‘Condition of England’ novels sought to engage directly with the contemporary social and political issues with a focus on the illustration of class, gender, and labour relations, as well as on societal turbulence and the growing animosity between the rich and the poor in England. Even a superficial glimpse at the history of the early Victorian writings unveils that many writers shared a particular concern: the social consequences of the Industrial Revolution in England at the beginning of the nineteenth century. ‘Condition of England’ novels helped to raise the collective awareness of the reading public and, in a way, illuminated the directions for both nineteenth century and twentieth century welfare reforms. The novels of the 1840s and ‘50 s, devoted to industrial relations, are, apart from their fictional plots, debate or discourse about the current state of the nation. They are also instruments of social analysis and a platform for reform messages. This paper intends to focus on the fictional representations of the ‘Condition of England’ by the women writers of Victorian Age. Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's Helen Fleetwood, Elizabeth Gaskell's Mary Barton and North and South, and Charlotte Bronte's Shirley are the most worth mentioning works of this genre.

The nineteenth century Britain was the high noon of the social realist novels and major Victorian writers like Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Benjamin Disraeli and Elizabeth Gaskell diagnosed the ‘condition of England’ in their works. Now the term the ‘condition of England’ novels is used to refer a body of narrative fiction, also known as industrial novels, social novels, or social problem novels, published in Victorian England during and after the period of the Hungry Forties, a decade of profound social unrest. The term came into prevalence from the famous ‘condition of England’ question raised by Thomas Carlyle in Chartism (1839), although some of these narratives were published earlier. ‘Condition of England’ novels sought to engage directly with the contemporary social and political issues with a focus on the illustration of class, gender, and labour relations, as well as on societal turbulence and the growing animosity between the rich and the poor in England. Even a superficial glimpse at the history of the early Victorian writings unveils that many writers shared a particular concern: the social consequences of the Industrial Revolution in England at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The industrial novel, which combined narrative interest with protest, was a rejoinder to a particularly murky period in which bank failures and the scarceness of jobs created conditions that many writers saw as dreadful. Victorian ‘Condition-of-England’ novels called both for social reform and reconciliation between the two nations, the rich and the poor. Early Victorian ‘Condition-of-England’ novels seem a storehouse of social principles, an ability to empathize with unbearable social inequalities and injustices. A number of writers were strongly motivated to arouse commiseration for the atmosphere of the emerging working class. Social conscience
was largely based on paternalism, which was a dominant ideology in early Victorian England until it was replaced by benevolence and humanitarianism, which were manifested in the reforms of late nineteenth century. However, early ‘Condition-of-England’ novels tended to exaggerate the degree and range of the social effects of the Industrial Revolution. They overstate the evils they expose by focusing exclusively on extreme cases, sometimes giving the notion that factories were piled high with human limbs wrenched off by machines or ravenous overseers. They tend to sentimentalize the poor, thus treating the working class monolithically. Their significance lies in the fact that they began the process of educating middle- and upper-class novel-readers, many of whom had formerly been quite ignorant of what was going on in the manufacturing areas of Britain. Although extremely weak as imaginative works of fiction, they also prepared the ground for those novelists of the later 1840s and the 1850s — Disraeli, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Kingsley, and Dickens — who dramatically raised the standard of writing of socialist novels. ‘Condition of England’ novels helped to raise the collective awareness of the reading public and, in a way, illuminated the directions for both nineteenth century and twentieth century welfare reforms. The novels of the 1840s and ‘50s, devoted to industrial relations, are, apart from their fictional plots, debate or discourse about the current state of the nation. They are also instruments of social analysis and a platform for reform messages.

The Industrial novels all share some common characteristics: the detailed documentation of the suffering of the poor, the reproduction of working class speech through dialect, criticism of the effects of industrialism, the discussion of contemporary reform movements like Chartism and Utilitarianism and some attempt at a solution to social problems. Frequently the plot is revolved around a sensitive protagonist, usually male, whose moral, intellectual, or emotional development spans the course of the novel and whose romantic attachments are troubled and conflicted. The protagonist is typically searching for a way to express or mitigate the dissatisfaction of the working class as he takes his role as their spokesman. It is generally agreed that the canonical ‘Condition-of-England’ novels include Benjamin Disraeli’s Coningsby and Sybil, Elizabeth Gaskell’s Mary Barton and North and South, Charles Dickens’s Dombey and Son and Hard Times, Charlotte Bronte’s Shirley and Charles Kingsley’s Alton Locke, and Yeast. Apart from these, mention should be made of the contribution of early Victorian female writers, including Frances Trollope, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, and Harriet Martineau, who wrote fictional narratives in order to expose social ills in a developing industrial society.

This paper intends to focus on the fictional representations of the ‘Condition of England’ by the women writers of Victorian Age. Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's Helen Fleetwood, Elizabeth Gaskell's Mary Barton and North and South, and Charlotte Bronte's Shirley are the most worth mentioning works of this genre.

Mary Barton is the first novel by English author Elizabeth Gaskell, published in 1848. The story is set in the English city of Manchester during the 1830s and 1840s and concentrates closely on the mishaps faced by the Victorian lower class. Manchester of the 1840’s exposed the human problems of rapid industrialization as starkly as it embodied the commercial success of manufacture. Carlyle influenced Elizabeth Gaskell to write her first ‘Tale of Manchester Life’, Mary Barton 1848

Mary Barton dramatizes the urban ills of the late 1840s, an era marked by industrial conflict, by strikes and lock-outs, by low wages and enforced unemployment, by growing class consciousness and by Chartist agitation which
reached its climax in the year of the novel’s publication. (Sanders 2008: 417)

The novel focuses on the Bartons and the Wilsons, two working class families. Mary Barton is a girl who has learned at a very early age that life is a struggle when one is poor. It is quite natural that she aspires for an escape from the adversities of poverty to the ease of wealth, though it would mean a fall from grace. Her father, John Barton is a weaver at one of the local mills, and the family is deprived. Mary's mother meets with an untimely death because of the strain resulting from the elopement of her sister, Esther. John is left with his daughter Mary to survive in the hostile world around them, which is not supportive to the working class. Wrecked by the grief over the deaths of his wife and son, Barton tackles depression and begins to involve himself in the Chartist movement connected with the trade unions. John Barton reveals himself to be a great questioner of the distribution of wealth and the relation between the rich and the poor. He gets more and more deeply involved in the workers' union as a way of combating the discrimination and suffering of the poor which he feels himself and also sees around him. Esther plays a significant role in Mary's future. Esther first planted the ideas in Mary's head which led to Mary's early shortcomings. Before Esther abandoned her family for her lover, she asked Mary whether she would not like it if her aunt would take her up and make a lady. The sayings of her mysterious aunt, Esther, had an unacknowledged influence over Mary. She knew she was pretty. So with this consciousness she had early determined that her beauty should make her a lady; the rank to which she firmly believed her lost Aunt Esther had arrived. The young Mary is shallow and concerned with superficial things like physical beauty because it will help her attract a gentleman lover. One can hardly blame Mary for wishing to be a lady. She has had a painful childhood and has only a difficult future to look forward to, so it is natural that she would jump at any chance to have a happy and easy life free from poverty. Mary is not totally blind to the cause that her father has adopted because she suffers too, but rather than work to stop poverty, she dreams of leaving her poor past behind her and becoming part of the masters' class. Mary's father had always been set against her working in the factories as he blamed them for her aunt's fallen character: they can earn so much when work is plenty, that they can maintain themselves any how. Mary takes up work at a dress-maker's and becomes subject to the affections of hard-working Jem Wilson and Harry Carson, son of a wealthy mill owner. Mary hopes to marry Harry Carson and thus to secure a comfortable life for herself and her father. Convincing herself that her father would approve of her dream marriage to Mr. Carson, Mary is anxious to share her anticipated happiness with her father; she would surround him with every comfort she could devise, till he should acknowledge riches to be very pleasant things, and bless his lady-daughter. It is difficult to imagine John Barton approving of such a scheme as he resents the wealth of the masters, and has become a strong member of the workers' union in an attempt to improve the lives of the poor and show the mill-masters, as well as the government, the injustice and inequality that is present between the masters and the workers. But immediately after refusing Jem's offer of marriage she realizes that she truly loves him. She therefore decides to evade Carson and hopes to be able to show her feelings to Jem in the course of time. Jem believes her decision to be final, though this does not change his feelings for her. Meanwhile, Esther returns and subsequently tries to warn John Barton that he must save Mary from becoming like her, a fallen woman. However, she is only pushed away and sent to jail for a month on the charge of drunkenness. Upon her release she talks to Jem with the same purpose. Jem promises that he will
protect Mary and confronts Harry Carson, eventually entering into a fight with him, which is witnessed by a policeman passing by. Not long afterwards, Carson is shot dead, and Jem is arrested on suspicion, his gun having been found at the scene of the crime. Esther decides to investigate the matter further and discovers that the wadding for the gun was a piece of paper on which is written Mary's name. She visits her niece to warn her to save the one she loves, and after she leaves Mary realises that the murderer is not Jem but her father. Now Mary is faced with having to save Jem without giving away her father. With the help of Job Legh, the intelligent grandfather of her blind friend Margaret, Mary travels to Liverpool to find the only person who could provide an alibi for Jem, Will Wilson, Jem's cousin and a sailor, who was with him on the night of the murder. During the trial, Jem learns of Mary's great love for him. In the nick of time Will arrives in court to testify, and Jem is found not guilty. Mary has fallen ill during the trial and is nursed by Mr. Sturgis, an old sailor, and his wife. When she finally returns to Manchester she has to face her father, who is crushed by his remorse. He summons John Carson, Harry's father, to tell him that he is the murderer and explaining that the act was carried out in retaliation to the class inequality. Carson is still set on revenge, but after turning to the Bible he forgives Barton, who dies soon afterwards in Carson's arms. Not long after this Esther comes back to Mary's home, where she, too, dies soon. Jem decides to leave England, where his reputation is damaged and where it would be difficult for him to find a new job. The novel ends with Mary and Jem, their little child and Mrs. Wilson living happily in Canada.

The first section of the novel centers mainly on the comparison between the rich and poor. In a series of set pieces across the opening chapters he depicts paucity in the lifestyles of the Bartons, Wilsons and Davenports compared to the contrasting affluence of the Carson establishment. A key symbol shown in this chapter is the use of five shillings; this amount being the price John Barton receives for pawning most of his possessions, but also the loose change in Henry Carson's pocket. Several times Gaskell attempts to mask her strong beliefs in the novel by disclaiming her knowledge of such matters as economics and politics, but the powerful language she gives to her characters, especially John Barton in the opening chapter, is a clear indication of the author's interest in the class divide. She openly pleads for reducing this divide through increased communication and, as a consequence, understanding between employers and workmen and generally through a more human behaviour based on Christian principles, at the same time presenting her own fears of how the poor will eventually act in retaliation to their oppression. Her novels offer a detailed portrait of the lives of many strata of society, including the very poor, and as such are of interest to social historians as well lovers of literature. John Barton's murder of the young Mr. Carson, Mary's lover, can be partially justified as being good for the morale of the repressed and depressed working men, as well as sending a pointed message at the other uncaring mill-owners. Barton is torn between being a good and honest man, and being a murderer in aid of a just cause: certainly a result of the extreme pressure he feels from the injustice of the industrial class system.

Elizabeth Gaskell’s another novel North and South is noted for the portrayal of an intricate story which encompasses a range of social issues such as the role of women in Victorian Britain, industrialization and its effects on class divisions, as well as the changing landscape of Britain brought on by advancement in trade in urban areas. It contrasts the snobberies, chivalries and artificiality of the country gentry of the South of England with the distinctive energetic anti-gentlemanly world of self-made manufacturers of the North. North and South is recurrently
eulogized for its realism in depicting the strike in Milton which was based on the actual labor conflict in Preston in 1853. This novel scrutinizes the nature of social authority and conformity and provides an astute account of the role of middle class women in nineteenth century society. Authority and obedience. Through the story of Margaret Hale, a southerner who moves from the drawing rooms of London and the exquisite beauty of the New Forest to the grim northern industrial town of Milton, Gaskell skillfully explores issues of class and gender. Margaret's sympathy for the town mill workers conflicts with her growing attraction to the mill owner, John Thornton. Moving from the industrial riots of discontented mill workers through to the unsought passions of a middle-class woman, and from religious crises of conscience to the ethics of naval mutiny, it poses fundamental questions about the nature of social authority and obedience.

When Margaret Hale moves with her father from the comfort of the south of England to the industrial north, she is at first repulsed by what she sees; and then when she discovers the conditions under which the workers are forced to live, she is outraged. Margaret is depressed by the dark industrial surroundings and uncomfortable in her reduced circumstances. Moreover she is disgusted by the attitude of the town’s leading citizen John Thornton. But as time goes on Margaret discovers in her a surprising strain of social activism and becomes concerned about the plight of the mill workers and determined to help improve their lot. That throws her initially into personal and ideological conflict with Thornton, until the two find a middle ground in which respect and love can bloom and grow.

*North and South* is a work which examined the relations between workers and their masters. But it also took into account the broader division between the haves and the have-nots that was already so clearly defined geographically. Gaskell took fairly liberally from her own experiences for aspects of the plot. But her skill lies in how she wove together into a coherent whole the various strands of conflict – north and south, workers and masters, men and women, faith and doubt, and of course Margaret Hale and John Thornton. Elizabeth Gaskell’s novels explore the social divisions of the 19th century with an exuberance that reverberates in the Britain of today when they are widening again.

Gaskell resorts to personal passions in *North and South* to explore deep social divisions. Although born in London, Elizabeth was brought up in England’s north, an area that was the core of the industrial revolution. While many manufacturers, merchants and associated traders enjoyed the considerable riches of this huge shift in the country’s economy, the workers did not; and the literate and literary population was largely unaware of what was suffered by those from whose work they benefited. Elizabeth was not like many of her class. In addition to her own upbringing near Manchester, her father’s experiences in the area and in Scotland would have been passed on to her; and she soon met a man who pioneered the education of the working class, a Unitarian minister, poet and social reformer, William Gaskell. She loved language, collected dialect terms, wrote verses for her husband and started writing short stories; as a result she was allowed to flourish, though within William’s shadow. Throughout Gaskell’s novels, she interspersed themes of social restructuring and enhancement. A contemporary of the great novelist reformer Charles Dickens, Gaskell used her books as her platform. In many ways Gaskell was far ahead of her time as Victorian-era England did not readily discuss themes such as feminism, social reform, and the plight of the working laborer. The heroine in the novel is Margaret Hale, the daughter of a British minister who resigned his position after a theological dissent. The character of Margaret Hale was a self-portrait of Gaskell. One of the main premises
in *North and South* is Margaret Hale’s prejudice against gentlemen in trade—or rather, the lack thereof. To the cultured and sophisticated Helstone resident, the words trade and gentlemen hardly belonged together in the same sentence. The working class existed, but solely for the benefit of others and was hardly deemed as an appropriate acquaintance. The Thornton family, namely John Thornton, ultimately changes Hale’s perception. Another social issue prominent in *North and South* was the working conditions of the lower classes. Cotton was the primary export in the town of Milton. Marlborough Mills, managed by John Thornton, was one of the most successful and had the fairest working conditions, yet Margaret still urged Thornton to make a difference in the circumstances of his employees. Throughout the novel, Gaskell effectively weaves a tale filled with at the time revolutionary new ideas for social reform. The Industrial Revolution was stirring in England, but the mill owners were slow to equate this sweeping change with a need to improve the lives of their slave laborers. The novel also points to the independence of industrial workers, a pride in themselves which survives despite the appalling working and living conditions which they have to endure, which is contrasted to the subservience, acquiescence and superstition of the rural poor.

Charlotte Bronte’s *Shirley* is grand romance against an industrial backdrop. It is set in Yorkshire in the period 1811–1812, during the industrial depression resulting from the Napoleonic Wars and the War of 1812. The back ground of the novel is the Luddite uprisings in the Yorkshire textile industry. In the novel, Charlotte Bronte both refracted some of Carlyle’s concerns raised in *Signs of the Times* and *Chartism* as well as Disraeli’s anxiety about the two nations divide and also blended them with the woman Question. The novel has a complex plot: an unromantic tale with two interpolated social commentaries: on the history of the Luddite riots in the cloth-making district of Yorkshire, and on the struggle for female independence from male dominance in patriarchal society. *Shirley*, which differs considerably from *Jane Eyre*, declares its affinity with Benjamin Disraeli’s *Sibyl* and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* and *North and South*. The novel contains an explicit social discourse about the Condition of England aimed at highlighting the class and gender divide and its possible social consequences. In early 1812, Luddism spread to Yorkshire, where croppers, a small and highly skilled group of cloth finishers, turned their anger on the new shearing frame that they feared would put them out of work. Soon Parliament passed the Frame Breaking Act which made machine-breaking a capital offence. Machine breaking was burning issue during that period is discernible from the following passage.

In human interest, nothing in the period equals the letters and journals of Byron, who mingles wit with description, and a gay and indiscreet exposure of himself to his friends, with a reckless commentary on life and on his own times. His most serious piece of prose is to be found in the speech he made in the House of Lords, his only speech, when he spoke against the death penalty for the workers who, as an action of extreme industrial protest, had been engaged in machine breaking. (Evans 1940: 323)

Charlotte Bronte sympathizes with workers who are most concerned with the loss of employment. They do not want to destroy machines because of ignorance but because they believe that factory owners will constantly reduce the number of employees thanks to the introduction of labour-saving machinery.
Shirley begins as Robert Moore, a Yorkshire mill operator, awaits a shipment of machinery, which arrives in pieces, smashed by angry workers protesting the loss of jobs due to mechanization. Although he is determined to become successful in order to restore his family's honor and fortune, Robert's business difficulties continue, due in part to the continuing labor unrest, but even more so to the Napoleonic Wars and the accompanying Orders in Council which forbid British merchants from trading in American markets. Robert is unmoved by the plight of workers whose jobs are being eliminated. He is so completely focused on profits that he rejects the idea of marriage to his distant kinswoman, the penniless Caroline Helstone, in favor of a proposal to Shirley, a rich heiress. Shirley Keeldar, a strong independent woman who relishes her role as land owner and mill owner, rejects Robert's proposal. Caroline, poor but respectable, has no other prospects for either marriage or employment, since all professions except that of governess are closed to women. Caroline suffers through what she imagines to be the courtship of her beloved Robert and her dearest friend. The daughter of an absent mother and an abusive father, Caroline has found refuge, such as it is, with her clergyman uncle, who ignores her. After Robert's rejection, Caroline retreats to this loveless home and begins to waste away until Shirley restores her to health by reuniting Caroline with her long-lost mother, Mrs. Pryor. Shirley, meanwhile, is in love with Robert's brother Louis, a poor tutor, but her pride prevents her from expressing those feelings. Louis, in turn, is similarly restrained from declaring his love for her by pride and fear of rejection by a woman whose means are considerably greater than his own. Events on the industrial front are brought to a head when Robert is shot by a member of the opposing faction. During his recovery, he learns what it is like to be at the mercy of another, to be totally dependent—the very status of his workers in relationship to Robert himself. This role reversal, along with the end of the war and the revocation of the Orders in Council, both of which alleviate Robert's financial difficulties, bring about enormous changes in the man. By the novel's end, Robert is reunited with Caroline and is eager to provide work for all the poor and hungry who want it. The communication problems between Shirley and Louis are finally overcome, and the headstrong Shirley submits to Louis as her master. The novel ends with a double wedding.

Bronte did not witness the Luddite riots, although she had some first-hand accounts of them from her father, who sometimes acted on behalf of the authorities during the riots. Like Carlyle and Gaskell, Charlotte Bronte is concerned with the plight of the industrial workers. She is aware that the revolt against the unemployment caused by the introduction of machines during the early phase of the Industrial Revolution might lead to major social upheavals. However, what Bronte eventually offers is a simplified solution to remedy the antagonism between masters and workers. Her solution is based on an idealized co-operation and co-existence between benevolent masters and loyal workers. The novel speaks for the working class but still cannot let them speak for themselves. They remain what Carlyle in Chartism (1839) called ‘that great dumb toiling class which cannot speak’. The Woman Question parallels the ‘condition-of-England’ Question in the novel. The eponymous character, Shirley Keeldar, is one of the first independent and strong-willed heroines in English literature, who anticipates the New Woman at the end of the Victorian era. Shirley’s foil, Caroline Helstone, represents a conventional Victorian female: she is shy, submissive and self-repressed. Both women struggle, each in their own way, to find happiness and fulfillment in life, but the epilogue of the novel demonstrates that options available to women were very limited. They both fail to find self-fulfillment outside
conventional marriage. Bronte proposes in *Shirley* paternalism as a solution to both industrial disputes and the Woman Question. Paternalism seems to have been advocated by Victorian writers as an alternative to a number of social ills. Victorian paternalism was a consequence of the laissez-faire doctrine. It offered an alternative to free-market economy by defining the relationship between employers and employees based on humane principles. Paternalism propagated the vision of an industrial society as a big hierarchical family with benevolent employers and dependent employees who revived the old master-servant relationship. The plight of women dependent on men for their survival is similar to the plight of workers dependent on the mill owners for theirs. Although the novel's treatment of its social and political theme is ambiguous, on the one hand sympathizing with the workers, while on the other fiercely defending the property rights of the owners, in the end, it seems to deplore inequality and exploitation for both women and workers.

Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna is a woman with a social conscience and living at a time of great social change and progress, she championed the cause of working class. Throughout her life, Charlotte Elizabeth was concerned with the plight of English factory workers and evangelical religion. Her *The Wrongs of Woman* describes the abominable living and working conditions of female laborers in London. It reveals the working conditions outside of factories and helped gather support for passage of the Factory Acts of 1844, 1847, and 1848 Her Pre-1842 industrial novels such as *Helen Fleetwood* (1839-41) presented powerfully detailed descriptions of factory girls' lives. She brought much needed attention to the plight of English factory workers in the 1840's through her editorship of The Christian Lady's Magazine from 1834 until her death.

Harriet Martineau, pioneering feminist and radical authority on economics, politics, and society, popularized the ideas of Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, David Ricardo, James Mill, Joseph Priestley, and Jeremy Bentham as well as those of Auguste Comte. Carlyle had described her as ‘swathed like a mummy in Socinian and Political Economy formulas’. She was the great contemporary of Dickens and profoundly influenced him. Dickens was inspired to write *Oliver Twist* by her factual, emphatically polemic sequence of tales, *Poor Law and Paupers Illustrated*. Her refined social conscience and convinced Utilitarian philosophy is clearly perceptible from her collection of twenty three short stories, *Illustrations of political economy* 1832-34. Her story ‘A Manchester Strike’ of 1832 from *Illustrations of Political Economy* prefigures some of the ideas in Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*. She made a reputation as a social novelist. She was an important advocate of political reforms in England and the anti-slavery movement.

Frances Trollope believed that novels should deal with important social issues. Her novel, *Jonathan Jefferson Whitlaw*, the first anti-slavery novel, influenced Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Her another work *The Vicar of Wrexhill* tackled the subject of church corruption. In 1839 Trollope became involved in the campaign against the employment of children in factories. After visiting several factories in Manchester and Bradford, Trollope wrote *Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy* the first industrial novel to be published in Britain. Francis Trollope was severely criticized for writing about such vulgar and low-bred people.

Change was slow to reach England, but no one can refute the tireless efforts of authors such as Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Bronte and other women novelists to arouse public sympathy and create a favorable background for a healthy change in the lives and working
conditions of the labor force. ‘Condition of England’ novelists proved that literature is not created in a historical vacuum but can offer analysis and synthesis of social reality. For a present-day student of the Victorian era, the value of ‘Condition-of-England’ novels lies primarily not in their fictional plots, social analyses, and recommended resolutions but primarily in first-hand exhaustive observations of industrialism, urbanism, class, and gender conflicts.

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