

## The condition-of-England novel

“Social-problem novels” (also known as “industrial,” “social,” or “condition-of-England” novels) are a group of mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century fictions concerned with the condition of the working classes in the new industrial age. “The condition of England” was a phrase used by Thomas Carlyle in his essay *Chartism* (1839) about the “condition and disposition” of working people; it combined sympathy for deprivation with fear of the “madness” of Chartism. Largely written by middle-class writers, the novels highlight poverty, dirt, disease, and industrial abuses such as sweated labour, child workers, and factory accidents; however, they also exhibit anxiety about working-class irreligion and a fear of (potentially violent) collective action, such as Chartism and trade unionism. The genre roughly spans the period between the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867, and the backdrop includes the “Hungry Forties,” debates over the franchise, Chartist demonstrations, the exponential growth of the new cities, and campaigns around sanitation and factory conditions.

No consensus exists on the works that should be included in the genre. Harriet Martineau’s “A Manchester Strike” in her *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832) is regarded as either the first true social-problem novel or an influential forerunner. Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1838) is sometimes considered a social-problem novel due to its critique of the 1834 New Poor Law. Frances Trollope’s *Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy* (1839) followed, arguably inspired both by Dickens’s tale and (in reaction against) Martineau. Trollope’s “fallen woman” novel, *Jessie Phillips, a Tale of the Present Day* (1843), is also generally included in the genre. Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna is another female social-problem author writing about factory workers and seamstresses (*Helen Fleetwood* (1841) and *The Wrongs of Woman* (1843–1844)). Like Martineau and Trollope, Tonna has been rescued from critical obscurity only in recent years. Charles Kingsley’s critical trajectory is in the opposite direction, but his *Alton Locke* (1850) (about Chartism) and *Yeast: A Problem* (1851) (about agricultural workers) appear in most studies of the genre. Although set in an earlier period, Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849) is often considered a social-problem novel because its depiction of Luddite riots is read as a reference to Chartism. However, the best-known examples are Disraeli’s political trilogy (*Coningsby* (1844), *Sybil* (1845), and *Tancred* (1847)), Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1854–1855), and Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854). George Eliot’s *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866), written on the eve of the second Reform Act, is arguably the last novel in the genre.

In the preface to her 1848 novel, *Mary Barton*, Elizabeth Gaskell reflected on the ‘unhappy state of things’ in Victorian England. Through the pages that followed she would, she said, highlight the divisions between ‘the employers and the employed’; she would speak for those who worked in the factories in appalling conditions, who struggled to feed their families, and who watched their children die from typhus. With its focus on the industrial North of England, and its use of Mancunian dialect, the novel had a pioneering quality. It was, Gaskell claimed, an attempt to break a silence and ‘to give some utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people’.

Gaskell was writing in a period of acute economic depression known as the ‘hungry forties’. Food shortages resulting from bad harvests swept across Northern Europe,

factories laid off their workers, banks failed, and trade unions threatened strike action. A scene from Benjamin Disraeli's 1845 novel *Sybil: Or, the Two Nations*, touches on the people's sense of alienation. We live, one of his characters argues, in 'two nations':

'between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets ....'  
'You speak of –' said Egremont, hesitatingly.

Novels by Fanny Trollope and Harriet Martineau, and works such as Gaskell's *North and South* (1855), Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), Charles Kingsley's *Yeast: A Problem* (1848) and *Alton Locke* (1850), and Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854) and *Bleak House* (1852), tried to capture atrocious working conditions, diagnose social problems, and render the disparate parts of society legible to one another. A common feature of these novels is a preoccupation with the need for reform at a Parliamentary level, initially provoked by the perceived failures of Factory Reform Acts of the 1820s and 1830s, and revelations of widespread pauperism following the introduction of the New Poor Law in 1834. The generic label is taken from Thomas Carlyle, whose 1839 work, *Chartism*, first posed the 'Condition-of-England question' in its very first chapter.

## Charles Dickens

Although Dickens generally despised the blue-book statisticians, men 'who see figures and averages, and nothing else', he was deeply concerned by the contents of some of these blue books. As Michael Slater notes, 1843 saw him 'perfectly stricken down' by the Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission. *A Christmas Carol* was written 'at white heat' that same year, in partial response to the report's contents, with the aim of 'opening the hearts of the prosperous and powerful towards the poor and powerless'. For Dickens, as for Gaskell, the challenge for the novelist was how to convey the scale of a national problem without losing contact with individual lives. Nearly a decade later, his *Hard Times* dwells satirically on such matters again, focussing on the way in which factory workers were dehumanised and accounted for. '[G]enerically called "the Hands"', the workers were, he writes, 'a race who would have found more favour with some people, if Providence had seen fit to make them only hands, or, like the lower creatures of the seashore, only hands and stomachs' (ch. 10). With what power the author's 'hand' might have, Dickens tried to piece these fragmented lives back together by imaginatively embodying the plight of the working-class.

## Make-believe was no refuge

*Hard Times* was one of many 19th-century novels to be published serially in a magazine. Dickens's weekly episodes in *Household Words* jostled for page space with non-fictional articles on subjects ranging from disability to drainage. One, entitled 'Idiots Again', praises the 'great improvement in the treatment of ... lunatics' in recent years. 'A Lesson in Multiplication' reflects on 19th-century demographics, noting that 'in the year eighteen-hundred and fifty one the population was above twenty-one millions'. In a poignant article about city conditions, which chimes with the sentiments of *Hard Times*, readers were urged to 'turn aside' from themselves and 'care about the quiet poor'. The layout and miscellaneous material of magazine print meant that

readers of Condition-of-England fictions were literally forced to 'turn aside', moving their gaze from the novel to the news. Make-believe was no refuge.

Indeed, one of the distinctive features of the 'Condition-of-England' novel is its delineation of the specific and detailed realities of working-class life. Charles Kingsley's *Yeast*, for example, highlights the impracticality of ill-conceived clean-up operations in slum-dwellings. 'Where's the water to come from to keep a place clean?' asks one character. 'We've work enough to fill our kettles' (ch. 13). A scene in chapter 30 of Dickens's *Bleak House* picks up this theme when a meddling evangelical missionary visits a poor brickmaker's cottage. After rejecting the missionary's message of spiritual salvation, the brickmaker points out that moral hygiene seems irrelevant in the face of literal dirt:

Look at the water. Smell it! That's wot we drinks. How do you like it, and what do you think of gin, instead? An't my place dirty? Yes, it is dirty – it's nat'rally dirty, and it's nat'rally onwholesome; and we've had five dirty and onwholesome children, as is all dead infants, and so much the better for them, and for us besides. Have I read the little book wot you left? No, I an't read the little book wot you left.

There's comedy in this strident passage – a comedy which the contemporary illustrator, Hablot Browne Knight, recognises in his accompanying etching which highlights the 'multiplicity of uses' to which this small space has catered – from cooking to washing to lounging or nursing. For the steely-faced missionary, Mrs Pardiggle, it is very much a parlour, and she sits complacently, surrounded by top-hatted junior acolytes.

But there's also tragedy. Tucked away near the fire, the brickmaker's wife holds the body of their dead baby in her arms – a victim of typhus contracted from the polluted water. The 'little book' that is so firmly rejected contains religious tracts that were intended to improve the brickmaker's spiritual life. But the reference to a book which has been cast aside has a wider resonance which reflects back on the novel itself. It raises the question of whether, in the face of physical suffering, books like *Bleak House* might too be beside the point.

### Cautious about change

Questions of novelistic purpose and utility haunt the cluster of Condition-of-England novels. In dramatising the horrors of child-labour in factories and extreme poverty, there was always a risk of apocalyptic elaboration. The quotidian boredom of grinding poverty rarely makes it to the page, and is sometimes lifted by what one critic calls 'the short cuts of melodrama and allegory'. Given the reality of wearying repetition, what to do with the end of such novels posed a challenge to their authors. While writers could be radical in their representations of working-class hardship, they were usually cautious in their suggestions for change, tacitly aligning themselves with laissez-faire capitalism. Brontë's *Shirley*, for example, ends with a vision of ideal care for the 'houseless, the starving, and the unemployed', but, as critic Jean Jacques Weber notes, 'this better future will not be brought about by any radical change in the socio-economic system' but by the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Both Gaskell and Dickens were equally moderate, discouraging trade union action, urging their readers to forge

emotional bonds between the classes, and for the wealthier to cultivate benevolent paternalism towards the poor – what Gaskell termed ‘the sympathy of the happy’ (‘Preface’, *Mary Barton*). During the latter part of the 19th century, reform and legislation did in fact improve. From the 1850s onwards, ‘their message having been heard, industrial novels ceased to have a topical message that readers were willing to pay to read’. Nevertheless, the legacy of the mid-19th-century Condition-of-England novel, and its attempts at fierce realism, was felt by later writers, such as George Gissing, George Moore, E M Forster, and George Orwell. Its tensions, and its convictions, continue to this day.

### Charles Dickens (1812-1870)

(Charles John Huffam Dickens) was born in Landport, Portsmouth, on February 7, 1812. Charles was the second of eight children to John Dickens (1786–1851), a clerk in the Navy Pay Office, and his wife Elizabeth Dickens (1789–1863). The Dickens family moved to London in 1814 and two years later to Chatham, Kent, where Charles spent early years of his childhood. Due to the financial difficulties they moved back to London in 1822, where they settled in Camden Town, a poor neighbourhood of London.

The defining moment of Dickens's life occurred when he was 12 years old. His father, who had a difficult time managing money and was constantly in debt, was imprisoned in the Marshalsea debtor's prison in 1824. Because of this, Charles was withdrawn from school and forced to work in a warehouse that handled 'blacking' or shoe polish to help support the family. This experience left profound psychological and sociological effects on Charles. It gave him a first-hand acquaintance with poverty and made him the most vigorous and influential voice of the working classes in his age.

After a few months Dickens's father was released from prison and Charles was allowed to go back to school. At fifteen his formal education ended and he found employment as an office boy at an attorney's, while he studied shorthand at night. From 1830 he worked as a shorthand reporter in the courts and afterwards as a parliamentary and newspaper reporter.

In 1833 Dickens began to contribute short stories and essays to periodicals. *A Dinner at Poplar Walk* was Dickens's first published story. It appeared in the *Monthly Magazine* in December 1833. In 1834, still a newspaper reporter, he adopted the soon to be famous pseudonym **Boz**. Dickens's first book, a collection of stories titled *Sketches by Boz*, was published in 1836. In the same year he married Catherine Hogarth, daughter of the editor of the *Evening Chronicle*. Together they had 10 children before they separated in 1858.

Although Dickens's main profession was as a novelist, he continued his journalistic work until the end of his life, editing *The Daily News*, *Household Words*, and *All the Year Round*. His connections to various magazines and newspapers gave him the opportunity to begin publishing his own fiction at the beginning of his career.

*The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* was published in monthly parts from April 1836 to November 1837. Pickwick became one of the most popular works of the time, continuing to be so after it was published in book form in 1837. After the success of *Pickwick* Dickens embarked on a full-time career as a novelist, producing work of

increasing complexity at an incredible rate: *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39), *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge* as part of the *Master Humphrey's Clock* series (1840-41), all being published in monthly instalments before being made into books.

In 1842 he travelled with his wife to the United States and Canada, which led to his controversial *American Notes* (1842) and is also the basis of some of the episodes in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Dickens's series of five Christmas Books were soon to follow; *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *The Chimes* (1844), *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845), *The Battle of Life* (1846), and *The Haunted Man* (1848). After living briefly abroad in Italy (1844) and Switzerland (1846) Dickens continued his success with *Dombey and Son* (1848), the largely autobiographical *David Copperfield* (1849-50), *Bleak House* (1852-53), *Hard Times* (1854), *Little Dorrit* (1857), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), and *Great Expectations* (1861).

In 1856 his popularity had allowed him to buy Gad's Hill Place, an estate he had admired since childhood. In 1858 Dickens began a series of paid readings, which became instantly popular. In all, Dickens performed more than 400 times. In that year, after a long period of difficulties, he separated from his wife. It was also around that time that Dickens became involved in an affair with a young actress named Ellen Ternan. The exact nature of their relationship is unclear, but it was clearly central to Dickens's personal and professional life.

In the closing years of his life Dickens worsened his declining health by giving numerous readings. During his readings in 1869 he collapsed, showing symptoms of a mild stroke. He retreated to Gad's Hill and began to work on *Edwin Drood*, which was never completed.

Charles Dickens died at home on June 9, 1870 after suffering a stroke. Contrary to his wish to be buried in Rochester Cathedral, he was buried in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey. The inscription on his tomb reads:

**"He was a sympathiser to the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed; and by his death, one of England's greatest writers is lost to the world."**

### **Dickens's impact on world literature**

There can be few other English writers—apart, of course, from Shakespeare—with such widespread influence as Dickens, not only on their successors in the national literature, but also on major foreign writers, and few have been the subject of so many outstanding treatises by foreign critics. Gissing, Shaw, Wells, Conrad, Joyce—these are among the most distinguished of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century writers whose work shows clear signs of Dickens's influence without any of the slavish imitativeness shown by the great tribe of avowedly 'Dickensian' writers like William De Morgan. Gissing also wrote some outstandingly good criticism of Dickens. The most celebrated examples of great foreign writers profoundly influenced by Dickens are Dostoyevsky (in his '*Two Scrooges*' essay Edmund Wilson noted the irony that 'The Bloomsbury that talked about Dostoevsky ignored Dostoevsky's master, Dickens') and Franz Kafka. The intense and abiding admiration felt for Dickens by Turgenev and Tolstoy is also well



documented. And, as Ada Nisbet amply demonstrated in her Dickens chapter in Lionel Stevenson's *Victorian Fiction: a Guide to Research* (1964), the presence of Dickens has been clearly traced in writers as various, and from as varied backgrounds, as Hans Christian Andersen, William Faulkner, Proust, Fontane, Benito Galdos, and Strindberg, and a number of communist Chinese authors. The great Japanese novelist Soseki Natsume (1867–1916) is another outstanding example she might have cited. Nisbet also surveys the wealth of foreign (non-English-speaking) critical response to Dickens, with important and substantial studies by critics as distinguished as Hippolyte Taine, Wilhelm Dibelius, Stefan Zweig, and Mario Praz. And today there exists, as has been indicated above, a mighty international academic industry centred on Dickens, demonstrating, in a way that the gasman who accompanied Dickens on his readings tours could hardly have imagined, the truth of his fervent praise of his great 'Chief': 'The more you want out of the Master, the more you will get out of him.'