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1. Point and view and narrative technique

One useful way to approach a novel involves asking yourself as you read, "Who's telling the story?" Is it (like the narrator of *Little Dorrit*) some unidentified person or voice, who always uses the grammatical third person — "he," "she," "they" — or is it a first-person narrative (like *Great Expectations*) in which the identified speaker relates everything from his or her point of view? Or does the novel unfold as an unusual hybrid, such as *Bleak House*, which a character (Esther Summerson) tells part of the story and an all-knowing narrator tells the rest?

Once you've determined that the novel seems to be told by either a first- or third-person narrator, next decide if this narrator knows absolutely everything about the story and its characters or only some of the things we want (and need) to know. Is the narrator, in other words, an omniscient or a limited narrator? One characteristic of an omniscient narrator is that such a story-teller, unlike any human being who has ever lived, knows what's going on inside the mind of other people (or at least other characters).

Readers almost always identify with the fictional character who relates stories in the first person, but can you tell whether this speaker is reliable or not? Most first-personal narrators are reliable, but a good many are not. Some, such as Swift's Gulliver in Brobdingnag, clearly do not represent the author's views and may even be the butt of satire or other forms of criticism. How can you tell?

2. Plot and narrative structure

Plot is what happens in a story, and structure is the order in which the novel presents the plot. Plot and structure converge almost completely in novels, like *Trollope's*, that start at the chronological beginning and progress to the end. In epics like *The Iliad* and novels like *Absalom! Absalom!*, which begin *in medias res* [in the middle of things] and then use flashbacks to explain what is happening, plot and structure diverge a great deal.

Although it might seem easy to merge plot and structure completely, it is virtually impossible to do so, for even books that at first seem to start at the "very beginning," such as *North and South* and *Great Expectations*, often pause late in the action to provide what in cinema is termed "back-story." Such delayed exposition is particularly common in detective stories or narratives in which a mystery plays an important part.
Every plot and every story has an end as well as a beginning. What effects does the ending have on the way we read a novel or other story?

3. Setting

Where does the action take place? In reading a novel, one almost always learns pretty quickly in what place and time the story unfolds — in other words, where in time and space the story "is set."

**Chronological setting**: What does setting a novel several decades earlier than the time of its writing and publication imply? Why did Thackeray place Vanity Fair at the time of Waterloo? Why did Dickens place Little Dorrit in a time when debtor's prisons still existed? How is setting a story three or four decades back different from setting it three or five centuries earlier?

**Place**: Although placement in time is obviously very important, many discussions of setting tend to focus on place and on those techniques, such as description and allusion to verifiable facts, that create setting. As you read a work of fiction consider if the author just informs us that the action happens in a specific real place (Manchester), a fictional one (Milton), or merely a general place (an industrial city in the north). Does the novel describe landscape, cities, and interiors in great detail? What does each approach imply about the writer's attitude toward reality (or "the world")? What is the relation of a particular setting to a novel's main characters, and can you imagine them in a different setting. What happens in novels, such as Gaskell's North and South and Dickens's Great Expectations, when the protagonists appear in a new setting — and what does that appearance in a new setting have to do with "what the book is about"?

4. Characterization

When you think of it, one of the strangest things about fiction is that authors can make us react to a bunch of words as if they were a real person. These assemblages of language can make us laugh or cry, get us angry or indignant, and even occasionally treat them as more important to us than people we know. The various techniques that create this powerful illusion of a person make up what we call **characterization**. Here are some of the more important of these literary devices:

- physical description — telling us what the character looks like
- dialogue — what the character says
- physical actions — what the character does (particularly in relation to what he or she says or thinks.)
- thoughts, or mental actions — the character's inner life, what the character thinks
- judgment by others — what other characters say and think about this fictional person
- the narrator's judgement — what narrator tells us about the character
- the author's judgement — what the author thinks of the character (sometimes difficult to determine until late in the narrative)
5. Theme vs. Subject

We frequently use the terms theme and subject interchangably, but one of my teachers in college used to urge us to distinguish between the two as a useful means of discussing works of fiction: in his usage subject is the general topic or topics the book implicitly discusses, such as, for example, "the condition of the working classes" or "the relations of manufacturers and mill workers." In contrast, theme is what the novel implies we should think about such subjects; it's what the book means. North and South thus shows that factory workers in mid-Victorian England led harsh lives of deprivation and injustice and that following the assumptions of classical economics led factory owners to mistreat their workers and to consider them almost as a separate, lower species. You'll notice that using the word theme in this way also requires using the word that, as in "the subject of the work-in-question is nature," but "this work shows [argues/demonstrates/implies] that nature is cruel." The use of that, in other words, makes one take a stand and state what one believes a text to mean.
Margaret Hale as Social Explorer in North and South

Joseph Kestner

[From Joseph Kestner, Protest & Reform: The British Social Narrative by Women, 1827-1867.]

Like Marian Withers and Mary Brotherton before her, Margaret Hale in North and South travels, to resolve both social and religious doubts. One needs to recall, as Young observes, that "industry was a wonder, and almost a terror, to strangers from the leisurely South" ("Victorian" 155). She becomes a social explorer, an image familiar from Kay's 1832 monograph or Cooke Taylor's Tour in the Manufacturing Districts. Manchester even in the fifties could still seem "the shock city of the age" (Briggs, Victorian Cities 96). Gaskell integrates the industrial and the female issues of the novel because the exploration is as much about the condition of women as the condition of workers. Only through the struggles provoked by the industrial era does Margaret grasp the nature of her mother, the sufferings of working-class girls, and the indeterminacy of women's position.

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Margaret Hale Described

George P. Landow, Professor of English and Art History, Brown University

Why does Gaskell present this description of Margaret in part from Mr. Thornton's point of view instead of only using her omniscient narrator?

Mr. Thornton had thought that the house in Crampton was really just the thing; but now that he saw Margaret, with her superb ways of moving and looking, he began to feel ashamed of having imagined that it would do very well for the Hales, in spite of a certain vulgarity in it which had struck him at the time of his looking it over.

Margaret could not help her looks; but the short curled upper lip, the round, massive upturned chin, the manner of carrying her chin, her movements, full of a soft feminine defiance, always gave strangers the impression of haughtiness. She was tired now, and would rather have remained silent . . . but of course, she owed to herself to be a gentlewoman, and to speak courteously from time to time to this stranger; not over-brushed, nor over-polished, it must be confessed, after his rough encounter with Milton streets and crowds. . . . She sat facing him and facing the light; her full beauty met his eye; her round white flexile throat rising out of the full, yet lithe figure; her lips, moving so slightly as she spoke, not breaking the cold serene look of her face with any variation from the one lovely haughty curve; her eyes with their soft gloom, meeting his with quiet maiden freedom. He almost said to himself that he did not like her,
before their conversation ended; he tried so to compensate himself for the mortified feeling, that while he looked on her with an admiration he could not repress, she looked at him with proud indifference, taking him, he thought, for what, in his irritation, he told himself he was — a great rough fellow, with not a grace or refinement about him. Her quiet coldness of demeanour he interpreted as contemptuousness. [North and South, Chapter 7]

Details of female beauty reveal much about a particular culture's conceptions of beauty, gender, sexuality, and status. What details of Margaret's appearance does the narrator provide, how do they relate to literary realism, and with what other details are the physical description supplemented? Why?

What details that you might expect to encounter are missing?

And do you think a male and a female writer would have handled this combination of description and characterization in the same way?

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Margret's Role as "Word Bearer" in North and South

Catherine Barnes Stevenson, Professor of English, University of Hartford

[From "'What Must Not be Said': North and South and the Problem of Women's Work," by Catherine Barnes Stevenson, Professor of English, University of Hartford.]

Margaret, noted for speaking her mind, is repeatedly cast into the role of mediator, of "word bearer" (for women's role as "word bearers" see Homans 226). For example, she is forced to tell her mother about the momentous changes that her father has set in motion but cannot explain to his wife. She faces an angry mob to speak for both the helpless Irish workers who are about to be attacked and the stubbornly silent John Thornton. Furthermore, like her author who tries to make readers see both sides of an argument, Margaret attempts to educate each side in the labor dispute about the others' points of view. She cites Nicholas Higgins's opinions to Thornton and vice versa.

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Growing Heroines

Introduction

This study examines the maturation of the main female characters in Mary Barton (1848), Cranford (1851), Ruth (1853), North and South (1855), and Wives and Daughters (1866). Five girls in five Elizabeth Gaskell novels, each coming from a different background, are all left motherless at some point in their youth. Because the girls' natural mothers die before their daughters have reached maturity, the girls miss the security which a relationship with a mother could give them, as well as the knowledge from their own experience that mothers impart to their daughters. There is a case to be made, however, for the benefits of being a motherless girl: "the Victorian heroine's motherlessness...gives her the freedom necessary to circumscribe her own developmental course" (Hirsch, 44). Susan Peter McDonald has also previously argued that the good supportive mother is potentially so powerful a figure as to prevent her daughter's trials from occurring, to shield her from the process of maturation, and thus to disrupt the equilibrium of the novel. But if she's dead or absent, the good mother can remain an ideal without her presence disrupting or preventing the necessary drama for the novel" (qtd. in Hirsch, 206).

In these five novels, the girls all lose their mothers early in life, thus opening the doors for the trials and challenges which will make them into credible heroines.

The changes in society brought about by the Industrial Revolution make it vitally important that there are other characters who, by word or example, will provide models of behavior and values for the girls to observe and adopt in order to successfully navigate the changing future. Each has a relationship with her father which helps shape her character, yet each also receives important advice and guidance from friends and relatives. This is not to say that there are only good influences at work in the girls' lives, because with the good must also come the bad. However, one hopes that the girls in these novels will learn to recognize what is good and honest and not be tempted down the wrong path.

In the first two books, Mary Barton and Cranford, Mary Barton and Mary Smith change without much notice on their part, but this will differ in the other novels. In Ruth we begin to see some awareness of the influence that other people are having on her character. In North and South and Wives and Daughters we see Margaret Hale and Molly Gibson more aware than the previous heroines are, of how the advice they are given, and the examples of behavior they are shown, are improving their characters.

Wives and Daughters

Elizabeth Malcolm


In her final book, Wives and Daughters, Elizabeth Gaskell does not undertake an examination of a social question such as the class disputes in Mary Barton or North and South, or the plight of a fallen woman and her illegitimate child in Ruth. Instead, she writes a novel that is a collection of brilliant character sketches which together form a novel about the joys and sorrows of the people of Hollingford, and the story of a young girl's growth and change.
The heroine is a little girl called Molly Gibson who lives with her father; her life is a happy one, only marred by the death of her mother "which was a jar to the whole tenour of her life but ... she had been too young to be conscious of it at the time" (36). At the beginning of the novel, Molly believes she is about to experience the most exciting day yet of her young life: a day at the Towers, the county home of the Lord and Lady Cumnor. The day is not all that Molly expects it to be: she loses herself in the gardens, misses lunch, has a headache, and after being rescued is forgotten about and left to oversleep and miss her carriage by Clare Kirkpatrick, the woman who will later be her stepmother. Molly is rightfully upset by both the events of the day and the words of Mrs. Kirkpatrick which make her feel "guilty and very unhappy" (48), and though she cries at times about the predicament she has gotten into, Molly also finds herself worrying about how her father will feel when she is not there to make his tea for him. This scene foreshadows the role Molly will play in relation to her father and stepmother. In the midst of her trouble, Molly thinks of others' feelings as well, and this trait will continue to grow in her.

Though motherless, Molly is not at a loss for people to look out for her and guide her, as Patsy Stoneman's discussion of several people's influence on Mary corroborates (Stoneman, 176-8). She shares a special bond with her father which, though taxed at times, continues to be influential as she grows. In Molly's eyes her father is a man among men, the wisest judge, and a person to be trusted and relied upon in all situations. As a doctor, Mr. Gibson is a caring and honest man, educated and respectful of life. Though Molly has acquired these important values and qualities from her father, Mr. Gibson does not appear confident that he is sufficient as a role-model and guide for his young daughter. For the mutual benefit of himself and his daughter, Mr. Gibson remarries so that Molly will have a mother again and he will have a wife to promote domestic harmony. When Mrs. Kirkpatrick becomes Mrs. Gibson, she professes to love Molly as if she were her own daughter and to have her interests at heart at all times; however, in the picture of Mrs. Gibson which Gaskell paints so clearly, what she says and what she does are two completely different things.

Molly has a temper and learning to control it is one of her first lessons as she grows from a child into a young woman. She once "flew out in such a violent passion of words in defence of her silent trembling governess" (67), that she stunned the housekeeper who had been speaking impertinently. This same governess attempted to curb Molly's temper, but it would be a long while before Molly could ignore her feelings and hold her tongue instead of giving way to her anger. We see her working towards this achievement when she learns of her beloved father's plans to remarry.

She did not answer. She could not tell what words to use. She was afraid of saying anything, lest the passion of anger, dislike, indignation - whatever it was that was boiling up in her breast - should find vent in cries and screams, or worse, in raging words that could never be forgotten. (145)

At the time of Molly's distress, she had been living with the Hamley family at Hamley Hall. Two people in particular begin to have a calming effect on Molly's temperament: Mrs. Hamley, a gentle invalid who adores Molly, and her youngest son Roger Hamley who becomes Molly's intellectual mentor. When Molly is terribly upset over this unwelcome change in her family life, i.e. her father's remarriage, Roger gives her hope by telling her the story of another girl in a
similar position, and the advice "to try to think more of others than of oneself" (152). This makes a big impression on Molly, and she tries earnestly to adopt this policy, although she worries that she will lose her self and individuality by thinking only of others. Gilbert and Gubar's study addresses this issue of the death of the self.

The surrender of her [the Victorian ideal of the 'angel in the house'] self — of her personal comfort, her personal desires, or both — that is the beautiful angel-woman's key act, while it is precisely this sacrifice which dooms her both to death and to heaven. For to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead (25).

How especially true this is for Ruth, as she dies from the ultimate selfless act of nursing her tempter. Molly is a good example of the balance Gaskell achieves between the Victorian ideal of the quiet domestic angel and the more aggressive new woman: Molly learns to be silent when it is helpful to others and out-spoken when there is just cause. As an early attempt at thinking of others, Molly is afraid of distressing the delicate Mrs. Hamley, and accordingly her manners grow quieter.

It is well that Molly makes an effort to swallow her anger early on, because without good control over her emotions she surely would not be able to tolerate her new stepmother. Though Mrs. Gibson speaks as though her greatest pleasure is to know that the people she cares for are comfortable, in truth she cares mostly for her own personal comfort. By the time of her father's remarriage, Molly has mostly resigned herself to the position of second most important woman in Mr. Gibson's life, but she still finds it hard at times to give up some of that special bond with her father. As time passes, Molly also finds it difficult to ignore Mrs. Gibson's shortcomings:

At first she made herself uncomfortable with questioning herself as to how far it was right to leave unnoticed the small domestic failings — the webs, the distortions of truth which had prevailed in their household ever since her father's second marriage. She knew that very often she longed to protest, but did not do it, from the desire of sparing her father any discord ... . It was a wonder to Molly whether this silence was right or wrong. With a girl's want of toleration, and want of experience to teach her the force of circumstances, and of temptation, she had often been on the point of telling her stepmother some forcible home truths. (407)

Mr. Gibson has noticed his wife's shortcomings as well, but he puts on a brave face and attempts to ignore them as much as possible. As a doctor, Mr. Gibson has plenty of chaos in his daily life: when he comes home at night he wants to enjoy peace and contentment with his family. He wants this so much that he blinds himself to the reality that his choice of wives was perhaps not the best. Molly observes this and does her best to follow his example of silence, though at times she finds she must speak out in defence of a friend.

Along with a new mother, the marriage provides Molly with a sister called Cynthia. A nuisance to her widowed mother, Cynthia was sent away to school in France at a young age. Consequently she did not develop a strong attachment to her remaining parent and is much more independent than Molly. In this case, however, independence comes with the loss of good parental guidance and Cynthia, who calls herself "a moral kangaroo" (258), finds herself entangled in an unwanted engagement to Mr. Preston, a local land agent. Unable to free herself from the situation of deceit
and shame in which she finds herself, Cynthia enlists the help of innocent Molly to retrieve her love letters. Upon hearing the story, Molly becomes Cynthia's champion,

rising up in her indignation, and standing before Cynthia almost as resolutely fierce as if she were in the very presence of Mr. Preston himself. 'I am not afraid of him. He dare not insult me, or if he does I don't care. I will ask him for those letters, and see if he will dare to refuse me.' (523)

Molly has a strong sense of duty to the people who she cares about and when their happiness is threatened, she will do all that is in her power to help and comfort them. This is a reminder of the way Mary Barton took on the role of Jem's savior at any cost, while treading carefully to keep her father out of suspicion. Molly has also acquired the recognition of what is good and proper from her father; however, "she began to be afraid that she herself might be led into the practice [of deceit]. But she would try and walk in a straight path; and if she did wander out of it, it should only be to save pain to those whom she loved" (525). Because Molly cares so much for her new sister, she is resigned to the fact that she may have to be secretive and deceptive in order to help her.

Though Molly does not swerve far from her moral code, the women of the town learn certain particulars of her activities and conclude falsely that Molly has "disregarded the commonest rules of modesty and propriety" (568). While still invited to the social gatherings out of respect to her parents, Molly is treated as a pariah. However, she shows that she is above the pettiness of the town ladies by ignoring their slights as much as possible.

She never told her father how she felt these perpetual small slights: she had chosen to bear the burden of her own free will; nay, more, she had insisted on being allowed to do so; and it was not for her to grieve him now by showing that she shrank from the consequences of her own act. (573)

From this example it is apparent that Roger Hamley's early words to Molly have remained a guiding influence on her: she keeps silent about her treatment in order not to disturb her father's peace and confidence in her.

An ongoing test of Molly's strength of character has been the relationship between her old friend Roger Hamley and Cynthia. We are sure that Molly loves Roger, whether she is always aware of it or not, and because she cares so much for both of them, "she would have been willing to cut off her right hand, if need were, to forward his attachment to Cynthia; and the sacrifice would have added a strange zest to a happy crisis" (390). By comparing this willingness to sacrifice herself for the happiness of others to Molly's earlier reaction at the announcement of her father's proposed remarriage, we can see how far Molly's character has grown as she gets older.

Furthermore, Molly becomes a foundation of strength and hope to her elders as well as her peers as shown in her loving care to the old Squire Hamley after the loss of his eldest son, Osborne. The Squire's grief is so great that Molly's gentle presence is the only thing that will reach him. When she must go back home for a few hours to fetch a paper, he is like a little lost child as he asks of her father, "She'll come back again? ... You - she won't leave me to myself?" (614). The
Squire also wishes Molly to face Osborne's mysterious wife for him because he can not do it. When Mrs. Osborne Hamley falls ill, Molly is again the provider of strength and comfort.

No one seemed to think of Molly's leaving the Hall during the woeful illness that befell Mrs Osborne Hamley...He [the Squire] needed someone to listen to his incontinence of language, both when his passionate regret for his dead son came uppermost, and also when he had discovered some extraordinary charm in that son's child; and again when he was oppressed with the uncertainty of Aimee's long-continued illness. Molly was not so good or so bewitching a listener to ordinary conversation as Cynthia; but where her heart was interested her sympathy was deep and unfailing. (634)

Molly pays the price for her selfless behavior once the initial scare is over: she enters into a long slow illness which takes away any remaining physical strength left to her after her time of care at Hamley Hall.

Molly's health is brought back by time spent with Cynthia, who allows her to talk of the troubles at Hamley Hall which Mrs. Gibson has dismissed. She is soon well enough to go visiting at the Towers and has her old spark back again. The last test of Molly's will is to help things settle at the Hall between the Squire and Mrs. Osborne Hamley, and she uses her gentle power to help the two people unite in the mutual love of Osborne's baby.

"The introduction of Aimee and her child suggests...that the novel which started with a critique of Molly's various mother-substitutes was to end with some comment on alternative modes of motherhood" (Stoneman, 197). By the example of Mrs. Osborne Hamley, Molly learns that determination is a powerful tool: the mother is determined that she will not be sent away from her child and anyone opposing her will have to give way. This shows that there are times when one must think of oneself before others, teaching Molly that she need not crush her spirit to be a good woman. On the contrary, it is her spirit which will continue to endear her to people and allow her to form strong relationships based on cooperation and respect, not petty alliances for purely self-serving purposes as her stepmother does. Elizabeth Gaskell introduces us to Molly when she is a motherless little girl who is good-natured but whose temper sometimes gets in the way and shows us the people and experiences which mold her into a gentle, caring, loving young woman.
Oliver Cromwell in North and South

From Joseph Kestner

[From "What Must Not be Said": North and South and the Problem of Women's Work," by Catherine Barnes Stevenson]

In North and South Gaskell introduces a small number of references that broaden her analysis of the gentleman. The two most significant are the names of the manufacturing city, Milton-Northern, and John Thornton's defense of Oliver Cromwell, which telescopes the rose imagery of a dying tradition and Lancastrian individualism: "Rose water surgery won't do for them. Cromwell would have made a capital mill-owner, Miss Hale. I wish we had him to put down this strike for us." Margaret replies, "Cromwell is no hero of mine" (145).

During the nineteenth century, Cromwell's reputation underwent considerable alteration from its ambiguous status in the Enlightenment, for example in David Hume's History of Great Britain (1754-1761). Carlyle's lecture "The Hero as King" in 1840, his Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell, with Elucidations in 1845, and the lectures of Thomas Cooper (a model for Kingsley's Alton Locke) on Cromwell to Chartist groups in the forties, reestablished Cromwell. "Evangelical in religion, a self-made man, anti-aristocratic and anti-establishment, a reformer of passionate moral conviction, Cromwell had all the ingredients to make him the hero of the reformers, liberals and new men of nineteenth-century Britain" (Strong 149). It is from this perspective that he is viewed by Gaskell's Thornton.

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Mr. Hale's Gentlemanly Conduct in Gaskell's North and South

Eliza Brownell '97 (English 61 1993)

John Henry Cardinal Newman's description of the gentlemen (1852) says that

"It is almost a definition of a gentleman to say he is one who never inflicts pain . . . the true gentleman . . . carefully avoids whatever may cause a jar or a jolt in the minds of those with whom he is cast. . . he is tender towards the bashful, gentle towards the distant, and merciful towards the absurd . . He is patient, forebearing, and resigned."

Charles William Day, in his 1843 Hints on Etiquette similarly admonishes any gentleman who invites others into his home to "Remember that all your guests are equal for the time being, and
have a similar claim to your courtesies; nay if there be a difference shown, those of lesser rank
require a little more attention than the rest, that they may not be made to feel their inferiority."

These statements into account, one might not consider remarkable Mr. Hale's gracious welcome
to Higgins. However, Newman and Day probably did not imagine that gentlemen would ever
come into social contact with workers like Higgins, and they did not mean the "adherence to . . .
politeness towards those with whom you may have dealings" that Day advocated to apply to
mill-workers.

Gaskell, though, obviously advocated equal treatment for the working class. She comes close to
preaching in this passage, when respect from a "better" changes Nicholas into a "new creature, "
from the "drunken infidel" that he was " in the rough independence of his own hearthstone." Contact with Margaret gives dying Bessy hope and inspiration, and Thornton's pivotal moment
in the text comes when he realizes that Higgins and he are both men, both human, not two
entirely different sorts of animal. Her social agenda sharply distinguishes Gaskell from Brontë.

The characters in Jane Eyre accept the social hierarchy unthinkingly, and the character of no one
is influenced by interaction with a person from a different class. Jane is very aware of her precise
place on the social ladder, thankful that Mrs. Fairfax has "no grandeur to overwhelm, no
stateliness to embarrass," but quick to inform the Rivers' servant Hannah that she is "very"
"book-learned." Like other subjects, class in Jane's world is treated personally. While she accepts
Blanche Ingram as her societal superior, she has no qualms about feeling immensely superior to
her as an individual. Brontë is not in the least concerned with the plight of the working class, and
so, unlike Gaskell, her book does not offer any remedies to solve it.

Both authors, however, show a character interacting with a person of a lower class in order to
shed light on that character. Mr. Hale is seen as kind, good, inherently generous and socially
correct, because of the way he deals with Nicholas Higgins. Brontë describes Blanche Ingram's
behavior around her social inferiors to drive home the fact that she is rude, mean-spirited,
inconsiderate and spoiled. When a footman at Thornfield hesitates to carry out one of her orders,
she shouts at him, "Cease that chatter, blockhead! and do my bidding." After a (supposed) gypsy
fortune-teller tells her things she doesn't want to hear, she remarks that "I think Mr. Eshton will
do well to put the hag in the stocks to-morrow morning," and her descriptions of the "merry
days" when she would ruin the lives of her governesses are nothing less than despicable. In this
way Gaskell and Brontë use the same method to illuminate two extremely different people.
Jane Eyre and North and South on Social Class

Wendy Vaughon '97 (English 61, Brown University, 1993)

Hale treated all of his fellow-creatures alike — it never entered his head to make any difference because of their rank. He placed a chair for Nicholas, stood up till he, at Mr. Hale's request, took a seat; and called him, invariably," Mr. Higgins," instead of the curt "Nicholas" or "Higgins," to which the "drunken infidel weaver" had been accustomed. But as he would have himself expressed it: and he was infidel so far as he had never yet found any form of faith to which he could attach himself, heart and soul. Margaret was a little surprised, and very much pleased, when she found her father and Higgins in earnest conversation each speaking with gentle politeness to each other, however their opinions might clash. Nicholas--clean, tidied (if only at the pump-trough), and quiet spoken--was a new creature to her, who had only seen him in the rough independence of his own hearthstone. (E. Gaskell, North and South, 1854)

The moral equality of the economic classes, a topic stressed in North and South, did not find the same support in Jane Eyre. Unlike North and South, which was meant to affect a broad audience, Jane Eyre was an intensely personal novel which never addressed the topic of economic classism seriously. If anything, Jane Eyre contained elements that would seem to contradict North and South. Evidence of the disparity between the concepts of class and privilege between Jane Eyre and North and South can be found by examining the writing styles of Gaskell and Bronte, and the role of class values in Victorian England.

In North and South, Margaret continuously criticized the British class system of classism. She remarks, for example: "It won't be division enough on that awful day, that some of us have been beggars here, and some of us have been rich, — we shall not be judged by that poor accident, but by our faithful following of Christ." Throughout the book, Margaret must come to terms with the effects of the class system. Her relationship with Higgins and Bessy teach her that people are people no matter where they may come from or the social status they have. In addition, Thornton's development in the novel stems from his realization that all men are special in all regards. As Margaret demonstrated, "Margaret the Churchwoman, her father the Dissenter, Higgins the Infidel, knelt down together. It did them no harm." In Jane Eyre, a discussion of classism doesn't appear as clearly. Jane accepts that everyone should know what their class in society should be. She draws distinctions between the servants, herself, and members of the upper class. Even though Jane had reason to dislike the Ingrams and their party, she maintained a subservient attitude when in their presence.
The settings of North and South and Jane Eyre affected their view of class. Although Milton and Millcote both represent northern manufacturing towns, Gaskell portrays a more accurate view of society than does Bronte. Of the working classes she comments, "They came rushing along, with bold, fearless faces, and loud laughs and jests, particularly aimed at all those who appeared to be above them in rank or station. The tones of their unrestrained voices and their carelessness of all the common rules of street politeness, frightened Margaret." Jane never really entered a town setting, as Margaret did, so she did not witness the effects of class distinctions as Margaret could.

In Victorian England, a great stratification existed between the upper and lower classes. The upper classes claimed that the lower classes "cannot be associated in any regular way with industrial or family life," and that their "ultimate standard of life is almost savage, both in its simplicity and in its excesses." (Reader, Victorian England, 117-119, 1973) A lack of adequate nutrition, medicinal care, and sanitary resources also contributed to the stigma attached to poor people. The disease and malnutrition that ran rampant among the poor caused "stunted physiques" and pale countenances that caused not only economic division between the classes, but also physical division as well.

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**Class Disparities and Linguistic Mannerisms in Gaskell and Dickens**

*Jonathan Glasser, English 151, Brown University, 2003*

In chapter eight of North and South, Margaret befriends a textile worker named Nicholas Higgins. During her stay in Milton, Margaret becomes close not only with Higgins himself, but also with his daughter, Bessy, who is dying of consumption. Margaret's interactions with Higgins and his daughter give the reader a sobering reminder of just how much suffering the working-class was forced to endure:

"Spring nor summer will do me good,' said the girl quietly. "I'm afeared hoo speaks truth. I'm afeared hoo's too far gone in a waste.' (ch.8, p.73)

"And I think, if this should be th' end of all, and if all I've been born for is just to work my heart and life away, and to sicken i' this dree place, wi' them mill-noises in my ears for ever, until I could scream out for them to stop, and let me have a little piece o' quiet — and wi' the fluff filling my lungs I could go mad' (ch.13, p.101)

Bessy and Margaret are the same age, and yet the disparity between these two girls is incredible. Margaret was fortunate enough to grow up completely surrounded by all of the beauties that life has to offer. Whether drawing the landscape of Helstone or indulging in the luxuries of Harley Street, Margaret's life before she came to Milton was not characterized by much suffering. Bessy, on the other hand, has only known misery and sadness. Her short life was devoted to working in a mill, and ultimately, her death was the result of that very same mill.
Gaskell uses the Higginses in order to comment on the immense class disparities of the Victorian period and to show the terrible suffering that resulted from these disparities. In order to allow the reader to distinguish immediately between a working-class character and a character of the gentry, Gaskell uses linguistic mannerisms and dialect. For example, Nicholas Higgins consistently uses the word "hoo" in place of the pronoun "she." Because there are so many characters, this technique is even more important in a novel like The Pickwick Papers where language mannerisms not only allow the reader to recognize class differences, but also permit us to distinguish between individual characters. Dickens' classic example of this technique is seen in Sam Weller:

the man in the white hat set to work upon a top-boot with increased assiduity. There was another loud ring; and the bustling old landlady of the White Hart made her appearance in the opposite gallery.

Sam,' cried the landlady, "where's that lazy, idle — why Sam — oh, there you are; why don't you answer?"

"Wouldn't be gen-teel to answer, 'till you'd done talking,' replied Sam, gruffly.

"Here, clean them shoes for number seventeen directly, and take 'em to private sitting room, number five, first floor.' The landlady flung a pair of shoes into the yard and bustled away.

"Number 5,' said Sam, as he picked up the shoes into the yard, and taking a piece of chalk from his pocket, made a memorandum of their destination on the soles — "Lady's shoes and private sittin' room! I suppose she didn't come in the vaggin." [ch.10, p.131]

Sam's dialect and sarcastic way of communicating make him easily recognizable among the many personalities in The Pickwick Papers. The fat boy is another example of this type of character. We know when the fat boy is present because he is inevitably either eating or sleeping.

Yet Sam and the fat boy are not realistic characters because Dickens bases their existence within the novel solely on their external characteristics. The reader needs these types of characters to be predictable because of the density of the novel, but at the same time, their one-dimensional personalities prevent us from getting to know them on a deeper level. For example, from the passage above, we know that Sam is part of the lower-class because of his language mannerisms and because he is a boot-black at an inn. Unlike Bessy, however, his opinions on class disparities are unknown to the reader. The high realism of North and South is witnessed in Gaskell's ability to represent a convincing portrayal of her characters' emotions and opinions. In The Pickwick Papers, on the other hand, it is precisely the frequent lack of character development that makes the novel more reminiscent of fantasy.

References
Challenging Social Hierarchies in Pickwick and North and South

Cortney Lollar '97 (English 73, 1996)

"And I think, if this should be the end of it all, and if all I've been born for is just to work my heart and life away, and to sicken i' this dree place, wi' them mill noises in my ears for ever, until I could scream out for them to stop, and let me have a little piece of quiet — and wi' the fluff filling my lungs... I could go mad..." (Gaskell, 145)

This passionate exclamation by Bessie draws attention to issues surrounding child labor and the health of factory workers that became important during the Industrial Revolution. In his essay on child labor, David Cody reflects that "The displaced working classes, from seventeenth century on, took it for granted that a family would not be able to support itself if the children were not employed." He continues, "Many children worked 16 hour days under atrocious conditions, as their elders did." Workers who made their livings in iron and coal mines generally began to work at age five and died by the age of twenty-five. Bessie and her family represent the working class. The Pickwick Papers markedly omits any commentary on class for a majority of the book. The characters in Dickens' novel approach life from a reassuringly upper-class perspective. Sam Weller, Pickwick's servant, is so happy with his station in life that he gets himself put in jail to stay by his master. But the absence of any commentary on class is a commentary in itself. The perception of Dickens as a man who represented the people appears to have been an accurate one. This novel attempts to reassure the working and middle classes by creating a way to escape the trials and tribulations of everyday life and live momentarily in a world removed from reality.

The newly created system of social class arose in response to the decline of the feudal system. The old aristocracy became the new "upper class," owing their status to wealth they earned through commerce, industry and professions. Accustomed to having power, the upper classes fought to maintain control over the political system by keeping the working and middle classes out of the system. The newly formed middle classes, those who had recently earned their wealth through industrialization or through other recently created and less respected professions, organized to challenge the political process. They succeeded in passing the Reform Act of 1832 and abolishing the Corn Laws in 1846. These actions helped the middle classes to gain control of political, and later, cultural, power. The working classes, however, gained very little from the actions of the middle classes. The continuing feeling of powerlessness experienced by the working classes led to a feeling of bitterness directed at both the upper and middle classes. The lack of political power manifested itself in poor living and working conditions, leading to illness and death in many cases. Gaskell and Dickens's awareness of the poor conditions in which the lower classes lived and worked come through in these novels. Both authors clearly work to challenge the power dynamics that existed as a result of the creation of a class system.

Thus though Gaskell and Dickens both challenge social hierarchies, they take different approaches, in part, because they aimed at different audiences. Gaskell uses realism while Dickens, throughout most of the novel, creates a fantasy world. Gaskell seems to aim her writing at someone who is from Margaret's upper-middle class, established background. Margaret takes
the readers by the hand and introduces them to the industrial world. As a upper-middle-class reader who is well established in society and skeptical of the new, self-made middle class, we relate to Margaret and her initial negative reactions to Thornton. Yet Gaskell lets us slowly be drawn into that world, introducing us to members of the working class and showing us a softer side of Thornton, so that by the end of the book, we have become thoroughly convinced that interactions among social classes are not so simple as we thought when we began the book.

Margaret returns to Helstone only to discover that her idealization of the countryside was simply that. She moves back to London and discovers that she actually misses the industrial town of Milton. When Henry Lennox returns from a visit to Milton, Margaret remarks that she "was only too willing to listen as long as he talked of Milton, though he had seen none of the people whom she more especially knew" (Gaskell, 507). And just as Margaret changes her view of Milton, Thornton changes his as well. Thornton comes to recognize that his adamant rejection of any cooperation between the factory workers and the factory owners only serves to create more problems. He announces to a party of business men,

I have arrived at the conviction that no mere institution, however wise, and however much thought may have been required to organize and arrange them, can attach class to class as they should be attached, unless the working out of such institutions bring the individuals of the different classes into actual personal contact. Such intercourse is the very breath of life. (Gaskell, 525)

Margaret, too, feels that interactions among the classes are "the very breath of life." She learns to love Milton and the way of life and the people that represent it, as does the upper-middle class reader. The reader sees the world through Margaret's eyes; and through Margaret's eyes, the reader is persuaded by Gaskell's re-creation of the social structure.

Dickens, however, uses a completely different technique in his challenge of the social structure. Although Dickens had a wide readership, a novel such as The Pickwick Papers seems especially aimed at the lower classes. Although everyone can feel a sense of comfort from reading about Pickwick and his friends, the stories are especially comfort those who constantly feel the pressures of daily living. Rather than recreate the images of suffering and depression that the lower classes see daily, Dickens's approach is to tell funny stories. In the introduction to The Pickwick Papers, Dickens explains that the novel was "designed for the introduction of diverting characters and incidents" (Dickens, 49). Social commentary does exist in the novel, in the form of the lawyers, Dodson and Fogg, and the prison, but this commentary is less blatant and harsh than in Gaskell's novel. Pickwick can still order a "little dining table, a roast leg of mutton and an enormous meat pie, with sundry dishes of vegetables, and pots of porter" while in prison (Dickens, 716). Thus even in prison Dickens creates the illusion of comfort. Yet by aiming the novel at a lower class audience, and by acknowledging the need for some form of diversion, Dickens too is challenging the strict divisions of class.
Contrast of the Industrial North and Rural South

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North and South argues that the Industrial Midlands represent the future, and a better future at that, by dramatizing Margaret Hale's gradual conversion from Heltone to Milton. Her godfather Mr. Bell, who playfully complains that her residence in Milton has "quite corrupted her," describes Margaret as "a democrat, a red republican, a member of the Peace society, a socialist," to which she responds, "Papa, it's all because I'm standing up for the progress of commerce. Mr. Bell would have had it keep still at exchanging wild-beast skins for acrons" [Chapter 40]. Margaret has in fact become converted to industrialism, urban life, a rising working class, and many other aspects of modern life, so when she and Thornton marry both have tempered their original views.

Among the contrasts that Gaskell provides, the following have particular importance:

1. Differences in standard of living of farm workers and mill workers

Mr. Hale voices the shock of encountering the culture of the north that Margaret registers when he admits,

I hardly know as yet how to compare one of these [worker's] houses with our Helstone cottages. I see furniture here which our labourers would never have thought of buying, and food commonly used which they would consider luxuries; yet for these very families there seems no other resource now that their weekly wages are stopped [by a strike], but the pawn-shop. One has need to learn a different language and measure by a different standard, up here in Milton. (Chapter 20, North and South)

Late in the novel, Margaret, who had previously always held up Helstone as a rural ideal by which to criticize Milton, dissuades Higgins from travelling south for work:

I owe it to you — since it's my way of talking that has set you off on this idea — to put it all clear before you. You would not bear the dullness of the life; you don't know what it is; it would eat you away like rust. Those that have lived there all their lives, are used to soaking in the stagnant waters. They labor on from day to da, in the great solitude of steaming fields — never lifting up their poor, bent, downcast heads. The hard spadework ribs them of their brain of life; the sameness of their toil deadens their imagination. . . . they go home brutishly tired, poor creatures! caring for nothing but food and rest. [Chapter 37]

This recognition that the inhabitants of her rural idyll suffer in grinding poverty and ignorance prepares for her later encounter with barbaric superstition in Helstone in the form of the woman who burns a cat alive to use its cries in a magic spell.
2. Differences in **working class behavior**

By focusing upon Margaret's experiences, Gaskell emphasizes the northern factory workers' dramatic lack of reserve toward strangers and absence of deference toward those higher in the social scale:

The side of the town on which Crampton lay was especially a thoroughfare for the factory people. In the back streets around them there were many mills, out of which poured streams of people two or three times a day. Until Margaret had learnt the times of their ingress and egress, she was very unfortunate in constantly falling in with them. They came rushing along with bold, fearless faces, and loud laughts and jests, particularly aimed at those who appeared to be above them in rank or station. The notes of their unrestrained voices, and their carelessness of all common rules of street politeness, frightened Maragret a little at first. The girls, with their rough, but not unfriendly freedom, would comment on her dress, even touch her shawl or gown to ascertain the exact material; nay once or twice she was asked questions relative to some material which they particularly admired. There was such a simple reliance on her womanly sympathy with their love of dress, and on her kindliness, that she gladly replied to these inquiries, as soon as she understood them; and half smiled back at their remarks. She did not mind any number of girls, loud and boisterious though they might be. But she alternately dreaded and fired up against the workmen, who commented not on her dress, but on her looks, in the same open, fearless manner. She, who had hitherto felt that even the most refined remark on her personal appearance was an impertinence, had to endure undisguised admiration from these outspoken men. But the very outspokenness marked their innocence of any intention to hurt her delicacy, as she would have perceived if she had been less frightened by the disorderly tumult. Out of her fright came a flash of indignation which made her face scarlet, and her eyes gather flame, as she heard some of their speeches. Yet there were other sayings of theirs, which, when she reached the quiet safety of home, amused her even while they irritated her. [Chapter 8]

3. Differences in **upper middle-class behavior**

[Margaret] was surprised to think how much she enjoyed this dinner. She knew enough now to understand many local interests — nay, even some of the technical words employed by the eager millowners. . . . They talked in desperate earnest — not in the used-up style that wearied her so in the old London parties. . . . She liked the exultation in the sense of power which these Milton men had. It might be rather rampant in its display, and savour of boasting; but still they seemed to defy the old limits of possibility, in a kind of fine intoxication, caused by the recollection of what had been achieved, and what yet should be. [Chapter 20]
Masters and Men

Jamie Mendac '97 (English 61, 1993)

The industrial revolution brought technology that enabled products to be manufactured on a large scale and employed thousands of people. With all this change, however, came hardship and trouble, including the constant clash between workers and the owners of the factories over wages and working conditions. Workers formed unions to address their interests, and sometimes these unions struck in an attempt to get their employers to address their grievances.

In November 1853, workers at Preston went on strike for a number of reasons. According to them, the mill owners had promised a general ten percent raise in wages with the return of prosperity in 1847, but when prosperity returned, wages did not increase. When workers insisted their masters give them a raise, the threatened masters closed down their mills leaving thousands workers unemployed. According to The London Illustrated News, <

The facts of the case seem to be that in 1847, when a general 10-percent reduction took place, the millowners either promised their operatives — or they believed so — a general 10 percent advance on the rates of piecework as soon as prosperity returned. Prosperity came, but with it no general rise — or at least none to the extent looked for. Dissatisfaction began to prevail...the time had come for insisting on a general rise of payments in their respective trades...the associated masters, feeling that the intention was to take them in detail, closed their mills. ("The Preston Wages dispute," November 12, 1853)

A similar strike takes place in Gaskell's North and South, which appeared just two years after the Preston strike. All of the workers refuse to work for the cotton millowners in Milton for reasons similar to those of the Preston hands. Their employers pay them poorly and plan on reducing their wages. According to the workers, the owners get rich off their work while they force workers to take a pay cut. "Why yo' see, there's five or six masters who have set themselves again paying the wages they've been paying these two years past, and flourishing upon, and getting richer upon. And now they come to us, and say we're to take less. And we won't. We'll just clem to death first, and see who'll work for 'em then." (Gaskell 182) The events and details in Gaskell's novel clearly mirror the events in Victorian society.

Much of the time the two factions misunderstood and disagreed with each other. In North and South, the millowners told their side of the story, which differed greatly from the views of the hands. They are angry that the hands do not understand that the price of cotton on the market has dropped and as a result the millowners are forced to cut their spending if they are to compete with the Americans.

The Americans are getting their yarns so into the general market, that our only chance is producing them at a lower rate. If we can't, we may shut up shop at once, and hands and masters go alike on tramp. Yet these fools go back to the prices paid three years ago. [Gaskell 195]

This complete lack of communication, in addition to the contempt many of the millowners had for their workers, was the root of the troubles of the workers and the millowners.
The newspaper article claimed that the millowners' unnecessary cruelty towards their workers caused a large part of the general enmity. "They are blamed for a generally stern and unbending demeanor towards their operatives, which freezes their sympathy, and lays the groundwork for constant suspicion and occasional violent ruptures, like the present" ("The Preston Wages Dispute," The Illustrated London News, November 12, 1853).

This same attitude appears in North and South. At first Mr. Thorton feels that it is workers' own fault that they are so poor. He feels that they deserve to live in horrid conditions.

I believe that this suffering, which Miss Hale says is impressed on the countenances of the people of Milton, is but the natural punishment of dishonestly-enjoyed pleasure at some former period of their lives. I do not look on self-indulgent, sensual people as worthy of my hatred; I simply look upon them with contempt for their poorness of character." [Gaskell 126]

Later in the novel Thorton changes after being greatly influenced by Margaret. He learns that these men are not different from him. They are like in him and do not deserve to be scorned and looked upon with contempt." Once brought face to face, man to man, with an individual of the masses around him, and (take notice) out of the character of master and workman, in the first instance they had each begun to recognise that "we have all of us one human heart" (Gaskell 511). Perhaps if the millowners of Victorian society had followed Thorton's suit, all enmity between the two factions would have eventually dissolved.

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North and South and Contemporary Attitudes toward Masters and Workers

Annette Chang '95 (English 61, 1993)

Two articles from the 1857 Illustrated London News, written a year after Gaskell wrote North and South, reveal the accuracy of her presentation of the tension between workmen and master and propose the same solution to problems it created for Victorian society. Gaskell sets her novel against the background of the master-workman relationship, with characters such as Higgins, the workman, and Thornton, the master.

The antagonism growing between workmen the master stems from the stubborn unwillingness of both sides to communicate. Because each side is ignorant of the motives and opinions of the other, their hatred and bitterness grow to a pitch. The factory owner Thornton, in Chapter 15 of North and South, when questioned "why could you not explain what good reason you have for expecting a bad trade [and thus having to lower the already low wages of the workmen]?", answers simply that "Do you give your servants reasons for your expenditure, or your economy in the use of your own money? We, the owners of capital, have a right to choose what we will do with it... I will not be forced to give my reasons" (164). Even though he in this way advocates the ignorance of the workmen, it is precisely this ignorance that embitters him; an exasperated
Thornton says of the workmen, "and these were the men who thought themselves fitted to direct the masters in the disposal of their capital!" (196).

This lack of communication resulted into heightened anger until a workmen's strike could release it. The futility of the strike only embitters the master and especially the workmen more. However, Mr. Hale reveals the elementary means of alleviating friction between master and workmen — communication: "I wish some of the kindest and wisest of masters would meet some of you [work]men and have a good talk on these things; It would, surely, be the best way of getting over your difficulties" (293). Only in this way can the ignorance barriers fall to promote a healthy relationship.

Turning to the contemporary press, one learns that on April 28, 1856, workmen instigated the "Scotch Colliers' Strike." These workmen, striking against the master's insistence of lower wages — the same reason given in North and South — were ignorant of why the masters had to tighten their incomes, and the masters were ignorant of, or rather indifferent to, the repercussions this reduction had on the poor workmen. Anger mounted, and while

hitherto the men have, generally speaking, conducted themselves in an orderly manner . . . it is needless to dispute that such a large body of men, ranging over the country, and assembling daily in masses of from 200 to 12,000, is likely to lead to mischief, and calculated at least to excite great uneasiness" (Illustrated London News, April 28, 1856).

Margaret and the Victorian media both understood that any alternative besides violence would best resolve the problems that distanced the workmen and the masters further from each other and that communication would best serve all sides. On February 23, 1856, an article appeared similarly presenting communication as the solution to the master-workmen antagonism:

Mr. Mackinson moved for a Select Committee to consider the inconvenience now felt in the country from the want of equitable tribunals, by whose means any difference between masters and operatives might be satisfactorily adjusted . . . The gentleman referred to the satisfactory manner in which the French system had resulted, by having a tribunal composed of delegates from both employers and the employed . . . and he urged the adoption of such a scheme for this country.

A year after Gaskell's novel, then, Victorian England stumbled upon the discovery that only communication would alleviate the mounting friction between master and workman. By creating a tribunal with representatives from both the workmen and the masters, ignorant opinions and unfounded anger would subside, and the two classes would live in harmony, as they did in North and South.
Dominance Issues in Gaskell's *North and South*

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Class relations play a significant role in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*. But there is more to class relations than simply masters and workers — there is the relation between masters and servants in the home. This is a more traditional relationship than that found in factories, but the dynamic is essentially the same. However, gender becomes more of an issue with the serving class, as the "woman of the house" can be in a position of power over maids and servants, a position she is very unlikely to hold in the industrial world. Early in the novel, Margaret has a confrontation with her housekeeper in Helston, Dixon. Dixon makes condescending comments about Margaret's father, and she quickly comes to his defense:

Dixon had been so much accustomed to comment upon Mr. Hale's proceedings to her mistress...that she never noticed Margaret's flashing eye and dilating nostril. To hear her father talked of in this way by a servant to her face!

'Dixon,' she said, in the low tone she always used when much excited, which had a sound in it as of some distant turmoil, or threatening storm breaking far away. 'Dixon! you forget to whom you are speaking.' She stood upright and firm on her feet now, confronting the waiting-maid, and fixing her with her steady discerning eye. 'I am Mr. Hale's daughter. Go! You have made a strange mistake, and one that I am sure your own good feeling will make you sorry for when you think about it.' . . .

Dixon did not know whether to resent these decided words or to cry; either course would have done with her mistress...and she, who would have resented such words from any one less haughty and determined in manner, was subdued enough. . . .

From henceforth Dixon obeyed and admired Margaret. She said it was because she was so like poor Master Frederick; but the truth was, that Dixon, as do many others, liked to feel herself ruled by a powerful and decided nature. [48]

**Questions**

1. When Gaskell attributes Dixon's subordinate desire to "many others," is she referring to many other women? Workers? Servants? What exactly is the meaning of that statement?

2. How does Dixon's relationship with the Hales compare to the relationship of a factory worker to Thornton? How does this reflect the broader "north and south" contrast?

3. What is the significance of a woman (Margaret) wielding so much power in a Victorian era relationship, albeit one so innately unbalanced as the master/servant relationship?
The role of the Working Class Woman in the Labor Strikes

Cortney Lollar '97 (English 73, 1996)

In her article, "'What Must Not Be Said:' North and South and the Problem of Women's Work," Catherine Barnes Stevenson points out:

North and South is frequently praised for its 'realism in depicting the strike in Milton North which was based on the actual labor conflict in Preston in 1853-54... Yet that 'realism' breaks down in one significant particular: in Preston 55.8% of the factory labor force consisted of females over the age of 13.

She cites a contemporary study that estimates the "number of women involved in the Preston lockout [was placed at] 11,800, while the number of men was approximately half that — 6200" (Stevenson). In an article from the Illustrated London News, November 12, 1853, the numbers are similar — "of 21,000 hands, nearly half are women and children." Yet while such statistics are mentioned here and there throughout the articles on the Preston strike, the workers are still referred to as "working men." In an editorial from November 12, the newspaper states "It is probable that if masters and men could but meet together and talk the matter over in an amicable spirit the difference would, ere many days, be arranged to their mutual satisfaction." The writer continues, observing that the strike is "inflicting much hardship on the innocent women and children." This portrayal of the generalized male factory worker is not surprising, but rather, representative of the masculinization of those who were supposed to financially support the family. Yet the appeal to pathos — if men could only work this out so that the "innocent women and children" could avoid suffering — is ironic when juxtaposed with another article from the same day entitled "Sketches of Strikes and Riots in the Cotton Districts."

The author of "Sketches" refers back to a time in 1763 when labor strikes were just beginning. He tells the story of

a street and lane near the present center of Manchester [that] retains the name of 'Spinning Field.' In that field...hundreds of women, sometimes thousands at once, sat on low stools, each with her single wheel and spindle...[these] females earned more money than men did on the looms. ("Sketches of Strikes and Riots in the Cotton Districts," Illustrated London News. November 12, 1853. p. 403)

The gist of this paragraph is an explanation of how male workers were dependent on female workers for their work. Until the females had spun the yarn, the male workers could not go to the loom and make cloth or ribbons. Thus the invention of the spinning-frame, an invention which allowed the male workers to gain some control over their work. This invention came about as a result of "an impudent Manchester chapman [who] attempted familiarity with the daughter of the landlady." This "chapman" knocks over the young woman's wheel, leading to Hargreaves' vision of a spinning-frame. Hargreaves suffers for his invention, however. Mobs of women "drew forth...tramping in their wooden-soled clogs on the stone causeways- and shouting with voices which made strong-hearted men tremble." The female workers rise up in protest, injuring his sons and driving Hargreaves back to his home to protect his wife and children. The author places
this story in the present, claiming "You may, in fancy, see him as he was then...". This article, positioned right before the article on "The Preston Wages Dispute," portrays women workers as indignant and controlling, quite a contrast to the "innocent women and children" mentioned only pages later.

The story of women laborers protesting seems to remind the reader that while "innocent women and children" are being harmed, other women (who cannot be included in the masculinization of the worker) are also out there creating the conflict. The author thereby posits these women as the source of the current conflict. He tells the story of the spinning-frame in the present, drawing attention to how similar the past labor conflicts correspond to the present. This idea is further supported by a short article written on October 8, 1853, entitled "The Value of Female Industry." The article quotes a Mr. Dargan of Limerick, Ireland as saying

I believe it [female industry] is a source of more value than any other branch of industry practiced in Ireland... I was astonished to hear that two millions of money come to this country from the labour of these girls. There is not education of greater importance to females than the cultivation of habits of industry... we would find [value] in the reply of Madame de Stail, when Napoleon Bonaparte asked her how he could make France a great nation. The reply was, 'Educate the mothers.' ("The Value of Female Industry," The Illustrated London News, October 8, 1853)

The equation of strong and useful women workers with Ireland, which was often racialized by the English into an "other," is very telling. Only in Ireland, the author seems to suggest, are strong women workers valorized. In England, strong women are a source of conflict.

Why, then, would Elizabeth Gaskell, in writing a story which also creates a strong female character, "shrink that female majority into a solitary disabled worker?" (Stevenson). Stevenson proposes that "from the 1830s on, the working woman was the center of an ideological battle in Victorian culture," using the notion put forth by Dorothy Thompson that "in the 1850s, working-class women began to re-define their 'place in society' by 'accept[ing] an image of themselves which involved both home-centeredness and inferiority." This battle is clearly being waged in the articles above. By creating the image of an angry female factory worker, the authors suggest that a woman's place is not in the factory, but at home. These authors place women in the role of the "innocent" wives who are being harmed by the strike. Apparently Gaskell buys into this idea. Although Margaret, the protagonist of North and South, does not simply accept an image of herself as inferior (she, in fact, is the one with financial control at the end of the book), she is, in many ways, confined to the home. Although she does have complete independence and financial control, she has inherited the money. She still enjoys a life of leisure. So while Gaskell does not concede to the idea of women's inferiority, she may concede to the notion that a woman's place is in the home. This idea is supported through the characterizations of Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Thornton and would add support to her portrayal of Bessie as a "disabled worker," for any woman who decides to work must be disabled in order for "the triumph of domestic ideology." Thus Gaskell's portrayal of Bessie works to counter the stereotype of the angry female factory worker and instead works to confirm the image of the "innocent" woman who is harmed by, and therefore opposed to, the labor strike.
North and South and Contemporary Agricultural Workers

Eliza Brownell '97 (English 61 1993)

The front-page article in the Illustrated London News of Saturday, February 14, 1851, sheds an interesting light on Elizabeth Gaskell's treatment of the rural poor in her novel North and South (1855). "Mr. Disraeli's Remedies for Agricultural Distress" makes clear that the British government was more concerned with the plight of the farmers than of the mill workers. Although Gaskell devotes much of the novel to stressing that members of the poor working class ought to be seen as human and treated accordingly, that conditions must be improved, and that the underprivileged workers should be granted more control over their own lives, the government did not seem at all worried about them. In fact, the article quotes Disraeli as wondering, "What is the reason that when all are prosperous, an important class should suffer?" The important class to which he refers is the agricultural class — the industrial class is grouped with the prosperous "all."

The farmers had tried to pass a bill "protecting" the crops they produced by setting minimum prices, restricting import of crops that could be domestically grown, and reducing taxation. The News distinctly opposed these measures, arguing that Agriculture . . . "wept when all around it smiled", . . . the cheapness of food, which made all other classes prosperous and happy, was ruin to everyone engaged in the cultivation of the land . . . There is no doubt that agriculture in this country is not prosperous; but it should be remembered that it never was prosperous within any tradtionary or historical period.

According to the paper, giving English farmers protection would cause them to become slothful and greedy, following the example of "The protected agriculturalists of France, who allege, like their English compeers, that they cannot cultivate the soil at sufficient profit, and who, having some protection, are clamorous for more." The downtrodden in Gaskell's world are factory workers who have to strike for better wages, suffer from diseases like "black-spittle", grinder's rot and potter's asthma, and are treated like animals by their employers. Nonetheless, the government, which considered the working class a harmonious part of the Great Industrial Chain of Being, worried that the farmers were trying to squeeze more benefits from the state than were due them. "It was . . . to say the least of it, exceedingly impolitic," The article begins, "to excite hopes which (Parliament) knew they could not realise, and to encourage the respectable and estimable people, who cultivate the land, in the false notion, that they are a class apart and to be aided in their business at the expense of all the rest of the community." This view lumps the workers with the middle class and nobility, as part of the section of the population that would have to pay if the agriculturalists recieved protection.

Gaskell does hint at the unhappy condition of "the estimable people, who cultivate the land," when Higgins expresses his desire to move to the country which Margaret has always described as so idyllic. She realizes both that the rural poor exist in greater poverty than do urban slum-dwellers and that the city and industry are the future and life of England. She at last agrees with
the Illustrated News that the problem is a problem of the poor in general, and not of the specific types of poverty. She would no doubt have agreed with the paper's solution to the agricultural problem which decreed

Let agriculturalists, instead of considering themselves a class apart, make common cause with their fellow citizens, in calling for a reform and re-adjustment of our whole fiscal system, and they will do good service to themselves and to their country . . setting class against class, and interest against interest — can effect no good for agriculture. It . . . impedes a work which, sooner or later, must be attempted in justice to the whole industry of the country — whether it be exercised in the corn-field or in the workshop, in the production of food, or in that of calicoes and hardware. [The Illustrated London News, 18, No. 470 (Saturday, February 15, 1851)].
Christian Service and Female Servitude in North and South

Annette Chang '95 (English 61, 1993)

Victorian England, having built its foundations upon Christianity, cast female identity in the Christian mold of womanhood. Society esteemed "goodness" in women, among other godly characteristics, and in this age of charity, goodness meant sacrificial service to others (Young, Portrait of an Age, 99). In New Testament the apostle Paul asserts that "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love" (Galatians 5:13). Christianity commanded the submission of women to their husbands even from the beginning in the Garden of Eden: "To the woman he said . . . your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you" (Genesis 3:16). Although God commanded both sexes to serve one another, women received the primary load of servitude since they were submissive to men. This Christian concept, then, innocently interwove servitude more with the submissive female identity, limiting a woman's freedom to live for herself.

Like Jane Eyre, Margaret, the Christian heroine of North and South, serves her loved ones out of the goodness of her heart, but their growing dependency burdens her more and more. Although she good-naturedly takes on this heavy load of responsibilities for her father, mother and Bessie Higgins, Margaret inwardly yearns to escape this world peopled solely with provincial minds and weak character. She must stifle this urge to "get high up . . . see far away . . . and take a deep breath of fullness in that air" (Ch. 13) as a sacrifice to those she serves. The passage in the beginning of Chapter 31 reveals Margaret's hidden urge to free herself from the unbearable weight of her responsibilities:

Margaret went languidly about, assisting Dixon in her task of arranging the house. Her eyes were continually blinded by tears, but she had no time to give way to regular crying. The father and brother depended upon her; while they were giving way to grief she must be working, planning, considering. Even the necessary arrangements for the funeral seemed to devolve upon her. Margaret has no time to "give way to crying" because others depend on her to be strong. Her role deprives her of even expressing her heartfelt grief for her dead mother. However, she must continue to relieve her family of responsibilities, "even the necessary funeral arrangements."

This necessary responsibility to support her brother and her father, while being in the truest sense Christian servitude, strips her of personal freedom to act as she herself wishes. Unable to escape the bounds of this servitude, Margaret performs her Christian duties less than passionately, even unwillingly and "languidly." Margaret knows her destiny lies beyond the realm of this provincial world. While initially frustrated and restless to move forward, she resigns herself to mechanically performing her duties, realizing the futility in attempting to escape this crystallized self into which Christianity has molded her. Margaret knows no other self other than that which Christianity taught her.
Working Class Anti-Religion and Atheism

George P. Landow, Professor of English and Art History, Brown University

One of the more powerful scenes in North and South takes place when Nicolas Higgins, the textile worker, visits Mr. Hale after Higgins' daughter, Bessie, dies of consumption, which various forms of air and industrial pollution have induced. Although Higgins admits that he still believes in God, he makes a powerful indictment of established religion, which he sees as a weapon of the capitalist mill-owners against their employees. A cultural relativist, Higgins tells the former clergyman:

"I reckon yo'd not ha' much belief in yo' if yo' lived here — if yo' been bred here. I axe your pardon if I use wrong words, but what I mean by belief just now, is a-thinking on sayings and maxims and promises made by folk yo' never saw, about the things and the life yo' never saw, nor no one else. Now, yo' say those are the true things, and true sayings, a true life. I just say, where's the proof? There's many and many a wiser, and scores better learned than I am around me — folk who've had time to think on these things — while my time has had to be gu'en up to getting my bread. Well, I sees these people. Their lives is pretty open to me. They're real folk. They don't believe i' the Bible — not they. They may say they do, for form's sake; but Lord, Sir, d'ye think their first cry i' th' morning is, 'What shall I do to get hold of eteranl life?' or 'What shall I do to fill my purse this blessed day? Where shall I go? What bargains shall I strike?' The purse and the gold and the notes is real things; things as can be felt and touched; them's realities; and eternal life is all a talk. . . . If salvation, and the life to come, and what not, was true — not in men's words, but in means hearts' core — dun yo' not think they'd din us wi' it as they do wi' political 'conomy? They're mighty anxious to come round to us wi' that piece o' wisdom; but t'other would be a greater convorsation, if it were true."

Note Gaskell's use of class and local dialect for characterization and to further her rhetoric of realism. This indictment, which incidentally demonstrates working-class intellectual ability to her middle class reader, sounds remarkably like that made by the Evangelicals he attacks (most North Country capitalists came from the evangelical and dissenting groups than from the Established Church) on what Wilberforce called "nominal Christians." Higgins also makes a point much like those Carlyle, Thoreau, and Ruskin makes in their attacks on the status-quo.

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Religious Doubt in North and South

[ [From Joseph Kestner, Protest & Reform: The British Social Narrative by Women, 1827-1867.] ]

According to Kestner,

North and South is a mid-Victorian text in that it confronts two questions close to the mid-century consciousness: religious doubt and the nature of progress. By confrontation with one or
the other of these the characters achieve self-realization. Religious doubt is the catalyst for the Hales' removal from the comforts of Helstone to Milton-Northern (Manchester).

How does Gaskell handle religious doubts in ways similar to Tennyson's In Memoriam? In what nonliterary art does Victorian doubt appear?

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Rev. Hale's Crisis of Faith in North and South

George P. Landow, Professor of English and Art History, Brown University

The decision by Margaret Hale's father to resign his living resembles those which appear in Froude's Nemesis of Faith, Mary Arnold Ward's Robert Ellsmere, and many other Victorian novels and autobiographies. In North and South this spiritual decision, which many modern readers might find difficult honoring, generates the novel by forcing Margaret and the Hale household to abandon their apparently idyllic existence and encounter different classes, economic attitudes, and living conditions. The late-twentieth-century reader must ask does such a plot device contribute to the novel's commitment to realism. On what grounds can we answer such a question?

In the following passage Mr. Hale informs his daughter of his decision.

"I must no longer be a minister in the Church of England. . . . I can meet the consequences of my painful, miserable doubts; but it is an effort beyond me to speak of what has caused me so much suffering."

"Doubts, pap! Doubts as to religion?" asked Margaret, more shocked than ever.

"No! not doubts as to religion; not the slightest injury to that. . . . You could not understand it all, if I told you — my anxiety, for years past, to know whether I had any right to hold my living — my efforts to quench my smouldering doubts by the authority of the Church. Oh! Margaret, how I love the holy Church from which I am to be shut out!" He could not go on for a moment or two. Margaret could not tell what to say; it seemed to her as terribly mysterious as if her father were about to turn Mohammedan. . . . The one staid foundation of her home, of her idea of her beloved father, seemed reeling and rocking. . . .

"Margaret, dear!" said he, drawing her closer, "think of the early martyrs; think of the thousands who have suffered."

"But, father," said she, suddenly lifting her flushed, tear-wet face, "the early martyrs suffered for the truth, while you — oh! dear, dear papa!"

"I suffer for conscience' sake, my child . . . I must do what my conscience bids. . . . Your poor mother's fond wish, gratified at last in the mocking way in which over-fond wishes are too often
fulfilled — Sodom apples as they are — has brought on this crisis, for which I ought to be, and hope I am thankful. It is not a month since the bishop offered me another living; if I had accepted it, I should have had to make a fresh declaration of conformity to the Liturgy at my institution. . . [Chapter 4]

The hard reality was that, her father had so admitted tempting doubts into his mind as to become a schismatic — an outcast. [Chapter 5]
The Rose Image in North and South

[From Joseph Kestner, Protest & Reform: The British Social Narrative by Women, 1827-1867.]

Gaskell provides the final summation of attitudes about the agricultural and urban sectors that had been investigated by Stone, Kingsley, and Cooke Taylor, integrating these into the consciousness of a middle-class woman. Margaret realizes that if "I live in a factory town, I must speak factory language when I want it" (281). When she goes to London after the death of her parents, she finds it deadening, "a strange unsatisfied vacuum" (445). With her experience of both the northern and the southern counties, Margaret Hale functions as a reader surrogate in evaluating cultural differences. By this strategy, Gaskell locates such comparisons in her character's consciousness rather than in the narrator's, as had been the case in Mary Barton with the narrator evaluating the diverse social positions.

Gaskell registers these changes by a unifying image of the rose. She remarks early that the roses grow all over the cottages. Margaret is shown picking roses, but the change comes when Margaret sees the cheap paper on the walls in Milton: "You must prepare yourself for our drawing-room paper. Pink and blue roses, with yellow leaves!" (73). That these roses are associated with Margaret is apparent in Mrs. Thornton's hostility to her for snubbing her son: "Her sharp Damascus blade seemed out of place and useless among rose-leaves" (374). When Margaret visits Helstone again she sees "the garden, the grass-plat, formerly so daintily trim that even a stray rose-leaf seemed like a fleck on its exquisite arrangement and propriety, was strewed with children's things; a bag of marbles here, a hoop there; a straw hat forced down upon a rose-tree as on a peg, to the destruction of a long, beautiful, tender branch laden with flowers" (469). At the novel's conclusion Thornton gives her a dead rose from Helstone, marking her assimilation to a new order, the dominance of agriculture by industry.

Industrial Imagery in North and South and Pickwick Papers

Benjamin Graves '97 (English 73 Brown University, 1996)

Midway through Chapter 31 in The Pickwick Papers, Sam Weller and Pickwick happen upon a "celebrated Sassage factory," whereupon Sam narrates an urban legend involving the "mysterious disappearance of a respectable tradesman . . . the inwenter o' the patent-never-leavin-off sassage steam 'ingine'" that would "swaller up a pavin' stone . . . and grind it into sassages as easy as if it was a tender young babby." A contented man in most other respects, this hapless tradesman takes a most "ow-dacious wixin" as his wife, and the morning after a
particular bought of their "screamin' and kickin," the husband turns up "missin." Two months later, Sam reports, the following interview occurred.

One Saturday night, a little thin old gen'lm'n comes into the shop in a great passion and says, 'Are you the missis o' this here shop?' 'Yes I am,' says she. 'Well Ma'am,' says he, 'then I've just looked in to say, that me and my family ain't a goin' to be choaked for nothin'; and more than that Ma'am,' he says, 'you'll allow me to observe that as you don't use the primest parts of the meat in the manfacter o' sassages, I think you'd find beef come nearly as cheap as buttons.' 'Buttons, Sir!' says she. 'Buttons, Ma'am,' says the little old gentleman, unfolding a bit of paper, and shewin' twenty or thirty halves o' buttons. "Nice seasonin' for sassages, is trousers' buttons, Ma'am.' "They're my husband's buttons," says the widder, beginnin to fain. "What!" screams the little old gen'l'm'n, turnin' very pale. 'I see it all,' says the widder; 'in a fit of temporary insanity he rashly converted hisself into sassages!" (Pickwick Papers 465, Ch. 31).

The abject working-conditions resulting from nineteenth-century industrial expansion in England were well known to both Gaskell and Dickens. "The conditions under which women and children toiled in mines and factories were unimaginably brutal" (Norton II 894), and involved among other things low wages, excessive working hours, the exploitation of children laborers, and dangerous machinery. In terms of the food industry, Anthony S. Wohl's research suggests that Dickens' comical portrayal of "'those odds and ends of meat, the by-products of the butchering business'" is perhaps not far from truth. "The Privy Council estimated in 1862 that one-fifth of butcher's meat in England and Wales came from animals which were 'considerably diseased' or had died of pleuro-pneumonia, and anthacid or anthracoid diseases" (Wohl, "Adulteration and Contamination of Food"). Laura Del Col has similarly researched the textile industry against which Gaskell inveighs, citing Michael Sadler's parliamentary investigation into the condition of textile mills in 1832 as one of the "great reports on the life of the industrial class" that led ultimately to the passage of the Act of 1833 limiting hours of employment for women and children in textile work (Del Col, "The Life of the Industrial Worker"). Del Col also draws upon P. Gaskell's observations of the "physical deterioration of textile workers" in Gaskell's The Manufacturing Population of England — a deterioration physically manifest in the "spiritless and dejected air," the "sallow and pallid" complexions, and "flat feet" of "great numbers of girls and women walking lamely or awkwardly."

In this sense both Gaskell and Dickens comment upon the material reality of nineteenth-century factory workers; however, where Dickens satirizes these conditions, Gaskell renders the conditions of Northern textile work through Bessy's realistic monologue. That is, Bessy's description of "fluff" bears a striking similarity to the well-documented conditions of nineteenth-century textile mills. In terms of theme, Bessy, herself a teenager (and ostensibly the only woman Gaskell describes as a worker), decries the mutability of life. Having "been bornäjust to work my heart and life away," she foresees the "end of it all." It seems Gaskell aligns her sympathies with Bessy by simultaneously lamenting the futility of Bessy's situation and finding genuine value in Bessy's Northern ethos of enterprise, self-sufficiency, and agency. So rigorous are these textile mills that the "mill noises" resonate against Bessy's mental and physical health. She "could go mad," but also suffers from the "fluff filling my lungs." The theme of mutability is brought about largely by Gaskell's technique or style of realism. That is, Gaskell participates in
the "nineteenth-century movement that believed novelists and painters should concentrate on describing the physical, material details of life" ("Realism" Victorian Web).

If Gaskell is concerned with accurately portraying these factories, Dickens attempts the same social reform through satire. Satire emphasizes humanity's ridiculousness by means of humor in an attempt to reform or correct these follies and improve the human condition. Whereas Gaskell conflates Bessy's body and spirit, her mental anguish and physical deterioration, Dickens literally casts the body of his tragic protagonist headlong into the "sassage" machine — turning him ironically into "sassage" himself. Sam's urban legend provides Pickwick with much-needed insights into the horrors of industrial life. No matter how cynical and fantastic the tragic protagonist's "mysterious disappearance" may be, Sam's embedded tale cleverly suggests the same social reform that Gaskell desires. Notice, too, that whereas Gaskell's Bessy occupies an important space in the novel's narrative, Dicken's depiction of industry appears in an ancillary embedded tale.
Elizabeth Gaskell: Biography

In November 1865, when reporting her death, The Athenaeum rated Gaskell as "if not the most popular, with small question, the most powerful and finished female novelist of an epoch singularly rich in female novelists." Today Gaskell is generally considered a lesser figure in English letters remembered chiefly for her minor classics Cranford and Wives and Daughters: An Every-day Story. Gaskell's early fame as a social novelist began with the 1848 publication of Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life, in which she pricked the conscience of industrial England through her depiction and analysis of the working classes. Many critics were hostile to the novel because of its open sympathy for the workers in their relations with the masters, but the high quality of writing and characterization were undeniable, and critics have compared Mary Barton to the work of Friedrich Engels and other contemporaries in terms of its accuracy in social observation. The later publication of North and South, also dealing with the relationship of workers and masters, strengthened Gaskell's status as a leader in social fiction. Gaskell's fiction was deeply influenced by her upbringing and her marriage. The daughter of a Unitarian clergyman who was a civil servant and journalist, Gaskell was brought up after her mother's death by her aunt in Knutsford, a small village that served as the prototype not only for Cranford but also for Hollingford in Wives and Daughters and the settings of numerous short stories and novellas. In 1832 she married William Gaskell, a Unitarian clergyman in Manchester in whose ministry she actively participated and with whom she collaborated to write the poem "Sketches Among the Poor" in 1837.

"Our Society at Cranford," now the first two chapters of Cranford, appeared in Dickens' Household Words on 13 December 1851 and was itself a fictionalized version of an earlier essay "The Last Generation in England." Dickens so liked the original episode that he pressed Gaskell for more; at irregular intervals between January 1852 and May 1853 eight more episodes appeared.

Two controversies marred Gaskell's literary career. In 1853 she shocked and offended many of her readers with Ruth, an exploration of seduction and illegitimacy prompted by anger at moral conventions that condemned a "fallen woman" to ostracism and almost inevitable prostitution — a topic already touched on in the character of Esther in Mary Barton. The strength of the novel lies in its presentation of social conduct within a small Dissenting community when tolerance and rigid morality clash. Although some Element of the "novel with a purpose" is evident, Gaskell's sensitivity in her portrayal of character and, even more, her feel for relationships within small communities and families show a developing sense of direction as a novelist. Although critics praised the soundness of the novel's moral lessons, several members of Gaskell's congregation burned the book and it was banned in many libraries. Even Gaskell admitted that she prohibited the book to her own daughters, but she nevertheless stood by the work.

The second controversy arose following the 1857 publication of The Life of Charlotte Brontë. The biography's initial wave of praise was quickly followed by angry protests from some of the
people dealt with. In a few instances legal action was threatened; however, with the help of her husband and George Smith the problems were resolved without recourse to law. The most significant complaint resulted from Gaskell's acceptance of Branwell Brontë's version of his dismissal from his tutoring position (he blamed it on his refusal to be seduced by his employer's wife) and necessitated a public retraction in The Times, withdrawal of the second edition, and a revised third edition, the standard text. Despite the initial complications and restrictions necessitated by conventions of the period (Gaskell did not, for example, deal with Brontë's feelings for Constantin Heger), The Life of Charlotte Brontë has established itself as one of the great biographies; later biographies have modified but not replaced it.

During 1858 and 1859 Gaskell wrote several items, mainly for Dickens, of which two are of particular interest. My Lady Ludlow, a short novel cut in two by a long digressive tale, is reminiscent of Cranford, yet the setting and social breadth anticipates Wives and Daughters. The second work, Lois the Witch, is a somber novella concerning the Salem witch trials which prefigures Gaskell's next work, Sylvia's Lovers, by its interest in morbid psychology. Sylvia's Lovers is a powerful if somewhat melodramatic novel. The first two volumes are full of energy; they sparkle and have humor. The ending, however, shows forced invention rather than true tragedy. Regarded by Gaskell as "the saddest story I ever wrote," Sylvia's Lovers is set during the French Revolution in a remote whaling port with particularly effective insights into character relationships.

Most critics agree that Cousin Phillis is Gaskell's crowning achievement in the short novel. The story is uncomplicated; its virtues are in the manner of its development and telling. Cousin Phillis is also recognized as a fitting prelude for Gaskell's final and most widely acclaimed novel, Wives and Daughters: An Every-Day Story, which ran in Cornhill from August 1864 to January 1866. The final installment was never written, yet the ending was known and the novel as it exists is virtually complete. The plot of the novel is complex, relying far more on a series of relationships between family groups in Hollingford than on dramatic structure. Throughout Wives and Daughters the humorous, ironical, and sometimes satirical view of the characters is developed with a heightened sense of artistic self-confidence and maturity.

Gaskell was hostile to any form of biographical notice of her being written in her lifetime. Only months before her death, she wrote to an applicant for data: "I disapprove so entirely of the plan of writing 'notices' or 'memoirs' of living people, that I must send you on the answer I have already sent to many others; namely an entire refusal to sanction what is to me so objectionable and indecent a practice, by furnishing a single fact with regard to myself. I do not see why the public have any more to do with me than buy or reject the ware I supply to them" (4 June 1865). After her death the family sustained her objection, refusing to make family letters or biographical data available.

Critical awareness of Gaskell as a social historian is now more than balanced by awareness of her innovativeness and artistic development as a novelist. While scholars continue to debate the precise nature of her talent, they also reaffirm the singular attractiveness of her best works.

(From An Encyclopedia of British Women Writers, pp. 186-187)
Gaskell's Style: Is it "charming," "delicate," and "exquisite"?

© Jonathan Sacerdoti, English undergraduate, Balliol College, University of Oxford

The prevailing attitude towards Elizabeth Gaskell's writing in the first half of the twentieth century was typified by Lord David Cecil's characterisation of her in Early Victorian Novelists as all a woman was expected to be; gentle, domestic, tactful, unintellectual, prone to tears, easily shocked. So far from chafing at the limits imposed on her activities, she accepted them with serene satisfaction.

It is this kind of attitude to her writing that would dismiss it as no more than charming, delicate, and exquisite.

While we can recognise the complimentary nature of these words, it is vital that they be recognised also for their underlying patronising tone, which is barely hidden at all in this context. There is possibly no more underhanded a way to devalue the worth of something than to attack it with patronising compliments which underrate its worth, and to describe Gaskell's work as no more than pretty is to do just that. Nonetheless it is also worth examining why and how her writing could attract such criticism, as well as why it is worthy of greater praise. At the heart of such descriptions of Gaskell's work is an attitude of sexism. "Charming," "delicate," and "exquisite" all suggest a lack of substance and an obsession with the superficial which some critics have labelled 'feminine'. If Gaskell's writing is indeed "feminine" in its style, this works in its favour, allowing social problems to be approached more sensibly from a different, more Christian angle.

Taken at face value, Gaskell's writing can seem very much bound by convention. As Cranford demonstrates, she is a great story teller with a particular talent for noticing the detail that characterises the particular situation she describes. Gaskell enjoyed collecting and using anecdotes both in her letters and in her books, and it might even seem at first glance that Cranford backs up quite well the image of her as nothing more than a Victorian story teller. But as Kate Flint suggests, even the apparently superficial Cranford, "may represent quite a bold experimentation in narrative techniques" (Writers and Their Work, Elizabeth Gaskell, p.60).

In Mary Barton and North and South, Gaskell uses the form of the typical Victorian romance novel to bring to the fore certain important social issues, such as industry, the role of women, and the differences between our internal and external behaviours in different settings. It is in how she strays from the traditional superficiality of the style, that much of the interest in her novels lies. She sets these novels in a socially acceptable way to the audience of her day, but deliberately
turns the work round so that it is by no means a simple romance. Her ability and willingness to do this is a credit to her writing skills, and should not be used to denigrate her work.

Cranford may seem to centre round domestic issues, and it's very first sentence might suggest an intentionally and unashamedly feminine style when it declares that, "Cranford is in the possession of the Amazons; all the holders of houses, above a certain rent, are women". In fact, however, this can also be read as quite un-Victorian in it's attitude, and almost suggests that what we are about to read is in some way a proto-feminist novel, though this would be to argue too far in favour of Gaskell as a feminist. It is true that the writing in Cranford shows Gaskell's eye for what Flint calls "whimsical detail": we read of the newspaper spread over the new carpet too protect it from visitors and sunlight, and the fifteen minute visiting habits of the ladies in Cranford, but the consistent distance maintained in the narration suggests a degree of irony. It is through living in the nearby industrial city of Drumble, that the narrator Mary Smith can keep this distance in her observations of Cranford society. While the details of what is referred to by the chapter title as "our society" may seem "Charming" and "delicate", it is not for this reason that Gaskell has described them, or rather it is, but only in order to show that the attitude of those living in Cranford seems to be one of denial: they try to preserve the past through a delicately planned and carefully executed set of rules by which they live. To speak of one's poverty is not done, to visit on someone for more than fifteen minutes is impolite. Flint suggests that "their minutiae of detail [seems] to ward off threats of the change and disruption of modern life". It is therefore not Gaskell's writing which is in any way devoid of value in the way some critics might suggest, but the subject about which she writes. Indeed, it is her wish to display this shallowness which is apparent in her writing. She is writing in Cranford about the mundane and the slightly ridiculous, but only to highlight its more unusual elements, and show it to be something of a bad method for tackling the social problems of her time.

Gaskell's ability to combine an apparently superficially attractive writing style with serious attitudes, something which can be argued works more in her favour than against her, is particularly apparent in North and South (1854). Similarly, Mary Barton (1848) concentrates on industrial and social issues while also sticking to an accepted form (that of the Victorian Romance novel). It is In Mary Barton, in fact, that we see the true genius of Gaskell's seemingly 'feminine' approach: it deals mainly with the working class, but also allows us to reconsider while we read each character and to judge them on their own merits, rather that on their stereotypical role in the romance plot alone. For example, John Barton who kills out of pure class hatred is exactly the kind of character who could easily be left as a hated villain in a romance novel, but in North and South Gaskell builds him up as a real character, and quite uncharacteristically for a feminine Victorian novel, he is transformed in the eye of the reader into a flawed, tragic figure.

The key role played by Esther equally transforms her in the reader's mind from being merely a prostitute and goes deeper into her personality, allowing her to develop more as a character. So while this concentration on the working class might rule out the sort of complexity of intertwined issues we find elsewhere in Gaskell's writing, it must also rule out the possibility of "charming" or "delicate" writing in the normal senses of the words. There is a distinct realism to her portrayal of these very real people. Though Gaskell does handle the issues in Mary Barton in a highly sensitive way, the word 'delicately' seems somewhat deficient if we wish to describe this
sensitivity. In North and South Gaskell manages to bring to the fore the issues of industrial expansion, intertwining them with those of class and gender, once again making the accusation of superficiality implied by the criticism of Gaskell mentioned in the title rather hard to justify.

The dismissal of Gaskell's work as no more than charming and pretty is typical of the kind of criticism that would devalue a writer simply by referring to her femininity. As if to challenge this type of attitude herself, Gaskell shows how Margaret Hale in North and South ends up having a lot more to her personality and character than the "ladies' business" Henry Lennox speaks of in the opening chapter. Yet this does not stop her taking part in the "playing with shawls" that the ladies in the Harley Street gathering seem to enjoy. As a sensible and balanced person she is quite able to do both, playing the part of a lady when she is in London, and playing the part of a responsible decision maker when she is back with her parents in Helstone, or in a dispute between the workers and their master in Milton. Moreover, Margaret shows a great deal of bravery when she puts her respectable reputation in danger twice, in order to protect a higher ideal: first by flinging herself at Thornton in the riot scene; and second in lying and letting Thornton believe that she was loitering at the station with a man in order to protect her brother. If anything her balanced personality makes her a stronger character, and makes her a great deal more likeable. It is after all Margaret Hale who bridges the key rifts in the novel, such as that between North and South, and that between the workers and their master, and ultimately, that between her and John Thornton. But all the time it is pleasant for the reader to realise she is realistically human as this gives hope for some sort of resolution in the actual Victorian world of reality. What saves the day, so to speak, is a character who is strong in Christian values, and applies sensible, possibly feminine or domestic policies to the social problems of the period. Much in the same way Margaret Hale is able to combine her rôle as a woman with that of being the uniting force between all the areas of weakness in her society, Gaskell is able to draw attention in her novels to the social unrest and concern of the day, whilst also managing to indulge in the "ladies' business" of charming writing.

One of the very issues Gaskell tackles in North and South is the role of women. Nothing is further from the truth, therefore, than Lord David Cecil's assertion that Gaskell accepted the limits imposed on her. Margaret Hale proves to be a very responsible person, and shows great strength of character and judgement in all her decisions regarding the relocation of the family's life. She knows exactly where they should stay, and is willing to say the 'right' things for the sake of her parents, even when she is unsure herself. In this sense there is something of a role reversal as Margaret takes on the job of comforting her parents and helping calm their fears about their newly changed future. She grows up at an amazing rate, and has to cope with a great many important decisions regarding her family's home, her parents' health, the safety of her brother, and the well-being of the Higgins family not just with "ladies' business". It is this that makes her suitable to go forth into the future by means of her marriage to Thornton at the end.

So it is the combination of Gaskell's ability to combine the feminine "ladies business" of charming writing with a strong grasp and understanding of the social problems of her time, that gives her work the impact it has. This is not to suggest that she has in any way sanitised or sentimentalised the Victorian social problems; on the contrary, Gaskell has managed to combine an understanding of the poor situation of the working class with an amazing power of description and empathy, whilst also managing to make her writing beautiful and exquisite when
appropriate. When the situation requires a blunt and brutal description of the poverty and social conditions that were far from attractive and superficially pleasing to her middle-class readership, however, Gaskell is quite capable of delivering. A good example of this is the passage in which John Barton goes too visit the Davenports:

They went along till they arrived in Berry Street. It was unpaved; and down the middle a gutter forced its way, every now and then forming pools in the holes with which the street abounded. Never was the old Edinburgh cry of "Gardez l'eau!" more necessary than in this street. As they passed, women from their doors tossed household slops of every description into the gutter; they ran into the next pool, which over-flowed and stagnated. Heaps of ashes were the stepping-stones, on which the passer-by, who cared in the least for cleanliness, took care not to put his footŚ After the account I have given of the state of the street, no one can be surprised that on going into the cellar inhabited by Davenport, the smell was so fetid as almost to knock the two men down." (Chapter 6, "Poverty and Death," Mary Barton)

Here, real squalor is evoked, but Gaskell is also careful to be euphemistic about the piles of excrement. As Arnold Kettle points out, Mrs Gaskell has quite an understanding of the social problems which surrounded her, and she manages well to present to us in a thoroughly believable and convincing way, the "material conditions, the grinding pressures of poverty and, above all, a sense of the dignity and decency of people" (The Early Victorian Social Problem Novel). She is not insensitive, nor is she blinkered to the facts of poverty.

Gaskell is concerned above all with sympathy, and especially in Mary Barton with sympathy for children. This is one way in which she shows links between the poor and the rich. After all, much of Gaskell's knowledge of the working class she stood up for in Mary Barton was second had, but the knowledge of what it was like to loose a child was certainly not. It is well known that she wrote the novel as a means of escape after the death of her son. So it is unsurprising that the novel has its fair share of mortality, and that much of the misery in the novel is the result of people trying to help their children. Without hiding the fact that poverty was the cause of much of the infant mortality at the time (John Barton says about the rich when it is argued that they too suffer, "han they ever seen a child o' their'n die for want o' food?" (Mary Barton, page 105), Gaskell manages to make love of children and the grieving at their death the common factor between rich and poor. John Barton loses his son, the Wilsons' twin boys seen with their parents in the opening scene in Green Hays Field, die of typhoid fever in the course of the narrative, Esther explains how she took to prostitution in a vain attempt to save her daughter's life, and when John Barton kills Harry Carson as revenge against employers, his death is seen as the death if a son. It makes Carson suffer in the way that so many of his employees have suffered through the death of a son. Indeed, Gaskell makes this the universal method of feeling pain. Certainly this near obsession with the death of children is far from delicate or twee, and it shows a well considered method for bringing the two divided classes together: through mutual pain and loss. Eventually, the improvements in employment practices are put down to Carson's being "taught by suffering" (Mary Barton, 460).

So it is unfair to dismiss Gaskell's writing as superficial, which is what the adjectives 'charming' etc do. They suggest a femininity that is weak and submissive in being bound by convention. They deny the very apparent sense of Christian justice present in Gaskell's novels, and they deny
the accurate painting of a picture of what it was like to be poor in Gaskell's day. Gaskell challenges the role of women, and the divisions of classes in her novels, and often does so in a decidedly un-charming way. To dismisses her work as light and pretty is entirely unfair, and to suggest any weakness is implied by the presence of any touching or charming moments is to deny that sentiment does in fact play a part in real life. Gaskell's novels are of worth because they combine sensitivity with a spirit of challenge, and because Gaskell knows how and when to use her skills as a charming writer.