

# Critical Essays on Arthur Morrison and the East End

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## 5 “Not What It Was Made Out” Hygiene, Health, and Moral Welfare in the Old Nichol, 1880–1900

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### Hygiene, Health, and Moral Welfare in the Old Nichol, 1880–1900

*Flore Janssen*

From the first pages of *A Child of the Jago* (1896), Arthur Morrison’s representations of the Old Jago slum neighborhood are strongly sensory. The opening paragraph sets the scene of a summer’s night by evoking sweltering heat, airlessness, and smell:

the hot, heavy air lay, a rank oppression, on the contorted forms of those who made for sleep on the pavement: and in it, and through it all, there rose from the foul earth and the grimed walls a close, mingled stink—the odour of the Jago.<sup>1</sup>

This mention of a pervasive and pungent smell is immediately suggestive of surrounding dirt. Although specific reference is made to the “foul earth” and “grimed walls,” the distinctive “odour of the Jago” equally affects the streets, buildings, and bodies that belong to the neighborhood, marking them all as sharing the same filth. The “rank oppression” of the smell and the dirt, Morrison notes, is accompanied by ubiquitous vermin: “on every moving creature in this, the Old Jago, day and night, sleeping and walking, the third plague of Egypt, and more, lay unceasing.”<sup>2</sup> There is no need for Morrison to make explicit the connection between dirt and the presence of verminous insects: it is enough to indicate that the people, as well as the houses, attract bugs to make clear that neither are clean. In fact, Morrison makes little distinction between the animal vermin that haunts the rooms in the Jago and the people who live in the neighborhood, describing the people’s “slinking forms, as of great rats.”<sup>3</sup> He repeatedly uses the word “rat” as synonymous with an inhabitant of the Jago, and when Jago residents gather in crowds, they are “swarm[ing]” and “teem[ing].”<sup>4</sup> From the beginning of the novel, Morrison thus implies that the neighborhood and its residents blur into one: all of the Jago is inescapably and oppressively dirty, verminous, and smelly. Straightaway, then, Morrison establishes a sense of contagion: the Jago and its dirt have, as it were, rubbed off on its residents and the people, in turn, soil their houses and streets.

These circumstances, it is implied, produce a vicious cycle in which the neighborhood and its inhabitants drag each other down to create an

environment that is compared to hell within the first few pages.<sup>5</sup> Referring to other notorious slum neighborhoods, Morrison writes: “What was too vile for Kate Street, Seven Dials, and Ratcliff Highway in its worst day, what was too useless, incapable and corrupt—all that teemed in the Old Jago.”<sup>6</sup> Morrison’s use here of words that carry an ethical judgment—“useless, incapable and corrupt”—introduces a moral inflection to his otherwise highly physical descriptions. In this way, the text implies that the residents of the Jago’s filthy streets are not only physically dirty and parasitical but morally too. This assumption is promptly illustrated by the description of cosh-carrier Billy Leary’s assault and robbery of a “decent young workman” and the way the other residents permit and even admire the crime, and some proceed to profit from it by stealing the victim’s boots.<sup>7</sup> These opening passages thus suggest that the Jago embodies the double meaning of “corruption”: the neighborhood is rotting through dirt and disrepair and its filth has infected the inhabitants’ characters as well as their bodies.

The novel, as well as the history of the demolition of the Old Nichol slum neighborhood in Bethnal Green, east London, on which the Jago was based, gives the impression that both the district and its residents were irreclaimable. Morrison seemed to be describing a community that could not be cleaned up, either physically or morally: its corruption was too ingrained. This notion is illustrated by the child protagonist Dicky Perrott’s inevitable fate of crime and violent death. Monica Flegel, in her study of cruelty to children in the nineteenth century, states that the child delinquent was “a key figure in Victorian narratives of child endangerment,” as child criminals raised difficult social questions regarding the impact of environment on character formation.<sup>8</sup> She notes that nineteenth-century child protection campaigners asked:

Was the child a criminal because of nurture, because that child had been reared in a lawless culture or, worse, a culture that had laws entirely opposed to those of normative Victorian society? Or were some children simply “born bad,” destined from the cradle for a life of crime?<sup>9</sup>

While these contemporary debates around nature versus nurture probably informed Morrison’s choice of a child protagonist, in the novel itself they are evoked only to be dismissed again at once. The surgeon who delivers Dicky’s baby brother tells the reforming clergyman Father Sturt:

Is there a child in all this place that wouldn’t be better dead—still better unborn? But does a day pass without bringing you just such a parishioner? Here lies the Jago, a nest of rats, breeding, breeding, as only rats can; and we say it is well. On high moral grounds we uphold the right of rats to multiply their thousands. Sometimes we

catch a rat. And we keep it a little while, nourish it carefully, and put it back into the nest to propagate its kind.<sup>10</sup>

It is clear that the surgeon believes care of any sort—medical or spiritual—to be wasted on the inhabitants of the Jago, whether child or adult: in a setting where the neighborhood contaminates the people and vice versa, nature and nurture are similarly negative. The surgeon here voices Morrison's own opinions, as reflected in an interview he gave to the *Daily News* in 1896 in which he claimed that "ignorance" and "wrong moral suggestion" were hereditary.<sup>11</sup> He argued that children born in neighborhoods like the Jago "could not escape from [their] environment" and "become perforce, as bad as [their] surroundings."<sup>12</sup>

The idea that poor physical and moral hygiene are contagious is represented in the novel by Hannah Perrott's steady lowering of her standards the longer she lives in the Jago, as she develops from a weak but originally respectable artisan's daughter into a negligent, dirty, and drunken mother. If it is assumed that both the moral and medical health of the people of the Jago are irrevocably compromised, however, it follows that attempts to contain, if not improve, this place of filth and corruption gain a context of concern for public health. Vermin and disease could spread from slum neighborhoods, but *A Child of the Jago* also shows that the district's moral laxity could harm neighboring areas, as Jago residents often pursued their criminal activities beyond the Jago itself.

At the time of Morrison's research for *A Child of the Jago*, the Old Nichol was already undergoing slum clearance on the orders of the London County Council to make way for the Boundary Estate, a plan that dealt with the presence of the notoriously unsanitary neighborhood simply by erasing it. The development was to create model dwellings whose intended residents might similarly be considered model specimens. The buildings required tenants who had regular work that would provide regular earnings with which to pay regular rent. There were rules against work carried out in the home that was linked to poverty wages, irregular hours, noise, vermin, or bad smells—while these types of trades, such as street selling, had supported many of the Nichol's residents. Arthur Osborne Jay, the Nichol's reforming clergyman who guided Morrison's research and was the model for the novel's Father Sturt, told an interviewer that, when the Boundary Estate was planned, "it was the original intention of the Council Expressed [*sic*] both to him and (through Mr Pickersgill [the local Member of Parliament]) to the people themselves to rebuild for the same class: this of course has not been done."<sup>13</sup> As a result, many of the neighborhood's original inhabitants were forced out of the area, often into increasingly crowded housing nearby.

Although issues such as poverty, overcrowding, and exploitation of tenants in the Bethnal Green area had not been resolved, the Old Nichol portrayed by Morrison and Jay himself no longer existed by the time of the novel's publication. The novel's appearance, furthermore, prompted

significant numbers of critics to point out, through a range of public platforms, that it had never existed at all. Well before Morrison presented his thinly disguised version of the Old Nichol to his readership, social investigators were already making a point of combating the very reputation for both physical and moral dirt and corruption that *A Child of the Jago* conferred on the area. This chapter explores accounts from the 1880s and 1890s that portray Old Nichol residents as resisting the physical dirt of their surroundings and its medical hazards, while also safeguarding their own moral health and well-being. The chapter is split into two sections. The first, “Metropolitan degradation,” considers how contemporary commentators responded to, and often reaffirmed, Morrison’s representation of poverty, dirt, and low moral standards as interconnected issues. The second, “Keeping clean in adversity,” examines contemporary accounts that show Nichol residents rejecting and resisting their reputation for dirtiness and immorality. The conclusion of this chapter returns to the Old Nichol’s perceived reputation in the final decades of the nineteenth century to show that the neighborhood was “not what it was made out.”<sup>14</sup>

### “Metropolitan Degradation”: Linking Poverty with Dirt

Among the best-known examples of public resistance to the depiction of the Old Nichol in *A Child of the Jago* is the review published by the literary critic H.D. Traill in the influential *Fortnightly Review*. Traill represented his challenge to Morrison as an evaluation of the novel’s claim to realism. He wrote:

No wonder that those who know the East End of London have protested against this picture. The houses in that area of “two hundred and fifty yards square” have been cleared of its [*sic*] former occupants and their dens, and the original of the Jago has, it is admitted, ceased to exist. But I will make bold to say that as described by Mr. Morrison it never did exist. Mr. Morrison has simply taken all the types of London misery, foulness, and rascality, and “dumped them down” on the area aforesaid. He has [...] made “the gruel thick and slab” in his infernal cauldron with a highly concentrated dose of the foul scum which is to be found floating, though in a much diluted form, on the surface of the vast sea of poverty in all great cities; and, pouring the precious compost into a comparatively small vessel, he invites the world to inspect it as a sort of essence or extract of metropolitan degradation. If it is not what you would actually find in exploring the Jago, it is no doubt what you might find if all London had happened to pour its manifold streams of corruption into that particular *sentina*.<sup>15</sup>

The presentation of this criticism as a question of literary realism means that Traill is not, here, defending the inhabitants of the Nichol; rather,

he is contrasting the novel with accounts by “those who know the East End of London” to point out that it does not reflect contemporary documented reality. It is notable, however, that the metaphors in his assessment echo the connections between physical and moral dirtiness also made by Morrison in the novel.

Traill brackets together “misery, foulness, and rascality”: in other words, poverty, dirt, and crime. He accepts that the Nichol contained “dens”—a word associated with slum living but also with disease, as in “fever den,” as well as with animal habitation—but points out that these, and their inhabitants, have been “cleared.” This choice of words links to the contemporary discourse of slum clearance but is not indicative of strong concern for the people involved; in fact, the suggestion that the people have been swept away with their dirty houses makes them seem part of the neighborhood’s problem. Throughout the article, many of the words Traill uses to refer, not merely to Morrison’s novel but also to the social problems he acknowledges to attend poverty, are distinctly unwholesome. It is no accident that his reference to Morrison’s making “‘the gruel [of his descriptions] thick and slab’ in his infernal cauldron” uses a quotation from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* act 4, scene 1, in which the witches use a range of disgusting ingredients to prepare a potion from which demonic apparitions then appear to prophesy to Macbeth. Yet the words he himself applies to people he considers to be as morally depraved as the inhabitants of the fictional Jago are similarly linked to dirt and disease. Although he insists that this is a small proportion of the numbers of people in London’s “vast sea of poverty,” he does describe these people as “foul scum.” London, he states, contains “manifold streams of corruption”; and his mention of waste products—“compost” and “*sentina*” (bilge)—applies not only to Morrison’s Jago, but also to the people who inhabit it. That dirt has the potential to corrupt both the physical and the moral being, then, is not being denied; only the extent to which this occurred in the Old Nichol.

Similarly, when Edward Hare Pickersgill, the Member of Parliament for the part of Bethnal Green that included the Nichol, set out to “defend his constituents,” as the *Shoreditch Observer* put it, his words did not seem to be intended for the ears of those constituents, the former residents of the Nichol.<sup>16</sup> His address was made to an audience at the Gibraltar Walk mission, a Christian religious organization based near the former Nichol that aimed to improve the neighborhood and promote Christianity among its inhabitants. The defense of the Nichol that Pickersgill put to this audience (which included local reporters) was distinctly double-edged: while the mission’s work was justified by the poor conditions in the neighborhood, accepting Morrison’s version of the inhabitants as irreclaimable would suggest that the mission’s work had no purpose. As a result, Pickersgill told his audience that he

knew that district, he could not say in all its glory, he must say in all its shame, for some years after he became the member for that

constituency, and heaven knew it was bad enough, but he did protest against the picture of the Old Nichol Street district drawn in that book. It was over-charged and too darkly coloured, and he held that there was no community or individual so degraded but that to them might be applied what their great national dramatist had said in his pithy way, —

The web of life is of a mingled yarn,  
Good and ill together.

Even among those awful surroundings he believed there was here and there the white lily of a good and pure life. (Hear, hear.)<sup>17</sup>

Like Traill, Pickersgill is adamant that Morrison's depiction of the Old Nichol was an exaggeration, but his speech is to a degree complicit in the identification of the district's residents with the dirt and dilapidation of their surroundings. He notes that the novel describes the state of the neighborhood "before the County Council took it in hand;" that is to say, before the commencement of the slum clearance project to make way for the Boundary Estate.<sup>18</sup> Pickersgill already held the office of MP for the constituency during this earlier period and states that he knew the original slum neighborhood "in all its shame." As there is no indication that this sense of "shame" reflects on himself as MP, it is instead conferred onto the residents of the neighborhood. While he allows that decent, honest, and good people living "the white lily of a good and pure life" did reside in what he calls this "degraded" community, he suggests that they were only to be found "here and there"; the implication being that the mission found these people and fostered them. With its literal and metaphorical connotations of cleanliness, his use of "pure" presents moral righteousness as a contrast to physical dirt. It follows that, in a dirty neighborhood, moral goodness is less likely to flourish.

While it seems likely, then, that Pickersgill intended to encourage the mission's work by pointing to the presence of "goodness," cleanliness, and moral health in the neighborhood, Arthur Osborne Jay aimed to show the relevance of his work—and to secure donations—by emphasizing what he called the "degenerate" nature of the inhabitants of the Nichol. Jay was interviewed as part of research conducted by investigator Charles Booth and his team among faith leaders in the Bethnal Green area in 1898–9. His interview, which probably took place in February 1898, stands out sharply from the rest of the inquiry for its representation of the community. The interviewer notes:

Father Jay is convinced that for many of these people there was no alternative than crime and the workhouse: they are an absolutely degenerate lot both morally and physically. [...] Men have often said to him "Father What am I fit for except to steal" and in his heart he has often had to agree with them.<sup>19</sup>

For Jay, this was expressing himself mildly. In an interview with *The London* in 1896 entitled “To Check the Survival of the Unfit,” he used explicitly eugenicist language, arguing that “the present stock” of “persons born to be lazy, immoral, and deficient in intellect” should be confined for life to “penal settlements.” This would “prevent them bringing into the world children stamped with the character of their parents.”<sup>20</sup> Speaking to the *Daily News* in 1896, Morrison gave his support to Jay’s model for penal settlements in order to “[l]et the weed die out, and then proceed to raise the raisable.”<sup>21</sup>

Booth’s interviewer contrives to give a strong impression, however, that Jay’s descriptions of the residents of the Nichol merely reiterate accounts given in “previous interviews [...], his own writings, [...] newspaper reports, and ‘The [*sic*] Child of the Jago’”—texts that played an important role in his fundraising campaigns to support his activities in the area.<sup>22</sup> In their summary of the conversation, the interviewer states:

I spent about 2 ½ hours with Father Jay but as nearly the whole of our long conversation is embodied in his book “A Story of Shoreditch” which he gave me I propose to paste in the most salient passages thereof as part of our interview merely adding notes of what is omitted.<sup>23</sup>

Jay is described as “a very voluble and discursive talker” who is “full of stories and reminiscences,” “but he added little I think on the points which is not common knowledge.”<sup>24</sup> In this way, the account suggests that the interviewer did not give much credence to Jay or his accounts, implying that they relied largely on anecdote while Booth’s investigation sought to base itself on factual observations.

Other local faith leaders interviewed for the inquiry generally gave a more balanced view of the neighborhood in which they worked: they acknowledged the reality of alcoholism, prostitution, and some crime, but all repudiated Jay’s claims and work in varying degrees. Edward Smith, Superintendent of Gibraltar Walk Chapel, stated:

Father Jay’s influence was not much. The “Child of the Jago” was an exaggeration. He (Mr S) had known the district 20 years and had slept in it + walked through it at all times without any fear. It was very bad but not what it was made out; practically his opinion was that it had been used by Father Jay to get a “big lot of puffs.”<sup>25</sup>

The strongest censure of Jay came from the Reverend Allison of the Old Nichol Street Mission, a parish which, it is pointed out, overlapped with Jay’s. He is described as “very loathe to speak” of Jay and stated:

Mr Jay’s spiritual work was nil but he did something with the clubs, where he used to get a few ruffians. [...] This influence he [Allison]



thinks has been evil; men trained [to box] in the club have gone out + figured as pugilists, whilst parents have had their sons, rather than be subject to parental control, go to Mr J's club + say they have no home.<sup>26</sup>

Allison's statements here were directly opposed to Jay's own in his book *Life in Darkest London* (1891), in which he "defend[ed] boxing as a healthy outlet for men who would otherwise be up to mischief in the streets."<sup>27</sup> According to Allison, Jay's influence was to wear down the moral health of both adults and children in the neighborhood, rather than to promote it, as other faith leaders tried to do.

It is unsurprising that speakers like Pickersgill and local faith leaders should aim to emphasize the need for interference in neighborhoods like the Nichol in order to reclaim the residents and promote physical and moral cleanliness. This argument for interference, however, often rested on an understanding that the residents of the neighborhood were, to a greater or lesser degree, to blame for the conditions in which they lived. Sarah Wise, in her study of the Nichol, *The Blackest Streets*, gives an account of the career of Bethnal Green's medical officer, George Paddock Bate, which, she states, was devoted to "balancing his horror at the notorious uncleanness of Bethnal Green [...] with his need to ensure that he did not upset his vestry employers."<sup>28</sup> This balancing act, she explains, was intended to benefit the neighborhood: "if Bate were to find himself dismissed, and a more compliant doctor hired in his place, the health of the parish would be even more fatally compromised."<sup>29</sup> As Wise shows, however, this forced Bate to echo some of the damaging assumptions made about the inhabitants of the Nichol and their habits and hygiene standards. Testifying at an inquiry into sanitary conditions in Bethnal Green,

he managed to imply that the vestry was only confused about the powers of enforcement that it possessed, rather than wilfully negligent. [...] In fact, Bate now attributed as much blame to the Nichol residents for the condition of their homes as he did to the vestry and to greedy landlords: "The habits of the very poor are extremely uncleanly, and whatever sanitary appliances might be supplied, the chances are that they would not be used," he said.<sup>30</sup>

Wise concludes that "Bate had shifted his ground, suggesting now that the pig made the sty, rather than the sty making the pig."<sup>31</sup>

In their 2016 edited collection *Slum Health*, Jason Corburn and Lee Riley show the persistent influence of assumptions such as these on popular perceptions of slum neighborhoods and their relationship to public health. They state:

the term "slum" is loaded with historical baggage that tends to be linked to dirty, disorganized, and dysfunctional places and people.

“Slums” too often are assumed to be one thing: unhealthy places and people; and the term fails to acknowledge the assets, resources, and cultures of urban poor places and populations that can contribute to health and well-being. [...] We are not romanticizing the term “slum” or the living conditions faced by slum dwellers; nor are we blaming the poor for the living conditions they face; nor are we blaming the slum for “creating” unhealthy people.<sup>32</sup>

Corburn and Riley, then, seek to move the debate around slum health away from a culture of blame which leads to apathy induced by the notion that, as Morrison suggested, dirt, depravity, and ill health are inevitable in a slum neighborhood and therefore impossible to rectify.

While Wise as well as Corburn and Riley identify prejudices against slum neighborhoods and their residents as widespread and deep-rooted, then, many commentators in the final decades of the nineteenth century were already attempting to challenge precisely these assumptions with regard to the Old Nichol. Certainly, Morrison’s novel gives a strong sense of the Jago and its inhabitants as “dirty, disorganized, and dysfunctional”: a description that suggests interference would be useless as behavioral cycles make improvements impossible. The appalling sanitary conditions in the Old Nichol were a byword supported by copious evidence that the district contained many structures that were both badly constructed and badly maintained, causing damp, smells, and vermin.

One key issue that reformers attempted to expose then as now, however, was that these conditions were not the result of the inhabitants’ low standards of personal and medical—and, of course, moral—hygiene. Corburn and Riley state that, between the late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries, “public health justifications were often used to segregate the urban poor from other groups and often combined with racist views of slums and slum dwellers that blamed the poor for disease and ‘dirty’ living conditions.”<sup>33</sup> While they point out that “structural, economic, legal, and environmental differences between urban slums and non-slums contribute to many differences in health outcomes in these communities,” they stress that “these disparities do not *cause* disease but do explain their distribution across populations and places.”<sup>34</sup> One of their primary principles for the volume is that “[s]lums and those who live there are not synonymous with pathology, deficits, crime, dirt, or unhealthy behaviors in need of fixing.”<sup>35</sup> I argue that this points to a key distinction between the types of interference in slum neighborhoods advocated by the religious missions mentioned above and the various social reformers who resisted the Nichol’s reputation. The religious and moralizing narrative employed by commentators such as Pickersgill and Jay suggests that the inhabitants of slum neighborhoods themselves needed “fixing.” The social investigators who form the focus of the second half of this chapter insisted on the moral health of the Nichol’s residents in order to show that it was their environment that stood in need of improvement.

### Keeping Clean in Adversity

Very similar principles to those put forward by Corburn and Riley underlie an account of social research in the Old Nichol conducted and published by trade union organizer and reformer Clementina Black. Black was a specialist on underpayment in women's work and women's home-based work was one of her particular interests. She visited the Old Nichol to investigate the conditions of home-based matchbox makers and published some of her findings in a feature article for the *English Illustrated Magazine* in 1892. It is important to note that, by this time, the slum clearance scheme that removed the Old Nichol to make way for the Boundary Estate was already underway and the observations she was relaying were based on an investigation conducted a number of years prior to the publication of the article; the precise date of her visit is unclear from the text. She writes:

A couple of years or so back there was quite a nest of match-box makers in the 'Old Nichol Street' district, close to Shoreditch Church. This little patch of slums had the character of being as poor, as vicious, and as unsanitary as any in London.<sup>36</sup>

Like Morrison and Traill, Black here connects the descriptors "poor," "vicious," and "unsanitary" as a matter of course; but where Morrison described the Old Nichol as worse than other notorious slum areas, Black's report, like many of the local clergymen interviewed for Booth's investigation, states that it was in fact less bad. She writes:

The district is melancholy enough, but not so frightfully depressing as many little sordid, modern, East-End streets [...]. These houses had "seen better days"; there had been good work in them once, and the lines of their original design were not quite so ugly as those of the newer sort of "small tenements."<sup>37</sup>

It is a small step for Black, as for Morrison, from the appearance of the neighborhood to the reputation of its inhabitants; but she also explicitly challenges what she implies to be a general perception of the neighborhood. She goes on:

Report attributes a very bad character indeed to the inhabitants of this square quarter of a mile; but personally I met with nothing to confirm it in the two visits of several hours which I made, and I have known highly respectable working women who have lived for years in this area, and were very unwilling to move. All the women admitted me readily, showed me their work, and answered my questions fully, civilly, and almost eagerly; and not one of them begged.<sup>38</sup>

Black's representation here is explicitly intended to reassure a middle-class and middle-brow readership about the moral character of people who live in extremely deprived areas. As an activist who sought to improve women's working conditions, she exposed the frequent occurrence of underpayment and the exploitation often linked to home-based work to a broad readership. She aimed to show why women in deregulated and low-wage employment should be incorporated into labor activism, but also to win broad support for her campaigns; as a result, she had some stake in ensuring that she represented women workers as honest and unthreatening. Perhaps for this reason, she sounds almost defensive over her choice to conduct her social investigation in a neighborhood with such a poor reputation. Her choice of a neighborhood known to be deprived and neglected, however, also helps to make clear that home-based matchbox making was often done by women in dire poverty, and to illustrate her argument that poverty was the result of underpayment, regardless of the moral character of the worker. By showing that these women's honesty and openness existed alongside an attachment to their neighborhood, Black makes the point that poverty and poor living conditions could not be taken as a reflection of the people subject to them (see Figure 5.1).

As opposed to the example of Hannah Perrott in *A Child of the Jago*, Black's account showed that neither poverty nor dirt necessarily had the power to wear down moral health. The implication of disease contagion in many contemporary accounts of the neighborhood should also be qualified. Wise points out that not infection but poor conditions and care were the real problem as far as medical welfare in the Nichol was concerned. She states:

Communicable diseases such as whooping cough (which killed more children under five than any other transmissible illness), scarlet fever, diphtheria, measles, smallpox, bronchitis and, above all, tuberculosis proved fatal to twice as many people in the Nichol as in the rest of Bethnal Green, even though the Nichol's contagion rates were not particularly high. Once stricken, however, you were less likely to recover here than elsewhere. Contemporary medical thinking had no hesitation in linking such appalling statistics to environment—to overcrowding; primitive or non-existent sanitary fittings; unconquerable, pervasive damp; and lack of light and wholesome air.<sup>39</sup>

The causal conditions identified by contemporary medicine, then, were clearly not of the residents' making or choosing. Overcrowding was the result of low wages and high rents; while the lack of sanitation, the damp, and the pollution should have been the responsibility of landlords and local government. Many contemporary reporters and reformers made it their business to expose these groups, rather than the residents, as the culprits for the state of the district.



Figure 5.1 “A Match-Box Maker at Work.” Illustration by W. Hatherell Accompanying “Match-Box Making at Home” by Clementina Black, *English Illustrated Magazine*, May 1892, p. 626.

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One representation, written nearly ten years before Black’s account was published, goes beyond merely disassociating the residents from their dirty surroundings: it shows the tenants of unsanitary and dilapidated buildings actively resisting the encroachment of filth on their homes and lives. The article, published in the *Daily Telegraph* in 1883, is entitled “‘No Rent’ at the East-End” and signed “One of the Crowd,” one of the aliases used by investigative reporter James Greenwood. It reported on rumors of a rent strike in the Old Nichol as an expression of tenants’ protest against the high rents charged for poorly maintained and unsanitary properties. The article recounts short interviews with participating tenants which show that their protest was as much directed against extortionate rent rates as against the failure to maintain properties to a decent standard. Like Black’s article, these accounts highlight the powerlessness of people in dire poverty and irregular employment who are not easily able to move elsewhere, and landlords’ ability to take advantage of their position. By showing his readers the interiors of slum houses and the people who lived in them in the context of the rumored

rent strike, however, Greenwood is able to give these slum tenants some power to redress their own moral reputation: the idea of a rent strike at least conveys tenants' desire for better, cleaner, and healthier homes, showing that their reputation for creating their own dirty environment was unfounded.

The opening of Greenwood's article reflects similar priorities to Black's, in that he seems eager to reassure his readers that the Nichol's tenants are no threat to the social order; rather, this form of resistance to the appalling state of their accommodation is a last resort for those who are otherwise unable to make their grievances heard. He tells his readers that,

like the proverbial worm, the unfortunate lodger of the East-end slums has been trodden on until he has at length turned, and that, driven desperate by years of persecution, and unable to see any other remedy, he is about to rise in rebellion. Not against the State, nor even against the parochial authorities [...], but against [...] Mr. Rent-collector, in short.<sup>40</sup>

Invoking the saying that "even a worm will turn" once again connects the tenants with lowly animal life in dirty surroundings, an idea that comes uncomfortably close to Jay's and Morrison's representations of the inhabitants of the Nichol as less-than-human. While their depictions present the residents as a danger to organized society only to be resolved by their isolation, however, Greenwood uses the comparison with the worm to emphasize the point that the tenants are completely unthreatening to wider social structures. He makes explicit that their rebellion will not be aimed at any official authorities: it is only designed to call to order those landlords who have failed in their duty of keeping their properties habitable. The rent strike, the opening of the article explains, is by no means a revolution or an attempt to upend class hierarchies: it is a mere correcting of an iniquity.

The tenants' inability to see any other solution becomes evident from an interview with a local cobbler. When asked what he expects to gain by participation in the rent strike, this man's response is simple:

"What could I lose?" retorted the mender of shoes, with a rueful grin, looking round the room, which contained a broken old wooden bedstead, two dilapidated rush chairs, and an old table. "Do you know what I pay for this dog-hole? Three and threepence a week, sir. It was three shillings, till I kicked up a row with the collector about the rats coming in through the holes in the wall, and then, for 'my cheek,' as he said, he stuck on another threepence. He knows I can't go anywhere else, and he'll let me know who is master, he says." "But why cannot you go elsewhere?" "Because there's no elsewhere to go to," returned the concise cobbler.<sup>41</sup>

Like other commentators who used words like “den” or “sty” for the houses in the Nichol, the cobbler speaks of his room as a “dog-hole”; in his case, his reference to a type of animal, rather than human, habitation highlights the fact that he knows this accommodation to be unsuitable, unhygienic, and unhealthy. His attempt to address the issue of the rats proves that it was not the tenants themselves but rather the owners of the properties who deemed verminous conditions to be acceptable for human accommodation.

Black’s and Greenwood’s representations produce an interesting tension with the slum clearance scheme. While Black retrospectively attempted to portray the Old Nichol in its best light, suggesting that some newer streets were comparably insanitary and aesthetically uglier, Greenwood’s depiction suggests that the perpetual neglect of the existing houses in the neighborhood may explain the decision to write them off and build newer, more hygienic properties. Both accounts, however, agree that so far from causing the dilapidation of the neighborhood, the residents were powerless against the decay. While Black traced the problem back to the root cause of underpayment, Greenwood brings in a sense of official responsibility for the conditions of the neighborhood when he demands:

And while all this is going on, it may well be asked, Where is the sanitary inspector of the district? Old Nichol-street is not such an insignificant thoroughfare that he is likely to overlook it [...] Why does not the official indicated bestir himself to set right such glaring offences against common decency, to say nothing as regards the public health?<sup>42</sup>

Greenwood, here, echoes the association of dirt with disease that has permeated the commentaries cited in this chapter. In his assessment, however, the reverse connection, between health and “decency,” reflects not on the disempowered inhabitants of the district but on the authorities responsible for the well-being of the neighborhood and its community. Traill, Pickersgill, and even Black all pointed to people who had managed to preserve their moral health in spite of the corruption around them, but Greenwood does not deem it necessary to prove the moral worthiness of the victims of unsanitary conditions to show that the situation was a bad one. Instead, he connects the fact that the unsanitary neighborhood is a threat to public health with his assessment of its condition as a blemish on the “common decency” of the people in charge of it.

Greenwood’s article opens with a number of caveats to make clear that his report relies on not much more than rumor, and that it cannot be guaranteed that the rent strike will go ahead. Indeed, the article is not followed up by reliable reports of a rent strike actually happening in the Old Nichol. This has its own context, however, which Greenwood explores to some degree: namely, it underlines the particular nature of

the tenants' disempowerment and their inability to offer sustained and organized resistance to high rents and dilapidation. As the example of the cobbler already brought out, this was linked to the difficulties Nichol tenants experienced in finding lets on conditions they could satisfy. In other words, in spite of Black's assurance that many of the women she met were "very unwilling to move," the fact that many Nichol tenants were tied to the locality for various reasons did not mean that they lived in slum conditions through their own free choice. One woman interviewed by Greenwood expressed enthusiasm about a rent strike as the only means of resistance but did not have much faith that it would happen. She stated that her landlord's power derived from the high demand for accommodation, as "the rooms will be snapped up as soon as they are empty."<sup>43</sup> Anticipating well-meaning suggestions, she went on:

Shouldn't we be more comfortable in one of the model lodging houses? Yes; but what's the good of talking about that? They won't have our sort. We are not good enough. If you go after a room there they come and see where you are living and what sort of furniture it is, and if they find you've got only a few sticks, or that you work at home at a trade that makes a mess or perhaps don't smell pleasant, they decline you. I've known dozens who have tried it, so I know. So, you see, we're glad to pig in anywhere where we are all of a sort, and where the landlord isn't particular, and if he puts the screw on, why, you must grin and bear it.<sup>44</sup>

Others, Greenwood's article illustrated, were even worse off. When a man living in what passed for a furnished casual let was asked what he thought of the proposed rent strike:

"I hain't got a chance of thinking about it at all," replied the poor fellow—he was a gaunt, half-starved looking man, with a bad cough—"they make us ready-furnished 'uns pay in advance." This was the dirtiest and most squalid part of the whole neighbourhood.<sup>45</sup>

Under these circumstances, with many tenants indoctrinated to "grin and bear it" for fear of losing what little they had, and a clear hierarchy even in slum lets based on who had furniture and who was utterly dependent on their rented accommodation, organized resistance seemed hard to achieve and sustain.

### **Conclusion: Reputations**

Many of the writers cited here, from Traill to Wise, employ words such as "den" or "sty," indicating dwellings not fit for human habitation, to refer to homes in the Nichol. While they accept, however, that these



words may have given an adequate representation of the condition of accommodation in the Nichol, it by no means follows that these environments were the creation of the residents; rather, the residents were obliged to “pig in,” as one tenant put it, as nothing more suitable was available to them, including model dwellings like those built on the “cleared” area that had previously housed the Old Nichol. Other contemporary sources testify to the difficulties tenants experienced in resisting their landlords, to the degree that many were not even aware that they had rights that would have allowed them to resist eviction or force repairs. Mary, Lady Jeune, a campaigner deeply involved in slum sanitation projects, noted:

Nothing has been more curious, in proceedings before the magistrates to enforce the closing of dwellings, than to find the complete ignorance of the poor as to the protection which the law affords them. It is with great difficulty they are persuaded that if they put the law in force it could not be used against themselves, and that there was no danger of their landlords punishing them for proclaiming the unsanitary state of the houses in which they were forced to live.<sup>46</sup>

Wise further explains the difficulties involved in organizing and participating in a rent strike for people dependent on landlords who were less “particular” with regard to their tenants. She notes that campaigners such as Jeune and crusading *Telegraph* journalist Bennet Burleigh, who were set on mobilizing the Nichol’s residents against their living conditions, came to realize that

suing and withholding rent was, for the most part, culturally alien to the majority of the poor in the Nichol; such action was bound to result not just in the loss of the family home, but in the tenant being branded a troublemaker and a bad risk to anyone with a room to let. In such a small community as the Nichol, with its scarcity of rental space, such a risk to reputation would be borne only by the foolhardy.<sup>47</sup>

Wise’s reference here to the tenants’ reputation forms an interesting contrast with the reputation attributed to the Nichol as a whole, and which writers like Black and Greenwood sought to contest. By trying to avoid a reputation as a “troublemaker” who might lose their access to the dwellings in the Nichol, tenants instead received a reputation for dirtiness, as it was assumed they contributed to the unsanitary conditions in which they lived. The impact of both reputations was to render them increasingly powerless to resist the worsening conditions in the Nichol, and to debar them from better homes like those on the Boundary Estate.

For Black, a key indicator that the women matchbox makers she interviewed carefully guarded their pride and moral compass was the fact that they did not beg. Similarly, an investigation into working poverty for the Nonconformist periodical the *British Weekly*, published as *Toilers in London*, reported that its investigators in the Nichol “have not once been asked for money, only for work.”<sup>48</sup> Accounts like these, however, also serve to underline the disempowerment of the residents of the Nichol that articles like Greenwood’s illustrate so poignantly. Professional social investigators like Black and the *British Weekly*’s commissioners praise the Nichol’s inhabitants for not asking for financial help while describing the grinding poverty and constant insecurity that marked their lives. Yet investigators like these, as well as the faith leaders who ran Christian missions in the city, based their work around the assumption that interference from other social classes was necessary to ameliorate conditions in slum areas like the Nichol. As a result, they found themselves obliged to explain why those who did not ask for help were deserving of it, because no one else would offer it to them. Meanwhile, as Wise’s research has shown, they had no access to hygiene or a healthy environment as landlords and local government ignored the question of unsanitary dwellings. The medical and moral health of residents of the Nichol is conveyed to modern-day readers almost exclusively through the mediation of commentators with specific social agendas, and is generally as concerned with the district’s reputation as with its residents’ immediate welfare. Not begging, then, may well have been a sign of self-sufficiency in the face of conflicting impulses that, whether they were intended to be beneficial or the reverse, residents had little power to influence.

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## Notes

- 1 Arthur Morrison, *A Child of the Jago*, ed. Diana Maltz (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2014), 65.
- 2 Morrison, *Jago*, 66.
- 3 Morrison, *Jago*, 66.
- 4 On Jagos as rats, see Morrison, *Jago*, 69, 81, 145, 153. For references to swarming and teeming, see Morrison, *Jago*, 65, 90, 163, 225, 214.

- 5 Morrison, *Jago*, 67.
- 6 Morrison, *Jago*, 65–6.
- 7 Morrison, *Jago*, 68, 69.
- 8 Monica Flegel, *Conceptualizing Cruelty to Children in Nineteenth-Century England: Literature, Representation, and the NSPCC* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 147.
- 9 Flegel, *Conceptualizing Cruelty*, 147.
- 10 Morrison, *Jago*, 204.
- 11 “The Children of the Jago: Slum Life at Close Quarters: A Talk with Mr. Arthur Morrison,” *Daily News*, December 12, 1896, 6.
- 12 “Children of the Jago,” 6.
- 13 Charles Booth Archive, LSE Library, London School of Economics and Political Science, Religious Notebooks, BOOTH/B/228, 41.
- 14 BOOTH/B/229, 189.
- 15 H.D. Traill, “The New Realism,” *Fortnightly Review* 67, NS 61 (January 1897): 68.
- 16 “Mr. Pickersgill Defends his Constituents,” *Shoreditch Observer*, January 30, 1897, 3.
- 17 “Mr. Pickersgill,” 3. Pickersgill’s quotation comes from Shakespeare’s *All’s Well that Ends Well*, act 4, scene 3.
- 18 “Mr Pickersgill,” 3.
- 19 BOOTH/B/228, 55.
- 20 “To Check the Survival of the Unfit: A New Scheme by the Rev. Osborne Jay, A Militant Bethnal Green Parson, for Sending the Submerged to a Penal Settlement,” *The London*, March 12, 1896.
- 21 Morrison, *Jago*, 269.
- 22 BOOTH/B/228, 39.
- 23 BOOTH/B/228, 37.
- 24 BOOTH/B/228, 39.
- 25 BOOTH/B/229, 189.
- 26 BOOTH/B/229, 165, original emphasis.
- 27 Morrison, *Jago*, 144, footnote 2.
- 28 Sarah Wise, *The Blackest Streets: The Life and Death of a Victorian Slum* (London: Bodley Head, 2008), 26.
- 29 Sarah Wise, *Blackest Streets*, 26.
- 30 Wise, *Blackest Streets*, 31.
- 31 Wise, *Blackest Streets*, 33.
- 32 Jason Corburn and Lee Riley, eds., *Slum Health: From the Cell to the Street* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 2–3.
- 33 Corburn and Riley, *Slum Health*, 12.
- 34 Corburn and Riley, *Slum Health*, 16–7; original emphasis.
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- 36 Clementina Black, “Match-Box Making at Home,” *English Illustrated Magazine* 104 (May 1892): 625.
- 37 Black, “Match-Box Making,” 625.
- 38 Black, “Match-Box Making,” 625.
- 39 Wise, *Blackest Streets*, 9.
- 40 “One of the Crowd” [James Greenwood], “‘No Rent’ at the East-End,” *Daily Telegraph*, October 15, 1883, 2.

- 41 "One of the Crowd," "No Rent," 2.
- 42 "One of the Crowd," "No Rent," 2.
- 43 "One of the Crowd," "No Rent," 2.
- 44 "One of the Crowd," "No Rent," 2.
- 45 "One of the Crowd," "No Rent," 2.
- 46 Mary, Lady Jeune, *Lesser Questions* (London: Remington, 1894), 223.
- 47 Wise, *Blackest Streets*, 48.
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