
The Nether World

George Gissing

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Categorie(s):Fiction, Literary

Detailed Biography:

George Gissing was born at Wakefield, Yorkshire on 22 November 1857, the son of a chemist who died young leaving five children in fairly straitened circumstances. He was a brilliant student who at the age of 15 won a scholarship to Owens College, Manchester. This institution prepared students for university and Gissing proved to be a star pupil, winning many prizes and securing entry to London University. Clearly he *The Nether World* (Annotated) was destined for an academic career in *The Nether World* (Annotated) the classics, the history and literature of the ancient world being his first and last love.

On the eve of his success, however, his life and prospects collapsed in ruins when he was caught stealing money from the students' cloakroom. The money *The Nether World* (Annotated) was for Nell Harrison, a young prostitute with whom Gissing was infatuated. After a month's imprisonment he was packed off to America, where he passed a year schoolteaching and writing his first short stories for a Chicago newspaper. He was back in London by October 1877, friendless and penniless; he sought out Nell again and they married. He scratched a living by doing private tutoring while working on his large first novel, *Workers in the Dawn*, whose publication in 1880 he paid for with a small legacy. The novel, which was a complete failure, is a naturalistic study of the most desperate levels of poverty-stricken London life. As the title suggests, at this time the young Gissing thought of himself as a committed socialist, but that was a brief passing phase. His true attitude to the poor soon stabilised as a most peculiar mixture of sympathy for the 'deserving' poor and a shuddering distaste for the rest: his position, roughly, is that poverty corrupts any sensitive soul but that social reform is likely to lead to mob rule, philanthropy is sentimental nonsense and the education of the lower orders is generally futile.

Gissing's marriage was desperately unhappy: his wife was a drunkard and intermittently returned to prostitution; eventually he paid her to live apart from him. The relationship in *Workers* *The Nether World* (Annotated) between the idealistic Arthur Golding and the sluttish and invincibly stupid Carrie Mitchell is clearly autobiographical. The other female character in *Workers*, Helen Norman, is a first study for a long line of ladylike, virtuous, refined woman, distant as stars and just as *The Nether World* (Annotated) unattainable for the Gissing hero. 'My one supreme desire is to marry a perfectly refined woman' says one of his many *The Nether World* (Annotated) alter egos, Godwin Peak in the later *The Nether World* (Annotated)

novel, but he never achieved it.

Nell Gissing died, of drink and syphilis, early in 1888; the account in his diary of being called to identify her body in a room in a Lambeth slum is one of Gissing's most moving passages. His investigations into, and personal experience of, the lowest stratum of London working class life had *The Nether World* (Annotated) stood him in good stead and supplied him with the materials for four other slum novels, of which the best, unforgettable for its superb evocation of tragic squalor, is the last, *The Nether World*. On the proceeds of this book, he fulfilled his dearest ambition by paying a long visit to Italy. He recorded how he had long been unable to read a book about Rome without feeling a pain in the heart. He repeated the visit in 1889-90 and 1897-8.

Gissing never knew wide fame or considerable prosperity. He was compelled to sell the copyright of his novels outright to publishers, which meant that even his occasional successes did him no good. Nevertheless, from 1884 onwards, he earned a modest if precarious living from novels and tutoring. For six years he lived alone, drawing inspiration, as he said sardonically, from his apartment's proximity to the Marylebone workhouse. He was oppressed by his 'guilty secret' — his having gone to prison for a disgraceful proletarian crime — and he had few literary associates or, indeed, friends of any kind. He was often desperately lonely, spending many punishing hours a day at his desk and rarely speaking to anyone congenial. The 'secret' moulded his relations with women also: Gissing was attractive to, and powerfully attracted by, women, but he believed no woman of his own kind could possibly be content to share his life, and that anyone in his position — a struggling intellectual whose books were destined never *The Nether World* (Annotated) to have a wide sale — was forced to choose for a partner *The Nether World* (Annotated) either an heiress or a work-girl. How far this was a rationalisation for deeper impulses, including sexual masochism and an appetite for lower-class women, is a matter of dispute. Certainly he explores the theme of exogamy obsessively in his novels.

Undeterred by his own prophecy in *New Grub Street* of the inevitable outcome of another exogamous marriage, he was *The Nether World* (Annotated) prepared to pay the price a second time. He picked up his second wife, Edith Underwood, daughter of a respectable artisan, at a *The Nether World* (Annotated) music hall. As soon as they had married in February 1891 they moved to Exeter, part of Gissing's plan for a deliberate exile from the metropolitan literary world. At first Gissing tried to follow through his private drama of *The Nether World* (Annotated) playing King Cophetua to her beggar-maid and wrote patronisingly to his sisters that he was going to make a start by correcting her grammar and pronunciation. But he soon discovered he had allied himself with a malevolent, violent and mentally unstable woman. The marriage was a disaster from the start. They returned to London to live in 1893 and *The Nether World* (Annotated) after many fearsome scenes Gissing parted from his family (they had two sons by that time) in 1897. It was now that he was first diagnosed as *The Nether World* (Annotated) suffering from the emphysema that was to end his life so prematurely.

Domestic and other kinds of miseries seemed to feed Gissing's genius. *The Nether World*

(Annotated) The novels of his middle period in the 1890s, some of which have been severely underrated, deal with the various levels of English middle class life (usually the lowest levels) and the social problems of the The Nether World (Annotated) day. His themes are struggling authors and their financial and marital difficulties in his masterpiece, *New Grub Street*; the lack of opportunities for well-educated single women in *The Odd Women*; the attempt, in *Born in Exile*, of an intelligent but poor man to ingratiate himself with, and to marry the daughter of, an upper class cultured family by pretending to have religious views which he really despises; an attack *The Nether World (Annotated)* on conventional marriage and on suburban pretension in *In The Nether World (Annotated) the Year of Jubilee*; and a study of various kinds of corruption among the artistic moneyed classes in *The Whirlpool*. These novels, some of which sold and were reviewed well, rapidly increased Gissing's reputation and expanded *The Nether World (Annotated)* his income, which he augmented by the rapid production of unsophisticated short stories and pot-boiling short fictions. And for the first time he acquired some literary and educated acquaintances: Grant Allen, George Meredith, W.H. Hudson and especially H.G. Wells, who became a close friend; though he still refused to be seen with his wife or to invite people to his house.

After the publication in 1897 of *The Whirlpool*, which is probably the most formally satisfying of his novels, Gissing's creative energy for fiction seemed to be mined out, though he wrote two more novels and a number of stories. He spent some months in Italy working on a monograph on Dickens which can still be read with profit, and his only travel book, about an *The Nether World (Annotated)* arduous trip to the South. Soon after his return to London he formed a union with Gabrielle Fleury, a young French translator, and he went to live with her and her mother in Paris. The most notable product of this last phase was *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, the curious part-fictional (not very fictional) set of reminiscences of a retired writer. This was the most popular of all his books for years after his death, but its reputation has faded now. Its mournful and dispirited tone, with the grumbling self-pity rather too much to the fore, does not present *The Nether World (Annotated)* the author in *The Nether World (Annotated)* his best light, even though he himself thought it "the thing most likely to last when all my other futile work has followed my futile life".

After the turn of the century Gissing's illness grew acute. He moved restlessly from *The Nether World (Annotated)* place to place as a semi-invalid, always sure that happiness was to be found elsewhere. He complained bitterly in letters about French cooking and developed an unlikely and neurotic fascination with English food: the thought of an English potato, he said, made him "frantic with homesickness". His last complete novel, *Will Warburton*, in part treats the guilty secret theme yet again; the hero runs a grocery store when he loses his money, thereby potentially suffering the humiliation in middleclass eyes that Gissing always feared.

Gissing died at St Jean Pied de Port, on the Bay of Biscay, on 28 December 1903, leaving unfinished *Veranilda*, a feeble if scholarly story set in the Rome of the Dark Ages.

He has had no obvious disciples, although George Orwell's early novels, which chart the same terrain, are clearly indebted to him, as Orwell himself insisted in a generous tribute. A remoter

influence may perhaps be traced in *The Nether World* (Annotated) the class-conscious 'condition of England' fiction by Kingsley Amis, John Wain, Margaret Drabble and others. Gissing's reputation has fluctuated over the decades but he has received plenty of critical attention over the *The Nether World* (Annotated) last 20 or 30 years and his place now seems assured as the most interesting, if also the most exasperating, late Victorian novelists of the second rank. It is unfortunate that though most of his novels are in print, only *The Nether World* (Annotated) *New Grub Street* and *The Odd Women* are well-known and widely read. Three others at least, *The Nether World*, *The Whirlpool* and *Born in Exile*, are nearly of the same quality.

Chapter 1

A THRALL OF THRALLS

In the troubled twilight of a March evening ten years ago, an old man, whose equipment and bearing suggested that he was fresh from travel, walked slowly across Clerkenwell Green, and by the graveyard of St. James's Church stood for a moment looking about him. His age could not be far from seventy, but, despite the stoop of his shoulders, he gave little sign of failing under the burden of years; his sober step indicated gravity of character rather than bodily feebleness, and his grasp of a stout stick was not such as bespeaks need of support. His attire was neither that of a man of leisure, nor of the kind usually worn by English mechanics. Instead of coat and waistcoat, he wore a garment something like a fisherman's guernsey, and over this a coarse short cloak, picturesque in appearance as it was buffeted by the wind. His trousers were of *The Nether World* (Annotated) moleskin; his boots reached almost to his knees; for head-covering he had the cheapest kind of undyed felt, its form exactly that *The Nether World* (Annotated) of the old petasus. To say that his aspect was Venerable would serve to present him in a measure, yet would not be wholly accurate, for there was too much of past struggle and present anxiety in his countenance to permit full expression of the natural dignity of the features. It was a fine face and might have been distinctly noble, but circumstances *The Nether World* (Annotated) had marred the purpose of Nature; you perceived that his cares had too often been of the kind which are created by ignoble necessities, such as leave to most men of his standing a bare humanity of visage. He had long thin white hair; his beard was short and merely grizzled. In his left hand he carried a bundle, which probably contained clothing.

The burial-ground by which he had paused was as little restful to the eye as are most of those discoverable in the byways of London. The small trees that grew about it shivered in their leaflessness; the rank grass was wan under the failing day; most of the stones leaned this way or that, emblems of neglect (they were very white at the top, and darkened downwards till the damp soil made them black), and certain cats and dogs were prowling or sporting among the graves. At this corner the east wind blew with malice such as it never puts forth save where there are poorly clad people to be pierced; it swept before it thin clouds of unsavoury dust, mingled with the light refuse of the streets. Above the shapeless houses night was signalling a murky approach; the sky—if sky it could be called—gave threatening of sleet, perchance of snow. And on every side was the rumble of traffic, the voiceful evidence of toil and of poverty; hawkers were crying their goods; the inevitable organ was clanging before a public-house hard by; the crumpet-man was hastening along, with monotonous ringing of his bell and hoarse rhythmic

wail.

The old man had fixed his The Nether World (Annotated) eyes half absently on the inscription of a gravestone near him; a lean cat springing out between the iron railings seemed to recall his attention, and with a slight sigh he went forward along the narrow street which is called St. James's Walk. In a few minutes he had reached the end of it, and found himself facing a high grey-brick wall, wherein, at this point, was an arched gateway closed with black doors. He looked at the gateway, then fixed his gaze on something that stood just above—something which the dusk half concealed, and by so doing made more impressive. It was the sculptured counterfeit of a human face, that of a man distraught with agony. The eyes The Nether World (Annotated) stared wildly from their sockets, the hair struggled in maniac disorder, the forehead was wrung with torture, the cheeks sunken, the throat fearsomely wasted, and from the wide lips there seemed to be issuing a horrible cry. Above this hideous effigy was carved the legend: 'MIDDLESEX HOUSE OF DETENTION.'

Something more than pain came to the old man's face as he looked and pondered; his lips trembled like those of one in anger, and his eyes had a stern resentful gleaming. He walked on a few paces, then suddenly stopped where a woman was standing The Nether World (Annotated) at an open door.

'I ask your pardon,' he said, addressing her with the courtesy which owes nothing to refined intercourse, 'but do you by chance know anyone of the name of Snowdon hereabouts?'

The woman replied with a brief negative; she smiled at the appearance of the questioner, and, with the vulgar instinct, looked about for someone to share her amusement.

'Better The Nether World (Annotated) inquire at the 'ouse at the corner,' she added, as the man was moving away. 'They've been here a long time, I b'lieve.'

He accepted her advice. But the people at the public-house could not aid his search. He thanked them, paused for a moment with his eyes down, then again sighed slightly and went forth into the gathering gloom.

Less than five minutes later there ran into the same house of refreshment a little slight girl, perhaps thirteen years old; she carried a jug, and at the bar asked for 'a pint of old The Nether World (Annotated) six.' The barman, whilst drawing the ale, called out to a man who had entered immediately after the child:

'Don't know nobody called Snowdon about 'ere, do you, Mr. Squibbs?'

The individual addressed was very dirty, very sleepy, and seemingly at odds with mankind. He replied contemptuously with a word which, in phonetic rendering may perhaps be spelt 'Nay-oo.'

The Nether World Annotated

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