

The Victorian Social Problem Novel

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That awesome phenomenon known as the Industrial Revolution appeared first in the United Kingdom in the later eighteenth century. Technological developments such as James Watt's steam engine and inventions like the power loom and the spinning jenny, coinciding with the rapid rise in population, created the conditions for an industrial transformation of Britain that was surprisingly well advanced by the 1830s. Such a revolution had far-reaching effects, none more so than the rapid rise of cities, especially in the English midlands. Having been small market towns before the nineteenth century, Birmingham, Manchester, and Leeds, among others, burgeoned into large industrial centers in the early decades of the century as agricultural laborers from the impoverished countryside flooded into the new industrial towns in search of work in the textile mills.

So massive and rapid was the onset of the revolution that it created unprecedented and unfamiliar social and economic problems to be solved by the kingdom's governing bodies. As the nation was plunged into the first great industrial depression in the mid 1830s (which lasted well into the 1840s), the increasing economic and social distance between the rich and the poor, as well as other ill effects of industrialization, gave rise to the so-called "Condition of England Question." This debate, which dominated the minds of the British people for many years, was central to a new form of the novel that rose to prom-

inence in the 1840s, a form of fiction that was unique in its focus on the social, economic, political, and even religious upheavals occurring throughout the kingdom. Quite different from the historical novel inaugurated by Sir Walter Scott and the novel of manners one associates with Jane Austen—both forms well-established in the early decades of the nineteenth century—the “social-problem” novel—as later critics came to name it—was practiced by such novelists of note as Benjamin Disraeli, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Kingsley, and Charles Dickens.

Popular in the mid-Victorian period, the social-problem novel was first identified as such by Louis Cazamian in his pioneering study, *The Social Novel in England, 1830–1850* (1903). However, the novel received little further study until the second half of the twentieth century, led by Kathleen Tillotson’s essay on Mrs. Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* in her celebrated *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (1956). The social-problem novel has continued to receive considerable attention from students and critics in recent years as a result of its appeal to various critical circles, in particular, Marxist and feminist theorists. Marxist readings of note are found in Arnold Kettle’s “The Early Victorian Social-Problem Novel” in *From Dickens to Hardy*, which appeared in 1958, and Raymond Williams’s chapter on what he termed the “industrial” novel, published in the same year. Among the notable feminist approaches to the social-problem novel are Rose-Marie Bodenheimer’s *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction* (1988) and Susan Morgan’s *Sisters in Time: Imagining Gender in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (1989).

The social-problem novel as it developed during the mid-Victorian period is a complex story, its variety and essential characteristics being manifold. Nevertheless, its central thrust, perhaps, can best be understood in short compass by discussing in some detail three novels that, though clearly within the canon, differ in their emphasis: Disraeli’s *Sybil* (1845), Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854), and Gaskell’s *North and South* (1855). Disraeli’s *Sybil* is an excellent example of how the social-problem novel was used to promote a novelist’s political agenda. A leader of the Young England movement, a conservative body of young men arguing for a nation led by a renewed and energized aristocracy, Disraeli (the future Tory prime minister who would make Queen Victoria Empress of India) employed the poverty-stricken state of the laboring poor and the uncaring posture of the idle nobility during the “Hungry Forties” to energize a debate about the Condition of England Question, a debate conjoined in the romantic setting of Marney Abbey where the novel’s hero, the young nobleman Charles Egremont, encounters some strangers viewing the gothic ruins: Stephen Morley, a proponent of the Chartist Movement; his friend, Walter Gerard, a factory inspector; and his daughter Sybil.

Egremont, young, idealistic, and of the opinion that Britain under the young Victoria is the most prosperous, progressive, and free nation in the world, echoes the Whig view of history as expounded by the popular, influential liberal statesman of the day, Thomas Macaulay, in such essays as “Francis Bacon” and “Robert Southey.” Stimulated by their medieval surroundings, Morley and Gerard recall an idealized, Tory view of the Middle Ages, a past time when the people and their leaders existed in harmony with one another and a sense of community and good will prevailed. How different, Morley and Gerard lament, the present state of the nation. Skeptical of so romantic a view that flies in the face of his Whig sympathies, Egremont confidently asserts: “Say what you like, our Queen reigns over the greatest nation that ever existed,” an assertion that is countered by Morley’s arresting question: “Which nation? . . . for she reigns over two.” Perplexed, Egremont hesitatingly asks: “You speak of—” and Morley replies: “The *Rich and the Poor*” (Book 2, Chapter 5). This famous exchange, the best-remembered statement in the novel, introduces Disraeli’s theme of social polarization.

As the plot of the novel unfolds, the novelist amply illustrates this theme through skillfully alternating chapters focused on the rich and the poor, thus vividly contrasting the palatial domiciles and idle, frivolous lifestyles of the nobility with that of the miserable dwellings and hard-working, deprived existences of both the industrial laborers crowded together in the slums of the factory town of Mowbray and the agricultural workers returning to their squalid hovels in the farming village of Marney. Few novels of the period depict so graphically the conditions in which England’s laboring classes lived during the “Hungry Forties.”

In exposing the rather sordid, disreputable backgrounds of the two aristocratic families—that headed by the Earl of Marney (Egremont’s elder brother) and that led by Lord Mowbray (Book 1, Chapter 3)—Disraeli illustrates the Tory view that the present English nobility is composed of a new species of middle-class interlopers posing as aristocrats, having obtained their lands and fortunes as well as titles through the rise of the Whig oligarchy, which diminished the monarchy, degraded the people, and displaced the old Norman aristocracy during the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Lacking any sense of *noblesse oblige*, the feeling of obligation to the people and a commitment to seeing after their welfare, which the old nobility responsibly maintained, the new Whig aristocracy has left the people to their own devices, abdicating its responsibility—thus the perilous gulf that has yawned between their leaders and the people.

Disraeli’s hope—shared by many Victorians—that there still existed in Britain a saving remnant of the old aristocracy that could rescue society from the clutches of the idle rich is embodied in Egremont, whose rambles through the

countryside and factory towns of England, disguised as a reporter, lead him to shed his Macaulayesque, Whiggish optimism and open his eyes to the shameful plight of the nation's poor as well as to its cause and cure. Gradually enlightened about past history and the causes of the present unrest by Morley and Gerard and, more significantly, by his growing admiration and love for Sybil, Egremont, at the conclusion of the novel, stands as Disraeli's beacon of hope for the future.

Although the brother of the loathsome Lord Marney and therefore sharing his bogus credentials as a true aristocrat, Egremont is legitimized, so to speak, by his marriage to Sybil, who turns out in the end to be the scion of a great Norman family whose lands and titles were usurped by the upstart Mowbrays. During a climactic scene in which Mowbray castle is besieged and burned by a desperate mob of laborers led by Gerard and Morley, Gerard succeeds in breaking into the castle's keep where he finds papers that—as he had long suspected—prove that he and his daughter are indeed the true aristocratic owners of the Mowbray estates and, therefore, the rightful leaders of the people.

Disraeli believed deeply when he wrote *Sybil* that the people could not lead themselves. In one of the most appalling chapters of his novel (Book 3, Chapter 4), he drives this message home, describing in grim detail the filthy, lawless, churchless town of Wodgate, a hellhole in which the people, left unguided, have degenerated into anarchy, drowning in their own ignorance and bestiality. The people, he felt, needed a noble aristocracy of men who would put the people's welfare before personal wealth and comfort and would lead them out of the mire of incivility and protect them from their brutish instincts. This paternalistic or patriarchal view, which was widespread, is memorably expressed by Disraeli's contemporary, the poet, Alfred Tennyson, whose old Ulysses speaks of the labor he leaves to his son Telemachus: "by slow prudence to make mild / A rugged people, and through soft degrees / Subdue them to the useful and the good" ("Ulysses," ll, 36–38).

Both Disraeli and Dickens were influenced in their assessment of society and its problems during the mid-Victorian years by Thomas Carlyle, the Scots sage whose writings such as *Past and Present* (1843) exuded a sharp sense of crisis. Both men shared Carlyle's uneasiness about the coming of democracy, and both seemed persuaded by his argument that his idealized paternalistic society of the Middle Ages was the proper model for the country, which, falling deeper and deeper into a state of anarchy, was ruled by a heartless philosophy known as Utilitarianism, a godless system of thought and action that denigrated emotion while it exalted reason and intellect. Needless to say, to Carlyle, Utilitarianism was anathema. Dedicated to Carlyle, Dickens's *Hard Times* is a powerful and penetrating critique of both the stultifying effects of Utilitarianism on

mid-Victorian society and the baleful effect of industrialization on the laboring poor.

As we have seen, Great Britain not only had the manpower and the tools to launch an industrial revolution, it also possessed a rising middle class ready and willing to take advantage of it and manage it. The British middle class, which had risen out of the skilled artisans and shopkeepers of the nation's past, was characterized by its practical intelligence; down-to-earth, no-nonsense attitude of mind; and a Protestant religion that taught its adherents that through hard work and sober living, success in this world could be attained. Material prosperity was a sign of godliness. Unlike the idle, dandified aristocracy that Carlyle railed against in his writings, the middle class seized the opportunity the Industrial Revolution provided and energetically set about organizing and managing it.

Given their empirical approach to life, the middle class largely embraced some form of the new philosophy of Utilitarianism that, ready to hand, sanctioned its hardheaded approach to organizing and dealing with the labor force as well as its mode of raising its families and educating its children. It is this latter element in the new dispensation for which Dickens shows much concern in *Hard Times*. By the 1850s, when he wrote his novel, Dickens was well aware that the new system of education developing in Britain in a desperate effort on the part of the nation's leaders to "educate our masters" before the coming of democracy was not only a system increasingly secular but one increasingly Utilitarian in its content and orientation. Consequently, in *Hard Times*, Dickens is as concerned about the effects of Utilitarianism on the education of the nation's children as he is about the effects of industrialization on the workers.

As a consequence of this dual concern, the novel has two major plots: one having to do with education, centered in the family of the prosperous middle-class Thomas Gradgrind, a recently retired hardware dealer; the other, having to do with industrialization, centered on Josiah Bounderby, a wealthy mill-owner. The two plots, of course, are neither wholly divorced from one another in the novel, nor are the characters, since, for instance, both Gradgrind and Bounderby are ardent Utilitarians—Gradgrind conducting his home, Stone Lodge, and his family according to strict Utilitarian principles as does Bounderby his mill.

Set in Coketown, a fictional name for one of the numerous new industrial cities in England's Midlands, *Hard Times* moves forward along these two plot lines. The centrality of what I shall term the education plot is indicated by the structure of the novel, arranged by Dickens in three parts titled Sowing, Reaping, Garnering—metaphorical language drawn from agriculture that represents the children as plants whose growth depends upon the kind of soil they are placed in and the kind of nurturing they receive as they grow toward matu-

riety. The children about whom the reader is concerned in *Hard Times* are students in a model school set up through the generosity of Gradgrind, two of whose own children, Louisa and Tom, attend.

Another indication of the importance of the education plot is the opening scene in Book 1, Chapter 1, set in “a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a schoolroom,” filled with children seated on an inclined plane. Before them is Gradgrind himself, M’Choakumchild, the new teacher; and another gentleman, a government inspector whose intent is to see that education follows the new Utilitarian line. In giving the charge to the teacher, Gradgrind reveals his Utilitarian colors, admonishing M’Choakumchild to teach facts: “Stick to Facts, Sir! . . . In this life, we want nothing but Facts, Sir; nothing but facts!” Drawing for the reader his portrait of a Utilitarian, Dickens provides Gradgrind with a “square wall of a forehead, which had his eyebrows for its base, while his eyes found commodious cellarage in two dark caves, overshadowed by the wall.” As one observes, Gradgrind here and throughout *Hard Times* is symbolized by sharp-angled geometric forms—as is the schoolroom itself. A near-tragic figure, Gradgrind, as indicated by this description of his eyes, has a tragic flaw: blindness, an inability to see the dangerous limitations of the philosophy he lives by.

This opening scene—the most memorable in the novel—acquaints the reader with the education. That Dickens is not so much concerned with what is taught in this schoolroom—specific subjects are not listed—but how it is taught is concretely demonstrated, that is, “shown,” in the famous “put-down” of Sissy Jupe, a poor girl from Sleary’s Circus Troupe camped on the outskirts of Coketown, by Gradgrind as he drives home his point that knowledge must be packaged in terms of facts and abstract definitions. “Squarely pointing” to the child “with his square forefinger,” Gradgrind calls on “girl number twenty” (Sissy) to define a horse. Astonished and rendered speechless by a question so alien to her nature and experience, Sissy is held up to the class by her censorious interrogator as one “‘possessed of no facts, in reference to one of the commonest of animals! Some boy’s definition of a horse,’” he commands. “‘Bitzer, yours.’”

In a fashion reminiscent of the future D. H. Lawrence, Dickens, skillfully employing the symbolism of light and dark, turns the spotlight on a pale, cold-eyed boy whose “skin was so unwholesomely deficient in the natural tinge, that he looked as though if he were cut, he would bleed white.” In contrast, Sissy, “irradiated” by a ray of sunshine, is “dark-eyed and dark-haired” and seems “to receive a deeper and more lustrous color from the sun” (Book 1, Chapter 2). The conclusion is obvious, of course: Bitzer has been taught to package knowledge in terms of definitions and abstractions, to deal with objects in general/universal terms rather than concrete, particular/individual

terms. Sissy, who has known horses firsthand all her life—her father belonging to what she calls “the horse-riding” in Sleary’s circus—fortunately can only know a horse or any other object in terms of a close, intimate, sympathetic, and emotional involvement with it as an individual not as a generalization.

Bitzer, of course, rattles off the definition Gradgrind requires: “‘Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.’” Triumphant in his obtuse and blind perspective, Gradgrind proclaims: “‘Now girl number twenty ... You know what a horse is.’” Dickens’s irony is powerfully effective here as it is throughout the novel.

The chapters that follow in Book 1 show graphically that in Dickens’s view Utilitarianism destroys children’s emotional apparatus, leaving them frustrated, drained of imagination, and emptied of spirit. For example, much to Gradgrind’s shock and mortification, after school, walking full of self-satisfaction toward Stone Lodge, he comes upon the circus encampment, a performance in full swing. Although his intention is to pass by without noticing so frivolous and useless an event, Gradgrind catches sight of a group of children who “were congregated in a number of stealthy attitudes, striving to peep in at the hidden glories” of the circus. Approaching to shoo them off, with horror, he sees “his own metallurgical Louisa, peeping with all her might through a hole in a deal board, and his own mathematical Thomas abasing himself on the ground to catch but a heel of the graceful equestrian Tyrolean flower-act!” Needless to say, both children rise “red and disconcerted. But, Louisa looked at her father with more boldness than Thomas did” (Book 1, Chapter 3), Dickens’s implication being that Louisa will not accompany her father home, as Tom does, like a machine, but like a human being still alive with passion and emotion.

Book 1 rises to its climax in the penultimate Chapter 15, a scene between Gradgrind and his now grown Louisa in which the father’s blindness leads to near-tragic consequences for himself and his daughter. Bounderby, although old enough to be her father, has asked Gradgrind for Louisa’s hand in marriage. Having summoned Louisa to his study (which Dickens ironically likens to an astronomical observatory without any windows), Gradgrind prefaces his announcement of Bounderby’s proposal with the presumption that Louisa is, indeed, the machine he has made her: “‘You are not impulsive, you are not romantic, you are accustomed to view everything from the strong dispassionate ground of reason and calculation.’” But when Louisa asks the inappropriate and embarrassing question—“‘Do you think I love Mr. Bounderby?’”—Gradgrind, disconcerted, waves the question aside and, blind to his daughter’s obvious feelings of distaste for Bounderby, reduces the whole matter to a ques-

tion of plain fact: “The question of Fact you state to yourself is,” he advises his daughter, “does Mr. Bounderby ask me to marry him? Yes, he does. The sole remaining question then is: Shall I marry him?”

As if her whole education has come down to one final examination question—“shall I marry him?”—Gradgrind is certain Louisa’s answer will be the correct one, confirming beyond doubt the efficacy of the education and upbringing he has provided her, that she will make her decision on the basis of fact and reason alone. Having received from her own lips the correct response, that she will indeed marry Bounderby, Gradgrind, with an unwonted show of emotion, embraces his daughter, exclaiming, “My dear Louisa . . . you abundantly repay my care. Kiss me, my dear girl.” And so she gives her father what, in effect, is a Judas kiss—a kiss of betrayal. Blind to the fact, Gradgrind concludes the interview in triumph unaware that his daughter has made her decision not on the basis of fact and reason but on the basis of emotion—her aberrant love for her ne’er-do-well brother Tom and her altruistic hope of being of service to him as Mrs. Bounderby.

Book 1, Chapter 10, opens with a celebrated passage of description, a dramatically vivid, graphic portrait of Coketown and its inhabitants. In form, a lengthy periodic sentence, it concludes with the introduction of one of the novel’s major characters:

In the hardest working part of Coketown; in the innermost fortifications of that ugly citadel, where Nature was as strongly bricked out as killing airs and gases were bricked in; at the heart of the labyrinth of narrow courts upon courts, and close streets upon streets, which had come into existence piecemeal, every piece in a violent hurry for some one man’s purpose, and the whole an unnatural family, shouldering, and trampling, and pressing one another to death; in the last close nook of this great exhausted receiver, where the chimneys, for want of air to make a draught, were built in an immense variety of stunted and crooked shapes, as though every house put out a sign of the kind of people who might be expected to be born in it; among the multitude of Coketown, generically called “the Hands,”—a race who would have found more favor with some people, if Providence had seen fit to make them only hands, or, like the lower creatures of the seashore, only hands and stomachs—lived a certain Stephen Blackpool, forty years of age.

Stephen, along with his devoted friend Rachel, represents the laboring poor of Coketown. Stephen is (as he continuously complains) always in a “muddle.” As he informs Rachel: “That’s where I stick. I come to the muddle many times and agen, and I never get beyond it.” Caught as he and his fellow Coketown laborers are between the indifference, greed, and harsh treatment of the mill owner Bounderby and the machinations of the unscrupulous labor organizer

Slackbridge—both of whom are bent on using the workers for their own ulterior purposes—Stephen is characterized by his gentle, childlike nature. Like most of his fellow mill hands, he has come into Coketown from the country where he has been brought up in a paternalistic society in which the simple folk look to the local nobility for protection and guidance, seeing their relationship to the lord of the manor as that of a child to his father. In this respect, he is allied in the novel with the members of Sleary’s circus, which is a microcosm of the patriarchal macrocosm, Sleary being the father of a family—that is, Sissy and the circus performers. Stephen and Sissy are aliens in the Bounderby/ Gradgrind world of Coketown. Consequently, Stephen finds no such relationship in the Utilitarian society of Coketown, where no sense of community exists. Dickens, as the reader is soon aware, symbolizes these two different societies by the geometrical forms of the circle (Sleary’s horse-riding) and the square/rectangle (Coketown). Bounderby and his ilk recognize only what was known as the cash nexus and spurn all other links and relationships with their hands.

In fact, the world of Coketown is divided by an unbridgeable gulf between two classes: the laboring poor and the well-to-do ruling middle-class (i.e., Disraeli’s rich and poor), the aristocracy significantly having all but vanished. Only a remnant remains in the form of a bedridden old woman, Lady Scadgers, whose “mysterious leg” has refused to get out of bed for the last fourteen years (a fitting icon for Dickens’s middle-class view of the aristocracy). Nevertheless, Stephen, steeped in a patriarchal tradition, instinctively turns to the mill owner Bounderby for help when he finds himself in a deeper muddle than usual. His wife, having refused to assume the role of the Victorian “angel in the house,” and having tired of the monotonous drudgery of a mill hand, has deserted her husband some years before, traveling to another town and, inevitably, falling into a life of drink and prostitution. Nevertheless, she exercises a modicum of power by defying her husband and returning to him from time to time. Her latest return (in a state of grim intoxication) to Stephen’s dark and ill-appointed rooms has made him desperate to be rid of his wife. Seeing in Bounderby the Coketown equivalent of the lord of the manor, Stephen approaches him for guidance and advice about obtaining a divorce from a woman who stands in the way of his marrying Rachel who, given her meek and self-effacing demeanor, will accept the role of angel.

Bounderby, rather than being one of the Carlylean “Master-Workers” who do, indeed, seek to assume the role of the feudal baron in the lives of their retainers, is more like what Carlyle termed a “Bucanier” or a “Chactaw Indian,” who is out for booty, plunder, scalps, money (*Past and Present*, Book 4, Chapter 4). Lacking any semblance of chivalry, Bounderby treats Stephen’s request for advice with contempt, finding his mill hand’s desire to obtain a divorce prepos-

terous and, along with his pretentious and sycophantic old housekeeper, Mrs. Sparsit, altogether shocking. Having been dismissed with the warning that he sees in his employee's behavior, "traces of turtle soup, and venison, and gold spoon," as well as a desire to ride in a "coach and four," Stephen leaves Bounderby's house cast down and more in a muddle than ever.

Stephen's allegiance to the idea of paternalism has failed him in his search for a way out of his muddle, and its firm hold over his mind and heart is further indicated by another highly significant episode in *Hard Times*. By the 1850s, early forms of the present-day labor unions were attempting to organize and attend to the needs of the poor mill workers. In Coketown the United Aggregate Tribunal has been formed to which all the men working in Bounderby's mill have been pressed to join (women were excluded). Stephen, however, is the lone holdout. In the opening scene of Book 2, Chapter 4, the entire union membership is gathered to consider what to do about Stephen. Haranguing the workers is the labor organizer, Slackbridge, newly arrived in Coketown to rouse the workers of Bounderby's mill to strike. The rhetoric Dickens puts in his mouth is clearly that of a rabble-rouser. Dickens not only speaks slightingly of Slackbridge directly to the reader but also adroitly interlaces his speech with responses from the Tribunal's membership, which contrast markedly in terms of rhetoric and moderation of tone and content with that of the labor organizer. Clearly bent on having Stephen openly chastised and "sent to Coventry" (i.e., shunned by the entire membership), Slackbridge refuses to allow Stephen to speak in his own defense. He is overruled by the chair of the meeting. Stephen speaks to the gathering. However, he concludes by saying simply that he has his reasons—"mine, yo see—for being hindered [from joining the union]; not on'y now, but awlus—awlus—life long!" (Book 2, Chapter 4)—Stephen gives his fellow workers no choice but to go along with Slackbridge and send him into the cold, murky streets of Coketown a pariah.

Although Stephen refuses to reveal his reasons to the Tribunal, he later tells Bounderby that he had made a promise not to "come in." And although to whom he made that promise is not revealed in the published novel, Dickens's manuscript contains a passage that reveals that his promise was made to Rachel who had counseled him to "let things be. . . . They only lead to hurt. Let them be." Stephen's brief speech in his own defense echoes Rachel's words when he doubts that the Tribunal's regulations and intended course of action against Bounderby will do the membership "onny good. Liker they'll do you hurt."

In truth, Stephen instinctively mistrusts the union as he mistrusts any organization that threatens the social fabric of paternalism. Continuing, as he does, to see Bounderby in terms of the feudal baron, the union—led by so unsavory a character as Slackbridge—cannot serve as a viable alternative. That Stephen assigns the cause of his muddled state of mind to the lack of fit leadership in ei-

ther Bounderby or Slackbridge is seen in his final interview with Bounderby, who, having failed to force Stephen to provide him with information about the Tribunal, sacks him.

Agreeing with Bounderby that union leaders like Slackbridge are bad, Stephen pointedly observes to him that the workers “take such as offers. Haply ’tis no’ the sma’est o’ their misfortune when they can get no better.” The interview concludes with the overbearing and intimidating Bounderby’s posing the question to Stephen: How would you “set this muddle (as you’re so fond of calling it) to rights?” Stephen’s ready reply is significant: “I donno, Sir. I canna be expecten to ’t. ’Tis not me as should be looken to for that, Sir. ’Tis them as is put ower me, and ower aw the rest of us. *What do they tak upon themseln, Sir, if not to do ’t?*” (Book 2, Chapter 5; emphasis added). The implications are clear: It is not the workers’ duty to set things right. It is the duty of those men God set above them. Stephen is in a muddle, as are his misguided fellows, because they are not provided the kind of leadership they *deserve*.

Having been literally run out of Coketown by the mill hands, their leaders, and Bounderby, and having wandered about the countryside for sometime, Stephen, returning to Coketown to refute the charge that he had robbed the bank, wanders blindly through the night across the pock-marked coal fields of the Midlands when he falls into the uncovered entrance to a mine, known locally as the Old Hell Shaft, the sad import being—yet again—that without paternal guidance, the laboring poor will inevitably find themselves at the bottom of a symbolic Old Hell Shaft.

Lying mortally wounded at the bottom of the pit, Stephen fixes his eyes upon a star shining high above the shaft, Dickens’s use of light and dark imagery throughout *Hard Times* culminating in this bright orb beaming clear in the dark sky. The dying man associates it with heaven. As he says to Rachel, who, with others, has rescued him from the pit: “Often as I coom to myseln, and found it shinin’ on me down there in my trouble, I thowt it were the star as guided to Our Saviour’s home. I awmust think it be the very star!” As his body is carried away, Dickens observes: “The star had shown him where to find the God of the poor; and through humility, and sorrow, and forgiveness, he had gone to his Redeemer’s rest” (Book 2, Chapter 6). How apropos to the close of Stephen’s life that both he and Dickens associate the star with a religion that sanctions and provides the model for the entire fabric of paternalism.

Just as Stephen, the son of the laboring poor, comes to a disastrous end, so, too, Louisa, a daughter of the prosperous, self-assured middle class. As Mrs. Bounderby, Louisa finds herself living in an even less heart-warming house than Stone Lodge. Her husband—self-centered, self-serving, and totally without feelings, a man who espouses Utilitarian principles as an excuse to starve his workers and hoodwink the public—is incapable of love, in fact, incapable of

any genuine human emotions. The arid, uncongenial atmosphere of Bounderby's house intensifies Louisa's sense of imaginative and emotional frustration, further undermining her desperate inner struggle to redeem herself from the ravages of her utilitarian education and upbringing. Louisa's life in Bounderby's house is made even more unpleasant by the housekeeper, a bitter old hanger-on, Mrs. Sparsit, who had for years nourished the preposterous notion of one day becoming Mrs. Bounderby herself. With the advent of Louisa, her jealousy and envy know no bounds. Not a poetical woman (as Dickens with some irony informs us), she, nevertheless, has it in her to construct in her mind a fanciful staircase that day by day she, with considerable relish (and no little malice), sees Louisa, the bride of Bounderby, descending. At the bottom of this staircase, Sparsit imagines "a dark pit of shame" (Book 2, Chapter 10).

Louisa's descent is hastened when the handsome, cultivated, urbane James Hearthouse enters her life. Offering her the fulfillment of her heart's desire, Hearthouse poses the emotionally starved Louisa with the most insidious temptation possible. Yielding to his offers of love, Louisa agrees to run away with him. However, poised to step off Sparsit's stairs into the dark pit of shame, Louisa (in a scene comparable to one in the best sensational novels) flees to Stone Lodge in the midst of rain, thunder, and lightning, breaks into the sanctity of her father's study, and throws herself at his feet, demanding that he come to her rescue: "All I know is," she exclaims to Gradgrind, "your philosophy and your teaching will not save me. Now, father, you have brought me to this. Save me by some other means!"

In the dramatic interview leading up to this demand, Louisa's heroic nature expresses itself as she relates to her astounded father her life-long inner struggle to save what she terms her "better angel" from being crushed "into a demon." With much passion she explains: "With a hunger and thirst upon me, father, which have never been for a moment appeased; with an ardent impulse towards some region where rules, and figures, and definitions were not quite absolute; I have grown up, battling every inch of my way." His eyes at last opened to his daughter's heroic struggle and her miserable plight, Gradgrind, his old certainty gone, stands helpless as he sees "the pride of his heart and the triumph of his system, lying, an insensible heap, at his feet" (Book 2, Chapter 12).

Although the social-problem novel presented a diversity of views on the many problems—as its name suggests—to which the industrialization of Britain gave rise, most novelists agreed that division must yield to communication and understanding between adversaries. Elizabeth Gaskell is no exception, her novel *North and South* showing that by mediating their differences through dialogue, masters and men, utilitarians and paternalists, north and south, can

reach a satisfactory solution to their problems. *North and South* focuses on the developing relationship between John Thornton, the northerner and Margaret Hale, the southerner. Thornton is a wealthy, highly regarded mill owner in Milton-Northern (Manchester), a factory town to which Margaret recently has moved with her parents from the village of Helstone in the south of England where her father was the parish priest. Having formed doubts about certain church doctrines, the Rev. Mr. Hale has resigned his benefice. The relationship between Thornton and Margaret is paralleled by Thornton's developing relations with his mill hands, both relationships centering in the ability of Thornton and Margaret, on the one hand, and master and men, on the other, communicating and, through communicating, coming to understand one another.

Like Elizabeth Bennett and Darcy in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the first contacts Thornton and Margaret have with one another are decidedly negative. Their first meeting in a hotel in Milton-Northern, where Margaret and her father are staying while house hunting, is anything but comfortable and, moreover, complicated by false first impressions on both sides. Her father briefly away on business, Margaret reluctantly meets Thornton when he calls at their rooms, Thornton having been solicited by a mutual friend of both parties to help facilitate the Hales' move north. Being met not by a middle-aged clergyman but by a handsome, dignified, socially adept young woman, John is disconcerted as he is invited to take a seat while he awaits the return of Mr. Hale. As the narrator observes, Thornton, who was in the habit of dominating most situations in which he found himself, is aware that Margaret had "assumed some kind of rule over him at once. . . . Her movements, full of soft feminine defiance gave" her visitor "the impression of haughtiness." He, himself, felt that he must appear to this refined young lady like "a great rough fellow, with not a grace or a refinement about him." Later, to her mother, Margaret describes Thornton as "'not quite a gentleman. . . . Altogether a man who seems made for his niche . . . sagacious, and strong, as becomes a great tradesman'" (Chapter 7).

Later, when Thornton comes to tea at the Hale's, Margaret attends but little to the conversation between her father and the mill owner. But when he rhapsodizes about the glories of Milton-Northern, extolling the energy and inventiveness of its people, the wonders of its machines and productivity, viewing the town as a showplace of science and industry, Margaret listens attentively. Homesick for her native south and offended by the dirt and smoke of Milton-Northern and its boisterous, unruly, ignorant, and sexually risqué working-class population who crowd her in its streets, she hears Thornton with distaste. And when he tells her father that he "would rather be a man toiling, suffering—nay, failing and unsuccessful—here, than lead a dull prosperous life

in the old worn grooves of what you call more aristocratic society down in the South, with their slow days of careless ease,” observing: “One may be clogged with honey and unable to rise and fly,” Margaret feels constrained to contradict the guest.

“You are mistaken,” said Margaret, roused by the aspersion on her beloved South to a fond vehemence of defense, that brought the color into her cheeks and the angry tears into her eyes. “You do not know anything about the South. If there is less adventure or less progress—I suppose I must not say less excitement—from the gambling spirit of trade, which seems requisite to force out these wonderful inventions, there is less suffering also. I see men here going about in the streets who look ground down by some pinching sorrow or care—who are not only sufferers but haters. Now, in the South we have our poor, but there is not that terrible expression in their countenances of a sullen sense of injustice which I see here. You do not know the South, Mr. Thornton.” (Chapter 10)

Although Margaret lapses into a determined silence, angry with herself for having said so much, she once again is roused to take issue with Thornton, who goes on to express his laissez-faire economic views to Mr. Hale. Unlike Bounderby, Thornton, a true believer and an honest proponent of the principles of the current political economy, one who sees the relations between master and men as a battle, argues that it is good for the masters and men to vie with one another, an activity that he considers salutary and productive of prosperity and wealth for all. “Now,” he points out to his listeners, this battle “is pretty fairly waged between us. We will hardly submit to the decision of an umpire, much less to the interference of a meddler with only a smattering of knowledge of the real facts of the case, even though that meddler be called the High Court of Parliament.” Both Margaret and her father, however, take exception to Thornton’s viewing the relations between masters and men in terms of the battle metaphor. “Is there any necessity for calling it a battle between the two classes?” Mr. Hale inquires, Margaret, again entering the conversation “in a clear, cold voice”: “You consider all who are unsuccessful in raising themselves in the world, from whatever cause, as your enemies, then, if I understand you rightly.”

Misconstruing Thornton’s gesture of extending his hand to her in parting, Margaret “simply bowed farewell; although the instant she saw the hand, half put out, quickly drawn back, she was sorry she had not been aware of the intention.” On his part, Thornton, interpreting her behavior as a mark of haughtiness, draws himself up to his full height, walks off, muttering to himself—“A more proud, disagreeable girl I never saw. Even her great beauty is blotted out of one’s memory by her scornful ways” (Chapter 10).

Margaret's distaste for Thornton's battle metaphor and her sense that it is wrongheaded to so view the relations between master and men, is reinforced over the next few weeks through her acquaintance with one of the local mill hands, Nicholas Higgins, and his dying daughter, Bessy. Having met casually and by chance, Margaret, Higgins, and Bessy become good friends, Margaret having readily made the effort to overcome the problems language and gesture inevitably present to a young lady from the south, new not only to the north but to another class of people. As his distrust of her fades, Higgins speaks more openly with her about the plight of the mill hands and their feeling that they are being unfairly treated by the masters. Sympathetic to and understanding of the workers' views and demands, Margaret finds herself playing the role of mediator as the threat of a strike looms over Milton-Northern. In contact with Thornton from time to time, not from choice but from circumstance, she comes to understand thoroughly the masters' position as well as that of the workers.

Having from an early age been accustomed to visiting the poor as the daughter of the parish priest, listening to their concerns and ministering to their needs, Margaret is used to entering the so-called social sphere, a space between the public and the private spheres, and sharing to some extent in both. An energetic, intelligent young woman of some independence of thought and action, she comes to Milton-Northern unwilling to remain—as so many Victorian women were constrained to do—immured within the confines of the home. Her father, disoriented and distracted by his theological problems, her brother afar in foreign lands, and her mother enfeebled and increasingly ill, Margaret is relatively free of paternalistic restraints. Her freedom to visit the Higginses and her contacts with Thornton place Margaret in a position to mediate between the masters and men of Milton-Northern at a critical point in their “battle.”

Margaret sees the battle lines drawn between Thornton and other mill owners on one side and the textile laborers and their union on the other. The masters all stand together in allegiance to the orthodox laissez-faire doctrines of the day, central among them the cash-nexus—cash pay for labor done. No other contact between masters and men need exist; workers' pay and hours of labor required, dependent entirely on the laws of supply and demand. The mill hands stand together in their hatred of the masters who, they feel, treat them unjustly and refuse to have any meaningful contact with them other than the cash-nexus. Although both sides talk to her, neither side is willing to talk to one another. Hence the inevitability of serious labor trouble in Milton-Northern.

These troubles come to a head when the union representing the mill hands initiates a strike. And despite the fact that Higgins and his fellow members of the strike committee intend the labor action to be free of any violence lest the public turn against their cause, a huge mob of strikers, having found that

Thornton has imported into his mill Irish laborers, take to the streets of Milton-Northern, their goal the home of the mill owner, which sits on the premises of the mill itself. Unaware of the impending event, Margaret, on an errand of mercy to the Thornton mansion to secure the loan of a water bed for her dying mother, finds herself trapped in the house with Thornton by the rapidly gathering mob, along with his mother and sister. During this, the most dramatic and in many ways the most significant scene in the novel, Thornton, having summoned the militia, intends simply to “sit it out,” hoping that the mob’s threats to his home and its occupants will not materialize. However, Margaret, watching with Thornton from an upstairs window the raging multitude of workers below, is concerned not only for the Thornton family but for the rioters themselves. Aware that a clash between the mob and the militia would bring serious injuries, even death, Margaret urges Thornton to go down and face his enraged mill hands in an effort to avoid the impending violence: ““Speak to your workmen as if they were human beings,”” she exhorts him. ““Speak to them kindly,”” she advises. ““Don’t let the soldiers come in and cut down poor creatures who are driven mad. . . . If you have any courage or noble quality in you, go out and speak to them, man to man!”” (Chapter 22).

Thus urged by Margaret, Thornton fearlessly rushes below and confronts the mob, leaving Margaret to bar the door behind him. Despite their master’s appearance before them, the maddened rioters rage worse than ever. Watching anxiously from above, Margaret, seeing lads removing their heavy clogs, “the readiest missile they could find,” intuitively is aware that it is figuratively “the spark to the gunpowder, and, with a cry . . . she rushed out of the room, down stairs . . . had thrown the door open wide—and was there, in face of that angry sea of men, her eyes smiting them with flaming arrows of reproach.” Quelled but for a moment, the mob rages into action, slinging clogs in Thornton’s direction. In an effort to save him, Margaret throws her arms around him. In a scene replete with sexual meaning, Thornton shakes her off, bidding her to go away. Determined to remain, while missiles fly, Margaret clings to Thornton’s arm. Thus exposed, she is struck by a pebble that grazes her forehead and cheek causing the blood to flow “and drawing a blinding sheet of light before her eyes. She lay like one dead on Mr. Thornton’s shoulder.” The sight of the injured Margaret, red blood running down her face, has the effect on the rioters that no words from her or Thornton has had. Reluctant to resort to any further physical violence, the mob slowly begins to disperse.

Margaret’s actions are interpreted not only by Thornton, himself, but his stern mother, as well as the public, as a sign of the young woman’s affection for the mill owner. Stung by such an apparent misreading of her intentions, Margaret insists that she was acting dispassionately to save bloodshed on both sides, describing her behavior as “woman’s work” (Chapter 23). Nevertheless, berat-

ing herself for acting “like a romantic fool,” Margaret is in no mood to entertain a proposal of marriage that Thornton tenders the following day. She rejects his suit after a heated, angry exchange of words, but, significantly, “when he was gone,” the reader is told, Margaret “thought she had seen the gleam of unshed tears in his eyes; and that turned her proud dislike into something different and kinder, if nearly as painful—self-reproach for having caused such mortification to anyone” (Chapter 24). Although in this proposal scene Margaret has told Thornton that she does not wish to understand him, he then, accusing her of being unfair and unjust, Margaret, as the complex plot unwinds, does come to understand her lover, and, in the end, to treat him fairly and justly. Similarly, Thornton comes to better understand his mill hands, as they him, through the continued efforts of Margaret as mediator.

For example, when, after the strike, Higgins, having been one of the union leaders, loses his job in the mill, Margaret suggests that he seek employment with Thornton. Although Higgins abhors the thought of asking Thornton for work, he decides to do so because he has undertaken the care of the wife and children of his friend, Boucher (the renegade union member, who, having led the mob in the scene before Thornton’s house, committed suicide). Meanwhile, in a conversation with her father, Margaret indicates the grounds on which the two men—as well as all masters and men—can come together: If Higgins and Thornton, she observes, “would speak out together as man to man—if Higgins would forget that Mr. Thornton was a master, and speak to him as he does to us—and if Mr. Thornton would be patient enough to listen to him with his human heart, not with his master’s ears,” the interview could be a success (Chapter 37).

After Higgins has patiently waited five hours to see Thornton, this first interview between the two men is tense, angry, and contentious. Yet in the course of the frank discussion, Higgins reveals information about his motives and actions during the strike and his commitment to undertake the care of the destitute Boucher family. Having refused Higgins’s request for a job and dismissed him, Thornton has second thoughts. Soon after, as Higgins tells Margaret of the conversation with Thornton, the man himself appears at the door of the Boucher hovel. Margaret hastens from the room leaving Thornton and Higgins to their second interview. Thornton had taken the time to confirm that all Higgins had told him was true. “And then,” the reader is told, “the conviction went in, as if by some spell, and touched the latent tenderness of his heart; the patience of the man, the simple generosity of the motive [for caring for the Boucher family] . . . made him forget entirely the mere reasonings of justice, and overleap them by a diviner instinct” (Chapter 39). The second interview having promoted further understanding between the master and the man, Higgins has his job.

That Thornton has a heart as well as a sense of justice is confirmed by his putting several of the Boucher children to school, and his growing interest in his mill hands' welfare. Moreover, he pursues several schemes—always with the input and approval of the workers—one of which grows out of his awareness of how ill-nourished his hands are, especially at a time when the price of food has risen so high. With Higgins, he draws up a scheme for a kind of dining club that requires him to build a dining room at the mill, to provide a cook, and to purchase the food wholesale. The success of this venture leads him to envision launching what he describes as “experiments” that might further facilitate a master’s relations with his men.

Ironically, it is at this crucial time when he, at last, welcomes an “opportunity of cultivating some intercourse with the hands beyond the ‘cash nexus’” (Chapter 51) that Thornton, a year and a half after the strike against the mill owners has ended, suddenly realizes the unthinkable: that his business is in serious financial difficulty due to the after effects of the union action and a down-turn in the nation’s economy.

Unable to find financial support in Milton-Northern, Thornton in desperation travels to London in search of a backer. There by chance at an evening party he meets Margaret, who is staying with the wealthy aunt with whom she had lived for some years before her move to Milton-Northern. Having recently inherited a great fortune left her on the death of her godfather, Mr. Bell, Margaret wants to put her wealth to good use. Restless and disoriented by the deaths of her father and mother and her subsequent removal from Milton-Northern, she anxiously looks for some worthy enterprise in which to immerse herself. Asked by another gentleman if he thinks his experiments in communicating with the mill hands will prevent the recurrences of strikes, Thornton replies: “Not at all. My utmost expectation only goes so far as this—that they may render strikes not the bitter, venomous sources of hatred they have hitherto been. A more hopeful man might imagine that a closer and more genial intercourse between classes might do away with strikes. But I am not a hopeful man.”

Suddenly on impulse Thornton crosses over to where Margaret is sitting, aware that she has been listening to his conversation about his experiments as well as about his financial losses. Informing her that he has had a letter from Higgins and other mill hands stating their wish to work for him if he is able to start anew, Thornton asks: “‘That was good, wasn’t it?’” “‘Yes. Just right. I am glad of it.’” The following day, Margaret pledges her wealth to re-establish Thornton in business. All misunderstandings and prejudices gone, Margaret and Thornton are married, the two settling down as husband and wife in the great house before which several years earlier the couple had stood defenseless, facing the maddened mob of rioters.

In providing *North and South* with a conventional close, Gaskell not only wished to gratify her Victorian readers with a happy marriage, but she also wanted to leave them with an *unconventional* marriage, a marriage in which there is less inequality, a marriage in which the partners communicate with one another as mature adults, working together in an enterprise of social betterment to which each has something important to contribute. In so doing, Gaskell displaces the father/child relationship of paternalism as the model for master and men with the adult/adult relationship of marriage, an arrangement that implies a more equal as well as a more interactive relationship between capital and labor.

Although *Sybil*, *Hard Times*, and *North and South* offer their Victorian readership different solutions to the problems the Industrial Revolution brought to the United Kingdom, these social-problem novels are in agreement about one thing: that the most alarming and dangerous problem facing the nation, the growing division between the rich and the poor, between master and men, must end. Though none of these novels advocates either the eradication of class distinctions or placing of the classes on an equal footing (or of the sexes, for that matter), they argue for closer ties between capital and labor that hopefully will promote mutual respect and goodwill, a sameness of purpose, a sense of unity. Only through community will prosperity and peace reign again in the nation.

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