Title of Paper: The Survival of the East End: Ruins, Liminality and Identity in Arthur Morrison’s Fiction

Abstract: This article probes the extent to which social-class stratification, moral thresholds and liminal spaces and bodies played a role in the survival of the East End in the late-nineteenth century. Arthur Morrison’s fiction, in this sense, builds awareness of neglect and degeneration, and highlights the need for renewal and restoration in the East End. Morrison’s style is distinctive for telling the story of East Enders from an insider’s point of view and translating the “stranger’s literature” into a more intimate and personal experience. Undertaking the city as a unified yet heterogeneous fabric, this study suggests that slums and ruinous spaces were a part of a greater whole and their potential for liminality was essential to the existence of the East End. The paper takes a thematic approach to the representation of the East End and focuses on ruins, holes, analogies of animals, indefinable objects and grotesque bodies in A Child of the Jago (1896) -with a greater focus-, Tales of Mean Streets (1894) and The Hole in the Wall (1903). In A Child of the Jago, the Jago is not only a place to dwell in but it also nourishes and hides criminals within its ruins and holes. It is an urban ruin that aggravates the efforts of the middle classes trying to re-construct an ordered and transparent space. The deviation and grotesqueness of the Jago help maintain its existence and survival disregarding the social codes and practices of the other classes.

Keywords: ruins, liminality, the grotesque body, Arthur Morrison, the East End.

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Introduction

The Jago, as mere bricks and mortar, is gone. But the Jago in flesh and blood still lives, and is crowding into neighbourhoods already densely over-populated.

Arthur Morrison, Preface to A Child of the Jago (1896)

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 called “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. In his 1889 study Life and Labour of the People in London, Charles Booth suggested that East London stretched from Aldgate to Bow and Poplar. On account of many disagreements over the boundaries of East End, it has remained an ambiguous or liminal space “that has never been clearly or adequately defined, delineated or drawn” and functioned as “an enigmatic imaginative space” (Newland 17). At the same time, the East End was defined against other parts of London- not just the West End, but also the City. As distinctive geographies, it became the abyss or the nether world with its extreme poverty, immorality, crime and savagery in the Victorian imagination through journalism and novels.

The term “East End” was already used by Londoners in the 1880s and it was generally considered as a homogenous unit including “the residuum, … unemployable, feckless, violent and incurably criminal”, that is, it inhabited 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. However, the East End was not a completely homogeneous area as there were many different social and economic levels sharing the same environment. The colour scheme, with which Charles Booth displayed the residency of social classes in the streets, provided the variations of a heterogeneous social unit.¹ Yet, this did not completely alter its representation as a symbolic space

¹ The color scheme by Charles Booth depicted social classes as follows:
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)
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rather than a real space, since it reminded all qualities that the middle and upper classes avoided in social and moral contexts. The East End, with its dwellers, became a spatially liminal area, where the dark side of London resided. In this way, divisions between social classes, ethnic groups and religions were “conveniently placed, positioned, named” through “the continued existence of a spatial idea of the East End” (Newland 29).

Slums were closely associated with the East End in terms of their influences on moral and social concerns in the Victorian cultural production. In The Imagined Slum (1993), Alan Mayne elaborates bourgeois concerns about urban growth and “slumland sensationalism” in the press, becoming highly popular for both entertainment and instruction (150). The word “slum” was primarily associated with “criminal trade”, unsanitary conditions and overcrowding in urban areas in the early nineteenth century. In later decades, the intruding borders and boundaries of slums contributed a determination and definition of “a moral threshold between decency and degeneracy” (150). In particular, sensational newspaper features played an important role in displaying certain ethical principles and appropriate behaviour for everyday life in the modern city. In 1882 in Birmingham Daily Mail, an improvement area was characterised as containing the “vilest rookeries” which imagination could conceive. This understanding continued until the beginning of the twentieth century. For instance, in municipal elections of 1908 a Liberal politician in Birmingham stated that: “Slums … were a disgrace, and were physically, mentally and morally degrading too many of those who lived in them” (150). Regarding the advance of slumlands, the bourgeoisie were concerned about the inevitable degrading influences, since they believed “the moral w[ould] become immoral, the pure-minded vicious, and the worthy citizen a genuine slumite” (151). This approach strengthened their opinion of slums as a world apart, and created an imagined slum represented by the degeneration and transgression of moral boundaries. Representations of slums operated within “unshakeable moral frameworks” throughout social surveys, discourses of reform and popular entertainment genres (151).

The works of a small group of social novelists, such as Israel Zangwill, George Gissing, and Morrison provided some exasperated views on urban poverty and the working class as a part of bourgeois moralism. In addition, amongst the realist authors of the East End, Edwin Pugh’s Street in Suburbia (1895), Pett Ridge’s Mord Ém’ly (1898), Richard Whiteing’s No. 5 John Street (1899), and Somerset Maugham’s Liza of Lambeth (1897) vividly evoked different aspects of the East End life through descriptive representation of the events, complexity, sentimentality and humour. One of the main objectives of these authors was to present a detailed and accurate portrayal of the everyday lives of the poor living in slums and to display their hardships as well as their ill behaviours and moral degradation. In this sense, their works contributed to the imagined slums by differentiating them from the other parts of the city both physically, as closet spaces, and morally, with their tendency for criminal acts and violence.

Despite being despised and marginalised as the social “other”, the East End’s continued imaginative power shows how its low culture constituted the imaginary
The Victorian repositories of the dominant Victorian culture. The representations of urban culture were not restricted to novels and stories. The moral threshold between slums and the modern city was depicted in theatre, British melodrama, caricatures and engravings, which enabled the Victorians to penetrate a liminal zone. Specifically, the huge influence of William Hogarth’s serials such as *A Harlot’s Progress* (1731), *Industry and Idleness* (1747) and *Gin Lane* (1751) could be seen in George Cruikshank’s productions such as *Life in London* (1821), *The Bottle* (1847) and *The Drunkard’s Children* (1848), which suggested a tradition of conveying moral messages to the public. In addition, the East End of London was successfully presented by George Sims’ productions into the urban culture marketing. The illustrations of city low-life by Gustave Doré, including those for *London: A Pilgrimage* (1872) written by Blanchard Jerrold, marked a bleak depiction that influenced textual representation. The publication of serialised fiction and social surveys triggered the emphasis on slums in *Punch* and *The Illustrated London News*, as well as cartoons such as *Mammon’s Rents* (1883) and *A Sigh from the Slums* (1884). The increasing number of these products of urban culture became a significant means of expanding the imagined slum with moral messages, which displayed a moral topography of the city and de-humanised the slum inhabitants as uncivilised and savage beings. The readers of slum novels and the participants of “threshold performances” found themselves in a “strange and repugnant liminal zone” and a reverse moral condition in which “bourgeois normalcy was turned upside down” (Mayne 163):

> Here we are in the very depths. Poverty unredeemed is found everywhere. Humanity is in its lowest and most corrupt and degraded state. Filth abounds. Morality is at its worst. A hundred streams of pollution seem to pour their poison in that pit of crime and slime. (qtd. in Mayne 163)

That is, the identification of slums particularly depended upon their association with the “lack of moral qualities or material possessions” (Gaskell 2). Interestingly, as a historical phenomenon, these features of the impoverished districts did not greatly change from the mid to late nineteenth century. Social explorers such as Henry Mayhew and James Grant had clearly described the characteristics and condition of the urban poor and slums in the civilised city. Besides the spatially isolated slums, the poor were considered as a race apart and de-humanised in some cases. Describing London life in *Lights and Shadows of London Life* (1842), Grant stated that Londoners were “as ignorant of the destitution and distress which prevail[ed] in large districts of London ... as if the wretched creatures were living in the very centre of Africa” (qtd. in Mayne 157). For instance, the chapters of *The Seven Curses of London* (1869) by James Greenwood were categorised as neglected children, professional thieves, beggars, fallen women, drunkenness, gambling, and waste charity. General Booth was one of those urban explorers who found the negligence of the middle and upper classes ironic: “What a satire it is upon our Christianity and our civilisation that the existence of these colonies of heathens and savages in the heart of our capital should attract so little attention!” (13). Although their attention shifted to moral corruption, the slum problem was still a significant issue and the demolition of the poorest areas was often considered as the only remedy for social and moral ills.
However, this approach did not prove to be as effective as it was thought since the East End maintained its existence for many decades. Yet, how exactly did the East End survive into the late nineteenth century? Why did the Victorians’ efforts to abolish or to transform this area result in partial failure? In examining these questions, this essay explores the ways in which social-class stratification, moral thresholds and liminal spaces and bodies played an essential role in the survival of the East End. Morrison’s fiction, in this sense, builds awareness of neglect and degeneration, and highlights the need for renewal and restoration in the East End. Morrison’s style is distinctive for telling the story of East Enders from an insider’s point of view and translating the “stranger’s literature” into a more intimate and personal experience. Undertaking the city as a unified yet heterogeneous fabric, this study suggests that slums and ruinous spaces were a part of a greater whole and their potential for liminality was essential to the existence of the East End.

In this study, I define liminal spaces as in-between or transitional spaces “which complicate the effort to construct spatial identity” since they are “fluid and ambiguous” (Newland 153). The East End, in this sense, was a liminal space situated somewhere between the local and the national, wealth and poverty, various ethnic groups, and its presence prevented the existence of a coherent and unified Victorian identity. However, the liminality of the East End was not only a form of exclusion but also of potentiality because it offered new possibilities of forming alternative social and moral structures in the city. Besides liminality, I use “marginality” in social terms as communities in the East End were “generally pushed to the edges for social reasons” such as ethnic, religious or racial differences (La Shure para. 22). This paper takes a thematic approach to the representation of the East End and focuses on social and moral codes, ruins, holes, analogies of animals, indefinable objects and grotesque bodies in A Child of the Jago (1896) -with a greater focus-, Tales of Mean Streets (1894) and The Hole in the Wall (1903). Firstly, I focus on the representation of the East End in Morrison’s novels and short stories, and then move on to the role of socio-spatial segregation and moral codes in maintaining the East End’s survival. In the third section, I elaborate on the significance of liminal spaces and grotesque bodies, and I finally discuss the ineffectiveness of slum clearances in A Child of the Jago.

Arnold van Gennep first developed the concept of “liminality” in his work ‘Rites de Passage’ (1902) and argued that there is a dichotomy between “hardened” and “changeable” structures (qtd. in Newland 153). Gennep suggests that transition or movement of the individual is characterised by three stages: separation; marginality or liminality; and finally union or incorporation. Separation indicates isolation of an individual from “the fixed social or cultural structures” and it designates the detachment “from the real temporal-spatial setting” (153). Liminality addresses “the ambivalent state of … [the] transit-traveler’ and ‘his transition to the intermediate, ambivalent social zone” (153). The final phase of incorporation corresponds to the return of the individual to society, but “in a renovated status” (153). The East Enders, in this context, seemed to be in the second phase, and in their own ways, they resisted the final phase of incorporation and union with the middle classes.
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The East End in Morrison’s Fiction

Arthur Morrison (1853-1945) 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 was his determination to tell the lives of those living in the East End. His style was distinctive for telling the story of East Enders from an insider’s point of view and translating “the stranger’s literature” into a more intimate and personal experience. This approach is significantly different from mid-Victorian authors’ view of the slums as remote, horrible and miserable places, as V.S. Pritchett points out:

> It lies under the melodramatic murk and the smear of sentimental pathos, which in the nineteenth century were generated by the guilty conscience of the middle classes. They were terrified of the poor who seethed in an abyss just beyond their back door. The awful Gothic spectacle of hunger, squalor and crime was tolerable only as nightmare and fantasy … and the visiting foreigner alone could observe the English slums with the curiosity of the traveller or the countenance of the anthropologist. (qt in Brome 16)

As this passage elaborates, the views of the middle and upper classes about the unclassed and the working class were similar with the approach of an anthropologist. The urban poor were viewed as foreign subjects in their own places within the city and the literature of the East End reinforced the idea of isolated species inhabiting the vilest slums. In Morrison’s fiction, slums are made up of enclosed spaces: ruinous streets, houses, depraved bodies and immorality pervading in and each corner of the nether world of the poor and the working class. The East End is described as “a howling sea of human wreckage” in *A Child of the Jago* (145). Both young children and poor intellectuals in these spaces deal with the degrading effects of poverty in different ways; however, they cannot always escape moral, social and financial ruination within the boundaries of the slums.

> “The street is in the East End. There is no need to say in the East End of what”, writes Morrison in “Vignette” published in *Macmillan’s Magazine* in 1891 (qt in Francis and Valman 1). The author treats the East End as a separate spatial entity in a

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3 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. In the preface to the third edition of *A Child of the Jago* (1897), for instance, Morrison claimed that he had “[encounter[ed] a place in Shoreditch, where children were born and reared in circumstances which gave them no reasonable chance of living decent lives: where they were born fore-damned to a criminal or semi-criminal career. It was [his] experience to learn the ways of this place, to know its inhabitants, to talk with them, eat, drink, and work with them” (9).
The Victorian 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). Every street in the East End promises a similar kind of filth, degradation and ignorance, and Morrison defines the boundaries of the East End to his middle-class readers as follows:

But who knows the East End? It is down through Cornhill and out beyond Leadenhall Street and Aldgate Pump, one will say: a shocking place, where he once went with a curate; an evil plexus of slums that hide human creeping things; where filthy men and women live on penn'orths of gin, where collars and clean shirts are decencies unknown, where every citizen wears a black eye, and none ever combs his hair … Foul slums there are in the East End, of course, as there are in the West; want and misery there are, as wherever a host is gathered together to fight for food. But they are not often spectacular in kind. (3) [Emphasis added]

Besides Morrison, a number of late-Victorian authors were interested in the spatial geography of the East End and its mythologised representation. Jack London, for instance, mentioned his West-End friend’s knowledge of the East End as “It is over there, somewhere”, in *People of the Abyss* and in Thomas Cook’s “In the City” a travel agent claimed to know “nothing whatsoever about the place at all” (London 2-3). Due to the lack of knowledge on its exact location or boundaries, the East End was a place “both intensely mythologised and intensively investigated” (2). In *Outcast London* (1871), it was characterised as a place embodying “destitute poverty and thriftlessness, demoralized pauperism, … as a potential threat to the riches and civilization of London and the Empire” (Steadman-Jones 15-16). Particularly, research and journalistic investigations into urban poverty in the 1880s and 1890s by G.R. Sims and Andrew Mearns, as well as the comprehensive study of Charles Booth, increased the anxiety of the middle and upper classes regarding the persistence and increase of “the East End residuum”, despite “substantial charitable and State attempts to eradicate it” (Francis and Valman 2).

The prevalence of similar places in the East End is emphasised by Morrison with a descriptive image of one of these streets:

Where in the East End lies this street? Everywhere. The hundred and fifty yards is only a link in a long and mightily tangled chain--is only a turn in a tortuous maze. This street of the square holes is hundreds of miles long. That it is planned in short lengths is true, but there is no other way in the world that can more properly be called a single street, because of its dismal lack of accent, its sordid uniformity, its utter remoteness from delight. (*Tales* 6)

The streets are characterised as being short in length, lacking uniformity and being far away from the charms of the other parts of the metropolis. They constitute parts of a chain in a maze that reaches nowhere. In fact, Morrison’s striking slum novels had received criticism for picturing the East End as being more violent and grotesque than
it actually was, therefore, they had a notorious popularity at first. However, Morrison’s language and narrative was not sentimental or melodramatic, and he portrayed a harsh reality of slum life seemingly far from the life of the middle classes in other parts of the metropolis (Henkle 302). Morrison's *A Child of the Jago* became immediately popular by 1896 as “a scandalous [novel] in its graphic portrayal of East End slums”, for the readers had a vague knowledge of the notorious sides of the East End, but still not ready for a portrayal of “a site of perpetual violence, misery, crime, and degradation” (Swafford 62). Considering the reactions against his representation, Morrison defended himself in the preface to the third edition of the book: “If the community have left horrible places and horrible lives before his eyes, then the fault is the community’s; and to picture these places and these lives becomes not merely his privilege, but his duty” (8). In his most popular novel, the Jago district is depicted as “one of the most anarchic and violent quarters of the East End”, and the violated human body reflects a social pathology on the streets of the Jago (Henkle 306):

> Out in the Jago the pale dawn brought a cooler air and the chance of sleep. From the paving of Old Jago Street sad grey faces, open-mouthed, looked upward as from the Valley of Dry Bones. Down by Jago Row the coshed subject, with the blood dry on his face, felt the colder air, and moved a leg. (Morrison, *Jago* 18)

For some readers, not keen on the accuracy of the novel, such as the critic H. D. Traill, it conveyed “some fairyland of horror” as an effect after reading it (Henkle 308). If so, is this novel a symbolic text or a realistic representation of the slums as Morrison claimed? The map of the Jago and the language suggest both: on a symbolic level, the differentiation of the Jago and the violated discourse of the language display the power of liminality in the everyday lives of the poor, from a middle-class reader’s perspective. On the other hand, the presence of grotesque bodies and real spaces like the Jago in the East End threatens and endangers the unity and safety of the middle classes, for they address geographies of exclusion and an irremediable poverty within the city.

**Social and Moral Codes**

In *Geographies of Exclusion* (1995), David Sibley notes that spaces inhabited by the urban poor can be defined as “strongly classified and strongly framed” for their difference, and considered “as deviance and a threat to the power of structure” in a city where an increasing “consciousness of boundaries and spatial order” exists (80). These types of strongly classified environments carry the possibility of generating a space of experience for its deviant, grotesque or foreign subjects endangering a coherent vision of the city. This experience partly depends upon “the paradoxical

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4 However, he had supporters like Father Arthur Osborne Jay, the author of *Life in Darkest London* (1891) and the Vicar of Holy Trinity, Shoreditch, who believed in Morrison’s depictions of the East End (Swafford 62).

interdependence of progress and poverty”, as Henry George stated in *Progress and Poverty* (1879): “The great enigma of our times [is that] material progress does not merely fail to relieve poverty- it actually produces it” (qtd in Pick 219). However, in everyday life, exclusionary practices are hardly recognised and the exercise of control in society is more easily hidden. Social groups usually consider themselves to be normal and erect boundaries to avoid any differences and the other groups. Not the action or behaviours, but merely the presence of a social group or individual can constitute deviance in public space. Once a social group believes in the necessity of the separation of the categories, the liminal zone becomes a source of anxiety and they desire the elimination of ambiguity; yet, this is not always possible. In this sense, the place-related identities of the East End gain more importance to understand “the emerging sense of border, of separateness and self, as a social and cultural process” in the city (Sibley 17).

Morrison’s depictions of the East End were shaped by the experiences of the urban poor and the working classes, located in proximate yet spatially segregated spaces. The author took a specific area and conveyed the subjective experiences of their characters, in a more distanced view and closed spatial unit. There was hardly any connection with other parts of the city except for some economic reasons or criminal activities of the lower classes. An elaborate social stratification of the nether world was also found and this approach addressed a stronger sense of social class system to define the unclassed and the lower classes, often generalised by the upper classes to avoid ambiguity in social structure. By contrast, Morrison’s fiction can be read as one of the ways of exploring this social and place-related self through the practices of deviant inhabitants in liminal spaces. His major characters belonged to “a minority of still unregenerate poor” who were frequently referred to as “the dangerous class”, the casual poor or “most characteristically, as the residuum” (Stedman-Jones 11).

In *A Child of the Jago*, socio-spatial stratification is emphasised with a particular focus on the grotesqueness, repulsiveness and savagery of the slum dwellers. Although the Jago seems to be a strictly classified place with its unclassed community from a middle-class perspective, it has its own moral codes and inhabits outcasts within its boundaries. Primarily, the Jago is described by its putrid smell and repulsive environment as well as by poverty and savagery. Besides getting involved in violent and criminal acts in the local area, the inhabitants are intolerant of the social and moral differences between their neighbours. Those who try to maintain some degree of middle-class respectability are outcasts and absolutely abhorred by the Jagos. An example of this is Dicky's mother, Hannah, who is “a partial outcast in the Jago because she feels superior to it” (Swafford 57). She criticises Dicky when he uses criminal slang and warns him. Although she resides in the Jago, she resents their moral degradation and in the same way, the Jago regards her as an outsider:

She was no favourite in the neighborhood at any time. For one thing, her husband did not carry the cosh. Then she was an alien who had never entirely fallen into Jago ways; she had soon grown sluttish and dirty, but she was never drunk, she never quarreled, she did not gossip freely. Also her husband beat
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her but rarely, and then not with a chair nor a poker. Justly irritated by such
superiorities as these, the women of the Jago were ill-disposed to brook
another: which was, that Hannah Perrott had been married in church.
(Morrison, Jago 35)

Hannah’s superiority compared to other married women in the Jago reveals different
degrees of poverty and moral values among the lower classes that share a spatial unit.
The fact that she is regarded an outsider shows the intolerance of the Jago towards
ambiguity and difference. Therefore, despite their better qualities, the presence of her
family disturbs the Jagos and in every opportunity they show their discontent. This
creates an oscillating tension between her family and the Jago dwellers based on hate,
jealousy, which is also displayed in a savage fight between Hannah and Sally Green
later in the novel. In this respect, it is important to reconsider different social and
moral values between the lower and lower-middle classes. For instance, marriage in a
church and looking for a respectable job are stereotypical middle-class or respectable
working class values that are not considered normal within the borders of the Jago. In
contrast, burglary, domestic violence, filth, drinking and gossiping are normalised as
an essential part of the Jago life. Normalcy and deviancy, therefore, address the
relative understanding of otherness among different social classes.

In Morrison’s tales and novels, slums are inhabited by a more homogeneous,
indifferent and morally degraded group of people that rejects rehabilitation and
progress. Members of this group are distinguished from the others by “their mutated
physicality, penchant for criminality and brutality” and their social and moral
degradation, which threatens others’ respectability (Swafford 54). The Jago, for
instance, is not only spatially isolated, but it is also morally excluded from the social
practices of all other social classes. In this slum, the High Mob members deserve
respect for they represent financial success and are superior to normalcy of social
classes. Dicky Perrott is taught their philosophy at a very early age:

Some day, if you're clever- cleverer than anyone in the Jago now - if you're
only scoundrel enough, and brazen enough, and lucky enough - one of a
thousand- maybe you'll be like them: bursting with high living, drunk when
you like, red and pimply. There it is - that's your aim in life - there's your
pattern. Learn to read and write, learn all you can, learn cunning, spare nobody
and stop at nothing, and perhaps-’ ... It's the best the world has for you, for the
Jago's got you, and that's the only way out except gaol and the gallows.
(Morrison, Jago 68)

This passage addresses the gradual corruption of Dicky as “a basically decent boy” in
a slum and portrays the “symptoms of a wider social pathology” (Pick 178). There are
only three ways Dicky is offered: gaol, the gallows and the High Mob: “ill ways out
of the Jago … but still ways-out” (Morrison, Jago 118). In addition, fascinated by the
limitless cakes and coffee presented by a shopkeeper called Mr Aaron, Dicky dreams
of more delights in his new world. Nevertheless, soon he realises that he is indeed in
debt for what he has received. He later learns how to take his business seriously and
exchanges the stolen goods with the food (43). In 1862, the Saturday Review
described criminality as inevitable like filth: “It is clear that we haven’t yet found
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what to do with our criminals. We neither reform them, nor hang them… Our moral sewage is neither deodorised nor floated out to the sea, but remains in the midst of us polluting and poisoning our air” (Pick 178). Even in earlier decades, Henry Mayhew had identified criminals as a race apart: “There is a large class, so to speak, who belong to a criminal race, living in particular districts of society” (182-83). In later decades, urban degeneration was used in association with drinking, early marriages, idleness, carelessness and disbelief as symptoms the city generated in a process of physical and moral degeneration (202).

The Jago inhabitants entertain themselves by drinking, fighting and violence, which address their moral degradation embedded in everyday life. Throughout the novel, there are many scenes full of screams, yells, shrieks of violence and cursing. However, especially the riots between the Ranns and the Learys (the Montagues and Capulets of the Old Jago) are represented “as mere, albeit deadly, fun; indeed, a spectacle worthy of attention” (Swafford 56). As Swafford points out: “The people of the Jago are completely self-generated. The Jago alone produces itself” (Morrison, Jago 58). Middle-class values and moral codes such as marriage in a church and finding a respectable job are rejected, and the Jagos maintain their life style with thievery, criminality, wife beating, drunkenness, gossip, and filth. The Jago has its own moral values and codes. To illustrate, the family of a cabinet-maker, called Roper, is put in a difficult situation when Dicky steals a clock from their house and is accused of theft. This is received as a shameful blame on the Jago:

For nothing was so dangerous in the Jago as to impugn its honesty. To rob another was reasonable and legitimate, and to avoid being robbed, so far as might be, was natural and proper. But to accuse anybody of a theft was unsportsmanlike, a foul outrage, a shameful abuse, a thing unpardonable. You might rob a man, bash a man, even kill a man; but to 'take away his character'—even when he had none—was to draw down the execrations of the whole Jago; while to assail the pure fame of the place—to 'give the street a bad name'—this was to bring the Jago howling and bashing about your ears. (65-66)

The Jago, therefore, represents both the degenerate place and its inhabitants, who formed and obeyed particular Jago codes and customs in order to survive in their own habitat and protect themselves from the law, the police or the gaze of the upper classes. Their identities are strictly shaped by and tied to these particular streets or “micro-localities”, as Morrison “ascribed East End brutality in the Old Nichol to its poverty-induced isolation” (Francis and Valman 6). This also shows the significance of historical geography in understanding “its distinctive ethos” (6).

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6 The Lancet used the word ‘degeneration’ to describe ‘an internal deterioration which might earlier have been studied under the heading of “decomposition” and to describe the decadence of certain races’ (Pick 182).
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Liminal Spaces and Grotesque Bodies

The Jago is not only a place to dwell in but it also nourishes and hides criminals within its ruins and holes. It is an urban ruin that aggravates the efforts of those trying to re-construct an ordered and transparent space in the city. 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 enters the Jago by force (Morrison, Jago 37). Nobody speaks or informs the police since one rule of the Jago is “Thou shalt not nark”; and it is a neglected and outcast space where the presence of the police is not welcomed. The Jago inhabitants find the presence of the police embarrassing and at the end of the day when the police are gone the Jago gets its freedom again (45). This indicates the difficulty of the control and supervision of the Jago as a degenerate place. After committing a crime, Dicky’s father Josh Perrott tries to escape from the police, however, there are a limited number of spaces that can contain him after the demolition of the Old Jago:

Every passage from the Jago was held by the police, and a search from house to house was begun. With clear consciences the Jagos all could deny any knowledge of Josh Perrott's whereabouts; but a clear conscience was little valued in those parts, and one after another affirmed point blank that the man seen at the window was not Perrott at all, but a stranger who lived a long way off. This, of course, less by way of favouring the fugitive than of baffling the police: the Jago's first duty. But the police knew the worth of such talk, and the search went on. Thus it came to pass that in the grey of the morning a party in New Jago Street, after telling each other that the ruins must be carefully examined, climbed among the rubbish, and were startled by a voice from underground. 'Awright,' cried Josh Perrott in the cellar. 'I'm done; it's a cop. Come an’ 'elp me out o' this 'ole.' (179) [Emphasis added]

This is an ironic detail that Perrott asks the police to help him to get out of the hole. He is trapped in the hole like a prey waiting for its hunter looking for him. The character of the Jago does not allow snitching on a fugitive as they “favour the fugitive” over the police (179). Subterranean spaces, ruins, rubbish and holes create new alternatives and paths for the fugitives who know this place very well. However, after his release from the prison, Perrott realises how this place has changed after the annihilation of the Old Jago for the first time. Although he is a part of the Jago, he is unfamiliar with the new open spaces in the Jago and hides himself in a hole where he is finally trapped. In this case, even his fellow neighbours cannot protect him from the dangers of outside forces and the police. Therefore, the demolition of the Jago affects the Jago dwellers negatively as they lose their sense of security and their relation to this place alters greatly.

In another Morrison novel, The Hole in Wall (1903), the unrecognisable body of Viney is found in the ruins (346). The ruin functions as a space covering dead bodies and mysterious crimes:
Viney’s body was either never found or never identified. Whether it was discovered by some person who flung it adrift after possessing himself of the notes and watch: whether it was held unto dissolution by mud, or chains, or waterside gear: or whether indeed, as was scarce possible, it escaped with the life in it, to walk the world in some place that knew it not, I, at any rate, cannot tell … Of a coarse, draggled woman of streaming face and exceeding bitter cry, who sat inconsolable while men raked the ruins for a thing unrecognisable when it was found. (346-47)

The body of the impoverished man is found among the ruins and it cannot be even recognised due to his decaying body. His decayed and unrecognisable body is abject now and “a thing” refers to his objectification for death separates the soul from the body. He is an integral part of the ruined spaces and lives in East End of London, at the same time. Another character in the novel, Stephen (an orphaned boy), is brought up in an atmosphere of filth, murder, deceive and theft, and he cannot avoid the aggravating effects of poverty on his moral values and identity. The story is told by the views of Stephen and an omniscient narrator, where it takes a wider perspective on the effects of the environment on the inhabitants. “The Hole in the Wall” is the name of a public house in Radcliffe Highway, and Stephen’s innocence and affection for his grandfather gradually changes the latter’s “degenerate character” (Brome 19).

In A Child of the Jago and The Hole in the Wall, Morrison writes from within the slums and takes an internal approach to describe the lives of young children in the East End. The reader finds a faithful but un-picturesque record of the everyday lives of Dicky and Stephen, as well as the dwellers of the Jago and Radcliffe Highway. Although Morrison’s style gives the impression that these characters are well adapted to their environment, the challenges for young protagonists to learn the codes of slums indicate how their future is shaped in these places.

The grotesque body infests slums and the streets of the East End in different forms such as mobs, savage children, and male and female inhabitants involved in violence and criminal acts. Their grotesqueness originates from degeneration and a lack of the standard moral, cultural and social values of the middle and upper classes in the 1880s. The alleys, streets, ruined houses and holes in the Jago host these physically and socially grotesque bodies, which are used in analogies such as rats, for their dense population by philanthropists and educated social-reformers. Although the vicar of the vicinity, Father Sturt, attempts to solve the Jago problem by destroying the Old Jago and building a new church and public facilities, the Jago proves to survive in alternative ways as Morrison clarifies in his preface to the novel:

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7 In Daniel Pick's Faces of Degeneration, Chapter 7, entitled “Crime, Urban Degeneration and National Decadence”, is particularly relevant to the social perspectives and cultural tendencies found in Morrison's A Child of the Jago. In Pick's study, the degenerate is another name for the grotesque. Likewise, Morrison's sense of the grotesque is wholly negative and can be understood as both physical and social.
I have remarked in more than one place the expression of a foolish fancy that because the houses of the Old Jago have been pulled down, the Jago difficulty has been cleared out of the way. That is far from being the case. The Jago, as mere bricks and mortar, is gone. But the Jago in flesh and blood still lives, and is crowding into neighbourhoods already densely over-populated. (Morrison, Jago 13)

In an embodied form, the Jago contaminates close neighbourhoods and resurrects through its filth, criminality and grotesque bodies inhabiting these spaces: “Left to its own devices and beyond the surveillance and control of ‘normal’ society, the Jago produces a certain type of human- the social deviant and the incorrigible criminal” (Swafford 54).

There are a significant number of analogies of animals, indefinable objects and spaces, such as rats, human forms and holes in A Child of the Jago, repeated throughout the novel. These are partly a representation of liminality: the loss of distinction between object and subject, animal and human, and the polluting and dangerous quality of indefinable bodies and objects. The crowds and children in the Jago are often represented as “great rats, followed one another quickly between posts in the gut by the High Street, and scattered all over the Jago” (10). Father Sturt’s “strain and struggle that ceased not for one moment of his life” never leaves “a mark of success behind it” since the Jago resists change (10). One of the reasons for this difficulty is the birth and death rates in the area: “The Jago death-rate ruled full four times that of all London beyond, still the Jago rats bred and bred their kind unhindered, multiplying apace and infecting the world” (88). Another undefinable thing “roll[ing] over and lay[ing] tumble on the pavement” proves to be a man robbed by two “Jago rats”, vanishing in the Jago Row (12). The front doors of the Jago are likened to “a row of black holes, foul and forbidding”, where only children and the dwellers of the Jago are bold enough to enter.

In addition, Dicky Perrott is described as “a slight child, by whose size you might have judged his age at five”; however, the narrator adds: “One who knew the children of the Jago, and could tell, might have held him eight, or from that to nine” (Morrison, Jago 13). He is affected by the circumstances he grew up in the Jago and “enter[s] his hole with caution, for anywhere, in the passage and on the stairs, somebody might be laying drunk, against whom it would be unsafe to stumble” (13). Dicky’s sister Looey, with her “large and bright” eyes looks “strangely old” and is described as a “little thing” to be fed and loved (14). When the weather is cooler out in the Jago at night, “sad grey faces, open-mouthed look upward as from the Valley of Dry Bones” and down the street, whilst “the coshed subject” still lies “with the blood dry on his face” and “move[s] a leg” when he feels the breeze (18). Not human bodies, but objects, body parts and rats are described in these passages about the daily life of the Jago dwellers. The holes in the Jago contain these grotesque bodies and shelter them with their dangerous plans to be carried out outside the boundaries of the Jago.
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The opinion of the missionaries and subscribers to the Elevation of the Jago reflects the middle classes’ perspective on slums and urban poor, for whom they offered their help, since most were convinced that “the whole East End was … packed with starving human organisms without minds and without morals” (Morrison, Jago 20). In his article on criminality and the grotesque, Kevin Swafford observes that:

The swarming grotesques and deviants of the Jago are not to be confused with William Booth’s respectable poor or the working class in general … the people of the Jago are grotesques not only because of their physicality but, more importantly, because of their social practices. In order to objectify the distinctions between the respectable and healthy, and the deviant and grotesque, the novel presents a variety of ‘normal’ social codes and practices within the Jago that are seemingly beyond the understanding and experience of the status quo. (54)

Violence is also “symptomised by the frequent set pieces of Amazonian brawls between women” (Henkle 308). Sally Green’s description as the female champion of the Jago and a good fighter in her own way is a marked one for it represents the female savagery. Within the Jago, violence and conflicts are very common unlike in normal communities, and “the aberrant Jago takes pride in combat and brutality” (Swafford 56). For instance, Sally is described in a fight as “red-faced, stripped to the waist, dancing, hoarse and triumphant” (Morrison, Jago 32). The hoarseness and violent nature of Green indicates the masculinity of the Jago women a quality that would invoke a sense of repulsion by the middle-class readers. Her character is represented through savagery, just like male inhabitants of the Jago. It shows that in this place, violence is not exclusive to men, yet the description of Green as a savage figure suggests a gendered approach from a middle-class view. The sub-social order in the Jago and the condition of the East End eliminate the potential objectification of females as ethical force in their surroundings. Slums as economically isolated spatial units restrict using them “as figures of commodity desire” (Swafford 304). Interestingly, although the middle and upper class women are more easily vulnerable to “fetishes of style, beauty, even spiritual worth”, which transformed their image into symbols of social and economic status, women in the Jago are less restricted and actively participate in violent acts and criminality.

That is, the deviation and grotesqueness of the Jago as a liminal space help maintain its existence and survival disregarding the social codes and practices of upper social classes. Their grotesque physicality as well as their tendency towards violence and criminality distinguish them from the rest of the lower classes whilst endangering the middle and upper classes’ security. The Jagos pose threat to the security of other social classes even after the demolition of the Jago houses, which suggests a strong connection between the dwelling place and its inhabitants in the long run. Their spatial segregation within the city and the normalisation of their own codes and criminal acts enhance their ability to overcome difficulties. Morrison uses a grotesque but realistic approach to convey social and moral messages through hybrid forms of human bodies, body parts and queer objects to describe the transforming liminal identities of the urban poor.
In *The Production of Space* (1991), Henri Lefebvre suggests that representational space is linked to “official relations of production and order”, that is, it is the space perceived and planned by architects and governments and it is “the dominant space”, such as a plan of a city site (42). In late-Victorian London, governing systems controlled slum clearances, filthy sites were demolished and new residences or public facilities were constructed. To illustrate, the *Artizan’s and Labourer’s Dwellings Act of 1868* was put into force with the advice of Medical Officers of Health due to unsanitary conditions (Jackson 205). More legislation passed in 1870 and in 1875 the *Artizan’s and Labourer’s Dwellings Improvement Act* (also known as *Cross’s Act*) dealt with “rehousing the displaced slum dwellers after demolition” and the building of new properties by “model housing association … who were experts in high density housing for the poor” (Jackson 206). In order to maintain an ordered, clean and coherent city, the Victorians used both destructive and creative methods such as building new disposal systems, demolishing filthy slums and rookeries, and mapping poverty in London. Nevertheless, this ideal was barely achieved, as Morrison demonstrates in his fiction.

The setting of *A Child of the Jago* was in the Old Nichol area in Bethnal Green, a number of streets at the east of “what is now Shoreditch High Street - about ten blocks north of Liverpool [Street] Station”, and Morrison named The Old Nichol “the Jago”, one of “the most impoverished and depraved wretches in London, a pocket of narrow streets and courts that was on the verge of being demolished by the London County Council in the 1890s” (Henkle 306). In the novel, the Jago is presented with its dense population in a limited space: “a square of two hundred and fifty yards or less” in which “the human population swarmed in thousands” (Morrison, *Jago* 9). The mapping of the Jago streets indicates the lack of an effectual urban planning of slums in London.

Father Sturt had in mind a church which should have by its side a cleanly lodging-house, a night-shelter, a club, baths and washhouses. And at a stroke he would establish this habitation and wipe out the blackest spot in the Jago. For the new site comprised the whole of Jago Court and the houses that masked it in Old Jago Street. This was a dream of the future—perhaps of the immediate future, if a certain new millionaire could only be interested in the undertaking—but of the future certainly. The money for the site alone had been hard enough to gather. In the first place the East London Elevation Mission and Pansophical Institute was asking very diligently for funds—and was getting them. (87)

In the novel, the Old Jago functions as a site where revolution and change can take place only within its borders and it has to be completely demolished in order to remove impurity and danger it exposes. Reverend Henry Sturt’s plans for the demolition of the Old Jago in order to build a church and public facilities
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emphasise the changing physical boundaries in the Jago and the effects of this radical change on its inhabitants. This also indicates the necessity of slum clearance in slums like the Jago, where rehabilitation does not seem to solve problems. Father Sturt’s plan creates some unpredictable problems. After the announcement of the purchase of the site for building 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 since 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:

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. (100-01)

As the Old Jago is identified with the Jago Court, its demolition signals a social threat for the inhabitants who spent their Sunday mornings watching duellos, playing games, and who escaped from the police by hiding in this “sanctuary and a city of refuge” (100). 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 introduces fundamental changes into their lives and it forces them to find new places to live in. On the 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” (103). The house-wreckers buy the old buildings, force the lodgers out and the next morning the place vanishes from the earth:

And the wreckers tore down the foul old houses, laying bare the secret dens of a century of infamy; lifting out the wide sashes of the old ‘weavers’ windows’—the one good feature in the structures; letting light and air at last into the subterraneous basements where men and women had swarmed, and bled, and died, like wolves in their lairs; and emerging from clouds of choking dust, each man a colony of vermin. (107)

The radical transformation of the Jago is unfolded again when Josh Perrott returns home after his imprisonment for about four years:

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]
Ironically, the transformation of this place puts the dwellers in danger and makes them feel insecure. After murdering Aron Weech, Perrott is caught by the police in a cellar under the houses in the 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 barracks” (176). In mere 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).

In this study, I have elaborated on the liminality of the East End in fiction by Morrison and showed how spatial, social and moral concerns influenced the representation of the slums and slum dwellers. The survival of the East End into the late nineteenth century, therefore, was not only related to its heterogeneous structure and exclusionary practices, but also to its liminal spaces and grotesque bodies preserving its marginality and spatial power. The particular social and moral codes in the Jago help the place maintain and continue its existence far from the gaze of the middle and upper classes. As a notorious place for its criminal activities, grotesque dwellers and tendency for violence, the Jago is not regularly supervised by the police and the efforts of charities to rehabilitate its social life and moral degradation remain ineffectual. As the passage above demonstrates, the Old Jago is extinguished but the “dispossessed Jagos” continue to “infect the neighbourhoods across the border”; and therefore, the Old Jago exists in flesh and bone and survives in displacement, “in the form of a ring” around some other houses around it after its demolition (Morrison, Jago 176). This explicates the impossibility of Father Sturt’s ideal to develop a moral and safe space by the destruction of the Old Jago, as it is a liminal place that cannot be expelled completely. It also gives rise to questions about the inseparability of the place and grotesque bodies, and their survival through displacement.

Works Cited


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