

Industrial and “Condition of England” Novels

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During the nineteenth century, questions about the lives and labors of the populace were of great interest to British citizens; it was under the broad rubric of the “condition of England” that these questions came to be addressed. From the late 1830s on, with issues such as the “factory question,” the “hungry forties,” the repeal of the Corn Laws, and the Chartist uprisings as rich ground from which to mine subject-matter, novels about problems of class conflict and capitalism became one of the most significant subgenres of Victorian literature. Such fiction has been variously labeled, but the “condition of England novel” seems most inclusive.

To understand how and why the condition of England novel originated, it is important to understand the laws that by the 1830s compelled the public to feel there were many victims in a society in which Benjamin Disraeli’s concept of “The Two Nations,” rich and poor, was a reality. Debates leading to passage of the New Poor Law of 1834 revealed the extent of pauperism, even as the Revd. Thomas Malthus’s *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (first published in 1798) argued that population pressure made poverty for the “lower classes” inevitable. Industrialization and explosive urbanization gave public prominence both to pauperism and to the proletariat and its discontents. As a result, the middle and upper classes began to realize how little they knew about the lives of their less fortunate compatriots. Most shocking of all was the realization that hundreds of thousands of people in Britain, including men, women, and children, labored like slaves (“factory slaves” became a widely used metaphor). To limit the ages and daily working hours of children employed by the factories was the aim of the Ten Hours Movement, which inspired Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna’s *Helen Fleetwood* and Frances Trollope’s *The Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy*. As the appetite for knowledge about the condition of England was whetted, novelists found an audience interested in learning more about the plight of the working classes, and the novel became a method of teaching the middle and upper classes about the “real” condition of England. Reform was on the minds of all of England, and the novel was the apparatus by which many matters of concern would be presented to the

public in a manner and language not suited only for lawyers and politicians, but for the common man and woman as well.

Paramount among the types of condition of England novels was the industrial novel, in part because by the midcentury as much as 38 percent of the working population of England was employed in factory work (Bairoch 1968: 191). Contributing to the appeal of the industrial novel was the further element of pathos and helplessness that the large numbers of children and women working in the factories provided. Women worked for lower wages and were found to be easier to manage than men; thus by the middle of the century more than a million women worked in factories. Furthermore, most factory work could be performed equally as well by children as by adults, and usually at half the wages. It is conservatively estimated that no fewer than 100,000 children under fourteen worked in English factories at midcentury, and if one includes all teenagers, the number rises to as much as half a million. Despite these substantive numbers, by the 1840s legislation had mandated that only a very few children over a certain age could legally be employed in factories, and only under strictly supervised hours of work and working conditions which had slowly (if sometimes marginally) improved since the beginning of the century. Considering that in the early 1800s there were few regulations governing the ages at which children were employable or the hours that children could work, the numbers of children working in the factories in the early 1800s must have been staggering. Thus, because large numbers of women and children did in fact work in industry, and because the plight of these workers was sympathetic, many industrial novels take as their central characters individuals who are children, females, or both.

To understand fully, however, how and why these large numbers of working people were deserving of sympathy, it is first necessary to examine the legal, economic, and literary influences that brought about the condition of England novel. These elements of realism would ultimately ensure that the condition of England novel was one of the most popular subgenres of Victorian fiction.

The "Factory Question"

The practice of using child laborers had originated during the Renaissance with the Elizabethan poor law of 1601, which empowered parish officials to apprentice paupers and orphans to industries so that they might learn a trade. Yet what began as a well-intentioned attempt to teach orphans and poor children useful skills by which they might earn a living had, by the late eighteenth century, become an abomination. Up until that point the public had remained for the most part ignorant of the conditions under which children worked, and apparently the first widely publicized indication that abuses existed in the mills occurred when an "infectious fever" broke out in a cotton works in Radcliffe in 1784. When health officials investigated, they were appalled to find that hundreds of children were crowded together in cramped rooms, working long hours in highly unsanitary conditions. Similar outbreaks of "malignant

fever” in Manchester and Liverpool during the 1790s led to comparable discoveries, and investigations revealed that children as young as three and four years old were employed in the factories, often working sixteen- and eighteen-hour days (Hutchins and Harrison 1911: 1–3).

As the deplorable working conditions in the factories were publicized, child labor in the mills, hours of work per day and week, the mistreatment and abuse of workers, diet, education, and lodging all came under the rubric of the “factory question,” and enlightened social reformers such as Sir Robert Peel and Robert Owen pushed for improved working conditions through legislation, one of the most significant measures being the Factory Act of 1802 (the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act). This Act called for reforms which included limiting the working hours of factory children to twelve a day, the eventual discontinuation of night work, and the provision of some form of education. The Act passed with little opposition, no doubt because it did not attempt to regulate the ages of employees, and furthermore, because even if the factory owners chose not to abide by the new law, noncompliance would result in a meager fine of two to five pounds. The next significant Factory Act, passed in 1819 (the Act for the Regulation of Cotton Mills and Factories), did attempt to regulate the age of child factory workers; it outlawed more than a total of twelve working hours a day for anyone under sixteen and prohibited the employment of children under the age of nine in cotton mills.

Yet even with these gains, the laws under which the factories were allowed to operate still seem appalling in their laxity. Owen, Peel, and others were attempting to do even more, but the powerful factory lobby was actively fighting the laws, and conditions in the factories improved only marginally, if at all. Despite the passage of further Factory Acts in 1820, 1825, and 1831, little substantial improvement in conditions for factory workers actually resulted, no doubt because the need to compromise to get the measures passed diluted their effectiveness. While these early Acts did help by making illegal the all-too-common employment of children five and six years old and even as young as three or four, in some cases the laws were ignored, and even when factory owners adhered to the law, by modern standards the conditions in which these children continued to work were squalid and their treatment in the factories was ghastly.

It was obvious to anyone paying attention that, notwithstanding the efforts of the reformers, conditions in the factories improved only marginally, and the indifference exhibited by the upper and middle classes seemed to indicate that factory children were victims of the popularity of the principles of Malthusian economics: they were regarded as an insignificant part of the surplus population. Thus, as the nineteenth century began, factory workers and factory children in particular had no voice and few official representatives to champion their cause.

Two voices did, however, emerge from the throng to decry the inherent evils of the factory system, from two men reared in widely different circumstances and with extremely different intellectual backgrounds. One was the man who Malthus himself claimed was “greatly erroneous,” the radical philosopher William Godwin. The other,

a factory child himself, was an illiterate orphan from the St. Pancras workhouse whose name would come to symbolize the horrors of the factories, Robert Blincoe. Godwin and Blincoe were two of the first to publish accounts of the lives of factory children. While Godwin’s brief episodic narrative of the life of a factory child would pass almost unnoticed, Blincoe’s personal account would become one of the most controversial and influential pieces of prose to be written about the new “factory system.” Both, however, were influential in establishing the Victorian industrial novel.

Godwin, the husband of Mary Wollstonecraft and father of novelist Mary Shelley, was one of the leading novelists and philosophers of the late eighteenth century. Though his *Fleetwood: or, the New Man of Feeling* (1805) contains only a few chapters in which he presents children doing factory work, it is the earliest novel to give any extended treatment to the factory question. In chapter 11, Kasmir Fleetwood’s godfather, Ruffigny, tells his godson about his experiences as a factory child in a silk mill, and the wretched and inhumane monotony of day-to-day life. Ruffigny explains that, as an orphaned boy, he was left in the care of an uncle. The uncle, anxious to appropriate the boy’s inheritance for himself, had Ruffigny apprenticed to a silk mill owned by Vaublanc. In an effort to justify his calling and the need for child labor, Vaublanc explains “what an advantage these mills are.” He goes on to say that rather than children being a burden to their families, by being put to work in the mills “they learn no bad habits; but are quiet, and orderly, and attentive, and industrious. What a prospect for their future lives! God himself must approve and bless a race who are thus early prepared to be of use to themselves and others” (Godwin 1805: 94–5).

Though the naïve Ruffigny is interested in an enterprise which does so much good for so many, when he enters the mill he notes a situation far different from that described. Rather than the healthy, happy workers he had been led to expect, he finds that “not one of the persons before me exhibited any signs of vigour and robust health. They were all sallow; their muscles flaccid, and their form emaciated. Several of the children appeared to me, judging from their size, to be under four years of age – I never saw such children” (pp. 96–8).

Even though Godwin’s novel is set in France and not England, *Fleetwood* is nevertheless an important early indictment not only of the mills themselves, but of the justifications advanced by the factory owners themselves for child labor. Although Godwin only briefly addresses the factory question before moving on to other events more central to the plot, an individual who would provide a more detailed account of his own real-life sufferings in the factories was, during that same year Godwin’s novel was published, being beaten, starved, and compelled to sleep in a sackcloth bed full of maggots in the Lowdham Cotton Mill. Where Godwin’s account would only briefly confront his readers with the wretched realities of the factories, Robert Blincoe’s account would be a rallying cry for the working classes for years to come.

There is no doubt about the political aims of John Brown’s *A Memoir of Robert Blincoe* (1828), arguably the most famous account by a factory child ever published and generally considered to be the first example of nineteenth-century life-writing which substantially dealt with abuses within the factories. Though journalist John

Brown served as amanuensis for the illiterate Blincoe and therefore the *Memoir* is not technically an autobiography, the account was important because of the legislation and the fiction which it inspired. As Richard Carlile, publisher of the radical paper *The Lion* in which Blincoe's story first appeared, noted, "such a memoir as this has been much wanted, to hand down to posterity, what was the real character of the complaints about the treatment of children in our cotton mills" (1828: 146). Indeed, perhaps the best way to judge the *Memoir's* impact is to note that after Carlile published it, trade union leader John Doherty reissued it in 1832, and Blincoe was named a star witness before the Select Committee Investigating the Employment of Children in Manufactories in 1833. Even as late as the early twentieth century Blincoe's story was seen as one of the most significant works of its day, and in 1911 Hutchins and Harrison's *A History of Factory Legislation* alluded to Blincoe's account as an accurate representation of the horrors of factory life by referring readers to "the revolting personal cruelties to be read of in Robert Blincoe's memoirs" (p. 19). Blincoe's detailed account of the beatings, starvation, and abuses suffered at the hands of the factory masters served as propaganda for the Ten Hours Movement. It also inspired one novelist in particular, Frances Trollope, who would borrow from Blincoe's narrative quite heavily when writing her novel *Michael Armstrong, The Factory Boy* (1840). The widely read *Michael Armstrong* itself served as propaganda for the Ten Hours Movement, which led finally to the Ten Hours Act of 1847.

The First Victorian Industrial Novels

Literary works which detailed the lives of factory operatives appeared throughout the 1830s. These include John Walker's *The Factory Lad* (1832), a dramatic interpretation of the factory controversy, and Caroline Bowles's *Tales of the Factories* (1833) and Caroline Norton's *A Voice From the Factories* (1836), both of which offered poetic representations of the misery of factory life for adults as well as children. Like *Michael Armstrong*, Tonna's evangelical novel or "tract," *Helen Fleetwood*, also condemned working conditions in the factories and supported the Ten Hours Movement. While these works emphasized the horrors of factory work with reform as the ultimate goal, their melodramatic plots allowed critics to dismiss them as the products of the over-worked imaginations of their writers. In contrast, proponents of the factory system could point to seemingly nonfictional examinations of the system such as Edward Baines's *History of the Cotton Manufacture in Great Britain* (1835) and Andrew Ure's *The Philosophy of the Manufactures* (1835) as proof that the factories were not injurious to workers, but in fact beneficial. Baines, a journalist, offered a historical approach in a volume complete with illustrations that tended to soften and idealize the factory system. Ure, a Scottish professor of chemistry and natural philosophy, repudiated the claims of critics who protested that factory work was bad for children by insisting on the cheerfulness of the operatives and the wholesomeness of their work. He noted that the children were

cheerful and alert, taking pleasure in the light play of their muscles, – enjoying the mobility natural to their age. The scene of industry, so far from exciting sad emotions in my mind, was always exhilarating. It was delightful to observe the nimbleness with which they pieced the broken ends . . . The work of these lively elves seemed to resemble a sport, in which habit gave them a pleasing dexterity. (1967: 301)

If there was a literary war over the factory system, up until 1839 it appeared that writers such as Ure, who obviously supported the system, were winning it. It was Trollope's novel, *The Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong, The Factory Boy*, that would bring the plight of the factory worker to mainstream Victorian audiences. In what Catherine Gallagher calls "a deliberately shocking piece of propaganda" (1985: 127), *Michael Armstrong* was, according to Trollope, an attempt to open the eyes of readers to "the hideous mass of injustice and suffering to which thousands of infant labourers are subjected, who toil in our monster spinning mills" (1840: iii). Michael Armstrong lives with his well-meaning but somewhat naïve mother and his crippled brother in Ashleigh, a factory town controlled by the evil industrialist Sir Matthew Dowling. Sir Matthew takes Michael into his home to impress Lady Clarissa Shrimpton with his benevolence, although his motives are entirely selfish. He considers Michael a "dirty little dog," and he asks his overseer Parsons for more information about the boy. Parsons tells him that Michael takes care of his brother, "who is but a poor rickety, shrivelly sort of a child," and his mother, who is a "bedridden woman, and ought to be in the workhouse; but she's uppish, and can't abide it." Parsons tells Dowling that, crippled or not, Michael's brother should have to work because "his fingers is just as able to handle the reels and handle the threads as they ever was; and in course, a little dwarf like him, with his legs like crooked drumsticks, can't look for any but the youngest wages, so after all, he's one of them as answers best" (pp. 33–4).

No doubt Trollope hoped that the malignancy of the factory owner and his overseer would strike a nerve with her readers, as would her presentation of the Armstrongs as abused but honest, hardworking British citizens. In order to make a claim for verisimilitude, Trollope spent several weeks in Manchester interviewing factory workers, and she also drew heavily upon Brown's *A Memoir of Robert Blincoe*. According to Ivanca Kovačević (1975: 99), Trollope was introduced to *A Memoir of Robert Blincoe* by trade union leader John Doherty, who had republished that *Memoir* himself. While there are many similarities between settings and incidents in the two works, in terms of the characters and their personal situations, the only resemblance is that Blincoe and Armstrong are both children. The setting of the Deep Valley Mill where Michael works is much like the Lowdham Mill where Blincoe worked, and individual incidents, such as fighting with the hogs for scraps, were unquestionably patterned after Blincoe's *Memoir* with only slight alteration. Due to the repeated republications of Blincoe's work, informed readers would have had little trouble connecting the two stories, and, by association, readers may have accepted Trollope's fiction as fact. Thus, Trollope's combination of melodrama and veracity made *Michael*

Armstrong one of the first widely read works of industrial literature. Though many critics savaged the book as being unrealistic – Trollope’s fairytale ending has benefactress Mary Brotherton adopting Michael, his brother, and another child, and making them prosperous, educated, and wealthy – the novel sold well and gained support among factory reform advocates, and particularly among the Chartists. As John Cobden noted in *The White Slaves of England*, *Michael Armstrong* was a novel that was “a fiction merely in construction, a truthful narrative in fact” (1853: 162).

Tonna’s *Helen Fleetwood*, also published in 1839–40, was one of the first industrial novels to make use of the “exploitation of women” by a “social-problem novelist” (Wheeler 1985: 19). Tonna would also go beyond Trollope’s use of mere melancholy and pity to appeal to readers’ sympathies, and to this mix she would also add the appeal to readers’ empathy for fellow Christians.

Helen Fleetwood has been called the “first novel completely devoted to the life of English proletarians” (Kovačević 1975: 101), and indeed, whereas a large portion of *Michael Armstrong*’s action takes place in the homes of the novel’s wealthy villains, the main setting of *Helen Fleetwood* is among the poor. The Widow Green leaves her rustic village to find jobs for her family (including the pious Helen Fleetwood) in the Godless town of M. (a thinly disguised Manchester), where other members of her family already live. The widow’s son-in-law and daughter, the Wrights, have been as corrupted by the factory system as the factory owners themselves, but perhaps the most marked contrast between the people from the country and those from the city is in the children. Factory children Phoebe and Charles Wright are vicious and hard-hearted, inured to pain, greed, and poverty by an industrial system that thrives on all three factors. Tonna suggests that as a result Phoebe is destined to become a prostitute and Charles an alcoholic. The Wrights’ other daughter, Sarah, is a good child, but her body is twisted and crippled from hours of labor in the factory. She is so deformed, in fact, that the Wrights initially try to hide her in the attic so that the Widow Green and her grandchildren won’t see her.

Tonna’s novel eschews the standard happy ending – the Widow Green ends up in a workhouse, and Helen Fleetwood dies – but there is a religious message from which readers can take heart. Through Christianity and devotion to God, the widow and her grandchildren are able to maintain their dignity and goodness and, even though some of the good characters die, their reward will come in heaven. This ending, unlike that of *Michael Armstrong*, was at least something many working-class readers could actually relate to: they were much more likely to die while still “factory slaves” than be rescued by a rich benefactress. Further, Tonna’s Christian call to action is quite clear, as the last lines illustrate:

We should pray for those men who are trying to make the factory children less miserable; and whenever you speak to the great folks, put in a word: for I can’t help thinking that God must be angry with them while they take so much care about their own little ones, and have no thought, no feeling for the perishing children of the poor. (Tonna 1841: 328–9)

A similar didacticism, but in defense of the factories, is evident in Frederic Montagu's 1839 novel *Mary Ashley*. Montagu emphasizes that a job in the factory has saved the titular heroine from a life of destitution. In contrast to illustrations in Trollope's novel that showed tattered children working exhaustedly in cramped spinning-rooms, illustrations in Montagu's novel depict a few clean, cheerful children working in large, airy rooms that look much like the interiors of cathedrals. Even the mill-owner stands in contrast to characters such as Trollope's Dowling and Parsons; he is a soft-spoken, kind-hearted, and intelligent man who doesn't mind if Mary sings a psalm or two while she works. In short, *Mary Ashley* is as much propaganda as are Trollope's and Tonna's novels, different only in that *Mary Ashley* argues the cause of the mill-owners, while *Michael Armstrong* and *Helen Fleetwood* present the opposite case.

Later Factory Acts and the Regulation of the Labor of Children

While the first significant Act to address the labor of children in the factories, the Factory Act of 1833 (introduced as an Act to Regulate the Labour of Children and Young Persons in Mills and Factories) was passed before these novels were written, mill-owners were constantly attempting to have the Acts overturned or amended to lessen their severity. As a result, the laws under which the factories were allowed to operate up until 1833 were appalling in their laxity. For example, though the Act of 1819 originally called for the working hours for all aged under eighteen to be less than ten and a half hours a day, the *Leeds Mercury* reported in 1830 that children in Bradford were working thirteen hours a day with a respite of only half an hour for a meal, and went on to note that in some other manufactories children worked from five in the morning until nine o'clock at night. In 1830, under the heading "Slavery in Yorkshire," Richard Oastler wrote a series of letters denouncing the abuses of the factory system to the *Mercury* as well as the *Leeds Intelligencer*, and soon the Ten Hours Campaign was underway. The campaign was bipartisan, with both Tories such as Oastler and Michael Sadler and Radicals such as John Fielden calling for the introduction of still more laws regulating the labor of children.

The first result was the Factory Act of 1833, which disallowed night work (between 8.30 p.m. and 5.30 a.m.) for all people under eighteen in cotton, hemp, worsted, flax, silk, linen, tow, or woolen mills, and mandated that a person under eighteen could not work more than twelve hours a day or sixty-nine hours a week. It further forbade the employment of children under nine in any but silk mills, and decreed that no child under eleven could be employed more than forty-eight hours in a week or nine in a day (the second year after the passing of the Act the age was increased from eleven to twelve, and the third year to thirteen).

Despite the 1833 Act and the Ten Hours Act of 1847, conditions in the factories, in mines, and in other workplaces continued to occupy reformers into the 1840s and beyond. For literature, one result was the flourishing of condition of England writing, as in Thomas Carlyle's *Past and Present* (1843), Douglas Jerrold's novel about rich

versus poor, *St. Jiles and St. James* (1845), and such poems as Thomas Hood's "The Song of the Shirt" (1843) and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Cry of the Children" (1844). With some legislative success in improving the lot of factory children, by the late 1840s attention was shifting to the issue of the poor law and the working class in general. While the Factory Act of 1844 included women under the same regulations as children, the first significant gains for adult males came through the Ten Hours Act of 1847, passed in the midst of the "hungry forties." According to Hutchins and Harrison, when the Act came into effect that year, trade was so bad that of the 179 mills in Manchester only 92 were working full-time. When one also considers that of the 41,000 mill employees in Manchester about 50 percent were only working part time or were unemployed, the Ten Hours Bill was, as the Report of Inspectors of Factories for 1847–8 noted, only "very partially felt." While legislation was finally improving working conditions, unemployment was so high that initially few workers benefited from the changes. Many of those whom the legislation would have helped were now unemployed, while those who worked were still living in poverty.

The Chartists were still doing what they could to call attention to the problems of unemployment and poverty among the working classes. The Chartist movement, founded in 1838 when William Lovett drafted the "People's Charter," had been campaigning for change since the Reform Act of 1832 in an attempt to improve conditions for the working classes. While the Chartists' petitions to Parliament for changes were denied in 1839, 1842, and 1848 – the final failure resulting in the collapse of their movement – they did bring England's attention to working-class problems. Nor did the failure of the Chartist movement mean that the plight of the working classes would henceforth go unnoticed. During the 1840s and 1850s, with the ill-used factory child now essentially a figure of the past, sympathetic writers turned to adults as the focus of their industrial novels. This posed a new problem, however, as novelists now had to produce works that would interest readers through other means than merely appealing to their sympathy: a dirty, cold, poor child living in the streets excites sympathy, while a dirty, cold, poor adult living in the streets is a ne'er-do-well who needs to get a job. Then, too, the industrial novels of this later period were more complex and significant as works of literature, because they aimed at portraying and understanding the condition of England question in all its complexity, and not merely at getting the Ten Hours Bill passed.

From Working-Class Child to Working-Class Adult

Elizabeth Stone's *William Langshawe the Cotton Lord* (1842) took a different approach to the factory question from earlier novels about factory life. Her vignettes of Manchester life and events depict the town as a center for culture and commerce. Stone (who was the daughter of John Wheeler, owner of the *Manchester Chronicle*) approaches the textile industry as a flawed but valuable system, and so she is

understandably concerned with pointing out the good that the factory system offers; but she does so in a fashion that is secondary to the plot. The novel tells the story of a factory-owner's son murdered by a trade unionist (loosely based on the murder of Thomas Ashton in 1831), and also addresses the adversity in the lives of a middle-class woman (Edith Langshawe) and of working-class characters (Jem Forshawe and Nancy Halliwell). Further, the plot elements of murder, seduction, and women's struggles offer greater complexity than the good versus evil conflict confronted by factory children in some earlier industrial novels. Indeed, *William Langshawe* foreshadows Elizabeth Gaskell's better-known *Mary Barton* (1848), although the theme of a young woman exploited by society harkens back to Tonna's *Helen Fleetwood* and prefigures Stone's own later novel *The Young Milliner* (1843) as well.

The focus on adult characters and issues also extends to Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil, or, The Two Nations* (1845), which detailed the Chartist agitation and the class conflict that beset Britain from 1839 to 1842. It was Disraeli who stressed the widening gap between the "two nations," rich and poor, "between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are . . . ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings . . . who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws" (bk 2, ch. 50). In *Sybil* the squalor and desperation pervasive in the lives of the poor sharply contrast with the lives of the rich. Chartist leader Walter Gerard represents the noble possibilities within the working class, and Walter's daughter Sybil is an "angel" (bk 2, ch. 14) who forgoes a life as a nun to marry the aristocrat Egremont. While Disraeli's sympathy is clearly with the working class, he nevertheless has a somewhat patronizing attitude towards them; it is still in their best interest, he believes, to defer to the aristocracy and the assumption that the blue-bloods truly know what is best for the nation. Indeed, Sybil herself turns out to be of aristocratic lineage and heir to a title, and thus the message seems to be that this superior being who has risen to the top of her class by good deeds and intelligence succeeds because of her noble lineage. *Sybil* was the second of Disraeli's Young England trilogy; along with *Coningsby* (1844) and *Tancred* (1847), it explores the condition of England question in depth, and makes the case that its solution lies in a rejuvenated aristocracy.

Certainly *Sybil* illustrates that condition of England novels were becoming better and more complex. While novelists such as Stone, Trollope, Montagu, and Tonna were all marginally successful, few of them are well known today, and the same might be said of their works. However, by the late 1840s more serious and better-known novelists began to address the condition of England in their novels, and as a result the works that best represent industrial fiction and that are best known today were all published a decade or two after the subgenre originated.

Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (1848) takes place in the midst of the unrest of the "hungry forties." Mary's father, John Barton, is a working-class man with a meager income; he is also an active trade unionist, and in the union meetings he finds solace, as the oppressed workers commiserate and unite against their oppressors. The unionists feel that they are not only ignored by the factory-owners,

but mocked and despised, and as a result they decide to murder Harry Carson, the son of Barton's employer. John Barton draws the lot to do the deed, but to complicate matters, his daughter Mary has been receiving attention from Harry Carson, which has led her to spurn her working-class lover Jem Wilson. After the murder the suspicion naturally falls on Wilson, and it is Mary who faces the task of how to clear Wilson without implicating her father, whom she knows to be the murderer. She manages to do this, and on his deathbed her father confesses his crime to Harry Carson's father, who forgives him.

Readers then and now have observed that the ending tends to undercut the novel's effectiveness, although, as the *British Quarterly Review* said, it "serve[s] the didactic purpose of the author" (1848: vol. 9, 128; cited in Gallagher 1985: 67). The oppression and misery of the workers, who are driven by despair to the extreme measures they adopt, seem to be almost forgotten in the Christian forgiveness between John Barton and Mr. Carson. Yet despite the ending, *Mary Barton* offers a stark look at the brutality, poverty, and oppression of working-class life. Gaskell is careful to point out differences between what the workers *think* is their lot in life and what is actually the case, even if the truth may actually be different from what it seems. The result is that she presents what appears to be an unbiased account, showing how and why both employer and employee think and act as they do, in what is almost a fictionalized literary case study. Thus, despite its flawed ending, *Mary Barton* remains a first-rate industrial novel, and one of the first written to remain even today a highly regarded account of factory life.

Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849) is another such novel. Unlike Gaskell, Brontë was at the height of her fame when she published *Shirley* as the follow-up to her acclaimed first novel, *Jane Eyre*. *Shirley* was no *Jane Eyre*, however; rather, it was both an historical novel and an industrial novel in which Brontë said she was trying not to "make even a more ridiculous mess of the matter than Mrs. Trollope did" (quoted in Wise and Symington 1932: vol. 2, 184). In *Shirley*, Brontë presents a tale of the Luddite machine-breaking riots which occurred in the north of England in 1811–13. Mill-owner Robert Moore decides to upgrade his mill with new machinery, and workers fear that this mechanization will put them out of work. The workers attempt to destroy the mill and later to kill Moore, but Moore is eventually able to overcome adversity and at the end of the Napoleonic wars he gains financial stability. The heroine, Shirley Keeldar, herself a mill-owner, braves the threats of the Luddites, rejects Moore's proposal of marriage (which would have provided financial security for him and his factory), and instead ends up marrying his brother Louis. While Brontë doesn't quite make "the mess" of the topic that she believed Frances Trollope did, her industrial novel takes industry and industrial matters mainly as a backdrop for its action; the middle-class characters' lives and romances are the centerpiece.

Another condition of England (but not technically industrial) novel is Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke: Tailor and Poet* (1850). Just as Chartism and Owenism were issues in Disraeli's novel, so Chartism and Christian socialism are issues in Kingsley's. Alton Locke is apprenticed to a tailor and works in sweatshop conditions that could

be considered only slightly better than factory work. He becomes a Chartist, while his talent for poetry allows him to begin to interact with individuals such as Eleanor and Lillian Staunton, as well as with the working-class intellectual bookseller Saunders Mackaye, Kingsley’s portrait of Thomas Carlyle. In an effort to please Lillian and her father, prompted partly by his own aspirations to move upward socially, as well as by his having fallen in love with Lillian, Alton tones down his vituperative verse about working-class life. As a result he is subsequently seen as one who has sold out and is spurned by his Chartist associates. To show that he is still true to their cause, he goes to the country to preach Chartism to farm laborers. There, he unintentionally incites the audience to riot. He is sentenced to a prison term, and in the meantime Lillian marries another man. Eleanor, however, remains devoted to him, nurses him through an illness, and eventually convinces him that Christian socialism is the means by which working conditions in England can be changed. Alton subscribes to this view, and in the end dies while on his way to the United States.

Not surprisingly, Kingsley himself was a Christian socialist. This movement, which spurned violence and instead espoused education and interclass cooperation (but not the abolition of private property), was led by Frederick Denison Maurice and John Malcolm Ludlow. Only a few years before *Alton Locke*, Kingsley had expressed a similar belief in Christian socialism as a tool for change in his novel *Yeast* (1848), which deals with issues of the poor and sanitary reform, particularly concentrating on the fouled water, filth, and raw sewage that affected the poor even more than the other classes. In that novel too religion plays a part, from the pointing out of the evils of the Catholic Church to the harm done by the atheist Lancelot Smith. Both *Yeast* and *Alton Locke* emphasize that the transformation of individuals and society as a whole must be based upon principles of Christian goodness if it is to be successful. Like some earlier novels such as *Helen Fleetwood*, the tone of *Alton Locke* (as well as *Yeast*) tends to be preachy and didactic, but it offers a more complex, interesting analysis of the condition of England than that in the earlier factory-child novels.

Charles Dickens, the most important novelist of the Victorian period, had shown an early interest in the condition of England genre; *Oliver Twist* (1838) had been and remains one of the best-known novels of its time. Though not an industrial novel, *Oliver Twist* addressed such social problems as the New Poor Law of 1834, crime, and poverty. Despite its popularity, Dickens abstained from writing an industrial novel for quite some time. In response to a letter in 1839 from Samuel Laman Blanchard concerning the subject of his forthcoming novel *Barnaby Rudge*, Dickens was clearly dismissive about factory novels, saying his upcoming novel “has nothing to do with factories, or Negroes – white, black, or parti coloured. It is a tale of the riots of Eighty, before factories flourished as they did thirty years afterwards, and containing – or intended to contain – no allusion to cotton lords, cotton slaves, or anything that is cotton” (House and Storey 1965: 507). This disclaimer might lead one to suspect that Dickens felt that there was enough literature on the market about factory workers.

While Dickens would never devote an entire novel to the factory-child controversy, it is perhaps ironic that, despite the many volumes dedicated to the plight of child

laborers in industrial settings, it is a brief section of *David Copperfield*, depicting young David's brief stint in Murdstone and Grinby's warehouse, that may be the most familiar of all nineteenth-century factory narratives. Through his experience at Murdstone and Grinby's, while not subjected to the beatings or to the unhealthy diet endured by many real-life child laborers, David does convey the drudgery and misery of the factory child. Dickens had himself briefly been a child laborer in a blacking warehouse, and thus *David Copperfield's* account has a poignancy that many novels about factory children lack. By dint of being the most popular author of his time, and by inserting this brief episode into one of the greatest novels of any time, Dickens achieved a visibility for the plight of factory children that perhaps surpassed the more protracted factual accounts by many of his contemporaries.

When Dickens published *Hard Times* (1854), his one truly industrial novel, it may have come as a surprise to readers that he avoided the issue of factory children altogether. Dickens is interested in other topical issues – the strikes and lockouts at factories in Preston in 1853–4. He is even more interested in the educations of his middle-class characters – Louisa and Tom Gradgrind – and the circus girl, Sissy Jupe. Further, his attitude toward the trade union and the strike in *Hard Times* is clearly no more sympathetic than his attitude toward the factory-owner and banker, Josiah Bounderby.

Early in the novel, Dickens sets the tone for life in Coketown, by noting that

it was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it . . . It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever . . . It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. (1854: 28)

Through descriptions such as these, Dickens brilliantly displays the sense of hopelessness and monotony that pervades Coketown. This hopelessness is not limited only to the factory workers; Dickens tells the stories of a number of characters, most of whom, such as Sissy Jupe, have little to do with the factories. The principal character who is concerned with the factories is Stephen Blackpool, an honest, hardworking man who works in the mill owned by Josiah Bounderby. It is Blackpool's honesty, causing him to refuse to join the trade union, that leads to his ostracism by his fellow factory workers; in contrast, it is Bounderby's dishonesty that leads to the latter's ruin. Yet Dickens's novel doesn't identify either character as good or bad simply because he is a worker or a factory-owner. While Stephen and the woman who loves him, Rachel, are positively portrayed, long-suffering characters, Stephen's wife, a former factory worker, is a drunken prostitute, and Stephen's co-workers who ostracize him and the trade-union organizer Slackbridge certainly are not admirable individuals. Gone is the moral simplicity of a novel such as *Michael Armstrong* where the good

factory worker is pitted against the evil factory-owner. Dickens presents a more complex situation, and one which no doubt more realistically mirrors the complexities of life.

Dickens serialized *Hard Times* in his periodical *Household Words*, and to immediately follow it he secured the services of Elizabeth Gaskell, who serialized her next industrial novel, *North and South*, there in 1855. Like Dickens, and unlike so many of the earlier industrial novels, Gaskell does not equate the factory owner with evil; indeed, one of the novel's heroes, John Thornton, is a factory-owner, and a loving son and brother as well. Owner of a factory in the town of Milton-Northern (yet another thinly disguised representation of Manchester), Thornton meets the heroine Margaret Hale, a woman who has been brought to the town by her father, who desires to teach mill-owners who want an education. Margaret dislikes industry and what it does to people and the environment, and, seeing the depressed conditions in the area she soon takes the side of the mill-workers in their struggles to gain better working conditions. Margaret advocates that Thornton take a more humane approach to the workers' problems, which Thornton initially rejects. However, he eventually comes to see that Margaret is right; after Margaret protects him from rioting strikers, the two very different characters come together at the end of the novel.

In literary terms, *North and South* may be the best of all industrial novels. It is neither preachy nor didactic; the factory question is intrinsic to the action of the novel, yet the story can stand on its own; it does not rely entirely on melodrama; and the characters are vividly portrayed rather than stock villains or angels. Gaskell attempts to deal with the issues surrounding the factory in an even-handed, adult manner, and she presents both sides of the question quite well. The result is a novel that is both readable and enjoyable whether one is interested in the factory question or not. Ironically, however, just as novelists such as Dickens and Gaskell seemed to have finally brought the condition of England novel to a state of high art, the genre itself became all but superfluous.

The End of the Condition of England Novel

As legislation enacted reforms and factory work became less dangerous and exploitative, there was quite naturally less antifactory literature written. The ways in which factory workers were perceived was undergoing a change, and by the 1860s the melodramatic factory novel was seen as *passé*. As the *Edinburgh Review* noted in an article of 1862 entitled "Modern Domestic Service," factory work was by then preferable even to domestic service, which had once been seen as the most genteel of working-class professions. The article claimed:

Servant-girls and foot-boys cannot dress as the factory lads and lasses may – [they have] not the daily stimulus and amusement of society of their own order . . . The maidservant must have "no followers," while the factory-worker can flirt to any extent.

Servant-girls rarely may marry, while factory-girls probably always may, whether they do or not . . . Public opinion among the class is in favour of the independence of factory and other day-work . . . In one word, it is *independence* against *dependence*. (Anon. 1862: 414)

Employment in the factories had become more normalized, and while abuses still existed and there were still some concerns about working conditions for both children and adults, clearly the widespread problems that had existed fifty years before had been improved or even, in many cases, eradicated.

As Peter Mathias notes in *The First Industrial Nation: An Economic History of Britain 1700–1914*, prior to 1853 “no limitations were imposed on adult males in the mills” (1969: 204), and thus in order to equalize the working conditions for all factory operatives, subsequent Factory Acts began to repeal or emend former Acts, and additionally they began to address issues other than those dealing with hours of work, such as questions of safety: for example, the fencing of shafts. Obviously, the regulation of labor in factories is a process that has continued since, but for the most part the period after 1850 introduced legislation that provided workers with a system of laws more uniform in their application, ensuring that all factory workers, be they men, women, or children, were subject to reasonably fair treatment. As Frances Gillespie notes in *Labor and Politics in England, 1850–1867*, after midcentury “the upper and middle classes [were] aware of the wage-earning classes with a distinctness that left no debate as to the latent power residing in the labouring classes” (1967: 4); and so, their message having been heard, industrial novels ceased to have a topical political message that readers were willing to pay to read. Consequently, other than the occasional novel such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *The Factory Girl* (1869) or Herbert Glyn’s *The Cotton Lord* (1862), as a subgenre the condition of England novel disappeared. Arguably the last significant work in the subgenre was George Eliot’s *Felix Holt, The Radical* (1866). In the early 1830s, Felix Holt keeps a watch and clock shop in North Loamshire. As an intelligent young man, Felix longs to expand his vistas and enter the political life, not only for his own benefit but also for the education and improvement of his working-class colleagues. Another man, Harold Transome, also has his sights set on a political career, intending to enter Parliament as a Liberal. Both Holt and Transome are interested in Esther Lyon, daughter of a Dissenting minister. As it turns out, Esther has a claim to the Transome estate, though she relinquishes her interest before she marries Felix. The backdrop of the novel is the political intrigue of the period, including the political corruption so prevalent at the time, just after the passage of the First Reform Bill of 1832. As *Felix Holt* illustrates, much of the subject matter in the condition of England novel during the latter part of the century relied on anachronism, as the abuses and concerns addressed involved events that had happened decades before. Indeed, who could write a novel with a Chartist uprising or a starving factory child at its center when such things, for all practical purposes, no longer existed?

In a sense, the condition of England novel became a victim of its own success, because as legislation enacted reforms and the working class enjoyed improving conditions, other issues such as socialism and feminism (as in the “new woman” novel of

the 1890s) came to the fore. Nevertheless, the condition of England novel played an important part in the development of Victorian literature, and more generally in Victorian politics and culture.

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