

## **Female Agency in *Mary Barton* Versus Male Supremacy in *Sybil***

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### **Abstract**

The industrial novels tackle the effects that industrialization had on the working classes. Both *Sybil* and *Mary Barton* are industrial novels that deal with the social upheaval that dominated the hungry forties. Both novels highlight the gap between the rich and the poor. Although Gaskell and Disraeli converge in their recognition of the problem, they diverge in their treatment of the subject matter. Disraeli's novel *Sybil* is an attempt to restore an idealized world view of patriarchal relationships. In contrast, in *Mary Barton* Gaskell sought to explore and subvert the traditional role of women in Victorian society.

### **Key Words**

**Industrial Novel- Chartism- the Question of England Novels-  
Industrialization – Patriarchy**

The industrial novels or the Question of England novels tackle the devastating effects the advent of industrialization had on the working classes and the polarization of society that ensued. Robin Colby highlights the common features of the industrial novels:

The industrial novels all share some common characteristics: the detailed documentation of the suffering of the poor, the reproduction of working class speech through dialect, criticism of the effects of industrialism, the discussion of contemporary reform movements like Chartism and Utilitarianism, and some attempt ...at a solution to social problems. (18)

Both *Sybil* and *Mary Barton* are industrial novels that deal with the social upheaval that dominated the hungry forties. Elizabeth Gaskell focuses on the plight of urban workers, whereas Disraeli exposes the conditions of both urban and rural workers. Both *Sybil* and *Mary Barton* refer to the "impassable gulf" between the two nations; the rich and the poor. Disraeli depicts the vast chasm separating them:

Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws. (74)

Similarly, the gap between the rich and the poor is highlighted in *Mary Barton*:

John Barton's overpowering thought, which was to work out his fate on earth, was rich and poor; why are they so separate, so distinct, when God has made them all? It is not His will that their interests are so far apart. Whose doing is it? (198)

Although Gaskell and Disraeli converge in their recognition of the problem, they diverge in their treatment of the subject matter. In *Sybil* Disraeli criticizes the aristocracy and the church for abandoning their duties towards the poor. He heaves criticism at the old aristocracy through his depiction of Lord Marney; "[t]he countenance of Lord Marney bespoke the character of his mind; cynical, devoid of sentiment, arrogant, literal, hard" (50). The representative of religious authority is also the target of Disraeli's attack; "[t]he Vicar of Marney, who had been presented by himself, was his model of a priest: he left everybody alone" (54). He also adds that the "Holy Church at Marney had forgotten her sacred mission" (62). Lord Marney explicitly expresses his role in augmenting the suffering of the agricultural labourers: "I build no cottages, and I destroy all I can; and I am not ashamed or afraid to say so" (121). Disraeli sheds light on the incendiarism that Lord Marney refuses to admit its political significance and chooses to view it as dissociated from his policies: "[t]he torch of the incendiary had for the

first time been introduced into the parish of Marney; and last night the primest stacks of the Abbey farm had blazed, a beacon to the agitated neighbourhood" (63). In *Sybil* Disraeli promotes the ideas of his political party. He calls for restoring an old world order through a reunion between the Church and the enlightened nobility. The patriarchal relationships that dominated the former feudal system are idealized. This is why *Sybil* is also categorized as a political novel. Disraeli has the credit of starting this genre.

Disraeli tried to restore an idealized world view of patriarchal relationships. In contrast, Gaskell sought to explore and subvert the traditional role of women in Victorian society. Due to Gaskell's unorthodox approach, some critics dismiss *Mary Barton* as a personal or provincial novel rather than a novel concerned with the social problems of its time. In response to this argument, Robin B. Colby argues that "Gaskell is writing about social problems...specifically identifying the problems within Victorian culture that are faced by its women. As feminists have long insisted, the "personal" ...what goes on in home, in the domestic sphere...is political" (18). Gaskell's contribution is remarkable; she chooses a woman to be the heroine of a novel on Chartism and industrialization. Gaskell differs from her contemporaries who assign the central role to a male character; a trend which dominated the industrial novels as Colby remarks:

Frequently the plot is developed around a sensitive protagonist, usually male, whose moral, intellectual, or emotional development spans the course of the novel and whose romantic attachments are troubled and conflicted. The protagonist is typically searching for a way to express or mitigate the dissatisfaction of the working classes as he takes his role as their spokesperson. (18)

Gaskell's choice of a female-oriented quest rather than a male-oriented one enables her to explore new possibilities for women.

In both novels romance is intertwined with politics, Chartism and the gap between classes. Thus, the borders between the personal and the political are overlapping. Moreover, the characters are entrapped in their social positions and their actions are linked to their classes. Thus, gender relations and class relations are intersecting in *Sybil* and *Mary Barton*.

The female heroines in both novels go through the experience of loving and being loved. However, one heroine is on the passive recipient side of a relationship, while the other is on the active side as she rescues Jem. The reversal of roles is manifest. Mary, unlike Sybil, does not wait till Jem comes to her rescue, she rescues him and insists on being his liberator: "She longed to do all herself; to be his liberator, his deliverer; to win him life, though she might never regain his lost love by her own

exertions!" (300). Mary is an independent character. She refuses help and accepts it according to her own terms. Moreover, Mary's autonomy is highlighted as she goes through different experiences on her own to save Jem. First, she goes to the railroads;

Common as railroads are now in all places as a means of transit, and especially in Manchester, Mary had never been on one before; and she felt bewildered by the hurry, the noise of people, and bells, and horns; the whiz and the scream of the arriving trains. (332)

Then, she takes a boat with two rough sailors alone at Liverpool:

Mary had not understood that Charley was not coming with her. In fact, she had not thought about it till she perceived his absence, as they pushed off from the landing-place, and remembered that she had never thanked him for all his kind interest in her behalf; and now his absence made her feel most lonely-even his, the little mushroom friend of an hour's growth. (345)

Third, she speaks openly in the court and expresses her love for Jem upsetting all the calculations of the audience at court and offending the Victorian readers' sense of propriety.

On the other hand, the portrayal of Sybil is a reinforcement of the sharp division between male and female roles as Sybil is an epitome of the

"Angel in the House" trope that characterized the depiction of "good" women in Victorian literature. Egremont describes her as an ethereal creature, he perceives her as a "seraph" or "ministering angel" and she is referred to by the narrator as "the Religious". Thus, Sybil does not belong to this world.

Unlike the heavenly Sybil, Mary Barton is deeply entrenched in our world and its earthly concerns. She belongs to a working class family and her life is full of conflicts and hard work. Mary has a say in the kind of job she wants and the type of man she loves. Mary is a human being of flesh and blood; she errs, recognizes her mistake and tries to redress it. Unlike Dickens's Louisa who is punished eternally for one mistake, Mary is granted a second chance as she regains Jem's love.

In *Mary Barton*, Elizabeth Gaskell engages with the norms of the Victorian middle class culture through offering alternatives. The solidarity between the working class people and the partnership that marriage represents in this class together with the dignity and independence women attain through work contest and bring to question the dominant Victorian culture that attributes to women idleness and passivity as markers of femininity. In contrast, Disraeli overidealizes Sybil in a way that renders her inept to deal with any challenging situation. She is totally helpless in the public domain. Unlike Sybil, who is in need of a savior, Mary takes the initiative and refuses to let Job

Legh carry out the task of going first to Liverpool to find Willy as an alibi. She insists on being the person who acts. Mary's determination to save Jem is translated into immediate action, she refuses the passive state of waiting,

She could not bear the idea of deputing to any one the active measures necessary to be taken in order to save Jem. She felt as if they were her duty, her right. She durst not trust to any one the completion of her plan: they might not have energy, or perseverance, or desperation enough to follow out the slightest chance...Besides (only that was purely selfish), she could not endure the suspense of remaining quiet, and only knowing the result when all was accomplished. (330)

Mary does not conform to the expectations of society of women. Mary's dilemma of saving her lover without implicating her father is finally resolved due to her perseverance and strong will.

Gaskell relegates the male spokesperson-John Barton- to the background. It is Mary's story, not his. The effect of the demoralization of the Chartists on women is highlighted. Gaskell's frame of reference is not "the sensitive consciousness of a male protagonist", but the effect of the social conflicts on women. Mary chooses her own job, handles the house matters, takes care of her father and proves to be an able person. The poor family in *Sybil* was offered help by the priest and Sybil in



Egremont's presence. Gerard helps his fellow workers, but later we will find out that he does not belong to the downtrodden people. In contrast, in *Mary Barton* the poor stand for each other and form a network of help and support; they do not receive any external help. John Barton felt desperate because all his fellow workers lived in miserable conditions, not just himself and this was what prompted him to commit the crime. Although Barton's murder of Harry Carson is a vicious act, this murder signifies the ability of the poor to cause harm and inflict pain and suffering on the privileged. Harry Carson was chosen due to his active role in combatting the strikers. Thus, John Barton commits a crime not as the injured father of Mary, but as the rejected and humiliated Chartist whose people live in destitution. Gaskell's narrative choices reflect her sympathies; they lie with the working classes. John Barton kills for a social cause; not a personal issue.

The negotiation of space signifies one of the major differences between *Sybil* and *Mary Barton*. In *Sybil*, the places allowed to Sybil are limited. She lives in seclusion in the cloister. Then, she moves to her father's cottage and she wants to be a nun. When Sybil ventures to go out of her familiar surroundings, she is in great danger. Thus, the public space where Sybil could exist is quite limited. Moreover, she is often escorted. This sheltered and secluded life of Sybil contrasts sharply with Mary's life. Mary on the contrary presides over her house, goes to work- which

allows for her short-lived romance, goes to Liverpool by train, goes to court, takes a boat with two strangers and spends the night among strangers in the sailor's house.

Thus, *Sybil* represents a narrative of a female character shaped by the patriarchal ideology of a male Victorian writer, while *Mary Barton* represents a female character depicted by a female writer who subverts the norms of Victorian domesticity. *Sybil* establishes male supremacy and authority as the norm- especially that of the young nobility. On the other hand, *Mary Barton* establishes female agency and autonomy- especially of working class women- as an alternative to the confined existence of women dictated by the ideological norms of the upper classes. In conclusion, *Mary Barton* gives voice to the silenced stories of working women that are marginalized in the grand narratives of industrialization and modernization. *Mary* and all the working class women constitute the other to *Sybil* and all the "Angels in the House" of the Victorian mainstream ideology as aptly remarked by Elizabeth Langland,

Although the nineteenth-century novel presented the household as a moral haven secure from economic and political storms, alongside this figuration one may discern another process at work: the active management of class power. The novel, in sum, stages the conflict between the ideology of the domestic Angel in

the House and its ideological Other (the Worker or Servant), exposing through women represented in fiction the mechanisms of middle-class control, including those mechanisms that were themselves fictions, stratagems of desire. (8)

In *Sybil* the overidealization of Sybil is balanced with a demonization of the working classes. Disraeli describes the unnatural birth and growth of Devilsdust. Moreover, he describes the group of insurgents who resort to violence as Hell-cats. Although Disraeli's representation of the working classes aims at enlightening his readers, attributing demonic characteristics to them further alienates them. On the other hand, Gaskell succeeds in giving a warm sympathetic view of the working classes. There is hope and there are chances of mobility; they are not doomed if not for the benevolence and chivalric interference of the younger nobility, as Disraeli proposes.

In Gaskell's novel the roles of men and women are overlapping. Men are represented as carrying out roles traditionally seen as women's domain. They take care of babies, share in house chores, and take part in nursing and care giving. They play an active role in the domestic space, not just the public. John Barton carries Jane Wilson's baby and asks her to comfort his wife. Jem, at Mary's bedside is compared to a kind mother, not father; "She smiled gently, as a baby does when it sees its mother tending its little cot; and continued her innocent, infantine

gaze into his face, as if the sight gave her much unconscious pleasure" (410). This upsetting of traditional roles of men in Victorian society is subversive of the patriarchal mainstream discourse which rests on the polarization of male versus female. Another stereotype is shattered when Jem admits that Mary's judgement is better than his: "Then again he felt as if she were the best judge, and knowing all (perhaps more than even he did), might be forming plans which his interference would mar" (413). He abstains from interfering with her plans so as not to spoil them. This reflects how much confidence he has in her sound judgement. The fact that Mary chooses Jem and not Harry contrasts sharply with the expectations of society which deems Harry far superior to Jem due to his wealth and social class;

For you see it was a fixed idea in the minds of all, that the handsome, bright, gay, young gentleman must have been beloved in preference to the serious, almost stern-looking smith, who had to toil for his daily bread. (380)

Gaskell subverts another stereotype dominant in Victorian culture; the depiction of the fallen woman dying homeless and friendless. She allows the fallen Esther to die at home. Moreover, Esther has the privilege of having sympathetic hearts at her side. Thus, Gaskell's subversive intake in *Mary Barton* contests the ideology that Disraeli strives hard to reinforce in *Sybil*.

Finally, it is interesting to note how the Empire features in both novels. In a novel written by a statesman, the Empire resembles a parliamentary seat taken unrightfully by a Lord who made a fortune in India and has nothing to contribute to the state. This implies that the English who leave for the colonies are unwelcome if they come back although their money buys them political power. The centre is allowed to interfere with the margin, but the margin is not allowed to play a role in the centre, even if the player is English. Moreover, Disraeli refers to heathen and savages. This reflects how the native populations were viewed by the conquerors. Disraeli expresses his astonishment at the religious movements that sent missionaries to redeem the unbelievers in the colonies when a whole community in Britain was never guided to Christianity proper. This again reflects his views that the English are more deserving than the people in the colonies.

In contrast, the Empire emerges in a novel by a female writer as denoted by absence rather than presence. The sons of the sailor are involved in the Imperial enterprise; "Mrs Sturgis led [Mary] into a little room redolent of the sea and foreign lands. There was a small bed for one son bound for China; and a hammock slung above for another, who was now tossing in the Baltic" (371). Gaskell presents the Empire through depicting a mother who keeps herself busy while waiting for her sons. Mrs Sturgis, the sailor's wife, tolerates bravely the absence of her sons:

What's the use of watching? A watched pot never boils, and I see you are after watching that weathercock. Why now, I try never to look at it, else I could do nought else. My heart many a time goes sick when the wind rises, but I turn away and work away, and try to never think on the wind, but on what I ha' gotten to do. (371)

This reminds us of all the waiting mothers and wives who suffered immensely while the Empire was expanding and whose suffering is marginalized in the grand narrative of conquest. Conversely, the Empire represents hope and new chances for Jem and Mary. Mrs Wilson's ignorance of the location of Canada is stressed when she expresses her belief that it is a way beyond London. London is the centre and the farthest place she could think of. Every other place is identified by how far it is from London. I argue that it is worthwhile to explore the imperial subtext in the industrial novel and to highlight the conditions at "home" that implicitly inform the Imperial novel. The following passage is a case in point. Gaskell expounds the point of view of both the workers and the manufacturers during the strike:

So class distrusted class, and their want of mutual confidence wrought sorrow to both. The masters would not be bullied, and compelled to reveal why they felt it wisest and best to offer only such low wages; they would not be made to tell that they were even sacrificing capital to obtain a decisive victory over the

continental manufacturers. And the workmen sat silent and stern with folded hands, refusing to work for such pay. There was a strike in Manchester. (101)

This passage shows how the competition between Britain and other European powers affected the lives of the workers. This goes contrary to the view held by critics who view the history of Britain as separated from its colonies or those who study the Empire without connecting it to the domestic scene.

*Mary Barton* ends happily in the New World, whereas *Sybil* ends happily in Britain. Thus, Gaskell's approach is more inclusive than Disraeli's. Disraeli excludes all other spaces except the homeland which is part and parcel of the patriarchal ideology that his novel consolidates. *Mary Barton* ends with Margaret restoring her vision; a woman is being empowered as Colby argues. *Sybil* ends with Egremont marrying Sybil after her noble ancestry is revealed which refutes the argument that Disraeli presented earlier through Egremont's conversation with Sybil concerning the possibility of their marriage despite the class differences. The old world order is established and maintained as the union between a working class woman and an aristocrat is still inconceivable.

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