

THE APPETITE OF THE STARVED: BODILY VIOLENCE IN GASKELL'S MARY
BARTON, GISSING'S THE ODD WOMEN, AND BRONTË'S SHIRLEY

by SOPHIA MARIE COUCH

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Approved:

Dr. Margaret Mitchell, Thesis Director

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Margaret Mitchell", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Claudia Mitchell, Committee Member

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Claudia Mitchell", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Rebecca Harrison, Committee Member

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rebecca Harrison", written over a horizontal line.

Approved:

Clint Samples
Dean, School of Humanities
March 25, 2026

ABSTRACT

SOPHIA MARIE COUCH: *The Appetite of the Starved: Bodily Violence in Gaskell's Mary Barton, Gissing's The Odd Women, and Brontë's Shirley*
(Under the direction of Dr. Margaret Mitchell)

The Victorian social problem novel serves as an observation and commentary on issues of workplace conditions, class inequality, and poverty. Social problem literature sheds critical light on issues of addiction, violence, and disease that erupt from extreme hunger and desperation. This examination of issues historically treated with prejudice and class bias gives empathy to characters labeled as being “lesser” than their upper-class counterparts—the prostitute, the addict, and the working class—all prevalent in social problem novels. I argue that these facets of many Victorian novels and social problem literature engage with poverty as a form of violence on the body. Violence on the individual and the collective body is pervasive in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*, Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849), and George Gissing’s *The Odd Women*; all texts that are concerned with the effect of prolonged poverty on the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of their respective characters. In my argument about poverty as violence on the body, I emphasize the ways in which poverty degrades and diseases the body, and how the psychological decline that results from these conditions may lead to self- or other-directed violence. I claim that these novels, in their emphasis on empathy, offer crucial insights into how modern-day social issues might be addressed to foster the most effective conversations and responses.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Social commentary on poverty, its causes, and the empathy and reform that arise from economic disparity drive many Victorian novels, as readers and writers of the era witnessed real-life manifestations of poverty in their own communities and towns. With filth, disease, and starvation spilling into the streets, the public eye became inevitably focused on the poor; deliberating solutions, debating reform policies, and devising charitable action to help the struggling. The Victorian Era, spanning 1837-1901, encompasses the reign of Queen Victoria and Britain's colonial expansion, characterized by economic and industrial developments. During this period, vast social and political shifts occurred that arose from economic stress and strained relations between the "upper" and "lower" classes. The social and economic inequality associated with the Industrial Revolution had a ripple effect, resulting in reform acts and movements aimed at supporting the working class. Largely because of the extreme social and political shifts rapidly occurring, "The Victorian age was a self-aware age, concerned actively in the production and dissemination of necessary fictions concerning itself, and the possibilities that representation afforded society for telling itself about itself" (Baker & Womack, 65-66). The evolving nature of a Victorian author's world thus lent itself to literary exploration that expanded readers' knowledge, empathy, and critical responses to social issues.

My three chapters will focus partially on the physical environment of cramped living conditions, filth, and insufficient food found in the homes of Gaskell's Davenport family in *Mary Barton*, Gissing's Madden sisters in *The Odd Women*, and Brontë's William Farren in *Shirley*,

exploring what critic Pamela Gilbert describes as “The continuity of the home with the disease, the disease with the town through the home, and by implication, on to the surrounding areas.” Through my emphasis on the physical environment both diseasing and representing the diseased body of the characters, I will show how “The individual becomes part of the social body; the home becomes part of the public space of the town, the town of the region, and by extension, the nation, the world” (Gilbert 49). This connection between the individual body and its physical home, and both with the community in which they exist, allows for an interpretation of poverty as an entity corrupting the bodies, homes, and communities of the characters in the three titles.

In my section on Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*, I show how poverty inflicts a form of physical violence on the bodies of Esther, John Barton, and the Davenport family. With a focus specifically on prostitution in the case of Esther, John’s opium addiction and descent into madness and violence, and the Davenport home, I argue that poverty marks the body; the effects of poverty are compounded and violently concentrated on the female body in relation to prostitution, marriage, or forced breastfeeding for the survival of the woman or in the latter case, her children. John Barton’s addiction and psychological decline will be the focus of poverty as violence on the male body, which will take into consideration how John’s addiction and violent urges arise out of his need for stability and survival amidst hostile class relations. This chapter will also postulate John Barton as a representative of the individual body at the beginning of *Mary Barton*, but by the end, a symbol of the destroyed social body, which ceased to exist without any communication and empathy from the factory owners to maintain the social body’s health.

Addiction and poverty are also pervasive in Gissing’s *The Odd Women*, though the addict in this novel is Virginia Madden, an alcoholic who exposes contradictory Victorian views

towards the female addict versus the male, in addition to more general societal perceptions towards excessive drinking. The poverty in Gissing's text is also represented differently than in *Mary Barton*, with a heavier focus on the decay of youth, beauty, and opportunity. Poverty is framed through a middle-class lens, similarly to *Shirley*, as the Maddens are brought up as the educated, well-bred daughters of Dr. Madden, who later must find a way to support themselves after his death. This descent into poverty allows the reader access to the "before" versions of the family, before the circumstances of their financial instability deteriorate their bodies to the point of premature decay or death.

Lastly, Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* follows the worker revolts against the introduction of machinery into mills to increase production efficiency, presenting a broader overview of the violence of poverty on the collective body rather than on the individual body. The social body of Yorkshire in the novel comprises the curates, mill owners, workers, their families, and middle-class observers such as Shirley and Caroline, with the first half of the novel centered around the conflict between mill owner Robert Moore and the "mob" of workmen. In this section, I elucidate how the social body breaks down due to mill owners' lack of communication, empathy, and prioritization of human labor. Additionally, I also discern between Brontë's *efforts* to address the suffering social body in *Shirley* with charity, resources, and shifting political policy, and the *execution* of these efforts, and the value of the attempt in connection with the narrative's apparent support for industrialism and the "inevitable" change and sacrifice that follows the new age of machinery.

The "social problem novel" became a prominent genre among early Victorian authors and their audiences, who sought both solutions and sympathy for the issues of poverty, labor conditions, and class inequality disproportionately affecting the working class. The social

problem genre saw the publication of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) and Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), both concerned with class relations, poverty, and the importance of communication and empathy as means of alleviating or even resolving the social injustices they present. George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893), though not officially a social problem novel, as its publication postdates the sub-genre, nonetheless explores the effects of poverty, class struggle, and conventional gender roles on its main characters. Henry Yeomans comments on Victorian interest in the origins of social issues, stating that the discourse arose out of "a growing interest in the capacity of external social forces to shape individual lives. The emerging labor movement, as well as researchers such as Charles Booth and Joseph Rowntree, promoted a less personal and more structural or environmental focus on social problems such as urban poverty and crime" (Yeomans 98). With growing interest in examining social issues, many Victorians looked to social problem novels for nuanced perspectives, as Patrick Brantlinger and William Thesing argue that "novelists' views of socioeconomic relations extended considerably beyond those of the political economists, who refused to acknowledge the arena of unpaid work, including much housework and care of dependants, or widespread but illegitimate work, such as prostitution. The novelists did not have so limited a view of the economy" (57). Many Victorian authors contributed to the social problem genre by complicating issues traditionally treated with limited consideration, refusing to afford a simplistic view of poverty that assigns blame to the poor for their suffering.

Increasingly hostile relations between factory workers and manufacturers are at the forefront of many social problem novels, including *Mary Barton* and *Shirley*, which examine and call into question poverty and unemployment threatening conventional Victorian social structures and the role of both parties in maintaining the stability of the community. Critic John

Host refers to the relationship between worker and mill owner as a “family authority structure that served to validate industrial hierarchy” (53). In this structure, the mill owners are the paternalistic figures, with the workers the subordinate “children” below them. To keep this “family” intact, Host explains that employees needed “continuous work, good conditions and fair treatment,” which “ensured ‘popularity and a stable workforce’” for factory owners (53). The rise of unemployment, poverty, and hunger in *Mary Barton* and *Shirley* effectively dismantles the family structure between employee and employer, enacting a form of violence on the social body. This damage, as Gaskell and Brontë argue, results from mill owners’ refusal to meet the needs of their workers, whom Host describes as the “pillars of the industrial hierarchy.” Host expands the family analogy further, noting the large-scale impact of employee and employer relations: “The kindly employer served to link the ‘factory regime’ to ‘the spirit of the neighbourhood.’ All grades of operatives came to identify ‘with the mill at which’ they worked” (53). The reliance of the “spirit of the neighborhood” on the family authority structure in factories provides a lens for approaching the representation of the social body in *Mary Barton*, *The Odd Women*, and *Shirley*. As the manufacturers chose to replace human labor with machinery and refused to hear the desperate voices of their workers, the violence inflicted upon the social body on both an industrial level and a societal level devolve into violence.

Mary Barton and *Shirley* stand out as notable pillars of the Victorian social problem novel, though many critics debate each novel’s ability to fully or accurately represent the working class and their struggles. Joanna Bourke writes that “For many middle-class commentators, trade unionism, suffrage campaigns, and other increasingly vocal political movements served as evidence that working-class emotions were already unstable” (425). The perceived “emotional instability” of the workers, in turn, generated middle-class fear toward the

groups organizing political action against the manufacturers, with novels such as *Shirley* and *Mary Barton* reflecting societal anxieties about the possibility of violence sprouting from the reform movements. Albert Pionke asserts that Victorian novels were “skeptical if not outright hostile toward the collective actions of their own working-class characters,” a reaction that Pionke says stems primarily from the association of the working-class social body with “mobs, riots, and other revolutionary disruptions of middle-class characters’ social structures” (100-101). This middle-class anxiety, and in some cases even fear, is identified by critics as complicating many social problem novels’ honest attempts at empathy and fair representation of the working class. I offer an alternative assessment of Victorian authors’ middle-class anxiety, which classifies their “fear of the lower classes” as not exclusively formed by conscious class prejudice, but rather the limited research, views, and cultural values available to writers of that era.

The mixture of fear and empathy in the narrative structure of social problem novels echoes the conflicted thought process of many Victorian authors as they navigated the social and political landscape of their own realities. Gilbert observes that “The Victorian period was a time of large contradictions...This was an era which saw an increasing fear of the lower classes, and an increasing concern for their well-being” (81). Grace Moore contends that many Victorian writers who were thought of or considered themselves to be “middle-class radicals” were only “committed to reform in moderation” (17). The social problem novel stands in opposition to the contemporary critical approach commonly applied to the texts, since the genre relies on nineteenth-century observations and value systems. At the same time, its merit is judged “chiefly in terms of the radicalism of their political critique” (Josephine Guy, 26). Given the contradictions and anxieties embedded in the social problem novel, it is no wonder that the body

of criticism surrounding the literature in turn becomes contradictory—in one instance praising the progressive and empathetic approach taken by the authors, while in another categorizing their work as a poor portrayal of the social issues it addresses. This approach to critiquing social problem novels is ineffective when the main criticism leveled at the texts is that, ironically, they are the very thing the criticism itself becomes when it fails to consider the limitations of the Victorian era: a contradictory stance on an issue.

Though not considered by many to be politically “radical” by today’s standards, perhaps novels like *Shirley*, *Mary Barton*, and *The Odd Women* call for a different critical approach that considers their value system outside of the contemporary critical lens through which they are often evaluated. Social problem novels such as *Shirley* might be interpreted as taking an observational, even conversational, approach to these topics, and the intended audience’s takeaway from reading the texts may be simply a deepened understanding, empathy, and consideration of the working class. Using this view of the three novels, I will examine the impact of poverty by focusing on how they map it onto the individual and the social bodies through disease, starvation, addiction, and neglect. In doing so, I aim to interpret poverty in these Victorian novels as a physical presence in the texts that invades the narrative, diseases the characters’ minds and bodies, and sets further destruction of community in place by forcing characters to engage in addiction, prostitution, and other-directed violence in an effort to survive. The deplorable conditions of hunger, unemployment, and inadequate housing are etched into the bodies of the characters in a way that exposes the grotesque nature of prolonged poverty to the reader. That in itself is a political act, a way for authors to force their predominantly middle-class audience to confront the existence of the impoverished body.

“Deeper and Deeper Still Sank the Poor:” Poverty’s Grip on Physical and Mental Being in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*

“Remember, too, that though it may take much suffering to kill the able-bodied and effective members of society, it does not take much to reduce them to worn, listless, diseased creatures, who henceforward crawl through life with moody hearts and pain-stricken bodies” (Gaskell 106)

Class, economic struggle, and industrialization are often central to Victorian fiction, particularly in novels that involve the “exposure” of social issues or the act of spotlighting otherwise cast-aside characters such as prostitutes and factory workers. The choice of many Victorian authors to use their novels as explorations of social issues, as Elizabeth Gaskell does in *Mary Barton* (1848), allows the text to align itself with the outcast factory workers and prostitutes, whose plights are acknowledged and empathized with rather than dismissed. The overturning of the upper class to expose the underbelly of the “lower” class thus requires a realistic and thorough depiction of poverty’s pervasive presence in struggling communities. The physical manifestation of poverty in the communities it ravages becomes a potent display of suffering, but also of *poverty as process*: a transition from struggling, to suffering, to the “gaunt,” corpse-like bodies described in *Mary Barton*. John Barton, Esther, and the Davenports become ghostly figures amid their struggle to preserve their families and community. The former minds and bodies of Gaskell’s characters, the “Before Poverty” versions, contrast with their current “After Poverty” selves, with Gaskell spotlighting the acts of desperation and violence under conditions of poverty in an attempt to show poverty’s corruption of the original self, rather than any claim that the impoverished self is undeserving of humanity or compassion.

Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* undertakes the arduous task of balancing the portrayal of acts of cruelty and violence in impoverished communities, committed by characters such as John Barton, with an empathy that considers how poverty starves its hosts of humanity. Without stable

income, lodging, or food, desperation forms in the famished bodies of Gaskell's characters and destroys their mental stability. In the novel, economic struggle leads to pathways of murder, prostitution, and addiction that characters would avoid under healthier conditions. While the choice to follow or refuse one of the pathways certainly exists, *Mary Barton* complicates the preconceived notion among many Victorian readers that poverty or a lack of virtue is the fault of the poor, rather than the product of their unfortunate circumstances. Mapping poverty as a process of degradation across the timeline of *Mary Barton*, and using John Barton, Esther, and the Davenports to trace the transition points from healthy and virtuous to decayed and "immoral," we can conclude that Gaskell not only reveals but also condemns the gratuitous bodily violence associated with being in a state of severe poverty.

The Davenports: Poverty's Physical Invasion of the Home

Introduced early in *Mary Barton*, the Davenport family represents one of the lowest states of bodily depravity enforced by poverty. Ben, his wife, and their three children are introduced as nearly at the cusp of insanity and death from sickness, starvation, and cramped living conditions. Ben Davenport, the sole provider for the family since his children are "too young to work but not too young to be cold and hungry," falls ill with a fever, which leads to John Barton and George Wilson's visit to the Davenport home to bring aid (56). Gaskell's point is evident in the descriptions of the living space before the formal introduction of the family to the reader: waste, filth, and disease permeate the walls of the Davenport home, suggesting that poverty infects the space occupied by the body before invading the body. Malnutrition from hunger and sickness creates ghostly imagery, the sunken eyes and other withered, skeletal physical features symbolizing the slow death of the body. At the same time, the descent of Ben Davenport's behavior into "animal instinct" and "naked madness" represents the death of the mind (59).

Gaskell uses Ben Davenport's suffering to humanize the underprivileged who inherit the "animalistic" traits passed down by poverty and splits Ben, as well as John Barton, into two distinct selves: Before Poverty and After Poverty.

The Davenport home is the first physical manifestation of poverty for the family, in addition to serving as part of the process of bodily violence against the Davenports by way of cramped, unsanitary conditions leading to illness and the spread of disease. The home itself is a physical space degraded by poverty, a small area leading to a "dim gloomy cellar" that contains "a smell so foetid as almost to knock the two men down...wet brick floor, through which the stagnant, filthy moisture of the street oozed up; the fireplace was empty and black" (57).

Gaskell's decision to describe the physical conditions of the Davenport home before establishing the diseased bodies accentuates poverty's ability to penetrate and subsequently flood every physical element belonging to impoverished communities. The home, a place intended for shelter and comfort, becomes a source of concentrated suffering and contagious disease, with Ben's presence in the house serving only as a grim reminder of the lack of available work hours. The Davenport living space is an unsanitary site for spreadable diseases, in the "filthy moisture" in the air of the room in addition to the narrator's description of Ben's illness: "'The fever' was (as usually is in Manchester) of a low, putrid, typhoid kind, brought on by miserable living, filthy neighborhood and great depression of mind and body. It is virulent, malignant, and highly infectious. But the poor are fatalists with regard to infection! And well for them it is so, for in their crowded dwellings no invalid can be isolated" (58). The Davenport home acts as a reflection of the family it houses, a mirror image of the diseased and degraded bodies through its own materialization of the witnessed suffering.

In addition to the squalid conditions of the Davenport house, lack of resources is another contributing factor to the family's state of bodily decay in the poverty process. "Food, light, and warmth" were unavailable in the house until the assistance of John Barton and George Wilson arrived, during which time John noted that "the poor woman had been too weak to drag herself out to the distant pump, and water there was none" (58). The question of whether work or water is "obtainable" is rendered obsolete, given the Davenports' frail existence, which poses the dilemma of opportunity versus capability in severe poverty. Though Ben and his wife have children, they are too young to work. With Ben sick and his wife physically weak, the presence of work or water just outside their home makes little difference when their bodies have deteriorated to the point of inoperability.

The violence endured by the minds and bodies of the Davenport family emerges through distorted, grotesque imagery, a grisly foreshadowing for their visitor John Barton, and a symbol of poverty's final developmental stages in *Mary Barton*. Ben Davenport, who eventually dies from what is said to be Typhoid fever, devolves physically and psychologically during the sections of the novel where John Barton and George Wilson visit the family at their home. The "worn skeleton of a body" of Ben, accompanied by a "burning heat of his skin," is exacerbated by his refusal of any helpful medicine, which allows death to encroach upon him shortly thereafter (59). After Wilson requests the infirmary order and the narrative returns to the Davenport home, Ben crosses the threshold from decay to death. A final description of Ben provides context for his final stage of deterioration: "The flesh was sunk, the features prominent, bony, and rigid. The fearful clay-colour of death was over all. But the eyes were open and sensitive, though the films of the grave were setting upon them" (66). Ben's death, occurring relatively early in the novel, sets the precedent for a story that chronicles the suffering of the

poor, serving as a representative of the living testimonies of struggling individuals. Ben's body is rendered a corpse before his passing, the determined cause of death being fever. However, the narrator informs the reader earlier that the spread of a fatal disease is particularly unavoidable for the impoverished living in cramped, dirty conditions. Upon consideration of this key information, Ben's death concludes the final stage of poverty's violent process; a societally enforced but otherwise avoidable fate that marks the completed bodily transition from healthy to hollow.

Ben Davenport exhibits behaviors of delirium and selfishness that would undermine the goodness of his character, had Gaskell not strategically split the body into the two selves and categorized the first, Before Poverty, as being the genuine self of Ben that would not commit the same acts of selfishness the readers see in the after poverty version. The psychological decline of Ben follows his full immersion into his illness, typhoid fever. The "sick man, whose mutterings were rising up to screams and shrieks of agonized anxiety" is consumed by the effects of poverty—physical and mental decay—and descends into an incoherent state (58). Random spurts of consciousness cause Ben to "start up in his naked madness, looking like the prophet of woe in the fearful plague-picture; but he soon fell again in exhaustion" (59). The degraded, diseased body of Ben is made useless by his inability to control it; screams and random physical movements caused by his diseased body prevent him from caring for or comforting the rest of the family. Ben's descent into poverty-driven madness continues in Chapter 6: "Wilson reappeared, carrying in both hands a jug of steaming tea, intended for the poor wife; but when the delirious husband saw drink, he snatched at it with animal instinct, with a selfishness he had never shown in health" (59). Ben's descent into illness becomes another marker of the poverty process. With no control over his body or consciousness, Ben becomes a frightening, skeletal

figure that haunts the Davenport home with disease and shrieking. The traits of his character that the reader is given knowledge of in *Mary Barton*, as Gaskell clarifies, would not belong to the pre-poverty version of Ben. This point adds to the theory that poverty is a process, whereby the successful end product *must* be a body and self that resembles nothing of the former version.

During John Barton and George Wilson's initial visit to the Davenport home, a display of poverty's violence, specifically on the female body, can be found in the introduction of Mrs. Davenport's character. The wails of Ben's wife, although they come from the physical body, form their own separate presence in the house, spreading hopelessness in the same way Ben's diseased body may spread his sickness: "The wife sat on her husband's lair, and cried into the darkness" (57). The crying continues after John Barton aids Mrs. Davenport: "Her little child crawled to her, and wiped with its fingers the thick-coming tears which she now had strength to weep" (58). While discussing the future of her family, Mrs. Davenport expresses that "'We've just been borne on in hope o' better times. But I think they'll never come in my day,'" and the poor woman began her weak high-pitched cry again" (61). The house, in tandem with the wife's crying, creates a hostile environment of suffering for visitors and the rest of the Davenport family, in which her despair suffocates hope. Meanwhile, the body suffocates with sensory deprivation, and the foul stench of filth and disease saturates the cellar.

The impoverished female body, in the case of Mrs. Davenport, is characterized by a gaunt frailty like Ben's and by her preservation as a maternal figure. Mrs. Davenport mimics that of her husband in her emaciated appearance stemming from poverty, discussed as being a "fainting, dead-like woman" (58). Even in the presence of readily available food offered to her by John Barton and George Wilson, she "took the bread, when it was put into her hand, and broke a bit, but she could not eat. She was past hunger. She fell down on the floor with a heavy

unresisting bang” (58). A character existing “past” hunger connects to the concept of poverty as a process in which the final stage is the removal of hunger before death, or a transition from hungry hopefulness to accepted suffering before death, as is the case with John Barton and Esther later in the novel. When not collapsed, fainted, or too weakened to move herself, Mrs. Davenport is tending to her children by “suckling the child from her dry, withered breast” or when asleep only “rousing to pull the coat round her little child” (60, 61). Ben displays no fatherly emotion or care towards his children; the prolonged hunger and illness have placed him in a state of delirium. Mrs. Davenport, though weak and deep in despair, still displays motherly instincts with her children despite her own condition and need for survival.

The description of Mrs. Davenport’s “withered” breasts as she tries to feed one of her children illustrates the additional gendered bodily violence that occurs when impoverished women must use themselves as a last remaining resource to keep their children alive, as noted by Mrs. Davenport when asked why she still breastfeeds her two-year-old son: “It keeps him quiet when I’ve nought else to gi’ him, and he’ll get a bit of sleep lying there, if he’s gotten nought beside. We han done our best to gi’ the childer food, howe’er we pinch ourselves” (60). The nature of breastfeeding being only a biologically female function of the body promotes the concept of gendered violence enacted by poverty. Furthermore, the forced exploitation of Mrs. Davenport’s body for the survival of her child serves as an area of contrast with Esther, the “streetwalker” in *Mary Barton*. Both women, forced to employ their bodies either for their own survival or for the survival of children, call into question whether the choice to exploit one’s body because of poverty-induced desperation is a decision made with full consent, or if poverty’s beginning in the lives of Gaskell’s characters means the end of virtually all bodily autonomy.

John Barton: Dehumanization and Psychological Devolvement of the Working-Class Man

Within the character of John Barton, who, at the beginning of *Mary Barton*, is able-bodied and hopeful, the mounting desperation for social change and a chance to escape the clutches of poverty results in a decaying, ghostly figure by the novel's end. The introduction of John Barton's character begins with a brief overview of his upbringing that leads into a physical description: "Born of factory workers and himself bred up in youth, and living in manhood, among the mills...There was almost a stunted look about him; and his wan, colourless face gave you the idea that in his childhood he had suffered from the scanty living consequent upon bad times and improvident habits" (7). Here again, the reader can observe the ghostly complexion of a working-class character before conditions worsen for John Barton. Already full of passion for social change, Barton sets the tone for the rest of the novel's rising social conflict as he declares to George Wilson: "And what good have they ever done me that I should like them? If I am sick do they come and nurse me? If my child lies dying (as poor Tom lay, with his white wan lips quivering, for want of better food than I could give him), does the rich man bring the wine or broth that might save his life? (10). This attitude towards social change to benefit the impoverished working-class is echoed by Gaskell throughout *Mary Barton*, as reflected by Sandro Jung's commentary on Gaskell's narrative purpose: "She is determined to break down barriers of decorum that protect middle-class readers from disease-ridden, under-nourished, and dying factory workers" (53). John Barton, arguably the character with whom the novel involves itself the most aside from Mary, slowly transitions after the death of Mrs. Barton and his son from passionate, to angry, to senselessly violent as poverty takes its toll on his mind and body. The conclusion of Barton's life, like that of Mr. Davenport and Esther, becomes an encouragement of empathy and a grim reminder of poverty's ability to take even the most well-

intentioned working-class person and reduce them to the cindered ashes of their hope for a better future.

The death of Tom, John Barton's son, marks the beginning of poverty's consumption of Barton and his spiral into hatred toward the upper class. Tom's death from scarlet fever is caused and made unrecoverable by malnutrition, a connection between his passing and poverty forming in John's mind as a result of the economic circumstances surrounding the tragedy. John Barton's employer letting him go leads to the death of Tom, with Barton soon after noting that "Hungry himself, almost to an animal pitch of ravenousness, but with the bodily pain swallowed up in anxiety for his little sinking lad, he stood at one of the shop windows where all edible luxuries are displayed...Barton returned home with a bitter spirit of wrath in his heart, to see his only boy a corpse!" (24). The tragedy-struck home of the remaining Bartons, John and Mary, quickly becomes a site for John's obsession with Trade Union meetings and working with the delegates of other towns to petition Parliament for acknowledgement of the working-class sufferings. John Barton, as well as the other delegates, is described in Chapter 8 as "Life-worn, gaunt, anxious, and hunger-stamped" (81). With Barton's last thread of hope hanging on the petition, poverty hungrily waits for triumph over the working class.

Parliament's refusal to work with the delegates propels Barton into a deeper state of psychological and bodily despair, the beginnings of suicidal, self-violent thoughts taking root in Barton's mind. When informed by Mary that George Wilson died unexpectedly, John responds with "Best for him to die" (93). This comment marks a turning point in Barton's mental health, the infection of poverty and despair starting to decay Barton's psychological state noticeably. The belief in death being more peaceful or preferred to a life of suffering is repeated in the novel again, but this time by Esther and Jem Wilson as they discuss Mary's connection with Harry

Carson: “Oh, Jem, I charge you with the care of her! I suppose it would be murder to kill her, but it would be better for her to die than to live to lead such a life as I do. Do you hear me, Jem?” To which Jem replies: “Yes, I hear you. It would be better. Better we were all dead” (153). This repeated sentiment portrays suffering from poverty as impacting the entirety of a community through its creation of self-violent beliefs and behaviors, which lend themselves to an analysis of poverty’s breaking down of both the human mind and will. The pervasive pattern of thoughts about self-violence in the working-class community is noted by Lucy Sheehan, as she states: “The implication, in *Mary Barton*, that suicide lurks close by belies the delicate balance between self-violence and self-control that is always threatened, in Gaskell’s novel to be overturned” (49). Barton’s notions of self-violence eventually deviate into violence against the mill owners, which occurs as the climactic event of Harry Carson’s murder after a complete decay of Barton’s mental and physical health.

After the failure to communicate with the “upper class” and the worsening conditions of the trade, John Barton’s deviation from thoughts of self-violence to outward physical aggression begins, and the decision to direct physical violence against Mary acts as the first unconscious step towards violence against the mill owners. Mary notes the “hunger in his shrunk, fierce, animal look” and “grim, unshaven, and gaunt” face, though he regularly fasts and only eats with “a sullen indifference” (108). The decision to ignore hunger and be emotionless when presented with food, despite being able to receive some relief from the town, displays Barton’s continuous pattern of self-violence through which he retains some of his bodily autonomy. The switch from inward to outward violence occurs in the Barton home shortly after: “He seldom spoke, less than ever; and often when he did speak, they were sharp angry words, such as he had never given her formerly. Her temper was high, too, and her answers not over mild; and once in his passion he

had even beaten her” (109). The moment when John physically harms Mary indicates a loss—however fleeting—of mental and physical bodily control due to the effects of prolonged poverty.

Another phase of mental and bodily decay caused by poverty occurs when John begins to use opium. The smoking and chewing of opium, initially described as a “habit” by Mary, quickly becomes an addiction (110). The connection between John Barton’s depression and his opium addiction becomes apparent towards the conclusion of Chapter 10: “The morning of the day on which it was to take place he had lain late in bed, for what was the use of getting up? He had hesitated between the purchase of meal or opium, and had chosen the latter, for its use had become a necessity with him” (115). The mental decline, accompanied by the rapid increase in opium usage, brings John’s decay to a rapid descent. John’s mental conflict as he decides between addiction/self-violence and nourishment can be categorized using Sheehan’s analysis of the class conflict Barton is amidst: “The kinds of psychological conflicts we see in *Mary Barton* not only result directly from class conflict but also metaphorically represent that conflict. Class conflict is internalized by its working-class characters as a physiological and psychological affliction, or a tearing apart of the self” (50). John Barton’s close connection to the class conflicts and subsequent poverty in the novel, especially as reflected in the state of the trade directly impacting the lives of his son and daughter, destroys the “self” he had before the current state of the factories. In the case of John, violent impulses emerge through the fragmented cracks of his former self.

Withering and despondent with an opium addiction, John Barton eventually kills Harry Carson, the son of a wealthy mill owner in Manchester. He dies without any change in his life circumstances; this fate aligns with Ben Davenport and Esther, who are all part of the doomed group of impoverished characters in *Mary Barton*. The physical and mental decay reaches a

tipping point shortly before the mill workers find the drawing of them made by the masters, and decide that violence must be the retribution and that John must be the enactor of it: “A long period of bodily depravation; of daily hunger after food...The mind became soured and morose, and lost much of its equipoise...And so day by day, nearer and nearer, came the diseased thoughts of John Barton.” (158-159). Gaskell’s decision to have John Barton, out of all the mill workers, kill Harry Carson manages to portray the desperation of the working class without villainizing the violence that arises out of the desperation fed by poverty. Sandro Jung further dissects the decision to have John Barton act as a martyr figure representative of an entire community’s frustration and suffering: “John Barton, the murderer of Harry Carson, is not categorically rejected as the evil threatening the economic superiority of the capitalist middle classes over the workforce and the balance of the class system; rather, she offers a sympathetic portrayal of his tragedy, reading his suffering in terms of the condition of his class” (53). The destruction of John Barton’s authentic self, the identity formed before severe poverty, acts as the guiding compass for any judgment passed on his actions by Gaskell’s audience. Though the current John kills Harry Carson, the non-obstructed, “authentic” version of John would not have made the same decision. Poverty’s corruption of the minds, morals, and bodies of the working-class community in *Mary Barton* elicits empathy for the characters, despite their disagreeable actions or moral depravity in their final moments of suffering.

Esther: An Exploration of Prostitution, Poverty, and Physical Violence on the Female Body

Esther, the sister of Mary (Mrs.) Barton, sister-in-law to John Barton, remains mostly an elusive figure woven throughout the background of the novel; the first discussion of her character is a mention of her disappearance, with her actual physical presence and diseased body occurring later in Chapter 10 and then sparingly reintroduced thereafter. Before the passing of

her three-year-old daughter, Esther is a single mother who, at the beginning of her immersion into sex work, did so as a means of procuring medicine and food for her child. Judieth R.

Walkowitz delves into Victorian attitudes towards prostitutes in her novel, as she denotes: “An object of fascination and disgust, the prostitute was ingrained in public consciousness as a highly visible symbol of the social dislocation attendant upon the new industrial era. By the 1850’s, prostitution had become “the Great Social Evil” (32). Esther’s existence as an outcast kept outside of the closed gates leading to the rest of Victorian society allows her character to literally disappear from the story’s narrative, reappearing like a prophet to Jem, John, and Mary, in an effort to primarily ensure that Mary does not become a diseased and degraded female body like herself. The diseased body of Esther then becomes almost a ghostly presence in *Mary Barton*’s storyline, reappearing as part of a mission to ensure that Mary’s connection to Harry Carson does not end with Mary pregnant and unwed, having to become a prostitute as Esther did to support herself financially.

Esther’s introduction into *Mary Barton* after her unexplained disappearance, occurring as John Barton leaves his Trade’s Union meeting, defines her bodily presence as a prostitute and impoverished addict in the novel as being diseased and degraded. John Barton, though of the “lower” class himself, enforces his previously held prejudice against Esther for her dress and lifestyle, attacking her seemingly morally decrepit appearance: “The woman who stood by him was of no doubtful profession. It was told by her faded finery, all unfit to meet the pelting of that pitiless storm: the gauze bonnet, once pink, now dirty white; the muslin gown, all draggled, and soaking wet up to the very knees; the gay-coloured barège shawl” (116). Here, the body of Esther is immediately categorized as diseased and of low virtue by the outer layers of clothing she wears to meet John, despite Esther having “out of her little choice of attire, had put on the

plainest she had” (116). The appearance of the physical body, regardless of actual “virtue” or even beauty, as Esther is described numerous times as “pretty” by John, is condemned to the label of immoral if the outfits dressing the female body have an “impure” connotation. Katie Baker comments on the connection in *Mary Barton* between clothing and the perception of a woman’s purity or lack thereof in her respective article that sought to “rewrite” Esther’s fallenness: “Gaskell outlines that judgment over women’s clothing (and indeed, suggestions of class mimicry and lewd sexuality) are placed on women by a condemnatory society and have no direct relation to their goodness or indeed lack of it” (682). This concept of the “fallen aesthetic” of clothing places the struggling impoverished woman into an impossible dilemma: become a prostitute to survive and be an indefinite social outcast or die a “pure” woman, body starved of everything by poverty except virtue.

Esther’s involvement with prostitution, which arises from her child’s ill health and lack of money, acts as another instance of poverty’s gendered violence against the female body in *Mary Barton*. Whereas in the instance of Mrs. Davenport, forced to breastfeed her child far beyond what was comfortable or developmentally necessary to help them survive, Esther must exploit her body as a sexual resource to men for the survival of herself and her child, who eventually passes away. After the failed meeting with John Barton, Esther reached out to Jem Wilson to plead for his help in “saving” Mary from going down the same path she describes in the following passage: “It was winter, cold bleak winter; and my child was so ill, so ill, and I was starving. And I could not bear to see her suffer, and forgot how much better it would be for us to die together;—oh, her moans, her moans, which money could give the means of relieving! So I went out into the street one January night” (152). The officer with whom Esther has a daughter out of wedlock is allegedly ordered to Ireland, leaving fifty pounds and Esther alone, forced to

become a single mother to their daughter. Afterwards, the trajectory of Esther's life, as laid out by herself in the earlier passage to Jem, becomes a desperate attempt at survival by any means necessary: a failed small-ware shop and many unreturned letters to the officer asking for help later, and prostitution is Esther's only option. In an analysis of prostitution in Victorian era society, Taher Badinjki writes, "What [women] they could earn from their work was usually not enough to live on. To supplement that income, many frequently resorted to the only marketable item they had, their bodies" (25). The act of surviving poverty, in the instance of both Esther and Mrs. Davenport, becomes the removal of bodily autonomy through the forced transformation of the female body into an exploited resource.

At this point in Esther's story, by Victorian standards, she had already failed the test of virtue by being unwed and pregnant. However, a modern reading can ascertain that the decision made by the officer to impregnate Esther and abandon her after the child is born is an inherently violent act against the female body. The officer is committing Esther to both a life of social exile and poverty through his own decision; arguably, he even indirectly forced Esther to become a sex worker for survival. Through a modern reading of Esther's diseased body, it becomes apparent that her life as a prostitute was decided not by herself, but by the conditions of poverty and gendered violence enacted against her and her daughter. This viewpoint of Esther as a complex character victimized by poverty rather than solely a "fallen woman" is furthered by Baker: "Through Esther (and other women like her) Gaskell looks at what exists beyond the moral implications of "falling" by exploring the reality of life for women with very little money and a child to look after...With jobs offering wages which were often impossible to live on, such women turned to prostitution as a way of simply existing" (680). An examination of the circumstances surrounding Esther's life, especially that of the pregnancy and prostitution, creates

“an example of a woman whose entry into the world of prostitution is a mixture of many causes and events” (680). Esther’s desire to save her daughter’s life, even at the cost of her own virtue, is empathized with and recognized by Gaskell, even though Esther ultimately never regains readmittance into the family and society as a result of her “fallenness.”

After the failed encounter with John Barton and the meeting with Jem Wilson, Esther eventually reunites with Mary herself. However, both John and Esther imply that Esther’s degraded body may influence Mary as an infectious identity. In light of John’s harsh words about Esther’s clothing and appearance, she believes that revealing her identity risks unintentionally leading Mary to become “fallen.” Baker elaborates on the concept of the infectious identity harbored by Esther and declared by John to be dangerous to Mary: “Like Barton, Esther too believes her appearance has the power to infect Mary, but instead of an inherent infection, Esther believes it is the prostitute’s clothing that can endanger the young girl and lead her astray” (684). The concept of a transmittable degraded body connects to the earlier section of *Mary Barton* detailing the conditions of disease among the poor: “...In their crowded dwellings no invalid can be isolated” (58). The poor, working-class women in *Mary Barton* are particularly dangerous to the well-being of society from a commonly held Victorian viewpoint because they are more susceptible to becoming prostitutes or otherwise behaving in sexually immoral ways, in addition to being more likely to spread their “infectious identity” the same way that literal bodily diseases are spread by the poor in their claustrophobic living conditions. Gaskell works to undermine this narrative by repeatedly “exposing” her audience to the characters Sandro Jung considers to be “liminal,” as in morally or sexually ambiguous people who are “unfit for Victorian society” and thus are entrapped in liminal spaces, unseen by those granted acceptance (53).

John and Esther's fear that the existence of her diseased body in Mary's life may cause Mary to contract the same fate as Esther implies the concept that poverty's corruption of identity, or even the corrupted identity itself, is spreadable through mere material existence through clothing or demeanor displaying impurity. Esther dresses differently, lies that she is married, housed, and fed properly when visiting Mary: "And Esther! How scanty had been her food for days and weeks, her thinly-covered bones and pale lips might tell, but her words should never reveal!" (223). The lies cloud the impurity surrounding Esther from Mary's view, achieving the goal of socially quarantining the diseased body so that it does not threaten Mary's uncorrupted one. This view of prostitution held by Esther and John in the novel is discussed by Sandro Jung, with their argument being that prostitution is "represented as a social contagion" (53). The prejudice towards sex workers and sexually "promiscuous" women in Victorian society, as Jung points out, was "reinforced by a strict middle-class moral code." A significant note that Walkowitz adds to her own discussion of prostitution in Victorian society is how the "moral code" was sanctioned against prostitutes through society and government policy: "For later investigators like Acton, prostitution remained a "social evil," but one that could be contained by a system of police and medical supervision" (33). With rising societal concern for the spread of Venereal Disease (sexually transmitted diseases and infections), Parliament enacted violence on the female body through forced examinations, studies, and quarantines. The perception held by Esther and the community of her body being diseased and degraded reflects the viewpoint of the time, during which any female accused of sexual promiscuity could be subject to bodily violence at the hands of policemen. Gaskell structures the character of Esther in *Mary Barton* to reveal the bodily violence caused by poverty, in addition to the bodily violence caused by the lack of

empathy at a cultural and political level towards prostitutes, who were primarily in that line of work to make a living amidst severe economic struggle in the working class.

The middle-class attitudes towards Esther lead her to temporarily conceal her outward appearance as a woman who failed to adhere to the moral code, developing a different perception of her appearance for Mary during the visit. Badinjki further clarifies Jung's label of social contagion to describe Victorian attitudes towards prostitutes: "In this value system, no sin was worse than that against chastity. The importance given to a woman's role as a wife and a mother made her the angel of the house. Middle-class revulsion at unchaste women was in proportion to this strained adoration of female purity" (25). The societal projection of the maternal figure as inherently pure removes any virtue a modern reader might assign to Esther's numerous acts of kindness towards her own child and then to Mary. The only option ultimately given to Esther is to remain a social outcast despite the redeemability her actions likely should have afforded her, if not for the rigid social code. As Esther is leaving the home, Mary attempts to kiss her, which garners the following reaction from Esther: "Her aunt pushed her off with a frantic kind of gesture, and saying the words, "Not me. You must never kiss me. You!" She rushed into the outer darkness of the street, and there wept long and bitterly" (226). The mutilation of Esther's character as a result of poverty creates the socially reinforced inner mindset that Esther is a monstrous being, draped in impure clothing and oozing disastrous influence.

The last physical description of Esther is shortly before her death, as the corpse-like features are illustrated as concordant with Ben Davenport's before he passes from poverty-caused fever. Esther reappears for a final time after her second disappearance in *Mary Barton*, at which point the final stage of poverty is in place, the soulless, even frightening body of Esther coming into view in disturbing imagery: "She [Mary] looked and saw a white face pressed

against the panes on the outside, gazing intently into the dusky chamber...a film came over the bright, feverish, glittering eyes outside, and the form sank down to the ground without a struggle of instinctive resistance” (365). The ruling is clear as the reader reaches the final few pages of the novel and encounters Esther’s death: Esther’s body had been consumed by suffering, with the remaining shell contorted by what Lucy Sheehan refers to as the “Ghoulish effects of poverty” in her article on *Mary Barton* (46). The “poor crushed Butterfly—the once innocent Esther” serves as a powerful final death in the novel, highlighting Gaskell’s desire to break down the “quarantining” of the diseased away from a middle-class audience by removing the class barrier with empathy and a realistic yet complex depiction of struggling working-class people. The bodies of Ben Davenport, John Barton, and Esther are employed by Gaskell in *Mary Barton* to represent the suffering of their impoverished community and to aid Gaskell in creating empathy in an audience accustomed to identifying characters such as Esther and John as the morally bankrupt social outcasts of the story. The novel tears down class barriers by enforcing realistic depictions of suffering that demand acknowledgment. Though Parliament refuses to give ear to the suffering of the poor, Gaskell requires her readers to observe and hear the depths of bodily violence inflicted by a state of unrelenting poverty. The struggle for survival despite the abhorrent conditions of their community fosters violence, addiction, and prostitution amongst the characters of John, Ben, and Esther, displaying the realistic result of forced removal of bodily autonomy and the choice for other paths to financial stability. The suffering of the characters in *Mary Barton* humanizes the violent man, the selfish husband, and the outcast prostitute, as the reader learns of the selves before poverty and the altered, uncharacteristic selves shown after poverty, who become unrecognizable even to the characters themselves.

CHAPTER II

Poverty's Appetite: Diseased and Degraded Female Bodies in George Gissing's *The Odd Women*

"I wish girls fell down and died of hunger in the streets, instead of creeping to their garrets and the hospitals. I should like to see their dead bodies collected together in some open place, for the crowd to stare at" (Gissing, 42)

A thorough examination of poverty in Victorian literature complicates the narrative that choice is the determining factor between economic success and ruin. The bodily harm associated with poverty in George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893) refuses to allow the reader to categorize poverty as self-inflicted violence, as opposed to the product of unfortunate circumstances. After the tragic death of Dr. Madden, the educated Madden daughters are thrust into a state of financial uncertainty and subsequent poverty. In the novel, poverty produces bodily consequences that reflect the characters' lack of choice in the shaping of their own circumstances. Poverty manifests itself through physical degradation of the female mind and body in George Gissing's *The Odd Women*, with malnutrition, physical decay, and alcoholism acting as corruptive forces in the novel. The concept of choice, though connected to themes of gender roles and marital dissatisfaction in the novel, comes to a halt at the presence of poverty. The Madden sisters, having never been afforded the career or educational opportunities of the opposite sex to escape poverty, are given no option but to resort to Rhoda Nunn's assistance or, in the case of Virginia, Isabel, and Monica, the decision to escape one form of bodily violence by choosing another in the form of addiction, suicide, or marriage. Poverty thus becomes a uniquely female form of bodily violence in *The Odd Women*, diseasing both the "odd" and "non

odd” women by invading their bodies with addiction, starvation, and, in the case of Monica, a violent man who will only further the destructive agenda of poverty.

The concept of “Odd Women,” as it relates to both the title of the novel and a significant topic of discussion between characters such as Miss Nunn and Monica, originates from W.R. Greg’s 1869 essay, “Why are Women Redundant?” “Odd,” in the context of Greg’s article and Gissing’s novel, refers to an odd number of women who are single and without any marriage prospects. Greg describes the existence of the odd women as “a problem,” arguing that “There is an enormous and increasing number of single women in the nation, a number quite disproportionate and quite abnormal; a number which, positively and relatively, is indicative of an unwholesome social state, and is both productive and prognostic of much wretchedness and wrong” (5). The disparity between the number of women and the number of men, according to Greg, is an “excess varying from two to five per cent” (8). The surplus of women, categorized as “odd” by Greg, are defined by their existence as single, presumably celibate women, but most importantly by their affront to nature, according to the article: “Marriage, the union of one man with one woman, is unmistakably indicated as the despotic law of life. This is *the* rule” (8). The main argument of the article, as boldly stated by Greg, is thus that unmarried, single women inherently go against the preconceived notion that there are laws of nature and life, and that these women are breaking them by existing outside the confines of marriage.

The Early Deaths of Martha, Gertrude, and Isabel Madden: Youth Exploited by Poverty

Before the main events of the novel, half of the Madden sisters abruptly die from the bodily violence of poverty following the death of their father, the domino effect of tragedies laying waste to nearly every female body in the family. Though Martha dies from being drowned by “the overturning of a pleasure boat,” both Gertrude and Isabel die from the long-term effects

of a brutally swift immersion into the working class (15). Gertrude dies from “consumption” (tuberculosis), while Isabel later “drowned herself in a bath” after working to the point of becoming severely sick (16). The novel discusses Isabel’s and Gertrude’s deaths in passing, similarly to the death of Dr. Madden, in that the deaths show the refusal of poverty to allow for mourning; after tragedy, the surviving Madden girls survive on their own as the threat of becoming an “odd woman” looms over Monica.

Gertrude’s death from tuberculosis marks the first instance of disease inflicted on the female body after the eldest three become “self-supporting” (15). Gertrude’s life after Dr. Madden’s death is restricted to only a few sentences before her own death occurs in the novel: “Gertrude, fourteen years old, also went to Weston, where she was offered employment in a fancy-goods shop, --her payment nothing at all, but lodging, board and dress assured to her. Ten years went by, and saw many changes. Gertrude and Martha were dead; the former of consumption” (15). The details of Gertrude’s illness, her suffering, and death are not disclosed to the reader, leaving a gaping wound in the narrative structure that aches for more details and an arrival of empathy and grief for the Maddens.

In the case of Isabel Madden, a succinct description of life and death follows in the footsteps of Gertrude and Martha’s. Gissing uses the brief passage dedicated to her character to describe the lethal effects of poverty on the female body: “Isabel was soon worked into illness. Brain trouble came on, resulting in melancholia. A charitable institution ultimately received her, and there, at two-and-twenty, the poor hard-featured girl drowned herself in a bath” (16). Gissing uses this incredibly short passage summarizing the life and death of Isabel to illustrate the swift nature of bodily descent into disease and destitution. Gissing carefully depicts poverty and the violence accompanying it as a forceful entity inherently void of female consent, whereby Isabel

works her body into a state of rapid decline not by choice, but by the forceful hand of poverty and economic struggle. Only through Isabel's suicide by drowning, her own form of self-inflicted bodily violence, is she able to escape the violence inflicted by poverty. In this section of the novel, the lack of choice in the girls' ability to determine the circumstances of their lives becomes clear: the effects of poverty are swiftly lethal on the body, leaving no room for improvement or hope of a change in financial status.

The causes of Gertrude and Isabel's deaths and their work life leading up to their characters' endings are described briefly, in a way that echoes the narrator's own intentions involving the review of the Madden sisters' shifting lives: "The story of his daughters' lives in the interval may be told with brevity suitable to so unexciting a narrative" (14). The narrator frames the tragedy-stricken Madden family as necessitating only a brief discussion of their deaths, despite the immense detail provided for the living conditions and bodily decay of Alice, Monica, and Virginia later in the chapter. The emphasis on the decaying feminine body as opposed to the deceased female body arguably represents Gissing's intention to show the lasting effects of poverty on both the community and the individual. Juliette De Soto writes that "Gissing turns the Maddens' dead, wasted bodies into discursive texts themselves, the shameful remnants of a society that has consumed them" (De Soto 10). Poverty and the novel itself, thus, involve the consumption of female bodies as the final act of bodily violence after the weakening process of disease and starvation. Gissing fashions the narrator with a similar attitude to the wealthier class, one that holds little empathy or sense of urgency when observing the wreckage of the sisters' bodies. The community does not mourn the individual female body because the surviving Madden sisters, and by extension the working class, are occupied with survival, much in the same way that Gertrude and Isabel are before illness and disease toss them aside in the

novel. *The Odd Women*'s central focus on survival and a female emancipation from societal expectations ultimately leaves a trail of dead, forgotten bodies in its wake.

Monica Madden's Purpose: Beauty and Youth as Currency in Poverty

Dr. Madden prophesies Monica's beauty at the beginning of *The Odd Women*, a prediction of the then five-year-old youngest Madden sister that ties her appearance to her worth and subsequent decay in the family: "And little Monica—ah, little Monica! She would be the beauty of the family" (9). This perception of Monica's potential "bodily value" is further echoed by her sisters after the passing of their father and the twenty-five years that follow: "Monica, if her promise were fulfilled, would be by far the best looking, as well as the sprightliest, of the family. She must marry; of course she must marry! Her sisters gladdened in the thought" (16). Monica, who "so notably surpasses" her older sisters in beauty, is tasked effectively with becoming the Madden lifeboat (16). Gissing repeatedly implies that Monica will be consigned to poverty for consumption if she does not marry, her youth, beauty, and health becoming depleted resources corresponding with the decrepit portrait of her sisters.

Monica's body, positioned in the text as a site of potential hope for Virginia and Alice, provides financially for the family through physical labor as the most able-bodied among them. The older sisters' anticipation of using Monica's body as a tool to escape poverty is crucial to Elizabeth Shand's interpretation of *The Odd Women*: "Alice and Virginia, impoverished and fraught, rest their financial hopes in their youngest sister" (55). Immediately, Monica is set apart from Virginia and Alice by Gissing and assigned a "greater" purpose: to later exploit her own body as a resource to escape the conditions of poverty. As the novel concludes, however, the reality of marriage to a controlling, abusive Mr. Widdowson settles into a tragic truth: beauty does not offer salvation from poverty in *The Odd Women*; rather, Monica's youthful, attractive

appearance—aided by coercion from her family—lends itself to the same detrimental outcome of bodily decay and death offered by poverty.

Virginia and Alice Madden: A Victorian Framing of Alcoholism and Bodily Decay

The surviving, oldest two sisters in the novel, Virginia and Alice, are presented to the reader using terms of decay applied to both their physical and mental well-being to signify the impact of poverty on the female body. In descriptions of Alice, her character is a victim of “the restrictions of poverty and ill-health” (13). Her body is composed of diseased physical attributes that create a haunting figure: “spoilt complexion,” “cheeks of the hue which is produced by cold,” and a “quick, ungainly movement as if seeking to escape from some one;” imagery that seeks to envision poverty’s effects as grotesque (14). Additionally, Gissing includes decay that goes beneath the outward appearance, a bone-deep infection of poverty that includes “headaches and back-aches, and other disorders” (17). Alongside the degradation of beauty, the physical disabilities, disorders, and pain also render the female body unable to work as efficiently to earn money for survival. With devolving physical mobility and no remaining beauty to qualify for a promising marriage, Alice’s chances of escaping poverty, as opposed to succumbing to a similar fate to that of the younger Madden sisters, become increasingly improbable.

Alongside Virginia, Alice becomes a symbolic representation of poverty’s detrimental effect on outward appearance, as Monica still retains her beauty and thus her chances of escaping poverty’s consumption of her youth. Virginia, noted for her “damaged health and faded prettiness,” is described as “Rapidly aging...her eyes sank into deeper hollows; wrinkles extended their net-work; the flesh of her neck wore away. Her tall meagre body did not seem strong enough to hold itself upright” (16, 14). Gissing immediately highlights the bodily decay

that has occurred over multiple decades, without the reader as a direct witness. The reader, kept from being able to observe the slow process of degradation on the female body, is now immersed in the grotesque outcome of years spent starving oneself of food and clean, comfortable housing. Helena Mitchie suggests that female bodies in *The Odd Women* are “to be piled indiscriminately before the public gaze...Descriptions like this, which abound in the book, put the sisters’ abused bodies on display for the readers much in the same way Rhoda Nunn wants the bodies of young women forced into teaching to be displayed before the British public” (51). The bodies of Virginia and Alice are now diseased from poverty in a process that could be defined by what Pamela Gilbert refers to as “‘The “othering” of the body from itself” (16). In this transformation, the healthy body is separated from the characters and decayed until it becomes unrecognizable, “other” from itself. The female body, in the case of the two older Maddens, becomes a foreign entity to the characters themselves, distinctly altered from the versions of their bodies previously unmarked by poverty. Poverty and addiction eviscerate the physical health of the Maddens’ bodies in addition to their youth and beauty, which completes the “othering” process of decay.

In addition to the weakened condition of her body due to poverty, Virginia also exists as a secret alcoholic throughout the novel, hiding her addiction from the other characters until the severity of her fixation becomes known to her sisters and Mr. Widdowson. The presence of Virginia’s addiction in *The Odd Women* is subtle, only referenced in passing by Gissing, with the first instance of drinking being when she visits Charing Cross Station and asks the barmaid to “Kindly give me a little brandy:” “Virginia added to the spirit twice its quantity of water, standing, as she did so, half turned from the bar. Then she sipped hurriedly, two or three times, and at length took a draught” (23). Virginia’s drinking during the visit to the Station is chronic, as evidenced by the description of her appearance before drinking, “Beads of perspiration and a

ghastly pallor,” compared to after drinking: “Colour flowed to her cheeks; her eyes lost their frightened glare” (23). The transformation that occurs only after one glass of brandy implies that her drinking is not only habitual, but to such a severity as to cause withdrawal symptoms if she does not consume alcohol. Virginia’s reliance on alcohol to function in everyday life after years of economic struggle aligns with Alexandra Gray’s argument that “Gissing’s text represents female ‘alcoholic’ self-harm as a womanly response to social and economic pressures” (139). Alcoholism in the novel becomes merely another symptom of poverty’s violence against the female body, as opposed to a failure of willpower or morals, which was a prevailing viewpoint during the Victorian era that did not consider alcoholism to be a disease.

Virginia’s “hurried, nervous movement” when she enters the Station, accompanied by her decision to sit at “a part of the counter as far as possible from the two customers” and request alcohol “in a voice just above a whisper,” are signs that point towards the shame and sense of secrecy surrounding her addiction (23). The self-conscious unease and fear of being noticed that Virginia displays are evidence of larger Victorian attitudes surrounding alcoholism, by which “The drunk female body was the breakdown of womanly virtue and all consumptive restriction. This breakdown was rendered both socially and morally unacceptable” (Gray 126). When Virginia’s addiction is exposed to her sisters and Widdowson later in the novel, the Victorian view of female alcoholics comes to light in startling congruity with Gray’s observation. Virginia’s alcoholism ultimately expedites the process of physical and mental decay initiated by immersion into poverty, diseasing the body further by starving it of food and mental clarity.

Gissing’s decision to keep Virginia’s addiction in the background of the novel, as well as the harsh reactions of other characters upon eventually discovering the truth, can be explained by further examination into Victorian perceptions of drinking and alcoholism during the latter half

of the nineteenth century. Gray makes an important note of societal perceptions of alcoholism that existed before adequate research, writing that “Since the concept of alcoholism as a disease would not become medically or culturally entrenched until the twentieth century, excessive drinking was subject to ethical rather than clinical debate, as part of a wider discourse about the perceived moral failings of a Victorian society increasingly estranged from conventional religion” (121). Without clinical research to accurately define alcoholism, Victorians formed prejudices towards alcoholics, comprised of scorn and judgment that relied on a moral interpretation of addiction, particularly towards women. This view of the alcoholic body as an immoral body is further untangled by Yeomans: “Excess in drinking therefore, as with food and sex, was dangerous due to its capacity to produce a multitude of sinful behaviour” (39). Virginia’s descent into alcoholism results in her body becoming physically degraded, and by Victorian standards, spiritually diseased and morally corrupted.

The next instance of Virginia’s “dangerous indulgence” in the novel occurs when Monica visits to tell her the news of her engagement. This scene further contextualizes the fear of the oldest Madden sister that her body will be subject to a Victorian perspective on alcoholism in the eyes of her family (28). The female body of an alcoholic in *The Odd Women*, having already been physically consumed by poverty and the effects of heavy alcohol consumption, risks further degradation if the public eye is alerted to her self-destructive habit. This fear in Virginia arises when, after having become inebriated, she finds Monica unexpectedly at her door: “When the door opened Monica was surprised by a disorder in her sister’s appearance. Virginia had flushed cheeks, curiously vague eyes, and hair ruffled as if she had just risen from a nap. She began to talk in a hurried, disconnected way, trying to explain that she had not been quite well” (127). A drunk Virginia, now the further devolved version of the same Madden sister seen drinking

brandy nine chapters ago, lies to conceal her addiction when Monica says to her, “What a strange smell! It’s like brandy,” rather than face potential ostracization from the family (127).

As opposed to only representing the female inebriate as a lying, bumbling embarrassment, the novel presents a complex look into Virginia’s addiction through its portrayal of her frightened body language in both the incident with Monica and the outing to the bar, as well as the poverty that formed the addiction. The deep-seated fear and shame surrounding the addiction aid in the humanization of her character and the formation of empathy in the reader, as noted by Gray: “In its rendering of the female drunk, Gissing’s text sympathizes with a woman driven to alcohol by both her poverty and her inability to prove useful to a society that privileges youth and beauty” (138). By showing the effects of poverty on the female body, Gissing encourages his readers to have sympathy for both the poor woman and the addict she becomes after entering economic uncertainty. The cause of Virginia’s addiction is linked directly to her life circumstances, as Alice reprimands Monica’s harsh attitude when the addiction is later discovered by saying, “You must remember what her life has been, dear” (336). Gray provides clarity for Monica and Alice’s mixed approach of sympathy and shame towards Virginia, arguing that “Late-Victorian fictional representations of alcohol consumption responded to deep class anxieties that discursively imagined the poor as both pitiable and disgusting, as worthy of sympathy but ultimately as other than the middle-class readership” (122). The brief sympathy afforded to Virginia suggests Gissing’s refusal to completely vilify the female alcoholic, although ultimately, Virginia’s body is still labeled as diseased and kept hidden for most of *The Odd Women*.

The next glimpse of Virginia’s diseased body in the novel reveals the long-term damage of years spent in active addiction and poverty, rendering her body visible to the public despite

persistent efforts to hide the effects of self-destructive habits and poverty's physical decay. When Virginia arrives at Queen's Road for her meeting with Rhoda in Chapter 27, "The Reascent," the narrator immediately spotlights her physical decay: "A disagreeable redness tinged her eyelids and the lower part of her nose; her mouth was growing coarse and lax, the under lip hanging a little; she smiled with a shrinking, apologetic shyness only seen in people who have done something to be ashamed of" (318). The physical description in Chapter 27 acts as the final physical description of Virginia prior to the other sisters discovering her addiction in the next chapter. While the novel is replete with mentions of bodily decay, the bodily decay resulting from alcoholism is used sparingly, and mostly reserved for the final few moments before Alice unexpectedly discovers her drunk in her bedroom. Gray evaluates the novel's subtle use of description for the decaying body of Virginia: "The female body is slowly revealed to be the site of self-harming drives, in a narrative striptease that sees Gissing incrementally (and only partially) reveal the drunken body" (137). The decision to rarely and lightly explore the diseased body of the alcoholic connects to Victorian categorization of alcohol as a moral issue. Virginia's lack of presence in the text appears to degrade the female body even more by suggesting that Virginia hide from the reader, possibly to afford more sympathy to her character, or to indirectly imply that even the narrative, like Virginia, is too ashamed to reveal her body fully.

In accordance with Victorian views towards alcoholism, Virginia subtly joins the ranks of other women degraded by society, deemed morally bankrupt, and thus excommunicated upon her sisters discovering the truth. Gray expands on the status of female alcoholics as "other," proposing that "Victorian women's consumption of alcohol was discursively equated with their powerlessness to control other bodily drives, and the figure of the female alcoholic was culturally interposed with that of the fallen woman" (128). When Alice and Monica smell the

alcohol on Virginia's breath and find the sugar-basin and gin in her room, Monica's comments are the harshest, responding to an incoherent Virginia with "Sit down, at once. You are disgusting!" (335). In a later conversation with Alice, Monica tells her, "I believe she has been drinking like that night after night. It explains the look she always has the first thing in the morning. Could you have imagined anything so disgraceful?" (336). Instead of offering Virginia any substantial empathy or kindness, the other Maddens treat the revelation using societal treatment of shame and ostracization given to "fallen" women. Virginia's impoverished, alcoholic body is classified as diseased and degraded, with her only option to achieve partial redemption being an admittance into an elusive "institution" (369). Virginia's body is shamed by the narrative as the novel, alongside Alice and Monica, abandons her character until she reemerges at the end, mysteriously "cured" of alcoholism. The return of a "fixed" Virginia could be interpreted as Gissing showing that redemption for the fallen woman is possible if given better life circumstances (and financial support to enter the modern-day equivalent of a rehab facility, as Virginia does). This seemingly optimistic approach to the fallen woman argues that redemption is a matter of both personal motivation and access to resources. If the diseased woman can only be motivated to fix her ways, the light of financial security at the end of the tunnel (in *The Odd Women*, presumably the plan to open the school) will yank her out of poverty's clutches.

The novel never allows for a complete reversal of poverty's wear on Virginia and Alice's bodies, their deterioration cemented until circumstances marginally improve for them at the very end. Deirdre David writes that "Their physical condition signifies a dispiriting contrast with women more socially and intellectually privileged" (122). Over the years since the eldest sisters became self-sufficient, they have transformed into "grim and unsightly" women, "worn down by

poverty” (David 123). In *The Odd Women*, Alice and Virginia become grotesque personifications of poverty that loom hauntingly over Monica as a warning of her future: without looks, there can be no marriage. Without marriage, the resounding outcome is a life as an odd woman; a prospect that Monica fears and ultimately rejects in favor of marrying Mr. Widdowson.

The older Madden sisters have become visibly plagued by poverty, and the violence enacted upon their bodies effectively strips them of any hope of securing a marriage to obtain financial support. Samiya Alam and Aimillia Ramli suggest the implications of poverty for the two unmarriageable older sisters, writing: “Alice and Virginia have spent their lives, after their father’s death, struggling to get paid, and their meagre salaries have taken a toll on their health and countenance. Working hard to earn money, they have destroyed their youth and beauty, features that normally attract any potential partner for marriage” (121). By sapping youth and beauty from women otherwise eligible to marry in Victorian society, poverty enacts a near-complete removal of bodily autonomy. Debadrita Saha comments on the intersectionality of gender, class, and education in *The Odd Women*: “The novel is replete with such jarring disparities even among the members of the oppressed sex, establishing the fact that gender is not the sole cause of their oppression, but also, class and the consequent educational and financial status – all are the main ingredients in the potion which comprises the varying degrees of misery that each “Odd Woman” of Gissing’s novel has to face” (53). The age and appearance status of Alice and Virginia prevent them from being desirable on the marriage market, this barrier subsequently forming a subclass of oppression among the two Madden sisters that separates them from Monica, resulting in the “disparity among members of the oppressed sex” that Saha establishes. In contrast, Monica’s youth and beauty create a distinct form of oppression for her,

in that she is consistently reminded of the potential for financial stability her looks provide and is pressured to exploit her status as the best-looking Madden sister to the family's advantage.

Monica Madden: The Fatal Transition from Working-Class Girl to Married Woman

Monica, the sister least physically affected by prolonged economic struggle thus far, represents the female body before poverty's corruption takes place; an enduring appearance full of youthful exuberance that serves as a testament to hope and optimistic survival for the family. A large portion of Chapter 4 of *The Odd Women*, titled "Monica's Majority," follows Monica's twenty-first birthday, and her subsequent thoughts anxiously surrounding the question of her future and those of her older sisters. At the beginning of the chapter, the reader gains new knowledge of Monica's beauty in a lengthy paragraph describing her "attractive features" consisting of a "face of a recognized type of prettiness," "dark lustrous eyes," and a "slim figure" (32). According to Michie, The depiction of Monica's appearance as a carefully crafted portrait of beauty is "Because so many Victorian novels focus on the adventures of a physically beautiful heroine and consider for so many pages the disposition of her body in marriage or death, Victorian heroine description would seem to bear many of the burdens of realism; the novel must in effect conjure up the body which will claim our attention over hundreds of pages until it is properly disposed of" (85). Gissing appears to make the reader aware of Monica's beauty, not to give the reader hope, as her sisters hold, but to illustrate the female body before its disposal, as the reader will encounter at the end of *The Odd Women*. Not only does the described image of beauty contrast greatly with the "wretched appearance" of Alice and the "unhealthy look" of Virginia, but Monica's appearance, in accompaniment with the passing of her twenty-first birthday, also marks the pivotal moment of awareness for her that she must begin seeking an escape route from her current life—or endure these conditions indefinitely (23, 14).

Monica has the following internal monologue regarding Alice and Virginia shortly before her introduction to Edmund Widdowson in chapter 4 to show the reasoning behind Monica's decision to entertain a significantly older Widdowson's company—and eventually his proposal of marriage: “Oh!--her heart ached at the misery of such a prospect. How much better if the poor girls had never been born. Her own future was more hopeful than theirs had ever been. She knew herself good-looking” (38). Monica's thought process alludes to her understanding of beauty as social currency in *The Odd Women*, which, if used to secure the correct marriage, transforms social currency into real, spendable income and an escape from poverty altogether. Furthermore, Monica's belief that better circumstances existed for the Madden sisters only if they themselves were in a state of non-existence—never having been born or even dead—serves as commentary for Victorian readers on the choices afforded to the poor. Addiction, prostitution, and marriage become forms of survival but also a chance at escapism, whether literally from poverty in the idealistic sense or a temporary release from the reality of abhorrent living conditions.

While Monica is younger, and thus so far able to retain her attractive appearance despite poverty, the imminent threat of bodily violence is alluded to by the passages mentioning the working conditions of the Messrs Scotcher & Co., where employees are punished with “the very scantiest meals” if they wish to work Sundays to make extra money, and “slavery threatens her with premature decay (31, 38). Monica describes her life and employment as being the equivalent of indentured servitude, a non-consensual bodily violation fostering desperation in her to escape the financially unstable life comprised of cramped living spaces and scant meals. Susan Colón comments on Monica's predicament in *The Odd Women*, noting, “As an overworked and underpaid shop girl, Monica provides a textual opportunity for Gissing to represent the lack of acceptable alternatives for unskilled single women. Her long hours for subsistence wages

threaten to ruin her health and curtail her freedom to form appropriate social contacts” (446). In this section of the novel, Gissing appears to draw attention to the effects of harsh working conditions on employees, though Monica’s situation ultimately traces back to her life transition from financial stability to poverty. This connection allows for a critique of cruel factory conditions for employees while still positioning poverty as a leading cause in the Maddens’ current suffering.

For Monica, the risk of becoming irreversibly “ruined” by circumstances associated with poverty and her low-paying job, which would in turn render her undesirable in the marriage market, translates into added mental stress and anxiety. Monica’s fear of becoming mutilated by poverty to the point of her own body matching that of her decayed sisters’ in turn produces pervasive suicidal thoughts: “Whenever I think of Alice and Virginia, I am frightened; I had rather, oh far rather, kill myself than live such a life at their age. You can’t imagine how miserable they are, really” (125). The presence of grotesque, degraded female bodies in Monica’s life arguably propels her quickly into marriage. This marriage might have otherwise been considered more cautiously and deemed an unfit match. Monica’s tragic death at the end of *The Odd Women* ironically recalls her former statements of preferring death to life as an odd woman, as that fate is precisely what Monica unknowingly chooses when she marries Widdowson.

The working conditions Monica endures add weight to the pre-existing fear of meeting the fate of her older sisters, in which she herself becomes one of the odd women. Monica’s discussion with Rhoda about her working conditions provides the reasoning behind her desire to forge a new life for herself, as she recounts that “Some of us get diseases. A girl has just gone to the hospital with varicose veins...Sometimes, on Saturday night, I lose all feeling in my feet; I

have to stamp on the floor to be sure it's still under me" (41). Michie comments on the effects of a working-class life on an already impoverished body, stating that "Work marks the body, making it representable, marked" (35). The bodies of the Madden sisters are physically marked by their lives of economic struggle, making their existence a testament to their own suffering. The state of being branded by poverty is further dissected through a gendered lens by Gilbert, as she explains that "A gentleman, however degraded in his experiences, remains a gentleman; a lady degraded is a lady no more. Even a lady who lost only her familial economic status and not her innocence might be referred to as a 'decayed gentlewoman'" (68). This kind of bodily violence, as Gilbert specifies, is unique to the female body as it becomes accompanied by a societal view of the Madden sisters as diseased or decayed; fallen from their previous status as "ladies" raised by their father, a respected doctor.

Gissing establishes Monica as a character with the potential to break the cycle among the three remaining Madden sisters, if for no other reason than to avoid being hospitalized or killed by her working conditions. The discussion of working conditions adds significantly to the relationship between poverty and choice, or lack thereof, in that Monica's working conditions are destroying her physical and mental health; yet she must keep working the job or risk becoming homeless and utterly destitute. Michie comments on the difficulty of decision-making when no available option affords a true escape from poverty: "The three options for fictional working-class women seem to be prostitution, severe illness, or death. The consequences of hard physical work stretch out in only two directions from the focal point of the heroine's body" (52).

In *The Odd Women*, an additional option is presented to Monica to avoid the bodily decay of poverty and hard physical labor: training and employment at the Ladies' Institute. Monica's current life of little food or opportunity leads her to Rhoda Nunn and Miss Barfoot, the two

primary odd women of the novel, who offer her an alternative path away from shop work or marriage. Miss Barfoot, the “fervid prophetess of female emancipation,” works as an instructor for her unmarried pupils (Gissing 59). Miss Nunn, the co-leader of the institute, acts as superintendent for the offices in which “type-writing and occasionally other kinds of work that demanded intelligence were carried on by three or four young women regularly employed” (64). Together, they successfully recruit an apprehensive Monica, who inwardly categorizes the institute as “an old maid factory” (59). As a result of a general distaste for the work and life of an “emancipated” woman, Monica ultimately chooses Mr. Widdowson over Rhoda’s offer to stay employed at the Ladies’ Institute and continue her training.

The decision to marry rather than stay employed and single arrives at a time when Monica is desperate to escape poverty and achieve a lifestyle of greater comfort than that of her sisters, an analysis of her character that De Soto corroborates: “The meager wages that this society allocates to women’s work contribute to the cycle of poverty in which these women are caught—unless they can marry” (2). Colón observes the conflicting life options offered to Monica through either marriage, employment at the institute, or remaining in factory work: “The pseudo-parental influence of Alice and Widdowson, the example of Virginia, and the allure of Rhoda offer contradicting intellectual models” (62). While Miss Nunn and Miss Barfoot’s lifestyle of emancipation through work offers Monica freedom from harsh working conditions and unwanted matrimony, marriage to Mr. Widdowson provides its own “emancipation”: freedom from employment and even poverty itself. The significant age gap between Monica and Widdowson, his controlling behavior, and her complete lack of genuine love for him no longer dissuades her from entering the marriage.

The swift immersion into marriage with Widdowson soon reveals a unique form of bodily violence against Monica as Widdowson exerts command over her both physically, in how he attempts to control her whereabouts and social activity, and mentally, in how he determines what she reads and how much of her mental space is occupied by household tasks. Now away from her sisters and the life of struggle they shared, Monica begins to experience isolation as part of Widdowson's concerted effort to minimize her contact with the world outside of their own home: "As soon as he understood that she desired more freedom of movement, he became anxious, suspicious, irritable...Widdowson had begun to perceive that he must exert authority in a way he had imagined would never be necessary" (172). The isolation tactics of demanding to know every detail of Monica's everyday plans and dissuading her from going out to socialize with others, as Widdowson admits, are targeted at everybody in Monica's life, regardless of gender or relationship to her: "I want to keep you all to myself. I don't like these people—they think so differently" (187). As their relationship conflict intensifies, the threat of bodily violence hangs in the air.

In addition to attempts at confining Monica's social environment to primarily just himself, Widdowson tries to minimize what books he allows her to read, telling her, "I don't think you'll get much good out of that...Why should you waste your time?" (185). Monica communicates to Widdowson that without the freedom she defines as a necessary component in her marriage, "life becomes a burden" (183). Despite Monica's protests, Widdowson's behavior becomes persistently controlling over her social life and everyday schedule. Colón interprets the conflict between an uncontrollable Monica and a power-hungry Widdowson as she asserts that "When, after their marriage, Widdowson tries to transform Monica into a meek and compliant version of the angel in the house with no knowledge of the world, he encounters the unwelcome

fact that her previous life cannot be simply excised by a change in circumstances” (448). The conflict arising from unmet, mixed marital expectations, coupled with Widdowson’s controlling impulses and insecurities, creates an unhealthy environment for Monica, both physically and mentally. The volatile environment’s toll on Monica as her demands for more freedom fall on deaf ears ironically becomes the same bodily decay that her previous life as a factory worker “threatened her with,” and the same fate belonging to her sisters that she ran from.

As Widdowson tightens control over Monica’s social and intellectual pursuits, physical violence against the female body emerges in *The Odd Women*. After Monica makes rebellious statements to disregard Widdowson’s desired authority, he resorts to physically violent actions to subdue her, “crushing her in his arms, his hot breath on her neck” (187). Later, in Chapter 24: “Tracked,” the bodily violence inflicted on Monica nearly reaches a fatal outcome: “He sprang at her, clutched her dress at the throat, and flung her violently upon her knees...It was well that he held her by the garment, and not by the neck, for his hand closed with murderous convulsion, and the desire of crushing out her life was for an instant all his consciousness” (276).

Widdowson’s desperation to control Monica despite the knowledge that she does not love him and desires more freedom, if not complete release from him, manifests into physically violent actions, as well as physically violent thoughts: “If she endeavored to release herself, I should feel capable of killing her. Is not this a strange, brutal thing?” (265).

Through the adverse effects of bodily violence, both physical and verbal, on the part of Mr. Widdowson, and eventually the bodily violence of a pregnancy, Monica dies at the very end of the novel, leaving her daughter to be raised by Alice and Virginia. As the last Madden sister to die in *The Odd Women*, Monica assumes her place as the most impactful tragedy to occur in the family because of self-inflicted bodily violence stemming from her desire to escape poverty.

Monica's life, and the ending of her marriage to Widdowson, concludes with her "defeated and disappointed on all sides, lapsing into psychological and physical decline" (David 125). Without the opportunity to leave Widdowson, return to the Ladies' Institute, or pursue an option other than the former two, Gissing refuses to allow Monica to survive and join Alice and Virginia; Monica must exit the narrative as a decayed body.

Virginia, presumably able to recover from her alcoholism after being sent away to an institute, and Alice, also given a promising ending as her "complexion lost its muddiness and spottiness; her step had become light and brisk," leave behind a Monica consumed by abuse and her pregnancy, who throughout the novel is represented as the central symbol of beauty and hope for the Madden family (370). Colón asserts that "Whether Monica could have found conjugal happiness with a less reactionary mate is impossible to know" (450). Despite Monica's insistence and determination to live a better life than Virginia's and Alice's, her passing symbolizes the death of the hope in her potential for success that every Madden in the family—including their father—had once held for her. Shand furthers this examination of Monica's death, writing: "Her death in the final chapter complicates an easy categorization of Monica, and *The Odd Women* in general, as a hopeful portrayal of women's progress" (67). Monica's realization that her marriage was in the category Joanna Bourke defined as "actual bondage...a wife's virtual slavery" arrives too late for her to escape in time (423). The life, and death, of Monica, serves as a testament; not of a warning dodged, but a warning from Rhoda Nunn come true: "If she marry at all, she will marry badly" (61).

The ending of *The Odd Women*, vividly marked by the introduction of new life and the final Madden death, serves as a representation of poverty's insatiable hunger. Soto analyzes Gissing's decision to end the novel with yet another tragedy by deeming the Madden sisters'

deaths as an intentional showcase of suffering, suggesting that “The novel’s crowd of readers are left to stare at the dead bodies of Gertrude, of Martha, of Isabel, and of Monica.” (De Soto 11). Certainly, the introduction of Monica’s baby may present a continuation of hopefulness for the future, and perhaps the emancipation movement headed by Rhoda Nunn and Miss Barfoot, but the existence of Monica’s baby also elicits the final line of the book spoken by Rhoda to the baby: “Poor little child!” (371). Leland Jasperse fleshes out the uncertain, even arguably bleak ending of *The Odd Women* as he elaborates that “In the end, the older Madden sisters, having sunk deeper into torpor and alcoholism, are recalled from narrative stasis to care for Monica’s baby after her death in childbirth. The novel ends with the future placed in the tremulous hands of the oddest of the odd women” (412). Monica’s death concludes the cyclical nature of poverty on the Madden family, her fatal bodily decay aligning with that of Gertrude, Martha, and Isabel; leaving surviving members, Alice and Virginia, with unclear futures.

George Gissing’s *The Odd Women* presents a complex investigation into the lives of impoverished working-class women through the Madden sisters' family. Class, disease, and poverty follow the Madden sisters from life until death, the closure of Monica’s character acting as the final thread, sewing all the sisters together using the needle of poverty and tragedy. Virginia and Alice, the surviving sisters, emerge as decayed odd women at the novel’s end, ushering in hesitant hope alongside apprehension about Monica’s baby’s fate. Monica herself, a character who loses her freedom after entering a traditional marriage in the hope of escaping poverty, details the unique characteristics of poverty’s invasiveness on the female body. Instead of escaping the dreary fate of the decayed woman, Monica meets her own version, which explicitly causes her death from pregnancy and prolonged exposure to Widdowson’s abuse.

Gissing effectively establishes poverty as a destructive force, particularly on the female body. The conditions of a life spent enduring economic struggle wreak havoc on every form of oppressed woman, permeating every bodily space held by the working class to deny the youth and intellectual opportunity belonging to the poor. Most of the Maddens die young, leaving behind their older sisters, Alice and Virginia, with gaunt, starved bodies for most of the novel. The structure of the novel allows for the tracking of the sisters' bodily decline over the years as they shift from hopeful to withering, without the financial security and protection their father had initially planned. Gissing emphasizes the lack of choice presented to the impoverished, as much of the beauty that could guarantee marriage and financial security was denied during their years of limited to no resources and physically taxing factory labor. The choice between an abusive marriage, factory work, or the life of an odd woman at the Ladies' Institute highlights the limitations placed on Victorian women.

CHAPTER III

“Restless, Meddling, Impudent Scoundrels:” Mapping Poverty’s Violence on the Social Body in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*

I cannot forget, either day or night, that these imbittered feelings of the poor against the rich have been generated in suffering: they would neither hate nor envy us if they did not deem us so much happier than themselves” (253)

Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849) is rich with political discourse on marriage, class conflict, and the economic struggles brought on by industrialization and the Napoleonic Wars. Not entirely unlike Gissing’s *The Odd Women* and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*, Brontë’s novel positions itself in between sides of political issues—not to determine a viewpoint of its own, but to observe the differing perspectives on issues including conventional matrimony versus freedom, the mill owners’ needs versus those of the workers, and machines versus the unemployed working class. While in *The Odd Women* and *Mary Barton*, poverty manifests primarily in the individual body, as in the case of the Madden sisters and John Barton, the working class in Brontë’s novel acts as a mobilized force opposing the conditions of its poverty through organized violent resistance. The novel thus becomes less a commentary on poverty as a diseasing entity on the individual body, and more a contagion spreading through the working class, giving way to the destruction of community as a social body.

In *Shirley*, poverty effectively mutilates the desperation of the working class into anger, and anger into organized crime against the machines, mills, and the people who own both. The mill owners and the workers, and the community as the social body, are degraded and destroyed by the fear of the upper class towards the poor and the poor’s anger towards the upper class.

Industrialization—and the byproduct of increased economic stress for the mill workers—are treated with consideration. However, the empathy the narrator extends to the poor is constrained by the fear of “the mob,” as the workers are described in the novel, and by the belief in the inevitability of society’s progression into an era of machinery. While Brontë’s *Shirley* is impossible to strictly confine to either siding with mill owner Robert Moore, or being in full support of the rebelling workers, the novel offers a complex lens with which to examine how the social body is formed—or torn apart—by poverty and economic struggle. *Shirley* provides the foundation for an interpretation of poverty that considers forced unemployment, helplessness, and hunger as driving factors behind revolts, emphasizing that the workers are not against the existence of machinery; rather, they detest the idea that machines should or have to replace human hands and labor—a decision that effectively renders the working class obsolete.

To examine the violent effects of the rapid implementation of machinery and subsequent poverty in the Yorkshire area in *Shirley*, we must analyze the individual body and observe how community-wide fear, anger, and hunger generate mass panic and violence that destroy the social body. By taking into consideration how the individual bodies of Mill owner, Robert Moore, and the workers interact with one another and respond with furthering conflict out of necessity for their own survival, an analysis of the social body can emerge through the text as Pamela Gilbert articulates:

“The body becomes both the sign and the metaphor of the nation. Individual bodies and their ills, as representatives of classes and populations, become indices of the condition of that less tangible entity, the social body. The social itself, in both its physical and moral manifestations, comes to be understood as a medicalized physical entity which can be fixed, observed, and dissected both through the individual bodies of its subjects and in toto (or en masse) in the form of statistics.” (4)

This strategy for finding and defining the social body in *Shirley* is well aided by an examination of the starving bodies of Yorkshire, through the characters of William Farren, his struggling family, and Moses Barraclough. The health of the social body, as the novel suggests, fundamentally rests on good relations between classes, with the higher classes' lack of empathy toward the lower being a principal cause of the agitation and unrest that produce violent reactions toward the rest of the community. By mill owners dehumanizing the collective body of the laborers by insulting their appearance and intellect, the social body becomes the direct recipient of degradation. This contradictory attitude of the mill owners demanding respect without providing any to their workers highlights the ironically violent nature of the upper class, who pride themselves in *Shirley* as being above the "mob's" aggressive protest actions. By their persistent efforts to dehumanize the working class, middle-upper-class members of the community are enacting violent rhetoric against the working body, and in turn forcing violence against the social body.

Published in 1849 but set in Yorkshire in 1811-1812, *Shirley* offers a complex yet often puzzling narrative of the struggle between mill owner Robert Moore and the Yorkshire laborers, the conflict reaching a critical point as the Napoleonic Wars continue to cut off the principal market for the woollen trade. An attempt at mitigating the suffering of the Yorkshire trade, as shown in *Shirley*, results in the production of labor-efficient machinery that "threw thousands out of work, and left them without legitimate means of sustaining life" (30). The subsequent hunger, anger, and desperation in the working-class community manifest themselves in violent outbursts: "A food-riot broke out in a manufacturing town, a gig-mill was burnt to the ground, a manufacturer's house was attacked, the furniture thrown into the streets, and the family forced to flee for their lives" (30). Despite the working class's efforts to enact positive change, Brontë is quick to clarify that these efforts only generate fear in the community and a general disdain for

the impoverished. Ultimately, as Brontë determines, “It would not do to stop the progress of invention, to damage science by discouraging its improvements; the war could not be terminated, efficient relief could not be raised: there was no help then; so the unemployed underwent their destiny—ate the bread and drank the waters of affliction” (30). While Brontë’s text does shed light on the plights of the working class, passages such as these appear to leave little hope that the poor will not become squashed under the boot of industrialism, all in the name of progress; a “fate,” as *Shirley* seems to argue, that is simply an unfortunate yet necessary stipulation of the times. Albert Pionke contends that “Brontë’s sympathies lay more with middle-class manufacturers than with working-class reformers” (93). This assessment of Brontë’s representation of the working class compared to the mill owners is a widely held belief among critics, who argue that *Shirley* is framed almost entirely through the perspective of the middle-class characters, thus allowing for little substantial insight or empathy for the working-class characters and the complexity of the historical Luddite movement.

In response, I would argue that while Brontë does appear to sympathize with the mill owners, she does so in a way similar to *Mary Barton*’s plot of Harry Carson’s murder: presenting both sides’ struggles—employees wanting hours versus employers not being able to give work without risking bankruptcy of their businesses—and by doing so, refuses to choose one stance to adhere to throughout the plot’s progression completely. The novel’s narrator, and perhaps even Brontë herself, seems conflicted as to where their allegiances in the political conflict fall; in one scene, discussing the mill owners’ fear and anger toward the working class for their frame breaking, and in another, highlighting the workers’ fear of industrialism and hatred of machines that motivate them to break the machinery. While the workers’ aggressive calls for reform are represented as divisive and even destructive to the Yorkshire community, the narrative also

criticizes the mill owners' unwillingness to communicate with or support their workers during a period of economic hardship.

Neither the workers nor the mill owners are perfect characters who deserve no blame or empathy, which arguably makes the narrative more accurate by refusing to portray either as entirely without fault or wrongdoing, as to do so would unfairly preserve the sanctity of only one side and align readers more easily with the novel's own political affiliations. Brontë's decision to tell the events of the novel through a middle-class perspective undeniably sways her more towards the manufacturers' side. However, I believe her decision to represent the mill owners as flawed people who effectively betray the bond between employee and employer by replacing human labor with machines allows her to swing back to the middle position between the two sides. Despite *Shirley*'s conclusion missing a long-term solution to the social problem it presents, the narrative still argues that more communication and empathy must be fostered to avoid the destruction of the social body. The novel advocates for the survival of the social body above all else to prevent further outbreaks of hatred, riots, and internal community violence, though the rising industrialism, a pivotal aspect of the plot, is largely viewed as an inevitable "forward" movement with unpreventable costs for some community members. This view of technological progress as unavoidable places Brontë's empathy for the workers in jeopardy, though I argue she avoids this by clarifying that, despite technology's constant evolution, this should *not* prevent human labor from being valued and protected.

The consistent theme of inconsistency in *Shirley*, whereby in one moment empathy is offered to the poor, and in another the working class is demonized or otherwise portrayed as being a necessary casualty for progress, is dissected by Shirley Foster in her book on Victorian women's fiction: "It may be more in keeping with Brontë's own intentions to regard her novels as conscious explorations of personally important issues with whose complexities she is seeking

to come to terms. The contradictory elements in her work may then be seen as avowed declarations of her ambivalence, and the ambiguities as an acknowledgment of the insolubility of the problems she depicts” (79). The value of *Shirley*, then, does not lie in any effort to solve poverty, or argue for or against industrialization, but in its determination to contemplate how economic struggle corrupts community and destroys good relations between employers and workers; the specific ways in which both sides are careless in their actions and cause further violence to the social body. The concept of the Victorian author as an observer of social problems, rather than solver of social problems, echoes Deborah Nord’s views on the role of Victorian novelists in relation to class issues: “The novelist-spectator took on the task of representing the poor and the outcast as features of middle-class experience and of illustrating the invasion of disease and disgrace into the homes of the respectable” (2). Through observing class conflict, the organized political responses of both sides, and the effects of industrialism and economic struggle on the social body, *Shirley* accomplishes the goal of the novelist-spectator.

Machine-Breakers and Mill Owners: Communication Amidst Rising Conflict

The beginning of the novel establishes a plot riddled with rising political conflict and violence on the social body, when Mr. Helstone meets with Mr. Malone, curate of Briarfield, to discuss the possibility of a riot or row occurring in protest against the arrival of “two waggon loads of frames and shears” (14). In the following passage, preparations are being put in place to safeguard the delivery of Robert Moore’s machinery from Stilbro’ to Hollows-mill, the men first ensuring that Malone still has his pistols, before Mr. Helstone informs him that “There *is* a chance of a row; if a positive riot does not take place – of which, indeed, I see no signs—yet it is unlikely this night will pass quite tranquilly. You know Moore has resolved to have the new machinery” (14). Mr. Helstone urges Mr. Malone to assist in protecting the mill and delivery, calling Moore “very careless” and insisting that “He takes no warning from the fate of Pearson,

nor from that of Armitage—shot, one in his own house and the other on the moor” (15). While one interpretation of the conversation between Helstone and Malone could be that it aligns itself with the mill owners—potentially even igniting fear and disgust in the reader toward the workers—another reading may suggest a different approach to the passage. This scene of expressed concern and armed preparedness highlights the violence of poverty on the social body, in that the community, though early in the novel, is already fragmented by the “upper class versus lower class” dynamic pervasive in Yorkshire.

The political conflict does not arise purely from poverty, a misconception Brontë is quick to dismantle, but primarily from the neglect of mill owners such as Moore, who fail to empathize with their struggling community. Frequent passages deem the riots and rows started by the workers as reactionary violence, attributed to the efforts of the mill owners to ignore the economic difficulties of the workers until the issue reached a boiling point: “Moore ever wanted to push on: ‘Forward’ was the device stamped upon his soul... He did not sufficiently care when the new inventions threw the old work-people out of employ: he never asked himself where those to whom he no longer paid weekly wages found daily bread” (29). This passage aligns itself against Moore, and thus more broadly speaking, against the mill owners by calling attention to their willful ignorance. In an effort to maintain his own survival, Moore quickly becomes unconcerned about the well-being of his workers, a pivotal cause of Yorkshire’s violent clashes between workers and employers that Brontë calls attention to over the course of the novel.

The next passage of the chapter, however, implies that perhaps the mill owners are not entirely to blame for their neglectful behavior toward the economic hardship of their community: “The sufferers, whose sole inheritance was labour, and who had lost that inheritance—who could not get work, and consequently could not get wages, and consequently could not get bread—they

were left to suffer on; perhaps inevitably left” (30). In this instance, Brontë draws attention to the poor, while also calling into question the possibility of unpreventable suffering—the argument that progress demands sacrifice, whether that be in the form of increased economic hardship or in the Mill owners needing to be more communicative rather than dismissive. While the novel wishes to preserve community and avoid violence on the social body by encouraging mill owners to grow out of ignorance and into empathy, industrialism itself is still encouraged, and even advocated for by Brontë, to the point of perhaps cheapening her own empathy towards the workers abandoned during society’s unwavering reach at “progress.”

Despite the “low scoundrels” insults thrown at the framebreakers, the narrative verges on blaming the mill owners for their lack of empathy, which leads to violence becoming a method of communication between employees and employers (24). The blame placed on mill owners is accompanied by Brontë extending sympathy in relation to the employers’ own desperation to survive the tumultuous economic state of Yorkshire, as Moore explains to William Farren: “If I stopped by the way an instant, while others are rushing on, I should be trodden down. If I did as you wish me to do, I should be bankrupt in a month: and would my bankruptcy put bread in your hungry children’s mouths?” (133). Moore’s lack of empathy for the workers persists despite the cautionary words of Caroline and Farren urging him to exercise more consideration; his justification for his harshness is a “duty to defend his property” (118). The narrative thus becomes a balancing act between revealing the questionable actions of both the poor and the mill owners, and maintaining a refusal to condone *or* condemn either amidst a confusing era of war and declining trade.

When Robert Moore’s machinery, intended for delivery to Hollows-mill, is broken, and the men responsible for the rebellious act temporarily escape capture, *Shirley* offers further commentary on how the social body, violated by a lack of communication and empathy for the

impoverished, culminates in destructive, reactionary violence. While awaiting the delivery of the machinery, Moore discovers that the wagon is empty, with none of his machinery or men present. At this point, he discovers the threatening message left behind by the workers: ““Your hellish machinery is shivered to smash on Stilbro’ Moor, and your men are lying bound hand and foot in a ditch by the roadside. Take this as a warning from men that are starving, and have starving wives and children to go home to when they have done this deed”” (32). The letter, arriving in the novel as a warning to Moore, also acts as a plea for communication between the workers and Moore himself. The harsh but honest words of the workers align with William Baker and Kenneth Womack’s observation of what many Victorian novelists offered as part of the solution to conflict between classes: “Although the social-problem novel presented a diversity of views on the many problems—as its name suggests—to which the industrialization of Britain gave rise, most novelists agreed that division must yield to communication and understanding between adversaries” (200).

Through this view of *Shirley* as a novel that encourages communication to help resolve the class issues it discusses, the novel is told through the perspective of mostly middle-class characters or the mill owners themselves to potentially show the failure of the upper class to reduce the violent tensions between themselves and the rebelling workers. Moore, alongside other characters such as Hortense, who calls the workers “stupid, evil, and unbearable,” is repeatedly shown to be dismissive, degrading, and dehumanizing towards the workers who have expressed a valid reason for their aggressive action (63). Though the reader is not placed directly into the perspectives of the workers, and thus may harbor fear or judgment toward them, *Shirley* clearly demonstrates its own judgment towards the category of characters who define the workers as “the mob,” and encourages readers to consider that the workers may act in inhumane ways in reaction to inhuman treatment.

“The Mob:” False Constructions of the Working Class by the Yorkshire Community

The characterization of the workers as the “mob” in *Shirley*, a term used to instill fear of organized working-class action, highlights the destruction of community trust resulting from increased economic stress on the social body. Without community trust, good class relations deteriorate, and each side ascribes the worst intentions to the other's actions; the result is widespread community unrest and anxiety whenever conflict arises. In *Shirley*, the perceived threat of violence from the working class generates fear, the fear in turn being the main cause of harmful rhetoric that portrays the working class as inherently dangerous. Caroline proclaims to Robert: “I am not sure that I can define my fears; but we all have a certain anxiety at present about our friends. My uncle calls these times dangerous: he says, too, that mill-owners are unpopular” (67). By revealing the fear of working-class revolts in the hearts of every middle-class community member, Brontë exposes another driving force of violence on the social body: the destruction of mutual trust caused by the relentless perpetuation of insulting, often inaccurate perceptions of the working class. Grace Moore expands this discussion of perpetuated working-class stereotypes, writing: “These anxieties are often expressed in novels through frenetic crowd scenes in which individual identities became subsumed. Although it is a loaded term, when discontented members of the working class occupied the streets in this way, they were often perceived as a ‘mob,’ and regardless of whether their intentions were peaceful, many middle-class bystanders were afraid” (17). The pervasive fear of the working class in *Shirley*, aided by the rhetoric of mill owners such as Robert, turns even the sturdiest bonds of trust and communication between classes into fragile relationships on the verge of destruction. With every limb of the social body effectively cut off from the other by fear, distrust, and poverty, the Yorkshire community is left flailing and helpless.

Despite the protest of breaking the frames and subduing the delivery men being inherently aggressive and confrontational, the letter draws more attention to the reasoning behind their actions—not as justification but as explanation—particularly in the section describing the men’s and their families’ hunger. Deborah Nord notes that “When the starving witness the bounty of the well fed, they feel betrayal and anger” (148). Moore, on the verge of financial ruin himself due to the bleak state of the woollen trade, decides to purchase labor-saving machinery for his mill, a choice he knows will bring ruin to many of his workers and their families by putting them out of work indefinitely. This bleak fate inflicted upon his workers does not affect Moore’s opinion of himself, even when he becomes disliked for his business decisions: “And it perhaps rather agreed with Moore’s temperament than otherwise to be generally hated; especially when he believed the thing for which he was hated a right and an expedient thing; and it was with a sense of warlike excitement he, on this night, sat in his counting-house waiting the arrival of his frame-laden waggons” (30-31). While Moore was never wealthy, the purchase of the machinery constitutes a betrayal of the workers, in that Moore’s refusal to hear their complaints and engage with them compounds the damage to their trust in the mill-owners. The social body in *Shirley* inevitably becomes strained under the weight of plunging economic stability and rising distrust, culminating in the shooting at Moore’s mill.

In addition to the betrayal of trust initially placed in mill-owners to support their employees and not replace their labor with machines, preexisting class structures exist in Victorian society that add to both the judgment of the lower class by the upper, and the mistrust of the upper class by the lower. Jill Franks describes the class issues extending beyond merely that of income, explaining that “Members of all classes believed that there was something essentially and morally different between rich and poor folk. The most obvious marker of class is income, but education level and employment type are also key indices of class” (12). Moore, a

man who has a personal relationship with financial strain himself, places the workers beneath him not just in conduct, but in education, respect, and profession. Rather than affording sympathy, he inflicts judgment wherever possible. In one instance, Caroline speaks honestly but constructively about his “manner,” meaning his general treatment of workers: “As if your living cloth-dressers were all machines like your frames and shears: in your own house you seem different,” to which Robert responds with “To those of my own house I am no alien, which I am to these English clowns. I might act the benevolent with them, but acting is not my *forte*. I find them irrational, perverse; they hinder me when I long to hurry forward. In treating them justly, I fulfil my whole duty towards them” (70). To Moore, class issues are but one part, encouraging his disdain for the “Yorkshire workpeople” (70). His desire to dip his hands, so to speak, in the lucrative waters of industrialism and, in doing so, pull himself away from the danger of bankruptcy, means effectively that his apathy towards the workers is not rooted in a fear or dislike of their riots, necessarily, but in a determination to leave them behind to “hurry forward.”

In the case of Robert Moore’s machine delivery, hunger fuels the workers’ anger, along with the knowledge that the machinery designed to replace their bodies entirely requires as little labor on their part as possible. Chapter Two also specifies that Moore had “risked the last of his capital on the purchase of these frames and shears” (32). The workers, though not having that explicit information, knew that the machinery cost money, money that Moore would rather invest in the machines than in his workers, saving labor rather than offering it to those hungry for work and food. The social body is starving, but here the starvation of the literal bodies of Yorkshire is also noted by Brontë, suggesting that the health of the social body rests on the wellness of the physical body in the form of the starving workers; community and good class relations cannot exist without persistent efforts to provide adequately for the impoverished. Pionke critiques how the workers and their cause are discussed in *Shirley*, writing that “By

representing the workers collectively as unthinking reactionaries ruled by their own appetites, the novel suggests that they are incapable subjects entirely determined by their material circumstances” (12). Derogatory terms describe the workers, and their cause is explained mostly by their declared hunger, both for themselves and for others.

Moore’s character also presents an alternative view of the representation of the workers; the novel establishes the central mill owner figure as unfeeling, apathetic, and cruel, advancing his own economic growth—moving “forward,” regardless of the cost to others. This representation of mill owners both combats and helps dismantle Pionke’s view of the workers as “unthinking, incapable subjects.” Not only are the mill owners presented as problematic themselves and as partially responsible for the central political conflict of the novel, but they are also shown to be traitors to their own employees: willing to dehumanize the working class and replace them with labor-saving machines to preserve their own economic well-being. The selfish nature, comprising little to no empathy and only consideration for one’s own financial stability, is assigned to the mill owners. At the same time, the workers’ plans of action are calculated and methodical, and they show their anger at not having food but most notably at Moore’s betrayal, which replaces them with machines—stripping away the humanity of the workplace and destroying community trust and respect.

During a conversation with Joe Scott at their mill, Moore expresses his personal feelings about the uprisings caused by declining trade, refusing to acknowledge the workers’ oppression or his role in fostering it. Moore, though choosing to acknowledge the unfairness of offering a small or no amount of hours, immediately diminishes the legitimacy of their cause and subsequent rebellion in his response to Joe: “You need not to suppose that because the course of trade does not always run smooth, and you, and such as you, are sometimes short of work and of bread, that therefore your class are martyrs, and that the whole form of government under which

you live is wrong...I have seen villains who were rich, and I have seen villains who were poor, and I have seen villains who were neither rich nor poor” (58). Moore’s lack of empathy arises in this passage from his refusal to acknowledge or validate the severity of the unemployment issue, in addition to his belief that the poor are simply overreacting to what he views as a temporary issue. His stance toward the issue of unemployment and the replacement of human labor with machines is, at best, a false neutrality in which he assumes no accountability for his part in his men being “short of work and bread.” The consequence of a deficiency in communication and empathy between classes becomes, as the later shooting and riot at the mill in *Shirley* suggests, a violent destruction of community from the inside out, the end of which causes both parties to resort to perpetuating negative perceptions of the other as being villainous.

Robert’s cousin, Caroline Helstone, challenges his problematic views on the workers and encourages a perception of the social body as inextricably linked to the treatment of the working class and their relationships with their employers. The fear of violence from the workers instilled in Caroline’s mind does not prevent her from advocating for better treatment of the employees during a conversation with Robert, as she urges him to consider a different perspective: “I cannot help thinking it unjust to include all poor working people under the general and insulting name of “the mob,” and continually to think of them and treat them haughtily...I know it would be better for you to be loved by your workpeople than to be hated by them, and I am sure that kindness is more likely to win their regard than pride” (90-91). Robert’s dismissive response to Caroline’s differing view by calling her a “little democrat” and requesting that she recite a poem serves as another example of failed communication. Rather than view the workers with empathy, Robert maintains his perception of them as a “mob” of dangerous men, who only rebel against his machinery for no valid reasons. Robert’s ignorance, whether because he feels as though he cannot help or, conversely, that he does not want to, aids further violence against the social body.

As Robert tells Caroline, ““The poor ought to have no large sympathies; it is their duty to be narrow...Poverty is necessarily selfish, contracted, groveling, anxious.” (69). By looking at Robert’s neglect of his workers through his own words to Caroline about what those struggling economically should prioritize, it is no surprise that, during an era of stress over the future of his finances and the mill, Robert chooses to be “necessarily selfish.” Ironically, by Robert’s own logic, then, the workers are completely justified in their stance against his machinery—and even in their own responsive actions.

The Violence of Empathy Deficiency on the Social Body

A meeting between tailor Barraclough, who led the assault on Robert Moore’s machinery, and Moore ensues after Barraclough and eleven other workers confront Moore, bringing tensions in the social body to a boiling point. When Barraclough arrives and mockingly holds out his hat as “a begging-box; a brazen grin at the same time crossing his countenance,” Moore immediately returns the gesture with cruelty, replying, “If I gave you sixpence, you would drink it” (129). Moore goes on to attack him further, calling him a “double-eyed hypocrite.” The narrative implies that Moore’s assessment of Barraclough is true, with his description confirming the insults: “His whole air was anything but that of a true man” (128). The next man, referred to as “Noah o’ Tim’s,” approaches Moore, starting his speech with “Reason rather than peace is our purpose,” and urging him to “give up his miln, and go without further protractions straight home” (130). This request echoes Barraclough’s when he adds on to his original statement: “I am not myself an aged person as yet, but I can remember as far back as maybe some twenty year, when hand-labour were encouraged and respected, and no mischief-maker had ventured to introduce these here machines...When I see my brethren oppressed like my great namesake of old, I stand up for ‘em...I advises you to part wi’ your infernal machinery, and tak’ on more hands” (131). Although Moore and the narrator portray the two men as being

“Restless, Meddling, Impudent Scoundrels,” the confrontation between Moore and the twelve men, particularly in the upcoming section with William Farren, display moments of complex thought that go deeper than “want of bread,” as Pionke suggests the workers’ plight is reduced to by the novel’s representation of the political issues in Yorkshire.

William Farren’s introduction into the debate between Robert Moore and the workers presents a contrast to the first two spokesmen for the movement and alters the perception of the workers as unthinking or violent; rather, it presents a mixture of the peaceful oral debaters and the aggressive action-minded working-class. William Farren, described as “very different from either of the two who had previously spoken: he was hard-favoured, but modest, and manly-looking,” presents the more peaceful rhetoric as opposed to the threatening words of the letter and previous speakers for the party (132). Farren points out the violence on the social body to an uninterested Moore, informing him that “We’re thrown out o’ work wi’ these frames: we can get naught to do: we can earn naught...I feel that it would be a low principle for a reasonable man to starve to death like a dumb cratur’: I will n’t do’t. I’m not for shedding blood: I’d neither kill a man nor hurt a man; and I’m not for pulling down mills and breaking machines...but I’ll talk, - I’ll make’ as big a din as ever I can” (132-133). The narrative exposes the workers who revolted by placing them in direct debate with Moore, which provides more context for the threatening letter he receives after he finds the empty wagons: heightened community tensions and revolts exist, primarily because of the working class’s betrayal.

Moore’s response is dismissive, heightening tensions between the two parties, as *Shirley*’s middle-class perspective ironically exposes the flaws in Moore’s prejudiced ideology toward even the most “reasonable” of the workers. He replies to Farren by proclaiming the following: “Talk to me no more about machinery; I will have my own way. I shall get new frames in tomorrow: -If you broke these, I would still get more. *I’ll never give in*” (133).

Immediately after Moore's statement, the narrative condemns his attitude toward the worker, informing the reader that "His last words left a bad, harsh impression...By speaking kindly to William Farren, —who was a very honest man, without envy or hatred of those more happily circumstanced than himself...—Moore might have made a friend. It seemed wonderful how he could turn from such a man without a conciliatory or sympathizing expression" (133). This scene clearly aligns the narrative with the workers' side and harshly criticizes Moore's handling of the conflict and refusal to offer sympathy or further communication to ease tensions. His actions directly highlight the opportunity—and the loss of that chance—to ally with one of the workers by building a friendship based on respect and kindness. Therefore, had Moore entertained the idea of an alliance, or at least an empathetic understanding of their cause, rather than cruelty towards even Farren and the other workers, he might have avoided the later shooting and riot. The loss of pride and respect that workers once held in their trade, coupled with the dehumanization that arises from the realization that their employer is replacing them with a machine, are feelings communicated that do not relate to impulsivity or simply wanting food. While starvation is a key hardship driving the cause, conversations between characters reveal the underlying fear of rising industrialism in the Yorkshire community as a large motivating factor in the uprisings, specifically against the mills and machinery.

The scene in which William Farren returns home after the confrontation with Moore and Barraclough's subsequent arrest for frame-breaking punctures the predominantly middle-class perspective in *Shirley*, inviting the reader into the struggling lives of the working-class Farren and his family. A despondent Farren, "the poor fellow's face looking haggard with want," is left to grapple with the ramifications of Moore's attitude on the social body after attempting—and failing—to reason with him about machinery and his own subsequent unemployment (133). After having the conversation with Moore, Farren considers the following consequences on the

relationship between mill owners and employees in the Yorkshire community: “How could Moore leave him thus, with the words ‘I’ll never give in,’ and not a whisper of good-will, or hope, or aid? Farren, as he went home to his cottage, - once, in better times, a decent, clean, pleasant place, but now, though still clean, very dreary, because so poor-asked himself this question. He concluded that the foreign mill-owner was a selfish, an unfeeling, and, he thought, too, a foolish man” (134). Without empathy and communication, the violence inflicted on the individual body of Farren risks becoming widespread violence on the social body. The working-class characters, now weary of the degradation inflicted on the individual body, become the collective body that seeks to destroy the machinery, but ultimately aids in destroying the community. While Robert Moore eventually aids Farren in finding employment elsewhere as a garden worker for Mr. Yorke, the damage done to the social body in the initial confrontation appears to have already set the workers into further action, which later manifests in the non-fatal shooting of Moore and the riot at his mill.

The short section detailing Farren’s return to his family at their cottage also serves as a reveal of the starvation the workers refer to, cultivating empathy for their cause while validating the severity of their actions. While the workers themselves may be content to starve, they have hungry children at home who rely on them for financial stability. The details of the following passage highlight the depth of economic struggle the workers endure: “On entrance, his wife served out, in orderly sort, such dinner as she had to give him and the bairns: it was only porridge, and too little of that. Some of the younger children asked for more when they had done their portion—an application which disturbed William much: while his wife quieted them as well as she could, he left his seat, and went to the door” (134). Here, the narrative specifies that only “some of the younger children” asked for seconds of porridge, implying the older children have endured food scarcity long enough to realize that the one serving of porridge would be all that

was able to be afforded to them. The younger children asking for seconds while the older ones do not make the same request reveals the prolonged nature of the family's economic struggle, which is also confirmed when Farren is described earlier as having "the aspect of a man who had not known what it was to live in comfort and plenty for weeks, perhaps months past" (133). The novel clarifies that the workers, though revolting in the present moment, all spent weeks, if not months, enduring the depths of poverty and hunger *before* finally resorting to the collective action of frame-breaking and rioting to have their voices heard. Mr. Hall arrives at the cottage and, upon hearing of their financial troubles, offers to give Farren a "pound or two" as a "loan, not a gift" (136). The topic of charity and the debate over whether the wealthy bystander, or even the struggling mill owner, is still obligated to assist the impoverished, underemployed part of the community becomes a core concern of the novel.

The Role of Charity and Empathy in Redeeming the Middle-Class

Robert Moore, in contrast with the earlier harshness of his character, decides in a later section of *Shirley* to alter his perception of Farren and advocate for his employment under Mr. Yorke; a move, particularly for a novel decisively framed by a middle-class perspective, which calls to the privileged such as Shirley, and the employers to feel some empathy and obligation to help the workers. While industrialism and its cost of economic struggle for some are "inevitable," the narrative argues that perhaps the duty of the more privileged should still be to alleviate suffering wherever possible, in this case, the suffering of Farren and his family. Both Moore and Shirley Keeldar act as occasionally unempathetic, but still caring individuals who have moments of charity and kind acts toward the workers in what arguably may be a strategic move on the part of Brontë to not only allow redemption for a stubborn mill owner, but also the hope in the renewal of the damaged social body. Moore reflects on his conduct towards the workers, William Farren in particular, as he is "congratulated" by Hortense and Sykes for his

behavior in Chapter IX: “Briarmains:” “He was so quiet, however, under their compliments upon his firmness, &c., and wore a countenance so like a still, dark day, equally beamless and breezeless” (137). The shame and regret Moore feels regarding his poor treatment of Farren leads him to confront his preconceived notions of the workers, inquiring with Joe Scott about the quality of Farren’s work ethic, with his question of “He was not a bad workman?” and his asking if “the whole family” was decent, is responded to by Joe with the following: “Ye never had a better, sir, sin’ ye began trade...Niver dacent: th’ wife’s a raight cant body, and as clean—! Ye mught ear your porridge off th’ house floor” (138). This information causes a critical shift in Moore and an even further widening of the narrative hole in the prejudiced middle-class perspective in *Shirley*: the workers, misconstrued as being scary, violent people with ill intentions, are, in reality, often the William Farrens who do not want violence but need employment and have exhausted all other means of communication. With his prejudice corrected by Joe’s account of Farren, Moore speaks with Mr. Yorke, urging him repeatedly to give Farren work as a gardener at his mill until Mr. Yorke begrudgingly agrees to contact him with an offer.

The kindness of Moore, though limited primarily to Farren, suggests that, while moving “forward” some community suffering may be unavoidable, the manufacturers should always exhaust all resources and empathy before allowing an honest worker to become indefinitely unemployed. The novel continues to wrestle with the conflicting options of assigning empathy for some workers but not for others, or direct action to provide aid being given based on the worker being of good enough character to “qualify,” so to speak, for any of Moore’s consideration; a problematic view that does not consider any real reform policies or action applicable to more than just Farren, as it seems out of the three workers named (the other two being Barraclough and “Noah o’ Tim’s”), he is the only “worthy” one due to his strong work ethic and aversion to violence. This facet of *Shirley* attempts to balance between the two sides of

the social issue, leaning toward the working class with empathy, but, in its twisted logic of granting aid only to deserving workers, the narrative pushes itself back toward the middle-class manufacturer.

Similarly to Moore's empathy-driven appeal to Mr. Yorke for Farren, Shirley Keeldar represents a wealthy, upper-class character who engages in charity for the sake of reviving the social body through the support of the Yorkshire people who are struggling. Despite Shirley's empathy for the poor, she is not overly considerate toward what she categorizes as "the mob" and "ruffian defiance" (253). Like Robert, Shirley's empathy is conditional and ends at the presence of any mill attacks, as she informs Caroline that if "my property is attacked, I shall defend it like a tigress—I know I shall. Let me listen to Mercy as long as she is near me: her voice once drowned by the shout of ruffian defiance, and I shall be full of impulses to resist and quell" (253). That being established, Shirley does acknowledge the cause of poverty within the circumstances of the wollen trade, claiming that "these imbittered feelings of the poor against the rich have been generated in suffering" (253). Shirley discusses her sudden motivation to engage in charitable acts with Caroline, much to Caroline's hesitance: "They say that there are some families almost starving to death in Briarfield: some of my own cottagers are in wretched circumstances: I must and will help them...We have none of us long to live: let us help each other through seasons of want and woe, as well as we can, without heeding in the least the scruples of vain philosophy" (252). After gathering the rectors —Mr. Hall, Boulton, and Helstone — for a dinner to discuss the charity, Shirley finalizes a plan to distribute her donation to three communities.

This plan marks another moment like Robert's request to Mr. Yorke that highlights the duality of the middle-class character: despite preconceived attitudes and prejudice toward certain members of the working class, the determination to help those in need persists in an almost

ironic way that serves to partially redeem the characters and the conflicted narrative of the novel itself. During the conversation between Shirley and Caroline, emphasis is again placed on the social body's health as a necessary task to support the well-being of all members of every class and economic background. Although the novel offers more insight into the fear, anxiety, and mindset of its middle-class characters, it also includes moments in which all prejudice is challenged and even inverted to reflect the kind deeds—or cruelty—towards the lower.

The Final Riot: The Fate of the Working Class Amidst Increasing Industrialism

The final riot outbreak occurs at Hollows-Mill in Chapter XIX: “A Summer Night,” and is described to the reader from the perspective of Shirley and Caroline as they leave Caroline's house, following both characters through the riot, which ends with several workers dead. After narrowly missing the threat of violence on their own doorstep, after some of the men arrive at their house to kill Mr. Helstone, Caroline and Shirley follow the rioters to Moore's mill. Once there, passages describing the ensuing violence are filtered initially through both women, Shirley informing Caroline: “Hatchets and crow-bars against the yard-gates: they are forcing them” (324). Soon after, Caroline verbally observes the commencing action of the riot: “The gates are down! That crash was like the felling of great trees. Now they are pouring through. They will break down the mill-doors as they have broken the gate” (324). Despite their shared fear and middle-class prejudice toward the workers, Shirley still notes to Caroline the following: “There is suffering and desperation enough amongst them—these goads will urge them forwards” (325). The two characters share in the fear that Robert will be injured or killed, and that the riot is horrific to witness even from a distance, while still recognizing the driving forces behind the riot.

The fear risks reducing the poor to a ceaseless “mob,” but I argue that the albeit brief recognition of the reason for their violence and that “there is discipline in their ranks” signifies a sophisticated, well-organized, and clear—even understandable—motive for the workers' actions.

As even the narrative states, “The indignant, wronged spirit of the Middle Rank bears down in zeal and scorn on the famished and furious mass of the Operative Class. It is difficult to be tolerant—difficult to be just—in such moments” (325). This deflates the notion of either side being only represented as “unthinking,” even if the middle-class perspective the novel uses clearly denounces the use of violence as a political strategy. Both sides of the social issue are at fault for the ensuing conflict at the mill, though workers’ violence is portrayed as taking the issue too far, while Robert Moore’s defense of his mill is largely justified. In that specific light, I concur with critics of *Shirley*’s representation of the working-class that in moments of violence, the narrative exclusively sides with the mill owners and portrays them as dealing violence themselves in the form of self-defense—a response to preexisting violence initiated by the workers, never an intrinsic choice they make such as in the representation of the workers’ violent actions.

Vengeance for the unemployed workers Moore had arrested for their crimes against his machinery and mills is consistently alluded to until the end of Chapter XXX: “Rushedgedge, A Confessional,” at which point a man wounds Moore, the violence of the social body becoming a literal mapping of physical violence on the individual body of Moore. Moore’s return to the town and his slow recovery are where the novel largely spends the rest of its time until Caroline and Robert, as well as Shirley and Louis Gérard Moore, marry as the repeal of the Orders in Council reopens trade. The changing tide of the trade allows Moore the freedom to escape bankruptcy, marry Caroline, and stay in England. In addition to the newly positive prospects for Moore’s future, he additionally informs Caroline that “Now, I can take more workmen; give better wages; lay wiser and more liberal plans; do some good; be less selfish” (602). Now, with Moore’s “heavy difficulties lifted,” his workers become the recipients of the “new-and-improved” mill-owner version of Moore.

Any loose ends are neatly tied up by Brontë, including the identity and fate of the attempted murderer Michael Hartley, the narrative informing the reader that “the poor soul died of delirium tremens a year after the attempt on Moore, and Robert gave his wretched widow a guinea to bury him” (597). The novel’s ending, though practically begging the reader to find it satisfying, abandons the decision to offer any clear solution to the social problem it spends a large portion of its page count discussing, whether from the middle-class perspective or the occasional workman. Are the readers provided with sufficient answers to issues of machinery replacing human labor and community-wide economic unrest, if the only ones offered lie in “communicate and offer empathy, and if that doesn’t work, just wait until the political tides shift in your favor, as Robert Moore does?” I assert that while Brontë certainly believes in empathy and communication as pillars of the healthy social body, community issues arising out of industrialization are largely dismissed as part of the necessary evolution of technology, meaning that her solution to the social problems in *Shirley* are limited to efforts to mitigate the effects of things such as industrialism, as opposed to arguing for long-term reform, regulation, or the implementation of policies to ensure the survival of the working-class amidst the rise of machinery.

Shirley’s investigation into growing political unrest during a period of industrialization and struggling trade in the Yorkshire community yields conflicting results that both criticize the mill owners and support the workmen. Brontë’s tackling of the social problem genre, though ambitious in nature, is executed in ways that risk dehumanization of the working class, with her focus being so heavily on the violent riot aspect of the novel’s plot that the novel may accidentally—or even intentionally—serve to generate fear in greater amounts than sympathy in the reader for the impoverished and underemployed men. While fear, as an emotion, does not necessarily entail an inherent dislike of the poor, the workers, or even some of their protest

methods, it may reflect a middle-class perspective more than an accurate representation of the workers. However, I believe that the middle-class lens is not problematic in the novel, only in that it often exposes rather than preserves class prejudice against the workers, prompting characters such as Robert Moore to reevaluate their harsh treatment of the impoverished and reconsider how they themselves contribute to violence within the social body. Brontë strategically employs small pockets of working-class perspective in *Shirley*, particularly in the case of William Farren, to reverse the stereotypes of “the mob” as composed only of unthinking, selfish men who join the cause for alternative motives or simply want to be violent for no rational reason, rather than use it sparingly and effectively. The novel is unique in that it recognizes a social problem but refuses to prescribe a solution, because its value lies in a critical observation of the problem’s manifestation in communities and the disease of the social body. The novel views the unemployment brought on by industrialism as unavoidable while encouraging empathy and community effort to limit the damage of invention progress on the social body and the lives of the working class.

CHAPTER IV

Conclusion

Mapping violence on the individual and social bodies in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, and George Gissing's *The Odd Women* opens the way to a more nuanced understanding of poverty as it relates to the authors' conceptions of the social problem and their proposed strategies for reform. By examining poverty in the nineteenth century, we can challenge modern-day misconceptions of class inequality that stem from the belief that economically struggling people are solely responsible for their circumstances. Characters such as John Barton, William Farren, and the Madden sisters are poor despite their prolonged efforts to improve their financial standing, with poverty damaging their bodies to the point of sickness and physical disability. Bodily violence causes characters to become unable to work due to weakened physical capability stemming from hunger and addiction, at which point they are deemed useless by society and tossed aside. Social problem novels take the people excluded from Victorian society and offer a view of their involvement in sex work, addiction, and violence that reframes poverty, not moral failure, as the culprit behind their suffering.

By reevaluating problematic approaches to poverty in the Victorian era, we can map how class inequality is predicated on a lack of empathy, allowing it to persist well into the twenty-first century. Modern understandings of poverty have analyzed how class prejudice and inequality hinge on a dismissal of concerns regarding dangerous workplace conditions, unaffordable housing, and lack of stable income opportunities, particularly for women and people of color. In addition to these topics, I suggest that modern conversations approach social

issues by tracing societal attitudes towards issues of poverty back to earlier historical periods, such as the Victorian era. In doing so, we can reveal how stereotypes and misconceptions of impoverished people allow a society to become complicit in their suffering by dehumanizing anyone whose financial status does not fit the conjured image of the “real” hardworking citizen. Social problem novels attempt to critique the lack of empathy and the dialogue that stems from it, which portrays poor people as lazy or otherwise undeserving of basic human needs. In a modern age in which affordable healthcare, housing, and food are becoming exclusive commodities reserved for those in the highest tax bracket, perhaps we can examine how a society arrives at the point of thinking that suffering is deserved by looking to Victorian novels. Violence on the individual body, as we have seen in *Mary Barton* and *Shirley*, becomes violence on the social body. In the same way, violence against marginalized communities, including immigrants and the poor, becomes community-wide violence.

Dehumanization of one category of minorities, as is shown in the Victorian social problem novel, will become applicable to all oppressed people, not just the ones regarded as the most unworthy of empathy by a society. A refusal to provide empathy to the oppressed is itself a form of violence that then carries over to create long-lasting violence against the social body. The violent shootings and riots in *Mary Barton* and *Shirley* are shown by their authors as ultimately originating from a culture too intent on villainizing its victims as opposed to holding those in positions of political and social power accountable. The Victorian social problem novel warns that the dehumanization of poor people will not line the pockets of its middle-class readers, meaning that not only should societal misconceptions about the impoverished be challenged, but those in authority who perpetuate those stereotypes should be seen as ineffective leaders who lack the empathy required to successfully tackle social issues.

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