

喬治·吉興之達爾文世界

凌念慈*

摘要

本文欲探究喬治·吉興小說中之達爾文世界。文中將吉興定位為達爾文主義作家，因為在其小說中，我們可以清楚看到達爾文主義之精義與影響：例如達爾文術語之使用、環境與人格之互動關係的描寫，以及“競爭”與“進化”觀念之探討。在二十六年的寫作生涯中，雖然吉興的題材、風格與語調一再隨著他個人的生活歷練而轉變，他達爾文主義代言人之角色卻始終如一。即使個人情感及心態等因素部份地扭曲、模糊了吉興對達爾文主義之詮釋，他對人們為了生存、成功而相互踐踏之赤裸裸的描寫，及對社會邊緣人被大環境淘汰之悲哀的深刻刻劃，使他的小說仍不失為探討達爾文主義之重要著作。

關鍵詞：喬治·吉興，達爾文主義作家，達爾文主義

George Gissing's Darwinian World

Abstract

This thesis attempts to explore the Darwinian world in George Gissing's novels. It will define Gissing's novelistic position as a Darwinian because in his novels the essence and impact of Darwinism could be clearly traced: the recurrence of Darwinian terminology, the depiction of the interrelation between environment and character, and the dramatization of the idea of competition and progress. During his twenty six years of writing career, Gissing's subject matters, style, and tone change several times with his experience of life. However, Gissing's stance as a Darwinian disciple remains unchanged. Even though Gissing's personal bias and attitude partly distort and blur his interpretation of Darwinism, his vivid depiction of the ruthless struggle for survival and success, his precise portraiture of the grievance of a maladapted borderer, and his deliberate exploration of the interwoven relation between environment and character all render his novels important documents on Darwinism.

Keywords: George Gissing, Darwinian, Darwinism

George Gissing (1837-1903), a “Mrs. Grundy's enemy” of the late Victorian age, has been buried in oblivion since his death because of his unconventional and offensive subject matters. It is not until 1960s that some scholars and critics began to notice the significance and uniqueness of his works. Gissing's “naturalistic” depiction of the life in the late Victorian age makes his critics view him as a truthful and important chronicler of the late nineteenth century. However, his critics are divided in their opinions as to his position as a novelist. Raymond Williams, for example, considers Gissing an industrial novelist because Gissing's works in the eighties “stand in the direct line of succession from the 'industrial novelist' of the 1840s” (*Culture* 174). Michael Collie, on the other hand, regards Gissing as a naturalist for Gissing explores the effect of environment upon character in his novels. Peter Keating, to take a third example, argues that Gissing simultaneously possesses the traits of naturalists and Darwinists. Such diversity in classifying Gissing is understandable because his novels are, in fact, multi-faceted and complicated--a natural and inevitable outcome of his wide reading. In childhood, Gissing first came upon Charles Dickens, Charles Darwin, and some writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (e.g., Scott, Defoe, Wordsworth, and Cooper) in his father's library. Later, as his diary and letters clearly show, he extensively pored over such writers as Dickens, Darwin, Herbert Spencer,

T.H. Huxley, Zola, and Schopenhauer. Under the profound influence of these writers, Gissing's novels therefore smack of Dickensian flavor, Darwinism, French naturalism, and Schopenhauerian pessimism.

To better understand Gissing's works, we should, first of all, notice his association with Dickens. As a matter of fact, Gissing has generally been regarded as Dickens's heir because no two novelists are so closely related as they are. Apart from their similar social origin (both came from the lower middle class), their realism, their use of London as their setting, their conservative attitude toward revolution and reform, and finally their subject matters (chiefly the dark side of the industrialized urban life) are quite identical. To be sure, Gissing was early influenced by Dickens. He began reading Dickens's novels when he was ten, and to Gissing, Dickens was the very model he emulated as well as his "household god." As John Goode rightly observes, Gissing is "a novelist whose major point of reference is Dickens" (15). Gissing's Charles Dickens: A Critical Study (1898) therefore offers "the best focus for an understanding of Gissing's own consciousness of his role as a novelist" (41). In this critical study, Gissing unhesitatingly points out Dickens's technical defects, such as his metrical language, the exaggeration of character portraiture, and the overuse of coincidences. Though Gissing well recognizes Dickens's technical flaws as a novelist, ironically, probably because of the profound influence of the master, Gissing himself commits the very errors he targets. As far as the subject matters go, Gissing, too, focuses on suffering children, aspiring youths, and benevolent old people--all of them are the recurrent figures in Dickens's world.

In addition to Dickensian flavor, Gissing's novels have a strong tincture of naturalism because of his truthful description of the influence of environment and his projection of a closed world. Gissing's sympathy for the working class does not make him bypass the seamy side of this class; instead, through deliberate character portraiture, he explores the effect of adverse environment on appearance, behavior, and capacity. In Gissing's fictive world environment is like an enmeshing web, so his characters are always at the mercy of ruthless and ironic fate. Many of Gissing's protagonists (e.g., Biffen in New Grub Street and Arthur Golding in Workers in the Dawn) find life painful, ruthless, and painful, so they choose suicide as an escape.

To be sure, the characters' pessimism about fate and their denial of human will in Gissing's novels undoubtedly register the influence of Schopenhauerian pessimism. Schopenhauer deems that any resistance to fate is futile because "struggle involves suffering." And, "the only alternative to suffering," as Schopenhauer suggests, is "the abandonment of the 'will to live,' or nonexistence" (Brown 475). Hence the resignation or death of Gissing's many heroes and heroines is, in fact, Gissing's Schopenhauerian reaction to the miseries of existence.

Though Gissing's novels smack of Dickensian flavor and are frequently associated with naturalism and Schopenhauerism, I prefer to classify him as a Darwinian novelist because in his novels we could clearly trace the impact and essence of Darwinism: the recurrence of Darwinian terminology (e.g., “competition,” “fight,” and “the survival of the fittest”) , the exploration of the interrelation between circumstances and character, and the dramatization of the idea of progress and competition. To better understand the Darwinian world in Gissing's novels, we should, first of all, refer to the rise, gist, and development of Darwinism.

With the publication of The Origin of Species (1859) and The descent of Man (1871), Darwin advanced the idea of the evolution of biological species by a process of selection and struggle. Based on his observation of the plants and animals, Darwin asserted that natural selection and competition were the ruling principles of nature. He also argued that behavior and character were profoundly influenced and determined by environment and heredity. Furthermore, grounded on his own experience with the Tierra del Fuego Indians, Darwin concluded that lower and inferior races could progress and improve themselves by education. Darwin's central ideas--the idea of competition and progress, the influence of environment and heredity on character, and the gradual process of character formation (gradualism)--were later included under the term “Darwinism” . Henceforth, Darwinism became a theory which uses the principles of competition and selection to explain the variation and progress of biological species. Herbert Spencer in 1864 coined the phrase “the survival of the fittest” to explain the phenomena of competition and progress in human society. The practice of applying Darwin's doctrine to the study of society is what is called social Darwinism. Under the influence of Darwin and Spencer, Darwinism and social Darwinism then became one of the prevalent and dominant ideologies in the 1870s. The prevalence of Darwinism fosters and encourages the spirit of competition. Life is no longer seen as mutual help. “Cloaked under due laws-of-war, named ‘fair competition’” (Houghton 78), it becomes mutual hostility. To pursue one's greatest happiness and to “climb higher” than others, one could and should trample and jostle his fellows without any scruple. The exploitation of the weak by the strong is in this way rationalized. Apart from sociology, literature was also profoundly influenced by Darwinism so that there again arise several literary schools, for example, naturalism and elitism. The writers of European Continent were very quick in their response to Darwinism, yet a number of years have passed before the British writers began to respond to Darwinism in their works. But, interestingly enough, the British writers' responses to Darwinism were disguised and modified:

It [Darwinism] tended to enter British fiction as a re-import, returning to its native land in various guise and modifications, fitting itself easily into Schopenhauerian pessimism, French naturalism, and Nietzschean elitism. (Keating, Haunted Study 111-2)

Therefore, the elements of naturalism, elitism, and Schopenhauerian pessimism in Gissing's novels, in fact, register his influence by and response to Darwinism.

Later, because of different focuses and interpretations, there arise several kinds of applied Darwinism. Some Darwinists accentuate on the necessity of progress, so they advocate the importance of education and eugenics. Still some make use of the Darwinian doctrines of competition and selection not only as a philosophical rationalization for imperialist, colonialist, and racist policies but also as the theoretical basis for the Marxian class struggle.

Gissing's Darwinism is eclectic. In addition to the central principles I mentioned before, he also embraces eugenics and imperialism in his novels. His Darwinian stance, too, is ambiguous and blurring. For example, he faithfully reflects Darwinism in his novels since Darwinism was the pervasive and dominant ideology of his times. However, Gissing is bitter over the "selection law" because he himself is a misfit. Gissing's idea of progress is even more ambivalent and wavering. In his later novels, e.g., Born In Exile (1892) and The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft (1903), Gissing asserts that progress is necessary and feasible for a youth of lower origin. However, in his novels on low life, e.g., Workers in the Dawn (1880), Demos (1886), and The Nether World (1889), he is anti-mobile and anti-progressive. The world he projects in these novels is a closed and static society; any escape or improvement is impossible. Gissing's ambiguity toward Darwinism, in fact, should be attributed to his personal feeling and experience. Ashamed of his lower social origin, Gissing loathes the working class. His hostility to and repulsion for the working people make him arbitrarily and pessimistically conclude that they are irremediable. What he takes from Darwinian theory hence is not "a sense of possible social amelioration but a bitter insight into the relative meaninglessness of individual experience" (Collie 15). Thus, in my opinion, the fatalistic note and the sense of fecklessness of Gissing's novels on low life is attributed more to Gissing's personal bias than to the influence of French naturalism.

As a matter of fact, Gissing's shifting attitude toward the working class not only results in the ambiguity in his Darwinian stance but also endows his novels with shifting styles. In fact, Gissing's writing career can be roughly divided into three distinct periods: the early, the middle, and the late. In these three periods, his focal points and themes vary greatly and his attitude toward the working class shifts as well. Such a shift is noteworthy and significant because with his changing attitude toward the working class, Gissing's tone changes and his snobbery and firm belief in (social) Darwinism gradually become obvious. Hence "Gissing's development as a novelist," as Keating clearly points out, is "closely related to his changing attitude towards the working class" (58).

Interestingly enough, Gissing's attitude toward the working class, as his novels indicate, shifts

with the change of his social status and financial condition. Born of the lower middle class, Gissing felt ashamed of his social origin. He therefore endeavored to climb up the social ladder. Yet, his ambition was thwarted by a series of misfortunes. In 1876 Gissing's promising academic career was cut short when he was dismissed from Owens College and sent to prison because of stealing. Later, he married Nell Harrison, the alcoholic and syphilitic prostitute for whom he stole the money, and led an obscure life in the London slum. Thus when he started his literary career in the late 1870s, his personal experience naturally made him focus on the dark side of the Victorian society. He consequently felt obligated to become the mouthpiece of the suffering and the oppressed: "The piece of youthful folly . . . turned him aside from a comfortable middle-class career and forced him to become the chronicler of vulgarity, squalor and failure" (Orwell 493). As a result, gloom and compassion characterize Gissing's novels of the first period. Though Gissing in this period shows overflowing sympathy and concern for the working class, however, his despair of and contempt for that class has already loomed up: "Throughout the eighties [the time during which Gissing wrote his novels about the low life] Gissing alternated between feelings of pity and loathing for the working classes and this personal confusion is apparent in his novels" (Keating 55). So, in his novels of this period, such as Worker in the Dawn (1880), Demos (1886) and The Nether World (1889), Gissing portrays sympathetically the misery and helplessness of the working class, meanwhile proposing private charity as a means to solve the poverty problem on the one hand. On the other hand, he pessimistically concludes that the working people as a class are irremediable. Thus, though the frequent allusions to charity bespeak Gissing's sympathy for the people in the slum and the working class, the tragic and sad endings of the novels disclose Gissing's pessimism over social reform and charity. Therefore, Arthur Golding's failure to educate his ignorant and vulgar wife in Workers in the Dawn, the fiasco of Richard Mutimer's reform project and his being stoned to death by those whom he seeks to help in Demos, or even Jane Snowdon's fecklessness when confronted with the ingratitude and degeneracy of the poverty-stricken people in The Nether World, all serve to disclose Gissing's distrust in and hostility to the lower class.

The publication of The Emancipated in 1890 marks the beginning of a new phase in Gissing's literary career as a novelist. Turning away from his regular setting, the East End of London, Gissing now focuses on the life of the middle class. His subjects range from marriage, child-raising, women emancipation, religion, to the literati's dilemma. Not only does he broaden his subject matters, but he shows a very different attitude toward the working class. With his rising fame, Gissing's fervid concern and sympathy for the working class gradually wane. This growing disgust of the working class, as Keating observes, is fully revealed in his novels of the middle

period:

From the beginning his championship of the working-class cause had been equivocal, but a strong sense of social pity had kept his doubts in check. Now, as his own material position improved . . . he dissociated himself from the working classes. . . . (54)

In this period, the misery of the working class is no longer his central concern; instead, social advancement becomes the most urgent issue of Gissing's protagonists. The early role of the narrator as the working class's mouthpiece has also been replaced by that of the staunch disciple of social Darwinism. "The survival of the fittest" becomes the motto of Gissing's narrator in this period. So, in New Grub Street, we see Reardon and Biffen, the weak and rigid writers, defeated and ruined without arousing any sympathy from the narrator. And, Godwin Peak, the protagonist of Born in Exile, even claims that the weak (for example, the proletarians) should be done away with. In this period, people from the lower class are viewed as an obstacle to progress instead of object of sympathy.

In the last period of his writing career, Gissing again changed his attitude as well as his subject matters. As an established novelist now, he could afford to completely dissociate himself from the working class. The grievance of the lower people and the dilemma or crisis of the alienated intellectuals were set aside. He now began to write some light topics, such as travelogue and romance. Consequently, his works of this period are characterized by an atmosphere of tranquility and resignation. The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft, a meditation and reminiscence of a retired writer, is the most representative work of this phase. No longer observing life from the perspective of the working class, and no longer feeling any sympathy for the suffering and oppressed people, the low-originated narrator of Henry Ryecroft now speaks in the tone of a detached observer and of the petit bourgeois. Wealth and ease have blunted his consciousness of social injustice and have diluted his sympathy for the working class. Gissing's attitude of this period is hence the "product of a material determination" (Goode 44). Gissing's three writing periods, in fact, is a good record of his intellectual transformation.

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