Elizabeth Gaskell

Introduction

Elizabeth Gaskell spread the message for the need for better understanding between employers and workers, and between the highly-regarded and the outcasts, through her writing and her active humanitarian role in society. She also challenged the traditional roles of women in society in many of her novels, including *North and South*, *Wives and Daughters*, and *Mary Barton*, but especially through her biography of fellow author *Charlotte Bronte*, who wrote the famous novel entitled *Jane Eyre*. Her writing is timeless, seeing that much of her work is still being published, read, and admired some hundred years later. She is undoubtedly one of the great writers of all time.

North and South was originally published in 1855 in segments as a part of a weekly magazine edited by Charles Dickens. Elizabeth Gaskell addresses a number of critical political and social issues stemming from the protagonist Margaret Hale’s relocation from Southern to Northern England. Among the differences in the two areas, Margaret is exposed to an entirely new social and class structure. She becomes involved with Mr. John Thornton and begins to challenge the previously assumed role of women in society. This social novel highlights the inadequacies of the industrial North from the perspective of a Southern woman. It also attempts to show the change in the significance of religion along with a justification for secrecy and honesty.

Information gathered from the Gaskell Society. For more, check out our Resources and Links.

Study Questions

1. What are some of the immediate differences that Margaret notices between the North and South after moving?
2. How are the relationships different between master and servant in both the Northern and Southern cultures?
3. What is the effect of greed on the people who participate in the industrial revolution of the Northern cities?
4. How does Margaret come into conflict with Mr. John Thornton and how does that make a statement about women’s rights?
5. What is the importance of the labor union in the novel and how does it develop over time?
6. What does it say about religion in the Victorian Era that Mr. Richard Hale left the Church of England because of doubts of faith?
7. How does Margaret ultimately gain control over Mr. Thornton and how does that alter the expected gender roles of the time?
8. How is masculinity defined and redefined throughout the story?
9. In what ways do people measure social class in both the North and South?
10. What causes the move from an economy of goods and services to one of building surplus and capital?

In Depth Character Analysis

**Miss Margaret Hale:**

Considered to be the protagonist. She is also the daughter of Mr. Richard Hale and Mrs. Maria Hale, and sister of Frederick. “Margaret was more like him than her mother. Sometimes people wondered that parents so handsome should have a daughter who was so far from regularly beautiful; not beautiful at all, was occasionally said” (17, Ch. 2, Vol. 1). She has her father’s “large, soft eyes” (16, Ch. 2, Vol. 1), which exemplify her caring, good nature. For example, during the riot, Margaret notices individual faces in the crowd rather than the crowd as a large mass (177, Ch. 22, Vol. 1). She wants to understand the workers and ultimately bridge the gap between the workers and the masters, which is her main purpose in *North and South*.

**Mr. John Thornton**

Owner of a mill in Milton, which is the industrial town the Hales move to from the countryside (Helstone). Throughout most of *North and South*, Mr. John Thornton struggles with his admiration for Margaret Hale, and in the following excerpt he thinks to himself what she must think of him: “...he told himself he was-- a great rough fellow, with not a grace or refinement about him” (63, Ch. 7, Vol. 1). This could be interpreted as he does not think of himself as a gentleman, but instead a man. It isn’t that he is necessarily improper, but that he is self-made and has worked hard to get where he is, which becomes clear throughout *North and South*. Also, he is a student and friend of Mr. Hale’s, which builds more tension between Margaret and him.

**Nicholas Higgins:**
Representative of the mill worker. Margaret Hale becomes friends with him and his daughter, Bessy. He also has another daughter named Mary. Nicholas truly helps Margaret understand the worker's perspective. A good example of this is when Nicholas explains what a strike is to Margaret, which is in chapter 17, Vol. 1. Not only does he explain a strike, but the difference between the North and South, which is on page 133 of chapter 17, Vol. 1.

Mrs. Thornton:
Mr. John Thornton’s mother. She is very protective over her son, and does not like Margaret interfering. After Margaret has denied Mr. Thornton’s proposal, Mrs. Thornton lets Margaret know the following: “You do not know my son. You are not worthy to know him” (316, Ch.13 Vol. 2). From this point forward, she does not find Margaret agreeable.

Bessy:
Good friend of Margaret’s and the daughter of Nicholas Higgins. She worked in a cotton mill, and swallowed too much cotton, so she now has a fatal illness, which is called consumption. Margaret helps take care of her, so they became close friends.

Mr. Richard Hale:
Father of Margaret, husband of Mrs. Maria Hale. He brings the Hale family from the countryside of Helstone to the industrial town of Milton (from the South to the North). Through an excerpt describing Mr. Hale, his character shows through: “His face returned into its lines of habitual anxiety. He had a trick of half-opening his mouth as if to speak, which constantly unsettled the form of the lips, and gave the face an undecided expression” (16, Ch. 2 Vol. 1). Despite his bold move to leave his church in Helstone, he is not one to participate in any sort of conflict. After leaving the church, he becomes a private tutor in Milton.

Mrs. Maria Hale:
Margaret’s mother and Mr. Hale’s wife. She came from a respectable London family. She does not agree with the move to Milton, and believes it is the reason for her illness. She has power over Mr. Hale: “At each repeated urgency of his wife, that he would put himself in the way of seeking some preferment, Margaret saw that her father shrank more and more” (18, Ch. 2, Vol. 1). Mrs. Hale has issues with illness, and can be very demanding; however, she married Mr. Hale for love, instead of wealth.

Dixon:
The Hale family’s maid, but most of all, Mrs. Hale’s maid and companion. On page 130 of Chapter 16, Vol. 1, Dixon expresses her love for Mrs. Hale. Mrs. Hale and Dixon have a special relationship, which is far from traditional for a maid and their master. They are more like friends. Dixon helps Mrs. Hale through the move and her illness in Milton.

Mr. Bell:
An old friend of Mr. Hale’s from their times at Oxford. He is also Margaret and Frederick’s godfather. He cares very much for the Hale family, especially Margaret. He is there for Margaret when she needs him most, and only wants the best for her.

Mrs. Shaw:
Mrs. Hale’s sister, Margaret’s aunt, and Edith’s mother. She lives lavishly in London, and only knows of life in London. During Margaret’s adolescence, she lives with Mrs. Shaw in London. Mrs. Shaw married a general not necessarily for love, but more so for the guarantee of wealth, which is exemplified on page 7 of Chapter 1, Vol. 1.

Edith:
Daughter of Mrs. Shaw, cousin of Margaret. She lives in London, on Harley Street, in a sumptuous manner: “…Edith had fallen asleep. She lay curled up on the sofa in the back drawing-room in Harley Street, looking very lovely in her white muslin and blue ribbons” (5, Ch. 1, Vol. 1). Her appearance and leisure life is of the utmost importance to her. She marries Captain Lennox, so in a way, she is following in the footsteps of her mother. She is very much detached from the poor, and does not know much of anything outside of her fixed social circle.

Mr. Henry Lennox:
First to propose to Margaret, but denied by her. Brother of Captain Lennox. Also, he is a young lawyer, so he is of the intellectual type. His character shines through in the following excerpt: “…he was the plain one in a singularly good-looking family; but his face was intelligent, keen, and mobile…” (14, Ch. 1, Vol. 1). There is simply nothing special about him that catches Margaret’s attention. In other words, he is one of many intelligent young lawyers.

Frederick Hale:
The older brother of Margaret, son of Mr. and Mrs. Hale. He served in the British navy until he was involved in a mutiny, which he then became a fugitive living in Spain. He makes a secret visit to Milton to visit his sick mother, which turns out to create a huge misunderstanding between Margaret and Mr. Thornton.

**Important Themes**

**North vs. South:**

Elizabeth Gaskell reinforces the contrasts of gender and class by illustrating the differences in location. She demonstrates how the North and South of England are incompatible and incomprehensible to one another. She shows the differences in setting, but also using economic and ethical value systems. The pastoral South esteems classical education (113), emphasized politeness (113), refined behavior, farming (101), and a slow leisurely pace of life (59, 101). The South is a relic of an older societal model. Feudalism and unchangeable position in society are the norm. The poorer classes are something to be pitied and then promptly forgotten.

The North-- on the other hand-- is a fresh, booming industrial area, with less rigidity in class structure-- where fast business is praised and, as a result of this, money is something to earn and to showcase (60). It is an ugly, smoky place, with visible strife between classes. The conflict between classes occurs partially because society has a new format where those in the lower classes can work their way up the social ladder, becoming the nouveau riche (69). Northerners have a more Teutonic value system, taking pride in fierce independence and strength of will (326).

**Power vs. Subjugation:**

*North and South* explores the concepts of power and subjugation on many different levels. The two title characters of the piece, Margaret Hale and John Thornton lock horns on several occasions with their fiery debates. The lovers must first determine which of the two is the dominant figure in the association, and as Margaret is the unconventional strong woman, it is John Thornton who first humbles himself to achieve the match (61). John Thornton's accustomed role of power-wielder in his master-minion relationship makes it more difficult for him to understand and empathize with Margaret (161, 270). Once Thornton takes the upper hand in their relationship, with the perceived-indiscretion of Margaret, the relationship practically terminates (274). Only with the Christian humbling of both partners are they able to unite in a happy union (425).

Gaskell exposes the Nietzschean relationship between the masters of the mills and their workmen, or in societal terms, the nouveau riche and the working lower class. The strike that occurs in the pages of this novel is the climactic point where the cruelties of both classes come to the fore, with starvation, suicide, bankruptcy, double-dealing, and violence being the most visible symptoms of this sort of societal structure (216, 177, 266, 408). Gaskell intones through her heroine Margaret that the ruling classes, i.e. the masters in power, have a responsibility towards their underlings' wellbeing, and should take that into account indulging in “the tyranny they exercised over their work-people” (70, 109, 84). The masters practice their witticisms on the dehumanized lower class, ridiculing them for their lack of logic and inability to feed themselves (119, 102).

The unwieldy role of power in this novel also brings forth the issues inherent in the class conflicts of the newly reformed society of the north. The class conflicts are most obvious between the southern gentry characters (the Hales) and their northern nouveau riche counterparts, as well as between both of the above and the lower working class (141, 74, 176, 409). At the beginning of the novel, the Hales look down on anyone associated with trade, such as the Thorntons (20). As the novel progresses these preconceptions are subtly extinguished, and only with the late introduction of Margaret’s brother does the reader recall that in society in general, these prejudices are still the norm (252).

**Religion:**

From the beginning, religion plays a significant role in the Hale family’s lives. The Hales leave Helstone because Mr. Hale has decided to leave his position of pastor in the Church of England due to doubts of faith in the system, but the reason is never fully explained. Margaret does not outwardly question her father’s decision, but Mrs. Hale expresses her disagreement. Further on, the Higgins family is influenced by religion, as well. Bessy Higgins struggles with the idea of God because her father, Nicholas, has strong doubts, but Margaret strengthens her beliefs through frequent visits and sharing her strong belief in God. During one of these visits, Margaret upsets Nicholas with her strong faith in God, which, at first, she is sharing with Bessy:

‘Bessy, don’t be impatient with your life, whatever it is—–or may have been. Remember who gave it to you, and made it what it is!’ … ‘Now I’ll not have my wench preached to. She’s bad enough as it is, with her dreams and her methodic fancies, and her visions of cities with golden gates and precious stones’… But surely—you believe in what I said, that God gave her life, and ordered what kind of life it was to be?’ “I believe what I see, and no more (91, Chapter 11, Vol. 1).
Bessy is quite ill during this time from working in the cotton mills, so Margaret’s intention is to bring hope to Bessy in a seemingly hopeless time. However, Nicholas sees it as false hope. He does not have the same faith in God as Margaret does, but for good reason. He has had a much harder life and has not been raised in a religious home, like Margaret. However, Margaret does not back down from her faith throughout the novel, and it only makes sense that it is the underlying force that gets her through the many hard times she endures.

Gender Roles:

The traditional gender roles are manipulated throughout the novel. For example, in the strike scene, Margaret is the protector of the man, Mr. Thornton, from the angry mob: “She only thought how she could save him. She threw her arms around him; she made her body into a shield from the fierce people beyond. Still, with his arms folded, he shook her off” (179, Chapter 22, Vol. 1). If this situation were to abide by traditional gender roles, then it would be Mr. Thornton shielding Margaret from the mob; however, the gender roles are reversed. Instead, Margaret uses her femininity with the thought that the mob is less likely to hurt a woman, to literally shield Mr. Thornton from any harm. Not only is this a selfless act, but a courageous one. Mr. Thornton’s initial reaction is to shake her off and in a way reclaim his manhood, but later on, he visits Margaret to thank her for her bravery. She truly believes she did the right thing; but under the terms of traditional gender roles, it was inappropriate.

Another example is after the dinner party when everyone is conversing, but not together. The men converse with the men and the women converse with the women, which abides by the traditional gender roles. However, Margaret finds the women's conversation boring, which is exemplified in the following quote: "She was glad when the gentlemen came, not merely because she caught her father’s eye to brighten her sleepiness up; but because she could listen to something larger and grander than the petty interests which the ladies had been talking about. She liked the exultation in the sense of power which these Milton men had" (163, Chapter 20, Vol. 1). Again, the reader finds Margaret shying away from the woman’s traditional role. She wants to be freed from the limitations which are brought upon her simply by being a woman. Unfortunately for Margaret, the idea of a woman engaging in meaningful conversation with a group of men such as the Milton men, especially at a dinner party, was unheard of at the time of the novel. Despite traditional gender roles, Margaret tests the boundaries, which is wonderfully audacious; and if it wasn’t for women like Margaret, then women would not have the rights they have today.

Secrets and Lies:

Gaskell explores the use of miscommunications and disinformation to move her plot forward in a variety of ways. The initial move up to Milton is done promptly, with little reason given by the head of house, Mr. Hale. He is very reserved on the subject of why he left the Church of England (35). The entire character of Frederick is shrouded in secrecy and mystery, due to unfortunate circumstances that occurred years prior (22). Another character who takes advantage of her family’s willingness to uphold secrets is Mrs. Hale, who hopes no one will find out about the truth of her condition, and only when pressured by her daughter does she confirm the truth of the matter (167). Margaret lies to herself and others repeatedly throughout the novel. Most obviously, Margaret blatantly lies to a police inspector to save her brother and ruin her own reputation (267). She deceives herself about loving Mr. Thornton (192). The masters of the mills use deception to bait their workers (135). All of these secrets and lies create turbulence for the characters and move the plot forward. Frederick himself was a mere plot device used to illuminate some internal characteristics of Margaret that would have otherwise not been seen.
**Form is Content**

**Important Quotes:**

"I take it that 'gentleman' is a term that only describes a person in his relation to others; but when we speak of him as 'a man,' we consider him not merely with regard to his fellow-men, but in relation to himself, to life to time to eternity." (Volume 1, Chapter 20) --Thornton

Mr. Thornton says this to Margaret after their short discussion concerning Mr. Morison’s identity as a gentleman. Thornton and Margaret decide that they have different understandings of the word “gentleman” and a “true man” (164). Margaret believes them to almost be one in the same, while Thornton asserts that a man is a “higher and completer being” than a gentleman. Then, he furthers this argument with the above block quote. This quote is important because it provides a glimpse into the manner in which Thornton wishes to live his life with regard to others and himself. He seems to belittle a male figure who strives to “only” be a gentleman—this seems to assert that this gentleman strives for less and has little regard to be the best he can be. A true man, on the other hand, is a gentleman who is favored by others, but who also thinks of himself and how his life has meaning in the world. Thornton believes this is the true way to live as a man, and it’s important that it is Thornton’s ideal of himself. It shows that he is indeed a deeper and more insightful person.

"But suppose it was truth double strong, it were no truth to me if I couldna take it in. I daresay there’s truth in yon Latin book on your shelves; but it’s gibberish and no truth to me, unless I know the meaning o’ the words.” (Volume 2, Chapter 3) --Higgins

Higgins says this to Mr. Hale during a discussion involving truth. Hale mentions that the strike could have been avoided because the “book” would have given the truth (230). Higgins argues back that in order for the truth to be told, everyone would need not only to be able to read the text, but also to understand what that text means, even to the most “stupid” people. He says that truth cannot be truth if it cannot be read and understood. Higgins says that there very well could be truth in those Latin books on the shelf, but because he cannot read them, the truth in those books doesn’t really exist. The books’ inaccessibility is their failure to live in truth. This block quote is important because Higgins points out the flaws in both government and religion in that their accessibility to only those of higher education condemns the lower working class because they have no ability to learn from the books deemed of higher quality.

"Mr. Thornton was in habits of authority himself, but she seemed to assume some kind of rule over him at once. He had been getting impatient at the loss of his time on a market-day, the moment before she appeared, yet now he calmly took a seat at her bidding.” (Volume 1, Chapter 7)

This quote comes from the narrator after Thornton first meets Margaret, after Mr. Hale sent for him once and then again a second time, though Hale is absent from the home when Thornton arrives the second time. This passage is important because it shows how Thornton was immediately drawn to the “beautiful countenance” of Margaret, as he expected to meet Mr. Hale’s daughter in the form of a “little girl” (62). The beginning of this passage is important too because it reminds readers of how professional and prompt Thornton carries himself, and how surprised he almost seems to be when Margaret assumes he will stay, though her father is not at home as was expected for business. Thornton was impatient about waiting for Hale to arrive, but at her words of waiting, he immediately sat down as she instructed. This shows the fact that he was drawn to her early on, and foreshadows that perhaps her words could sway him in the future.

"I wonder when you Milton men intend to live. All your lives seem to be spent in gathering together the materials for life…You are all striving for money. What do you want it for?” (Volume 2, Chapter 15) --Mr. Hale

This important passage is spoken to Thornton by Hale after Thornton is brought into a previous conversation with other men. Prior to this quote, it is said that Margaret said it would do the Milton manufacturers “good” to associate a little more with Oxford men. Mr. Hale then makes the quoted statement to “do [his] part” in the discussion (333). It’s an important quote because it shows the differences between the two men from two very different cities and shows how these cities defined life. Hale asserts that men in Milton don’t actually live because they focus so much time running around working. The quote is ironic because Hale remarks that Milton men spend their whole lives gathering the “materials” to live, though because of this, they don’t actually get to enjoy their lives and live well. Thornton counters that by “living,” Hale means “enjoyment.” Hale agrees, and later says that Milton men work hard to have lots of money, but asks for what purpose they wish to have it. Thornton says he doesn’t know, but he asserts that "he doesn’t work for money."
The famous portrait painted by William John Thompson

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elizabeth_Gaskell_1832.jpg

**Biography**

Dates: September 29, 1810 - November 12, 1865
Hometown: Lindsay Row, Chelsea
Characters

- Miss Margaret Hale
- Mr. John Thornton
- Nicholas Higgins
- Mrs. Thornton
- Bessy
- Mr. Richard Hale
- Mrs. Maria Hale
- Dixon
- Mr. Bell
- Mrs. Shaw
- Edith
- Mr. Henry Lennox
- Frederick Hale

Images

- Artist's Depiction of Manchester
- Boates on the Thames
- Cramford Mill Gateway
Bradford Industrial Museum

Cotton Plant

Spinning Machine

Elizabeth Gaskell
Crystal Palace Centre

Cotton Mill

Spinner In a Cotton Mill
Worker's Home
Elizabeth Gaskell was born with the name Elizabeth Cleghorn Stevenson on September 29, 1810 in Lindsay Row, Chelsea England. She was the eighth child of William and Elizabeth Stevenson. At the tender age of thirteen months, her mother died, and so she was transported to her mother’s sister, Hannah Lumb. Gaskell referred to her Aunt Hannah Lumb as “my more than mother”; therefore, Aunt Hannah Lumb fulfilled the role of Gaskell’s mother quite well.

Gaskell's father re-married when she was at the age of four. Her stepmother then became Catherine Thomson, who was the sister of the Scottish miniature artist, William John Thomson, who painted a famous portrait of Gaskell in 1832. In this same year, Gaskell married William Gaskell, who was in this particular time the assistant minister at Cross Street Unitarian Chapel in Manchester. The Gaskells then resided in Manchester where Elizabeth helped her husband in his work with the distribution of food and clothes for the poor at Cross Street Chapel. Also, while the Gaskells lived in Manchester, the city was a vast cultural and intellectual centre, and the symbol of the new industrial age. Unfortunately, the rapid growth of industry resulted in uncontrolled urban development, which produced severe poverty and filth. In addition, it was a time of great political change, which Elizabeth Gaskell observed intently, hence, her “industrial novel” genre.

The Gaskells had four daughters and a son, who died as an infant from Scarlet Fever. Elizabeth Gaskell was enclosed by her grief at his death, so her husband recommended for her to sway her attentions to creative writing. Out of this powerful sadness came her first novel titled Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life, which was namelessly published in 1848. This novel displayed the true and horrendous state of the poor in the industrial activities of Northern England, which helped awaken many people to this societal issue. The same novel attracted the attention of Charles Dickens, who helped many of her works to be published, and resulted in her fame as a writer.

Elizabeth Gaskell did not stay in the United Kingdom her entire life. From 1853 until her death on November 12, 1865 she traveled to France, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy on holidays. She had a true motivation to observe human behavior, and her travels furthered this important observation, which supplied her with locations and plots for her writing.
Resources and Links

Video Version of North and South:
- BBC Production - The North and South
- Youtube - Search Results for Gaskell's North and South

Additional Resources:
- The Gaskell Society
- The Victorian Web
- The Literary Gothic
- Elizabeth Gaskell House

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Prose by Women Writers: The Long Nineteenth Century in Britain

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