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**MAPPING POVERTY**
**IN LATE-VICTORIAN FICTION**

**Keywords:** mapping; poverty; slums; Victorian London; George Gissing; Arthur Morrison; Charles Booth

**Abstract:** The increasing numbers of urban poor and the unprecedented growth of Victorian London significantly altered the ways in which social and moral differentiations came to be written into the structure of the city in the late nineteenth century. In George Gissing and Arthur Morrison’s city, this paper argues, the ‘otherness’ and ‘isolation’ of the poor were explicitly identified and narrated through mapping poverty with a naturalistic representation of smaller spatial units within the borders of impoverished districts. Considering Charles Booth’s distinctive analysis of London as a physical structure in Labour and Life of the People (1889-1903), this article provides a comparative approach to the representation of urban poverty and slums in Gissing’s The Nether World (1889) and Morrison’s A Child of the Jago (1896) with an emphasis on physical boundaries, spatial segregation and naturalism. In these works, the outcast poor dwell in strongly classified spaces because of their difference; they are considered deviant and a threat to the structure of power in the metropolis, where an increasing consciousness of boundaries and of spatial order exists. Gissing’s city is generally described as dull and monotonous, while Morrison’s streets are full of grotesque and lively characters corrupted by socio-economic conditions and trapped in East London.

In late-Victorian London, physical borders, as well as social and moral boundaries, were re-identified and re-constructed in response to growing concerns about foreignness, criminality and degeneration among the lower orders. The metropolis, in this sense, was a “great differentiator” because it “analyse[d] and sift[ed] the population, separating and classifying the diverse elements” in the process of progress and civilisation, as Anna F. Weber noted in 1899 (qtd. in Olsen 19). The otherness of the poorest districts was particularly evident in their exploration as “an immense terra incognita”, mapped out by the missionaries and urban explorers “who catered to an insatiable middle-class demand for traveller’s tales” (Steadman-Jones 7-9). Yet the ‘invisibility’ of the poor gradually became a source of anxiety for the bourgeoisie in later decades of the century, and the transformation of the labouring classes and the poor required a socio-spatial visibility (Stallybrass and White 135). In line with this, from the 1830s to the 1870s studies of social explorers favouring methods of observation, scientific data and facts gained more importance, and investigations gradually shifted attention to the immediate need for action against the problem of slums and slum dwellers (Gaskell 7). In this respect, this study draws upon the increasing socio-spatial visibility and classification of the poor and the labouring classes in Gissing and Morrison’s

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narratives by examining dramatic changes in the representation of urban space and urban poor in *The Nether World* (1889) and *A Child of the Jago* (1896). I will also briefly address Booth’s spatial analysis of poverty by mapping; Booth introduces us to new methods to read the ‘illegible city’ and helps us interpret the real and represented spaces in the aforementioned novels.

**London as a Physical Structure**

Charles Booth’s comprehensive research on the condition of the poor can be conceived as a significant step in the identification and classification of the lower orders in the late-Victorian period. His thorough study remains a primary example of mapping the impoverished areas in the city and essentially focuses on scientific facts, economic behaviour and objectivity. In his works, Booth accentuated the ‘differences’ and ‘deviancy’ of the lower class members and contributed to the establishment of classifications and boundaries between social classes and urban spaces. One of his main objectives was to denounce contemporary socialists’ ideas about the extent and causes of urban poverty as extravagant and conflicting. The timeline and scope of the project and his desire to use statistical methods to evaluate his findings show an ambitious attempt to define and categorise social classes according to their location, employment and economic situation. However, from his descriptions of poverty and the deprived, it is difficult to observe an objective approach in moral and social terms.

The first volume of *Labour and Life of the People*, which focused on poverty and covered East London, was published in 1889 with some basic data and descriptive maps. One of the most significant results was that “30.7 percent of London’s population [was] below the line of poverty”, which demonstrated the great extent of the problem in the city (*Poverty Series* I). The definition of a spatial “poverty line” and Booth’s findings proposed “poverty classes […] situated in the most spatially segregated streets of the area” (Vaughan 11-3).¹ In the *Poverty* series, the street was necessarily chosen as the unit of investigation to collect data about the number of children and the employment and social positions of the families via the information provided by School Board Visitors. The collected data was divided into different categories: the population according to their social condition, industry, income and so on. The first classification included letters A to H, from the lowest class (occasional labourers, loafers and semi-criminals) to the upper middle class based on their income.²

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¹ A line of poverty was described by Charles Booth, who differentiated those who were ‘in poverty’ and those ‘in comfort’. Yet, an actual ‘poverty line’ as a concept was first used by Joseph Rowntree in his study on York entitled *Poverty: A Study of Town Life* (1901).

² The classification was as follows:

- A. the lowest class of occasional labourers, loafers and semi-criminals
- B. casual earnings—"very poor"
- C. intermittent earnings (the poor)
- D. small regular earnings (the poor)
- E. regular standard earnings — above the line of poverty
- F. higher class labour lower middle class
Booth further complicated his analysis of the population by using a seven-colour scheme to depict the streets according to the social and economic conditions of the inhabitants. In the *Descriptive Map of London Poverty*, Booth applied colours for specific social classes and mixed streets, and each colour indicated one of, or a mixture of, the classes (Figure 1.1). London was divided into four spatial units for investigation and analysis: East London, Central London, West London and South London, with their sub-districts (Pfautz 55). However, the difficulty of mapping the city in smaller units was soon recognised by Booth, and even the streets were not considered “a common unit as long streets run through block to block, from sub-district to sub-district” (*Industry Series* II:16). Booth’s effort to read the illegible city was also challenged by numerous classification errors, the difficulty of determining units either by space, time or occupation and the heterogeneous dwellers. His method of colouring maps according to residential patterns of social classes divided the city into spatial units: whilst the upper classes generally occupied the West End, the middle classes settled in the main streets that led into the city centre, frequently cutting through relatively poor districts. The poor and the working classes mostly resided in East End and South London, on both sides of the river, and the colours in the maps lightened with distance from the Thames.

Booth addressed the significance of ‘physical barriers’, however, such as docks, railways, open spaces and the river Thames, noting that they were functioning as boundaries and forming administrative districts. He suggested that, “South London is different from North London […] the differences lying deep. They are historical and physical in origin, but are industrial, social and moral in result” (*Industry Series* II: 67). More significantly, poverty areas

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Black: Corresponding to Class A
Dark Blue: Corresponding to Class B
Light Blue: Corresponding to Class C and D
Purple: Mixed with poverty (corresponding to Class C and D with E and F, and B in many cases)
Pink: Working class comfort (corresponding to Class E and F, and also G)
Red: Well-to-do
Yellow: Wealthy (hardly found in East London and little found in South London).
typically had physical boundaries that separated and isolated them from the rest of the neighbourhood. To illustrate, Booth wrote: “in Battersea poverty is caught and held in successive railway loops [...] beginning with the dark blue and black area lying between the gas works and the railway” (Poverty Series I: 192). These boundaries also functioned as the determiners of social character and classes that occupied these spaces. For instance, whilst the labouring classes lived in East London, the middle classes dominated North London. However, not all districts had a homogeneous character and some included different social and ethnic groups. There were also some streets considered outcasts for being “hemmed in one side of the railway and entered only here and there on the other three sides like a fortress through its gates”, which addressed the liminal image of the streets identified by their spatial exclusion and isolation (VI: 15). Without any communication with other parts of the city, some of the poorest streets became disreputable. In Slums (1990), S. Martin Gaskell notes:

though cheek by jowl with wealthy and respectable neighbourhoods, the slums were isolated and physically cut off from them in a way which reinforced their basic characteristics of terrible housing, foul drainage and inadequate sewerage, abundance of bugs and dirt, extreme unhealthiness and populations of transients, criminals and the unskilled living in extremely poor and impoverished circumstances. (2)

That is, slums were identified not only by isolating physical barriers, but also by the filth, criminality and deprived lifestyles of the slum dwellers. Their proximity to the well-to-do caused more anxiety regarding lack of security and moral degradation, and encouraged the upper classes to instigate immediate urban reforms as Booth suggested. However, this also aroused curiosity and an irresistible attraction of repulsion towards these outcast sites and their inhabitants.

Mapping Poverty in Fiction

Gissing and Morrison’s depictions of the city were shaped by the experiences of the poor and the working classes, located in proximate yet spatially segregated spaces. Both authors used a specific area from the deprived parts of London and conveyed the subjective experiences of their characters from a distanced view and closed spatial unit. There was hardly any connection with other parts of the city in their work, except for some economic reasons or criminal activities of the lower classes. Gissing’s city was generally dull and monotonous, while Morrison’s streets were full of grotesque and lively characters, corrupted by socio-economic conditions and trapped in slums. Gissing’s city did not offer any hopes for nourishment, accommodation or friendships and it was “drained of its epistemological excitement”: “the blank streets, the gritty light, the course sounds seem to provoke sullen resignation rather than the vigilant expectancy” (Poole 43). The faith in the ‘blest morning’ in mid-Victorian fiction was replaced by isolation, discontinuities and helplessness in late-Victorian fiction. Although Gissing’s methodology was different from Booth’s scientific approach to poverty in London, his novels and artistic ability impressed the readership; he worked carefully on the
descriptions of the working classes and their environment. Unlike Gissing, Booth pursued his study of poverty with the hope of social reform and a policing state along with his scientific and objective approach. Although both condemned the manners and moral degradation of the deprived, Gissing preferred writing his novels as “a conscious, frequently self-conscious, artist rather than a social reformer” (Freeman 37). He was more interested in art than social reform, unlike his contemporaries and social reformers; he believed that destructions and degradation caused by poverty could not be perfectly healed by political remedies (Korg 5). Thus, he was inclined to depict the everyday lives of the lower orders as they were, with an artistic and subjective view of their circumstances.

Gissing and Morrison presented a ‘minute-delineation’ of the world of the lower classes in a realistic way to convey their messages to the rest of society. This literary style, however, did not satisfy all readers because they were unwilling to accept these sufferings as ‘realities’ and considered them to be exaggerated. The degree of violence, negligence and criminality evoked fear and shock for those who did not know the East End very well. Yet Booth, Gissing and Morrison, each in their different way, explained their experiences and observation, and tried to give a more accurate and objective view of the poor from a middle-class intellectual view, sympathising with the deprivation they saw and concerned about the moral defects they perceived. In Morrison’s fiction, there was no “explicit anger” or condemnation, unlike the social messages conveyed in Gissing’s novels (Brome 10).

For instance, along with the grotesque depictions of characters and their lives, Morrison presented the Old Jago without any direct social comments or concerns from the narrator’s point of view. His general method was to elaborate surface realities in detail and convey his messages through sarcasm and implicit messages on philanthropy and charity. However, his literary style and realistic representations were not always welcomed by Victorian readers. In 1889, the reviewers of Tales of Mean Streets rejected Morrison’s claim of accurateness and the reality of the stories in The Spectator: “By all means let us abate the evils of London life [...] but do not let us delude ourselves into imagining that half London is inhabited by a race of Yahoos” (qtd. in Freeman 54).

The growth and pace of late-Victorian London could not be captured in a single novel and there were some limitations in the representation of political, social or economic circumstances. The French novelist Emilé Zola’s experimental methods and the characteristics of French naturalism had influenced both Gissing and Morrison, and they emphasised the influence of the environment on the workings of characters in their novels. In Four Realist Novelists (1965), Vincent Brome elaborates on the distinction between English realism and its ancestor, French naturalism, as follows:

French writers saw character and event shaped by environment and other processes which could be scientifically defined. English writers tended to be interested in character as something essentially idiosyncratic, an end in itself, and action as often determined by the operations of chance. (12)
In the first place, naturalism was criticised for not offering any hope for the future and circumstances of the poor with social or political remedies. It was more interested in the detailed investigation and representation of the daily lives of social classes through an objective approach. The approach of naturalism toward ‘urban deprivation’ was one of the possible consequences of a literary strategy of dividing the city into smaller parts and focusing on a single street or area (Freeman 48). An author would choose a strictly confined space for further analysis and focus on the surroundings and details of the reality. This strategy allowed him/her to establish the setting of the novel in a more manageable way, by fragmenting the city and conveying his/her aesthetic and political views within the plot (Brome 12). For instance, Gissing used specific districts of urban poverty as settings for his novels and described the character of both the place and the inhabitants through a detailed observation of the everyday life among both the poor and the working classes. However, there were also some difficulties that stemmed from naturalism, such as being criticised as inconvenient and disgusting by the middle-class reader and the difficulty of providing an overall picture of the interactions between different social classes in the city.

Using a helpful framework developed by Blanche Gelfant for urban fiction, I will briefly introduce three main novel forms: the “portrait novel” to describe the city from a single protagonist’s view; the “synoptic novel” to focus on the city’s own character and countless experiences contained in it; and the “ecological novel” to describe a small spatial unit and the life identified with the place (Freeman 48-9). In most novels these forms are embedded in each other, but this framework helps us clarify the methods used to control and manage the city in narratives. Lambeth, Hoxton, Islington and Camberwell are some of the particular districts Gissing wrote about, and in these examples we can find both synoptic and ecological novel forms he used to convey his views on poverty and deprivation. His novels describe the growing city’s enigmatic character as well as social and moral conflicts experienced by its inhabitants from the lower social classes. For instance, Shooter’s Gardens and Clerkenwell in The Nether World provide an example of real spatial units described in detail as in an ecological novel. The scrupulous description of these confined spaces introduces the setting of the novel as a gradually impoverished and degraded district. On the other hand, New Grub Street represents a symbolic spatial unit referring to the corruption of mass culture and literary production in the metropolis. The transformation of Grub Street into ‘New’ Grub Street signifies this changing reality and offers a more challenging space for authorship and literary achievements. Gissing uses the symbolic power of this street to convey his ideas about the hardships confronted by young intellectuals and authors like him, using a plain yet powerful language.

The setting of all Gissing’s novels (except Veranilda) is London, where mass culture and social forces complicate and challenge the relations of the lower and middle classes, whose “noble human capacities represented by art and learning were bound to be submerged” in the city (Korg 104). Gissing’s early novels, Working in the Dawn (1880), The Unclassed (1884) and Demos (1886), used a more romanticised style to refer to social protest, the political criticism of urban poverty and its corrupting influence on young men who were born and bred there. However,
Gissing soon noted the working classes’ persistence in “pursuing the way of life they had learned in the slums” and focused more on the misery of “a class of young men distinctive of our time – well educated, fairly bred, but without money” (Korg 107). *New Grub Street* differs in its literary style from *The Nether World* as Gissing employs a more distanced and objective method of realism in the contrast between city and country, expressing his views on social injustice and the new standards of literary success.

In *The Nether World*, a graveyard in the church functions as a physical boundary between the city and country. At the outset of the novel, the narrator introduces Clerkenwell, where the old Snowdon enters the district via a graveyard of St James’s Church and the everyday toil, smell and noises among the poor are presented. Clerkenwell is located between Islington, Holborn and the city, and by the 1880s it was occupied largely by the lower classes. Booth’s map of poverty depicts Clerkenwell with yellow, red, light and dark blue colours, which confirms the presence of the wealthy and well-to-do as well as the poor and the very poor inhabitants in the district. However, as a local Medical Officer of Health wrote in 1883: “for some years many of the well-to-do residents of the parish have been gradually leaving their houses, which become occupied by a poorer class of people, many of the houses which were formerly held by one family, being now let to several” (qtd. in Whitehead). For more than a century, Clerkenwell had been associated with “highly skilled artisan trades, watchmaking in particular, but also jewellery and precious metal work, and specialist printing, bookbinding and furniture trades”. By the 1880s, however, standardisation and mechanisation started to change the profitability of craft skills and forced many labourers to seek other jobs. In the novel, Clerkenwell is identified with its monotonous working-class life and work places in every street; there is no explicit comparison between the rich and the poor, although the narrator tells the story of the lower-class world from a middle-class member’s view. This place is also inhabited by a minority of the “unregenerate poor”, called the “dangerous class, casual poor”, or even “the residuum”, as the Shooter’s Gardens in the novel illustrates (Stedman-Jones 11). The residuum in this context refers to the unemployed poor without privileges or opportunities in Victorian society.

Although the nether world of the lower classes signifies a social class division, it also creates a physically and spatially excluded area where only the poor and the labouring classes dwell and work. In
the following chapters of the novel, the everyday lives of these people are elaborated on from Sidney Kirkwood’s perspective, as a self-conscious working class member. Gissing carefully emphasises the similarities between other impoverished areas in London and the streets in Clerkenwell, which share common characteristics: “Sidney Kirkwood had a lodging in Tysoe Street, Clerkenwell. It is a short street, which, like so many in London, begins reputedly and degenerates in its latter half” (The Nether World 50). Looking back to Booth’s Descriptive Map of Poverty, Tysoe Street is coloured yellow (wealthy) and surrounded by red coloured (well-to-do) areas, which indicates its contradictory feature of supporting both the upper and lower classes.

In the novel, Gissing also describes the slum where Pennyloaf lives, yet he distances himself from this degraded place and describes it with pity and contempt:

She lived in Shooter's Gardens, a picturesque locality which demolition and rebuilding have of late transformed. It was a winding alley, with paving raised a foot above the level of the street whence was its main approach. To enter from the obscurer end, you descended a flight of steps, under a low archway, in a court itself not easily discovered […] A stranger bold enough to explore would have discovered that the Gardens had a blind offshoot, known simply as ‘The Court’. Needless to burden description with further detail; the slum was like any other slum; filth, rottenness, evil odours, possessed these dens of superfluous mankind and made them gruesome to the peering imagination.

(74) [Emphasis added]

Shooter’s Gardens and the Court in this passage exemplify particular repulsive and abject spaces where the lower class was identified with vicious qualities impossible to diminish or improve through charity. This place carries a unique “picturesque locality” of transformation through demolition and rebuilding; therefore, it is in a transitional state. Gissing describes this slum by addressing its “filth, rottenness, evil odours” and emphasises that it was “like any other slum”, which informs the reader of a general association of slums with decay, dirt and foul smells. As with the inhabitants of the Jago in Morrison’s novel, they are content with this place since it provides the independence and liberty they need for their deviancy and socio-spatial invisibility. As Jacob Korg suggests in The Dictionary of Literary Biography, the inhabitants of slums “make a hell out of their environment” with their “violence, drunkenness, cruelty and dishonesty”. At the same time, these abject spaces provide an opportunity for outcasts to commit any social and moral crimes, escape punishment and freely misbehave far from the sight of the middle and upper classes. Gissing addresses the difference between a middle-class view and that of a slum dweller, yet he doesn’t engage a reforming onlooker’s eye. Instead, he seems to agree with the idea that working-class liberty is only a licence for degeneration.

Like Gissing, Morrison was interested in giving voice to the sufferings and hard life of the poor and the working class. However, one of the most distinguishing features of Morrison’s fiction is his determination to tell the lives of those living in
the East End of London. During the last decades of the Victorian era, whilst the West End was a prosperous area, the most notorious slums were situated in East London. The East End was often referred to as “darkest London” or “a terra incognita” by the middle and upper classes (W. Booth 12). The working classes, which consisted of Irish immigrants and immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe, mostly poor Russian, Polish and German Jews, dominated the East End. They lived in Whitechapel and the adjoining areas of St. George’s in the East and Mile End. According to Charles Booth, East London stretched from Aldgate to Bow and Poplar. The East End was an abject image of a real place defined against other parts of London – not just the West End, but also the city. As distinctive geographies, the East End became the abyss or the nether world with its extreme poverty, immorality, crime and savagery in the Victorian imagination, an image perpetuated through journalism and novels.5

The term ‘East End’ was already being used by Londoners in the early 1880s. Morrison treated this part of the city as a separate spatial entity in a short story entitled ‘A Street’ in Tales of Mean Streets: “The East End is a vast city, as famous in its way as any the hand of man has made” (3).6 The East End was generally considered as a homogenous unit including “the residuum”, “unemployable, feckless, violent and incurably criminal”, that is, it was inhabited by the abject bodies of outcast classes (Pfautz 51). This generated a public consciousness and anxiety among the middle classes against a geographically defined lower-class and triggered an interest both in the press and social life. The East End was considered as a place that the poor inhabited and it aroused fear and disgust amongst those living beyond its borders. However, it was not a completely homogeneous area, as Charles Booth revealed in his studies of London, and there were many different social and economic levels sharing the same environment. The colour scheme, with which Booth displayed the residency of social classes in the

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4 Regarding Morrison’s personal life, it is known from his birth certificate that he was born in the East End of London in 1863, not in Kent as he had stated earlier. His father was an engine fitter and Morrison described himself as ‘a civil servant’ for helping run the People’s Palace, ‘a charitable mission’ founded by Walter Besant in the East End of London in 1887. As Vincent Brome suggests in Four Realist Novelists (1965), both his background and personality are masked and it seems like he wanted to escape from his roots in the East End.

5 Amongst the other realist authors of the East End, Edwin Pugh, Street in Suburbia (1895); Pett Ridge, Mord Em’ly (1898); Richard Whiteing, No. 5 John Street (1899); and Somerset Maugham, Liza of Lambeth (1897) vividly evoked different aspects of the East End life through descriptive representation of the events, complexity, sentimentality and humour.

6 Morrison wrote his second novel To London Town (1899) to describe the quieter lives of the semi-respectable in the East End and it differs from his first novel with its less vivid descriptions and the lack of extremities of violence and savagery. His novel did not gain any success; however, Morrison aimed at presenting a more complete picture of the East End along with Tales of Mean Streets and A Child of the Jago. In the preface of his novel, he stated that: ‘I designed this story […] to be read with these books: not that I pretend to figure in all these a complete picture of the life in the eastern parts of London, but because they are complementary, each to two others’. That is, Victorian readers were re-assured about his sincerity in describing the East End in a more accurate and complete view rather than looking for melodrama and extremities for literary success.
streets, outlined the variations of a heterogeneous social unit. However, this did not completely alter its representation as a ‘symbolic space’ rather than a ‘real space’, as it reminded everyone of qualities that the middle and upper classes avoided in social and moral contexts. This space, with its dwellers, became a spatially excluded area, where the dark side of London resided.

The treatment of ‘real spaces’ in Morrison’s fiction helps us interpret the significance of the physical boundaries and spaces represented in the East End. In ‘A Story of Shoreditch’ (1896), A. Osborne Jay stated that the Jago represented the original “Shoreditch parish of 8,000 people, with a death rate four times that of the rest of London” (qtd. in Freeman 60). Morrison narrated the Jago by using a real space (Old Nichol – a criminal quarter of Bethnal Green) and reconstructed it with fictional characters who live with real situations. Morrison also distanced himself from the narrative by choosing an area that was in the process of demolition, as Gissing did in The Nether World. Keating notes that “it was Morrison, more than any other author who had picked up the new sociological objectivity and applied it to fiction” because his viewpoint was both “distanced and familiar” and he employed “a descriptive method that might have come straight from Booth’s notebooks” (61-2). In A Child of the Jago, Morrison describes the Jago as follows:

A square of two hundred and fifty yards or less—that was all there was of the Jago. But in that square the human population swarmed in thousands. Old Jago Street, New Jago Street, Half Jago Street lay parallel, east and west: Jago Row at one end and Edge Lane at the other lay parallel also, stretching north and south: foul ways all. (9)

Morrison, however, was not keen to label his work as ‘realist’, as he explained in the preface to A Child of the Jago: “I have never called myself a ‘realist’, and I have never put forth any work as ‘realism’. I decline the labels of the schoolmen and the sophisters: being a simple writer of tales, who takes whatever means lie to his hand to present life as he sees it” (7-8). As Nicholas Freeman adds, “The Old Nichol was popularly known as the Jago; but by blurring the distinction between an actual place and his renderings of it, Morrison once again showed how naturalist fiction was a set of literary techniques rather than an uncomplicated mimetic response to the external reality” (62). Yet, in Morrison’s fiction, the Jago gets spatially defined and is distinguished as a slum in both actual and symbolic terms. Morrison participates in this process by casting new light on the symbolic narratives and providing actual physical descriptions of the Jago and his grotesque characterisation of its inhabitants. In Booth’s poverty map the old Nichol Street is depicted in dark blue, corresponding to class B (casual earnings – ‘very poor’). Yet Morrison’s novel conveys the idea that most Jago inhabitants belonged to class A,

Sarah Wise notes that ‘the Old Jago was a direct, street for street, copy of the Old Nichol. Old Jago Street was Old Nichol Street, Jago Row was Nichol Row, and so on. Bethnal Green Road, Shoreditch High Street and The Posties all starred as themselves’. Furthermore, ‘The LCC’s Boundary Street Estate was a complete reconstruction of the area and today, little remains of the Nichol. Boundary Street (Edge Lane in Morrison’s novel) still features a few original buildings at its southern end, on the western side’.
which included the lowest class of “occasional labourers, loafers and semi-criminals”.

With Morrison’s sketch plan of ‘The Old Jago’ and his description of the area in the beginning of the novel, the reader is aware of the borders and boundaries of an overpopulated site in the East End, a ‘real’ space with ‘unreal’ qualities (Figure 1.3). In the centre of this ‘darkness’, there lies the “blackest hole”, the Jago Court, which symbolises the gloomy and abject existence and survival of the deviant, the criminal and the poor. Remarkably close to Shoreditch High Street, the Old Jago is a hideous and less visible space (like Shooter’s Gardens) that maintains its existence for one hundred years and resisting any form of improvement. With the sketch plan, the reader is able to observe the everyday lives of the Jago dwellers and even the growth of Jago children like Dicky. The narrator locates the protagonist in a strongly defined space, in which Dicky grows up and roams the streets. As Dicky’s identity is greatly shaped by his experiences in the Jago, the time span of the novel, consisting of nine years in intervals, helps the author map out these influences in a linear and reasonable order. The reader is left with a narrative of the formation of a child’s social and place-related identity, which ultimately entails his death.

In the Jago, the fights between two rival families, the Ranns and the Learys, present a struggle for the domination of the Jago by gangs and mobs “ramifying throughout the Jago”, where “neutrality meant double drubbing” (28). The Feathers, “the grimiest and vilest of the four public-houses in the Jago”, becomes the centre of their fight in which “the two mobs were broken into an uproarious confusion of tangled groups, howling and grappling” (31). As the fight spreads in the Jago, some of the few outcasts or ‘neutral’ Jagos, such as Josh Perrott, Piegony Poll and the old Beveridge, stay away from the scene. Dicky and his friend Tommy hide in a hole in Jago Row while “the Learys swe[ep] the Jago” (33). The Jago does not seem to be under any supervision by the police unless there is “a homicide in the open High Street’, where ‘the police dr[aw] the line and [enter] the Jago by force” (37). Ironically, nobody speaks or informs the police since the one rule of the Jago is “Thou shalt not nark”; this is a neglected and outcast space where the presence of the police is not welcomed: “Ordinarily, a peep now and again from a couple of policemen between the ‘Posties’ was all the supervision the Jago had, although three policemen had been seen to walk the length of Old Jago Street together, and there were raids in force for special captures” (37). The Jago inhabitants find the presence
of the police embarrassing and at the end of the day when the police are gone “the Jago [is] free” again (45). This indicates the difficulty of the control and supervision of degenerate spaces by the state or governing systems.

As Sarah Wise points out, “the maze-like configuration of the Jago/Nichol street plan appears both to influence behaviour and to reflect emotional states. The topography of the Jago induces a cunning, furtive mentality; the possessor of that mentality, in turn, learns to make use of the Jago’s intricacies to evade hostile ‘outsiders’ in pursuit” (prg 14). After one unsuccessful attempt at theft, Dicky “slouch[es] into the Jago, disappointed”; his roaming around the high street and his flight back to the Jago so he isn’t caught address his potential capacity to transgress boundaries of danger and safety in the city. Dicky learns each and every street, lane and hole in the Jago by heart (partly due to his ‘clicks’) and uses this knowledge to avoid danger – being recognised and caught. In his full flights after his ‘clicks’, he swiftly processes all alternative routes, streets and lanes in his mind to take his earnings home or to Mr Weech, a Jewish shopkeeper who buys the stolen goods from him. Ironically, at his first ‘click’ Dicky steals a gold watch belonging to Bishop in a meeting at The East End Elevation Mission and Pansophical Institute: “Dicky Perrott, excited by his novel exploit, ran hard: forgetting the lesson first learnt by every child of the Jago, to avoid, as far as may be, suspicious flight in open streets” (23-4). He is not only taught ‘the art of clicking’ and earning his own living, but he also uses space effectively both in and outside the boundaries of the Jago.

After a time gap of four years, the reader is informed of the Reverend Henry Sturt’s plans for the demolishment of the Old Jago in order to build a church and public facilities. This transformation emphasises the changing physical boundaries in the Jago and the potential effects of this radical change on its inhabitants. It also indicates the necessity of slum clearance in the Jago, where rehabilitation does not seem to solve problems. Father Sturt’s plan creates new unexpected problems, and deprived of their haven, the Jago inhabitants spread out and infect the neighbourhoods. After the announcement of the purchase of the site to build a church, the tenants are given good notice and informed that they should still pay rent at a reduced amount. The Jago dwellers condemn this plan; they cannot understand why so much money should be spent “in bricks and mortar, instead of being distributed among themselves” (100). Their major concern is:

More: it was felt to be a grave social danger that Jago Court should be extinguished. What would become of the Jago without Jago Court? Where would Sunday morning be spent? . . . But mainly they feared the police. Jago Court was an unfailing sanctuary, a city of refuge ever ready, ever secure . . . Then the runaway would make straight for the archway, and, once he was in Jago Court, danger was over . . . The blotting out of such a godsend of a place as this would be a calamity. The Jago would never be the same again. (100-1)

As the Old Jago is identified with the Jago Court, its demolition signals “a grave social danger” for the inhabitants who spend their Sunday mornings watching duellos, playing games, and escaping from the police by hiding in this “sanctuary and a city of refuge”. The identity of the Jago will change forever, as the dwellers identify themselves with the Old Jago, in which they find comfort and freedom. The
announcement also introduces fundamental changes into their lives and it forces them to find new places to live. The house-wreckers buy the old buildings, force the lodgers out and “the next morning it had vanished” (103). On eviction day, the police evacuate the Old Jago and the rest of tenants who “did nothing to find [lodgings]” find “themselves and their belongings roofless”; then, they “demand the lodgings of the vicar” (103). The radical transformation of the Jago is reflected again when Josh Perrott returns home after his four-year imprisonment:

He strolled out into the street, to survey the Jago. In the bulk it was little changed, though the County Council had made a difference in the north-east corner, and was creeping farther and farther still. The dispossessed Jagos had gone to infect the neighbourhoods across the border, and to crowd the people a little closer. They did not return to live in the new barrack-buildings; which was a strange thing, for the County Council was charging very little more than double the rents which the landlords of the Old Jago had charged. And so another Jago, teeming and villainous as the one displaced, was slowly growing, in the form of a ring, round about the great yellow houses. (162-63) [Emphasis added]

The Old Jago is extinguished, but the “dispossessed Jagos” continue to “infect the neighbourhoods across the border”; the Old Jago continues to exist and survives its displacement, “in the form of a ring” around “the great yellow houses” after its demolition. This passage demonstrates the impossibility of Father Sturts ideal to develop a moral and safe space through the destruction of the Old Jago, as it is a place that cannot be expelled completely. This also gives rise to questions about the inseparability of the place and bodies, and their survival through displacement. Ironically, the transformation of this place puts the dwellers in danger and makes them feel insecure. For instance, as mentioned in the first chapter, after murdering Aron Weech, Josh Perrott is caught by the police in a cellar under the houses in Jago Row because he literally forgets about the demolition and finds himself in “an open waste of eighty yards square, skirted by the straight streets and the yellow barrack” (176). In his panic and “instinct to burrow, to hide himself in a hole” he is “trapped like a rat” in the cellar where “many a Jago had been born, had lived, and had died” (176).

Briefly, Charles Booth’s map of poverty suggests that the classification of the poor and spatial segregation played a fundamental role in the identification of the lower classes challenging the anxiety of the upper classes, and provided a socio-spatial visibility for the surveillance and control of the disordered city. Booth’s approach was a more likely objective and scientific approach to the segregated geography of the poor, although he did not hide his contempt for their moral degradation. Nevertheless, his studies shed light on the lives of geographically close yet socially and morally distanced inhabitants of slums, which threatened the unity and coherency of the middle and upper class identities. In fiction, Gissing and Morrison’s narratives of the urban poor portrayed an isolating experience in strongly classified spaces with their own moral codes. In Gissing and Morrison’s fiction a successful transition between social classes is not allowed and it is almost impossible to overcome all difficulties of a lower-class life. Yet, spatial segregation was also an advantageous state for the poor and criminal classes as it provided them
a place to maintain their morally degraded life styles without the surveillance of the police and the gaze of the upper classes. Gissing and Morrison’s novels presented a more detailed account of social-class stratification among the lower classes and re-humanised them in their environment with their everyday life struggles and concerns. Their narratives of the urban poor took a realist and objective approach which contested the idea of a progressive and civilised Victorian city, and presented a widening gulf between the rich and the deprived. Spatial, social and moral elements of the city proved to be a great differentiator, playing an essential role in the isolation of the urban poor and the slums in London.

Works Cited


