitterand argues that Zola is "the first novelist to make the crowd a character in itself" (as cited in Bloom, 2004, p. 166). In Zola's novels, a small group of characters are consistently foregrounded from the background of the crowd. This small group is the most important tool that Zola utilises to depict the crowds in his *Rougon-Macquart* (as cited in Bloom, 2004, p. 175) and in the same manner, in *Le Ventre de Paris*, Zola was markedly trying to establish a socio-economic context (Schehr, 2009). Similar to Zola, Gissing in *The Nether World* is always conscious of the crowds, especially we can see them through the confused gaze of Jane Snowdon both before and after she met her grandfather. One most brilliant examples of Gissing's description of the crowds occurs on the wedding day of Bob Hewett and Pennyloaf (Carey, 1992).

The naturalistic novel of Zola is unexpectedly filled with details. The reader's knowledge of details can equal the knowledge of the author/narrator who is a scientist. In other words, the reader is provided as much as possible to be able to share the scientific knowledge of the author/narrator (Schehr, 2009). Gissing's narrative is completely like Zola's in terms of the details. We, as readers, know all the details of the lodgings, of physical appearances, and of socio-economic and cultural background of *The Nether World* and its people.

One of the features of naturalism that Zola and Gissing share is the rejection of idealism (Harsh, 1992). In *The Nether World*, Gissing looks at Michael Snowdon's idealism that go so far as to changing the life of a

woman, Jane, and obliging her to remain unmarried till the end of her life with a critical eye. Gissing represents Michael Snowdon's idealistic and at the same time repressive visions in a way that implies their improbable occurrence in the real world while they can affect Jane's whole life:

Suppose when I die I could have the certainty that all this money was going to be used for the good of the poor by a woman who herself belonged to the poor? You understand me? It would have been easy enough to leave it among charities in the ordinary way; but my idea went beyond that. I might have had Jane schooled and fashioned into a lady, and still have hoped that she would use the money well; but my idea went beyond that. There's plenty of ladies nowadays taking an interest in the miserable, and spending their means unselfishly. What I hoped was to raise up for the poor and the untaught a friend out of their own midst, someone who had gone through all that they suffer, who was accustomed to earn her own living by the work of her hands as they do, who had never thought herself their better, who saw the world as they see it and knew all their wants (2002, p. 115).

Scheher (2009) notes that in Zola's mode of experimental novel, the author can only touch the 'wound' but is unable to prescribe any cure for it. Like Zola, Gissing is also unable to provide any alternatives for the filthy nether world he creates and depicts. At the end of the novel, the characters are left sinking even in their miseries without any hope for change; the more they struggle, the less they gain.

Determinism

Determinism is the cause which determines the appearance of the phenomena, or in other words, it is made by the necessary conditions for the manifestation of the phenomena (Zola, 1964). The characters set in a certain story, follow a special pattern, in which "the succession of facts will be such as the requirements of the determinism of the phenomena under experimentation call for" (Zola, 1964, p. 8). The ideal of the theory of determinism was to identify the causes and effects of the natural phenomena. In other words, the central promise of naturalism was to represent "the causal determination of natural and human phenomena by

the physical milieu" (Berg as cited in Bloom, 2004, p. 46). Zola (1964) emphasises that the naturalist novelists are not fatalists but determinists. The determinist can act upon the phenomena while the fatalist lacks this capacity. Zola paraphrases Claude Bernard's conception of determinism in the following terms:

He calls 'determinism' the cause that determines the occurrence of phenomena. This immediate cause, as he terms it, is nothing other than the physical and material condition for the existence or manifestation of phenomena. The aim of the experimental method, the goal of all scientific research, is therefore identical for living bodies and for inanimate bodies: it consists of finding the relationships that link a given phenomenon to its immediate cause, or otherwise stated, of determining the conditions necessary for the manifestation of that phenomenon (Zola as cited in Bloom, 2004, p. 58).

Heredity and surroundings (milieu) are the two significant poles of Zola's mode of determinism (Zola, 1964). Of the social effects of the surroundings Zola (1964, p. 20) has brilliantly written:

Man is not alone; he lives in society, in a social condition; and consequently for us novelists, this social condition unceasingly modifies the phenomena. Indeed, our great study is just there, in the reciprocal effect of society on the individual and the individual on society.

Schehr (2009, p. 90) argues that in Zola, "the individual is set against a collective, shared memory that is personalised in each individual case at the same time." The knowledge of event, the knowledge of social structure and socio-economic position, therefore, allowed the narrator of *Rougon-Macquart* as well as Zola to take a scientific approach (Schehr, 2009, p. 88).

The accident, called life, represented by the novelist is the product of micro and macro forces (Thiher, 2001). According to Thiher (2001, p. 129), the naturalistic/experimental novel "can be the equivalent of a statistical study of a social macrocosm whose state at any given moment is produced by the random movements of the microscopic elements composing the system." Gissing by manipulating the details of the personal life of his characters and the macro social forces, manifests a unique understanding of

the inhabitants of *The Nether World*. In the naturalistic novel, the narrative is progressive meaning that its development of the plot is moving towards a pre-determined telos (Schehr, 2009). The telos in *The Nether World* is the continuation of death, failure, and unhappiness of especially female characters.

About Zola's determinism, Thiher (2001, p. 147) explains that

Zola creates a sense of the indeterminacy that envelops the individual characters struggling in a social context in which aggregate determinisms are at work. To be sure, characters must struggle with their hereditary penchants as well as the forces that create aggregate historical dramas.

Zola is preoccupied with representing the emergence of the individual against the great and powerful cultural forces. His characters are simultaneously subject to physiology and the receptor of cultural forces. In sum, the characters should confront both physiological determinants (heredity), and the socio-economic and cultural determinants (Thiher, 2001). Like Zola's determinism, Gissing's determinism relies upon heredity and the social surrounding as its two most important parts. Here come some extracts of *The Nether World* in which Gissing reveals the socio-economic-cultural as well as physiological roots of his determinism: "That these do it all without prospect or hope of reward save the permission to eat and sleep and bring into the world other creatures to strive with them for bread, surely that thought is yet more marvellous" (2002, p. 12). Gissing portrays the conditions of Jane Snowdon in the novel as a woman who is dependent on men:

But her nature was incapable alike of rebellion and of that sullen callousness which would have come to the aid of most girls in her position. She did not serve her tyrants with willingness, for their brutality filled her with a sense of injustice; yet the fact that she was utterly dependent upon them for her livelihood, that but for their grace —as they were perpetually reminding her —she would have been a workhouse child, had a mitigating effect upon the bitterness she could not wholly subdue (2002, p. 12).

Even a male character, John Hewett, in Gissing words is a character who:

John revolted against it, as against all the other natural laws that visited him harshly (2002, p. 22) ... recognition of the fact that he was a mechanic and never could be anything else. 'What a vile, cursed world this is, where you may see men and women perish before your eyes, and no more chance of saving them than if they were going down in mid-ocean! (2002, p. 68)

And finally, the most excellent example where Gissing directly refers to the deterministic life of his character: "This was at ten o'clock on Sunday evening. So do we play our tragi-comedies in the eye of fate" (2002, p. 69).

According to Harsh (1992), the fictional resolution of Gissing's novels signifies that in these fictional worlds the escape from determination turns out to be delusory. In his "Hope of Pessimism", Gissing writes about fate and determinism. Hence, Fate is an unrelenting force that first brings to existence, and then tortures and destroys (1970).

Gissing and the Heroines

Gissing had an odd attitude towards women, best reflected in his novels. Carey argues that women are the main recipients of Gissing's scorn (1992). It seems that it is women in his novels who are mostly fallen prey to the powerful webs of determinism. Clara Hewitt and Jane Snowdon are evidently the two most suffering female victims of Gissing's determinism. Clara "had felt the horrible fascination of that sheer depth, and thought of it for days, thought of it until she dreaded to quit the tenement, lest a power distinct from will should seize and hurl her to destruction" (2002, p. 177), and Jane "was incapable of revolting against the tyranny of circumstances" (2002, p. 201). About Clara Hewett, a revolting, ambitious, and a man-like character Gissing writes:

Such cast of countenance could belong only to one who intensified in her personality an inheritance of revolt; who, combining the temper of an ambitious woman with the forces of a man's brain, had early learnt that the world was not her friend nor the world's law (2002, pp. 21-22).

The point in Gissing's portrayal of Clara Hewett is that as a woman, she cannot act out her revolt and ambition without having mental faculties which

resemble a man's. Later on in the novel he manifests his resentment towards women in more clear and straightforward terms:

Theoretically she had now accepted every debasing compact by which a woman can spite herself on the world's injustice. Self-assertion; to be no longer an unregarded atom in the mass of those who are born only to labour for others; to find play for the strength and the passion which, by no choice of her own, distinguished her from the tame slave ... She wished to break free from her slavery, but had not the force to do so ... Why should she struggle uselessly to justify herself in the eyes of people predisposed to condemn her? Fate was busy in all that had happened during the last two days ... It was not her own doing; something impelled her, and the same force —call it chance or destiny —would direct the issue once more ... what use to try and look further, when assuredly a succession of circumstances impossible to calculate would in the end constrain her? (2002, pp. 58-59).

The image of the female character here is the one of a slave who is entrapped in the clutches of fate while, for her, there are no hopes of release. Clara Hewett is the target of Gissing's determinism for woman:

Her faults he dealt with not as characteristics to be condemned, but as evidences of suffering, the outcome of cruel conditions. Her engagement at the luncheon-bar he spoke of as a detestable slavery, which had wasted her health and driven her in the end to an act of desperation ... she aims at an impossible change of circumstances. It comes from her father; she can't help rebelling against what seem to her unjust restraints (2002, pp. 68).

It seems that the lessons Gissing has learned from Zola's elements of experimental novel can be only applied to his female characters. As it is evident in the lines quoted above, Clara Hewett cannot be even partly responsible for her own faults; she is so affected by the deterministically masculine force of her father that changes are already impossible for her as the statement "an impossible change of circumstances" represents.

Another example of Clara's inescapable fate as a poor girl that is a kind of environmental or socio-economic determinism:

How can she help her nature? How can we any of us help what we're driven to in a world like this? Clara isn't made to be one of those who slave to keep themselves alive. Just a chance of birth! Suppose she'd been the daughter of a rich man; then everything we now call a fault in her would either have been of no account or actually a virtue. Just because we haven't money we may go to perdition, and comfortable people tell us we've only ourselves to blame. Put *them* in our place! (Gissing, 2002, p. 68)

As all these quotations and portrayals of Clara Hewett suggest, she is just a toy at the hands of powerful social, economic, and familial forces and unable to overcome any one of them successfully.

In Gissing's world, the art and young girls are conceived to be irreconcilable things. Art comes only as a stimulus of the individual's environment. Since Clara Hewett lacks the opportunity to rise from a stimulating environment (heredity and the conditions of upbringing), she can never become a true artist. What Constance Harsh has written of the female character Maud in *The Unclassed* can also be applied to Clara in *The Nether World*:

In Maud, a combination of heredity and upbringing, rather than anything in the essential nature of women, is responsible for the form of her aesthetic impulses. Self-consciousness is a great good in the world of *The Unclassed*, and it is precisely the lack of this that inhibits Maud's artistic development: "She could not understand herself, seeing that her opportunities had never allowed her to obtain an idea of the artistic character" (1992, pp. 929-930).

Like Clara Hewett, Jane Snowdon is trapped by many social and familial deterministic factors. Especially, she suffers from social and class discomfort, in performing the philanthropic actions forced upon her by her idealistic grandfather that ruins her future (Jameson, 1976); Jane Snowdon is a slave who is easily manipulated by men:

It was not until he set forth to go to work next morning that Sidney called to mind his conversation with Jane. That the child should have missed by five minutes a meeting with someone who perchance had the will and the power to befriend her, seemed to him, in his present

mood, merely an illustration of a vice inherent in the nature of things ... She wished to break free from her slavery, but had not the force to do so (Gissing, 2002, p. 60).

Gissing (2002, p. 65) writes that Jane Snowdon's eyes "no longer reminded you of a poor animal that has been beaten from every place where it sought rest and no longer expects anything but a kick and a curse." Hence, Gissing relegates Jane Snowdon from the position of a powerless and passive animal to a mere thing that is ready to be kicked and cursed.

Clara's aspirations to leave her miserable social status and to rise in an unmerciful society are not only suppressed by representing the immorality of her career as an actress, but also frustrated through the narrative judgment of the author in the form of the vitriol dashed in her face by her jealous friend and colleague, named Grace. But the consequences of Clara's decisions and what happens to her are not restricted only to her, but also to another woman: Jane Snowdon. Clara's destiny directly affects Jane's (Jameson, 1976) in that Sidney Kirckwood can easily forget about Jane after Clara's return. Clara and Jane, however, are only two examples of the harsh deterministic webs of the Nether World. Pennyloaf, Mrs. Hewitt, Mr. Michael Snowdon's wife, Grace Rudd, Bessie Byass, Mrs. Candy, Clem Peckover and even Amy Hewitt also suffer from double disaster: determined and unchangeable life beside men who degrade them.

Conclusion

What Gissing adds up to Zola's theory and practice of experimental novel in *The Nether World* is the female character. While Zola puts both the male and female character under scientific study in a laboratory called novel, Gissing is interested in scrutinising and examining the female character. As a key element of Zola's naturalistic thought, determinism in both its environmental and hereditary forms affects women with a greater intensity in *The Nether World*. As it was discussed in the study, the two female characters of Gissing's novel Clara Hewett and Jane Snowdon are deprived of any sort of decision-making and choice. What deteriorates the two characters' conditions is that they are unable to make any changes in spite of having a spirit of revolt. Finally, Gissing can be considered as a follower of Zola's school of naturalism in *The Nether World* as he practices the central

elements of experimental novel in his work; however, he adds another extreme to a theory which was extremist itself, and that extreme is the double disaster of his female characters who are under the power of both a patriarchally-determined society and a male author.

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