T.C.
İSTANBUL ÜNİVERSİTESİ
SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ
BATI DİLLERİ VE EDEBİYATLARI ANA BİLİM DALI
İNGİLİZ DİLİ VE EDEBİYATI BİLİM DALI

DOKTORA TEZİ

THE REPRESENTATION OF SOCIAL CLASSES IN THE 19TH CENTURY BRITISH LITERATURE

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İSTANBUL, 2016

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DOKTORA
TEZ ONAYI

ÖĞRENCİNİN;

Adı ve Soyadı	:	Barış ÖZKUL	Numarası	:	2502090049
Anabilim Dalı / Anasanat Dalı / Programı	:	BATI DİL. VE ED. ANABİLİM DALI İNGİLİZ DİLİ VE ED. BİLİM DALI	Danışmanı	:	Doç. Dr. Murat SEÇKİN
Tez Savunma Tarihi	:	21.06.2016	Saati	:	11.00
Tez Başlığı	:	"The Representation of Social Classes in the 19th Century British Literature"			

TEZ SAVUNMA SINAVI, İÜ Lisansüstü Eğitim-Öğretim Yönetmeliği'nin **50. Maddesi** uyarınca yapılmış, sorulan sorulara alınan cevaplar sonunda adayın tezinin **KABULÜNE** OYBİRLİĞİ / OYÇOKLUĞUYLA karar verilmiştir.

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ÖZ

THE REPRESENTATION OF SOCIAL CLASSES IN THE 19TH CENTURY BRITISH LITERATURE

BARIŞ ÖZKUL

Bu çalışma, 19. yüzyıl Britanya edebiyatında toplumsal sınıfların temsilini geleneksel cinsiyet rollerinin inşası ve yeniden üretiminde tezahür eden sosyo-psikolojik örüntüler çerçevesinde incelemektedir. Sınıf ve cinsiyet rollerinin iç içe geçtiği bağlamları psikanalizin kavramlarıyla sorunsallaştıran tarihsel bir girişin ışığında inceleme konusu olarak 19. yüzyıl ortasında yazılan iki toplumsal-sorun romanı seçilmiş, ardından bu iki roman 19. yüzyıla alternatif bir sınıf ve cinsiyet anlatısıyla yeni bir ışık düşüren çağdaş bir romanla karşılaştırılmıştır. Seçilen yapıtlar Elizabeth Gaskell'ın *Mary Barton* (1848) ve *North and South* (1855) romanları ile John Fowles'un *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) romanıdır. Bu üç roman 19. yüzyıl İngiliz işçi ve madun sınıflarına mensup kadın karakterlerin sınıfsal ve cinsel gerçekliklerine, öznel deneyimlerine ilişkin alternatif anlatıları temsil etmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Toplumsal sınıf, cinsiyet, psikanaliz, sosyo-psikolojik örüntüler.

ABSTRACT

THE REPRESENTATION OF SOCIAL CLASSES IN THE 19TH CENTURY BRITISH LITERATURE

BARIŞ ÖZKUL

This study investigates the representation of working-class women in early to mid-19th century British literature. In the light of a historical introduction problematising the contexts in which class and gender roles intertwined by application of a concept from psycho-analysis, the madonna-whore complex, the framework of socio-psychological patterns emerging in the construction and reproduction of traditional female-gender roles is analysed. The novels selected are two of Elizabeth Gaskell's contemporary "social problem" or "industrial" works, *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855), and John Fowles' "post-modern" revised reconstruction, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). Each of these three novels represent the English working and subaltern class realities and subjective experiences of female characters in the early Victorian period, in Gaskell's case as delineated by the madonna-whore complex, and in Fowles' as retrospectively liberated from it.

Keywords: Social class, gender, psychoanalysis, socio-psychological patterns.

PREFACE

This study investigates the representation of working-class women in the mid-nineteenth century English novel, with a specific focus on the conventional gender roles that confined female characters to the traditional boundaries marked by the prevalent, "Victorian" ideology. During the first part of the nineteenth century, England witnessed the rise of the working classes as a self-organised social category, from the mid-1830s through the 1840s. This development was a particular concern for several novelists, who tended to write a distinct type of novel, namely, the "industrial" or "social-problem" novel, which focused on working-class struggles, with Chartist actions a familiar theme.

While these novels were somewhat radical in terms of their political content as it related to structures and experiences around industrialisation, they were considerably less so regarding their concern with issues related to gender. Guided by the paradigm of "benevolence ideology," based on the conception of a supposedly restored organic societal unity among all social classes, the industrial novels tended to reproduce patterns informed by the patriarchal gender ideology. The main problematic of this dissertation is constructed around one of the most pervasive of these patterns, the *madonna-whore complex*, as characterised by Sigmund Freud and revised in the light of a feminist approach by Julia Kristeva.

In the introduction, I have outlined the concepts and issues involved in this complex in order to clarify its patterning within a theoretical framework; as the crucial term for my problematic, this unfolds the power relations determining the representation of the working-class female characters in the social-problem novels. Then, in Chapter 1, I have contextualised the place of working-class women in terms of the roles they played at the mid-century, focusing on the intersection of gender and class. In the second and third chapters, I have demonstrated how the madonna-whore complex was expressed in two of the industrial novels by a female author, *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, by Elizabeth Gaskell; essentially, their working-class women lose their agency in the narrative, and the female proletariat is thereby

reduced to domestic angel (through marriage) or else cast out (vilified and killed off). In the fourth chapter, I have looked at a dissolution of the complex by John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*; as a retrospective using a post-modernist temporal narrative, this is read as reclaiming Victorian female subjectivity in an emancipatory direction.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Murat Seçkin accepted me in the department and encouraged me to write this thesis. Without his support, intellectual collaboration and never-ending patience, this study would not have been possible. A special thanks goes to him for his invaluable guidance and support. While attending to my PhD courses, Prof. Dr. Esra Melikoğlu, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Yıldız Kılıç and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Canan Şavkay enriched my vision with their lectures, articles and insights. Prof. Dr. Melikoğlu and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Yıldız Kılıç made me aware of the importance of John Fowles and *the French Lieutenant's Woman* and thus were crucial to the development of content in this thesis. I owe them many thanks. Prof. Dr. Murat Belge allowed me to access his personal library and motivated me throughout the process. He was always an inspiration for me. Andy Hilton read the whole text and made important suggestions. My parents, Salih and Gülten, gave their love and provided moral and practical support. I dedicate this thesis to them.

İstanbul 2016

Barış Özkul

ABBREVIATIONS

Ibid: Ibidem (Aynı eser/yer)

op. cit: Opere citato (Adı geçen eser)

Ed. by: Edited by (Editör/yayına hazırlayan)

Trans. by: Translated by (Çeviren)

p./pp.: page/pages (sayfa/sayfalar)

CONTENTS

CHAPTER IV

***THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN*: "THE WHOLE VICTORIAN AGE LOST"**

INTRODUCTION

In his famous classification of the mid-Victorian "industrial novels", Raymond Williams appears to have expected a degree of radical consciousness as unlikely among authors in the nineteenth-century as it was uncommon. Realism – of some kind – operates in his critique as an aesthetic criterion, but together with frequent recourse to Marxist formulations, like "reification", "alienation" and "praxis", and his own term, "the structure of feeling", which seems also to designate an outlook shared by a number of writers in a period that is determined by such factors as their historical consciousness, class allegiance and social status. A common inheritance of traditional ideological patterns, like the conception of organic social unity and the mid-Victorian myth of social balance among the different classes, further influences the novelist's representation of social class, according to Williams.

Williams' insistence upon the relationship of literary and social facts, in terms not only of content but also of mental structures, might have useful explanatory value within the scope of sociological investigation, but it falls short within the context of literary analysis. As Alistair Duckworth remarks, "the trouble with Williams' approach is that it equates aesthetic quality with progressive consciousness and thus begs serious questions regarding the relationship of literature to ideology".[1] Like György Lukács's similar demand for "concrete potentiality"[2] or Lucien Goldmann's distinction between "actual" and "possible" consciousness – and, moreover, with his expectation that novelists develop "transindividual subjects" in their fiction[3] Williams' assumption of a necessary link between literary production and societal situation effectively introduces a sociological judgementalism into literary reflection, which, has the effect of diminishing, discrediting and even disrespecting authors who failed to present their texts within the requisite ideological framework.

[1] Alistair Duckworth, "Raymond Williams and Literary History". **Papers on Language and Literature**, Fall 1975, No: 11, p. 4.
[2] György Lukács, **Realism in Our Time**, New York, Harper & Row, 1971, p. 132.
[3] Lucien Goldmann, "The Sociology of Literature: Status and Problems of Method", **International Social Science Journal**, Vol. XIX, No: 4, 1967, pp. 493-517.

For Williams, "literary history is not a matter of placing individual works in relation to traditional topics, genres or styles", but rather one of "evaluating the ways in which English literature records through its eras the slow transformation of English society", with this specified as that "from feudalism through agrarian and industrial forms of capitalism to the democratic capitalism of today".[4] Pushed to its natural limits, this approach demands from a novelist that s/he accord with a specific theory of societal development, one that has been formulated outside the realm of art and literature and which will thus tend to instrumentalise and reduce literary (indeed, all artistic) production to the course of social history and dictates of the dialectic.

Nevertheless, contrary to this external imposition of a socio-political conceptualisation, in his specification of the 'industrial novels', Williams delineates a category, that did, in fact, play a definitive, historical role in setting the terms of debate on social issues and related questions in mid-19th century Britain. This may, therefore, be taken as a starting point, even if not necessarily an analytical tool. As Cazamian points out in the same vein,

> "[A]n intellectual movement accompanied and expressed the social agitation between 1830 and 1850: namely, the formation of a new emotional and intellectual response to the subject of social relations on the part of English society and the middle class in particular… One distinct type of novel emerged around 1830, and survived until the end of the century. It maintained a close relationship with political agitation, and its developments mirrored the phases, and to some extent took on the pattern, of the Victorian era. The social 'novel' with a purpose appeared with the early-Victorian period in 1830, and until about 1850 exhibited characteristics analogous with it."[5]

From our contemporary vantage point, Williams' retrospective cannot escape the shortcomings of a modernist analytic. Most obviously, perhaps, as a cultural critic writing before the conversion of his discipline by the feminism of the Western women's liberation movement and the critical perspective of gender studies,

[4] Raymond Williams, **Marxism and Literature**, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 3-4.
[5] Louis Cazamian, **The Social Novel in England 1830-1850: Dickens, Disraeli, Mrs Gaskell, Kingsley**, Trans. by Martin Fido, London, Routledge, 1973, pp. 5-6.

Williams is pretty much unaware of the basic problem with the representation of social classes in these novels: the invisibility of working-class women. Critics – not especially, but certainly including Raymond Williams – have generally been rather silent about the (lack of) ways in which female workers are represented in Victorian fiction.

One may argue that in Victorian fiction, social problems ultimately became identified as gender problems, insofar as the return of the female to the domestic was imagined as a cure, or even panacea, for the woes of the new social configuration, be that imagined in terms of satanic mills or city riots and public disorder. The arrival of industrialism was a particular concern of the urban and urbane, of the nouveau riche and (petite) bourgeoisie, who, unlike the landed gentry, had to rub shoulders with the working-classes who therefore needed, for example, a civil police force to protect their material capital (property). In other words, the middle class (rather than, strictly, the upper class) male perspective dove-tailed with that of radicals and libertarians in desiring a restriction of female opportunity.

The employment of the working-class female as societal problematic does not necessarily employ a single form of this. On the contrary, it may be expected to assume a variety of representations, accordingly as each particular situation to be remedied or issue to be resolved was imagined in the terms of, that is, the perspective of the bourgeoisie, aristocracy, gentry, radicals, etc. Thus, Patricia Johnson, in her book full of valuable insights, *Hidden Hands: Working-Class Women and Victorian Social-Problem Fiction*, argues that

> "[N]ineteenth-century social-problem fiction is imbued with and permeated by a variety of what may be regarded as women's issues, ranging from sexual harassment at the workplace and on the street through the political involvement of working class women in the mass movements of the day such as Chartism, Luddism and unionism, and to the attempts to imprison them within the domestic sphere. The lower-class

> and underclass female does not stand as simple sign, performer of a single meaning."[6]

And the historian Cora Kaplan remarks, in the same vein, that 'representations of working class women' in the nineteenth century "are far from univocal…they are peculiarly incoherent and contradictory."[7]

Nevertheless, before attempting to propound a particular analytical line to be derived from these "incoherent and contradictory" representations, it might be argued that there was a consensus in terms of the depiction of working-class women as based on the patriarchal morals shared by the authors of the industrial novels (and quite obviously inherited by their successors to the extent that they almost became a literary norm in the masculine novelistic imagination of the *fin-de-siècle*).

This consensus suggests that, becoming increasingly visible in the public sphere after the arrival of industrialism, female workers were treated (symbolically imbued) with the traditional fear of female sexuality. Indeed, within the framework of Victorian society's hierarchical sexual configuration, this masculine complex was expressed as a deeply entrenched and all-pervading fear:

> "The specter of women living and working outside the confines of their families stimulated deeply entrenched fears of women's unrestrained sexuality. These fears were exacerbated by the explosive growth of factory towns and cities. Numerous urban and public health reformers, as well as those writing about the factory system, focused on the real or imagined autonomy of the working-class women in conjunction with the 'promiscuous mingling of the sexes' as both a social problem and a metaphor for social order."[8]

[6] Patricia Johnson, **Hidden Hands: Working-Class Women and Victorian Social-Problem Fiction**, USA, Ohio University Press, 2001, p. 12.
[7] Cora Kaplan, **Genders**, London, Routledge, 2008, p. 22.
[8] Sonya Rose, **What is Gender History?**, London, Polity Press, 2010, p. 199.

Or rather, social *dis*order. Citing episodes from the mid-Victorian fiction, Patricia Johnson demonstrates how this fear took on different forms of subjugation attempting to, sometimes paradoxically but certainly forcibly instil the order threatened and damaged or at least represented thus in the social consciousness, with these forms "ranging from sexual harassment in the work place and on public streets… from religious millenarian rhetoric that expressed desires for sexual – as well as class – equality; to the violence that shadowed the attempts to enforce working-class women's domesticity".[9]

Here, instead of focusing on Patricia Johnson's problematic and investigating the hierarchical bifurcation of power constructions and operations in a general context based on women's common experiences of sexual harassment or imposed dependency on male authority, I will try to reframe the representation of working-class women in the Victorian fiction with a different theoretical postulation indebted to a particular aspect of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory and Julia Kristeva's theoretical insights on the historical definition of female/maternal identity. Regarding the former, I will do this neither unaware of the irony of another reclaiming of the work of this *founding father* (of psychoanalysis) for a feminist/gender perspective (historically appropriated but also vilified within the feminist cannon), nor also unattracted by the rather apt, I would say, circularity implied in the usage of that which was informed by and thus continued much of the same, deeply patriarchal conditioning that genderised the Victorian class issue in the industrial novel in the first place (and all the more so since Freud specifically developed his "talking cure" for "neurosis" from elaborations on the case studies of the women he treated as the female medical condition (diagnosis) of "hysteria").

Unquestionably one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century in laying the foundations for the discourses and disciplines of depth psychology, Sigmund Freud presented many concepts and theories in his ground-breaking works relevant to an understanding of the "modern self". Accordingly, the psychoanalytic interpretation of literary texts has, on a different plane, contributed greatly to the

[9] Johnson, **op. cit**, p. 3.

analysis of the individual as a social construct shaped by both the general ideological apparatus of modern society and its own unique, lived history, embodied in the Bourdieuean sense of *habitus*.

Emblematic of Freudian methodological significance, and famously adapted by French philosopher Althusser in dialogue with Freudian theory, the term "over-determination" articulates the idea that all social practice is multiply determined and all individual action has more than one cause, which results in contradictory characters and applications. The crucial implication of Freudian psychoanalysis here is that an act performed at one level (consciously intended, the avowed) might be interpreted as a psychoanalytic effect at another (unconsciously intended, the disavowed), be this expressed in a straightforward fashion or otherwise. The complex reality of the modern self, according to Freud, includes this fundamental, dyadic distinction of different levels signifying different aspects or phases of human behaviour and defined by the deep-seated, inner conflict between the ego (identified as logos, the rational, conscious self) and id (expressed through the essentially irrational, pre-conscious libido, and identified with repressed urges linked to infant and child sexuality).

Related to this basic approach, two of Freud's articles, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality", published in 1905, and a short piece entitled "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life", from 1912, assume importance for an understanding of the dynamics of male sexual dysfunction and, in this respect, become relevant to my problematic permeating class and gender identities in the social-problem novels. Freud noted that in his clinical practice, "psychical impotence" was a highly prevalent complaint.[10] For him, this was a dysfunction caused by an inhibition due to an unresolved neurotic fixation leading to an arrest of the libidinal development.

[10] Sigmund Freud, **Selected Writings**, Ed. by Robert Coles, London, Norton Books, 1996, p. 22.

The degree of this arrest (total or partial), Freud argued, determined the severity of what was the ensuing sexual dysfunction and concluded in a splitting of the tender (egoistic) and sexual (libidinous) dimensions of sexuality. Crucially constitutive for Freud of his central Oedipal complex and its associated castration fear, this is also projected through the madonna-whore complex. The psychological projection then becomes a social one insofar as it is "acted out". Reified (as though real), it is thus realised, (moves from the imaginative of phantasy to the material of society) and a large-scale, cultural neurosis emerges. Thus, the *civic* respectability and the sexuality of woman are separated and, opposed and, thereby, both over-determined and yet stripped of meaning.

This neurotic phenomenon, or the *madonna-whore complex*, as it is psychoanalytically constructed, is introduced as the crucial term for my own problematic, since it unfolds the power relations determining the representation of the working-class female characters in the social problem novels and their reproduction of the ideology of gender and family dominant in the mid-Victorian age. The representation of working-class women in the industrial novels grapples with the restricted options offered within the frame of madonna-whore complex, that is, in order to reconcile with it at the end.

Female options under these conditions are reduced to the one-dimensional tropes of virgin (respectable, pure, outside of normal life) or prostitute (fallen, loose, deserving degradation), oppositionally expressive of the original split (or, anthropologically, of the genderisation of cosmic dichotomies, like civilised-wild). The female options of the madonna-whore complex operated both symbolically – through the structuring of representations of the feminine culturally available to, for instance, novelists – and materially – in the psychic construction of society and the place of women and thus men (although really men and thus women) in this, then to be represented especially in "realist" schools, as, for example, in the socially (self-) conscious portrayals of Victorian industrialism.

In Freud's rather pessimistic view grounded in his matrix of intra-psychic conflict (as opposed to, say, the later human fulfilment model developed by Jung), the erotic life of "civilised people" tends to be characterised by varying degrees of expression of this complex. Transposing this to the social and representational realities, we may say at least that the Victorians at least were locked within the conflict and the split (even if subsequent generations were not so destined). The madonna-whore complex as a finding from psycho-social inquiry (or, social psychoanalysis), therefore, presents a particularly apt way of understanding the condition of women and the feminine of the (mid-nineteenth century) period, grounded, as it is, in the patriarchy (Freudianism) that developed out of and expressed it (at the literal end of the century and metaphorical *fin de siècle*).

Elaborating on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis in a theoretical attempt to delineate a critical feminist psychoanalysis, Julia Kristeva argues that the madonna-whore complex originated in the Patristic age of Christianity and varied across the ages in line with the changing assumptions offered by the religious discourse. For Kristeva, unlike Freud, the cult of the Virgin Mary played a practical role for women to the extent, even, that it is perceived as a satisfactory discourse on motherhood. Since the the mid-nineteenth century novel gives its female characters rather complex and ambiguous reactions to the restrictive options imposed within the frame of the complex –on the one hand pushing women-at-odds with-motherhood to the margins of society, and on the other, providing an illusion of safety and feeling of happiness to the *voluntary* mothers (restoration of some kind of natural order in the happy ending as reconciliation)– then Kristeva's perspective deserves attention.

Before clarifying Kristeva's approach to the myth of virginity, her alternative account of psychoanalysis should be analysed in order to grasp her basic theoretical premises and the significance she attributes to the maternal function in individual development.

In traditional accounts of psychoanalysis (developed principally by Freud and Lacan), it is maintained that the child's entrance into culture requires separation from the maternal body. Both Freud and Lacan assume that the infant becomes a cultural

subject as soon as he/she separates himself/herself from the maternal body due to the paternal threats expressed as the fear of castration. Tragic loss experienced by the infant due to this painful separation is gradually replaced by words and signification process, that is to say, the culture itself.

In Freud and Lacan's psychoanalytic model, the infant's fulfilling this separation is defined as a move away from the neurosis and taken as the starting point of self-consciousnesss. For Freud, the separation process begins with the male child's Oedipal situation**,** his struggle with the father for the mother, and ends with his sacrificing his love of mother which has erotic overtones (Jung also introduced the consideration of same-sex competition through the mother-daughter Electra complex, which is not a concern here). For Lacan, the path to separation begins at the mirror stage and comes to an end with the utmost obedience to the paternal law; as Lacan laconically expresses it, "*nom du Père*" (the name of the father) is "*non du Père*" (the no of the father)".

Hence, in Freud and Lacan, the paternal function is described as the pre-condition of language acquisition and socialisation.

Questioning the reduction of the maternal body to a mere passive object in Freud and Lacan, Julia Kristeva shifts the emphasis to the maternal *function*. She argues that as a foetus in the womb, long before the infant confronts the paternal law (law of father), the relationship of the individual to the maternal body takes on a permanent, and more importantly, *significative* dimension. For Kristeva, the maternal body regulates and monitors the infant's access to the self-consciousness from the beginning. Therefore, there is "the law before the law" (of the father).

As a corollary to this, Kristeva presumes that it is the maternal function that is at the root of language and culture.

Although Kristeva agrees with Freud and Lacan on the separation of the infant body from the maternal body, she thinks that this separation is not fulfilled as a violent/forcible separation but rather as the emergence of another loving support

embodied in the "loving imaginary father." Otherwise, if the separation process is governed by laws and threats – as argued in the traditional accounts of psychoanalysis set in the cultural framing of the traditional anthropology (male initiation) – far from becoming free from the neurosis, argues Kristeva, even *more* people would be neurotic.

Kristeva's concept of "loving imaginary father" is, in Kelly Oliver's words, "a mother-father" conglomerate.[11] So the infant's entrance into culture with a "normal" psychology requires not the violent overthrow of child-mother unity by the law of father but rather the loving support of a hermaphrodite parent figure.

Then, having established her theoretical framework on these premises, Kristeva observes that the total negation of motherhood expressed with significant force in radical feminist currents might be an idealised misconception.

From Kristeva's point of view, motherhood *can* play revolutionary roles, given that and providing that it serves for the re-enactment and reunion of the primal mother-child relationship preceding the "abjection" of the maternal body. And, along with mothers, who are intuitively aware of the positive potential of motherhood, "artists [can also] gain access to the repressed maternal body through their work" – just as, in fact, "the mother gains access to the repressed maternal body through childbirth, which is a type of reunion with her own mother."[12]

It should, however, be noted that what Kristeva promotes in this context is not the classical marriage. She is not prone to support the constrictions of domestic norms as the necessary condition of motherhood. Rather, Kristeva thinks of the embracing of a motherhood/maternal identity as a radical challenge to the masculine ideology; insofar as and to the extent that this is constructed as an autonomous identity, then, mothers can subvert the domestic norms promoting childbirth only within the confines of a traditional marriage.

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[11] Kelly Oliver, **Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double Bind**, USA, Indiana University Press, 1993, 177.

[12] Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater", **The Kristeva Reader**, Ed. by Toril Moi, New York, Columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 28-35.

Thus, "women can take up the law [of mother] in revolutionary ways." If "the desire to have children is a sublimated incestuous desire for reunion with the maternal body," as Kristeva[13] suggests, then even from her marginal position within the social order, a woman can "challenge the symbolic element of signification merely by the law or reason as women."[14]

Kristeva's account of motherhood also stands as an alternative that might replace the madonna-whore complex with an inclusive identity. Inviting female sexuality to be unyoked from the law of marriage, Kristeva's emancipatory "madonna" embraces the long degraded whore and hence melts these two figures into an alternative female existence. By describing various aspects, roles and functions that the maternal figure can assume and in emphasising the radical ambiguity of motherhood, Kristeva constructs a new discourse and ethics for a female identity that excludes the well-worn binary oppositions.

On the other hand, the madonna-whore complex is not to be summarily dismissed as a minor trouble in Kristeva's model. Kristeva does analyse, within a historical framework, the traditional myths of female sexuality and virginity that contribute to the ever recurring madonna-whore complex.

Kristeva's approach to the myth of virginity is clarified in the article first published (in 1977) as "*Hérethique de l'amour*" and later[15] reprinted as "Stabat Mater" (the inspiration behind this title being the Latin hymn dedicated to the suffering of Virgin Mary, which opens with the phrase "*Stabat mater dolorosa*…", meaning "Stood the mother, full of grief…").

Kristeva argues that the "consecrated representation of femininity," which is absorbed by motherhood, started with the early, Patristic Age of Christianity and its concentration of the figure of the Virgin Mary. For Kristeva, Christianity is "doubtless the most refined symbolic construct in which femininity, to the extent that

[13] **Ibid.**, p. 35.
[14] Oliver, **op. cit**, p. 178.
[15] Kristeva, **loc. cit**. pp. 28-40.

it transpires through it and it does so incessantly, is focused on maternality."[16] This is still quite visible, in fact, with the iconography of the holy Mother-and-Child still prominent in the Orthodox Church (in which the Jesus narrative tends to complete or fulfil the Mary narrative but without ever superseding it, as Parts I and II of a whole), while the role of Mary and the mother in Catholic dogma and culture also remains paramount.

Paradoxically, the spiritual dimension of Christianity is predicated on the material being-body of Mary, cleared of sin. "Christ, the Son of man, when all is said and done is "human" only through his mother."[17] At the same time, Kristeva reminds that "the most intense revelation of God, which occurs in mysticism, is given only to a person who assumes herself as "maternal".[18] But this person is the de-sexualised mother of madonna-whore complex. Mary is stripped of her sexuality and sensuality repeatedly in the Christian theology with the help of Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Meister Eckhart, to mention just a few (Kristeva also cites the pagan roots of Virgin Mary cult, as a form distinct from the official ecclesiastical assumptions).

Kristeva observes that this reduction was the masculine appropriation and sublimation of Maternal:

> "Could it be that such a reduction represents no more than a masculine appropriation of the Maternal, which, in line with our hypothesis, is only a fantasy masking primary narcissism? Or else, might one detect in it, in other respects, the workings of enigmatic sublimation? These are perhaps the workings of masculine sublimation, a sublimation just the same, if it be true that for Freud picturing Da Vinci, and even for Da Vinci himself, the taming of that economy (of the Maternal or of primary narcissism) is a requirement for artistic, literary and painterly accomplishment?"[19]

[16] **Ibid**. p. 30.
[17] **Ibid**., p. 31.
[18] **Ibid**., p. 32.
[19] **Ibid**., p. 33.

To follow Kristeva's account, during the fourth-century asceticism, Christianity combined the Virginity cult with the damnation of sexual relationship and sexuality became associated and intertwined with death. As John Chrysostom vigorously observed, "For where there is death, there is also sexual copulation, and where there is no death there is no sexual copulation either."[20] Likewise, Augustine condemned the "concupiscence" and argued that Mary's virginity is the logical precondition of Christ's chastity.[21] At the Second Constantinople Council, convened in 1381 under Arianistic influence, the dogma instituted even came to assert the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity.

Kristeva observes that the virginity cult weaved around the figure of Mary is contrasted with Eve during the first centuries of Christianity. Jerome's letter "Death came through Eve but life came through Mary" and Iranaeus' declaration that "Through Mary the snake becomes a dove and we are freed from the chains of death" bear witness to this comparison, or contrast. Although she never states it explicitly, Kristeva locates the alternative potential of motherhood, at least implicitly, in the personality of Eve, who maintains her autonomy and does not bow to the rules of Abrahamic religions and obey their male God.

Kristeva focuses on the symbolic construction of motherhood in the figure of the Virgin Mary, citing many examples from the history of Western and Eastern Christianity. She demonstrates how even an artist like Dante contributed to the condensation of "gathering the three feminine functions (daughter-wife-mother) within a totality [Mary] where they vanish as specific corporealities while retaining their psychological functions"[22] (Dante exclaims, "*Vergine Madre, figlia del tuo Figlio*" [Virgin Mother, daughter of your son]).

According to Kristeva's account, the Virgin Mary symbolic developed into and through its analogy with and as the "noble feudal lady" of the mediaeval court and thus transformed into an image of power presented as a role model for women:

[20] **Ibid.**, p. 34.
[21] **Ibid.**, p. 35.
[22] **Ibid.**, p. 36.

> "This feminine power must have been experienced as denied power, more pleasant to seize because it was both archaic and secondary, a kind of substitute for effective power in family and the city but no less authoritarian, the underhand double of explicit phallic power."[23]

Kristeva observes that, in modern times, the Virgin Mary as cultish presentation of the traditional role model for women took on the form of feminine masochism associated with and translated into motherly grief:

> "Even though orality – the threshold of infantile regression – is displayed in the area of the breast, while the spasm at the slipping away of eroticism is translated into tears, this should not conceal what milk and tears have in common: they are the metaphors of non-speech, of a "semiotics" that linguistic communication does not account for."[24]

While emphasising the positive dimensions of motherhood, Kristeva thus demonstrates how Western social configuration and symbolic (or again, "semiotic") economy has restricted the maternal function to the restricted roles constructed in terms of the madonna-whore complex. She even criticises Freud for neglecting the problematic situation of motherhood, since although he diagnosed this complex for the first time, "among the patients analysed by Freud, one seeks in vain for mothers and their problems"[25] (In Freudian psychoanalysis the neurosis as sexual is inherently pre-pubertal. It renders the real life experiences of marriage or motherhood of the women irrelevant for Freud).

Consequently, for Kristeva the maternal role, the issue of motherhood is "an entire continent to explore, a black one indeed… [full of] points that are still resisting analytical rationality." Manifestly, not all kinds of motherhood can be diagnosed as the symptoms of madonna-whore complex. There might also be ambivalent maternal positions.

[23] **Ibid.**, p. 37.
[24] **Ibid.**, p. 38.
[25] **Ibid.**, p. 39.

Applying Kristeva's *internally* generated gender analysis along with Freud's psychoanalytic insights to the issue of class – later characterised by Williams in terms of the industrial novels – promises some interesting insights into the position of working-class women in literature.

Here, I will argue, therefore, that in the representation of working-class female characters, the social-problem novels of the 1840s quite coherently, albeit just as unintentionally, manifested the same madonna-whore complex in the person of their male protagonists and thereby reframed the Victorian norm of patriarchal domination within a paternalist problematic. This problematic presupposes the masculinist judgementalism that sunders the image of working class women and splits it into basically three character categories: (1) good, respectable, trustworthy, domestic (pure, angelic); (2) an innocent victim of circumstance, an object of a smear of false suspicion (3); bad, fallen, sexually promiscuous, corrupt, so morally unworthy and socially unrespectable (degenerate, dangerous).

Expressive of the male impotency embedded in the madonna-whore complex, these three categories subvert, each in its own way, the novels' claim to be the most progressive social actor during the Chartist decade. Indeed, as the terminology suggests, they are more evocative of the parallel religious doctrine informing this socially conservative aspect of nascent socialism that was to extend into that proper during the twentieth century, the tripartite division of paradise, purgatory and perdition. Indeed, the very framing of the complex, with the Madonna (mother, the Virgin Mary) standing for heaven and the whore (devil, the Gregorian Mary Magdalene) as hell, overtly presents the psychoanalytic in Christian terms.

Viewed thus, the fate determined by male will becomes the narrative of the vulnerable or threatened woman and her chance for redemption through a socially described purgatory on Earth. Structurally, this offers an interesting reversal of the Marxian analysis implicit in any class perspective, since rather than the synthetic as dynamic resolution to the ongoing dialectic (resulting in inevitable progress), there is the stasis of final conclusion derived from the dualistic potential (resulting in a fixed position, either one or the other). In fact, we may say, the class logic of the former is

diametrically opposed to the gender logic of the latter. And indeed, the industrial novelists' seemingly progressive conception reaches its own limits when gender issues are at stake, parallel to the limit of the struggle for enfranchisement as the rights of *men*.

To start with three novels may suffice here as brief illustrations for introductory purposes.

In Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), we learn from the heroine's father, the factory-worker John Barton, that the lower classes face great difficulties in industrial Manchester (and in fact all across England), and it appears as less an occupational than a moral necessity that one such as he, who is depicted as valuing his working-class affiliations more than anything else, supports the Chartist movement. Accordingly, the narrative voice of the novel describes the squalid conditions under which ordinary people are forced to live with ample, sometimes brutally realistic detail.

On the other hand, however, the same character objects to his daughter Mary's working in a factory, since he finds it morally degrading for a woman to be placed in such an environment, and so apprentices her to a milliner. One notes, therefore, that this is positioned as a decent occupation in terms of the conventional femininity imposed by the pervasive domestic ideology of the time.

Clearly, the radicalism of John Barton has tightly defined gender limits, which bind him to the world of patriarchal value rather more closely than to the sense of justice of the working class agitation with which he identifies and which he would thus have us all believe in. Here, the madonna-whore complex manifests as a masculine approach to the working-class female protagonist in the form of the middle category of vulnerability and the representation of the young innocent who needs a male protector figure. In *Mary Barton*, it is the very domestication and diminishment of working-class women in terms of this complex that questions and can thus be read as subverting the central argument of the novel. Thus, the feminine is removed from its (her) potentially ambiguous role in the male-defined class

conflict by the male character in the guise of saviour, and he purporting to save the female but really preserving the male locus of interest.

In *North and South* (1855), Margaret Hale implies some kind of moral superiority, to the extent that she makes a sacrificial act by intervening between the workers on strike and the employer Mr. Thornton. But Margaret's very existence, established on the basis of intervening in the male world, takes on a different turn as she starts to reflect the male character's views and domestic ideology through her relationship to John Thornton. Her relative autonomy evaporates. Characterising Margaret with her "maiden pride," unremitting "shame" and "angelic purity" rather than the brave and free-spirited female of a retrospective reclaiming for a contemporary narrative, the narrative voice condemns her to the verdict of her times. At the end, she lacks any kind of independent vitality, her goodness identified with her compliance to the domestic ideology, extended to the paternalist eschatology of the novel.

Margaret Hale as the symbol of angelic immunity, desexualised to her most inner depths (until marriage) and subjected to the male authority either as an ideal daughter or wife (madonna) is counterpoised with Bessy Higgins, the factory girl who resists to forsake her freedom to compromise with the dominant patriarchal and domestic ideology and ends up with a fatal lung disease. In other words, Bessy is placed in a position of possible opposition. Depicted as a somewhat rebellious, outcast female (nihilistically thinking that "such a life as this is not worth caring for") and thus associated in some measure with the transgressive danger of denying the gender and class roles determined for her, Bessy Higgins has the potential to provide a real counterpoint to the madonna of the novel, Margaret Hale. However, in the last analysis, by placing her in the domain of the vulnerable and quite irredeemable – insofar as the woman in this role is doomed to be the "innocent *victim* of circumstances" – and thus sacrificing even her ambivalence to a one-dimensional trope, Elizabeth Gaskell confines *North and South* to the restrictive moral schema of the domestic ideology.

Another text exploring the same theoretical problematic but written in 1969 with a plot set in the Victorian age, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* provides a certain parallel with and thus offers an instructive reading of the contemporary novels. Recognition of the characterisation in this work of *declassé* female protagonist Sarah Woodruff as defying the masculinist norms of the Victorian age is crucial for its understanding. Although Charles Smithson first sees Sarah as the object of his desire in a natural setting, where "she is sleeping amongst the flowers, looking vulnerable, innocent and idyllic",[26] she subsequently and incrementally plays on the concepts of the obedient Victorian female image until the romantic heroine figure is twisted beyond recognition, upon which the narrative is realised as a quest and reaffirmation of her female identity.

From perspective of the novel, the new woman depicted by Sarah represents a clever exit from the Victorian fallacy (that a woman has to choose between the madonna/whore options). By posing for the pre-Raphaelites (probably naked, at least partially), Sarah shows that the line between the conformist view of femininity (the social role of wife/mother) and its denial (although paradoxically confirmation) in prostitution (bodily condemnation in the male imagination) is actually rather thin. Sarah Woodruff is a self-imposed outcast, and in this way she is able to remain free from the force of socially defined danger. Hers is a form of passive existentialism – and her position brings us to the relationship between the female body and sexuality.

The Victorian conception takes sexual desire to be biologically normal for the male but socially abnormal for the female: should a woman desire or imply sexual desire in any way, she is made into a lesser object. Cultural order is guaranteed by imprisonment of the body, and the transgressions of the body are punished so as to (re-)establish the boundaries of the body; hence, the naturalisation of taboos. Parallel to this and symbolically constitutive of domestic order – and thence from the domicile to society more broadly in the mid-Victorian age – family and home went with merit and character and hard work and modesty as some of the prime features of

[26] John Fowles, **The French Lieutenant's Woman**, London, Vintage, 2004, p. 119.

the masculine code. In a further bifurcation, they put the female in charge of the household domain and the male in charge of "worldly" business (like Ernestina's entrepreneurial father Mr. Freeman in *The French Lieutenant's Father*). The domain of the home as inner is thus structurally distinct and opposed to that of the outer. Victorian sex in the context of family was a representationally functional act of procreation. Therefore, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*'s male characters – including Charles Smithson – implicitly identify Sarah Woodruff with hysteria and the *whore*.

Betrothed to Charles Smithson at the beginning of the novel, on the other hand, Ernestina Freeman is emblematic of the dominant masculine code. But Ernestina does not know what to think of her sexuality, and she identifies with the female image imposed upon her by her father and family. She is mundane and hence a knowable woman (standing for the repressed Victorian female figure), thereby acting as foil to the mysterious and strange Sarah. Thus is the madonna-whore complex completed in the novel (even the physical features of these two female characters are counterpoised, with Sarah having a "wide-mouth and shiny eyebrows", whereas Ernestina has a "small chin and oval face" in harmony with the conventional beauty of the Victorian age).

Following the ideas outlined in this introduction, therefore, in this thesis I shall reinterpret the various Victorian episodes, narratives and characters of the industrial novels as re-enactments, instances and expressions of the madonna-whore complex. The split as defined by Freud will be investigated for expressions in this fiction genre that position it in the context of a supposedly radical egalitarian politics but which actually just reproduces the conventional gender iniquity. The dysfunctional operation of the patriarchal will thus be identified in its literary composition of the three models for women – angelic, endangered, fallen – as directed specifically by the men around them and generally by the male-defined society, which, in forcing the madonna-whore choice, reveal the limits of the pre-feminist/gender-informed polemic, while paying particular attention to the middle-

category ambiguities and possibilities delineated by female endangerment and male protection.

CHAPTER I

CLASS AND GENDER IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY

For a long time, British Marxist historians narrated the political history of the 19th century as the story of a common identity known as "the proletariat." Instead of defining certain subcategories corresponding to ethnic, linguistic or gender identities, they promoted a general category, also referred to as "the masses" and "the People." In this homogenised amalgam defined solely by (a single perspective on) economics, gender was not conceived of as entwined with class but as something different, standing apart, separate. Demarcated thus, class and gender had no decisive effect on each other and remaining as distinct parts of the social configuration. The methodology of Marxist historians was limited to the general categories that resolved in the simple binary of capital and labour:

> "Much labor history focused on institutions (unions and parties), organizations, and leaders who were public men and who succeeded in dominating movements and institutions. Thus the historiography of the labor movement was for many years dominated by the story of the formation of socialist parties, labor parties, socialist party congresses, and the rise and fall of labor leaders… Labor history was written as a drama of triumph or defeat."[1]

The structural discriminations of this rather narrow methodology had its historical roots in the political vocabulary created by the revolutionary and progressive movements of the post-French Revolution era. Inadvertently or otherwise, these movements served to propagate the masculinist prejudice that counterpoises the virile masculinity of progressive ideas to the femininity/effeminacy of aristocratic corruption and decadence. "Workingmen's votes would bring to the political system

[1] Laura L. Frader, Sonya O. Rose, "Introduction: Gender and the Reconstruction of European Working-Class History", **Gender and Class in Modern Europe**, Ed. by Laura L. Frader, Sonya O. Rose, USA, Cornell University Press, 1996, p. 8.

moral purity, 'manly virtues' rather than the 'effeminacy of a debased aristocracy, and a disinterestedness as opposed to corruption'".[2] As a corollary to this, manhood was redefined as progressive and revolutionary virtue and hence became the *raison d'être* of the discourses reproduced by movements like Corresponding Societies of post-Revolution era Britain.

While attempting to disseminate the idea of revolution across the Union during the first decade of the nineteenth century, the Corresponding Societies nurtured the notion of manhood to the extent that they verbally defended the basic tenets of domestic ideology and its grounding in gender discrimination:

> "The London Corresponding Society tried to appeal to workingmen as husbands and fathers. Trying to encourage flagging activity in 1797, the L.C.S. asked delinquent members if they stopped attending meetings because "the pittance of the Labourer well provides him with Food, comfortable clothes, and fills his little Cot with cir'cling pleasure… They must respond, it claimed, to the 'voice of reason, and the tears of suffering humanity…in the name of …your famished wives and weeping children, to rally around the standard liberty' and prove 'by your virtuous, peaceable, and manly conduct, that you are worthy of being free.'"[3]

Similarly, radicals like William Godwin sustained the same vocabulary, and so much so as to complain that "the dissipation and luxury that reign uncontrolled have spread effeminacy and irresolution everywhere."[4]

Indeed, radical movements and individuals alike were far from immune to the masculinist/patriarchal discourse characterising the dominant ideology. As Iain McCalman notes, the situation was almost disastrous in this aspect:

[2] Keith McClelland, "Rational and Respectable Men: Gender, the Working Class, and Citizenship in Britain", **Gender and Class in Modern Europe**, p. 283.
[3] Anna Clark, "Manhood, Womanhood and the Politics of Class in Britain, 1790-1845", **Gender and Class in Modern Europe**, p. 270.
[4] As cited in Clark, **op. cit**, p. 271.

> "At the beginning of the nineteenth century, various of the ultraradical leaders were indicted for rape and brothelkeeping. Yet they went on the offensive by attacking supporters of the government and soldiers as effeminate dandies of uncertain gender."[5]

The basic paradigms provided by this Marxist historiography and the radical tradition it drew on were limited according to the partiality of the grand narratives, which draw the caricature of the working classes in the guidance of assumptions referring to ideological absolutes rather than objective realities. The working classes were not, therefore, grasped as a multifarious complexity generalised as a historical entity but rather treated as an immutable, singular essence behaving *en masse* in accordance with its class interests. This narrow perspective was detrimental since, in reality, there were numerous historical dimensions and variants of language, culture, gender, "colour" and faith and more besides all continuously informing and shaping the daily lives of the working classes.

This problematic situation was characteristic of the pre-feminist age in social theory, no doubt. Although, as a radically new perspective in social theory, the history of feminism might go back as far as Mary Wollstonecraft, and as a deeply disturbing rupture among the entitled, the women's movement sent a shock through the higher echelons of society with the Suffragettes, gender analysis and its concomitant politics only really gained its profound influence with feminism in the 1970s. As Catherine Belsey on the new analysis notes, "Criticism was not a matter of recognizing meaning; it was rather about openly acknowledging how each reader produced meaning for himself or herself," with the result that "If this argument is accepted, the question of ahistoricality vanishes."[6] It was only with the new approach to culture and history that this paradigm shift, as it may be regarded, occurred, and which, as such, pertained also to class. More generally, the confluence of feminism, post-structuralism and literary theory contributed greatly to a critique and

[5] As cited in Clark, **op. cit**, p. 272.

[6] Catherine Belsey, **Critical Practice**, London, Routledge, 1980, pp. 67-82.

reconstruction and thus the rewriting of working class history. Sonya Rose and Laura Frader summarise this vital development thus:

> "Historians who stress the importance of gender as a fundamental feature of social relationships have challenged the models and assumptions of 'traditional' labor and working-class history. With gender as a focus of research in working-class history, the foundational assumptions we have discussed become problematic. Gender analysis leads historians to question how such crucial categories as 'workers', 'wages', 'skill', 'men', 'women', and 'class' have been socially and culturally constructed."[7]

As a part of this development, feminist scholars increasingly tended to focus on the literary case history of the social problem novels, demonstrating how the gendered identities and issues are assembled and represented in these texts. As Francis O'Gorman observes,

> "In the 1980s, the most important feminist contribution argued that key facts about social problem fiction – that it was a genre invented and prolifically explored by women – had been masked by male-centred literary history and a male-dominated canon. Later feminists concentrated on the gender politics represented in the texts, arguing that women's entry into the public domain of politics was transgressive in Victorian culture and novelists were aware of this taint."[8]

In this framework, gender came to provide an analytical category inflected by as well as influencing conceptions of class, race, ethnicity and other social categorisations, one that enabled a theoretical approach exploring how sexual difference and restricted options of gender are used to construct and justify forms of power.

In the light of the crucial findings of the feminist researchers, therefore, we might argue that gender roles were a significant factor functionally shaping the configuration of the social classes in nineteenth century Britain. Women structured

[7] Rose, Frader, **op. cit,** p. 20.
[8] Francis O'Gorman, **The Victorian Novel**, Londra, Blackwell, 2002, p. 186.

and organised social life through their influences on social behaviour, cultural practices and political confrontations, and, paradoxically, through their absence and passivity as well as their active presence. Indeed, "as feminist historians have maintained, gender is present even when women are not". [9]

Since the political and social participation of working class women had pioneered a crisis of manhood that would eventually express itself in the madonna-whore complex of the social-problem novels (the main problematic of this work), a brief overview of the gender and class position of working class women in nineteenth century Britain will help us contextualise the matter in its historical wholeness.

1.1. Women and the Public/Private Split

Until the eighteenth century, the public sphere was under the domination of a male ideology that allocated this space to public opinion, citizenship and the participation of men. Women had no right to participate in this gendered arena, which was occupied by "rational," economic and autonomous male actors reproducing the social life and the wealth of country. The public sphere was gendered male. The private sphere, on the other hand, was gendered female and dualistically conceptualised as "the domain of 'natural feminine attributes: emotion, nurturance, domesticity and piety'". [10] This engendered view of society as divided into two separate spaces was at the same time, a hierarchical one, and it was emblematic of the patriarchal imagination that takes women valuable as long as they are imprisoned to the domestic sphere.

Even Marx and Engels, who were critical of bourgeois ideology, reproduced this division by identifying the public sphere as the primary domain of productive forces and thereby the main area of social inequalities. Instead of problematising the

[9] Rose, Frader, **op. cit,** p. 21.
[10] **Ibid.**, p. 12.

private/public split, their thinking about politics located social actors in the public sphere and grasped the problem of family as the mere extension of the hierarchical order of productive forces in capitalist societies. Even though, for both of them, the gender hierarchy was a socially constructed problem, they were not able to escape their times and attribute sufficient attention to the inner dynamics of this problem.

When the order of the traditional gender hierarchy started to become undone by the accumulative logic of capitalist production pushing women into the public space (factories, for instance), many men became exposed to the symptoms of impotency due to the unaccustomed phenomenon of mixed gender that they could not easily make sense of. As Mary Pooves observes "two assumptions – that work was gendered and classed – reinforced the connection between work and moral contamination".[11] For instance, in the *Condition of the English Working Class*, Engels reports the protest of one of the male workers who complains of having encountered female workers in public sphere:

> "(…) but now the t'world is turned up side down, Mary has to turn out to wark and I have to stop at home to mind Barns –and to Wash and Clea – and Bake and mend, for poar Lass— when she comes home at night, she is down up – thou nows Joe this is ard wark for one that want to Dow Different. Joe sead, "I Lad it is ard War", – Then poor Jack weept agane and sead that he wisht that he had never being Wead and that he never had being Born – but he did not think when Marred Mary that things would have corned to this, "I have meney a cry about it," said poor Jack."[12]

Somewhat astonishingly, Engels reacts to this situation thus:

> "Can one imagine a more senseless and foolish state of affairs than that described in this letter? It deprives the husband of his manhood and the wife of all womanly qualities."[13]

[11] Mary Poovey, **The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England**, USA, UCP, Chicago, 1988, 160.
[12] Fredrich Engels, **The Condition of the Working Class in England**, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 106.
[13] **Ibid.**, p. 107.

In other words, Engels' "revolutionary" vision does not appreciate a man's struggle when it involves dealing with the baby-care, or, in turn, a woman's when it means her working outside.

The private/public split and dichotomy were not limited to theoretical assumptions or debates. The separation of workplace and household was carried by real historical subjects, and the social construction of public sphere was based on a material exclusion – of women by men, and belonging both to the middle and working classes. Sonya Rose and Laura Frader summarises the process thus:

> "The notion of gender-related oppositional spheres of human life in political and social theory was also elaborated as ideology by historical subjects. It was developed by the European middle classes in the eighteenth century and then over the course of the century it was taken on by the members of the working class as well. The ideology of separate spheres identified male activity and masculinity with the public sphere of politics and the market and female activity and femininity with the private, domestic sphere of the household and reproduction. Nineteenth century discourse frequently invoked an idealized, orderly feminine private domain as the essential support for male activity in the public world and as a counterweight to the perceived evils of industrial capitalism, among them the increasingly visible participation of women in the labor force, especially in the insalubrious and exploitive conditions of factory labor. Nevertheless, the private sphere, though valorized, appeared to contemporary minds as a 'secondary arena' of social relations."[14]

Before leaping to the analysis of women working "in the insalubrious and exploitive conditions of factory labor," the middle-class women's situation should be examined in order to demonstrate the basic premises of the dominant middle-class ideology that produced the image of the ideal woman, which was extended as role model to the lower classes.

[14] Rose, Frader, **op. cit,** pp. 12-13.

1.2. The Middle Class Women in the Public Sphere

With the all-embracing work ethic of the industrialist age, middle-class women became active participants in the public sphere roughly from the 1800s onwards. Soon after these women gained an undeniable visibility, they uncovered a revolutionary potential that operated to undermine and overturn the traditional gender hierarchy in its challenge to the ideology of manhood and masculinist potency embodied in the reproduction of the private/public split. Images epitomizing middle-class women in the nineteenth century emerged that, despite their variety in terms of occupation and social status, became indicative of the redistribution of the social roles hitherto played by men: the nineteenth century witnessed the rise of female clerks, accountants and teachers, for instance. The increasing intervention of the middle-class woman in the public sphere was neither tolerated with the full consent of the general public nor welcomed as a step forward to gender equality. On the contrary, a set of stereotypes was unleashed that, to all intents and purposes, would bolster the distinction between, on the one hand, woman as sexualised and therefore indecent and, on the other, woman as suppressing her gender and so respectable (the very stereotypes that would become a component part of the imagination of art and fictions and provided some of the basic imagery pervading the mid-nineteenth century novel). But no matter what kind of stereotypes it produced, the increasing visibility and active role of middle-class women, the overlapping of gender and class in a hitherto unmatched way, was a significant event that deserves a historical account.

One common explanation for the rise of middle class women revolves around the economic analysis of the mid-century. Reductive as it is with its heavy emphasis on the rising trend of consumption in the mid-century, this explanation pointing to the phenomenon of conspicuous consumption as the underlying reason for the social participation of middle class women did add a new dimension to the relation of dependency between genders. For Mary Poovey, however, this type of explanation is limited, inasmuch as it repeats a “commonplace truism”:

> "The first of these truisms was that leisure represented social status. As capitalism pervaded all sectors of society, much of the burden of representing privilege was transferred from men's possessions or attributes (a landed estate, a title) to women's activities and appearance. The paradoxical place leisured women occupied in their conspicuous consumption made them uniquely appropriate for this role, for their consumption simultaneously fueled the home market and enabled them visibly to incarnate the leisure most men could not afford to enjoy. As a consequence, it was in his ability to support the leisured woman that the middle-class man could most clearly identify his success."[15]

As implied in Poovey's account, rather essentialist conceptualisations like "female nature" were promoted with a discrimination between "genteel" works appropriate for decent women and morally contaminated works degrading women – the recurring syndrome:

> "Discussing… female nature and the public and private spheres, feminists in the 1850s confronted two images that dissuaded most women from questioning their social role. One was the image epitomized in [the] prostitute but also… the image of a sexualized, and therefore vulnerable, woman who could not find protection in marriage or the law; the other was the picture of women "failing" at the moral mission that supposedly proved their superiority to sexuality simply because they sought economic independence."[16]

Tailoring this "nature" to Victorian mores and attributing an essence to the middle-class women led to the exclusion of women who deviated from this normative approach.

Rather interestingly, Mary Poovey demonstrates that even some feminist scholars, while trying to make sense of the middle-class woman's social standing in the nineteenth century, show a willingness to suggest that a woman might choose not to marry on the condition that she conceives of her work as a solution to the problematic set by the patriarchal ideology: "because there were not enough husbands or solvent fathers, women had to work; therefore there should be more

[15] Poovey, **op. cit**, p. 159.
[16] **Ibid,** p. 160.

jobs".[17] Here, the intimation is that these middle-class women were indebted for their relative autonomy to the lack of economically suitable men on whom they could depend. Once again, the terms are set by the men's situation rather than by women's autonomous decisions (to enter in the public sphere).

Although limited in number, the female authors of the nineteenth century disclosed a more prospective middle-class potential, as their effort to express themselves through novels partly succeeded in creating an awareness of and even sympathy for the independent and idiosyncratic aspects of the middle-class female existence.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf finds this crucial in respect of its role in the women's emancipation struggle:

> "(…) towards the end of the eighteenth century a change came about which, if I were rewriting history, I should describe more fully and think of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses… The middle-class woman began to write… When the middle class woman took to writing, she naturally wrote novels… The novel alone was young enough to be soft in her hands."[18]

The era's great Libertarian, John Stuart Mill, was also hopeful about this new prospect: "Literary women are becoming more freespoken and more willing to express their real sentiments", he noted approvingly, adding that "if women's literature is destined to have a different collective character from that of men… much longer time is necessary than has yet elapsed".[19]

Although middle class female authors like Elizabeth Gaskell produced a kind of sympathy for and sense of identification with the working-classes in their novels, however, the madonna-whore syndrome, which they inherited from the dominant ideology, restricted their thinking about the gender issue and led them to the

[17] **Ibid**, p. 161.
[18] Virgina Woolf, **A Room of One's Own**, London, Harper Collins, 1977, p. 14.
[19] As cited in Joseph Kestner, **Protest and Reform: The British Social Narrative by Women, 1827-1867**, UK, Methuen, 1985, p. 12.

dichotomous nexus of private/public-household/workplace-mother/prostitute and all its overgrown imagery of manly virtues and feminine vices.

Feminists like Mary Poovey have demonstrated the structural disadvantage of women's entry into the public realm by pointing out the logic of the reproduction of these binaries at the level of fictional works, that is, the oppositions necessarily assumed in the novels that they wrote. Importantly also, Poovey argues that the commercialisation of feminine authorship within the traditional representation of the domestic sphere was not such a progressive step forward:

> "I simply want to point out that the same process that helped clear the way for women to write and publish also erected barriers against all but limited access to such "self-expression." If the feminization of authorship derived its authority from an idealized representation of woman and the domestic sphere, then for a woman to depart from that idealization by engaging in the commercial business of writing was to collapse the boundary between the spheres of alienated and nonalienated labor."[20]

Nevertheless, for all its disadvantages, the encouragement that literature gave to middle-class women did sustain a productive social intercourse between these women and the social realities of other classes – which found its expression in the social-problem novels. Indeed, for many of the middle-class female authors themselves, their lack of direct contact with the working classes was also substituted by the activity of reading, and "it was by reading," indeed, "that women writers acquired the remarkable quantity and quality of information about workaday realities that they brought to literature".[21]

Thus, we see middle-class women as having entered the public arena but surrounded by an overarching worldview that defined what was pure, moral and decent and what was otherwise by direct equation with a complex of dualities that placed them in the position of the latter. It is entirely unsurprisingly that the female heroine's literary redemption would come through the resolution of this inherently

[20] Poovey, **op. cit**, p. 161.
[21] Kestner, **op. cit**, p. 13.

ambiguous, conflicting and ultimately untenable position with marriage, which effectively restored the social and cosmological order and afforded the authoress enough moral capital to write another day. The alternative that threatened the leading lady, as with the author and her female class alike, was ostracisation to a nether world of neither family nor position.

The situation and its rules were no different for working class women, whose labour was required in the public sphere now in addition to the private – in the factory and the shop as well as in domestic service of one kind or another – but who were relatively *more* vulnerable due to their class position. Working class and outcast women risked encounter with a more fateful consequence in every public setting where they needed to or were able to make their presence felt, when their voice was responded to with a masculinist and stereotyping response that came with full force, even and more tragically from their "fellow" working class men under the wheel of the inhumane conditions of nineteenth century capitalism. Suffering thus did not prevent these men from oppressing women, particularly those thrust into and desiring even to act in the public space – or, reverting to Marxism, it only led the working class to be set against itself. Thus, the madonna-whore complex took a different turn in the attitude of working class men to these women.

1.3. The Working Class Women in the Nineteenth Century

The modern proletariat in Britain was far from a homogeneous social bloc in terms of its political, ethical and behavioural responses. The more we dig into the complexities and subtleties of the Victorian age, the less easy does it become to identify sufficiently discriminating general categories or single solutions to the problems presented by the societal thrusts and displacements rent by the motivation of profit toward mechanised production and its concomitant urbanisation. Gender was no exception. Industrial capitalism implemented its consolidation through a

complex process based on a variety of dynamics touching on a dynamic complexity of gender and class positions.

Out of this process, on the one hand, came some new opportunities for working-class women equipped with an active social role. Following Foucault's notion of genealogical analysis, Carolyn Lesjak offers a notable explanation on this point. She argues that political uses of labour and pleasure overlapped during the nineteenth century as they underwent "extraordinary and transforming" changes. For Lesjak, "this genealogy also speaks to our contemporary situation: it historicizes what has come to be taken as a given – the divide between labour and pleasure – and offers possible models of a radically "other" social life in which labour and pleasure would be reinvented.[22]

But the new opportunities and the potential indicated by Lesjak were not realised to the extent that made it possible for working-class women to construct a fully autonomous sphere. And in fact, the relative autonomy working-class women gained in this period of upheaval in gender and class relations can easily be seen as just leading to the creation of new types of oppression. Certainly, while a degree of autonomy for the female workers was enabled by the opportunity to earn their own living as wage labourers, the industrial configuration also brought the unpaid/underpaid labour of servitude and widened the sphere of oppression. This did not merely take part within the old gender order, however, but also operated upon it:

> "Industrialism brought women along with men into factories to work for capitalist employers, and thus made it possible for women and men to compete for jobs. This development changed the presumption of sexual difference, which was a cornerstone of bourgeois society and a linchpin of nineteenth-century ideas of social order. Capitalist industry depended on the labor of women while at the same time it created the potential for a new female subject, one that contradicted the female subject at the heart of nineteenth-century gender ideology. Women workers, then, were anathema to laissez-faire political economy."[23]

[22] Carolyn Lesjak, **Working Fictions: A Genealogy of the Victorian Novel**, Durham, Duke University Press, 2006, p. 2.
[23] Sonya Rose, **Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth Century England**, London, 2003, p. 199.

But the potential that the new breed of capitalism created for the emergence of a new female subject encountered serious barriers, barriers that were most acutely felt at the site of their production – the workplace. As Kestner observes, the most conspicuous aspect of the nineteenth century economic transition was "the rapidity of increase in the manufacturing population"[24], and this imposed on the working-class women a secondary position in the economic organisation of society. With their segregations and power differentiations of "women's work" and male owners and managers, the workplaces of the nineteenth century were effectively – and often enough quite deliberately – organised to reproduce the traditional gender roles and inequalities in a new form, and within a new context of productive relations. Shedding light on this aspect of the masculinist hegemony, therefore, enables a pertinent insight into the working-class woman's position in the context of general class relations.

1.4. The Division and Organisation of Labour in the Case of Working-class Women

Women's subordinate status as low-paid labour in England dates back to the pre-industrial period. Sonya Rose gives an account of this gender inequality within the particular context of English history:

> "[I]n medieval and early modern England…wages for work normally done by women were significantly below those paid for work normally done by men. Even women who did skilled work were ill paid… [I]n the period just prior to the

[24] **Ibid.**

> mechanization of cotton spinning, manufacturers based spinners' wages on the assumption that spinners were supported by their husbands."[25]

Then, when the increasing labour-force demand following the introduction of machines driving production led to the employment of ever greater numbers of women, the ideology of separate spheres and its attending morality was transferred from the "cottage" to the factory and transformed from technique to technology, whereby the generally alienating effect of the latter was particularly gender informed.

One of the most manifest expressions of the continuing ideological influence was that a The distinction based on the supposedly "natural" traits and proclivities promoted by industrialists so as to justify the gender discrimination in the organisation of the work became one of the clearest expressions of the socioeconomic evolution of the traditional ideological influence: "skill and the ability to run large, complex machinery were widely believed to be 'natural' masculine traits," and "industrialists hired women for work that had already been defined as women's work," this comprising "jobs that were, relative to men's jobs, low paid and were believed to require little technical competence or training".[26] Thus, in her (pre-)World War I work, *Women in Modern Industry*, B. L. Hutchins[27] was arguing "There is no reason, save custom and lack of organisation, why a nursery maid should be paid less than a coal miner. He is not one whit more capable of taking her place than she is of taking his."

This "naturalist" conception relying on social distinctions constructed by physical attributes was indeed a structural feature of industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century. The technology was created and developed to reproduce the comprehensive operation of gendered codes in numerous manufacturing sectors, such that we can speak quite simply, almost literally, of the capitalist production of gender. First, the heavy industries founded on coal and iron did indeed involve heavy

[25] **Ibid**., pp. 23-24.
[26] **Ibid**., p. 24.
[27] B. L. Hutchins, **Women in Modern Industry**, London, Forgotten Books, 2015, p. 196.

work and were suited to those with a greater muscular capacity, which tended to be men; second, these workplaces were developed as men-only environments, so the natural tendency became distinguished as an absolute and then normatively ossified.

Not all machinery in all sectors was designed for men. The machines utilised in the carpet and lace industries, for instance, were materially light, suitable for a woman of average strength and hence widely used with working-class women. Yet, it should be noted that the crafts of carpet-making and lace-weaving were traditionally associated with women's domestic roles, so the presence of women in these sectors was not taken as indicating and qualitative development of new areas of skill so much as the "natural" extension of God-given domestic talents. This work was less highly valued, the women not expected to support a family and the pay correspondingly lower.

Despite working-class women's participating in the mass production stage of industrial capitalism, they were thus deprived of an active subjectivity in the production process both by the exploitive mechanisms of capitalist economy politics enforcing low wages and precarious conditions and by the common masculinist discourse assuming their lesser financial need and negating their productive skills by reducing them to "natural" talents derived from the domestic sphere.

The machinery deemed appropriate for the working-class woman – "ladies machines" was largely restricted to the textile sector; even so, its actual application implied a conscious choice related to simple gender economics, as Ava Baron underlines:

> "Machines were designed to be worked by skilled workers were built to be operated by people with the hands, height and weight of an average male, unless a manufacturer had in mind reducing labor costs by replacing men with women and therefore contracted with a machine maker to build a machine that would be suitable for bodies."[28]

[28] As cited in Sonya O. Rose, **Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth Century England**, p. 20.

In other words, employers searched for ways to replace male with female labour because it was cheaper. For their own profit, they struggled to sustain an instrumental and undifferentiating relation with the labour force in this sense. But no wonder how comprehensively utilitarian this strategy seems in terms of its undifferentiating approach to the sexes once the economic profit is at stake, the working-class women's class position were more aggravated than their male counterparts, for all intents and purposes – in the twentieth century a new social differentiation would bring another change in the organisation of labour force and racialised codes would accompany gendered codes.

Thus were the material-economic conditions of working-class women defined by industrial capitalism. However, capitalism has never been merely an economic system made up of *homo economicus*, but also has its cultural, moral and ideological dimensions – or, to revert to Marxist terminology, capitalism, as its predecessors, created its own oppressive "superstructure." Without this, indeed, it would be quite easy at the moment of a given economic crisis to supplant capitalism with a new, differently organised socioeconomic system.

Under the illusion that capitalism could be transcended merely on economic terms, many socialist states founded on the twentieth century could not develop, or more precisely, did not make any effort to develop a more effective system of representation that would enable the masses to participate in the political decision-making processes. Instead they deemed it sufficient to redistribute the monetary wealth (the industrially added value) in a *relatively* equitable way. One of the core ideas of socialist utopia – to enable the conditions that would maximise people's creative skills and human potential – was thus sacrificed to an economistic conception of society. In Althusserian terms, instead of replacing the over-determining arrangement of social antagonisms with a radically new arrangement, all the antagonisms were melted into one specific sphere, with obvious results. Thereby, working-class women's position in the workplace during the nineteenth century was not merely characterised by its economic conditions in narrow terms: on the contrary,

these were supported and reinforced by and suffused with and integrated into a thoroughgoing ideological indoctrination: paternalism.

1.5. Paternalist Ideology Surrounding the Working-class Women

While making use of modern technology and technical-productive forces to maximise its profits, the industrial capitalists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries resorted to a rather traditional legitimation in order to sustain the gendered structure of the workplace in transforming the factories into a miniature model of the traditional family. Although they not radically different in terms of their basic premises, unlike the aristocratic paternalism that made a general appeal to an abstract humanity embodied in the Christian conception of charity, the capitalist paternalism appealed to more pragmatic and conjenctural needs based on the target-instrument dialectics of production processes. From the Midlands, Edward Cadbury, management theorist and philanthropist son of the founder of the chocolate company, outlined his understanding of what quite this paternalism meant for businessmen:

> "The supreme principle has been the belief that business efficiency and the welfare of the employees are but different sides of the same problem. Efficiency depends not only on the physical condition of the employees, but on their general attitude and feeling towards the employer. The test of any scheme of factory organization is the extent to which it creates and fosters the atmosphere and spirit of cooperation and good-will, without in any sense lessening the loyalty of the worker to his own class and its organization."[29]

The organisation of the common workplace – factories in this case – was based on a metaphor of family in which the employer was the father, working men his sons and working women his daughters. "Underpinning paternalist practices was a vision of family relationships as hierarchical, gendered, harmonious and

[29] **Op. cit**, p. 38.

cooperative," writes Rose, and, "By creating such familial bonds between labour and capital, paternalist employers hoped to mute labour unrest they feared would bring down the social order".[30] The paternalist ideology expressed through this family metaphor gradually transformed into a managerial strategy; as it needed to be consolidated after the threat the Chartists posed during the 1830s and 1840s.

Accordingly, paternalist rituals added a communal dimension to the labour process. By creating an *effect* of solidarity, these rituals provided an ideological legitimation to the labour process:

> "Through their participation in the daily practices and ritual occasions of paternalism, working people came to accept capitalist relations of production as legitimate. By going on company-sponsored outings or picnics or taking an all-day excursion to the seashore on trains provided by the firm, and certainly by elaborating on the theme of the harmony between capital and labor in speeches and illuminated memorials at ceremonial teas and dinners, working people and their families paid tribute to their employers and to the legitimacy of the emerging capitalist order… As a gendered cultural construction modeled on a vision of "natural" family relationships, paternalism was a managerial style that helped to turn industrial capitalism into a way of life."[31]

As a result of the paternalist turn in class and gender relations, the spatial content of the ideology of separate spheres was re-defined and the boundaries between family and work melted in the pot of paternalism in order to enhance workers' loyalty. The masculine identity as head of the household and female as secondary, dependent on and integral to the masculine authority, were thus reproduced under the auspices of industrial paternalism. Envisioned as "daughters" of the factories, working class women were thus confronted with the two-fold exploitation of proletarianisation aggravated by paternalist norms.

[30] **Ibid**. p. 39.
[31] Sonya O. Rose, "Protective Labor Legislation in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Gender, Class, and the Liberal State", **Gender and Class in Modern Europe**, p. 195.

Industrial capitalism did not develop without resistance. After the initial response from the Luddites in the 1810s – initially to employers engaging in bad labour practises and thereafter to the socioeconomic ramifications of the technological project of capital more generally – the Chartist movements of the 1830s and 1840s sought, among other things, to expose the hollowness of the paternalist discourse. The essential illusion underlying the paternalist conception of industrial society was predicated on a metaphor of family set to normalise the inhuman and "alienating" effects of the working conditions under the guise of a natural, domestic harmony. Chartism posed an obviously modern challenge to this conception that could not be ignored by mobilising workers' unions across Britain for overtly political aims. The objection raised by Chartists to the hegemonic discourse was also at odds with the basic premises of the paternalist imaginary of the workplace as the extension of familial relations. In the name of the working classes, Chartists resisted being envisioned thus. But for all its contributions to the emancipation movement of the working classes, in terms of its approach to the gendered structure of class relations, Chartism was not different in *essence* from the partriarchal paternalism that informed the idealied social relations model of capital that it riled against.

1.6. Masculine Identity of Chartism

Even during the extraordinary period in which the English working classes organised themselves as a progressive political force under the guidance of Chartist movement were the working class women of the nineteenth century victimised. Born as a social response to the disastrous effects of New Poor Law (1834) on families, which were routinely divided and sent to different institutions, effectively making orphans out of children and childless adults out of parents, the Chartist movement

was propelled and supported by people primarily concerned with family issues. Working class women were numbered among these masses, but as family members, for which reason they were considered first in terms of a traditional social morality.[32]

As it developed, the political discourse of early Chartism defended the political mobilisation of women as a necessity in the development of a strong opposition to the ruling classes. Simply, the movement needed to maximise its greatest strength, it numbers. Moreover, in order to gather and organise and thereby realise the power of the mass as a whole rather than as a part (a half, in fact), activists needed not only to include women but also to locate the movement in an appropriate setting, which meant finding and developing non-male-only public spaces at which to assemble. James Epstein explains the issue and its resolution thus:

> "(…) women enthusiastically participated in the early years of Chartism. Indeed, Chartists needed their help in mass demonstrations, in gathering signatures for petitions, in strikes, and in exclusive dealing – that is, boycotting shopkeepers who refused to support Chartists. To draw women in, they tried to reshape the old masculine plebeian public of beershops and workshops into a more integrated, disciplined, orderly public sphere. As an alternative to the pub, they had tea parties, soirees, and processions attended by whole families."[33]

Naturally, the more "feminine" space of "tea parties" and "soirees" meant not only the inclusion but also the active participation of women. And the necessitated inclusion of women and encouragement of their intimate involvement in the cause led to a change of self-identity wherein their own concept of themselves expanded into the realm of the political. Basically, these women became empowered. Anna Clark puts a special emphasis on how the meaning of domesticity was altered by the conscious efforts of Chartist women:

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[32] Clark, **op. cit**., p. 275.
[33] Deborah Nord Epstein, "Class Antagonism and the Sexual Plot in *Mary Barton*", **Mary Barton**, Ed. by Thomas Recchio, New York, Norton, 2008, p. 223.

> "Chartist women fashioned a political identity for themselves as mothers, workers, and activists which differed in important ways both from the middle-class ideal of domesticity and from male Chartists' notions of women's role. Chartist women developed what I call a militant domesticity, justifying their actions in stepping outside the home by defining the responsibilities of motherhood not just as nurturing children in the home but as laboring to feed them and organizing to better their lives."[34]

These were the Chartism's undeniable contributions to the condition of working class women, no doubt. In terms of its contribution to liberation through the political dimension it added to the daily lives of working-class women, Chartism provided a radically new perspective. The overbearing weight of the restrictive gender hegemony was not easily repelled by this new force, however, and the "mainstream" policies Chartism adopted in its later years – during the second half of the 1830s and into the 1840s – were generally articulated within the confines of the inherited masculinist *ethos*. Similarly, manly virtues and an accompanying paternalist discourse started to inform the policies conducted by "official" Chartist organisations and shape the speeches of Chartist leaders.

For instance, the secretary of the South Lancashire Anti-Poor Law and a man of some renown in the movement during the 1840s, due in no small measure to his influential pamphlet, *The Rights of Women*, Reginald John Richardson advocated female suffrage and women's right participate in the political process generally, as equal citizens. Indeed, this naturally followed the logic of the movement's demands. At the same time, however, Richardson stressed that "women were formed to temper man and should return to domestic circles and cultivate finer feelings for the benefit of their offspring".[35]

This masculinist language was not limited to the individual discourse of Chartist leaders and formal establishment of principles. Once Chartism had founded its official organisations, it descended to and condescended with the traditional paternalist discourse, propagating the usual list of manly virtues and masculinist prejudices. As indicated by its name, for example, the influential London Working

[34] Clark, **op. cit**, p. 275.
[35] As cited in Clark, **op. cit**, p. 277.

Men's Association chose its members only from among those who possessed "the attributes and characters of *men*" (emphasis original), explicitly stating the laudable family norm that "little worthy of the name are those who… forgetful of their duties as fathers, husbands, and brothers…drown their intellect amid the drunken revelry of the pot house".[36] The very definition of a man, that is, focused on his role as breadwinner (the working man) for the family as dependent, with women specified thus, explicitly, as wives, and implicitly, as sisters. Thus was the family metaphor extended to the centre of a paternalist policy that identified political and moral integrity with being a good father/husband/brother. It was utterly unsurprising, therefore, that the six-point charter of 1838 prepared by twelve men (six MPs and six members of the London Working Mens's Association) and presented before Parliament the following year stated the first aim of the movement as "universal suffrage," which was defined, subject to basic conditions, as "every male inhabitant".[37] Reminiscent of the frankly romantic capitalist conception and organisation of the factory workplace as home to an imagined family sponsored by the owner as patron, this shift of emphasis in the movement to the manly attributes – or, its realignment with the hegemonic as its revolutionary potential was compromised in the focus on acquiring practical power – indicates that the two opposing parties of the mid-century, the ruling class (the landed gentry and nouveau capitalists) and the Chartists (the "trading and labouring classes," of "factory workers" and "agricultural labourers"), adhered to more or less the same ideology in respect of their paternalist vision of woman.

Gradually, the Chartists came to reproduce the male notion of separate spheres and take on a masculinist identity, thus leaving behind the optimistic radicalism of its early years. This manifested in movement's style of activity and its approach to women and their role in the organisation. The appreciation of the political participation of women as a critical threshold to be crossed in order to gain the mass of popular support that was a distinctive characteristic of the movement in the early years became sacrificed to belligerent argument conceiving the political

[36] **Ibid**.
[37] Norman Gash, **Politics in the Age of Peel**, London, Faber & Faber, 2013, pp. 30-45.

arena as a battlefield occupied by male actors. This became expressed, even, as violence in the name of women. Since the protection and consecration of family was traditionally integral to the masculinist rhetoric, one of the favourite slogans chanted by Chartists in this period was "For child and wife, we will war to the knife."

The new conception Chartism developed in line with its changing rhetoric about women characterised the working class consciousness by afflicting it with a deep masculinist bias which vindicated the ideology of separate spheres:

> "By manipulating the middle-class ideology of domesticity, Chartists insisted that the class-based privileges of separate spheres – citizenship for men, domestic motherhood for women – become universalized markers of gender. In the short run, manipulating the notion of domesticity was a powerful tool to pry concessions from the government, and indeed Parliament passed acts limiting the work of women and children in factories and mines in the 1840s."[38]

In the longer run, however, one also infers, the price may have been too high, since what was conceded was the humanistic principle of the Enlightenment, the inalienable (and thus civic) rights of the people (qua people, thus of *all* people). It is no wonder, then, that when the Chartists convened their congress in 1843, delegates used the word "males" instead of "persons" in the rules of the National Chartist Association, thereby "making clear that Chartism defined only men as political agents" – and leading a woman writing under the pseudonym "Vita" to protest that "women might withdraw from a movement from which an improvement of their status was not to be expected".[39]

[38] Clark, **op. cit**, p. 278.
[39] Jutta Schwarzkopf, **Women in the Chartist Movement**, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1991, p. 249.

1.7. The Paradoxical Situation of Working-class Women

As a consequence, the overall situation of working class women in the mid-nineteenth century in terms of their class position and gender identity remained largely ambiguous, not to say paradoxical. Since they were needed as a labour force and thus employed in hitherto unmatched numbers at the factories serving various industries, neither the factory-owning capitalists nor the working class men dared to ignore their presence. Encountering this increase in the number and the visibility of working-class women, working-class organisations like the Chartist unions initially promoted the participation of women. No matter how feebly they did this overall, these developments served the idea of gender equality.

Later in the 1840s, however, Chartism became an established political actor negotiating its position with the ruling classes, and its family-oriented origins in opposition to the Poor Law combined with a prioritisation of demands in accordance with the socioeconomic motivations of the new industrialism to allow the proto-feminist consciousness to lapse and its concomitant policies to be quietly placed to one side. The inherited paternalist discourse, supporting the ideology of separate spheres and therefore confining women to the domestic sphere with the basic function of child care and other household duties, was maintained, even as women entered into the newly constituting workforce in ever greater numbers.

From the capitalists came a relatively subtle response to the increasing visibility and social experience of working-class women. A paternalist conception of the work process, historically shaped by certain objective interests in the service of profit-making and crystallising in the various forms of class relations, was now proposed as a solution to the ills of industrial society. According to this, working-class women were daughters of the factory owners, so to speak, the charitable fathers helping their children – children as waged labourers, in this case. This was, moreover, an ideology easily insinuated into the minds of the Chartist leaders, since it could seem to merely extend their own roles as masters of the household, and it

was behoven, therefore, to either and/or both the capitalist and head of the family to paternalistically look after their women.

Under the constant surveillance of this masculinist gaze, therefore, the working-class woman had no space to claim other than that allotted, either the traditional, the domestic sphere centred on the home and its service roles of caring and cleaning and cooking, or also, now, the modern, in the factory, which meant operating in both, at home and at work, with a kind of dual identity constructed from the ideology of separate private and public spheres. In the latter case, working-class women had gained access to both realms and yet retained power in neither.

Despite the public visibility working-class women acquired and some particular roles they played (and advantages they enjoyed even), therefore, the improvement in the overall situation of female workers in the industrial nineteenth century should not be exaggerated. At the level of socio-psychology, the cultural determinants of gender in the collective imagination were not so greatly affected by the new economy. The figure of the working-class woman constituted –by her very (public) presence as well as through the material threat of economic independence– an inherent challenge to the old order, perhaps; but it was one that was rather easily incorporated as a new persona for the old archetypes. This was still a novelty, demanding a new role to be integrated into the collective consciousness, so it was one that might better suit a newer form of art than the old, one of its age. Thence, of course, the novel. Thus, the social background behind the madonna-whore complex recurring in the literary imagination of the mid-century authors was indicative more of continuity than of a radical break with the past in terms of the gender and class positioning of working-class women.

CHAPTER II

MARY BARTON AND THE MYTH OF DOMESTIC BLISS

Elizabeth Gaskell has an exceptional place among the social-problem novelists of the 1840s since she was able to observe the predicaments and predilection of working class people not through journalistic reports, – which were sporadically widespread during the decade –, but directly as an inhabitant of Manchester, the pioneering industrial city she dubbed as "Cottonopolis". Besides, Gaskell's occasional participation in charity organisations gave her further opportunity to encounter and contemplate the disastrous effects wreaked on the working classes by the notorious "hungry forties"; – the squalor these people were obliged to live in across Manchester's slums was unfolded as a naked fact before her eyes.

As a corollary to this, Gaskell developed an insight into the minutae of the daily life of working-class families, and thus her novelistic method, to quote Raymond Williams, became "that of documentary record, as may be seen in such details as the carefully annotated reproduction of dialect, the carefully included details of food prices in the account of tea-party, the itemized description of the furniture of Bartons' living room, and the writing-out of the ballad of the Oldham Weaver."[1]

Gaskell's practical knowledge about the daily life of working-class families enabled her to avoid depiction of one-dimensional characters merely playing out their pre-given roles within the prevailing frame of class and gender conception of the mid-century. Although, in the final instance, she did arrive at traditional novelistic solutions affirmative of the domestic bliss contrived almost as a rule by marriage and hence reproduced the ideology of separate spheres, the distinction

[1] Raymond Williams, **Culture and Society: 1780-1950**, New York, Anchor Books, 1960, p. 65.

between male and female realms, especially the naturalised "traditional" dichotomous division as constructed by patriarchy and [further] developed under the conditions of modernism). However, Gaskell's novelistic imagination was rather complex. She neither hesitated to question the limits of the middle-class gender ideology pushing women to profitable marriages nor avoided shedding a critical light on the masculinist bias of working-class ethics – or, more precisely, the Chartist notion of morality. The transgressive acts embedded in *Mary Barton* (1848) demonstrates the functioning of Gaskell's confrontation with the dominant gender ideology.

2.1. Aunt Esther: A Self-imposed Outcast

Mary Barton starts with the sudden disappearance of Aunt Esther, a factory worker, from the Barton household. Having eloped with a soldier, Esther remains nowhere to be seen for years and then eventually emerges as a prostitute wandering the rundown districts of Manchester.

Though this is perceived as an enigma by the Bartons, Esther, did not, in fact, pack up and leave the family for no reason. Before her disappearance, head of the family, John Barton, – a proletarian father seeming to be "heartily" tied to the Chartist ideals and nurturing a notion of social justice – warns and reprimands his sister-in-law for her conspicuous finery and nightly wanderings after her working hours:

> "Says I, "Esther I see what you'll end at with your artificials, and your fly-away veils, and stopping out when honest women are in their beds; you'll be a street-walker, Esther, and then, don't you go to think I'll have you darken my door, though my wife is your sister."[2]

[2] Elizabeth Gaskell, **Mary Barton**, New York, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 120.

So, in John Barton's mind, honesty is identified with behaving in full conformity with the domestic code, and he assumes it is inevitable that a woman will lose her social status along with her "honour" if she deviates from the norm. Esther's attempt to extricate herself from traditional gender roles by relying on her economic independence thus bears no social value in the eyes of a Chartist man.

As Deirdre D'Albertis observes "the criminal and prostitute, here jointly emblematize "the deviant body" of Victorian culture, the maximal, most daring social deviance imaginable in nineteenth-century".[3] Thus, Esther is conceived of as a demon and scapegoat by John Barton:

> "His feelings towards Esther almost amounted to curses. It was she who had brought on all this sorrow. Her giddiness, her lightness of conduct, had wrought this woe. His previous thoughts about her had been tinged with wonder and pity, but now he hardened his heart against her forever."[4]

The narrator of *Mary Barton* appears to be in accord with John Barton in demonising Esther as one of the "obscene things of night"[5] and marking her out as the utmost sinner, beyond the social pale: "To whom shall the outcast prostitute tell her tale! Who will give her help in the day of need? Hers is the leper-sin, and all stand aloof dreading to be counted unclean".[6]

But Esther does not let the masculinist gaze of others effect her inner being. Instead, she creates an internal space – an inner room of her own, one might say, after the world sought by Woolf – and she clings to her self-imposed identity, which is shaped less by economic difficulties encountered than her voluntary decisions. She is the subject of her own narrative within the confines of the exterior, rather than determined as object by it.

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[3] Deirdre D'Albertis, "The Streetwalker and Urban Observations in *Mary Barton*", **Mary Barton**, Ed. by Thomas Recchio, New York, Norton, 2008, p. 585.
[4] Gaskell, op. cit, p. 22.
[5] **Ibid**, p. 222.
[6] **Ibid**, p. 154.

Even though, if her statements are taken at face value, it might appear that Esther is repentant and regrets her new identity as prostitute, her intervention in the matter of Mary Barton's future prospects and rejection of the idea that she return to the domestic sphere have the effect of exposing the hollowness of the ideology of separate spheres and its assumption of the maternal role as a woman's primary definition.

Thus, when Jem Wilson pleads with Esther to return home and thereby save her "honour", she replies:

> "Do you think one sunk so low as I am has a home? Decent, good people have homes. We have none. No; if you want me, come at night, and look at the corners of the streets about here. The colder, the bleaker, the more stormy the night, the more certain you will be to find me… I tell you, I cannot. I could not lead a virtuous life if I would."[7]

Many critics (Stoneman, Schor, Callagher, etc.) interpret this brief exchange between Jem Wilson and Esther as the literal expression of Esther's attempt to save her niece Mary Barton from the hands of Harry Carson (who flirts with Mary for some time) by calling the help of another man who has been in love with Mary since his childhood.

But this vein of comment misses the point that Esther's intervention in the love affair between Carson and Mary also triggers the sequence of events that will result in the murder of one masculinist man (Harry Carson) by another (John Barton) –not less masculinist, in any way– and the trial of a third (Jem Wilson) who dreams of a traditional marriage with Mary. So, Esther's warnings and interventions have a transgressive potential to undo the domestic ideology and its masculinist norms. "She perversely reinvents feminine influence to encompass seduction, culpability, and carnal experience, all ostensibly beyond the domestic sphere."[8]

[7] **Ibid**, pp. 157-159.
[8] D'Albertis, **op. cit**, p. 587.

Only one character in *Mary Barton* identifies the "danger" to the patriarchal order inherent in Esther's threatening role: John Barton. For John, a woman "unfettered by domestic conventions" should be deprived of her right to speech and pushed to the margins of society as an evil.[9] He draws here on the judgement of Victorian society, in which "the epithet 'prostitute' was often invoked spuriously to control, intimidate, or disparage women who deviated from prescribed norms"[10], and the moral code of monogamy was rooted in the power relations of which men like John Barton made use.

Though he has a certain aggression to his character, at his depths, Jonh Barton suffers an impotency manifesting itself as a masculine crisis. So much so that, when he confronts Esther's demand in the public sphere to speak with him as a self-proclaimed prostitute, he does not even pretend to be condescending and instead accuses her of being the cause of his wife's sudden death on the basis that she had been unable to bear the brunt of her sister's violation of the confines of domestic ideology, a blasphemous act profaning the divine order of things for him:

> "Dost thou know that it was thee who killed her, as sure as ever Cain killed Abel. She'd loved thee as her own, and when thou wert gone she never held head up again, but died in less than a three week; and at her judgment-day she'll rise, and point to thee as her murderer; or if she don't I will."[11]

After John flings Esther aside and strides away, a policeman witnessing this comes and takes Esther to the lock-ups. Meanwhile, Esther continues to voice her concern about her sister's daughter, Mary, muttering: "Oh what shall I do to save Mary's child! What shall I do? No. They'll only do harm. How shall I save her?"[12]

[9] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 35.
[10] Judith R. Walkowitz, **Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State**, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 177.
[11] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 122.
[12] **Ibid**.

As the plot unfolds, it becomes apparent that the need for rescue indicated here by Esther is not a reference to the domestic status she expects Mary Barton to attain.

The next morning, Esther is taken to the New Bailey and imprisoned. This subplot is crucial, as it stands as the symbolic exposition of Esther's fear of incarceration. Either in the domestic sphere, under the sway of the "father" – John Barton in this case – or in prison, under the control of the paternal and institutional head of society, here the state, Esther suffers great pain from the limitation of her freedom to move and imposition of the disciplinary of masculine norms.

During the time Esther spends in the New Bailey, she grapples incessantly with hallucinations; the "shelter" the jail provides becomes a parallel to the illusory – in fact, deeply damaging – protection afforded by patriarchal society to women in the domestic sphere. As Hilary Schor's Foucaultian analysis observes, "when Esther goes to prison for vagrancy and drunkenness, just at the moment when she wants to be free to save Mary, her experience is one of 'shrinking', of 'hopelessness' of total surveillance".[13] Family is no better than prison for Esther. The tortuous confinement reducing her becomes her abusive guardian, so that when she is released "the door closed behind her with a ponderous clang, and in her desolation she felt as if shut out of *home* ".[14]

For Esther, clearly, "independence, no matter how high the cost, was preferable to the illusory comforts of this sort of "home".[15]

But the traditional cost of such independence is inevitably and stereotypically determined by the overarching masculine codes, which describe her as having a "violent and unregulated nature rendered morbid by the course of life she led"[16] and attribute to her character a "wild vehemence, amounting almost to insanity".[17] For

[13] Hilary M. Schor, "Maternal Authority in *Mary Barton*", **Mary Barton**, Ed. by Thomas Recchio, New York, Norton, 2005, p. 560.
[14] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 154.
[15] D'Albertis, **op. cit**, p. 586.
[16] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 228.
[17] **Ibid.**, p. 157.

rejecting the restrictions of domestic life, Esther's ostracising punishment is to be consigned the character of the mad and the savage, ejecting her not only from society but from human civilisation.

Although Jill L. Matus suggests that "the linkage of disorderly working-class subjects with pathological psychic states is indicative of a larger pattern in which excessive feeling and lack of control are coded as a working-class problem"[18] here, in the case of Esther, excessive feelings and lack of control are additionally identified with a gender identity prone to transgress conventional roles and produce a different subjectivity, at odds, that is, with the domestic ideology. Hence, the inevitable demonisation of Esther, and, by extension, the application of the binary of reasonable-insane invoking rational-emotional – and also civil-savage, or social-wild – to the outcast, working-class "whore" who jeopardises the basic tenets of gender ideology. In this sense, Esther is truly beyond redemption.

Historian Judith R. Walkowitz places Esther's situation in the larger context of the laws designed to protect gender/family ideology in the mid-Victorian age:

> "Being outside these oppressive 'houses' afforded the streetwalker some fraction of self-determination in pursuing her livelihood. With passage of the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864 and 1866, establishment of venereal disease "lock-hospitals," and escalating debate over "the criminalization of all street-soliciting", the streetwalker's distrust of institutions and her reliance on collective action with fellow sex-trade workers was confirmed, as was her sense of identity as an outcast from both her own class and society in general."[19]

It should be noted that, even though, in Schor's words, "to be shut out of home is the worst fate in this novel," and "the novel itself enforces" a separation "between women who walk the streets for money and women who walk the streets for the sake of charitable causes".[20] Esther does not yield, no matter how much she is

[18] Jill Matus, "*Mary Barton* and *North and South*", **The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell**, Ed. by Jill Matus, Cambridge, CUP, 2007, p. 32.
[19] Walkowitz, **op. cit**, p. 23.
[20] Schor, **op. cit**, pp. 36-44.

constantly and collectively degraded – as testified to by the name representing her insistence on freedom, "Butterfly".

The fatal blow to Esther comes from another female character, her own niece Mary Barton.

Esther's first encounter with her niece following her disappearance from the Barton household occurs just after the murder of Harry Carson by John Barton. At the scene of murder, Esther finds a piece of paper inadvertently dropped there. It belongs to John Barton, and she decides to give it to her niece in order to inform her about the incident. Some critics, like Deborah Nord[21], evaluate this act as an attempt to help Mary out of the mystery she faces regarding the identity of the murderer.

Yet, if interpreted in the light of the fact that the piece of paper utilised as gun-wadding by John Barton was originally sent as a valentine to Mary from her inexorable lover Jem Wilson, the plot takes on a different turn. By acquainting Mary with this thing – once a token of love, now a deadly weapon – Esther demonstrates that men's conception of love and their way of showing it might have fatal consequences, no less than murder. Hence the gift can be interpreted as a call to Mary to overcome the limitations of idealised love, targeting traditional domestic bliss as constructed by masculinist codes set by a protective "father" or a lover.

Esther is aware of the fact that she has to compromise with society to the extent, at least, of adapting her outward appearance to a measure of normality in order to step into the Barton house to communicate with her niece. As a ruse, she disguises herself in clothes "befitting the wife of a working man" and wears "a black silk bonnet, a printed gown, a plaid shawl… which had a sort of sanctity to the eyes of the street-walker, as being the appropriate garb of that happy class to which she could never, never more belong".[22] She also pretends to assume "the manners of a mechanic's wife".[23]

[21] Deborah Nord Epstein, "Class Antagonism and the Sexual Plot in *Mary Barton*", **Mary Barton**, Ed. by Thomas Recchio, New York, Norton, 2008, p. 570.
[22] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 230.
[23] **Ibid.**

Thus recreating herself in accordance with normative family codes – and in the process, reproducing the maddonna-whore division as a split identity – she knocks the door, and Mary confuses her with her long-gone mother: "'Oh! mother! mother! You are come at last?' She threw herself, or rather fell, into the trembling arms of her long-lost, unrecognised aunt, Esther."[24] Esther's physical access to the Barton household thereby becomes a symbolic act of renunciation from her identity as street walker, but only for a specific purpose.

Although as Deborah Epstein argues, "this scene raises the possibility that even "character" can be adopted, put on and taken off, played like a part, and that a woman like Esther is no more definable by the prostitute's finery that first announces her profession to John Barton than she is by the costume of a laborer's wife"[25], Esther's concealment of her real self, "controlling herself more than she had done for many a long day"[26], might also –more, perhaps– be taken as indicative of a subtle strategy necessarily utilised for the purpose of communicating to Mary the fact that it is the very love token of Jem Wilson (her future husband) that has turned out to be the murderous weapon in the hands of John Barton (paternal head).

So, Esther compromises or temporarily negates her reprobate gender identity – in her own words as, "a prostitute; an outcast" – only once, and only for the sake of her niece, whose "very bodily likeness" to her aunt (Esther) irritates John Barton for the suggestion of "a similar likeness in their fate".[27] She gives her niece the gun-wadding paper that will have a catastrophic consequence for two masculinist characters in the novel, Harry Carson and John Barton.

Far from following the same path as her aunt, Mary Barton prefers to get married and have a child and hence live out a more classical fate: "She [ends] as a mechanic's wife, the very role that Esther chooses for her disguise".[28] And out of this

[24] **Ibid**., p. 225.
[25] Nord, **op. cit**, p. 570.
[26] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 232.
[27] **Ibid.**, p. 124.
[28] Nord, **op. cit**, p. 571.

comes the "real" fall of Aunt Esther, which subverts the myth of domestic bliss promoted at the end of the novel.

Just after they get married and begin to embody domestic "bliss," Jem reveals the truth about Esther to Mary: "Your poor Aunt Esther has no home: she's one of them *miserable creatures* that walk the streets".[29] Overcoming the shock this information gives her, Mary decides to seek out Esther before the couple permanently moves to Canada. Saying that it will be "but a *wild* chase",[30] Jem persuades her wife to seek the help of police in the search.

The vocabulary adopted by Jem in this episode reiterates Esther's status as a fallen woman and its radical potential to undermine traditional gender roles, while Jem's asking the police to help with locating Esther – read in the light of the constant police harassment Esther faces due to her profession – effectively transfers the role of father in the family to the paternal head of society, the state. The provision and the "no" of the father as person, his socially and culturally instituted power, is transposed to the force upholding security within the system ensuring this power, so ultimately securing the power itself.

Eventually, Esther is found lying on the threshold of the Barton house, now occupied by the newly-weds (Mary and Jem). Her pulse almost stops before, or one might say, instead of stepping into the house. She has a fatal wound – a wound arguably opened by Mary insofar as her niece makes a choice affirmative of the prevalent gender ideology – and Esther proceeds to the house "as a wounded deer drags its heavy limbs once more to the green coolness of the lair in which it was born". The outcast *whore* of *Mary Barton* returns to the domestic sphere not to live but to die.

Further indicative of the fatal effects that the domestic sphere inflicts on women who insist on nurturing a notion of "independence," we see Esther at her last gasp holding the locket containing of her deceased child's hair – the child she never obsesses about until then. But, following Kristeva, the same episode might also be

[29] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 376.
[30] **Ibid**.

evaluated as testimony to an alternative motherhood, embodied here in the personality of Esther. The motherhood constructed outside the domestic sphere and masculinist confines of family is thus finally revealed as the novel's emotional grounding, the well-spring from which the dynamised narratives of rejection and love and murder and migration all flow.

It is tragic that *Mary Barton* does not allow Esther to avoid the pervasive punishment of gender ideology even in death as she is laid in the same grave as John Barton, representative of an entirely opposite gender position – and a cruelly ironic Biblical verse is inscribed onto her grave in which the ultimate authority maintaining the patriarchy – the masculine God – is supposed to relinquish His Condemnation now she is destroyed and can do no more harm: "For He will not always chide, neither will He keep his anger for ever".[31]

2.2. Mary Barton: From *Love* Triangle to Domestic Bliss

Approached through the lens of gender ideology, it might be argued that the eponymous character of *Mary Barton* inherits the traditional characteristics of family ideology since this is evidenced not only in her responses to the specific situations in which she has obliged to make choices but also in her conception of "happiness," which does not go beyond a dream of classical marriage and maternal bliss.

Mary is subjected to the influence of her father John's never-ending indoctrination primarily based on the condemnation of anything antithetical to domestic and maternal values and expressed in terms justifying family ideology and paternal protection.

[31] **Ibid**, p. 378.

As a Chartist, John Barton tends to resort to the imagery of starving "children" in order to promote his ideals. He complains about the people assuming the "office of legislators… who were ignorant of *domestic rules*" and not caring to know that "children had been kept for days without food".[32] Or he defines himself as "struggling on for bread for his children"; he dreams of an "uncomplaining wife at home" and for "children [to stop] wailing for enough of food".[33]

The idea of misery for John Barton is intimately linked to (impoverishment, rejection, etc. of) the domestic condition – so much so that, at some unconscious level, he explains his murder of the son in the Carson family, Harry, as a revenge taken in retaliation for the death of his own son, Tom.

As Patsy Stoneman notes, even the novel's explicit criticism of the Carson family in particular as factory-owners is predicated on the assumption that they do not extend paternal care to their workers.[34] Justifying his violent masculinity on this basis, John announces to his Chartist friends, "I've seen a father, who had killed his child rather than let it clem before his eyes; and he were a tender-hearted man".[35] John Barton's solution to the social ills he sees around him is based on a kind of paternalism, the foundation of family ideology, and his personal actions also reveal the assumption of dominance and withholding of life implicit in this.

In John Barton's obsession with family ideology and domestic rules – a concern, no doubt, less personal than societal – his role as the protector of female "purity" leads him to exert an unrelenting pressure on his daughter, extending to his refusal even to consenting to Mary's working in a factory out of fear that she might follow down the same path as her aunt Esther:

[32] **Ibid**, p. 83.
[33] **Ibid**, p. 23.
[34] Patsy Stoneman, "The Feminization of Working-Class Men in *Mary Barton*", **Mary Barton**, Ed. by Thomas Recchio, New York, Norton, 2008, p. 545.
[35] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 182.

> "That's the worst of factory work for girls. They can earn so much when work is plenty, that they can maintain themselves any how. My Mary shall never work in a factory, that I'm determined on. You see Esther spent her money in dress, thinking to set off her pretty face; got to come home so late at night."[36]

For John Barton, therefore, the economic independence of a woman makes her prone to great *sins* (getting home late, spending money on clothes/appearance), and he deems it better for his daughter to take up domestic service or dressmaking. The most immediate influence on his daughter's individual development, John Barton pushes Mary to the acquisition of a traditional notion of gender moulded in the light of the domestic ideology in which he is himself immersed. And neither resisting her father so much nor paying regard to her aunt Esther's ironic warning that dressmaking is "a bad life for a girl," Mary follows her father's wish and takes a job at Miss Simmonds' dressmaker's.

Although she thus gains a relatively public status, at least moving away from the house, Mary nevertheless yields to a job traditionally associated with the domestic role of mothers. Gaskell does not conceive of the dressmaking business as a space out of which a certain female solidarity might flourish enabling Mary to invert traditional gender roles. Rather, it is constructed as a means of her enmeshing with the craft of suitable matchmaking.

After a short while at Miss Simmonds', Mary is seduced by Harry Carrson, who, as the son of a factory owner, stands in contrast both to her Chartist father, nurturing a daily increasing hatred of the factory-owning capitalists, and to the foundry mechanic Jem Wilson, who is infatuated with Mary but hitherto rejected by her everytime he tries his chance.

After flirting with Harry for a considerable time, Mary suddenly understands that she loves Jem Wilson, truly and deeply. This moment of epiphany comes following Jem Wilson's rhetorical speech given on an occasion when he is once again rejected by Mary:

[36] **Ibid**, p. 9.

> "His agitation rose and carried him into passion. 'Mary! You'll hear, may be, of me as a drunkard, and may be as a thief, and may be as a murderer. Remember! When all are speaking ill of me, you will have no right to blame me, for it is your cruelty that will have made me what I feel I shall become."[37]

This threatening confession of despair – idolising and thus blaming (a classic madonna/whore scenario) – inspires a changed consciousness in Mary that leads her to rescind her plan to marry Harry. But she hesitates to reach a final decision about whom she had better marry. Hence the calculation of the pros and cons of the matter at stake:

> "Her plan had been, as we well know, to marry Mr. Carson. True…the occurrence an hour ago… had unveiled her heart to her and convinced her that she loved Jem above all persons or things. But Jem was a poor mechanic, with a mother and aunt to keep; a mother, too who had shown her pretty clearly that she did not desire her for a daughter in law… while Carson was rich, and prosperous, and gay, and would place her in all circumstances of ease and luxury…"[38]

Given the fact that he calls Mary as a "sweet little coquette"[39] or "a darling little rascal"[40] – thus also playing into the Madonna/whore dichotomy-, Harry may be judged as no better than Jem Wilson regarding his general approach to gender. In addition to these patronising and ultimately manipulative endearments, his appointing Sally Leadbitter as mediator between Mary and himself contributes an instrumentalising dimension, and, further to his attitude to the women around him (including his sisters and his mother, and), Harry adopts a rather superior, derogatory attitude towards the workers affiliated with the Carson factory when they are on

[37] **Ibid**, p. 127.
[38] **Ibid**, p. 128.
[39] **Ibid**, p. 132.
[40] **Ibid.**

strike: "If working-class women are seducible little rascals for Harry Carson, working-class men are clowns".[41]

In *Mary Barton*, Harry Carson is the symbol of a conventional masculinity pretending to power while really suffering an insurmountable impotency – but Mary does not leave Harry for this reason. The reason she puts forward for breaking her relationship with Harry is expressed thus:

> "You may think that I am a fool; but I did think you meant to marry me all along… and now, sir, I tell you, if I had loved you before, I don't think I should have loved you now you have told me you meant to ruin me; for that's the plain English of not meaning to marry me till just this minute."[42]

So, the primary reason of Mary's enragement with Harry Carson is his unwillingness to marry. The next minute Sally Leadbitter's laugh is heard – another working class girl who is depicted as "considerations of modesty or propriety never checked her utterance of a good thing".[43]

The events precipitating Harry's murder further expose the myth of purity and protection weaved around Mary and to which she will bow in the end.

Although Harry Carson is drawn as having a characteristically evil and sarcastic personality and utilising his class position to ridicule and victimise not only Mary but also the workers daring to protest the working conditions at the Carson factory (and hence suffering the impotency pervading all of the male characters in the novel), the motives behind his murder are far from transgressive, deeply imbued

[41] Catherine Gallagher, "Causality versus Conscience: The Problem of Form in *Mary Barton*", Mary Barton, Ed. by Thomas Recchio, New York, Norton, 2008, p. 530.
[42] Gaskell, **op. cit**, 134.
[43] **Ibid,** p. 88. Sally Leadbitter's chorus role here might have been extended to deflate the paternalist family ideology, but instead she is used to support the working-class girl's game-playing within the social context, implicitly supporting Mary for seeing through Harry's treachery – but which also reveals Mary as making a practical rather than, or as well as, pure choice.

as they are in the conventional gender codes and, moreoever, affirmative of the masculinist struggle ongoing in *Mary Barton* regarding the protagonist.

Before the narrative spotlight is thrown on John Barton, Harry Carson is beaten by Jem for his continuing interest in Mary. Warned by Esther on the grounds that Mary is keeping company with a seemingly rakish man and that, should nobody intervene, her probable elopement would result in disaster, Jem decides to speak to Harry.

Having found an opportunity to discredit his rival, Jem interrogates Harry thus:

> "'I will tell you, in plain words, what I have got to say to you, young man. It's been telled me by one as knows, and has seen that you walk with this same Mary Barton, and are known to be courting her; and her as spoke to me about it, thinks as how Mary loves you. That may be, or may not. But I'm an old friend of hers and her father's; and I just wished to know if you mean to marry the girl."[44]

What Jem's statement implies is that the *sine qua non* of moral integrity for a lad in a relationship with a girl is the presence of an intent to marry; should this be lacking, it is justifiable for a father or friend (or, indeed a desperate lover) to intervene.

Despite being constantly denounced by the narrator for his "immorality" and "ill conduct," in fact, Harry Carson's response sounds more reasonable than Jem's intervention:

> "'Before I make you my confidant, my good man. I think it might be as well to inquire your right to meddle with our affairs. Neither Mary nor I, as I conceive,

[44] **Ibid**, p. 173.

> called you in as a mediator… And so my fine fellow, you will have the kindness to leave us to ourselves, and not to meddle with what does not concern you'"[45]

Enraged upon this inquiry, Jem attacks Harry and performs an act of traditional heroism intended to protect Mary's purity and chastity: "Jem standing over him, panting with rage" and if not intercepted by a policeman "what he would have done next in his moment of ungovernable passion, no one knows".[46] The act of violence affirms the conventional gender norms and consolidates the conservative notion of manhood, with its tendency to exert physical violence for the purity and protection of the beloved female as (if) possession.

Though not directly relevant to Mary's purity or protection, Harry's somewhat *understandable* (in terms of the dominant masculinist ideology) but ultimately unjustified murder by John Barton raises certain questions. As a type of punishment for his denigratory attitudes towards the working-class delegation communicating their concern to the factory owners about the aggravated working conditions they interpret as a terrible ordeal, Harry is killed only for the joke of "attempting to transform a worker's delegation into a troop of Shakespearean clowns".[47]

> "Mr. Harry Carson had taken out his silver pencil, and had drawn an admirable caricature of them –lank, ragged, dispirited, and famine-stricken. Underneath he wrote a hasty quotation from the fat knight's well-known speech in Henry IV. He passed it to one of his neighbours, who acknowledged the likeness instantly, and by him it was set round to others, who all smiled and nodded their heads."[48]

The response to this "farcical distortion of the working-class life"[49] is a murder, so to speak, a revengeful, self-destructive and nihilistic act.

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[45] **Ibid**, pp. 173-174.
[46] **Ibid**, p. 174.
[47] Callagher, **op. cit**, p. 530.
[48] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 179.
[49] Callagher, **op. cit**, p. 531.

Inadvertently, therefore – since he receives information about the affair between Harry and his daughter only after the murder – John Barton contributes to the collective effort to protect Mary's purity, and even if he does euphemistically justify his dark deed with reference to the idea of *salvation* – less a socialist than a Christian ideal. And though appearing as a trivial matter, it is no coincidence that John borrows the murder weapon from Jem.

All of these events centres on the struggle to posses Mary and to protect her *purity*. As if to quicken the traditional fate awaiting her, Mary's response to the events following the removal of Harry from the love triangle takes on a self-negating character. First, she discovers that is not Jem, the mosty likely suspect in the eyes of many, but actually her father who has killed Harry. Shocked by this news, she nevertheless deems it convenient to conceal the guilt of her father –and at the same time suppresses her recent recognition of the tendency to violence in her father's personality, having even been beaten once herself.

Neither willing to disclose the truth she discovers about her father nor consenting to Jem's execution for the crime he did not commit, Mary instead resorts to practical solutions to vindicate both. Here the immorality imputed to Aunt Esther and Harry Carson might be re-evaluated with a comparative approach.

Supposing that Will Wilson may prove an alibi, since he was together with Jem at the night of murder, Mary sets off to Liverpool to find Will. No sooner does she arrive in the city, than she learns that Will's ship is heaving up anchor, about to set sail for America, so she obtains the help of two old steersmen in return for two shillings, and pursues the ship carrying Will down to the mouth of the river. While they are sailing, the attitude of the sailors towards Mary takes on paternalist overtones in the disguise of benevolence: "Once Mary in her impatience had risen up to obtain a better view of the progress they had made; but the men roughly told her to sit down immediately, she had dropped on her seat like a chidden child".[50]

[50] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 284.

Despite fulfilling her aim by shouting at Will's ship, Mary cannot take the sailor back to Liverpool immediately (he pops up just before the trial of Jem in Liverpool Court Assizes), and she returns to Liverpool harbour with nowhere to go, left desolate. Another episode of domestic bliss is performed to save Mary from this predicament. The old boatman whom Mary had asked for help to to catch the ship on which Will is aboard, leads her to his home. His insistence on taking Mary to his home is reminiscent less of a helpful friend than an oppressive and domineering father as he asserts himself both mentally and physically:

> "She had offered no resistance to the old boatman, when he had clutched her arm, in order to insure her following him as he threaded the crowded dock-ways… She came on *meekly* after him scarcely thinking in her stupor where she was going… and that someone was deciding things for her.".[51]

Mary's contentment with someone (a father-figure or lover, preferably) "deciding things for her" multiplies when she steps into the sailor's home. The paternalist imagery reproduced by an assertive kind of masculinity becomes far more visible in this episode. The old man looks at Mary "with the most satisfied air imaginable, half triumphantly, as if she were captive of his bow and spear, and half defying, as if daring her to escape".[52]

Mrs. Sturgis, the wife of the boatsman, an old and domestic woman, repeats some conventional gender roles by preparing tea, profferring food and thus refreshing Mary. Domestic harmony in the Sturgis household resonates with the homely bliss and hence provides a comforting shelter to Mary. "Thanks and blessings on those who took the stranger in"[53], murmurs Mary; her moral integrity restored, her belief in the goodness of mankind once again revives under the roof of family. The boatsman's roughness – the masculine grip, its grasping and control of the situation – is eminently justified.

[51] **Ibid**, pp. 300-301.
[52] **Ibid,** p. 301.
[53] **Ibid,** p. 304.

The next morning, at Jem Wilson's trial, Mary encounters state authority. She is interrogated by people who are perfectly willing to scapegoat and stigmatise her. Caught in the dilemma of confessing her father's guilt or turning a blind eye to the fatal consequence awaiting Jem, she is victimised by the male gaze fantasizing the dream of seeing a "fatal Helen":

> "Many who were looking for mere flesh and blood beauty, mere colouring, were disappointed; for her face was deadly white, and almost set in its expression, while a mournful bewildered soul looked out of the depths of those soft, deep, grey eyes. But others recognised a higher and a stranger kind of beauty; one that would keep its hold on the memory for many after years."[54]

The two options that the conventional order presents to Mary point to two representatives of masculinist authority, setting the rules for women:

> "And amid all that sea of faces, misty and swimming before her eyes, she saw but two clear bright spots, distinct and fixed: the judge, who might have to condemn; and the prisoner, who might have to die."[55]

The barrister verbally harasses her by his questioning: "And pray, may I ask, which was the favoured lover? You say you knew both these young men. Which was the favoured lover? Which did you prefer?"[56]. She is guilty merely by association, or rather by her association – with *two* men – marking her out as *wanton*.

As soon as Mary is urged to leave the scene of trial, she goes into convulsions and starts to shriek upon learning that Jem Wilson has been acquitted – although the court exculpates Jem not because Mary had successfully defended his innocence (her performance, after all, was rendered less than worthless within by the legal

[54] **Ibid.,** p. 312.
[55] **Ibid.**
[56] **Ibid.,** p. 313.

construct), but because another man, Will Wilson, proved a convincing alibi (so the impotency of the feminine in the world of men is confirmed).

Mary Barton's drift into a spectral world of delirium as a response to the state authority embodied in the general attitude of the court towards her indicates the madonna/whore reproduction of the dominant gender ideology, expressed in Mary's case as the split between a mother fulfilling her domestic (heavenly) duties and a madwoman falling prey to her emotions and sensual (carnal) desires. After this experience, she might be expected to move in some way to a critique of these restrictive roles. Instead, she merely stretches her neck to the yoke of marriage.

At the end of the novel, Jem Wilson's response to his wife's vehement wish to find Aunt Esther foretells the fate awaiting Mary: "What we could do, darling?' asked he, fondly *restraining* her".[57] Their decision to move to Canada together with Jem's mother appears as an attempt to make their domestic "bliss" permanent and genuine in an idealised, mythical land where they can abstract themselves from all social ills and start from zero as an autochthon couple, struggling to attain a sublime kind of marriage in a way not possible in Britain. As Raymond Williams observes "there could be no more devastating conclusion".[58]

In fact, not only Mary, fulfilling herself in the prospect of marriage and domestic bliss, but even her nearest and dearest are, almost without exception, completely under the sway of the marriage and family ideology. Mary's best friend Margaret similarly regains her sight as soon as she is offered marriage by Will Wilson. Marriage and domestic bliss thus turn out to be a value-in-itself in *Mary Barton*. And Mary herself stands as the figure of the madonna.

During Jem's trial, someone in the court likens Mary to Beatrice Cencini from Guido's Picture.[59] During Jem's trial, someone in the court likens Mary to Beatrice Cencini from Guido's Picture.[60]

[57] **Ibid.,** p. 376.
[58] Williams**., op. cit**, p. 55.
[59] Gaskell., **op. cit**, p. 313.
[60] **Ibid.,** p. 314.

Beatrice Cencini was an Italian woman from the the seventeenth century, who with her siblings, notoriously and violently killed his own father, who had sexually abused them all. The Beatrice of *Mary Barton* struggles to conceal her father's guilt to the end and affirms the institution of family even though she recognises that when left to men's mercy "her very words seemed not her own, and beyond her power of control, for she found herself speaking quite differently to what she meant".[61]

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar demonstrate in their seminal work *Madwoman in the Attic* that the Victorian woman and her representation in literature was "not only fated to inhabit male-defined masks and costumes but that male-defined masks and costumes inevitably inhabit her, altering her vision".[62] The case of Mary Barton was not an exception. Under the influence of the male characters struggling for her control and dominion, Mary's identity is gradually submerged, covered by the veils of patriarchy until she sees happiness in domestic bliss and no more and marries Jem Wilson. Jem Wilson is rewarded with the prize of marriage after a long and formidable struggle for the possession of "angelic Mary," the madonna, indeed.

So in the end, Mary Barton resembles Beatrice Cencini less than the Honoria of Coventry Patmore's *Angel in the House*, a classically Victorian lady (angelic, pure, simple, *virtuous*) rewarding her husband that he might fulfill himself (although only in the role constructed by a patriarchy that ultimately limits him also):

> "No happier post than this I ask,
> To live her laureate all my life.
> On wings of love uplifted free,
> And by her gentleness made great,
> I'll teach how nobleman should be
> To match with such a lovely mate."[63]

[61] **Ibid.,** p. 288.
[62] Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, **The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination**, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000, p. 597.
[63] Coventry Patmore, **The Collected Poetry**, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1949, p. 52.

CHAPTER III

NORTH AND SOUTH: THE NEGATION OF ALTERNATIVE FEMALE IDENTITY

North and South is widely appraised as Elizabeth Gaskell's novelistic attempt to resolve the inherent contradictions of mid-19th century industrial capitalism by means of a humanistic interventionism that blurs the distinctions between the pre-modern, agricultural, slow-moving south of England and sordidly industrial north within the frame of a new civilisation that is at the same time economically productive but predatory and culturally refined.

Unlike *Mary Barton*, the social concern of *North and South* is primarily for employers (the Thorntons) and the middle-classes (the Hales). In *North and South*, Mrs. Gaskell does not focus on the minutiae of working-class life, yet the marginal status attributed to the working-class female characters in *North and South* still comes to consolidate the myth of domestic bliss acted out by the mutual cooperation of John Thornton and Margaret Hale. *North and South* has its own madonnas and whores who unfold and expose the power relations, negotiations and compromises reproduced by the overarching domestic ideology.

3.1. Margaret Hale: Marriage as a Social Reconciliation

Before the Hale family moves to the heart of industrial area, to Milton (probably Manchester) out of Richard Hale's religious scruples – more precisely, as a reaction to his wife's unrelenting complaints about his not seeking preferment in the Church – the female protagonist Margaret Hale is depicted as a delicate beauty, a proud spirit, prone to the art of drawing, devoted to the poetry of English country life.

Complementing this, and in contrast to her relatives, Margaret Hale shows a dimension of independence; she is a strong woman, and almost everybody in the Hale family relies on her. While her "feminine"[1] father and "delicate"[2] brother "were giving way to grief", she had to be "working, planning, considering".[3] Or, confronted with the task of reconciling her parents to the practical circumstances of Milton, Margaret stands "upright and firm over her feet"[4], goes along "with a bounding fearless step".[5] Thus, she learns to "bear the burden alone," since "Alone she would go before God… Alone she would endure…".[6]

Citing these episodes, Patsy Stoneman jumps to the conclusion that "It is this strength of character (honest, brave, responsible, straight-looking and straight-speaking) which equips Margaret to urge straight speaking on Thornton and Higgins".[7] Accordingly, Terence Wright suggests that Margaret's strength, which is "manifest in her handling of domestic problems, the reception of news of her

[1] Elizabeth Gaskell, **North and South**, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 24.
[2] **Ibid**, p. 242.
[3] **Ibid**, p. 247.
[4] **Ibid**, p. 58.
[5] **Ibid**, p. 85.
[6] **Ibid**, p. 281.
[7] Patsy Stoneman, **Elizabeth Gaskell**, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2006, p. 84.

mother's imminent death and the independence of her views on industrial relations," in fact "corresponds to the more obvious male integrity".[8]

From this perspective, Margaret appears as an unusual female protagonist, one, perhaps, of a new type, defying the Victorian domestic idyll and inverting the conventional gender roles. But Margaret's relationship to John Thornton, her acquaintance and confrontation with the working-class characters of Lancashire, her insight into the "manly" and "womanly" virtues, cast a different light on the protagonist of *North and South* and makes her societal role more problematic than it might appear at first sight. Here, I will indicate how Margaret Hale turns out to be a domestic Victorian angel inhibited by social conventions and reluctant to go beyond the conventional boundaries.

The overarching courtship plot of *North and South* involves the reconciliation of Margaret Hale's character with John Thornton's paternalist tendencies in a way suggestive of a retreat to the sphere of domestic ideology now expressed in capitalist terms, that is, encompassing not only the Thornton couple but also the Marlborough Mills (Thornton's cotton factory), with the employees infantilised under the auspices of the employer, ultimately tamed and humanised by a "Southern" effect. The bitter class resentment between the proletariat and the capitalist owner is eventually managed through the genderised instillation of "humility" in the workers with a dining-room scheme introduced to establish a domestic realm within Thornton's factory.

Since Margaret Hale's relegation to the intrinsic qualities of the Victorian conception of womanhood unfolds in her love affair with John Thornton, her transformation to domestic angel should be construed in terms of her adjustment to the life in Milton and Thornton. Before she moves to Milton, Margaret has no positive idea about the commercially minded people settled in manufacturing towns, who are taken to be worthy of contempt both in the pastoral setting of Helstone and in Harley Street (London). She has a repugnance for the idea of trade and gives vent

[8] Terence Wright, **Elizabeth Gaskell "We Are Not Angels": Realism, Gender, Values**, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1995, p. 55.

to her dislike of people making fortune in this way: "Are those the Gormans who made their fortunes in trade at Southampton? Oh! I'm glad we don't visit them. I don't like shoppy people. I think we are far better off, knowing only cottagers and labourers, and people without pretence".[9]

Margaret Hale "feels inclined to sit down in a stupor of despair" on her first night in Milton, losing herself in dismal thought. As she has spent most of her life in the south of England, with a feeling of belonging to a world that represents stability and freedom, Lancashire represents a sordid truth as regards the horrifying conditions "crushing human bone and flesh under [the] horses' hoof without remorse".[10] Gaskell presents Milton to the reader through Margaret's eyes:

> "Nearer to the town, the air had a faint taste and smell of smoke; perhaps, after all, more a loss of the fragrance of grass and herbage than any positive taste or smell. Quick they were whirled over long, straight, hopeless streets of regularly-built houses, all small and of brick. Here and there a great oblong many-windowed factory stood up, like a hen among her chickens, puffing out black 'unparliamentary' smoke, and sufficiently accounting for the cloud which Margaret had taken to foretell rain."[11]

John Thornton, on the other hand, boasts of the industrial system having flourished in the North:

> "(…) it is plain matter-of-fact. I won't deny that I am proud of belonging to a town—or perhaps I should rather say a district—the necessities of which give birth to such grandeur of conception. I would rather be a man toiling, suffering—nay, failing and successless—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. One may be clogged with honey and unable to rise and fly."[12]

[9] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 23.
[10] **Ibid.**, p. 101.
[11] **Ibid.**, p. 71.
[12] **Ibid.**, p. 98.

John Thornton is described by Nicholas Higgins, the Union committee member and the novel's representative factory worker, as an "unfeeling" man:

> "He must know of the growing anger and hardly smothered hatred of his workpeople, who all look upon him as what the Bible calls a "hard man,"—not so much unjust as unfeeling; clear in judgment, standing upon his "rights" as no human being ought to stand, considering what we and all our petty rights are in the sight of the Almighty. I am glad you think he looks anxious."[13]

So Elizabeth Gaskell introduces Margaret and John as two opposing characters through stark contrasts between in terms of their life-style, aesthetic sensibility and outlook (ideological stance). Half-way through the novel, there are several episodes in which Margaret and Thornton confront each other around a gendered logic predicated on binary oppositions, such as sentimental female/rational male, cold and calculating factory-owner/charitable and amiable middle-class lady.

For many critics (like Patsy Stoneman, Joseph Kestner and Helena Bergman), the conflict between the two characters is gradually reconciled in the course of the novel as Margaret's self-awareness leads to her assimilation by Thornton, while Thornton's inimitable qualities are tamed and humanised by Margaret with the result, in Raymond Williams' scathing irony, that "Thornton will work at what we now call the improvement of human relations in industry",[14] since he has arrived at the conviction that "no mere institutions, however wise, and however much thought may have been required to organize and arrange them, can attach class to class as they should be attached, unless the working out of such institutions bring the individuals of the different classes into actual personal contact."[15]

[13] **Ibid.**, p. 196.
[14] **Ibid.**, p. 515.
[15] **Ibid.**, p. 504.

Although what Thornton intends by actual personal contact between the different classes does, in reality, correspond to the establishment of a paternalist haven within the factory, which would rather bolster capitalist relations in a different form – infantilised workers gathering in the "dining room" of the paternalist father, that is to say, the factory owner – it might be evaluated as a step forward in terms of Thornton's individual struggle for a civilising sensitivity (of the kind expressed by Margaret).

In the light of this, *North and South* is interpreted as a *Bildungsroman*, intended to reconcile opposite personalities, Thornton refined and matured by the gentleness of the South, Margaret Hale consenting to the "noble" ideals of the commercially thriving North. Yet the compromise Margaret makes for the sake of this reconciliation adds a *conservative* dimension to *North and South*, and the novel promotes the Victorian ideal of womanhood. Indeed, the further we dig into this conservative dimension, the more the pervasive the madonna-whore complex begins to emerge in *North and South*, too.

3.2. Margaret's Construction as a Domestic Angel

At their first encounter, Margaret Hale appears thus to John Thornton:

> "Margaret could not help her looks; but the short curled upper lip, the round, massive up-turned chin, the manner of carrying her head, her movements, full of a *soft feminine defiance*, always gave strangers the impression of haughtiness… she owed it to herself to be a gentlewoman, and to speak courteously from time to time to this stranger; not over-brushed, nor over-polished…"[16]

[16] **Ibid.**, p. 75.

Having thus intimated the style of Margaret's feminine defiance (as *soft*), Gaskell goes on to give fuller account of a Victorian beauty, again in the eyes of Thornton, as the combination of serenity, tenderness and *maidenliness*, from whence a freedom:

> "She sat facing him and facing the light; her full beauty met his eye, her round white flexile throat rising out of the full, yet lithe figure; her lips, moving so slightly as she spoke, not breaking the cold serene look of her face with any variation from the one haughty curve; her eyes, with their soft gloom, meeting his with quiet maiden freedom."[17]

Here also, it is not only the "lovely haughty curve" of Margaret's lip that betrays a sexual engagement but also her "largeness of figure" that is "associated with (potential) maternity".[18] The Victorian female sexuality is thus identified and unleashed in the novel, justified, that is, by maternity, sexuality in its functional from as a denial of sexuality-as-pleasure through its marginalisation in maidenhood. The clear link of maidenhood with freedom, that is, means that only the pre-sexual woman is liberated, in an imaginative sense, at least; the reference to the material world is of the restricting role, of woman as mother (madonna); this all invoking a logic that has no place for a mature lust, which is thus rendered invisible.

Apart from Margaret's visible features in conformity with the prevailing sensibility, her emotional responses are also affirmative of the gender roles tailored for the needs of the masculine ideology. For instance, she persistently blushes, often for no good reason: "the thick blushes came over her face"[19]; "again the deep carnation blush"[20]; "She blushed as the word passed through her mind"[21]; "And, said Margaret, blushing excessively as she spoke"[22]; etc.

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[17] **Ibid.**, p. 76.
[18] Terence Wright, "Women, Death and Integrity: *North and South*", **North and South**, Ed. by Alan Shelston, London, Norton, 2005, p. 571.
[19] Gaskell, **op. cit**. p. 228.
[20] **Ibid**., p. 229.

As Patsy Stoneman observes, "blushing was an acceptable sign of modesty in a Victorian woman, 'a weakness' in man, but 'in woman particularly engaging'".[23] And from a psychoanalytic perspective, "blushing is a symptom [that] links with fatigue and depression as anxiety responses to repressed sexual consciousness".[24] The blood thus rising in her face as a silent acknowledgement, Margaret's incessant blushing presents her in the socially ordained role, of a respectable Victorian woman (modest and maternal, socially oppressed, sexually repressed).

As Barbara Leah Harman notes, her feeling "a deep sense of shame that she… should be the object of universal regard"[25] is also in resonance with the ideal femininity in Victorian writing, from novels to domestic handbooks. Female sexuality is restrained by an internalisation of societal attitude, thus the shame, as the blushing. These are the tell-tale signs of the guilty, the revelatory of woman-as-sexually pure and subjugated.

Margaret's description as an angel in several episodes – "a strong angel of comfort to her father and brother",[26] her being "continually on the point of weeping",[27] her "strange choking… [making] her unable to answer"[28] – further confine her to the same traditional motif.

What catches Margaret Hale's attention on her first visit to the house of her prospective mother-in-law, Mrs. Thornton, is the lack of domestic cosiness and tranquility: "Whereever she looked there was evidence of care and labour, but not care and labour to procure ease, to help on habits of tranquil home employment".[29]

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[21] **Ibid**., p. 376.
[22] **Ibid**., p. 431.
[23] Stoneman, **op. cit**, p. 86.
[24] Elaine Showalter, **A Literature of Their Own**, London, Virago, Princeton University Press, 1977, p. 45.
[25] Barbara Leah Harman, "In Promiscuous Company: Female Appearance in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*", **Victorian Studies**, No: 31, 1988, p. 355.
[26] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 293.
[27] **Ibid**., p. 335.
[28] **Ibid**., p. 361.
[29] **Ibid**., p. 135.

It must, however, be reminded that Margaret is not a one-dimensional character in terms of her confrontation with the domestic norms of Victorian society. For instance, she attempts to separate herself from the gendered language of Milton and complains about ladies' quietness in the face of "a very animated conversation going on among the gentlemen".[30] Yet, in the last instance, she lacks the ideological and intellectual formation necessary to construct an alternative identity, very much like Elizabeth Gaskell herself, who grew apprehensive about "the women, their natural duties as wives and mothers". And at the end, by way of her marriage to John, she restores the organic balance of society.

In *North and South*, two events stand out as significant in regard to Margaret's relation to John Thornton.

The first is the episode of the strike. As mentioned (Chapter One), the organisation of the labour force by unionisation was one of the most important features of the mid-nineteenth century working-class movement in Britain. Mobilising the labour force, especially in the North, the Chartist movement radically challenged fundamental assumptions in English society. The caricatures of the mill owners, workers, the Union leaders or committee members in the social-problem novels were, in a sense, drawn in relation to this.

Although Elizabeth Gaskell's intellectual commitment lent her a fundamentally middle class perspective, she was well aware of the social change, on the relationship of economy to psychology and had the sense of *the people*. But, both sensitised to the inhumanity of some aspects of working-class life and anxious about the revolutionary potential of the emerging worker's movement as a threat to their tenuous wealth, the British middle class reflex was to promote an ideology of charity, strongly linked to a liberal political tradition allied to religious formations, notably Methodism, and expressed in Parliament through the Whigs. Under the influence of what was ultimately a rather conservative worldview, Gaskell was motivated to deny the working-class potential for resistance and tended instead to a philanthropic pity that warranted some sort of justice in the novel.

[30] **Ibid**., p. 191.

In *North and South*, the primarily middle-class (educated) Victorian reader is introduced to working-class/Unionist characters like Nicholas Higgins in order to underline social injustice. The labour movement appears on the occasion of a strike carried out by the labourers at Milton cotton factories and organised by the Union against the low wages and inhumane working-conditions. In order to maintain society, it was necessary to grant a basic humanity to the nation's citizens, and this meant, in effect, preventing the worst injustices – as did factory legislation at that time, mostly restricting child labour in cotton mills – and calling attention to the worst iniquities perpetrated by the entrepreneurial class, the new industrialists.

Initially, John Thornton does not even deign to do a charitable justice when he becomes aware of the threat of strike that would take place in his Marlborough Mills. Insolently and arrogantly, he murmurs: "Do you give your servants reasons for your expenditure, or your economy in the use of your own money? We, the owners of capital, have a right to choose what we will do with it".[31]

Thornton thus sees the strike in crudely capitalist terms and, in his own words, on "sound economic principles." The terminology he utilises for his argument is predicated on the rigidly hierarchical laws of a social Darwinism that preaches a kind of fatalistic predestination: "there must always be a waxing and waning of commercial prosperity; and that in waning a certain number of masters, as well as of men, must go down into ruin, and be no more seen among the happy and prosperous".[32]

Bessy Higgins' account of the strike touches an entirely different chord, indicating the emotional gap between Thornton and his employees:

[31] **Ibid**., p. 140.
[32] **Ibid**., p. 180.

> "'Yo'd ha' been deaved out o' yo'r five wits, as well as me, if yo'd had one body after another coming in to ask for father, and staying to tell me each one their tale. Some spoke o' deadly hatred, and made my blood run cold wi' the terrible things they said o' th' masters,—but more, being women, kept plaining, plaining (wi' the tears running down their cheeks, and never wiped away, nor heeded), of the price o'meat, and how their childer could na sleep at nights for th' hunger.'"[33]

John Thornton's reactionary logic expresses itself in his attempt to replace the workers on strike with the Irish hands hired as the reserve labour force. Consequently, the "indigenous" workers who have been on strike for three weeks and are on the verge of starving now, run amok and break down the gates of Marlborough Mills to defy Thornton and attack the "Irish blacklegs."

Before focusing on Margaret's intervention in this scene, we should note that the confrontation of Thornton and the workers is expressed in masculinist – in fact, militaristic – terms. It is not insignificant here that labour trouble, be it manifested as a direct confrontation between the proletariat and the capitalist or as the treatment of social and political issues, is restricted to a masculine language. On the contrary, the language of the dominant as that of the masculine (rather than capital) may be regarded as fundamental to the labour discourse and thus as defining its expression of resistance; gender not only underwrites class but writes it, and this is revealed in conflict precisely because social justice is conceived of as won through conflict. Thus the imagery of aggression and violence and the demand for victory for workers is employed even though, at mid-century, "the individuals employed… are chiefly girls and young women… and indeed the weavers in many mills are exclusively females".[34]

Again, as argued in Chapter One, Chartism gradually departed from its earlier radicalism, fell into the prevalent ideology of separate spheres and took on a masculinist identity.

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[33] **Ibid**., p. 178.
[34] Aina Rubenius, **The Woman Question in Mrs Gaskell's Life and Works: Essays and Studies in English Language and Literature**, London, Russell & Russell, 1973, p. 46.

Accordingly, in *North and South*, both Thornton and the workers resort to the terminology of masculine violence in order to make sense of the strike. Thus, whereas Thornton's voice is perceived as "like the *taste of blood* to the infuriated multitude", many in the crowd that break down the gates of factory are "gaunt as wolves, mad for prey…" resembling "a *troop* of animals"[35] while conjuring up the necessary punishment and suffering for those who had taken part in the riot, Thornton is bent on being "clean and sharp as a *sword*"[36]; seeing that Thornton might be hit by the stones hurled at him, Margaret makes her body into "a *shield* from the fierce people beyond";[37] and the struggle waged between "Masters and Men" is "the great *battle* o' Armageddon".[38]

Further illustrative of the same pattern, although Bessy Higgins declares that her father, the leader and orator of the trade union, Nicholas Higgins, "would show the world that th' real leaders o' th' strike were… good hands, and good citizens, who were friendly to law and judgment and would uphold order"[39], Nicholas Higgins spares his mercy from Boucher for Boucher does not comply with the *commands* of the Union: "th' Union would ha' thanked him for following up th' chase after Boucher and them chaps as went right against our *commands*".[40] Forced to become a member of the Union and then excommunicated, Boucher eventually commits suicide as an act of self-destructive violence. Although the Union revolts against the capitalist authority, it reproduces the same authoritarian logic when it comes to the working-class members not joining the organisation: "Well! If a man doesn't belong to th' Union, them as works next looms has orders not to speak to him—if he's sorry or ill it's a' the same; he's out o' bounds; he's none o' us".[41]

[35] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 209.
[36] **Ibid**, p. 221.
[37] **Ibid**, p. 210.
[38] **Ibid**, p. 178.
[39] **Ibid**, p. 236.
[40] **Ibid**, p. 270.
[41] **Ibid**, p. 235.

Hilary Schor construes the ubiquity of the vocabulary of violence as the absence of any shared language in *North and South*:

> "[W]ith the segregation of the male realm of business and the female world of party dresses; with the inability of conversation to incorporate a new languages with which to describe "new things"… men speak only to men, women only to women, and the toilers and moilers only to one another. What kind of dictionary is it that this novel tries to be or imagine, if its romance depends on the absence of any shared language?"[42]

I would argue, however, that although the absence of shared language is acutely felt in *North and South*, the absence is also deeply denied by the ubiquity of the masculine, which does effect a commonality; the patriarchal ideology informs a linguistic framework that actually does relate all in and of society to one another. It constructs Margaret as a domestic woman, for example, and not within the female realm alone, since it equally specifies her as obedient and subservient to her male protector. The extent to which the others (different sexes and classes) cannot speak with one another does not alone determine non-communication; the pairings are (necessarily) related, and including in language.

Thus, we may say, following Schor, the Chartists create a vocabulary of (industrial era) class that assumes the grammar of (Victorian) gender; although using a different dictionary, they are unable to escape the overarching masculine construction, or system for construction – and it is precisely this that enables them to communicate with the other (the employers), through the fight. Indeed, the class opposition is only possible on the genderised assumption of masculine ideology as the grounds for its very possibility.

[42] Hilary M. Schor, **From Scheherezade in the Market-Place: Elizabeth Gaskell and Victorian Novel**, Oxford: Oxford UP, p. 130.

When Thornton is threatened by the workers defying him in his own property, Margaret challenges him thus: "Go down and face them like a *man*, go out and speak to them, *man to man*".[43] Tellingly, she offers male bonding as a solution to the class conflict.

The strike episode reaches its climax with Margaret's fall to the ground after she throws herself before Thornton. Perceiving the danger posed by the "hundreds of infuriated men and reckless boys", she risks her own life and one of the stones thrown by the angry workers crazes her head. In a sense, "the strike literally strikes Margaret's body".[44] The scene takes on sexual undertones with Margaret's wounding and bleeding (for example, it is this that brings to an end the workers' "trance of passion"). Additionally, in respect of a public sphere occupied by male actors confronting each other in a barely civilised warfare organised around the logic of infuriation, the violence inflicted upon Margaret's body might be interpreted as a martyrdom ritual.

The question may be, then, "For whom or for what does Margaret sacrifice herself?" Despite her self-soothing with the rationalisation of her sacrificial act as an attempt to be fair to both sides (Thornton and the workers) what she fails to appreciate is that her action rescues Thornton from the "predicament" of reaching a possible consensus with the workers on fair conditions, not the other way around.

But the question may also be "Why is it a woman who makes the sacrifice?" And, at the risk of over-reading, it is easy to see the feminine as the victim of this conflict, that the masculine definition which inevitably goes toward a violent expression already precludes other forms of settlement process, for all of which Margaret's sacrifice is emblematic. Her pain is a ritual slaughter codifying the social order.

Thornton is deeply affected by Margaret's challenge during the strike. He reads what Margaret does as a declaration of love – indeed, she does it for him. He thinks that he is indebted to her for his survival, so he decides to declare his love to

[43] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 208.
[44] Schor, **op. cit**, p. 131.

her. Thus, Thornton's utilitarianism in his business life takes an individual twist at this point with the aim of adding Margaret to his staff. No deeply emotional basis for the love declaration is indicated, so it becomes, really, just another transaction – and one, indeed, from which he may expect to profit.

In his first declaration of love, Margaret rejects Thornton's proposal on the grounds that "there was not a man -not a poor desperate man in all that crowd, for whom [she] had not more sympathy, for whom [she] should not have done what little [she] could have done more heartily".[45]

At first sight, this defensive remark seems to draw on a philanthropic justice suspending the gender distinctions. But Margaret soon underlines the fact that she was merely guided by a "womanly instinct" and asserts that "we all feel the sanctity of our sex as a high privilege when we see danger".

Margaret therefore arrives at a rather conservative and self-contradictory conclusion - identifying the privilege of being woman with throwing her body in front of a multitude of angry men to save another man. Affirming the same logic, she thinks that she did "a woman's work" to salvage her "maiden pride".[46]

While Margaret manifestly expresses and even boasts of her attempt to construct herself as the "madonna" of *North and South*, at the same time she feels degraded by the rumour about her maidenliness. We are informed by Gaskell that if Margaret "thought her sex would be a protection…she would be wrong".[47] It is the denial of the very subject of a woman's sexuality through sacralisation that permits the society of the male to make its sexual claim by force when this sexuality is extra-marital – so she is publically denounced, as it were (she becomes *whore*). And indeed, some critics, like Katherine Allison and Deirdre David, regard the climax of the strike episode as a symbolic act of rape: "the political invasion by the working-class of the middle-class system of manufacture, exemplified in the mill, may in part

[45] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 203.
[46] **Ibid**, p. 223.
[47] **Ibid**, p. 210.

be read as the symbolic rape of a middle-class woman by the working class".[48] And it inscribes on Margaret's personality an unrelenting albeit righteous shame.

She suffers the "cold slime of women's impertinence"[49] imputed to her and grapples with the "ugly dream of insolent words spoken about herself.[50] "No wonder those people thought that [she] was in love with [Thornton], after *disgracing* [herself] in that way".[51] She feels herself "like some prisoner, falsely accused of a crime that she loathed and despised, and from which she was too indignant to justify herself".[52]

The psychic quagmire Margaret drifts into after the symbolic act of sacrifice is after all symptomatic of the paradox that "the humanly ethical action is sexually disgraceful".[53] Even though the ethical premises underlying her action are debatable – insofar as the mediating role Gaskell attributes to Margaret amounts to the reconciliation of class conflict in the melting pot of paternalism – the disgrace Margaret experiences again displays the madonna-whore complex as axiomatic. And while she internalises it (she was "disgracing herself"), she also rejects it (she is "indignant"), but she is not able to reject it (she is a "prisoner" after all).

The second crucial episode in Margaret's relation to Thornton is entwined with the story of Margaret's brother, Frederick.

Mutineering against his captain while a British naval officer, Frederick flees to Spain and risks a death sentence if caught in British soil. In order to fulfil her dying mother's last wish, Margaret calls her brother back to England. Although Frederick is branded as a traitor, Margaret initiates a plan to acquit her brother on the grounds that one might "show his disobedience to authority [if] that authority was unworthily exercised".[54] Margaret's plan is to summon the witnesses/sailors that

[48] Deirdre D'Albertis, "The Streetwalker and Urban Observations in *Mary Barton*", **Mary Barton**, Ed. by Thomas Recchio, New York, Norton, 2008, p. 592.
[49] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 233.
[50] **Ibid**, p. 217.
[51] **Ibid**, p. 223.
[52] **Ibid**, p. 228.
[53] Stoneman, **op. cit**, p. 85.
[54] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 302.

would justify Frederick's "misdeed." As a result, they decide to seek the help of John Lennox in London to discuss Frederick's chances of exculpation.

Before the siblings keep company on Frederick's way to London train, they perform some rituals in the Hale household, where they keep Frederick's presence a secret – in keeping, of course, with the dominant family ideology: "Margaret opened the study door, and went in like a *serving-maiden*, with a heavy-tray held in her extended arms. She was proud of serving Frederick".[55] And Frederick reciprocates: "His patient devotion and watchfulness came into play, and made him an *admirable nurse*".[56]

At the train station, just before his leave, Frederick is recognised by a porter named Leonards, who once served under Frederick while they were at sea. Bearing a grudge against Frederick, the porter pushes Margaret aside and seizes Frederick by the collar, just to be hurled back onto the tracks and sustain an injury that will result in his death.

Two days later, a police inspector appears at Margaret's door, informed by a witness who observed the fall of porter from the platform and identifies the lady in the scene as Margaret. Instead of admitting her presence and thereby implicating her brother and since she is not sure about whether Frederick is out of England or not, Margaret lies to the inspector. The vagueness of the evidence to show that she had been at the station makes Margaret's denial sufficiently convincing. Following his interrogation of Margaret, the inspector meets Thornton on his way to the police station, and Thornton, in his capacity as magistrate, intervenes to forestall any further inquiry in order to protect Margaret.

Some critics construe Margaret's lie as 'innocent' for the reason that after all she does is lie to protect a family member, not to protect herself, and thus Gaskell intends for the reader sympathise with her protagonist. However, interpreted in the light of the power dynamics involved in the episode, things take on a different turn.

[55] **Ibid**, p. 288.
[56] **Ibid**, p. 290.

Patsy Stoneman illustrates how Thornton converges different aspects of authority in his personality:

> "As a magistrate, he controls the police and the army who protect his own class interest… He calls in soldiers and patronises police officers; and his magisterial intervention on Margaret's behalf, though welcome, recalls Frederick's work: 'evidence itself can hardly escape being influenced by the prestige of authority.'"[57]

Compromising her moral principles and waiving her emphasis on adherence to the truth – which she otherwise articulates incessantly – Margaret is saved from further scrutiny through the intervention of Thornton as the masculine authority; the man protects the woman at the moment of her vulnerability.

Margaret's sense of justice in terms of her relation to the authority indicates a character of easy principle, one might say. Whereas she readily questions the authority of the captain who tyrannises over her brother, Margaret is happy to utilise Thornton's authority ("clean and sharp as a sword"), let alone dare to question it. She states her belief that "loyalty and obedience to wisdom and justice are fine; but it is still finer to defy arbitrary power, unjustly and cruelly used-not on behalf of ourselves, but on behalf of others more helpless"[58] – which strikes a most ethically robust not to say courageous stance; yet Leonards, the "more helpless" and deceased porter, is stripped of meaning, deprived of voice, exposed to violence and injustice and eventually left to oblivion for the sake of Margaret's *brother*'s well-being, with the help of the prospective *husband* Thornton. There are, it appears, certain limits to Margaret's practical sense of justice.

It should also be noted that Margaret's lying is not at odds with the prescribed convention of "maidenliness" in the Victorian era. Adrienne Rich underlines the fact that according to the dominant masculine ideology, "women's honour is chastity…Honesty in women has not been considered important," and, indeed, "We

[57] Patsy Stoneman, **Elizabeth Gaskell**, p. 82.
[58] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 130.

have been rewarded for lying".[59] So Margaret complies, again. She does worry less about her honesty than her "chastity" and how it is perceived by herself and by others, a chastity defined in line with the needs of prevalent masculine ideology.

Thornton is another person who has seen Margaret near the station with Frederick and interprets the situation as confirming of an illicit relationship, the proof of Margaret's "stain[ing] her *whiteness*".[60] Thornton's prejudice and the imagery he resorts to express it (whiteness as the symbol of angelic purity, virginity) are symptomatic of the one-dimensional tropes reproduced by the madonna-whore complex.[61] One of the categories the masculinist judgementalism that sunders the image of women in the madonna-whore complex rests upon the supposition of an innocent victim of circumstance, an object of a smear of false suspicion. There is thus good reason to suspect that Thornton might perhaps not be able to overcome his prejudice if Frederick had happened to be Margaret's lover. Until he learns that the opposite is true, Thornton does not forgive her. The restrictive Victorian middle-class morality denies emotional maturity, and all encased in it play out their various versions of its fixated plotlines.

Sharing Thornton's sensibilities and hence confining herself to the gendered logic, Margaret torments herself for being degraded in the eyes of Thornton: "Oh! had any one such just cause to feel contempt for her? Mr. Thornton, above all people, on whom she had looked down from her imaginary heights till now! She suddenly found herself at his feet, and was strangely distressed at her fall".[62] So whereas, in another scene, Margaret has reproached Thornton for expecting from his workers "a

[59] Adrienne Rich, **On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-178**, London, Virago, Norton, 1979, p. 186.
[60] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 228.
[61] For Joseph Kestner, the rose is another unifying image in the novel. While Margaret is fond of roses growing all over the cottages in Helstone, shown picking roses and hence with a blissful relationship to nature, she is disappointed by the cheap paper on the walls of their home in Milton. At the end of the novel, Thornton gives her a dead rose from Helstone. Although Kestner interprets this scene as marking Margaret's "assimilation into a new order, the dominance of agriculture by industry", it might equally be construed as Margaret's ending up in the devitalised confines of the domestic sphere she is led by Thornton. Joseph Kestner, **Protest and Reform: The British Social Narrative by Women, 1827-1867**, UK, Methuen, 1985, p. 166.
[62] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 332.

blind unreasoning kind of obedience",[63] now she obeys the conception of propriety deemed suitable by him, in the name of the authority nesting the conservative code.

Margaret's clinging to these codes amounts to the feeling of a peculiar kind of shame and self-reproach, to the extent that she finds it pleasant to be in accord with the dominant morality:

> "His cause for contempt was so just that she should have respected him less if she had thought that he did not feel contempt. It was a pleasure to feel how thoroughly she respected him… it was the one comfort in all this misery."[64]

And in a parallel scene, where she is seen as looking after another authority figure, Mr. Hale, the narrator concedes that obedience and submission suit Margaret: "All the more complete and beautiful was her meek spirit of obedience".[65]

At the end of the novel, Margaret and Thornton's roles are reversed, the authority transferred from one to other. Margaret inherits Mr. Bell's property and comes to a financially advantageous position, and Thornton goes bankrupt. But Margaret's changing circumstances does not lead her to an autonomous life (or any hint even of a radical decision to re-structure the public sphere in the name of an alternative womanhood). She saves Thornton from bankruptcy by making another "charitable" deed; and interpreting this "charity" as a declaration of love, Thornton proposes marriage. The two lovers come cheek to cheek to embrace each other, while Margaret's "face is still glowing with *beautiful shame*".[66]

Elizabeth Gaskell thus constructs *North and South*'s female protagonist so as to confer on her the qualities characterising the dominant domestic ideology. Although she poses an obvious contrast to the indoor and passive Cinderella-like female characters of *North and South* like Edith, Fanny and Aunt Shaw, Margaret

[63] **Ibid.**, p. 141.
[64] **Ibid.**, p. 337.
[65] **Ibid.**, p. 401.
[66] **Ibid.**, p. 410.

Hale's maturation process goes no further than the Madonna figure of the cult of marriage. Not her *innate* qualities but her relations to authority figures, her responses to the events rendering her character and her confrontation with the ideological configuration of the mid-nineteenth century combine to confine Margaret to a reproduction of the existing socio-sexual inequalities.

3.3. The Negation of Alternative Womanhood

North and South does allow an intimate relationship between masters and employees, and also, moreover, between Margaret Hale and female servants/workers. But this relationship is also rife with contradictions that undermine the female protagonist's innate goodness and ultimately resonate with the novel's paternalist scheme.

Dixon, the middle-aged female servant, generally plays a parental role in the Hale household. The whole family obeys her in domestic matters. Since Margaret Hale's invalid and listless mother, Mrs. Hale, is practically replaced by her, Dixon even dares to criticise Mr. Hale for his indifference to the family concerns, and it is not Margaret or Richard Hale but Dixon who enjoys the privilege of being the only person with knowledge of Mrs. Hale's deteriorating medical condition. Her authority becomes so unquestionable over the years that she vocally remonstrates with her mistress for her poor choice of marriage partner (Mr. Hale).

Gaskell therefore attributes to Dixon an ambiguous class position. Dixon is characterised less as an ordinary servant or lady's maid than the maternal family head, who becomes "doubly tardy" when she has to "degrade" herself by "answering

doorbells"[67] and touches no part of the household work other than dusting Frederick Hale's empty room.

On the other hand, Margaret Hale is rather removed from the servants, not to say aloof: "The very servants lived in an underground world of their own, of which she knew neither the hopes nor the fears; they only seemed to start into existence when some want or whim of their master and mistress needed them".[68] And it is in this context that she puts an end to Dixon's authority with a single gesture.

In spite of the intimate relationship Margaret seemingly sustains with Dixon, upon another of Dixon's negative remarks about Mr. Hale, she responds with a purpose, finally and literally standing her ground, provoked to retort:

> "To hear her father talked of in this way by a servant to her face! 'Dixon,' she said, in the low tone she always used when much excited, which had a sound in it as of some distant turmoil, or threatening storm breaking far away. 'Dixon! you forget to whom you are speaking.' She stood upright and firm on her feet now, confronting the waiting-maid, and fixing her with her steady discerning eye. 'I am Mr. Hale's daughter. Go! You have made a strange mistake, and one that I am sure your own good feeling will make you sorry for when you think about it.'"[69]

Margaret emerges thus as the head of family and secures her superior social position vis-a-vis Dixon the servant. Here, the authority Margaret exerts over Dixon touches on class relations as she does not complain about her father's being talked of in a negative way by anybody but by a servant. Although the narrator informs us that Dixon is surprised for a minute to discover that her protests about Mr. Hale will no longer be tolerated, she represses her surprise and becomes subdued enough to declare in a humble tone that: "Mayn't I unfasten your gown miss, and, do your gown?".[70]

[67] **Ibid.**, p. 95.
[68] **Ibid.**, p. 236.
[69] **Ibid.**, p. 58.
[70] **Ibid.**

Henceforth, Dixon "obey[s] and admire[s] Margaret…" as "[t]he truth [is] that Dixon, as do many others, like[s] to feel herself ruled by a powerful and decided nature".[71] As a parallel to John Thornton's resort to both oppressive-penal precautions and benevolent paternalism in order to bow his workers to his authority, Margaret attempts to subordinate Dixon not only by utilising the servant's psychic frustration manifesting itself in the face of an authority figure but also by drawing on the paternalist techniques of subjugation. As Julie Nash notes:

> "In speaking up to Dixon, Margaret appeals to her own superior social position ("you forget to whom you are speaking") as well as to the human side of the maid ("your own good feeling"). This manner of dealing with her employee is a model of…social paternalism in which workers are expected to obey, but in which employers are sympathetic to the worker's feelings and situations. In other words, it is not enough for Dixon to merely feel 'her place', she must also arrive at the truth of Margaret's words on her own."[72]

For her part, Dixon clings to the same despotic strategies of class hierarchy and superiority in dealing with the common folk. She is disgusted by the Milton workers who regularly visit the Hales, reproaching Margaret and Richard Hale, for instance, for their invitation of the Higgins:

> "Why master and you must always be asking the lower classes upstairs, since we came to Milton, I cannot understand. Folk at Helstone were never brought higher than the kitchen; and I've let one or two of them know before now that they might think it an honour to be even here."[73]

Neither could she endure the maids. When those applying for the servant's place in the Hale household express their doubts as to the solvency of the family and question Dixon's inquiries in return, she becomes furious and feels resentful.

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[71] **Ibid.**
[72] Julie Nash, **Servants and Paternalism in the Works of Maria Edgeworth and Elizabeth Gaskell**, UK, Ashgate Books, 2007, p. 109.
[73] Gaskell, **op. cit.**, p. 380.

Therefore Dixon does not offer a more reasonable alternative to the womanhood embodied by Margaret Hale. She neither establishes a real contact with Margaret Hale on egalitarian terms nor develops anything like a spirit of solidarity with the female characters belonging to her own class. This inability to establish authentic human bonds results in her own frigidity as she is pushed to the sphere of non-sexuality. Spending her whole life within the confines of the domestic sphere and the multiple harmful effects of power relations (class antagonisms and domestic restrictions overlapping), Dixon represents a severe self-negation and fragmentation of the female identity, an identity confined to the conservative notions of gender and class. She becomes, as it were, a madonna inversion, de-sexed but non-radiant.

Bessy Higgins, on the other hand, represents a very different, more progressive and expressive type of female identity that Elizabeth Gaskell tends to underestimate. When Margaret Hale takes a personal interest in the Higgins family and introduces herself as a saviour angel, she finds Bessy Higgins on the verge of death from a lung disease, constantly coughing and spitting blood, since she is literally poisoned by the fluff in the factory.

Supposing that she is respected by Margaret Hale, since Bessy Higgins establishes an egalitarian and intimate relationship with her, to the extent of confiding her anxiety about her (Margaret Hale's) mother's health and expressing her views until now concealed about John Thornton, some Gaskell scholars[74] jump to the conclusion that Margaret Hale communicates the Unitarian message of mutual dependency (by treating her socially inferiors as equals). In the same vein, for some critics, Margaret's relationship with Bessy enables Gaskell to describe the miserable conditions the working class women have to and are expected to endure in a realistic way.

But even though Margaret pretends to be willing to put herself on the same level as the Higgins family, Bessy still forces Margaret to acknowledge that there are insurmountable class barriers and gross injustices separating them:

[74] Ruth Marie Cavanagh, "Rebellious Women in the Novels of Elizabeth Gaskell", University of Alberta, 1995 (Unpublished MA Thesis), pp. 20-120.

> "If yo'd led the life I have, and getten as weary of it as I have, and thought at times, 'maybe it'll last for fifty or sixty years—it does wi' some',—and got dizzy and dazed, and sick, as each of them sixty years seemed to spin about me, and mock me with its length of hours and minutes, and endless bits o' time—oh, wench! I tell thee thou'd been glad enough when th' doctor said he feared thou'd never see another winter."[75]

Although Bessy is forced to comply with the paternalistic scheme of the novel by admitting that Margaret appears as an *angel* in her dreams and comforts her, when she is at her most virtuous, indeed, she confesses that if there were no God or angels to appease the pain she has suffered on the earth, she could go mad and kill Margaret:

> "And I think, if this should be th' end of all, and if all I've been born for is just to work my heart and my life away, and to sicken i' this dree place, wi' them mill-noises in my ears for ever, until I could scream out for them to stop, and let me have a little piece o' quiet—and wi' the fluff filling my lungs, until I thirst to death for one long deep breath o' the clear air yo' speak on—and my mother gone, and I never able to tell her again how I loved her, and o' all my troubles—I think if this life is th' end, and that there's no God to wipe away all tears from all eyes—yo' wench, yo'!' said she, sitting up, and clutching violently, almost fiercely, at Margaret's hand, 'I could go mad, and kill yo', I could."[76]

Confronted with this threat to her conviction based on the Unitarian message of unity blurring class antagonisms in the general scheme of charity ideology, Margaret reassures: "Bessy, we have a Father in heaven"[77], and "it won't be division enough, in that awful day [judgement day], that some of us have been beggars here, and some of us have been rich; we shall not be judged by that poor accident, but by our faithful following of Christ".[78] Thus, at the moment of "Bessy's clutching [her] hand and momentary desire to kill Margaret," which indeed does appear as "the most ferocious

[75] Gaskell. **op. cit**, p. 307.
[76] **Ibid**. pp. 121-122
[77] **Ibid**. p. 121.
[78] **Ibid.** p. 178.

expressions of class antagonism that *North and South* contains"[79]– Margaret's euphemistic egalitarianism shows her ability to *adhere* to the outward form of an impression of justice, at least as meted out in the hereafter. But it is of little consequence, and Bessy dies soon after having "led the life of a dog… with hard work first, and sickness at last… without knowing one good piece o' rejoicing in all her days".[80]

Evaluated in the light of the fact that she shows no inclination to domestic duties and protests against being stuck in the world of men and the struggle waged between the "masters and men" – thus thinking, indeed, that "such life as this is not worth caring for"[81] – Bessy Higgins might have been developed as a radical alternative to the model of traditional womanhood represented by Margaret Hale. Her effort to keep her father distant from violence (the policy of forced compliance) and the emotional maturity she demonstrates towards her sisters brings to mind the positive type of motherhood Julia Kristeva posits in her "Stabat mater" formulation. Not biologically but spiritually, Bessy has the potential of representing this form of maternity and occupying a radical or or at least an ambivalent position.

But Elizabeth Gaskell insists on restricting Bessy's potential by obliging her to embrace domestic values at the symbolic moment of truth. In her last gasp, Bessy laments that her mother had died before teaching her domestic skills and begs Margaret to employ her sister Mary as a domestic servant in the Hale household. And so at the end of the novel, Mary Higgins works as a cook in John Thornton's mill, reconciling, thereby, the domestic ideology with the conditions of capitalist production in a manner affirming the novel's general scheme of paternalism.

Thus, the working-class female characters of *North and South* are consistently portrayed in ways that implement a paternalist ethic resting on the traditional notions of gender and class. Even though Bessy Higgins may be interpreted as a hope for exit from the Victorian madonna-whore structure, Gaskell does not allow her character to

[79] Patricia Johnson, **Hidden Hands: Working-Class Women and Victorian Social-Problem Fiction**, USA, Ohio University Press, 2001, p. 38.
[80] Gaskell. **op. cit**, p. 208.
[81] **Ibid**, p. 210.

fulfil this in any significant way. Instead, Bessy is confined to the tautology of being good, respectable and trustworthy as an innocent victim of circumstance who yearns for a domestic life even on her deathbed (or, especially there).

In this sense, *North and South* does not have its Esther, and, unlike the peripheral *anti-heroine* of *Mary Barton*, this later, arguably more developed work from a literary point of view, no longer offers even the marginalisation of escape from the normative gender and class reproduction. The enforcement of marriage, Margaret's reconciliation to the patriarchal and the interior world of Margaret Hales' domestic relationships combine to suffocate, allowing no respite, until any hope that the contemporary reader may have of some salvation is finally extinguished in the death of Bessy. Elizabeth Gaskell would never recover the possibilities suggested and embodied by the figure of Esther, and *North and South* can be regarded as sounding the death knell to any hope of such.

CHAPTER IV

THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN: "THE WHOLE VICTORIAN AGE LOST"

Published in 1969, John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* poses a stark contrast to the restrictive patterns of domestic ideology so prevalent in the novels hitherto examined. Set in the mid-nineteenth century, and hence a retrospective narrative, this work turns upside down the Victorian convention expressed in terms of women either as victims of unjust social circumstances that make them fall from grace and into the category of *whore* or "rationalised" them on the grounds of innocence as sexually pure to be married (*madonna*).

The protagonist of *the French Lieutenant's Woman*, Sarah Woodruff, is unwilling to be confined to these established categories. Thus rejecting the dichotomy and by implication the whole gender discourse, she represents an exit from the madonna-whore complex revisited to the point that "the whole Victorian age [is] lost". Taking the risk of seeming anachronistic (perhaps not inadvertently), John Fowles creates a proto-feminist character who succeeds in living on her own terms, in a self-defined fashion, in the Victorian context. Sarah Woodruff is emblematic of an alternative womanhood that has far reaching effects, going beyond the binary oppositions circulating within the horizon of Victorian domestic ideology.

The transgressive characterisation of Sarah Woodruff is crucial to her function as non-conventional protagonist. She twists the romantic heroine figure beyond recognition in setting out on what seems like a romantic quest but transforming it into a quest for reaffirmation of her self-identity. Sarah Woodruff's social status as an outcast/*déclassé* character adds further dimension to her critical function of undermining the myth of the "Angel in the house". All these manifest themselves in her relation to Charles Smithson. In order to demonstrate how she

transcends the Victorian domestic ideology, Sarah's confrontation with Charles Smithson should be analysed.

4.1. Charles Smithson at Odds with a Conventional "Beauty"

The French Lieutenant's Woman opens up "at one incisively sharp and blustery morning in the late March of 1867". [1] Fowles's choice of 1867 not only highlights the period of "new cockneys, new Victorians, the starry-eyed young Londoners," but, and more to the point, points to a new emancipatory horizon that would find its most prominent expression in John Stuart Mill's offer to give women equal rights at the ballot box – since it was in that year of election reform that Mill spoke in the first parliamentary debate on women's suffrage and thereby raised it as an issue of the day. Thus, "Another wind was blowing in 1867; the beginning of a revolt against the crinoline and the large bonnet".[2]

The novel idea of women's suffrage as advocated by Mill was covered in at least three editions of (the London) *Punch* (in March, May and June) – where it was summarily dismissed. In a Melbourne *Punch* cartoon, a female MP has handed her baby to the speaker – a rather pertinent point about childcare in the modern context, but then an expression of the idiocy of the idea of women voting. Indeed, it was the long established features of a certain middle class respectability, such as family and home, merit and character, hard work, duty and modesty that prevailed, along with their surrounding imagery expressing the discourse of traditional femininity (motherhood and wifedom) versus prostitution/whoredom (bodily condemnation). But the change was afoot.

[1] John Fowles, **The French Lieutenant's Woman**, London, Vintage, 2004, p. 3.
[2] **Ibid**, p. 5.

Under these circumstances, Charles Smithson is born to be the son of a baronet and hence belongs to a social class that is on the brink of extinction. At first sight, Charles's love of palaeontology makes him appear as fossilised as the rocks he collects and the class he belongs to. But that is just an appearance. His attempts to predicate his worldview on new scientific grounds inspired mainly by Charles Darwin's theory accords with the Victorian gentleman's habit of spending time on scientific inquiries. He spends most of his time in Lyme visiting the Old Fossil Shop and the Undercliff in order to discover rare pieces, like the sea-urchin. If Charles Smithson is not concerned with extinction –his own class, and the old order including its gender structuring– then the social interpretation of Darwinian theory here might be "the necessity to blend with the unquestioned assumptions of one's age".[3]

Charles's pursuit might also be interpreted in the context of the scientific impulse as an impulse to conquer nature, one of the defining characteristics of scientifically-minded *men* in the Victorian age. They were convinced that the rational/reasonable man would eventually tame the irrational. "After all, [Charles] was a Victorian… His statement to himself should have been, I possess this now, therefore I am happy".[4]

Laziness and impudence are also Charles's defining characteristics. He never enters into society "without being ogled by the mamas, clapped on the back by the papas and simpered at by the girls".[5] Another quality we find in him is his cynicism: "There was outwardly a cynicism about him, a sure symptom of inherent moral decay… Thus he had gained a reputation for aloofness and coldness… by the time he was thirty he was as good as a polecat at the business".[6] Winking at himself in the mirror, he sees the solemn young *paterfamilias*.

[3] Harald Williams Fawkner, **The Timescapes of John Fowles**, Toronto, Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1984, p. 79.
[4] Elizabeth Gaskell, **North and South**, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 69.
[5] **Ibid**, p. 18.
[6] **Ibid.**

In his private life, Charles's obsession with the discovery of rare things to re-affirm his identity as an ever-searching, rational man stands in sharp contrast to the narrative starting-point of his betrothal to Ernestina Freeman. Ernestina is more emblematic of a conventional beauty than a riddle to be solved or an unknown "land" to be explored and conquered. She has no exceptional features, neither physically nor intellectually. She "had exactly the right face for her age; that is, small-chinned, oval, delicate as a violet. You may see it in the drawings of the great illustrators of the time - in Phiz's work, in John Leech'".[7]

She demurs appropriately: "At first meetings she could cast down her eyes very prettily, as if she might faint should any gentleman dare to address her".[8] And her surname, Freeman, can only be ironic, since she is the very antithesis of suffrage: "she was so very nearly one of the prim little moppets, the Georginas, Victorias, Albertinas, Matildas and the rest who sat in their closely guarded dozens at every ball".[9] Whereas Charles appears keen on exceptional discoveries, at least in an amateurish fashion, Ernestine fits an orthodox Victorian taste.

Ernestina suffers from a "narcissistic self-contemplation": "In her room that afternoon she buttoned her dress and stood before her mirror in her chemise and petticoats… Her neck and shoulders did her face justice; she was really pretty, one of the prettiest girls she knew".[10] On the other hand, when the idea of domestic bliss is at stake, she readily sacrifices her narcissistic self and obliterates her individual traits in the name of established norms of propriety. She looks "more in love with the idea of marriage than with her husband-to-be"[11], and dutifully notes in her diary:

[7] **Ibid.,** p. 26.
[8] **Ibid**.
[9] **Ibid**., p. 27.
[10] **Ibid**., p. 29.
[11] **Ibid**., p. 113.

> "Let this be a lesson to me to take the beautiful words of the Marriage Service to my conscience, to honour and *obey* my dearest Charles even my feelings would drive me to contradict him. Let me earnestly and humbly learn to bend my horrid, spiteful wilfulness to his much greater wisdom, let me cherish his judgment and chain myself to his heart, for "The sweet of true Repentance is the gate to Holy Bliss."[12]

Eventually, however, even Charles complains that "she was very deferential… so dutiful-wifely that he was beginning to feel like a Turkish pasha - and unoriginally begged her to contradict him about something lest he forget theirs was to be a Christian marriage".[13] Evidently she has taken her marriage vow too literally and internalised the gender convention to an extreme – at least, in a way that is too pure for Charles. Thus, far from nurturing any subversive idea, Ernestina giggles at the idea of women's emancipation, and irrevocably confined within the Victorian morality, she struggles with sexual frustration, which puts insurmountable barriers between her soul and body:

> "For what had crossed her mind - a corner of her bed having chanced, as she piroutted, to catch her eye in the mirror - was a sexual thought; an imagining, a kind of dimly glimpsed Laocoön embrace of naked limbs. It was not only her profound ignorance of the reality of copulation that frightened her; it was the aura of pain and brutality that the act seemed to require… She had once or twice seen animals couple; the violence haunted her mind… Ernestina wanted a husband, wanted Charles to be that husband… but the payment she vaguely divined she would have to make for them seemed excessive… She sometimes wondered why God had permitted such a bestial version of Duty to such an innocent longing."[14]

Charles suffers a similar kind of sexual frustration, although for entirely different reasons. Having travelled abroad for several years and "allowing himself to take an occasional woman into his bed" –and hence also to take his mind off domestic affairs– now, he comes to strictly forbid himself such relationships. The outcome is that "he was in a sexual frustration since his moral delicacy had not

[12] **Ibid**., p. 256.
[13] **Ibid**., p. 113.
[14] **Ibid**., pp. 29-30.

allowed him to try the simple expedient of a week in Ostend or Paris".[15] And thus Charles's solution to this sexual frustration, to find a regular partner by way of marriage.

His self-justification is as complacent as it is conventional:

> "He thought of the pleasure of waking up on just such a morning, cold, grey, with a powder of snow on the ground, and seeing that demure, sweetly dry little face [Ernestina] asleep beside him - and by heavens (this fact struck Charles with a sort of amazement) legitimately in the eyes of both God and beside him."[16]

While legitimacy becomes key to the union, and this is established with the male gaze of God and husband, Ernestina is stripped of meaning and value. The wording of Charles's marriage offer sounds no less self-referential: "But if I believed that someone cared for me sufficiently to share…"[17]

Willingly imprisoned within the Victorian conventions and perceptions of womanhood, Ernestina's remarkable exploitation by Charles Smithson results in a self-destructive process, in which she is victimised spiritually. "They kiss, with lips as chastely as asexual as children's".[18] From the outset, Charles treats Ernestina as a mere domestic commodity.

And he has a collaborator. While Ernestina runs into her mother's arms with tears of happiness emanating from the marriage offer she gets, her father and Charles stand "smiling at each other; the one as if he had just concluded an excellent business deal, the other as if he was not quite sure which planet he had just landed on, but sincerely hoped the natives were friendly".[19]

[15] **Ibid**., p. 82.
[16] **Ibid**.
[17] **Ibid**., p. 83.
[18] **Ibid**.
[19] **Ibid**.

Charles's interpretation of his personal feelings through a colonial context smacks of the Victorian aspiration to empire, the assumption to subordinate the indigenous and fulfil the quest for adventure that would consolidate its (his) masculine, egocentric self. Thus globally rendered, Charles's aspiration has no clear limits; it resembles the accumulative logic of the capitalism of his day, whose existing possessions never suffice and which therefore extends to other, untouched lands.

As a typical Victorian woman dreaming of marriage and domestic bliss, Ernestina does not promise a real adventure for Charles: "After all she was only a woman. There were so many things that she must never understand: the richness of male life, the enormous difficulty of being one to whom the world was rather more than dress and home and children"[20] - these being, of course, precisely the types of reasons why she should not gain the vote. Seeking romance and mystery, he does not want to be teased by mundanity and ordinary people: "I wish you hadn't told me the sordid facts. That is the trouble of provincial life. Everyone knows everyone and there is no mystery. No romance."[21]

As her name indicates, Ernestina, is feminine sincerity, which does not excite. In order to both have his cake and eat it, the Victorian man requires the expression of sexuality in the whore and the embodiment of purity in the madonna. Ernestina cannot be that for Charles. Her disruptive attachment to Charles as male prototype in any way outside the strictures of the madonna would most assuredly result in her tragedy. And indeed, Charles Smithson is not as radical as he thinks himself, and for this reason another tragedy awaits him.

Before leaping to Charles's *tragedy*, we need to emphasise that, as representative of domestic Victorian womanhood, tightly embracing the traditional gender format, at least Ernestina Freeman has some inalienable principles. When Charles loses his previous social status after being disinherited by his uncle, she does not compromise for position. On the contrary, the private strength she shows in

[20] **Ibid**., p. 130.
[21] **Ibid**., p. 11.

committing to her duty upon marriage is expressed in her public persona, since, we are informed, she does not even contemplate the possibility of dispensing with him. Whether Charles Smithson has such fortitude of character though, let alone holds to the same principles, is open to debate.

4.2. A Self-Proclaimed Saviour Grappling with Sarah Woodruff

In their very first interaction, Charles Smithson immediately perceives that Sarah Woodruff represents a different kind of womanhood, something, someone, at odds with the Victorian codes of female propriety and etiquette. We also, at first glance, may see this in her surname, with its implication of the wild (wood) and uncultured (rough [ruff]) distancing her from the social norm and thus alerting us to the possibility of her taking the role the marital narrative seems to dismiss. Moving closer to her, as though hunting, when Ernestina tells Charles that Sarah is referred to as the French Lieutenant's Woman and Poor Tragedy in Lyme eliciting pity, sympathy and condemnation as a fallen woman, Charles observes her at some distance: "Her hair was pulled tight back inside the collar of the black coat – which was bizarre, more like a man's riding-coat, than any woman's coat that had been in fashion those past forty years. She too was a stranger to the crinoline."[22]

In the Victorian age, crinoline was one of the encumbering symbols representing the role of oppressed woman. In the light of the hegemony of an ideology that demanded the strict dress code as symbol-bearer of the gender division, Sarah's rejection of crinoline is presented as an indisputable statement of difference. She stands, literally, in opposition to the Victorian fashion trap condemning women to the narrowly defined role of auxiliary.

[22] **Ibid**., p. 10.

Apart from her dress, Charles perceives some other extraordinary features in Sarah. When he sees her face in profile, he realises that "her stare was aimed like a rifle at the farthest horizon." Not only is she different, distant, looking to the distance, but she also thereby is possessor of her own gaze. Far from internalising the degradation of the fallen woman, Sarah prepares for a war to be waged in order to reach a radically unknown future. Her face confuses Charles:

> "It was not so much what was positively in that face which remained with him after that first meeting… for theirs was an age when the favoured feminine look was the demure, the obedient, the shy. It was certainly not a beautiful face, by any period's standart or taste. But it was an unforgettable and tragic face."[23]

The confusion Sarah creates in the community of Lyme is not limited to Charles Smithson. It does not stand as isolated and self-contained theme, but is constituted through various associations with and references to the madonna-whore complex. Tropes of prostitute (fallen, loose, deserving degradation) are attributed to the social figure of Sarah, interwoven with the genderisation of cosmic dichotomies, like civilised-wild.

For instance, Mrs Poulteney to whom Sarah is a servant, thinks of her as an "uncanny" person: "It was rather an uncanny – uncanny in one who had never been able to London, never mixed in the world – ability to classify other people's worth: to understand them, in the fullest sense of that word."[24] As external to the social order, of course, she must also be out of her right mind. Mrs Poulteney and Mrs Fairley remind each other that "poor 'Tragedy' [Sarah] was mad".[25]

[23] **Ibid**., p. 10.
[24] **Ibid**., p. 53.
[25] **Ibid**., p. 65.

Similarly, in their first unexpected and somewhat clandestine encounter Charles attributes his own conception of pure, innocent and outcast virgin to Sarah:

> "He stood unable to do anything but stare down, tranced by this unexpected, and overcome by an equally strange feeling - not sexual, but fraternal, perhaps paternal, a certainty of the innocence of this creature, of her being unfairly outcast, and which was in turn a factor of appalling loneliness. He could not imagine, what, besides despair, could drive her, in an age where women were semi-static, timid, incapable of sustained physical effort, to this wild place."[26]

Here, by way of a parenthetic note related to the use of a contemporary text in the present work, we may note that Fowles should perhaps be read as effectively giving voice to the Victorian male unconscious. Charles is awarded no particular insight into the condition of life and thus neither into that of his times. The observation here of his "age", therefore, as one in which "women were semi-static, timid, incapable of sustained physical effort," is implicitly ascribed to him in an act, we may say, of authorial omnipotence. Retrospectively, Fowles knows what was in Charles' unconscious.

Returning to the narrative itself, not only Charles but almost none of the people in Sarah's milieu could understand her situation or comprehend her conscious decision to sustain the semblance of a fallen and mad woman. According to the prevalent social code, unmarried and educated women would occupy the role of governess, like Jane Eyre (conventionally), or do voluntary work, like Florence Nightingale (accepted a decade and a half after the Crimea War), or train themselves to become writers after a painstaking journey, like George Sand). Sarah, however, rejects these in constructing a radically alternative narrative for herself.

In fact, Sarah chooses a performance of passive existentialism. The passivity is a stancethat fits easily with the conventionally feminine, , but in this case it also operates as cultural witness. Thus does she create her own space and ensure her independence outside of conventional Victorian society. So the truth, as Charles is

[26] **Ibid**., p. 71.

allowed to realise, is that "she was far less mad than she seemed…or at least not mad in the way that was generally supposed."[27] Charles, as the incarnation of typical masculine authority, cannot but admit this: "he was pure intellect, walking awake, free as a god, one with the unslumbering stars and understanding all. All except, Sarah.".[28] Sarah's situation is quite enigmatic for him.

Further complicating the enigma of Sarah is that she plays on the concepts of the obedient "Victorian female" image since Victorian society deprives her of the direct power that would provide her an opportunity to voice her ideas explicitly. Keeping in her own counsel on the fact that the patriarchal establishment is a torment for her, "she deceives and manipulates in order to gain power and influence".[29] On the one hand, the seduction of a typical Romantic hero like Charles does not subvert any gender conventions, but on the other, the institution of marriage epitomises a societal obsession, a divine edict that must be obeyed. Therefore, in order to keep Charles attached to her, Sarah fabricates a story that enables her to save her appearance as a pitiable woman, while performing an act of freedom that would transcend the boundaries of Victorian gender conventions. Marrying shame and embracing "whoredom" –overtly– is her strategy to create her own space:

> "People should point at me, should say, there walks the French Lieutenant's Whore, - oh yes, let the word be said… So I married shame… What has kept me alive is my shame, my knowing that I am truly not like other women. I shall never have children, a husband, and those innocent happiness they have. And they will never understand the reason for my crime… Sometimes I almost pity them. I think I have a freedom they cannot understand. No insult, no blame can touch me. Because I have set myself beyond the pale."[30]

[27] **Ibid**., p. 65.
[28] **Ibid**., p. 163.
[29] Anne Rachel Sokolov, "Confession, Power and Gender in the French Lieutenant's Woman", Truman State University, 2001 (Unpublished MA Thesis), p. 31.
[30] Gaskell, **op. cit**, pp. 175-176.

Charles's predictably imperfect understanding of what Sarah insinuates is not limited to this episode. The narrative is full of clues pointing at the strategies Sarah utilises, and the the hidden meanings of her strategies overlap in a way that mocks and refutes the conventional gender stereotypes. For instance, the first time Charles sees her up close, she is in a natural setting sleeping amongst the flowers, "looking vulnerable, innocent and idyllic" and we learn that the scene resembles "a kind of minute green amphitheatre" where Sarah performs her play.

In the company of Charles and other feeble-minded people of Lyme, she emphasises the validity and morality of demystifying the traditional gender roles by means of intricate strategies justifying her resistance. She has "a propensity for manipulating people by fictionalizing reality".[31] On Mrs Poulteney's birthday she presents her an antimacassar "embroidered with a border of ferns and lilies-of the valley" which stand for the freedom to move outside of domestic borders. In another episode, even as she reads the Psalm 119 ("blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of Lord") with a subdued voice and promises to Mrs Poulteney that she is to walk in the path of righteousness, she speculates that "righteousness was synonymous with suffering".[32] She extends and develops her text through Charles and "plotting her own seduction with the care of an author marshalling facts, she arranges her dismissal from Mrs.Poulteney's employ and lures Charles first to Carslake's Barn by means of a note (in French!), and then to Exeter by means of an address".[33]

It should be underlined, therefore, that the main conflict between Sarah and other characters does not arise from what they project -or do not project- onto the external reality of Victorian society. Sarah re-shapes reality by making use of the very same tactics cultivated and legitimised by the conventional gender roles. The objective correlative of her strategy corresponds to a critical parody of the Victorian morality.

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[31] Jean Merriell, "Variations on a Theme: The Monomyth in John Fowles's The French Lieutenant's Woman", University of North Texas, 1998 (Unpublished MA Thesis), p. 23.
[32] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 93.
[33] Pamela Cooper, **The Fictions of John Fowles: Power, Creativity, Femininity**, USA, University of Ottawa Press, 1991, p. 112.

Charles is not entirely unaware of Sarah's "strategies." Instinctually, he grasps that Sarah not only represents a deviation from the conventional morality but also produces an alternative subjectivity based on strategies and contradictions: "It became clear to him that the girl's silent meekness ran contrary to her nature; that she was therefore playing a part and that the part was one of the complete dissociation from… her mistress".[34] And, "he was intrigued to see how the wild animal would behave in these barred surroundings, and was soon disappointed to see that it was an apparent utter meekness".[35] Sarah even declares that she has told Charles a lie: "I have told you a lie, I made sure Mrs Fairley saw me, I knew she would tell Mrs Poulteney".[36]

Yet, at the level of consciousness, he is unable to interpret or express these strategies and their contradictions out of the gender-ideology context, and this despite Sarah's plain – albeit often wordless – attempts to have him conceive of a different horizon:

> "She raised her face to his… as if there was something he must see, it was not too late: a truth beyond his truths, an emotion beyond his emotions, a history beyond all conceptions of history. As if she could say worlds; yet at the same time knew that if he could not apprehend these worlds without her saying them"[37]

Instead of elaborating on what Sarah's situation and motives may suggest, Charles devotes his mind to the Victorian vision that helps to promote and mystify gender stereotypes. Upon hearing from the dairy man that Sarah "been't no lady. She be the French Loot'n'nt's Hoer"[38]; he adopts the role of saviour and appoints himself the chivalrous task of rescuing. Hence he thinks that he will cure Sarah of her madness. His inner voice reveals the masculine traits of Victorian mentality:

[34] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 103.
[35] **Ibid.**, p. 103.
[36] **Ibid.**, p. 252.
[37] **Ibid.**, p. 262.
[38] **Ibid.**, p. 86.

> "Some moments passed before Charles grasped the meaning of that last word. And he threw an angry look at the bearded dairyman, who was a Methodist and therefore fond of calling a spade a spade, especially when the spade was somebody else's sin. He seemed to Charles to incarnate all the hypocritical gossip -and gossips of- of Lyme. Charles could have believed many things of that sleeping face; but never that its owner was a whore"[39]

Charles's position is a form of denial, a repression bearing witness to his own entrapment in that madonna-whore complex. As the representative of Western masculinity (nurturing the *virtues* of "rationality, intellect and will") in relation to Sarah's position as an outcast woman (degraded as "whore" and doomed to be helplessness), he emphasises the stereotypical male self-confidence that would prove self-destructive:

> "After all, he was not a moth infatuated by a candle; he was a highly intelligent being, one of the fittest, and endowed with total free will. If he had not been sure of that latter safeguard, would he ever risked himself in such dangerous waters… That was how Charles's mind worked."[40]

In a typical episode, Charles seeks the help of Dr Grogan to grasp the reason and remedy for Sarah's atypical behaviour. Charles and Grogan's mutual incomprehension amounts to the male impotency that medicalises or criminalises the marginal identities in a degrading way.

Being interrogated about the "real" and final intention of Sarah Woodruff in seducing a betrothed man, Grogan replies with terms borrowed straight from the madonna-whore complex:

[39] **Ibid.**, p. 86.
[40] **Ibid.**, p. 190.

> "'As a man who is betrothed?' The doctor smiled grimly. 'I have known many prostitutes. I hasten to add: in pursuance of my own profession, not theirs. And I wish I had a guinea for every one I have heard gloat over the fact that a majority of their victims are husbands and fathers."[41]

While the victim and victimiser are operating in Grogan's mind in the light of hegemonic gender ideology, the web of clinical associations he constructs around Sarah Woodruff corresponds to a mentally diseased figure, a *femme fatale* to be shunned in order to accommodate a middle-class respectability.

Then, Grogan assembles his quasi-scientific and medical evidence to diagnose Sarah's disease. Making an analogy with the La Roncière trial (a case of public interest, attended by Hugo, Balzac and George Sand), Fowles has Grogan find Sarah guilty of hysteria:

> "Herr Doktor proceeds, in a somewhat moralistic tone, to explain the mental illness, we today call hysteria - the assumption, that is, of symptoms of disease or disability in order to gain the attention and sympathy of others: a neurosis or psychosis almost invariably caused, as we now know, by sexual repression."[42]

Hence Dr. Grogan decides that Sarah is addicted to her melancholia. Her sadness is her happiness and that is why she refuses to be cured. Grogan's interpretation of Sarah misses the point that the social resentment Sarah reproduces at the individual level could not be resolved by means of mere medical treatment. Not yielding to the masculinist gaze and logic, Sarah deserves to be dismissed as hysteric.

Charles's seeking medical advice to understand Sarah's motives indicates that he thinks of himself not only as her saviour but also as her physician. In a certain parallel to the contemporary standard of therapeutic psychiatry, Victorian medicine for the psyche was mainly oriented to getting *abnormal* people to reconcile with

[41] **Ibid.**, p. 225.
[42] **Ibid.**, p. 233.

middle-class standards and morality. His lack of self-criticism, justified with the help of Dr. Grogan's advice, therefore pushes Charles to the conviction that a mere therapeutic treatment may suffice to re-accommodate Sarah into society, that is, to the society that groups gender identities into counter camps, with the female kept to the household domain and the male put in charge of the "worldly business". He does not comprehend the fact that this is the ordeal of fate from which Sarah Woodruff flees.

Charles's progressive benevolence has its limits too. Although he thinks that Sarah is a helpless victim of fate who is in need of an enlightened man, when his reputation and future prospects are at risk, his more basic conservative-minded character asserts itself. Ernestina's father, Mr. Freeman, offers him the management of his business, but Charles feels "caged" and "as a bought husband", a "[father-]in-law's puppet"[43] – and despises his class for accepting this sort of "traditional" marriages. But after his clandestine meetings with Sarah, he feels "infuriated that she should so carelessly risk his reputation," to the extent of becoming "outraged at the threat implicit" in this affair.[44] Thus, Charles's enthrallment with Sarah's story, his "sensing… a wildness of innocence, almost an eagerness"[45] in Sarah's untamed nature, does not lead him to leave behind his obsession with "social reputation." When his precarious social prestige is at stake, he is not a benevolent patriarch or chivalrous saviour.

In fact, the general outlook of Victorian society on the issue of morality is more or less the same – or rather, Charles is only expressing the norm. It is no wonder, then, that Charles's attitude towards the social implications of this affair ends up in hypocrisy. Fowles intervenes and reminds us that we are immersed here in

[43] **Ibid**., p. 295.
[44] **Ibid**., p. 206.
[45] **Ibid**., p. 250.

> "An age where woman was sacred; and where you could buy a thirteen-year-old girl for a few pounds—a few shillings, if you wanted her for only an hour or two. Where more churches were built than in the whole previous history of the country; and where one in sixty houses in London was a brothel (the modern ratio would be nearer one in six thousand). Where the sanctity of marriage (and chastity before marriage) was proclaimed from every pulpit, in every newspaper editorial and public utterance; and where never—or hardly ever— have so many great public figures, from the future king down, led scandalous private lives. Where the penal system was progressively humanized; and flagellation so rife that a Frenchman set out quite seriously to prove that the Marquis de Sade must have had English ancestry. Where the female body had never been so hidden from view; and where every sculptor was judged by his ability to carve naked women. Where there is not a single novel, play or poem of literary distinction that ever goes beyond the sensuality of a kiss, where Dr. Bowdler (the date of whose death, 1825, reminds us that the Victorian ethos was in being long before the strict threshold of the age) was widely considered a public benefactor; and where the output of pornography has never been exceeded. Where it was universally maintained that women do not have orgasms; and yet every prostitute was taught to simulate them. Where there was an enormous progress and liberation in every other field of human activity; and nothing but tyranny in the most personal and fundamental."[46]

Sarah Woodruff is placed by Charles as standing out of time in this context while in fact she points to the possibility of another age.

[46] **Ibid**., pp. 268-269.

4.3. The Idea of Female Solidarity and Sarah Woodruff's Alternative Subjectivity

Sarah is aware of the fact that she is reduced to an exotic and extraordinary object in the eyes of Charles Smithson. Incarnating the gender ideology of Victorian times, Charles is bent on and obsessed with possessing Sarah, like the fossilised rocks he collects in Lyme. Far from understanding Sarah's claim to an alternative female identity and subjectivity, Charles even identifies himself with Varguennes (the protagonist of Sarah's fabricated story) in his bid to win her heart: "He was at one and the same time Varguennes enjoying her and the man who sprang forward and struck him down; just as Sarah was to him both an innocent victim and a wild, abandoned woman".[47]

As mentioned, Sarah's attitude to other characters representing the prevalent gender ideology (Mrs Poulteney, Mrs Fairley etc.) is not radically different from her attitude towards Charles. But when the subaltern and marginalised female characters deprived of voice and identity are at stake, she remains faithful to the idea of female solidarity. In this sense, one may suggest, Sarah is not an entirely ahistorical character positioned surreally or post-modernly, out of time and context.

Before demonstrating how she acts in solidarity with marginalised female characters, a specific feature of Sarah that might provide an alternative reading of the text in terms of gender roles should be elucidated. In one of the early episodes of *French Lieutenant's Woman*, Charles, after examining Sarah in profile, notices that her delicate, fragile, arched and dark eyebrows gives her a "tomboyish air".[48] Sarah's "tomboyish air" as linked to the incompatibility of Charles' heterosexual and traditional ambitions with a radically different sexual identity could be interpreted as a rejection of stereotypical gender roles. Once defined somewhat independently of biological sex, gender becomes a liberating medium that has the effect of

[47] **Ibid**., p. 119.
[48] **Ibid**., p. 119.

complementing Sarah's emancipatory project, predicated on overturning the pre-destined gender roles.

In Simon Loveday's words,

> "Fowles's female characters reign over the private sphere, the world of intuitive knowledge, sensibility, the emotions…[and] conversely men exercise dominance in the public sphere, the world of science and systematic classification of action, violence and war. It follows from this that Fowles associates men with orthodoxy, conformity, and repression"[49]

Sarah's disruptive role is not limited to undermining male dominance only in the public sphere. While she is a part of Mrs Poulteney's household, she is involved in another radical moment, one indicative of both a female solidarity and lesbianism.

As a servant to Mrs Poulteney, Millie has been installed in a long-unused dressing room next to Sarah's bedroom. One night, Sarah notices that she is weeping and goes into her room to comfort her. The girl suddenly slips into Sarah's bed and kisses her. They then start sleeping in the same bed regularly. Until Sarah departs Mrs Poulteney's home, whenever she goes bed alone, she wakes "in the dawn to find the girl beside her".[50]

In one respect, the relationship between them might be interpreted as the expression of sisterly solidarity acted out by two outcast and marginalised women. Millie is "the plowman's daughter, fourth of eleven children who lived with their parents in a poverty too bitter to describe, her home a damp, cramped, two-room cottage".[51] Hence Sarah feels a certain responsibility to protect her. But, on the other hand, their affiliation is laden with a sexual undertone: Millie is no longer a child,

[49] Simon Loveday, **The Romances of John Fowles**, Hampshire, Basington Press, 1985, p. 5.
[50] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 160.
[51] **Ibid**., p. 160.

after all. The episode takes us to the issue of lesbianism, an issue raised by Fowles simultaneously.

From the perspective of Mrs Poulteney and her like, lesbianism is an incomprehensible type of sexuality, so much so that, we can "doubt if Mrs Poulteney had ever heard of the word 'lesbian'; and if she had, it would have commenced with a capital, and referred to an island in Greece".[52] At home within the confines of the madonna-whore context that reduces respectability to a desexualised form of female "purity", Mrs Poulteney is unable to imagine that women can feel carnal pleasure even, let alone enjoy a lesbian relationship.

Here the narrator attempts to show that Sarah is as ignorant as her mistress on this point: "Yet she was, I think, as innocent as makes no matter"[53]. But Sarah does not suffer from the complex haunting Mrs Poulteney's mind and never feels herself at home with men's company. Therefore we have no reason to support Fowles in this respect. Not coincidentally, Sarah ends up with Pre-Raphaelites. Joseph Boone notes that:

> "In rejecting academic training in mannerism and classical form and in rebelling against Victorian moral hypocrisy, the Pre-Raphaelite and Symbolist movements, for instance developed a repertoire of stylistic traits -willowy figures verging on the androgynous, expressions of tremulous emotion breaking through states of repression, and lushly heraldic symbolism- that easily lent themselves to the depiction of scenes of a scapegoated sexuality. Most often, these took the form of the "fallen woman" (and, occasionally, hinted at lesbianism), but the male homoerotic potential latent in the fascination with the sensuous and the symbolic also breaks through on occasion."[54]

[52] **Ibid**., p. 157.
[53] **Ibid**., p. 159.
[54] Joseph Allen Boone, **The Homoerotics of Orientalism**, New York, Columbia University Press, 2014, p. 362.

So Sarah's relationship with Millie might be interpreted as the fulfilment of female solidarity under the circumstances marked by the restrictive confines of the domestic sphere. But it also suggests an alternative kind of sexuality. Given that the fact of biological sex is incidental for Sarah, becoming a strategy only as long as she could utilise it, this relationship epitomises an attempt to blur conventional distinctions of gender, sexuality and class.

At the end of the novel, while recounting the fate of his characters, Fowles asks an ironic question: "Sam and Mary – but who can be bothered with the biography of servants? They married, and bred, and died in the monotonous fashion of their kind".[55] In fact, Sarah does bother with the fate of servants. Her commitment to the idea of female solidarity manifests itself in her protection not only of Millie but also of Mary.

The relationship between Sam (Charles's servant) and Mary operates as a parallel to the secret affair between Charles and Sarah. They come together in clandestine meetings as is the case with Charles and Sarah, but, on the margins of society, their love story is filtered through the feeling of humiliation in front of their masters. Since they are forced into silence, they are helpless without each other. Their clandestine meetings provide a temporary exit from the subaltern status imposed upon them. An East Londoner with a Cockney accent, Sam is physically enslaved and verbally abused by Charles, such that his vocabulary shrinks to a mere repetition of "with respeck Mr Charles, I wouldn't", while Mary experiences a two-fold humiliation as a female servant. She is socially disgraced and sexually repressed by her masters. Forced to exist as "an innocent country virgin" and thus deny her sexuality in the name of respectability, Mary clings to the emotional experience she shares with Sam.

Sam and Mary take their revenge on their masters with the cooperation of Sarah Woodruff, whose now intercession renders them justified. Sarah's intricate strategies and subtle plays once again operate in the manner of aggravating Charles's predicament. Just as she puts Charles's reputation in risk by making sure that Mrs

[55] Gaskell, **op. cit**, p. 460.

Fairley sees her in a secluded spot with him, she lets Sam and Mary see that Charles flirts with her at the Undercliff. When Sam and Mary intrude at the Undercliff (probably upon the recommendation of Sarah), Charles feels alarmed and "pierced with embarrassment," whereas Sarah behaves as if she knows who the intruders are, and much to the Charles's astonishment, smiles: "And then she did something as strange, as shocking as if she had thrown off her clothes. She smiled."[56]

Likewise, just before leaving Lyme, by bringing a letter of notice to Charles's apartment without disguising her identity, she deliberately informs Sam and Mary that Charles has betrayed Ernestina. Hence, Sarah mocks Charles's ordeal by acting in solidarity with Mary and Sam. She applies to her strategy of "exhibiting shame" to the effect that power balances are turned upside down in the favour of the subjugated and marginalised. Eventually, it becomes Sam who reveals the secret of Charles to Lyme, and in an effort to hide his shame by offering her a "pocket of money", Charles is forced to lower his eyes in front of Mary.

It is not accidental that Sarah chooses to call at Exeter after leaving Lyme. A city that enables her active collaboration with the fallen and marginalised women, Exeter's distant urban environment, rather than the nearby Dorchester or Bristol, well represents Sarah's commitment to the task of subverting the norms propagated by the madonna-whore complex. Exeter is depicted as a female retreat from the oppressive order:

> "There were brothels there, and dance halls and gin places; but rather more frequent were variously undone girls and women—unmarried mothers, mistresses, a whole population in retreat from the claustrophobic villages and small towns of Devon. It was notoriously a place to hide… crammed with cheap lodging houses and inns like that one described by Sarah in Weymouth, safe sanctuaries from the stern moral tide that swept elsewhere through the life of the country. Exeter was, in all this, no exception—all the larger provincial towns of the time had to find room for this unfortunate army of female wounded in the battle for universal masculine purity."[57]

[56] **Ibid**., p. 265.
[57] **Ibid**., p. 276.

Appreciative of the safety in this fallen women's haven, the "faint taste of ownership" comes to Sarah, "with a childlike absorption".[58] It is as if she is enjoying the first holiday of her life. In Exeter, she ends her manipulation and tells Charles the truth about Varguennes – the French lieutenant – that the whole story is a fabrication. Obsessed now, though, haunted even by the idea of conquering Sarah's body, Charles does not try to comprehend what has led Sarah to the extreme of lying everybody in Lyme and doomed her to a voluntary spinsterhood. Being absorbed in his own masculine universe, Charles's sole intention is to "possess her, to melt into her, to burn, to burn, to burn to ashes on that body and in those eyes".[59]

He gives vent to his enragement with the woman only after the sexual intercourse. Now he realises that Sarah was a virgin, and, as a conqueror, feels comfortable to express his misogyny:

> "She had lied. All her conduct, all her motives in Lyme Regis had been based on a lie. But for what purpose. Why? Why? Why? Blackmail! To put him totally in her power! And all those loathsome succubi of the male mind, their fat fears of a great feminine conspiracy to suck the virility from their veins, to prey upon their idealism, melt them into wax and mold them to their evil fancies... these, and a surging back to credibility of the hideous evidence adduced in the La Ronciere appeal, filled Charles's mind with an apocalyptic horror. The discreet sounds of washing ceased. There were various small rustlings—he supposed she was getting into the bed. Dressed, he stood staring at the fire. She was mad, evil, enlacing him in the strangest of nets... but why?"[60]

Entrapped in the masculinist vision of Victorian gender ideology, Charles puts the question as a matter of moral weakness embedded in the female "essence." Thus, it is impossible for him to seek the answer outside of Sarah's own personality, and the matter becomes entirely incomprehensible.

[58] **Ibid**., p. 280.
[59] **Ibid**., p. 347.
[60] **Ibid**., p. 320.

Neither does he realise that Sarah is a woman of insight and intellect. Having tested Charles's potential for change in a town teeming with marginalised women, she decides to leave him alone with his deprivation and move to London to pose for Pre-Raphaelites. Just as they at least attempted in some ways to position themselves, these retro romantics are employed by Fowles to represent a radical challenge to the Victorian gender ideology. They demonstrate that the thin line between the conformist view of femininity, the dichotomy of purity and prostitution, can be blurred by means of art.[61]

In this synthetic process, the virtues we find in Charles of duty, propriety and conventionality are, in a certain way, transformed. He grasps that he is in love with the idea of a conventional marriage with an unconventional woman – thus is the limit of his transformation. Now his obsession concentrates on Sarah's symbolic significance:

> "It was hardly Sarah he now thought of - she was merely the symbol around which had accreted all his lost possibilities, his extinct freedoms, his never-to-be-taken journeys. He had to say farewell to something; she was merely and conveniently both close and receding."[62]

So he makes his journey to find the person who has reminded him of his extinct freedoms just to face the sordid truth declared by Sarah herself: "[In] another age, another world, another life, I might have been your wife. What duped you was my loneliness. A resentment, an envy, I don't know."[63]

[61] The pre-Raphaelite romance may indeed have been a nod in an emancipating direction, but it was not a *real* escape (hence usual stories of the models, like addiction, marriage to the painter, and the latter's attempts to convert the working class girls among their muses and consorts to some sort of lady, a là Bernard Shaw). Instead, therefore, Fowles takes at least a writer's responsibility for his sex and its system to pay a historical debt and free the feminine from its binary entrapment.
[62] **Ibid**., p. 336.
[63] **Ibid**., p. 430.

At the end of *the French Lieutenant's Woman*, Charles Smithson's self-appointed, heroic mission to save and deliver Sarah remains a task unfilled. His gentlemanly prestige is undermined, he becomes blemished with the affair, and his actions alarm all sorts of propriety in his inner circle when he is stripped off of his title of gentleman by way of a newspaper note. Unable to overcome his impotence, he lives the fate of his age, and thus his tragedy.

On the other hand, Sarah Woodruff stands as a foil to the female image imposed upon by the social content of madonna-whore context. She is culturally disinherited but individually liberated. Thus does Fowles endeavour to return us to a reconstructed Victoriana for a gender redemption. Written in the throes of Women's Liberation a century after the events described, this is, then, less a work that "one of the Victorian novelists ... failed to write"[64], than one they could not write, since they were not really less trapped than Charles Smithson (and one they would not write, of course, since it is necessarily, to some degree inauthentic).

[64] **Ibid**., p. 431.

CONCLUSION

In the mid-nineteenth century, with the Chartist movement as culmination of a growing antagonism between the urban workforce and industrial bourgeoisie, England witnessed the rise of the working-class as a self-organised, self-identifying social category. The aristocracy of wealth and birth had so long been in decline, that, even though country gentlemen sat in the House of Commons, their interests were no longer at odds with the urban interests represented by the middle class of the manufacturing and trading nouveau riche. In line with this societal configuration, in which the working classes formed a vast multitude, Chartism easily found a firm social basis and within a decade was able to transform itself into a mass movement.

A huge amount of emotional and intellectual energy was mobilised for the working classes during this period, roughly, the mid-1830s to 40s. Speaking in London on the fourth anniversary of the *People's Paper*, Karl Marx anticipated that English working classes would be the driving force and principal subject of an imminent social revolution:

> "[The] antagonism between modern industry and science on the one hand, modern misery and dissolution on the other hand (…) this antagonism between the productive powers and social relations of our epoch is a fact, palpable, overwhelming, and not to be controverted (…) We know that to work well the new-fangled forces of society, they only want to be mastered by new-fangled men – and such are the working men (…) The English working men are the first-born sons of modern industry. They will then, certainly, not be the last in aiding the social revolution produced by that industry, a revolution which means the emancipation of their own class all over the world, which is as universal as capital-rule and wage-slavery."[1]

[1] Karl Marx, **Surveys from Exile: Political Writings**, Ed. by David Fernbach, London, Verso, 2010, p. 120.

Marx's anticipation was not to be realised. The English working classes were gradually assimilated into the organic unity of Victorian society following the 1848 year of revolutions in Europe, and, after its heyday in the 1840s, Chartism dissipated.

The arrival of Chartism had been a particular concern for several English novelists in the mid-century and a distinct type of novel – the "industrial" or "social-problem" novel – emerged. This novel tended to a narrative form of heroic realism, situated in the fervent societal milieu of class conflict propelled by a movement for the rights of working classes. The main problematic of this dissertation is constructed around the representation in the industrial/social problem novels of working-class women.

The representation of the working class or lowly-born female is significant as it indicates the intellectual limits of these novels. Whereas the industrial novel never goes beyond the paradigm of "benevolence ideology", based on the restoration of organic societal unity by means of charity and unity among all social classes – for example through exaltation of the nation – the novelists, both male and female, certainly attempted to garner sympathy and empathy for the working classes by depicting the vile conditions the proletariat was forced to endure. And this was indeed a *radically* new dimension added to the Victorian novel – most famously, of course, to be expressed by Dickens, such that the world of urban hardships became paradigmatic. But when it came to the representation of female working-class and underclass or outcast characters, the challenge of this new dimension was immediately squashed by the dominant, the heavy tradition of patriarchal gender ideology.

Thus, the industrial novels largely reproduced patterns in the sphere of gender that were bent on the promotion of distinctly *un*challenging familial and domestic values. While the character of the working-class male, asserted a positive, not to say masculine, dynamic *driving* the story forward, the role of his female counterpart was ultimately, well, supportive. Meaning both that she was to be a dutiful daughter, wife and mother and also that she was to thereby and in other ways to facilitate the

maintenance of the patriarchy, even in her role as part of the challenge to that in its aspect of class formation.

One of the most pervasive patterns in this regard was the *madonna-whore complex* as defined by Sigmund Freud and revised, in the light of a feminist approach, by Julia Kristeva. Introduced as the crucial term for my own problematic, this complex unfolds the power relations determining the representation of the working-class female characters in the social-problem novels and their reproduction of the ideology of gender and family dominant in early-to-mid-nineteenth century Britain. Thus, the representation of working-class women in these works is investigated here as grappling with the restricted options offered within the scope of the madonna-whore complex, that is, as characterised by the tropes of virgin (respectable, pure, and a mother) as opposed to prostitute (fallen, loose, irretrievable on Earth and thus deserving of degradation and damnation).

Since the female options in the madonna-whore complex operated both symbolically – through the structuring of representations of the feminine culturally available to, for instance, novelists – and materially – in the psychic construction of society –, in the first chapter, I have clarified the place of working class women in terms of the gender and class roles they played at this time. In the second and third chapters, I have shown how this was expressed in two of the industrial novels by a female author, *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, by Elizabeth Gaskell. And in the third chapter, I have looked at how a dissolution of the complex was indicated, by John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, but only as a retrospective using a post-modernist temporal narrative.

In orthodox Marxist historiography, the story of the nineteenth century was told as that of a common identity known as "the proletariat." Instead of subcategories corresponding to ethnic, linguistic or gender identities, a general category, referred to as "the masses" or "the People" was promoted, which was to be led out of bondage by its vanguard proletariat (as opposed to the lumpen proletariat of the unemployed and unemployable and *degenerate)*. In this economics-oriented worldview, gender was rather little conceived of, and insofar as it was, it was as something apart from

class rather than entwined with it. Class and gender were not regarded as greatly affecting one another, maintaining a distance as distinct principles of societal structuring (within which class was valorised and gender not, so gender, if anything, was regarded as logically supervening on class).

In the first chapter, I attempted to replace these assumptions with an approach based on the assumption that gender provides an analytical category influencing conceptions of class, race, ethnicity and other social categorisations that constructed the panorama of Victorian society. In the light of the crucial findings of feminist researchers, it has to be granted that gender is a significant factor functionally shaping the configuration of social classes in nineteenth century Britain. Then, following this (second-wave) feminist analysis, I have contextualised the gender and class position of both middle- and working-class women in terms of the public-private split. The public space of factory and strikes – the political – was gendered male, while the private sphere of home and family – the personal – was conceptualised as the domain of the female. The realm of the personal was analytically apolitical, and the female sphere of influence and concern was domestic, from which followed ideals about what was feminine, about how women should be as well as what they should do – or not.

This split was so rooted in the prevalent Victorian ideology that James Lees Milne even praised the profession of domestic servant as profitable in his *The Industrial and Social Position of Women*:

> "The situation of a domestic servant… is attended with considerable comfort. With abundant work it combines a wonderful degree of liberty, discipline, health, physical comfort, good example, regularity, room or advancement, encouragement to acquire saving habits. The most numerous class of depositors in the Saving Banks is that of domestic servants. The situation frequently involves much responsibility, and calls forth the best features of character. Kind attachment in return for honest service is not uncommon with the master or mistress; and an honest pride in the relation springs up on both sides and lasts throughout life."[2]

[2] James Lees Milne, **The Industrial and Social Position of Women in the Middle and Lower Ranks**, London, Chapman & Hall, 1856, p. 250.

In the second chapter, I have focused on Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* with the aim of demonstrating how the *madonna-whore complex* was presented and promoted in the novels through the disguise of domestic bliss. Gaskell had an exceptional place among the social-problem novelists of the 1840s, as her occasional participation in charity organisations gave her opportunities to encounter and contemplate the disastrous effects wreaked on the working classes by the notorious "hungry forties" not through journalistic reports but directly as an inhabitant of Manchester, the pioneering industrial city she dubbed "Cottonopolis."

Although Gaskell's practical knowledge about the daily life of working-class families enabled her to avoid a depiction of one-dimensional characters merely playing out their roles within the prevailing class and gender conception of the mid-century, in the final instance, she did arrive at traditional novelistic solutions affirmative of the domestic bliss and contrived almost as a rule by marriage. *Mary Barton*'s self-imposed outcast character, Ester, with her transgressive potential to undo and subvert the domestic ideology, is perceived as a danger and condemned to oblivion, whereas the fate awaiting the eponymous heroine is heaven in the home, the "domestic angel" of the madonna-whore complex ultimately fulfilled in motherhood.

The same pattern recurs in Gaskell's *North and South*, whose heroine, Margaret Hale, exhibits a certain moral superiority – to the extent, at least, that she intervenes between the workers on strike and the employer Mr. Thornton – but whose ideas and personality take on a different turn as she starts to reflect the male character's views and domestic ideology through her relationship to John Thornton and her relative autonomy gradually evaporates. Characterising Margaret with her "maiden pride," unremitting "shame" and "angelic purity", the madonna-whore complex is reproduced by Gaskell condemning her heroine to the verdict of her times. At the end of the book, Margaret lacks any kind of independent vitality, as, contrary to the relatively autonomous and socially dynamic female of a somewhat

emancipated womanhood. Her goodness is identified with her compliance to the domestic ideology, extended to the paternalist eschatology of the novel.

Whereas Margaret Hale is positioned as the symbol of angelic immunity and subjected to the male authority as an ideal daughter and wife (madonna) in *North and South*, Bessy Higgins, the factory girl who resists renunciation of her freedom in a compromise with the dominant patriarchal and domestic ideology, ends up like *Mary Barton*'s Ester, doomed, in Bessy's case with a fatal lung disease. Depicted as somewhat rebellious, nihilistically thinking that "such a life as this is not worth caring for," and associated in some measure with the transgressive danger of denying the gender and class roles determined for her, Bessy Higgins does have the potential to provide a real counterpoint to the madonna of the novel. But the enforcement of marriage, Margaret's reconciliation to the patriarchal and the interior world of domestic relationships combine to suffocate any hope that Bessy Higgings would represent as an alternative working-class female subjectivity. Her death, literally by suffocation, denied the very air of life to breathe, is apposite.

Finally, written in 1969 with a plot set in the Victorian age, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is used as an interesting post-modern rendition of a certain alternative to the 'Victorian' woman's subjectivity entrapped in the confines of the complex. Fowles' narrative is based on the quest and reaffirmation by Sarah Woodruff of her autonomous female identity. Sarah twists the romantic heroine figure beyond recognition by playing on the concepts of the obedient Victorian female image and hence defying the masculinist norms of the dominant ideology.

Representing an exit from what might be dubbed the "Victorian fallacy" – that a woman has to choose between the madonna-whore options – Sarah is a self-imposed outcast and thus is able to remain vibrantly free. Hers is a form of passive existentialism which brings us to the relationship between the female body and sexuality that is central to the madonna-whore complex. While *The French Lieutenant's Woman*'s male characters – including Charles Smithson – identify Sarah with hysteria and the *whore*, she points to the possibility of another age. Disruptive thus of the Victorian narrative, her identity represents an attempt to blur

conventional distinctions of gender, sexuality and class. Her commitment to the idea of female solidarity under the circumstances marked by the domestic sphere promotes the idea of alternative voice hitherto denigrated by the restrictive confines of domestic ideology. Meanwhile, we are allowed into the world of Mary, the servant girl, sexually active and uncondemned. Thus the outcast prostitute woman and the proletarian servant girl unite in their power to a embody a norm of female sexuality in the Victorian period that is permitted without reduction into the either/or split of the madonna-whore complex.

In conclusion, neither the working classes, organised around the progressive cause of Chartism nor the social-problem novelists, like Elizabeth Gaskell, representing the conditions of the working classes in the context of the movement, were able to challenge the dominant ideology with respect to gender when it came to working class women. The novels of the era reflected an ultimately conservative gender and class framework, which even while seeming relatively "emancipatory" on the surface, was unable to penetrate the female proletariat without reducing her to the domestic angel. An alternative Victoriana was only constructed retrospectively, as in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, with a reclamation of the female working class subjectivity in an emancipatory direction.

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