

Linda M. Shires

As Patricia Ingham claims, it is now axiomatic for feminists to examine gender issues in the larger contexts of institutionalised power relations, including class structure. Moreover, historians have long noted that nineteenth-century representations of social class and industrial society were always in the making and under contest. Yet literary critics have often ignored or underplayed the importance of such conflict. In this lucid and provocative book, Patricia Ingham, building on prior work by such feminist literary critics and historians as Mary Poovey, Judith Walkowitz, and Catherine Gallagher, sets out to illustrate the uneven development of Victorian descriptions of class. In two general chapters and in six chapters devoted to specific novels, Ingham convincingly demonstrates how the two semantic areas of gender and class were first ideologically connected to support a putatively “coherent” identity for the middle class. She then illustrates how gender and class were progressively disconnected from each other. The result of this disconnection was, Ingham argues, the release of new images of femininity.

Although Ingham states her focus as the (re)organisation of “the semantic field” (21) and not the historical causes of social and linguistic crisis, she provides a wealth of historical information. Such information lends weight to Habermas’s theory of the progressive breakdown of the social sphere into component parts and to Foucault’s claim that, during this era, proliferating regulatory discourses emerged along with new social identities, especially at the end of the century. Lest I give the wrong impression, Ingham does not foreground history and politics. She does not focus, for example, on regulatory commissions, a crisis in liberalism, or the push for the female vote. Furthermore, although she speaks eloquently about the two periods in Victorian history when political opposition to the state was at its height—the 1830s-1840s and the 1880-1890s—and although she refers often and concretely to structural economic inequities among classes, her sophisticated understanding of the complexities of determinism, agency, and the social sphere does not allow her to get seduced into any simplistic cause and effect arguments. In fact, what her first chapter demonstrates so well is that the paradigms with which Victorians sought to describe and make sense of the social were competing, multiple, and multi-accented. These included political economy, patriarchal paternalism, evolution and organicism, and religion. As she brilliantly shows, these paradigms do not merely rival each other, but they overlap and knot themselves into each other to enable utterly contradictory political positions.

Ingham’s chief interest lies in the relationship of literature and language to ideology. In this book she investigates novels which dismantle images securing dominant ideologies. She understands well the power of hegemonic ideologies not only to shape public opinion but also daily practices; at the same time, she is quick to point out that dominant ideologies are themselves fluid, which is why they can be broken apart. In the genre of the multi-voiced novel, she argues, we find a form well-suited for challenging and reworking dominant ideologies. She would, I think, agree that, because of its polyphonic nature, the novel offers a vision of society available nowhere else. And she might also agree that novels can easily engage in such disruptive strategies as transgenerating or transclassing precisely because of the fiction of fiction—the happy lie

that the world presented in a novel is just a safe aesthetic realm where anything can happen, and where anything does happen.

Ingham provides us with an explanation of why and how some novels are subversive of dominant ideologies and some are not. In authors, she argues, we find historically conditioned consciousnesses which, though in some part determined, do provide us with individual idiolects. Gaskell's use of a fallen woman in *Ruth*, say, is an individual variation and rewriting of a trope, not a replica of Dickens's uses. In turn, Hardy's construction of Tess differs from fallen women written by Gaskell or Eliot or Dickens; thus certain authorial idiolects can contribute to changing novelistic language itself. Every authorial investment is not aimed at change and every variation will not necessarily lead to or be read as change. To sharpen her argument, Ingham makes distinctions among discursive, rhetorical, and symbolic levels of narratives and claims that change in semantic areas as large as gender or class must take place on the symbolic and rhetorical levels, not merely on the discursive level, in order to break down entrenched ideological codings.

Ingham's choice of novels is dictated by her desire to show a re-encoding of class and gender over time, so that while the syntax of gender tends to contain that of class conflict in the early-mid nineteenth century, changing social conditions from mid-century on "contributed to the unlocking of class and gender which had immobilised the treatment of both subjects" (114). The general trajectory which Ingham documents is borne out by many examples, not just the ones she chooses. So, for instance, many novels of the 1840s, as Nancy Armstrong has shown, focus on family strife and gender issues, while echoes of European upheavals or English Chartism haunt them. And though Ingham attends chiefly to class and gender and not to race or other social categories, her approach confirms and profitably expands work done recently on a novel such as *Jane Eyre* by critics such as Susan Meyer, Jenny Sharpe, or Susan Fraiman. Riven with class disturbance, this novel labours to subsume class and race difference in gender difference and re-negotiation. Class revolt and other social crises, such as the failure of paternalism or the recent history of British slave ownership, are programmatically displaced onto gender issues—Bertha's sexuality and madness, for instance, or Rochester's crossdressing and crossvoicing as a gypsy woman. However, the closure of *Jane Eyre*, while still relying on a fairly conventional gender politics, cannot so easily contain either aberrant desires or unequal power relations as novels of just thirty years earlier such as *Pride and Prejudice* had done. As Ingham shows, the containment of class difference by gender syntax becomes increasingly impossible to sustain after the 1840s.

It is to Ingham's credit that she selects novels which are not necessarily the most obvious ones. In fact, she usefully limits her discussion in two prime ways. First, she selects romance novels related to "the condition of England" debate which include scenes of class disturbance, such as strikes or open confrontations: *Shirley*, *North and South*, and *Hard Times*; and, to demonstrate strong re-encodings of class and gender issues, she selects novels which concentrate on questions of moral worth and social mobility: *Felix Holt*, *The Unclassed*, and *Jude the Obscure*. Second, she attends closely to the multi-acculturality and progressive dismantling of two prime images, those of the domestic Angel and the chaos-producing Whore. In so doing, she offers fresh and exciting readings of her prime texts.

Ingham's method is also noteworthy in that she treats generic structure as signifying practice as well as a signifying system. That is, she attends to the social importance of genres in structuring specific social meanings and she shows how certain examples of a genre challenge familiar conventions of story, characterisation, narration, and audience expectation. In fact, she divides her novel analyses into sections: gendering and ungendering the narrator, narrative syntax (the structuring of events into plot), and rewriting the woman as sign (actors' functions and characters' traits). For Ingham, then, novels are never merely literary constructions, but they are social and subjective forms shaping masculinity and femininity. Her method of analysis allows her to show how the same paradigmatic events, whether a strike or a marriage, can signify differently book to book, while still supporting the cultural semiotics of the genre. In this context, her selection of Thomas Hardy is of major importance. Noted for challenging, rather than just playing to, audience expectations, Hardy can undermine completely the prime paradigmatic event of the main genre within which he works—say marriage in the romance/bildungsroman *Jude the Obscure*. The fact that his novels are usually composed of several types, which call each other into question, and the fact that he consequently often undoes the value of several key paradigmatic events at once only indicates the extent of his demolition of the English novel. Hardy's is a far more radical reworking of novelistic language than a mere changing of character traits or functions as done by other novelists. He blasts open narrative syntax.

Ingham's book excels in its individual analyses of texts. The readings are crisp, particularly those of Dickens's ludic handling of novelistic language in *Hard Times* and Gissing's linguistic contradictions in *The Unclassed*. I would only suggest that at times the book gives the impression of too much emphasis on the paradigms of a genre, so that an individual novel may appear more stable than it is in its handling of events. A greater dwelling on the relationship of syntagmatic events, at how events get placed side by side in *Shirley*, say, may have made the narrative syntax of that book more complicated than it appears in Ingham's handling where the choice of events, rather than placement, and the rewriting of character traits and functions are given credit as Brontë's major subversions within the form. Dwelling on paradigmatic events and closure, which allows a reading with the novel's linearity and promise of resolution, may too easily limit our view of notable syntagmatic subversions throughout.

The book is theoretically sophisticated and nuanced in its readings. But since it features prose, the dearth of references to the poetic tradition occasionally diminishes the texture of the book's argument. I am not asking for a discussion of poetry in a book whose focus is the novel, but at certain points some reference to poetry would have thickened the argument further in interesting ways. For one thing, the absence of reference to poetry makes the novel appear to develop in a literary greenhouse. Whereas Ingham indicates connections of the novel to real events and to non-fictional prose, she does not mention what I think could be used to buttress her argument—that the poetry of the period is also undoing the knot of class and gender, that it is often double, if not polyphonic, in form, and that it is also overrun with subversive variants on standard tropes as it rewrites dominant ideologies. One could posit that it actually works temporally ahead of the novel in this endeavour. Several of the novels Ingham explicates also seem to have a running conversation, if you will, with poetry of the period. In the case of Gissing's *The Unclassed*, for instance, a novel Ingham compares to the sensation novel, Gissing's references to Tennyson are so abundant that one may only suppose

Gissing to be rewriting *Maud*, *The Princess*, and the Laureate's own stunning subversions of standard representations of sexuality and identity. Gissing's letter to his brother Algernon, as he completes *The Unclassed*, quotes Tennyson's mixed description of his own character Maud: "faultily faultless, splendidly null" in a passage where he gives advice to Algernon about drawing a female character named Lucy. It seems clear that Gissing, immersed in Tennyson, is rewriting not only Tennyson's gender politics by concentrating on a subversion of female stereotypes in poems where Tennyson had intricately subverted masculine ones, but is also aggressively recasting Tennyson's class politics.

Gissing places his own story of Maud, Ida, fears of hereditary madness, death, and womanly ideals undone, not among the gentry and business classes, as in Tennyson's poems, but at the margins of the middle and lower classes. Gissing's novel may thus be seen, on closer look, to provide an even more complex narrative language of gender and class by its many intertextual associations with the Laureate's long anti-narrative narrative poems and not just with the sensation novel tradition. My comments should be read, however, neither as correctives nor as complaints, but as dialogue with a major and exciting book.

Penny Boumelha

This fine book addresses itself at once to changes within the structure of British society in the mid to late nineteenth century and to the development of fictional genres within the same period. What brings the two together, in Patricia Ingham's argument, is the role of social ideologies of class and gender. Ingham is to be taken seriously in the emphasis her title gives to language. The principal theoretical framework of her analysis is a linguistic structuralist one, positing the "sign" as the interpretative unit, identifying binaries such as the Angel/Whore opposition as the mechanisms of meaning, and taking a narratological approach to the analysis of such matters as narrative voice or plot structure. At the same time, her major critical focus is indeed the language of class in particular: the lexicon, syntax, registers, dialects, accents and figuration available to nineteenth-century fiction for the representation of one of its key preoccupations, class conflict. Ingham's main argument is centred upon shifts within that language, from the turn-of-the-century stability of "rank," through the mid-century model (inherently conflictual) of a tripartite class structure, to the later layering of the working class into artisans and the worthless "residuum," with the accompanying moralisation of misery. In mapping such shifts, she is inevitably called upon to make clear some particular understanding of the processes of change, and once more Ingham is linguistic in her inflection. The predominant "novelistic language" or "narrative syntax" provides a common stock of signs, but the idiolect of any particular writer "works to re-accent the communal system of signs" (30), allowing new significances and emphases to emerge and thus enabling further change. Such a theory can broadly be paralleled with Russian Formalism, except that its de- and re-familiarisations are specifically ideological rather than narrowly literary, and it comes as no surprise that Ingham's most explicit theoretical reference point is Bakhtin.