

GENERIC DUALISM IN THOMAS MARTIN WHEELER'S SUNSHINE AND SHADOW

Dr. Vijaya Khatri*

ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to present Thomas Martin Wheeler's Chartist novel 'Sunshine and Shadow: A Tale of the 19th Century' as a literary work of two genres - history as well as fiction. The novel's subtitle 'A tale of the 19th century' bespeaks its generic duality. The work exposes the events corresponding to the 19th century Chartist Movement which was a working-class male suffrage movement for political reform in Britain. It was kindled by the conflicts between capitalists and working-class during Industrial Revolution in Victorian England. The work comes under the genre of fiction as well since it is a novel with invented characters, plot and incidents. Besides being fictive, the story maintains empirical historical accuracy and becomes an expression of the author's perception of social reality depicting wretched social, political and economic conditions of the working-class people of 19th century England. The central character of the novel acts as a mouthpiece for the distressed laborers of the time, afflicted by poverty, brutality, hunger and injustice. These workmen performed industrial labor for the capitalists who used to exploit them. The protagonist undergoes many ups and downs in his life like losing parents in early childhood, tortured by his reckless uncle, learning the skill of printing, suffering from unemployment and hunger, indulging in Chartist movement against government, fleeing from the government's attack, falling in semi-adulterous love with his friend's sister, losing the beloved, resuming Chartist activities, marrying a female supporter of the movement, getting afflicted by unemployment and poverty, and finally going into exile and leaving his family behind. The novel conveys Karl Marx's conviction that the liberation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself, which can be politically and economically strong only through its own conscious efforts and not through the sympathy or philanthropy of the aristocratic or middle classes.

Keywords: *Generic Dualism, Chartism, 19th Century Working Class, Capitalist, Proletariat, Industrial Revolution, Male Suffrage, Political Reform, Victorian England.*

Introduction

"The emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class, who will gain economic and political power only through their own conscious agency and not through upper or middle class benevolence."

---Thomas Martin Wheeler

Being a responsible part of society, it becomes indispensable for us to contemplate and criticize social injustice especially when it is against the building blocks of society viz. the working class which creates wealth of a society without owning any part of it.

Working class, also known as 'proletariat' is that class of individuals which sells its manual labor for wages and does not possess the means of production. They physically grow food, construct bridges, nurse children, make furniture and weave clothes but do not own land, property or factories. Some of them are awfully poor and homeless.

* Assistant Professor (English), vijayamkhatri@gmail.com

Many litterateurs, moved by the miserable circumstances of the proletariat, have penned noteworthy literary works on their lives to promote social and economic reform and political revolution among them. The literature which depicts the life of the poor working-class people in 19th century England is termed as Chartist Literature. 'Chartist Movement' or 'Chartism' flourished in England from 1837 to 1854 with the commitment to improve the lives of working-class people and to achieve democratic political reforms. Chartism was a powerful and influential response by the lower-middle and upper-working classes to the industrial revolution and the growth of the capitalist middle class. In addition to its political inclination, Chartism was also a significant literary movement. Many Chartist leaders achieved success as Chartist writers, and the literature produced by them were highly acclaimed. These works traced the plight of the working classes of 19th England highlighting oppression, female and child labor, cruelty, exploitation, subjugation, humiliation, low wages and horrible conditions of laborers. They portrayed the miserable conditions of the working class in the climax of the industrial revolution, effectively drawing the attention of the reader to the wretchedness of the poor laborers, and appealing them for empathy, understanding for the poor laborers. One such widely read and applauded chartist novel was Thomas Martin Wheeler's 'Sunshine and Shadow' which was serialized in the weekly Chartist newspaper 'Northern Star' between 31 March 1849 and 5 January 1850.

Thomas Martin Wheeler was born in 1811 in a merchant family. He moved to London as a schoolteacher in the late 1830s. Moved by the plight of the afflicted underprivileged working class people in Victorian England, he joined the Chartist Movement in 1839 and became actively involved in it. In 1839 he became the secretary of the London Chartists. In December 1842, he was a delegate of the London Chartists to the Union Congress for Full Suffrage in Birmingham. In September 1843, he was elected as a member of the executive committee of the National Charter Association. Later, Wheeler became treasurer of the association and resigned in 1846 as its secretary. During 1849-1850 he wrote a semi-autobiographical Chartist novel 'Sunshine and Shadow' serialized in the Northern Star. In 1852, he wrote another novel 'A Light in the Gloom'.

The present article analyzes Wheeler's best known and most discussed Chartist novel 'Sunshine and Shadow' (1849-50) to demonstrate generic dualism in it i.e. to show that the novel is both a history and a fiction. The novel is a semi-autobiographical work that portrays the highs and lows of the Chartist movement that emerged in 1836 and was at its peak between 1838 and 1848. Apart from being a working-class bildungsroman, it also discusses political demonstrations and miserable domestic life of the working-class. The novel was written as a plea for political rights, economic development and social reform of the contemporary downtrodden laboring class. The novel plots the highs and lows of the Chartist movement. It truthfully depicts the contemporary tumults and class conflicts triggered by the Industrial Revolution, along with the trials and tribulations of the laboring class which is subjugated by the hypocritical middle class. Wheeler had written the novel with a conscious thirst to use fiction as a medium for debating the controversial social, industrial and political issues related to proletariat. The endeavor was intended to contribute in deciding the future path of the workers' movement. The novel draws attention of the literary scholars by its form and interests, plot, devices, and authorial choices. The novel is not simply a reconsideration or look-back of a dead movement, but is a fictive interpretation of the history to nurture and promote a living movement that must look for new theories and methods of organizing for independence and centralized leadership of the working-class. Through the novel, Wheeler makes attempts to balance the demands of a fiction with political theory and history. From this perspective, his novel is truly unique and radical, and from this it derives its liveliness and significance.

Ian Haywood (2017) in his book 'Chartist Fiction' mentions the significance of the major Chartist novel 'Sunshine and Shadow' (1849-50). He says: Thomas Martin Wheeler's novel Sunshine and Shadow is the only serialized novel to have been published in the Northern Star. It brings together fictional biography and historical account of events to form the first truly working-class novel.

"The love of liberty in name alone, without the careful application of its values, is vain and deceitful."

--Thomas Martin Wheeler, Sunshine and Shadow

'Sunshine and Shadow' as a Fiction

Thomas Martin Wheeler's semi-autobiographical Chartist novel 'Sunshine and Shadow' has a well structured plot narrating the lives of two childhood friends Arthur Morton and Walter North. Walter North becomes heir to his father's business and acquires great wealth by callously chasing his commercial interests. Being rich, he marries an earl's grand-daughter and eventually gains self-identify and fame in the society. On the other hand, the orphaned Arthur Morton, being property-less, is hand-to-mouth. To earn his livelihood, he learns the skill of printing as an apprentice. His experiences as a

working man, combined with his sublime ideals and noble character make him devote himself to Chartist Movement. To escape the government's attack on the movement in 1839-40, he sails for the United States, but undergoes a shipwreck. He is rescued by the boat that is taking his childhood friend's sister Julia North unwillingly to the West Indies, where she is to join her to-be husband - the governor of West Indian island –with whom she has been engaged forcefully under the influence of her brother. Arthur is happily surprised to see Julia. Both get engaged in a mutual discourse on misfortune of the working-class labourers and tyranny of the middle class capitalists. Julia, despite being a bourgeois, sighs and acknowledges Arthur's complaints against the middle-class, as she herself has been oppressed by her corrupt marriage scheme. She sympathizes with the politics of Chartism because she too has undergone injustice (in form of legalized prostitution) as the hypocrisy of bourgeoisie. Despite her engagement, both fall in love with each other. But, unable to cope with the tropical climate, Julia dies. Arthur returns to Britain, where he resumes his Chartist activities and marries a young lady of his own class who is an active female supporter of the Chartist movement. Their initial marital happiness is ruined by a long period of unemployment and consequent poverty. Arthur engages in a semi-adulterous relationship, and as a consequence, later undergoes a miserable period in which he starts drinking, and even robs a man on the street. Defeated and degraded in his own and others' eyes, Arthur loses self-respect. His desperate concern for his ailing wife embarrasses him, and he loses all self respect.

When his circumstances improve, advocating Chartism and justifying working-class politics, he makes distance from his wife and home, and dedicates himself more to politics than to personal relations. In the end, Arthur, having been involved in the revolutionary events of 1848, has to go to exile and leave his family behind.

Through Arthur's character Wheeler makes a point about literary conventions and moral philosophy that 'good is not always rewarded, nor evil punished; and far from being a set of fixed, abstract principles, ethical standards and behaviours are heavily determined by material circumstances'.

'Sunshine and Shadow' as a Historical Account

The Great Reform Act which was passed in 1832 in Britain introduced major changes to the electoral system. It enfranchised (gave the voting right to) property owning middle-classes, small landowners, tenant farmers, shopkeepers, householders paying high yearly rent, and some middle-class lodgers, while disenfranchising the property-less working-class, laborers, self-employed artisans, and women. The Act refused to adopt universal suffrage. Individuals were required to own property worth at least £200 in order to vote. The Reform Act disenfranchised the proletariat i.e. the property-less wage-earning working class. This split the alliance between the working class and the middle class, giving rise to the Chartist Movement.

Chartism emerged in response to difficult economic circumstances and numerous restrictions and laws which benefited the middle and upper classes at the expense of working-class people. The movement of Chartism was the world's first and most dramatic working-class movement. It was intended for political, economic and social reform in Britain and demanded universal adult male suffrage. It emerged in 1836 and was most active between 1838 and 1848. The aim of the Chartists was to gain political rights and authority for the working classes. It was possibly the first mass working class movement in the world. Support for Chartism reached its peak at times of economic crises and hunger. There were riots due to unemployment and starvation. Although the Chartist movement ended by the mid 1850s without achieving its aims, but the fear of civil unrest remained.

The movement took its name from the People's Charter of 1838, which laid down six main objectives, most important of which being universal suffrage for all men over the age of 21. Though the six points of the Charter dealt specifically with voting and electoral reform, Chartism came to encompass much broader social, political, economic and cultural goals, and left an important legacy for the development of socialist/Chartist literature. Many revolutionary writings were published to reflect the struggle of the British proletariat in the revolutionary-democratic stage of the working-class movement. These literary works, reflecting all the peculiarities of the Chartist ideology, appeared in the Chartist newspapers and periodicals, and helped to politicize and mobilize the working classes. The literature that arose from the movement was committed to improving the lives of working-class people and achieving democratic political reforms, and became popular as Chartist Literature. The early Chartist literature was mainly journalistic. It was composed of appeal to the people by the founders and leaders of Chartism, along with the outlines of conditions among the workers, chartist articles, and reports of lectures, propaganda tours, and meetings.

'Sunshine and Shadow' serialized in the Northern Star paper during 1849-50 presented the 19th century proletarian class-conflicts, and was characterized as a social realist work as well as a working-class fiction rendering historical facts regarding Chartism. It truthfully represents the contemporary events and conditions of working class during Industrial Revolution, and depicts the historical facts without embellishment or extravagant exaggeration. Its protagonist Arthur Morton being a member of working-class suffers the tragedies of enslavement, oppression by the employer, scarcity, unemployment, poverty, discrimination, maltreatment, exploitation and starvation. To stand with the poor and oppressed workers of his class, Arthur devotes himself to Chartist activities. The novel highlights the hypocrisy and ostentation of the 19th century middle class society which subjugated the proletariat to fulfill its self-interest. The novel faithfully portrays the tyranny of capitalists on the working-class.

'The interest of the worker is to sell his labor at the most lucrative rate, whereas the interest of the capitalist is to minimize it to the point of starvation.'

–Sunshine and Shadow

Generic Dualism of 'Sunshine and Shadow': The Novel as a Fiction and History

Unlike fictional interpretation of industrial Britain by Charles Kingsley, Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell, the novel 'Sunshine and Shadow' written by Thomas Martin Wheeler does not skim over the predicaments faced by the unprivileged employed classes of England. The majority of the literary works of that period present the contemporary plighted condition of the labor class superficially with an idealistic or unrealistic denouement by offering the redemption of heaven, all-conquering goodwill, emigration, or sudden revelation of inherited fortune or aristocratic birth. Such denouements deceive the terrible reality of the working-class society, and thus block the prospects of significant change for betterment. They prevaricate and distract the readers' focus from the central debates faced by the characters. This holds the readers from the broody laborers portrayed by the novels, thereby preventing a serious deliberation on the problems faced the crusades in which they participate. The novel 'Sunshine and Shadow' deals directly with the debates and issues that occupy the mind of its worker protagonist. Its perspective is optimistic regarding the effectiveness of the collective activity of the workers, investigating diverse conflicts and approach of managing hopefully and not affrightedly. The novel does not consider the revolutionary change of 1840s as impossible and imprudent, and hence there is a note of melancholy in the depiction of the collapse of the revolution.

That Wheeler was concerned with the relation between fiction and history is evident from the very beginning of his novel, not only in his dedication but also-perhaps ironically-in the poetic epigraphs to each of his first two chapters. The apparently opposite epigraphs carefully balance fact and fancy, truth and imagination, and quite effectively introduce the twin concerns of Sunshine and Shadow. The novel declares its historic-fictional double vision from the beginning. Wheeler traces the class-struggles and history of the 19th century Chartist movement through the ups and downs of a fictional orphaned working-class character. This character, who is the protagonist of the novel, looks forward to reconstitution of the 19th century British society; and to actualize his thoughts, he proceeds from those grounds to a struggle for the organizational machinery indispensable to achieve it.

Wheeler has so consciously and deliberately interpreted history through his novel 'Sunshine and Shadow' that it is difficult to disentangle the accounts of historians from the novel's account of Chartist history. The narrator tells us that much of the novel's plot is formed from history which is full of prejudice and disparage. Wheeler condemns those novelists who neglect working-class characters because they do not know any of the actors in these historic struggles. By contrast, the aim of this novel of explicit generic dualism is to combine a history of Chartism, with the details of a story specifically by depicting a working-class hero in a complex and interesting way.

Conclusion

Wheeler's semi-autobiographical Chartist novel 'Sunshine and Shadow' is not just history, but a fictionalized history, acknowledging the unique potential of creative expression to win sympathy, stir the imagination, stimulate creativity, and encourage action. Wheeler openly acknowledges his deliberate decision to make the history of Chartism the topic of his novel. Wheeler defends his hybrid work by saying: "We might have made our tale more interesting to many, by drawing more largely from the regions of romance. . . We might have made it more piquant, by delineating the portraits of the active minds in the movement, but the true subject and hero of the book is Chartist history, not a romance or a hagiography or an expose".

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