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### **The Representation of Industrialized England in *Sybil* and *Mary Barton***

*Sybil* and *Mary Barton* are two novels that can give a real-life picture about industrialized Victorian England. Their events span a truly turbulent period in the history of the English society; that is between the late 1830s and the early 1840s. Although Benjamin Disraeli and Elizabeth Gaskell might have had different aims when they wrote these novels, they both posed the question of the hardships faced by the working classes during the Victorian period. A plethora of similarities can be traced in the two novels as they were published around the same era: Disraeli's *Sybil* in 1845 and Gaskell's *Mary Barton* in 1848. They also give a full account of the harm that the Industrial Revolution caused to the poor people whether in rural or urban areas. In addition, both writers show an interest in the Chartist Movement and are filled with nostalgia for the simple medieval life in England. Finally, they offer solutions to the divide created by the industrialization of England. Therefore, the monstrous conditions of the working classes in England during the Victorian period are examined in the two novels.

The history of the Industrial Revolution, which changed the entire civil society of England, started with the invention of the steam engine in 1712 and of the machinery for working cotton. Consequently, England was the classic soil where this revolution was born and where the proletariat or the working classes' conditions could be studied at all levels and from all sides as

Friedrich Engels indicated in his book *Condition of the Working Class in England* which he wrote during his stay from 1842 to 1844 in Manchester describing the industrial working class in Victorian England (Engels 31-33).

Engels summarizes the horrible conditions to which the Industrial Revolution has led the English working-people both in urban and rural areas. In all great towns such as London, Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds, misery was the prevalent aspect of their life. Workers did not own anything and lived on very low wages, "which usually go from hand to mouth". Society did not care about them or their families, and they often lost their work and died of hunger or disease. Their homes were badly planned and kept in the worst condition as they were badly ventilated, damp, and unfit for life at all. Their clothing was no more than rags, and their food was unhealthy and insufficient (Engels 71). In rural areas, the agricultural proletariat suffered the same. Farmers had to hire themselves as labourers to the landlords. However with the extension of industry, the population increased and it became impossible for the improved manufacture "to absorb the whole surplus of the agricultural population". Thence, farmers had to sell their corn at low prices or leave their land and work in factories (175). Thus, they suffered the same agonies that townspeople went through. It was this dark picture of the English society which Disraeli and Gaskell drew in their novels.

In *Sybil*, Disraeli strikes a sharp contrast between the exterior and interior appearance of the rural town of Marney. Located in a spreading valley, the town is surrounded by meadows and gardens. It is also supported by lofty hills and rich woods that its merry prospect can make the traveler recall "the traditional epithet of his country"(54). However, when one gets into the interior of the town, there is nothing but a storehouse of pain. With the exception of the dull agricultural market town, the town consists of narrow and crowded lanes full of cottages

built of rubble or stones without cement, which could give no protection against the bad weather. In front of these cottages, open drains ran full of animal and vegetable refuse decomposing into disease. The cottage itself has no more than two rooms, in one of which the whole family has to sleep with water streaming down the wall and with no hearth or sufficient ventilation outlets even in winter. Such inhumane conditions often lead to the affliction of the young with the killing typhus (54). Moreover, Disraeli gives a live example of a suffering family when he describes the life of one of the tenants at Mowbray. Warner was the tenant of a single chamber furnished only with mattresses, a check curtain and a few utensils. The man worked at his loom for twelve hours daily "at the rate of one penny each hour"(119). He had no food, no fuel, no furniture and "four human beings dependent on him". He wonders why he and six hundred thousand subjects of the Queen are "driven from our innocent and happy homes, our country cottages that we loved, first to bide in close towns without comfort, and gradually to crouch into cellars"(120). He knows that the Capitalist has replaced the labour and ingenuity of man with the work of a slave at a machine. The man is awakened from his reverie by the arrival of Sybil to rescue the sick wife and the children from starvation. Sybil was enticed by the vicar of Mowbray to do this charitable work (118-129).

It is this same picture of misery which Gaskell portrays when she describes life at Manchester during the same period. As the family of the Bartons and Wilsons were returning from "the Grey Heys Fields", which reminded them of "other beautiful times and other occupations which now absorb the population of the neighbourhood"(Gaskell 1), they passed through "many half-finished streets, all so like one another,., until they turned out of one of these innumerable streets into a little paved court, having the backs of houses at the end opposite to the opening, and a gutter running through the middle to carry off household slops, washing

suds, etc" (4). Not only was this gloomy condition of the poor in the surrounding environment, but it also penetrated their homes since it was clear when George Wilson called John Barton to the rescue of the feverish Davenport and his hungry family. They lay in a filthy dark cellar, where "three or four little children were rolling on the damp wet brick floor, which the stagnant, filthy moisture of the street oozed up"(32).

In consequence to all those miseries, both writers show their interest in the Chartist Movement, which could in turn lead to a revolution. Chartism was a working-class movement. It started in 1836 and became more active between 1838 and 1848. It aimed at gaining political rights and power for the working classes. The six goals of this movement were: "a vote for all men (over 21), the secret ballot, no property qualification to become a MP, payment for MPs, electoral districts of equal size, and annual elections for Parliament" (Chartist Protest). Chartists presented several petitions, but they were all rejected. Disraeli expressed his belief in the revival of the role of the parliament in *Sybil* as asserted:

In a parliamentary sense, that great party has ceased to exist; but I will believe that it still lives in the thought and sentiment and consecrated memory of the English nation... Even now it is not dead, but sleepeth; and, in an age of political materialism, of confused purposes and perplexed intelligence, that aspires only to wealth because it has faith in no other accomplishment, as men rifle cargoes on the verge of shipwreck, toryism will yet rise from the tomb over which Bolingbroke shed his last tear, to bring back strength to the Crown, liberty to the Subject, and to announce that power has only one duty: to secure the social welfare of the PEOPLE.

(273)

Gaskell in *Mary Barton* shows the same interest in this movement when she talks about Barton getting ready for his trip to London as he was chosen as one of the delegates to present the workers' petition to the Parliament in 1839. Visitors came to his house the night before his departure; each one of them had a complaint that they wished him to report. However, he replied to all their demands summing up their terrible conditions in a few lines as he said:

I've not much chance o' telling 'em all yo say; what I think on, is just speaking out about the distress that they say is nought. When they hear o' children born on wet flags, without a ragt' cover 'em or a bit o' food for th' mother; when they hear of folk lying down to die i' th' streets, or hiding their want i' some hole o' a cellar till death come to set 'em free; and when they hear o' all this plague, pestilence, and famine, they'll surely do somewhat wiser for us than we can guess at now. (49)

Support for Chartism increased at times of economic depression and hunger. There was rioting in Stockport because of the high rate of unemployment and people came close to starvation. In Manchester workers protested against wage cuts, wanting "a fair day's pay for a fair day's labour". The "Plug Plots" were a series of strikes that happened in Lancashire, Yorkshire, the Midlands and parts of Scotland in the summer of 1842. Workers removed the plugs from the boilers in order to bring factory machinery to a stop (Chartist Protest). Though revolution was the natural outcome of such oppressive practices, Disraeli does not recommend it as he depicts the Hell-cats of Wodgate as rioters who "destroyed and ravaged; sacked and gutted houses; plundered cellars; burned rate-books in the market-place, cheering and laughing amid flames and rapine" (Disraeli 391). For Disraeli, Chartists created a movement without a leader; thus, the real solution to the problem was not within their reach.

Then, how can the divide between the two nations be eliminated? For Disraeli, it seems that the secret lies in the creation of a more responsible and a reformed aristocracy; represented by the character of Egremont and Trafford as the novel ends with a passionate call to the youth of England to take up this initiative:

That we may live to see England once more possess a free Monarchy, and a privileged and prosperous People, is my prayer; that these great consequences can only be brought about by the energy and devotion of our Youth is my persuasion. We live in an age when to be young and to be indifferent can be no longer synonymous. We must prepare for the coming hour. The claims of the Future are represented by suffering millions; and the Youth of a Nation are the trustees of Posterity. (499)

This view is supported by Walter Gerard who is a Chartist, yet his rightful claim on the Mowbray estate stems from his inherited right to rule since-throughout the novel-hints are given that the Gerards are descendants of nobility through their aristocratic and noble appearance. Robert O’Kell suggests that his family is “an ancient family, probably of Saxon roots” and this view is reinforced by the fact that Sybil’s dog is named Harold (263). Disraeli was considered the leader of Young England that existed from 1842 to 1846. This group consisted of young Tory aristocrats who “despised utilitarianism, middle-class liberalism, and centralized government,” and “yearned for an idealized feudal society in which Church and aristocracy combined to protect the people’s rights” (Schwarz 81) Reformation and reconciliation seem to be the only means to solve the problems of England as it is also asserted in *Mary Barton* when

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