



# International Journal of Research in English

ISSN Print: 2664-8717  
ISSN Online: 2664-8725  
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.00  
IJRE 2023; 5(1): 44-46  
[www.englishjournal.net](http://www.englishjournal.net)  
Received: 10-12-2022  
Accepted: 16-01-2023

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## Mrs. Gaskell: A comparative study of Mary Barton & North and South

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2023.v5.i1a.74>

### Abstract

The Industrial Revolution brought a gigantic transformation in the socio-economic and political sphere of the people of the nineteenth century. As factories, mills and industries were set up in large numbers, many people were rendered jobless. The contemporary authors depicted the hard realities of industrialization, strife and struggles of the working class. In *Sybil* or *The Two Nations* (1845), Benjamin Disraeli depicts the plight of the working class. Mrs. Gaskell in *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (1848), deals with the hard realities and difficulties of the working class of the Victorian age and focus on the relation between the employers and workers of the mills in Manchester. Charlotte Bronte's *Shirley* (1849) is written against the backdrop of the Luddite riots uprisings in the textile industries of Yorkshire. The novel *North and South* (1854-55) which is set in a fictional town Milton is a comment on the mill owners and mill workers at the time of industrialization. *Hard Times*, *Mary Barton*, *Michael Armstrong*, *The Factory Boy*, *Sybil* and *North and South* are the exemplary of the time. In *Hard Times* (1854) Dickens created a fictional town which is known as a Coke town depicts the dangers of industrialization and the exploitation of the workers.

My paper is an effort to draw a comparison between the themes of *Mary Barton* and *North and South* and how the dilemma of the industrial workers urged Mrs. Gaskell to produce masterpieces like *Mary Barton* and *North and South*.

**Keywords:** Industrialization, exploitation, socio-economic, mill workers, mill owners

### Introduction

“To stand as brothers, side by side, united

Where is the wisdom that shall bridge this gulf?

And bind them once again in trust and love?”

“Love Truths”<sup>[1]</sup>

Mrs. Gaskell was not only a short story writer and a biographer but was a novelist par excellence. While the authors of that time were depicting the hard realities of industrialization and the struggles of the working class, Mrs. Gaskell with her writing skills poured emotions and sympathies for the working class and emerged as a social thinker, and a writer drew a first-hand sympathy of the readers. “The upheaval of class boundaries, the industrialization of England, religion and women's issues in the Victorian Era were all themes of her work<sup>[2]</sup>.”

“Mrs. Gaskell lived a large part of her life at Manchester, during the first period of the Industrial Revolution. And she was horrified by the bad conditions in which the poor lived and by the un-Christian spirit that possessed both employers and employed. She therefore wrote both *Mary Barton* and *North and South* in order to expose these evils and suggest a remedy<sup>[3]</sup>.”

In her novels *Mary Barton* and *North and South* she did not only focused on Capital and Labour but very skillfully observed the condition of young women's Labour too. Tessa Broadetsky (1986) observes that, “Gaskell endeavored faithfully to portray the deplorable conditions of the working class. Empowered by her belief system, Gaskell a woman, became a potent agent of social change, effectively drawing the attention of England's populous of the poor's situation.(67)<sup>[4]</sup>”

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By the 1930's England had become a black industrial country. The material prosperity gave birth to a factory - system which gave way to exploitation of the working class. The working class was subjected to poverty and hunger on the other hand the manufacturers were leading a life of leisure and power. In fact, the rich were becoming richer and the poor becoming poorer.

The factories were dark due to smoky and dusty environment and most of the rooms were un-ventilated which added to their miserable health conditions. 'The Chimney Sweeper' by Blake and 'The Water Babies' by Kingsley talk about the horrors of the children. In 'The Chimney Sweeper' how a child says - "So your chimneys I sweep and in soot I sleep <sup>[5]</sup>." (The Chimney Sweeper). In the Water Babies - A Fairy Tale For a Land Baby, Charles Kingsley describes the horrible condition of a little boy, "He cried when he had to climb the dark flues, rubbing his poor knees and his elbows raw; and when the soot got into his eyes, which it did every day in the week; and when his master beat him, which he did every day in the week and when he had not enough to eat which happened every day in the week likewise <sup>[6]</sup>". The sufferings of the children, men and women was so tragic that the poets and the writers came to a social platform and gave a clarion call for a reform.

"Elizabeth Gaskell wrote a short preface to her first work, *Mary Barton* she recorded that living in Manchester, she had started work on a tale set in a rural scene when she realized that her true subject was immediately to hand: I bethought may how deep might be the romance in the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets of the town in which I resided. I had always felt a deep sympathy with the care-worn men who looked as if doomed to struggle through their lives in strange alterations between work and want (my emphasis) <sup>[7]</sup>."

In *Mary Barton*, Mary's love episode first with Harry Carson and finally with Jem Wilson added with the sub plot by showing the pitiable plight of Esther, the aunt of Mary Barton. *Mary Barton* depicted the misery of the working class, their conflict between the masters and the working class in the background of the Chartist movement.

The theme of fallen women too through the character of Esther. Esther became the victim of the evils of the Industrial Revolution. How she was exploited and was dragged in flesh trade. Mrs. Gaskell had very well depicted the plight of fallen women in the industrial world. Somewhere Esther resembles Nancy in *Oliver Twist* leading a life of a fallen woman in the underworld of the criminals. As Shinwell Julia states Gaskell lived in a century that was riddled with change; her fiction is in many ways a response to changes that were occurring in her lifetime and at the same time is an agent of change. Capitalizing on her respectable status as the wife of a Minister and mother of four, Gaskell entered the condition of England debate to make new claims for women <sup>[8]</sup>."

*Mary Barton* clearly shows the failure of Chartism. After the failure of Chartist movement, the laborers did not stop, they continuously tried to unite themselves in unions and trade unions. The government took betterment measures too. As *Mary Barton* evoked charges of impartial attitude, north and South was produced with a different mindset. One could observe the fervor of harmony and balance in the novel. *North and South* deals with the industrial theme. Both the novels depict the conflict between capital and Labour. But

in *North and South* author shows reconciliation. In the life of Charlotte Bronte, Mrs. Gaskell deals with the Luddite riots unrest. "The Luddites represented a section of workers who felt threatened by the increasingly large scale use of machinery by manufacturers and Industrialists <sup>[9]</sup>."

"Gaskell's novel *Mary Barton* has been credited with the doing mode to highlight the continuation of the working class poor them any number of pamphlets on the subject <sup>[10]</sup>."

*Mary Barton* and *North and South* both center social struggle. "Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, for here the writer's difficulty are related to the problem of form and plotting in social - problem fiction...Elizabeth Gaskell's detailed, often harrowing realism engages the sympathy of the reader in the lot of the poor, particularly of the Chartist and union man, John Barton his daughter Mary and their friends the Wilson's, her portrayal of the wealthy mill-owning Carson family is unflatteringly stereotyped <sup>[11]</sup>."

The theme of *North and South* is quite engaging and interestingly rooted in the social problem. *North and South*, a social novel was published in a serial form in *Household Words* 1954 - 55. It was later published in two volumes. The first title given to the novel was 'Margaret Hale' but the present title north and south was suggested by Dickens. North stands for energy and the industrial scenario and South stands for agrarian society. In comparison to South, North had more resources and was densely populated. Northern England represented the emerging newly middle class, the mill owners and manufacturers while on the other hand Southern England represented aristocracy. Due to the industrial production the industrialists like Thornton became wealthy. Richness of the mill owners developed antipathy towards the workers. There was all Labour strike, trade union due to the reduction in wages and unemployment. "John Boucher a downtrodden laborer who's struggling to support many children. Boucher argues that the union is the worst tyrant of all because it forces people to starve to death rather than oppose the union and it ostracizes anyone who does <sup>[12]</sup>."

The dilemma of the industrial workers urged Gaskell to produce novels like *Mary Barton* and *North and South*. In *Sybil* or *The Two Nations* (1845), Disraeli depicts the plight of the working class. Charlotte Bronte's *Shirley* (1849) is written against the backdrop of the Luddite riots uprisings in the textile industry Yorkshire. *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (1848) deals with the hard realities and difficulties of the Victorian working class and focused on the relation between employers and workers in Manchester. *North and South* which is set in a fictional town of Milton is a comment on the mill owners and the workers in the industrializing city. "North and South depicts precisely the inter class co-operation" that Dickens believed to be necessary for the reformation of the society. Gaskell presents the solution as limited in scope not to "do away with strikes but merely to make them less better" <sup>[13]</sup> (27 Jan 1855,568;II;27:432) but it seems achievable, because the end of the novel provides a concrete example of communication leading to improved industrial relations within the realm of everyday reality.

In *North and South* the female protagonist Margaret Hale is from Southern England who talks about the relation of Mill owners and workers in an industrializing brutal world. She grew sympathy towards the poor mill workers and had a clash with Thornton, a cotton mill owner. The problem

erupted at the Thornton's compound when he employed Irish workers, and rendered English workers jobless. "Gaskell, according to more recent critics was. In her novels of social reform to Disraeli and Kingsley because of a knowledge of working class conditions; she had" advantage over them of personal experience and personal contact of having not only observed but known visited and held men like John Barton and the other mill workers <sup>[14]</sup>"

### Conclusion

Mrs. Gaskell had a keen social insight. Her social content was distinguished from that of her contemporaries because she was untouched by any political complexion. She picked contemporary issues and the most relevant cause of the sufferings of the working classes which showed her humanitarian outlook somewhere pleading for reconciliation. Whatever theme she dealt with, she displayed her courage. Gaskell's work talk about realism touching a level of artistic portraiture with sincere direction.

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