

Chartism for John
Barton: a lesson or a
pure detriment?



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

John Barton, father of Mary Barton, became a member of the Chartist movement after he was laid off from his original place of work when his master had failed. While he was forced to look for other work, his son got ill with the scarlet fever. With no food or money to acquire medicine, his beloved son passed away. In lieu of the death of his son, John wanted to seek revenge against the employers who he believed caused it, and joined the Chartist movement as a result. Later on in the book, John goes to deliver the Chartist petition, dubbed the "People's Charter" to the Parliament for approval. Unfortunately, the Parliament rejected the petition. While the petition was not received well by Parliament, the rejection of the Chartist petition served to be a valuable lesson. This Chartist lesson is that the proletariat of England and the aristocracy should not have attempted to work together, as the rich did not care for the working man and their respective conditions or needs. In this piece, I will use historical evidence to support my claim, then I will then apply that evidence to a close reading of the novel regarding John Barton's respective situation to further prove that the bourgeoisie simply do not concern themselves with the needs of the proletariat.

In the 1830s and 1840s, it was extremely hard to be a working man in England, as the workers in England were horribly exploited. The book *Chartism* explains that one factory owner named Sir Robert Peel would whip his workers who were aged from five to seven years old. *Chartism* also explains that in the year 1809, manufacturers that used cotton spinner machines were exploiting their workers. This was because the workers were routinely getting crushed by the machines trying to spin the cotton for their

masters. Along with these incidents, the working order at the time was not helpful. The order included atrocities like: the youngest workers were as young as three years old, working days were about sixteen to eighteen hours, and wages were at 9 shillings a week. According to The Proceedings of Old Bailey, two shillings are currently worth a quarter of one penny. This cruel working order ensued mass sickness and mortality that broke up families. Furthermore, the commerce at the time was so fluctious that the working man was constantly uncertain if he would keep his job. So, what was the frustrated, sick, and tired working man to do?

The Chartist movement aimed to solve this very problem. Chartism was popular in the United Kingdom in the 1830s and 1840s, and the movement was meant to represent the working man. The movement aimed to speak out against the discontents of the working man and the “ injustices of the new industrial and political order in Britain” (Britannica, Par. 1). Another book titled From Chartism to Labourism defined the Chartist movement as “ the working class made the first attempt to establish a party of its own for the conquest of political power” (Rothstein, 7). People that joined the Chartist movement understood a couple of key aspects, according to Chartism: Firstly, Until the working man’s needs are fulfilled, he will constantly be angry and discontent will follow suit. His needs were “ Food, shelter, due guidance, in return for his labour...” (Carlyle, 89). Secondly, the working man had feelings, and his tiredness, well-being, and prosperity should be considered by Parliament as well. By speaking up about these injustices and exploitations mentioned in the last paragraph and the discontent of the

working man, the movement also hoped to achieve Parliamentary reform. In fact, Chartists petitioned many times to Parliament.

In fact, according to Chartism, the cotton spinner injustice of 1809 was petitioned by the common working man. Because of this and countless other injustices, they petitioned to Parliament with the demand that there be less apprentices, or working men, in factories. This demand made sense because, as mentioned, they were overworked, underpaid, and horribly exploited. Furthermore, from an ethical perspective, at least don't have the children work if they don't need to. To this demand, the Parliament came to the verdict that they could not pass an act that constrains the freedom of the industry, which meant Sir Robert Peel could keep whipping his workers, or could not pass an act that allows the individual worker to dispose the time he should be working to his own interests, like taking care of their sick families. Additionally, Parliament also explained that if they were to pass an such an act, it would contradict the prosperity of the community -meaning it would hinder the profits the community collectively makes-, and it would contribute to the unemployment issue. However, if the manufacturers and the workers' masters would provide them with better working conditions, this unemployment would not be occurring in the first place. This and countless other petitions were shot down by the Parliament, which showed " a child-like faith in the goodwill and omnipotence of the State." (Carlyle, 13). The Parliament even had the audacity to advise workers to wait for better times and look for work elsewhere. The unfortunate reality was that the State was more focused on capitalism than the well being of the workers and that Parliament was on the aristocrat's side, not the working man's side.

While these petitions failed, the Chartist movement tried to push their strongest, most coherent effort to the Parliament in 1839: their very own “People’s Charter”.

The goal of the “People’s Charter” according to Chartism was meant to create a people-oriented government rather than an aristocratic one and was meant to transform the social and economic system for the better. When presented to the House of Commons on June 1839, the Charter had over 1.25 million signatures. The Charter was based off of six main principles. According to the United Kingdom Parliament website, these six principles were: All men have the right to vote (universal manhood suffrage), voting should be by secret ballot, Parliamentary elections should happen every year rather than once every 5 years, constituencies should be of equal size, Members of Parliament should be paid, and the idea to abolish property requirement for becoming a Member of Parliament. However, government was so over the Chartist movement that they arrested the speakers of the Chartist groups, and the police busted into the working man’s homes. They forbade the formation of secret groups, and martial law was promptly proclaimed in London. This caused the people to riot, but the police quickly shut these riots down. Like every other petition of the working man, the “People’s Charter” was rejected. The rejection came by a huge majority which took place after these riots and arrests. The rejection of the Charter proved that the working man could not ally himself with the aristocrats, and that they are a nation divided. This was how John Barton felt after he witnessed the rejection of the Charter in Mary Barton.

Chapter Nine of *Mary Barton* began with the return of John Barton. While Mary was extremely happy to see her father and greeted him cheerfully, the fatigued and wet John sat down by the fire to dry off. She tried to cheer her father up, but to no avail. She then heard the political news of that day: the “People’s Charter” was rejected in London, and “that Parliament had refused to listen to the working men...” (Gaskell, 143). Mary understood her father’s grief and sadness, and pressed his hand to show support. An hour later, John spoke to Mary about his trip to London. While in the Parliamentary house, he explained that for breakfast there were “mutton kidneys, and sausages, and broiled ham, and fried beef and onions;”, and it was “more like a dinner nor a breakfast” (Gaskell, 145). John also noted how fancy London was, specifically how nice the carriages were outside the Queen’s house and the people riding them. He explained that “Some o’ the gentlemen as couldn’t get inside (the carriages) hung on behind, wi’ nosegays to smell at, and sticks to keep off folk as might splash their silk stockings” (Gaskell, 146). While his trip to London was swell aside from the rejection of the Charter, his home life was not as swell.

John Barton’s early life was not the easiest. His parents had suffered in the poverty and his mother died from “absolute want of the necessaries of life” (Gaskell, 55). Despite this, John was a good worker with a confident attitude and believed he could supply his wants and needs if he worked hard enough. However, as the introduction states, this was not the case. When his master Mr. Hunter had failed, he only had a few shillings to his name, he went from factory to factory looking for work. Unfortunately, he was turned down at every factory. During that time, his son “...the apple of his eye, the cynosure

of his strong power of love, fell ill of the scarlet fever" (Gaskell, 56). Doctors explained to Barton that the only way he would survive is with proper nourishment. "Mocking words!" (Gaskell, 56) the novel exclaims, as there was no food in the house that would come close to a meal. John also grew hungry, but was more consumed with the anxiety he had for his son. He went into town and passed by a shop displaying many delectables, such as "haunches of venison, Stilton cheese, moulds of jelly - all appetising sights to the common passer-by" (Gaskell, 56). As he is admiring the food, Mrs. Hunter, exited the shop and went into her carriage followed by the shopkeeper carrying enough food for a party. When John returned home, he found his son dead, "to see his boy only a corpse" (Gaskell, 56).

Clearly, there are many contrasts between the aristocrats and the working man. The rich feast daily and ride in nice carriages wearing beautiful silk, while John the working man and his fellow Chartists lived in a constant state of hunger, had very little worth to their name, and could arrive home to a dead family member at a moment's notice. This comparison was portrayed while John was in front of the shop displaying the delicacies. While John was staring at the food he was too poor to have, the wife of the master that failed him walked out with enough food for a party. Furthermore when the working men -who live in these basically unlivable conditions and constantly are at the will of their ruthless masters- tried to ask the Parliament to make their lives and working conditions better, they are turned down. After examining the historical evidence and John Barton's strife, it is still clear that the Chartist lesson, as Chartism eloquently states, is "that the leaders of the proletariat cannot with impunity ally themselves with the bourgeoisie, and

that the only guarantee of success lies in keeping live contact with the masses." (Carlyle, 65). This means, as stated before, that the aristocracy and masters do not care for the working man or their needs and conditions. The lesson also implies that Parliament was on the side of the rich, and that their main focus was on capitalism rather than the well being of those who contributed to said capitalism.

John Barton lost his son, other workers were killed by the cotton machine spinners, and the masses starve while the bourgeoisie enjoyed their mutton, ornate clothing, and their health. When reading Mary Barton, it is important to note this distinction between social classes and understand how detrimental the divide is for the Bartons and their companions. This divide kept the Bartons and their fellow working men hungry and on the verge of death each day. The Chartist lesson was a hard one to learn, and unfortunately the workers who had to learn it, including John Barton, suffered for years and decades to come, even though all they wanted was basic human necessities and some food on the table. At the very least wanted to keep their beloved children alive to succeed them, but even that was a stretch to ask for. To compare John's strife to the real world, it is important to speak out against manufacturing injustices when they occur, like sweatshops for example. Find ways to help these people now so that they do not suffer as the many families in England did back then.

Works Cited

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Chartism." Encyclopædia

Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 8 Feb. 2018, www.britannica.com/event/Chartism-British-history.

Carlyle, Thomas. "Chartism." Google <https://assignbuster.com/chartism-for-john-barton-a-lesson-or-a-pure-detriment/>

Books, books. google. com/books? hl= en&lr=&id=-78KAQAAMAAJ&oi=fnd&pg= PA1&dq= chartism&ots= iXHFRX1loB&sig=

uvMq8ururb1qnrjMAtWoZhuzou4#v= onepage&q= chartism&f= false.

Rothstein, Th. " From Chartism to Labourism." GIPE, Dhananjayano Gsdgil

Library, dspace. gipe. ac. in/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10973/22195/GIPE-

008465. pdf? sequence= 3." The Proceedings of the Old Bailey." Crime and

Justice - Trial Procedures - Central Criminal Court, www. oldbaileyonline.

org/static/Coinage. jsp." Chartists." Www. parliament. uk, UK Parliament,

www. parliament.

uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/chartists/

overview/chartistmovement/.