

## Portrayal of Alternative Masculinities and Depiction of Male Anxiety in Gissing's Novel: *New Grub Street*<sup>a</sup>

Özlem Yılmaz<sup>b, c</sup>,

### Abstract

This study aims to contribute to the development of literary masculinity studies by investigating the construction of alternative masculinities in George Gissing's *New Grub Street*, which was written in Victorian *fin de siècle*, during which British society witnessed great transformations in its social structure and gender order. In *fin de siècle* Britain, because of the societal pressures, men who found it difficult to fit into pre-determined hegemonic masculine roles either suffered from male anxiety, or they created their alternative masculine identities themselves. Tracing the reflection of these two occasions by applying the tenets of masculinist theory to the novel, and focusing on male protagonist Edwin Reardon, the study demonstrates that the novel can be classified as an early example of masculinist texts, in its portrayal of alternative masculinities and exhibition of the devastating effects of hegemonic gender idealizations on male individuals which resulted in the formation of male-specific anxiety.

### Keywords

Literary Masculinity Studies  
British Novel  
Alternative Masculinity  
Male Anxiety

### About Article

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## Gissing'in *New Grub Street* Adlı Romanında Alternatif Erkeklik Betimlemeleri ve Eril Anksiyete Tasvirleri

### Özet

Bu çalışma, İngiliz toplumunun cinsiyet rolleri açısından büyük bir değişim geçirdiği ve Viktorya döneminin son on yılına tekâmül eden *fin de siècle* döneminin başında yazılmış olan George Gissing'in *New Grub Street* romanını maskülinist bir bakış açısıyla, alternatif erkeklik inşası ve eril anksiyete tasvirleri bağlamında analiz ederek, edebiyatta erkeklik çalışmaları literatürüne katkı sağlamayı amaçlamıştır. Toplumsal baskının had safhada olduğu bu dönemde, hegemonik erkeklik normlarına uyum sağlamakta güçlük çeken eril bireyler, ya üzerlerinde oluşan psikolojik baskının altında ezilerek eril anksiyete yaşamaya başlamış, ya da kendi alternatif erkek kimliklerini oluşturmuşlardır. Çalışma, seçili romanı her iki bağlamda da inceleyerek, Gissing'in yarattığı Edwin Reardon karakterine yoğunlaşmış ve bu karakter üzerinden hem alternatif erkeklik modellerinin varlığını hem de hegemonik cinsiyet normlarının erkeklikler üzerinde yarattığı yıkıcı etkilerin eril anksiyete ile sonuçlanmasını göstermesi açısından *New Grub Street*'in erken dönem bir maskülinist edebi metin örneği olduğunu ortaya koymuştur.

### Anahtar Kelimeler

Edebiyatta Erkeklik Çalışmaları  
İngiliz Romanı  
Alternatif Erkeklik  
Eril Anksiyete

### Makale Hakkında

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<sup>b</sup> Özlem Yılmaz: ozlem.yilmaz@cbu.edu.tr,

<sup>c</sup> Res. Assist, Dr., Manisa Celal Bayar University/ Faculty of Science and Letters, Department of English Language and Literature, Manisa/ TURKEY  
ORCID: 0000-0001-6906-3825.

## **Introduction**

Masculinity studies emphasize the fact that there exist some masculinities which constitute alternatives to the "hegemonic" model of masculinity and suggest that these alternative types should be foregrounded in order to underline the possibility of the transformation of hegemonic gender norms in patriarchal societies. In parallel with this suggestion, masculinist scholars aim to detect "positive models of masculinities in which masculinity operates in a non-hegemonic way, and moments in which" masculinities "attempt to break their own hold over power" (Reeser, 2010, p. 8). Literary masculinity studies, in a similar vein, aim to bring out these models portrayed in literary texts, with the purpose of giving the message that it is possible to construct alternative masculinities too, since masculine identities are constructed with the influence of extrinsic factors such as discourse, ideology, family, and role models. Thereby, what masculinist theory and literary masculinity studies coherently strive for is the exhibition of "the fluidity and instability of masculine identities by revealing their constructions as social processes" (Smart and Yeats, 2008, p. 4) so as to expose the reality that they are always prone to extrinsic factors such as the patriarchal ideology and its hegemonic gender norms.

The failure of alternative masculinities in conforming to the hegemonic masculinity ideals, and the psychological effects of this failure are among the most significant focal points of masculinist theory. Therefore, both the sociological and the literary masculinity studies deal with the problem of male anxiety in contemporary societies and scrutinize the notion of anxiety encountered in male individuals which occur in relation to the "masculine roles and burdens of society employed through the concept of hegemonic masculinity upon men" (Edley, 2006, p. 603). With its portrayal of the multiplicity of masculinities in both their hegemonic and alternative forms and its demonstration of the slippery ground they are built upon, George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891) constitutes a perfect subject matter for masculinist analysis. The novel steps ahead in its presentation of the fact that patriarchal discourse concerning the duties and responsibilities of Victorian men was the primary shaping force in the construction of Victorian masculinities as well as being a valid ground for male anxiety.

### **Literary Marketplace, Capitalist Ideology, and Hegemony in *New Grub Street***

*New Grub Street*, which was published at the beginning of *fin de siècle*, in 1891, is accepted to be one of the best novels not only of George Gissing's oeuvre, but also of British literature in general. The novel is frequently evaluated to have a modern quality, and it steps ahead in literary discussions in its autobiographical aspects (Selig, 1983, pp. 205-6). Almost all the male authors portrayed in this novel who are struggling in the capitalist literary market resemble to Gissing's own life story in one aspect or another, and the protagonist of the novel – Edwin Reardon – is also generally identified with Gissing especially in terms of his unhappy marriage. In addition to male characters, the autobiographical aspect of the novel also lies in its description of the literary marketplace by touching on its hypocritical aspects. Presentation of the literary marketplace as a capitalist atmosphere through realistic descriptions is most probably what makes the novel one of the best novels in British literature. Patrick Brantlinger (1983) suggests that Gissing titled his novel as *New Grub Street*,

thus, asserting a continuity or perhaps a revival of the conditions of commercial hack writing satirized in many eighteenth century-works, including Alexander Pope's *Dunciad*

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and Jonathan Swift's *Tale of Tub*. According to Dr. Johnson's Dictionary, Grub Street was originally the name of a street near Moorfields in London, much inhabited by writers of small histories, dictionaries, and temporary poems, whence any mean production is called Grub Street. By 1830, when its name was changed to Milton Street, Grub Street had yielded to Paternoster Row, Fleet Street, and other centres of literary activity. But the phrase had passed into the language as a metaphor for the commercialization of literature that Gissing deplores. (p. 25)

As a matter of fact, the novel not only explores the commercialization of literature and the difficulties it brought into authors' lives, but also presents a critique of the capitalising world order in which everything – including the concept of masculinity – is in transformation. As Brantlinger (1983) explains, the title of the novel refers to “a condition rather than a place” and it is “a relentlessly dismal affair” (25). In relation with this condition, “Edwin Reardon dies, an abject failure in literature and in love, and Reardon's best friend Harold Biffen, also a failed novelist, commits suicide” (25). Describing the “London literary life as chiefly a matter of business” (27), *New Grub Street* presents readers the typical hegemonic masculinity norms of the middle-class economic model of masculinities, although male characters that Gissing presents are authors rather than industrialists (27). In industrialising Britain, literary market was also under a process of great transformation, and it was directed by a profit-oriented point of view rather than artistic quality.

During the late Victorian and *fin de siècle* years, “circulating libraries and their subscribers dominated the production and distribution of new novels in England” (Bassett, 2005, p.73). Of these libraries, the largest ones were Mudie's Select Library and Library of W. H. Smith, both of which imposed the requirement that novels must be published in three volumes (73). Moreover, “the purchasing power of the libraries exerted control well beyond the physical format of the novel by imposing a strict code of middle-class values on authors and publishers” (73). Since these libraries “exercised caution in circulating any novel deemed of questionable morality or poor taste”, authors were almost obliged to conform to the requirements of these libraries while writing their novels (73). Fortunately, however, “by 1890, the three-volume novel format began to show serious signs of weakening, and the format was abandoned in 1894” (73).

According to Troy J. Bassett (2005), during *fin de siècle*, there were some authors who “questioned and challenged the censorship imposed by the library system” (73). As he explains, this challenge was initiated by George Moore, who “rightly recognised the part the libraries played in controlling the distribution of literature” and suggested that “censorship could be effectively removed by eliminating the library system” (73). Moore's calls for the authors to disregard the expectations of the libraries and publishers, and to preserve their indigenous quality found reflections in literary circles for some time and “a number of mostly male authors, including George Gissing, responded to his letter in *Pall Mall Gazette* to register their own complaints against library censorship” (84). Unfortunately, however, they could not succeed, and the “meaningless” literary censorship strengthened itself day by day, a “perfect example” of which was “the rejection of Gissing's *Mrs Grundy's Enemies*” which “ended up in his destroying the manuscript with resentment and rage” (87). In that atmosphere dominated by the oppressions of the literary marketplace, “for those with literary ambitions, earning a living remained difficult, but in time even these authors felt themselves obliged to adapt themselves and their works to the expectations of the literary marketplace” including Gissing

(Heyck, 2002, p. 254). Gissing's reluctant acceptance of the capitalist ideology prevailing in the literary marketplace demonstrates the fact that even alternative masculinities like him – who revolted against the hegemonic norms centred around money and profit – were forced to adapt themselves to this system and act in accordance with the hegemonic masculinity norms in order to gain a respectable masculine position in society and sustain a financially stable living. However, these pressures resulted in his suffering from a severe level of anxiety, which transformed into more serious mental conditions towards the end of his life. *New Grub Street* perfectly portrays these difficulties that Gissing and other male authors experienced in *fin de siècle* Britain and demonstrates the devastating consequences of the hegemonic masculinity expectations on the lives of male individuals no matter how educated, intellectual, or self-conscious they are.

As Marilyn Butler underlined, “the problems of the professional writer in marketing his works to a larger, more urban public” were directly “related to the frustrated and alienating experiences of other citizens in an increasingly complex and specialised environment” (as cited in Sloan 1989, p.86). Therefore, “what [led] novelists like Gissing to introduce writers into their work [was] not simply a natural self-absorption, but a sense of the importance and centrality of their experience” which meant that “the writer in effect lived out in his very labour a wider social conflict between the claims of free selfhood and the determinations of the marketplace” (Sloan, 1989, p.86). This conflict they experienced between their real selves and the hegemonic norms is what makes the story and the male characters of the novel appropriate for masculinist analysis.

During the nineteenth century *fin de siècle*, there were immense pressures in British society which forced male individuals to conform to the hegemonic gender norms. As a result of these pressures, men who found it difficult to fit into those pre-determined masculine roles either suffered from male anxiety, which sometimes dragged them into serious psychological disorders, or they transcended the borders of the hegemonic norms, thus, creating their alternative forms of masculinities themselves. Those who failed in their efforts to preserve their indigenous and alternative masculine identities experienced a more serious level of male-specific anxiety, which had devastating effects on their lives. *New Grub Street*, with its presentation of the sorrowful story of its male protagonist Edwin Reardon, is appropriate for masculinist analysis in terms of its demonstration of the devastating effects of hegemonic gender ideology on alternative masculinities and exhibition of the severe consequences of male anxiety.

### **Severe Consequences of Hegemonic Masculinity Ideals and Occurrence of Male Anxiety in Alternative Masculinities: Edwin Reardon's Case**

Despite the varieties in living styles of male individuals which took shape in accordance with their own contexts, there were still some standards and ideals that were expected to be adopted by members of both the upper and the middle classes, beginning from the early Victorian era till the end of *fin de siècle*. All these standards were expected to be embodied by Victorian men as long as they wanted to have respectable positions in society, in accordance with the prevailing understanding of hegemonic masculinity. Those who could not measure up to these standards – just like Edwin Reardon – on the other hand, had to struggle with the conflicts resulting from the dissonance between their real selves and societal expectations. This tiresome struggle created a state of anxiety on them which was specific for male individuals, and which can be defined as male anxiety. Edwin Reardon, an idealistic author who is

regarded to be unsuccessful in his profession even by his wife – because of his inability to meet the expectations of the literary market and his rejection of sacrificing from the literary quality of his works – constitutes a successful example for the portrayal of alternative masculinities who does not / cannot conform to the expectations of the hegemonic gender order.

In spite of his struggle to preserve his alternative masculine identity by adhering to his own beliefs and values, Edwin is exposed to the relentless pressures of the hegemonic gender ideology, and suffers from male anxiety, resulting from his reluctance and incapability of conforming to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. Through this male protagonist he created in the novel, George Gissing presented readers the reality that male individuals – who were thought to be the absolute advantaged members of patriarchal societies – also suffered from the pressures and expectations of the patriarchal ideology. Moreover, he exhibited the fact that hegemonic gender ideals – which were interpellated through the discourse concerning what masculinities should / should not be like – were frequently impossible to conform to, and that they created a constant psychological burden on male individuals, resulting in male anxiety in various levels.

In late Victorian and *fin de siècle* Britain, men felt themselves stuck between the responsibilities of domesticity at home and the freedom granted on them outside the household, especially in male-dominated environments (Brady, 2009, pp. 1-2). Victorian men were expected to be conforming to the hegemonic gender norms by demonstrating themselves as self-confident and friendly in the social spheres in perfect accordance with their peers. Moreover, they were obliged to lead a successful business life and prove their competency in taking good care of their families in financial terms. In that context, “to be unemployed and thus unable to provide food and housing for wife and children was, and continues to be, a deeply unmanly experience” (Sussman, 2012, p. 94). Edwin Reardon, with his idealistic vision and non-hegemonic ideas, fails to conform to majority of these characteristics throughout the novel, which makes him “unmanly” in the eyes of his social circle, his wife, and eventually of himself, according to Herbert Sussman’s explanation.

As it can be seen in the following quotation, his wife Amy directly defines him as “unmanly” because of his inability to sustain financial stability in their household. She says: “But don’t you feel it’s rather unmanly, this state of things? You say you love me, and I try to believe it. But whilst you are saying so, you let me get nearer and nearer to miserable, hateful poverty?” (Gissing, 1891, p.72). In this scene, in which Amy accuses Edwin of being an incompetent husband in terms of earning money, Edwin explains that he is incapable of meeting the hypocritical explanations of the literary marketplace which resembles a trade centre. Nevertheless, as similar dialogues pass between them, Edwin begins to feel himself lacking the ability to take care of his wife and child, which creates a serious level of anxiety on him day by day. In time, with the effect of this humiliating discourse he is exposed to through Amy’s statements, he also begins to see himself as “unmanly”, which Gissing portrays as follows: “The feeling of unmanliness in his own position tortured him into a mood of perversity” (1891, p. 240). What Gissing (1891) means by “a mood of perversity” in this quotation is the anxiety Edwin experiences every day in an increasing level, which demonstrates itself both in physical and psychological symptoms as the novel progresses:

His bearing, his personal habits were no longer those of a young man; he walked with a stoop and pressed noticeably on the stick he carried; it was rare for him to show the countenance which tells of present cheerfulness or glad onward-looking; there was no

spring in his step; his voice had fallen to a lower key, and often he spoke with that hesitation in choice of words which may be noticed in persons whom defeat has made self-distrustful. Ceaseless perplexity and dread gave a wandering, sometimes a wild expression to his eyes. (1891, p. 238)

All the responsibilities such as taking care of the household in financial terms and of maintaining a balanced relationship with his wife in the domestic sphere, as well as his vain efforts of keeping up his successful professional appearance in the eyes of male peers such as Milvain and Carter constitute a double burden on Edwin, resulting in exhaustion and anxiety as in the following quotation:

He looked something older than his years, which were two-and-thirty; on his face was the pallor of mental suffering. Often, he fell into a fit of absence, and gazed at vacancy with wide, miserable eyes. Returning to consciousness, he fidgeted nervously on his chair, dipped his pen for the hundredth time, bent forward in feverish determination to work. Useless; he scarcely knew what he wished to put into words, and his brain refused to construct the simplest sentence. (Gissing, 1891, p. 70)

The unendurable level of male anxiety Edwin suffers from and its reflection on both his physical and mental health are very apparent in these lines. He is dragged into a state of vicious circle; in which his inability of writing in accordance with the expectations of the literary market functions both the cause and the result of his anxiety. Because of this vicious circle he finds himself in, Edwin's psychiatric health deteriorates every day along with his inability for writing.

The male anxiety that Edwin suffers from reaches almost to the level of an anxiety disorder and he can't even sleep properly because of this anxiety: "He seldom slept, in the proper sense of the word; as a rule, he was conscious all through the night of a kind of fighting between physical weariness and wakeful toil of the mind" (Gissing, 1981, p. 238). Edwin's sleepless nights which continue until his death approves the fact that male anxiety he experiences reached to the level of a psychiatric disorder called as "generalised anxiety", in accordance with Richard J. McNally's explanation that a person with generalised anxiety may have complaints such as "feeling on edge, keyed up, or restless; becoming easily fatigued; having difficulty in concentrating or having one's mind go blank; irritability; tense muscles; and having difficulty in either falling asleep or staying asleep or failing to be rested after having slept" (2012, p. 31). Since "generalised anxiety" disorder can be defined as "a constant burden of anxiety (also called excessive worry) aroused by situations that are ordinary in character" and characterised by traditional concerns such as "Will I find a job? Will I find a partner? Can I pay my bills?" (Mackenzie and Neuger, 2012, p. 43), Edwin's male anxiety can be classified under this category. In most of the patriarchal societies, male individuals are conditioned to ask themselves these questions and feel anxious about not having proper answers to these and similar questions related to hegemonic masculine expectations. The following quotation affirms that Edwin was facing difficulties and feeling himself under a great oppression because of these problems:

When shall you begin in earnest? In a day or two you must pay this quarter's rent, and that will leave us just about fifteen pounds in the world. Where is the rent at Christmas to come from? What are we to live upon? There's all sorts of clothing to be bought; there'll be all the

extra expenses of winter. Surely, it's bad enough that we have had to stay here all the summer, no holiday of any kind. (Gissing, 1891, pp. 73-4)

Frequent reasons of generalised anxiety disorder encountered in male individuals concerning the obligation to have financial competence and the ability to take care of the household relates it directly to Edwin although these are problems which should concern the whole family. However, because of the patriarchal mentality which has been putting these responsibilities to men's shoulders rather than splitting these responsibilities between men and women for centuries, such responsibilities constitute an unbearable psychological burden even on alternative masculine identities like Edwin, who attempt to get rid of the hegemonic gender norms coded in their minds through discourse beginning from their very early ages. Nevertheless, since these alternative masculinities cannot totally isolate themselves from hegemonic masculinity and femininities surrounding them, hegemonic expectations are frequently dictated to them by their beloved ones, and they cannot preserve their mental indifference to these hegemonic gender expectations. Since Edwin Reardon is aware of the fact that he could have a careless attitude towards these norms if he was on his own, he cannot help himself, but he sees wife and child as burdens on his shoulders from time to time:

Amy's grief, however sincere, would be but a short trial compared with what else might lie before her. The burden of supporting her and Willie would be a very slight one if she went to live in her mother's house. He considered the whole matter night after night, until perchance it happened that sleep had pity upon him for an hour before the time of rising. [...] For months he had been living in this way; endless circling, perpetual beginning, followed by frustration. A sign of exhaustion, it of course made exhaustion more complete. At times he was on the borderland of imbecility; his mind looked into a cloudy chaos, a shapeless whirl of nothings. He talked aloud to himself, not knowing that he did so. (Gissing, 1891, pp.157-8)

The constant angst and the feeling of desperateness leads him to the idea that they would be better without him. Only on that occasion he would have the freedom to die, which he wishes more and more as his relationship with Amy deteriorates. As masculinity studies insistently suggest, as the "other" oppressed sex of patriarchal societies, most men experience a serious level of male anxiety in relation to their fear of not being able to conform to the predetermined hegemonic gender roles, mostly in the task of being the caretaker of the family (McNally, 2012, p. 31). Facing the reality that he is incapable of realising this significant task of a so-called "proper man", Edwin also experiences the fear of being alienated from society, of being humiliated or embarrassed in front of his peers, as in the following quotation:

after all he preferred to keep his shame to himself as long as possible, and with a hurried reading he dismissed sheet after sheet. His imagination did not work the more happily for this repugnant task; still, he hit at length upon a conception which seemed absurd enough for the purpose before him. Whether he could persevere with it even to the extent of one volume was very doubtful. But it should not be said of him that he abandoned his wife and child to penury without one effort of the kind that Milvain and Amy herself had recommended. (Gissing, 1891, p.202).

Demonstrating the fear and anxiety Edwin experiences, the quotation given above exposes the reality that even an intellectual and educated alternative masculine character like Edwin cannot remain indifferent to patriarchal discourse surrounding him. He worries about what

other men will say about his masculinity if they hear that he cannot take care of his wife and child. Striving for keeping up with the pre-determined roles to fit into the position of masculinity assigned to him, Edwin feels himself obliged to conform to the heteronormative norms with the fear of losing his wife, which results in a sense of insufficiency and anxiety since the standards that Amy is asking for are almost impossible for his reach, as long as he does not sacrifice his indigenous identity and act in a hypocritical manner in accordance with the expectations of the literary market. The following quotation successfully portrays his desperate situation and his awareness of the impossibility of reaching those standards:

The soft breathing of Amy at his side, the contact of her warm limbs, often filled him with intolerable dread. Even now he did not believe that Amy loved him with the old love, and the suspicion was like a cold weight at his heart that to retain even her wifely sympathy, her wedded tenderness, he must achieve the impossible. [...] The impossible; for he could no longer deceive himself with a hope of genuine success. If he earned a bare living, that would be the utmost. And with bare livelihood Amy would not, could not, be content. (Gissing, 1981, p.156)

With this awareness, Edwin continues his agonising life dominated by the fear of being left by Amy. Unfortunately, this happens in a very short time, and she leaves him. This anxiety Edwin experiences without being able to do anything to support her is in accordance with the basic definition of "anxiety" suggested by McNelly, in which he describes the notion as: "a state triggered by the prospect of a future threat whose function is to motivate the person to take steps to prevent the threat from materialising" (2012, p. 16). To prevent this threat from materialising, Edwin gives up his dream job – authorship – and he finds himself in a clerk position at the hospital where his friend Carter works as a manager. Until his first salary, he asks Carter to lend him some money, which ironically results in Amy's leaving home and moving in with her mother. Telling Edwin that borrowing money from Carter is a disgrace, she leaves him behind in a miserable position. A short time passes, and Amy inherits a huge amount of money. However, Edwin does not accept their reunion because of his masculine pride. From that moment on, Edwin's anxiety reaches an unbearable level, he does not take care of himself, and continues to live in devastating conditions. Right after losing his son from syphilis, he dies. All the selected quotations scrutinized in the scope of the study demonstrate that Edwin Reardon constitutes a successful example of alternative masculinities because of his non-conformance to the expectations of the hegemonic gender order and his inability to meet the expectations of the prevailing materialist ideology. Edwin rejects sacrificing from the literary quality of his works even for the sake of his marriage. Despite his struggle to preserve his alternative masculine identity by adhering to his own beliefs and values, Edwin is exposed to the relentless pressures of the hegemonic gender ideology too, and he suffers from male anxiety, resulting in the loss of his health and eventually dies as a desperate man.

### **Conclusion**

At the end of the masculinist analysis, the novel was evaluated to be coherent with aims of the masculinist theory since it depicted male anxiety in relation to hegemonic masculinity responsibilities. Edwin Reardon was evaluated to be embodying some autobiographical aspects too, which reflected the male anxiety Gissing experienced in his marital issues. The application of tenets of masculinist theory to the analysis of the novel also resulted in the



conclusion that, through Edwin's story, the novel presented the patriarchal discourse concerned with the duties and responsibilities of men as the primary shaping force in the construction of Victorian masculinities, as well as in the formation of male anxiety in *fin de siècle* Britain.

Analysing Edwin Reardon – the male protagonist of the novel – with a masculinist perspective exhibited that he was a successful representation of alternative masculinities in his non-conformance to the expectations of the hegemonic gender order and in his inability to meet the expectations of the literary market. Edwin's rejection of sacrificing from the literary quality of his works for money despite the hegemonic masculinity expectations regarding to the marital responsibilities in expense of his marriage validated his alternative masculine characteristic. Despite his struggle to preserve his alternative masculine identity by adhering to his own beliefs and values, Edwin was exposed to the pressures of the hegemonic gender ideology and the capitalist system, which dragged him into a state of continuous anxiety. Such an anxiety ruined his physical health and finally it resulted in his death. Therefore, through his creation of a male protagonist who was reluctant for and incapable of conforming to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, Gissing presented readers with the reality that male individuals – who are generally thought to be the absolute advantaged members of patriarchal societies – also suffered from the pressures and expectations of the patriarchal ideology. Through his portrayal of realistic accounts of male anxiety which was experienced in nineteenth century *fin de siècle* Britain by alternative masculinities, Gissing realised what today's masculinist theorists aim for almost a century earlier than them and demonstrated the devastating effects of hegemonic masculinity expectations on male individuals.

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