



The Nether World

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The Nether World (1889), generally regarded as the finest of Gissing's early novels, is a highly dramatic, sometimes violent tale of man's caustic vision shaped by the bitter personal experience of poverty. This tale of intrigue depicts life among the artisans, factory-girls, and slum-dwellers, documenting an inescapable world devoid of sentimentality and steeped with people scheming and struggling to survive. With Zolaesque intensity and relentlessness, Gissing lays bare the economic forces which determine the aspirations and expectations of those born to a life of labor.

The Nether World Details

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From Reader Review The Nether World for online ebook

Tara says

This is a brilliant novel and George Gissing deserves more credit. He should be as famous as Dickens or Eliot. As the title suggests it is about the working class, set in Clerkenwell which was, in the Victorian era, one of the most deprived areas of London. Gissing came from a middle-class background and this shows, but his life was a difficult one and he experienced poverty at first hand. There are many characters, all strongly drawn and if some tend to be a little grotesque, this reflects the horror of their surroundings. Gissing sets up expectations only to destroy them, and the more heroic characters are eventually crushed by their baser neighbours. Unlike other social realists of the period, Gissing had little faith in either religion or philanthropy, and in this he resembles his French contemporary, Emile Zola. 'The Nether World' also seems to anticipate later works such as Hardy's *Jude The Obscure*. It is a long book and may seem a bit slow at first, the style is very much of its time - but Gissing was a truly gifted writer, and his bleak vision will ultimately take your breath away.

Bob Schnell says

Although similar to the bleaker books of Charles Dickens, George Gissing's "Nether World" goes a bit darker and adds some editorial comments along the way.

The action starts with the arrival of a mysterious stranger looking for someone by the name of Snowden. As he searches the London slums, we are introduced to several families and figures of the poor neighborhood. The book relates the entwined paths of these people, like a Victorian soap opera, with plenty of drama. There are twists and turns the reader won't expect and no guarantee of any happy endings. If the evil people seem a tad too evil and the nice people seem a little too ethical we at least are given the back stories to understand them.

Although I enjoyed the book I thought it was too long with too many scenes of characters' inner struggles and hand-wringing agonies.

Candace says

Once again, Gissing astonishes me. Why isn't he more well-known? His writing is superb and his subject matter, the effects of poverty and social oppression, are presented from first-hand knowledge. The grueling hardships of Victorian London's working poor test their character, for better or worse, yes, but it's the unrelenting struggle to obtain enough food and coal for themselves and their children that wears down even the hardiest of souls because ultimately, there is no hope for a better life. Yes, it's a depressing read, but it's honest and gripping. I'll always think of this when reading the more popular Victorian novels about the lives and loves of those in the upper classes.

Alex says

As other reviewers have written, this is a fascinating sociological document of working class Victorian London. I decided to read this book because of Fredric Jameson's discussion of it in his Political Unconscious. Biographical details matter: Gissing floated between nether- and upper worlds - and his relationship to the working classes was deeply ambivalent.

I think it is an interesting move that we never meet any characters from the upper world: these are only shadows. There are only various nether world denizens that aspire to escape, but even when they believe they have achieved a kind of escape velocity, it is eminently clear to the reader that a nether world creature only floats about its own world.

The narrator reminds the reader that she must suspend her sense of [bourgeois] morality in judgement of the downtrodden characters. "Were Bob Hewitt wealthy, this sort of behavior would have far different consequences." Drunkenness, hooliganism, cravenness, unfiliality, avarice, and explosive tempers of various low characters are judged harshly. Nonetheless, even the 'heroes' of the book are condemned for their own gross faults: Michael's impracticable idealism against Sidney's and Jane's dismal fatalism.

Marti says

When I downloaded this to my e-reader for \$2.00 I did not realize that this was the author of *New Grub Street* which I probably enjoyed more because it dealt with the literary world and was probably a little more autobiographical. However, I am always drawn toward stories of Dickensian slum life. Although, Gissing is not as good at creating memorable characters as Dickens, there are no eternally sunny upper-middle-class types to distract me from the interesting parts of the story (ie. the prisons, the workhouse, and squalid tenements).

However, at least two of the main protagonists of the story had a maddening propensity for self denial in the name of preserving their integrity. I really doubted that this story could possibly have a happy ending, but I did not find out for sure until near the end. It had me turning the pages to see what would happen next.

Kimberly says

This book was a great look at the struggle to survive and make a life in the poor districts of mid-18th century London and a glimpse at the numerous types of people to fill the houses of the poor, as well as being a commentary on the poor quality of living they could never expect to escape from. The Nether World broke my heart, but it was still an excellent book.

Stephen Goldenberg says

A fascinating story of late Victorian poverty in London . Like so many Victorian novels, it revolves around a will and issues of inheritance. The two central characters are a bit too good to be true and the villains are in the end not quite villainous enough which makes Gissing somewhat of acut price Dickens. Nevertheless, a

thoroughly enjoyable novel.

Fionaonaona says

I had read other reviews of this before I started it, and so had been warned that it was bleak, but I hadn't anticipated quite how bleak it would leave me feeling.

The poor are depicted in the main as being hopeless, greedy, criminal, lazy, and profligate. Completely lacking in any moral fibre, they breed excessively and squander their resources on booze, puddings, and worthless entertainments.

In a society without the safety nets of a health service or state benefits system, the odds are stacked against those who do have a desire to improve their circumstances. Minor misfortunes and ill health can have catastrophic effects. With no state pensions, people needed to work until they dropped, and it was interesting to read of characters dying their hair in order to improve their chances of getting a job. For a family who could barely cover their own needs, providing for elderly relatives might just not be feasible.

For those born in such surroundings, rising out of them requires an enormous amount of self-discipline, hard work and dedication. Only those who were realistic and practical about their circumstances, understood the value of education, and practiced honesty, hard work and prudence had any chance of survival or improvement in their circumstances.

More depressing than the poor being trapped by their own fecklessness and criminality, is the theme of human relationships which with very few exceptions, are entirely selfish and conducted without real care or compassion for others.

Ricardo Moedano says

splendour in squalor

It is fortunate indeed that Gissing, while exploring the seediest region of the capital of the British Empire at the close of the 19th century, and relating the loathsome conditions of its denizens, neither lost himself in maudlin meanderings as Dickens was wont to, nor did he, like Hardy, ordain every possible, however improbable, reason for distress to befall a single character. Gissing doles out calamities widely, plus, rather than resorting to prolix ramblings to point out what disgusts him, he makes concise remarks: *Society produces many a monster, but the mass of those whom, after creating them, it pronounces bad are merely bad from the conventional point of view; they are guilty of weaknesses, not of crimes* (chapter XXIX); *Poverty makes a crime of every indulgence* (chapter XXXI).

Now, in terms of framing the drama, Gissing is, as honest and loyal Sidney Kirkwood professed himself in chapter XXXI too, *not one of those people who use every accident to point a moral, and begin by inventing the moral to suit their own convictions*.

While the human baseness and general ordeal of the penurious population laid bare in this volume appalled

me all along, its phrasing fascinated me: even those descriptions of the most gruesome environments and reflections on utter anguish are simply gorgeous if astonishing also. For instance:

On all the doorsteps sat little girls, themselves only just out of infancy, nursing or neglecting bald, red-eyed, doughy-limbed abortions in every stage of babyhood, hapless spawn of diseased humanity, born to embitter and brutalise yet further the lot of those who unwillingly gave them life. With wide, pitiful eyes Jane looked at each group she passed. Three years ago she would have seen nothing but the ordinary and the inevitable in such spectacles, but since then her moral and intellectual being had grown on rare nourishment; there was indignation as well as heartache in the feeling with which she had learnt to regard the world of her familiarity. (chapter XV)

The tendencies which we agree to call good and bad became in her (Clara, the aspiring actress) merely directions of a native force which was at all times in revolt against circumstance. Characters thus moulded may go far in achievement, but can never pass beyond the bounds of suffering. Never is the world their friend, nor the world's law. (chapter XXXII)

Think of Hardy expounding on the countryside; although Gissing's object of observation is the metropolis, the zeal and detail wherewith Hardy executed his portrayals is also a feature in this book, nevertheless it now serves to illustrate corruption and degradation:

John Hewett was not the only father who has come forth after nightfall from an obscure home to look darkly at the faces passing on these broad pavements. At times he would shrink into a shadowed corner, and peer thence at those who went by under the gaslight. When he moved forward, it was with the uneasy gait of one who shuns observation; you would have thought, perchance, that he watched an opportunity of begging and was shamefaced: it happened now and then that he was regarded suspiciously. A rough-looking man, with grizzled beard, with eyes generally bloodshot, his shoulders stooping—naturally the miserable are always suspected where law is conscious of its injustice. (chapter XXIV)

Therefore, as far as the subject matter is concerned, I consider *The People of the Abyss* by Jack London the *The Nether World*'s true next of kin; nay, a perfect supplement also, since the former work is a brutal yet authentic account of the author's personal experience as a hobo in the East End slums of his namesake city fourteen years after Gissing's tale was published.

Still, all is not bitterness in the *Nether World*: as though driven by the sentence *To pity, without the power to relieve, is still more painful than to ask and be denied* (spoken by Surface in Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*; Act V., Scene I.), Michael Snowdon, with the view of alleviating somehow the woes of his fellow Clerkenwellers, imposes a tremendous task on his granddaughter Jane, which task entails many sacrifices for her whose childhood had been marked by cruelty and humiliation before he, on a happy and wholly unexpected turn in his position (Michael Snowdon comes into possession of wealth), rescued her, but alas! later on Mr. Snowdon curtailed Jane's own desires and natural development for the sake of his project, thus becoming, despite his altruistic designs for the legions of the damned, a tyrant himself to his ward. Big irony, uh? Well, here's another one - this book is so dismal that it dazzles.

Beside Jane's father Joseph, a downright scoundrel, Mrs Peckover and her vulgar daughter Clem, a pair of vengeful scheming harpies, the chief agents of tragedy are abstract forces present within every person, regardless of class, for it is avarice, hatred, envy, ambition, laziness and cowardice that bring about disgrace to the *Nether World* folk. Moreover, contrary to the Dickensian formula, there is no easy and sudden solution

to their troubles, as no angel of salvation appears out of the blue (or the grey, rather, in this case) to deliver comfort to the victims, and precious little retribution against the villains is effected (and that, as mere consequence of their actions, not by a ludicrous coincidence or accident).

Therefore this work is definitely not recommended to the faint-hearted idealists, but at any rate it might appeal to your sympathy for the oppressed - and I quote Gissing again to clinch my commentary: *It is a virtuous world, and our frequent condemnations are invariably based on justice; will it be greatly harmful if for once we temper our righteous judgment with ever so little mercy?* (chapter XXXII).

F.R. says

This evocation of the poorest people in the poorest parts of Victorian London does of course bring Dickens to mind. Yet this has none of young Charles's sentimentality – we have little hope and no happy ending forced upon the characters. This probably comes from the differing biographies of the authors: Dickens was poor as a child but spent nearly all of his adulthood in affluent circumstances, while Gissing was constantly hard-up. This is reflected in the texture of the book, with the author viewing poverty as a grind whose permanency cannot be broken.

We follow a number of characters around industrial Clerkenwell (which is now a very media-friendly part of London) and discover their grim lives. The chapter concerning the marriage of Bob Hewitt and Pennyloaf Candy is particularly brutal. This is not an easy read, as it builds hardness onto hardness and offers little respite. However, the details and Gissing's obvious sympathy with his characters (one pantomime villainess apart), makes it well worth persevering.

Max Fincher says

Although some readers may find Gissing's pessimism and lack of humour a turn off, his knowledge of what was the reality of the working poor of London, and Clerkenwell in particular, in the 1880s and 1890s is probably second only to Dickens. At times, it feels as if the shadow of Dickens lurks over Gissing - there are several influences at work, and obvious debts - but undoubtedly, 'The Nether World', like the French realist novelists (e.g. Zola) with whom Gissing was contemporary, shows us an unflinching and honest insight into how the idea of change from both within and without seemed almost impossible until the General Strike of the 1920s, when workers' rights were advanced, along with women's emancipation. The idea of an 'underclass' is not a new phenomenon; Gissing's novel is a document to it, warts and all.

BELIEVESINMIRACLES says

This is my very favorite Victorian novel and would definitely be in my top 3 of all time favorite books ever.

It is far more brutal, depressing, violent, miserable than anything Dickens wrote. The women characters break your heart, and the sense of hopelessness and despair never gives you a second respite. People starve, there is domestic violence, children die, people live in hovels that have more dust and dirt than furniture or bedding.

Thoroughly depressing and grim, but that is precisely why I love it so much. If you all turn away or pretend to be an ostrich, and make believe these things are not happening, nothing gets better.

I am a former caseworker for adoption and foster care, and we removed so many children from potential lives of horror, although the foster homes they went to often had a lot to be desired, as they were in the same neighborhoods where they were born. It was a color problem, which I can't expand upon here, but one that is quite sad, and if the problem did not exist, many more children would have been saved.

We are (and should be) our brother's keepers, especially when it comes to children who are suffering and dying daily, because people want to ' mind their own business ' or ' not get involved '.

Beverly says

The Nether World is another great book by George Gissing, the unsung hero of the Victorian age. His New Grub Street exposes the writing world and its horrors and The Nether World examines the world of the poor. Poverty, then and now is thought of as the responsibility of the poor. As if you could somehow get a better job or if only you worked harder or kept to a straight path with no deviations you could pull yourself out of it. There was virtually no upward mobility then or now, but people born into the upper and middle class think that it's all dependent on the morality of the person.

Gissing shows that even the most decent, hard-working people are doomed from the start and must accept this and do accept this and the wonderful thing about them is that they continue to work and strive and put food on the table and house their families, even though there is no light at the end of the tunnel.

Robin Friedman says

In his novel "The Nether World", George Gissing offers an unsentimental, grim, and uncompromising portrayal of life in the London slums in the last third of the nineteenth century. Gissing (1853 -- 1903) was a late Victorian English novelist who deserves to be better known. As a promising young student, Gissing fell in love with and stole to support a prostitute, Helen Harrison ("Nell"). After a prison term and a subsequent stay in the United States, Gissing returned to England and married Nell in what proved to be a stormy and unhappy relationship for both parties. Nell died in 1888 after she and Gissing had been separated for six years. When Gissing saw the conditions of the foul room in which Nell lived, he vowed to write a book in her memory to expose the abysmal character of London slum life. The result was "The Nether World" (1889). It is Gissing's seventh novel and his fifth and final book set in the London slums. Together with "New Grub Street", "The Odd Women", and "Born in Exile" it is among Gissing's best novels. Unlike most of Gissing's books, it is generally in print and accessible.

Although Nell's death moved Gissing to write this novel, little in it is autobiographical. Gissing had lived in the slums of London he describes after his return from the United States. He was a compulsive and inveterate walker of city streets and a detailed observer of what he saw. He also did a great deal of reading, both of novels and of studies of the urban poor, that found its way into "The Nether World."

The book is lengthy and densely plotted. It is set in its entirety in a small area called Clerkenwell with few scenes of life outside the slum. On first blush, the novel can be read as a series of scenes and episodes of slum life and of characterizations of the varied residents of Clerkenwell. The elaborate plot initially appears

hazy but emerges as the book proceeds. The novel includes an extended group of characters who are carefully delineated. The novel centers on a young man, Sidney Kirkwood and a younger woman, Jane Snowdon. As with other Gissing male lead characters, Kirkwood has a degree of artistic and intellectual interests that makes him restless. He has a steady job setting jewelry which places him on the higher levels of the nether world. Jane Snowdon is a young girl of 13 when the story begins and suffers from abusive treatment from the owners of a cheap rooming house, Clem Peckover and Clem's mother. Jane is rescued from the worst of the abuse by John Hewitt, an aging and struggling worker who rooms with his large family in the Peckover house.

The plot centers upon the appearance of an aged man, Jane's grandfather, Michael Snowdon, and separately upon the appearance of Jane's father, John Snowdon, a wastrel who abandoned Jane when she was young to the cruelties of the Peckovers for whom she works as a scullion. Michael Snowdon has lived in Australia and rumors, which prove to be well-founded, circulate throughout the nether world that he has become wealthy. The plot revolves around Michael's wealth and his will, as John Snowdon and the Peckovers scheme, together and against one another, to take the old man's money upon his death. Their attempts are vicious and low in the extreme. As Jane reaches the age of 16-17, she and Kirkwood fall in love. Kirkwood plans to marry her but backs off because he does not wish to be seen as scheming for Michael's money and because Michael has planned to use his money for charitable purposes only to be administered by Jane and by Sidney. Sidney marries the daughter of John Hewitt, Clara who had spurned him years earlier. Talented, ambitious, and selfish, Clara had run off from Clerkenwell in the hopes of becoming an actress. A rival had thrown acid in Clara's face permanently disfiguring her, and Clara had returned to her father in Clerkenwell because she had no other place to go. Largely out of a sense of duty, Sidney marries Clara in a relationship that proves depressingly unhappy.

Scenes of Clerkenwell, the streets, the garment factories, the fetid, crowded and unsanitary dwellings, the criminality, the hopelessness, and the venality of the residents are tightly drawn without hint of sentimentality or idealism, unlike, for example, Dickens. The descriptive scenes of the novel include a chapter called "Io Saturnalia!", which is a description of the poor masses during a bank holiday. Another chapter "The Soup Kitchen" describes the response of the Clerkenwell residents to attempted charity.

Among the many characters in the novel is a young woman named Pennyloaf Candy who marries Bob Hewitt, the rootless and ultimately criminal son of John. Pennyloadf is subjected to endless abuse which she endures unstintingly. Another figure from Clerkenwell is Mad Jack who functions as a prophetic figure. In a chapter "Mad Jack's dream" late in the book, Mad Jack exclaims: "This life you are now leading is that of the damned; this place to which you are confined is Hell! There is no escape for you! From poor you shall become poorer; the older you grow, the lower shall you sink in want and misery; at the end there is waiting for you, one and all, a death in abandonment and despair. This is Hell -- Hell-Hell!"

Gissing's portrayal of the nether world is bleak and grim. From this novel, he sees no hope of redemption, either in the form of education, charity, or social change. His attitude towards his characters is a difficult mixture of sympathy and hopelessness. "The Nether World" is Gissing at his harshest and most pessimistic. A difficult novel, "The Nether World" succeeds in capturing the world of a woman Gissing loved, Nell Harrison.

Robin Friedman

Katie Lumsden says

A brilliant, brilliant read - one of the best and most-underrated Victorian novels. Although a bleak story, it examines the lives of the urban poor in 1870s London so brilliantly and paints such real portraits its characters that I can't help but adore this book.
