**Book Review:** Christine DeVine, *Class in Turn-of-the-Century Novels of Gissing, James, Hardy and Wells* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005). xii + 158 pp. ISBN 0-7546-5150-9. £40.00. [John S. Partington]

In *Class in Turn-of-the-Century Novels of Gissing, James, Hardy and Wells*, Christine DeVine sets out to demonstrate the way in which the authors under consideration perceived social class at the fin-de- siècle. Arguing in her introduction that, while writers like Charles Dickens had portrayed class relations as fixed and unalterable (even while being sympathetic to the plight of the poor), by the end of the nineteenth century novelists such as George Gissing, Henry James, Thomas Hardy and H. G. Wells no longer saw social class as the natural order of things. More controversially, perhaps, DeVine also maintains that these later novelists differed from their earlier counterparts by being 'outsiders', with James being an American émigré to southern England, and Gissing, Hardy and Wells being of lower-middle-class origins, albeit relatively well educated. This being such, DeVine argues that 'they were writing from a world-view which was not limited by a middle-class English consciousness, and which expressed therefore a more sceptical view of the social class system'. To these writers, she concludes, the class system was a 'social construct'. DeVine does acknowledge exceptions to her theory about mid-Victorian class fixity in fiction, citing Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) as a case in point. However, DeVine argues that Braddon's sensationalist fiction represented 'the viewpoint of subversives' rather than positing a new world-view (as occurs in Gissing, James, Hardy and Wells), and so can be discounted in the analysis. Subversion in itself, of course, cannot be discounted, however,

as many critics have identified subversive themes in several of the works by DeVine's subjects, although DeVine does not acknowledge this point in her introduction. DeVine's reason for studying her four subjects rather than working-class writers of the period is that these four (with the exception of James, the American 'special case'), left out of the literary canon for much of the twentieth century, now form our canon, and she finds it important that writers as critical of class as Gissing, James, Hardy and Wells have ultimately succeeded at achieving canonical status.

After spending three chapters discussing Gissing's *The Nether World* (1889), James's *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) and Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), chapter four bears the title '"The splintering frame": Wells's *Tono-Bungay* and Edwardian class' (though more of Wells's novels than just *Tono-Bungay* are, in fact, discussed). DeVine argues that *Tono-Bungay* (1909) 'chronicles the changes taking place in the English class system in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first years of the new one'. She concludes that Wells's novel demonstrates that '[f]ar from disappearing in the early twentieth century, with the beginnings of democracy, the advent of the new monarch and the commercial boom bringing with it the rise of the plutocracy, the class system was still very powerful and perhaps more pernicious because ostensibly unacknowledged'.

Before considering *Tono-Bungay*'s critique of social class, DeVine revisits the famous Wells-James debate about art, maintaining that there was a clear class-basis to James's attack on Wells in 'The Younger Generation' (1914) and in Wells's reply in *Boon* (1915). Although the debate has been well rehearsed in several places, DeVine does a splendid job in exposing the prejudiced and unwarranted position taken up by Leon Edel and Gordon N. Ray in their *Henry James and H. G. Wells* (1958), a position which has harmed Wells's reception in literary studies (outside of the narrow domain of specifically science-fiction studies) for the past half-century. DeVine, through an assessment of Edel and Ray's language in that book, convincingly demonstrates that 'the judgment of Edel and Ray is greatly affected by their *own* class prejudice, a class prejudice of which they are unaware, and is typical of the kind of critical class prejudice that has followed Wells through the twentieth century' (DeVine's emphasis).

In considering ways in which Wells attacks the social fixity in traditional realist fiction, DeVine maintains that he used his own experiences of class to redraft the rules of fiction, writing realist fiction still, but realism with a difference. DeVine uses Wells's metaphor of 'the splintering frame' (a phrase he coins in his *Experiment in Autobiography* [1934] to describe his aesthetic approach) to suggest his break with the realist tradition in his late-Victorian and Edwardian social novels. Refreshingly, DeVine acknowledges the start of Wells's approach with *The Wheels of Chance* (1896), a novel predating *Kipps*

(1905), *Tono-Bungay* and *The History of Mr Polly* (1910), but often ignored by critics of Wells's social comedies. The two distinguishing features of Wells's realism, according to DeVine, are his use of lower-middle class protagonists and his willingness to engage 'with political questions and religious questions and social questions' in his novels. DeVine agrees with Raymond Williams about the import of Wells's employing lower-middle class characters in his fiction, as these characters necessarily project a different worldview than former protagonists / narrators in Victorian realist fiction. Whereas Dickens's lower-middle-class characters were often humorously portrayed and stereotyped as mere class representatives, DeVine states Wells's 'have an inner-life'; this position defying many critics of Wells in the past who often saw his characters as just the opposite – mere types. (DeVine does not deny that characters such as Kipps and Mr Polly represent petit-bourgeois 'types', but she feels they are not limited to status-representatives, but also reveal a consciousness and personality of their own, at odds with the protagonists of an earlier generation of fiction.)

In *The History of Mr Polly*, Wells again portrays a lower-middle-class protagonist, one feminised and comical (in keeping with earlier petit-bourgeois characters), but who liberates himself from these burdens to achieve a life of happy companionship and satisfaction. Considering the success with which Mr Polly faces 'desperation, violence and danger', DeVine asserts that 'Wells […] has taken the conventional lower-middle-class clown and given him a completely new aspect. In so doing, he helps to break the hold the middle-class world-view has on the English novel'.

Turning to *Tono-Bungay*, DeVine emphasises Wells's (or George Ponderevo's) repeated assertions of the text's and the characters' fictiveness, referring to George's autobiographical book as 'in the nature of a novel', observing personages in the book as living 'in character', and calling 'personal unity an illusion', thus even casting doubt on the reality of the reader as one and indivisible! The result of these observations or assertions in *Tono-Bungay* is to ultimately put the lie to the reality of the realist novel – '[f]or, of course, while purporting to represent the real, the realistic novel is highly constructed'. DeVine makes the astute point that, in subverting or recasting the Victorian realist novel in *Tono-Bungay*, Wells is also subverting or denying the class-fixity represented by the older form of realism – the social hierarchy represented by Bladesover dissolves as surely as George's quap-carrying ship. Similarly, George's social class, as partner to his uncle, Edward Ponderevo, the manufacturer of quack medicine, is the destroyer, metaphorically presented through the illnesses spread by Tono-Bungay, and literally expressed by the X2, the destroyer George has designed and which heads out on a secret mission down the Thames and 'out to the open sea'.

In her conclusion, while acknowledging the importance of feminist and post-colonial interpretations of Victorian literature, DeVine makes the case for

considering that literature in terms of social class and the hierarchies asserted and attacked in fiction. She sees such an approach as being out of fashion in recent years, but wishes to assert its importance for our understanding of Victorian literature and culture. She might have gone further and warned feminist and post-colonial critics of the dangers of ignoring social class in *their* analyses, for while women and 'subject peoples' had a distinct place in culture (historically, negative), they additionally occupied a social class. While their social class did not override the 'racial' or gender disadvantages they faced, it could act to soften or intensify their situations (depending upon which social class they occupied) and so warrants consideration in itself in both feminist and post-colonial criticism.

In terms of her assessment of the realist form, DeVine concludes that it shifted dramatically between the mid- and late-Victorian periods; George Eliot's Hetty in *Adam Bede* (1859) 'had wanted to raise herself on the social ladder, but this is the fairly predictable, stereotypical desire of a working-class girl created by a middle-class writer'. By the century's end, 'characters like Sidney Kirkwood, Hyacinth Robinson, Tess Durbeyfield and George Ponderevo have class conflicts going on within themselves'. This shift from authorial class-externality to class-association (though Henry James, even as a social 'outsider', has no class allegiance with Hyacinth Robinson!) created an 'inextricable bond between realism and class relations'. DeVine ends her book by asserting that the studied authors' 'facing the problems associated with class so squarely has paved the way for further questions in later writing', citing Arnold Bennett, J. M. Synge and D. H. Lawrence as cases in point.

This book does not present a comparative study, but rather four essays on different late-Victorian authors whose work is viewed through the prism of social-class consciousness. While greater discussion of the subject-authors' interactions might have been interesting and useful (apart from the Wells-James debate, Wells reviewed work by all three of the other authors considered, and was on friendly terms with two of them), DeVine's approach is important and well done, and her writing style is appealing and her arguments convincing. It is pleasing to see social-class foregrounded as an issue in literature, after its marginalisation for perhaps thirty years, and one can only hope that further studies of this nature will follow by others. It is through reading a work like *Class in Turn-of-the-Century Novels of Gissing, James, Hardy and Wells* that we can see how important late-Victorian and Edwardian society was in shaping a world still recognisable in the twenty-first century. It is for this reason, above all others, that I strongly recommend DeVine's book to a wide readership.