



The Crisis of Literati in George Gissing's *New Grub Street*

Du Haixia

School of Foreign Languages, Xinxiang Medical University, Xinxiang, Henan

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Abstract— *George Gissing is a famous essayist and novelist in the late Victorian era. His masterpiece New Grub Street reveals the negative impact of literary marketization on literature and even culture by describing the different living conditions of literati. The novel depicts three different types of literati images, namely idealists who adhere to artistic standards, utilitarians who cater to the market, and female writers who are on the edge of literature, thus reflecting the writer's critical attitude towards the social reality that literature has become a commodity.*

Keywords— *George Gissing, literati, New Grub Street*

INTRODUCTION

George Gissing (1857-1903) was one of the famous essayists and novelists in the late Victorian era and had the reputation of British Gorky. George Orwell mentioned Gissing at the beginning of an article as the best English novelist. His representative work *New Grub Street* reveals the negative impact of the marketization of literature on literature, academia and even culture and civilization by describing the different living conditions of literati. Q. D. Leavis once commented on the novel: "When Gissing took the life problems of the literati and the literary world as the theme of the novel, he made a permanent contribution to the English novel" [1] 266. Gissing expert Robert Selig also pointed out that the novel is Gissing's classic and one of the best novels of the late Victorian era. Gissing's biographer Jacob Korg also commented that the novel is "an accurate description of the external reality that reflects the commodification of literature" [2] 365, and Marcus Nissey also found that the novel has "an invaluable reference to contemporary literature". A sharp, faithful and reliable description of the world" [3] 1998. One of the reasons is that

he restricted all the main characters to one social identity, the literati. The author originally planned to name this novel "The Literati", which shows that the life of the literati is an important theme of the novel. By describing the suffering and setbacks of professional writers, Gissing's goal is to criticize the social conditions that have reduced literature to a commodity. This paper argues that the novel depicts three different types of literati images, namely, idealists who adhere to artistic standards, utilitarians who cater to the market, and female writers who are on the edge of literature.

The English Dictionary compiled by Dr. Johnson, published in 1755, contained the entry "Grub Street", which was defined as: "Grub Street, a street in London, was a place where men of letters lived, who wrote mainly short stories. It also refers to any similar mediocre work." It Later changed to Milton Street (not named after the poet Milton), and now it has become a commercial center rather than a place for the literati. Grub Street is still used today and still refers to writers and journalists who have to make a living with a pen. Of course, New Grub Street took on a new look in the nineteenth century, reflecting the strong impact of

news, newspapers and periodicals on traditional literary concepts and creative and ideological literature and art in the commercialized market of literature. The literati fell to the bottom of the society; and the literati who regarded art as a business, as a profession, catered to the public's interest, engaged in the writing of news, newspapers and periodicals, and the literati who were morally depraved, talented and mediocre, became successful people with both fame and fortune. Through the characterization of three types of literati, Gissing believes that this phenomenon is a sign of civilization decline and criticizes it fiercely.

Two. Three Types of Literati Images

The novel depicts three different types of literati images, namely idealists who adhere to artistic standards, utilitarians who cater to the market, and female writers who are on the edge of literature, reflecting the writer's attitude towards the social reality that literature has become a commodity. criticism.

The first category of literati refers to idealists who cling to artistic standards, represented by Alfred Yule, Edwin Reardon, and Harold Biffen. They are either serious journal critics or serious writers, but they all maintain a relentless pursuit of art against the marketization of literature. From classical literary theory to nineteenth-century romantic literature to Matthew Arnold's cultural elitism, artists have embraced the notion that artists should rely on their own imagination to perceive and express "fundamental truth."

In this novel, Yule is one of the representatives of this kind of literati. Yule was the editor-in-chief of a literary review publication. He adhered to the literary values of Arnold and others, and tried to present readers with the best ideas and knowledge in the world. After the failure of this publication, he has always hoped to start a pure literature magazine. Originally, his daughter's inheritance brought him a glimmer of light, but his daughter's rejection and the shrinking of his inheritance made his biggest dream in life also vanish, and he could only write some small articles barely make ends meet. Then his vision gradually blurred until he became blind, and his survival became a problem. In the end, he could only die in poverty and depression.

The tragic fate of the protagonist Reardon typically reflects the complete collapse of traditional literary views and cultural ideals. Born in the middle class, he received a

good education in classical literature, and the classical world of ancient Greece and ancient Rome was his spiritual home. His ideal is to become a scholar and live an independent and quiet study life. But the magazine did not accept any anonymous articles, and his dream of being a scholar was soon dashed, so he turned to writing novels. However, his academic accomplishment, moral sentiments, and traditional literary views made him dislike anything that was mediocre, superficial, and ill-suited to readers' tastes. He despised newspapers and news literature, and despised advertising. As Milvain puts it, "He was an impractical old-fashioned artist who couldn't budge to meet the needs of the market."¹⁴ However, the pressure of survival and the needs of the market, through his wife Amy, kept pressing him to give up his code to write for money, to let go of self-esteem and personality, to curry favor with the powerful, to rely on culture climb the ladder to the upper classes. In order to support his family, he began to consider market needs, but he lost his imagination and creativity, so he could only give up writing and become a hospital outpatient clerk, and his wife also left him. In the end, when he found a good career to get rid of poverty, his vain wife did not come back to him. Only when his son died of illness and he was dying did he reconcile with his wife, leaving the world with regret and pain. According to James, Yule's literary labor ended in sickness and death.¹⁵⁹

Another creative independent artist is Harold Biffen. Aesthetic criteria are the only criteria for Biffen to create this novel, although he knows that such a work is doomed to fail. The fact that he risked his life to save the manuscript of the novel from his humble attic despite the erosion of the fire is even more indicative of how much he cherishes the work of art and the fruits of his labor. At the same time, the fire also has symbolic significance. Biffen's suicide proves that in this dark background, even if the writers adhere to the principles of literature and art, they will still fight as if they were alone, falling into crisis repeatedly, and finally being swallowed up by the "fire". After more than half a year, Biffen finally completed his masterpiece after choosing his words and sentences and painstakingly. However, once his work was published, he was criticized in various ways. Numerous commentary articles have been vocal, accusing his work of not prioritizing entertainment. As a good friend of Reardon, he also found that classical

works were not commercialized, and was deeply attracted. From time to time they discussed Greek poetry for a little solace. Biffen's independence and strong self-esteem are also one of the reasons for his demise. Biffen has been living on the edge of poverty, and finally lost confidence in the world and had to end his life by suicide.

The second category of literati refers to utilitarians who cater to market demands, represented by Jasper Milvain and **Whelpdale**. Jasper Milvain is keeping up with the times. He came from a veterinary family and had two years of university education. He had been living under the protection of his mother and had no independent career. After his mother's death, he came to London and had to work on his own. He found that literati could also be successful businessmen, so he wrote various articles for newspapers and magazines, looked around for opportunities, courted celebrities, and got to know the editors-in-chief of various magazines, without any moral code. He said: "I only write to make money, never to write. My overall plan, my efforts: everything starts with money. I will not let anything hinder the improvement of my material conditions."^{[4]141} His view of marriage can also reflect the utilitarian tendencies. His wife should be rich, beautiful and good-natured to help him achieve success in his career. His experience of finding a wife can be described as twists and turns. In the end, he succeeded in marrying the ideal wife, Reardon's widow, who was not only rich and noble to help him succeed, but more importantly, they shared the same values: hypocrisy, selfishness, contentment with material things, and both considered literature as a business. At the end of the novel, Amy plays the piano and sings while Milvain lies high in a dreamlike paradise.

Mr. Whelpdale is another utilitarian in the novel who caters to the market. In the first half of the novel, Mr. Whelpdale is still just a down-and-out literati, and his novels have repeatedly failed, and his three marriage proposals have been rejected. After suffering from hunger and cold, he finally gave up writing novels and made a living by teaching students to write and writing newspaper articles. Although he was not very successful in writing, he succeeded in teaching people how to write. He intends to make his newspaper for readers with little education, let them have something to read on the train or bus, "they want the lightest, most glaring tidbits—pieces of stories, pieces

of descriptions, pieces of scandals, pieces of jokes, pieces of statistics, Fragments are stupid and miscellaneous. . . In my newspaper, each article should not take up more than two inches of space, and every inch must be divided into at least two paragraphs."^{[4]149} He renamed the newspaper, achieved a new development in journalism and made a sensation in the UK. Eventually, he became editor-in-chief of the magazine, became a wealthy literati, and married Dora, making him one of the most famous and rich literati. It can be seen that the influence of utilitarianism lasted until the end of the 19th century, and further fermented in the literary world, leading to the survival crisis of traditional literati, and even those who made a living by writing could not compete with this value.

The third category of literati refers to female writers on the fringes of literature. Literary but not business-savvy, Marian Yule is arguably the most literary single woman in the novel, and her ethos and morals are the closest to artists like Reardon. She was her father's assistant at first, and used her father's fame to publish commentary articles. She often went to the British Museum to find information and became a "resident of the valley of the shadow of the book". Then she received a large inheritance and received Milvain's love, but suddenly learns that her estate has shrunk dramatically, Milvain abandoned her because of this, her father is in danger of going blind again, and she has to make a living by contributing to publications and take on the burden of supporting her family. Unable to appreciate the joy of literary creation. Bowing to the brutal pressures of survival, this talented romantic woman kept asking herself what was the point of making journal articles that were just commodities, and would rather throw away that pen if she hadn't had to support her family. She believes that literary and artistic work is like a malignant tumor. In the vast sea of books in the British Museum, it is like walking into a vast desert, which makes people lose their way and feel at a loss. Finally, when her father Yule died, Marianne left London to take up a job as a librarian in a small town, a subsistence job that distanced her from the sanctuary of true literature.

Dora and Maud, two well-educated daughters of the Milvain family, were also constantly tormented by life dilemmas. After the death of their mother, they had to move to London with Milvain to seek more opportunities, and tutoring and writing became their means of earning a living.

Both sisters have received good education, love to read and read newspapers, but they are half-literate people. For single women like Dora and Maud, marriage is a big problem. Their education gave them clear criteria for choosing a mate, would not marry a small proprietor or a tenant farmer, and lived too poor to be in contact with men of the upper class. Maud is a more realistic person. With her good cultural literacy as her capital, she married a vulgar and wealthy businessman and got rid of the embarrassment of life. For her, literature is not a lifelong pursuit and ideal, but a means of seeking life security. Dora is more romantic and idealistic than Maud. She is also Marian's best friend. She also uses her literary talent to write children's stories and has achieved success, but this kind of story is still not enough, and it is far from a real artist. big difference. To achieve a life of worry-free food and clothing, she still has to rely on marriage. In the end, she accepted Whelpdale 's proposal and became an editor's wife with a stable income, so that she could secure her future life. It can be said that the literary accomplishment of the two sisters not only made them barely make ends meet, but also became the biggest capital in their marriage market. As for the ideal of art, it is impossible for such women to realize it.

Three Gissing's Criticism of the Commercialization of the Literary Market

Since the 1820s, a huge middle-class readership has gradually emerged, the aristocratic subsidy system has gradually evolved into modern general commercial publishing, writers have become a profession, works have become commodities and entered the market, and art has succumbed to the laws of the market. And regarded as a specialized form of production, literature became a buying and selling transaction. Adam Smith wrote, "Thought or reasoning, like every other profession, becomes a peculiar commerce." [6] 64 By the time of Gissing's life, the commercialization of literature and the professionalization of writing had long been a generally recognized reality. The Education Act of 1870 only aimed at cultivating industrial workers. While it made most people literate, it also created a large number of readers with vulgar reading tastes and no ability to appreciate words. Milvain brilliantly describes the influence of the new journalism and the new market on literature at the beginning of the novel that literature is a kind of transaction today, and the literati who is smooth

sailing is the successful businessman. In the creative environment at that time, writing had been completely absorbed into the overall process of commodity production. Therefore, whether it was Yule who founded serious publications, or Reardon and Biffen who wrote seriously, they were all swallowed up in the wave of commercialization because of their adherence to the ideal of pure literature, and they paid the price of their lives for this. Failure was perhaps the most powerful indictment against society at the time. 6 Reardon's tragedy was caused by the conflict between ideal and reality, as Jacob Korg said, "Industrial civilization does not accept the art that Reardon offers, and since he cannot produce the products that meet the needs of the literary market, then He doesn't need to exist anymore." [2] 248 *New Grub Street* also deeply depicts the survival plight of middle-class women in the Victorian era. Although middle-class women in that era received a certain education and good culture, they could not be reduced to the plight of industrial workers, but their The choice is not very big, it is nothing more than the company of a tutor or a rich lady. In fact, it is not much different from being a servant, just a little more decent. In Gissing's time, literature became a means of supporting the family, and some women writers also participated in this trend, and even succeeded, such as Mrs. Gaskell, Trollope's mother Francis Trollop. In "New Grub Street", readers can also see middle-class single women who make a living by writing. They are eager to make a living through writing, but they are still struggling on the edge of poverty, and they are unable to enter the mainstream of literature.

Four Epilogue

To sum up, by realistically portraying three types of literati images, Gissing wrote his real life in "New Grub Street". Gissing himself, like Reardon, Yule, and Biffen, is an artist who grew up in pain, struggled in poverty, failed in his career, and suffered setbacks in love and marriage. He is the poorest and most unfortunate literati in the novel. In this novel, Gissing writes into his works what he has heard, seen, and personally experienced about how poverty hinders the development of an artist's talent and how the commodified society of literature does harm to artists. The novel fully reflects the writer's profound criticism of the commercialized literary world, as well as his extreme anxiety about the writer's existential crisis, and even a

pessimistic attitude towards the late Victorian society.

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