Elizabeth Gaskell’s Portrayal of Social Inequality

The Struggle between Masters and Men in Mary Barton and North and South

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

This essay examines Elizabeth Gaskell’s portrayal of the issue of social classes in the Victorian era. It discusses the inequality between mill owners and their workers and their living conditions with focus on two of her novels. *Mary Barton* provides a very limited interpretation of the situation, as it conveys information mainly through the experience and opinions of the working-class members, who often live in atrocious conditions and fight illness and hunger. The reason behind such struggles is the arrogant and indifferent behaviour of their masters who refuse to raise their wages in fear of losing control over their workforce. Further, it discusses John Barton, his activism and efforts to secure better work and living conditions for the working class. The second part of the essay explores *North and South*, which is Gaskell’s more mature work concentrating on the same social issues. *North and South* provides various perspectives on the issues between masters and men, and this essay discusses how impactful these different perspectives are in creating a realistic picture of the situation. The narrative focuses on Margaret Hale, who as a member of the middle class brings forth an unprejudiced perspective, which is important for understanding the issue. This part of the essay further examines the opinions of Mr Thornton in relation to trade, workmen and distribution of power. Margaret’s desire to improve the situation between masters and men leads to some positive changes in how the classes perceive each other. The last part of the essay compares *Mary Barton* and *North and South*. The comparison deals with the differences between how the two stories are narrated, as *North and South* provides the opinions and point of view of more than only the working class. It further compares the most important characters and their attitudes towards the issue of inequality.
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Introduction

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell is one of the most influential English authors of the 19th century. Her works belong in the Victorian era, which lasted most of the century. Gaskell’s works deal with some of the most vital problematics and main characteristics of the age. One of these problematics is the industrial revolution, which is connected with serious issues within the society, such as the distribution of power between classes and poverty and malnourishment. Mary Barton and North and South are two of Gaskell’s novels, which depict these social issues. Mary Barton was published in 1848 and is Gaskell’s very first novel. The book is named after the heroine of the novel, whose story is mainly about finding true love and resisting the temptation of riches. The second story line, and more important part for the purposes of this essay, is about John Barton, Mary’s father, who struggles with a life-long dilemma concerning the injustice of the social system. As a mill worker in Manchester, he lives the life of the lower class. He fights for changes within the society, which would enable fair living for members of the working class. The second novel discussed in this essay, North and South, was published in 1854 and is one of Gaskell’s more mature works. The heroine’s name is Margaret Hale. She is forced to change from a middle-class young lady’s life of idleness when she and her parents move to the north to an industrial city called Milton. Margaret gets to know a completely different environment and meets new people, who are impacted by social injustice. The struggles of the workmen are shocking for Margaret, and later she tries to make masters and men understand each other. The two works are often compared, due to their similar themes. However, there are various differences between these two texts. North and South gives voice to the opinions of both workmen and masters and includes characters of a higher social rank. The voices of characters from different social classes and their various perspectives make the issue of social class more credible in North and South than in Mary Barton, where Gaskell presents the issue merely from the workmen’s perspective.
1. *Mary Barton*

The issue of social classes and the conflict between them in *Mary Barton* is presented mainly through the experiences and ideas of members of the working class. John and Mary Barton, the Wilson family, the Davenports, Job Leigh and his granddaughter Margaret are the most prominent representatives of the working class, whereas the class of masters is represented merely by the Carson family. Therefore, there is not enough insight into the life or mentality of the masters. Stone argues that “Gaskell portrays the voices of the poor with the loving and intimate detail” (178), which encourages the readers to feel empathy with the poor, while the industrialists have hardly any voice. From the beginning, the focus is on the working class, its ideas and struggles. There is also the reoccurring theme of death, usually of the poor, which makes the readers’ empathy even more profound.

There are not many instances in the book where we see the masters’ reasoning behind their actions or decision making in particular matters. However, one of the rare cases where we are given some insight is the meeting of workmen and masters. The workmen want to gain more bearable conditions for the people by the means of this dialogue with their employers. One of the masters presents his idea to his companions, saying that “A rise of a shilling or so won’t make much difference, and they will go away thinking they’ve gained their point” (Gaskell 176). This idea, however, is banished by the others, who believe that such treatment would make the workmen feel that they have some kind of power over the masters, which would encourage their rebellious nature to want further reforms in the future. This anxiety of the industrialists suggests that the real issue is not that they refuse to give their workmen higher wages, but rather that they are frightened by the possibility of losing the power over their workforce.

The Chartist petition and visit to the Parliament in London in 1839 is a vital part of the story because it emphasises the seriousness of the social situation in Manchester. This visit made by the Trade Union’s delegates, one of them being John Barton, reflects a true event. The fact that Gaskell elaborates on actual happenings in England adds to the credibility of the story and makes readers more engaged with the issue. The Chartist Ancestors webpage talks about the petition which was introduced to the Parliament on June 14, 1839. The petition called for social justice, and the Chartists insisted on change of legislation. The text of the original petition reads: “We tell your Honourable House that the capital of the master must no longer be deprived of its due reward; that the laws which make food dear, and those which, by making money scarce, make labour cheap, must be abolished” (Chartist Ancestors). However, the high hopes of the Chartists were dissolved as the petition was rejected a month later. This led to the discontent of the working class and subsequently to
riots all around the country. Gaskell was inspired by this particular event and based John Barton’s journey on it. Barton hopes for a major change in the system and anticipates that “When they hear o’ children born on wet flags, without a rag t’ cover ‘em or a bit o’ food for th’ mother; when they hear of folk lying down to die i’ th’ streets, … they’ll surely do somewhat wiser for us than we can guess at now” (Gaskell 86). However, the novel follows the outcome of the real event and the petition is rejected. Barton does not handle the outcome well and complains to his friend: “our rejection of that day will abide in my heart; and as long as I live I shall curse them as so cruelly refused to hear us” (Gaskell 99). Barton’s speech points out that not only the mill owners dismiss the calls for help, but that even the Parliament takes no account of the severity of the issue, which leaves no positive prospects for the suffering people.

The Davenport family and their living situation is the most vivid representation of the severity of the social class issue in the novel. Ben Davenport, who used to be employed by Mr. Carson, has a large family living in a horrid environment harmful to people’s health, especially for the little children he has. The family is starving and John Barton accompanies George Wilson on his visit to their place. The disturbing description of the Davenport’s living situation includes telling us how “the window-panes, many of them, were broken and stuffed with rags…the smell was so fœtid as almost to knock the two men down” (Gaskell 58). The depiction proves the severity of their situation. The conditions in which children of such families lived are, besides the hunger, a reason why children often did not live into adulthood. The archaeologist Pitts writes about “the subdivided cellars where people [in Victorian Manchester] shared beds or slept in doorways,” explaining how the families living there “suffered industrial injury, cholera, TB and typhus; consumed adulterated food and contaminated water; and lived in a maze of wet, filthy, light-deprived rooms and passages.” Gaskell’s descriptions are in line with this, as Barton sees “three or four little children rolling on the damp, nay wet brick floor, through which the stagnant, filthy moisture of the street oozed up” (Gaskell 58); these children immediately run to him because they notice that he has brought some food.

The charity of the working-class members towards each other is ironical in contrast with the non-action of those of higher social and economic status. In the same chapter, Wilson goes to Mr. Carson’s house to ask for an infirmary order for the miserable Davenport, who is ill. When he enters the house, it is obvious that the family has no such issues as the Davenport. The family has many servants and “a good house, and furnished with disregard to expense” (Gaskell 65). The irony of the whole situation is made evident when to Wilson “The servants seemed very busy with preparations for breakfast” (Gaskell 65). In Carson’s house, the servants, who are themselves an indicator
of the abundance of wealth, are busily preparing food for the Carson family, while in the Davenport’s “house”, there is no breakfast being served at all. Another contrast of the classes, in this case, is the willingness to help those in need. John Barton, even though he does not have much himself, sells his valuables to purchase food for the poor Davenport family, while Mr. Carson reluctantly agrees to give an out-patient’s order. This order, however, is of no use, because Ben Davenport dies at the end of the chapter.

1. John Barton

John Barton’s radical and unyielding attitude towards the issue of social class is profoundly influenced by his personal experience. Barton is notably affected by the death of his son Tom when Tom is still a child. Already in the first chapter, Barton complains about social injustice to his best friend George Wilson. He asks him “And what good have they [the masters] ever done me that I should like them? … If my child lies dying (as poor Tom lay, with his white wan lips quivering, for want of better food than I could give him), does the rich man bring the wine or broth that might save his life?” (Gaskell 10). Barton clearly blames his son’s premature death on the indifference of the rich. This critical point of his life makes John Barton feel with the suffering children of others and he often uses children’s suffering as the main point of his speeches and complaints. His empathy with the Davenports is undeniably highly influenced by the “three or four little children rolling on the damp” (Gaskell 58). Upon entering the house, he first notices the children. Surridge notes that “John Barton goes to London to speak on behalf of ‘many a little one clemming at home in Lancashire’” (336). The reoccurring motif of suffering children makes the reader more inclined to feel sympathy with John. He is, according to Gaskell, the true hero of the novel, since Gaskell’s first intention was to name the book “John Barton” and tell a story of Barton as he fights for human rights and social justice, as noted by Milne (91).

The vehemence of Barton’s beliefs and actions affects his whole life. He is very strict in his opinions and is prepared to make a sacrifice for them. He would even sacrifice the potential well-being and easy life of his daughter Mary. In the first chapter of the novel, he says “I’d rather see her earning her bread by the sweat of brow … though she never got butter to her bread, than be like a do-nothing lady, worrying shopmen all morning … and going to bed without having done a good turn to any one of God’s creatures but herself” (Gaskell 10). Considering the circumstances in Manchester at the time, this is a very bold statement to make. Barton detests the higher class so much, that he would rather have his daughter work hard than to have a comfortable life through the means of a profitable marriage. Stone mentions “John Barton’s radical language and views” (180), which
are visible throughout the novel. His frequent passionate speeches are the undeniable proof. The speeches make him one of the best speakers because they make it apparent that he believes in his cause. Therefore, he is appointed the Trade Union’s representative for the Lancashire area in the Chartist Petition affair.

The journey to London means great jeopardy to John Barton’s livelihood, and therefore for his whole life. He arrives back in Manchester after the petition has failed and “when he asked leave to resume his work, he was told they were diminishing their number of hands every week, and he was made aware, … that a Chartist delegate, and a leading member of a Trades’ Union, was not likely to be favoured in his search after employment” (Gaskell 111). He never returns to a regular work environment and cannot cope with the disappointing result of his London trip. It is rather strange that Barton expects to be admitted back at his workplace after taking part in an act that attacks the system and the masters of the mills. Added to the fact that he is not able to provide for his family, even though it consists only of his daughter Mary at this point, this has a negative influence on his mental health. His relationship with his daughter suffers a great deal, as he becomes detached from reality. He develops monomania, which makes him haunted with terrible thoughts, and he falls into opium addiction, which was a common consequence of distress during the Victorian era.

Even though John feels abhorrence towards the system and the masters, his humanitarian nature allows him to connect with one of the masters through mutual suffering and makes John feel empathy with him. Throughout the whole novel, John does not have the slightest sympathy with the upper class. However, his attitude changes after his terrible deed of murdering Mr. Carson’s son. Towards the end of the book, John confesses to Mr. Carson that it was he who killed his son. Carson is shocked, enraged, and threatens Barton with hanging. As a reaction “John Barton gasped; but not with fear. It was only that he felt it terrible to have inspired such hatred, as was concentrated into every word, every gesture of Mr. Carson’s” (Gaskell 351). It is rather strange that Barton’s innate reaction is to be surprised because he, after all, has killed Carson’s son. It seems as if Barton has not taken into account that even the masters have feelings. He knows them only as authoritative figures, who show no emotion when faced with the suffering and deaths of others. And since all deaths encountered until this point take place without any particular notice paid by the masters, Barton has not realised the severity of his deed and its impact on others. It is precisely the same pain, the pain of losing a son, that makes Barton realise what he has done. For the first time, Barton is able to feel sympathy towards one of the masters, someone whom he has hitherto despised, owing
to the fact, that for once, the master experiences the same agony that the workmen suffer from on a daily basis. Later, Carson forgives Barton’s deed, and Barton dies in his arms.

**ii. Mary Barton**

Mary Barton plans on securing her future by the means of a profitable marriage because she sees how poorly many people of the working class live; however, her vision does not get fulfilled. Mary is very well aware of the social situation in Manchester and does not want to be among the working-class people struggling for food and money. The Davenport family sets a warning example for her, as she assists her father and Mr. Wilson when Mr. Davenport dies. Mary wants to do better, and her point of view is completely different from the ideas of her father. He cannot stand the class of masters, while Mary sees an opportunity of obtaining comfortable living in marrying a member of the higher class. She is conscious of her beauty and uses it well during her flirtation with young Harry Carson. However, this acquaintance is soon over, because she realises that she loves Jem Wilson and feels bad about her treatment of Harry. Her vanity and desire for wealth cause unnecessary pain to Jem. Yeazell says that “*Mary Barton*...seems to question its heroine’s character only so that all doubts may be rapidly dispelled” (140). However, Mary’s boldness enables her to get involved in the flirtation, which is important for the storyline, because it links members from both classes, and shows that these connections are possible. Nevertheless, Mary quickly realises the consequences of her behaviour, and she redeems herself by undeniable honesty towards Harry Carson: “I beg your pardon if I’ve done wrong by you...If you will know why I won’t have anything more to do with you, it is that I cannot love you. I have tried, and I really cannot” (Gaskell 133). Therefore, she cancels any possible prospects of a rich and carefree future. Her true self cannot sacrifice true love for abundance of wealth and the status of a lady.

Mary is conscious of her situation and her position within society. However, she does not let her predisposition fully control her life. Gaskell portrays Mary as a strong working-class woman, with powerful will, who does not succumb to the social system. Already at the beginning of the story, we get to know that “she had early determined that her beauty should make her a lady” (Gaskell 26), and therefore the reader already expects that Mary is not a common working-class girl. Brown argues that “Mary has pursued additional options. She has made decisions and taken action on her own accord” (347). She decides to be a dressmaker, which is not a usual case among the working class. She believes that “a dressmaker’s apprentice must ... be always dressed with certain regard to appearances; must never soil her hands, and need never redder or dirty her face with hard labour” (Gaskell 26). This idea supports her vision of becoming a lady. Her next step is to marry a
wealthy man, which of course she never does. However, if it was not for the change of her priorities, she might have accomplished this goal too. During her last meeting with young Harry Carson, she discovers that his innate intentions were not to marry her. Nevertheless, he changes his opinion in fear of losing her and vows “But now, if you like, I’ll get a licence to-morrow morning - nay, to-night, and I’ll marry you in defiance of all the world, rather than give you up” (Gaskell 134). If she consented to the marriage, she would have achieved her initial ambition, and escaped her destiny as a member of the working class (considering that the circumstances would have been different, and Harry Carson would not have died). Nevertheless, Mary still manages to secure a good future, as Jem is not in a difficult financial situation. Gaskell shows here, that one does not have to climb up the social rank to have a good life, and that not everybody who belongs to the working class necessarily struggles.
II. North and South

In North and South, the theme of social class and the injustices inherent in the class system are explored through the opinions and experiences of the working class. The Higgins and the Boucher families provide insight into the life and struggles of the working class. Both families have negative opinions of the mill owners, due to their struggles being caused by the masters’ indifference to their workers’ situation. Nicholas Higgins lives with his two daughters Bessy and Mary. Bessy suffers from a severe lung condition about which she tells her friend Margaret: “The fluff got into my lungs and poisoned me…They say it winds round the lungs, and tightens them up. Anyhow, there’s many a one as works in a carding-room, that falls into a waste, coughing and spitting blood, because they’re just poisoned by the fluff” (Gaskell 102). The disease can be prevented by the installation of technology that collects the “fluff”, and therefore averts its contact with people’s lungs. However, the technology “costs a deal o’ money…and brings in no profit” (Gaskell 102). Here we can notice the indifference of the masters, and the severity of the issue. In this instance, Gaskell portrays the masters as completely unbothered by the unhealthy work environment and focused only on profit. Bessy points out that she is, by far, not the only one suffering from such a condition. The whole situation has a tremendous impact on her overall health: “At nineteen, Bessy is so ill and work-weary that she longs to die rather than endure a lifetime of factory drudgery” (Parker 328). Gaskell calls for further attention to these avoidable health issues when Bessy dies. The atrocity of young people dying over attempts to save money is one of Gaskell’s most vivid representations of the severity of the issue of distribution of power between social classes.

Furthermore, Thornton’s uninterested approach prompts Higgins to further action, that is, participating in a workmen’s strike. John Boucher also participates in the strike but starts doubting its efficiency and provokes a riot. The riot ends as a debacle and Boucher is blamed by the Union for his conduct. Subsequently, he commits suicide. Solidarity among the working class is evident, as Higgins, even though he does not have much himself, takes on Boucher’s family. He was never going to ask for work again; however, he puts his pride aside for the sake of the children: “I would na ask for work for mysel’; but them’s left as a charge on me. I reckon, I would ha guided Boucher to a better end; but I set him off o’ th’ road, and so I mun answer for him” (Gaskell 305). The humanitarian nature of the working class is obvious, and contrasts with the selfishness of the masters. Higgins suppresses his ego and is ready to accept humiliation for the sake of others, meanwhile the self-centred behaviour of the masters gradually leads a man to suicide. The suicide is one of the strongest elements representing the human desperation that grows out of the helplessness of the
working class. The outcome is even more alarming because Boucher leaves behind a whole family with many children who are dependent on his income.

Nevertheless, *North and South* also gives voice to the ideas and reasoning of the mill owners. Through Thornton, Gaskell provides information about the history of trade so that Margaret, and the readers, can grasp the principle of his behaviour. He explains that the masters of past times acted violently: “There can be no doubt, too, of the tyranny they exercised over their work-people” (Gaskell 83). As the treatment of the workmen has immensely improved since then, due to higher competition in the trade, he believes that his treatment is adequate for the situation. It is not the intention of the masters to be hard on the employees. They are simply anxious about the situation of trade and their ability to keep up with the competition: “the Americans are getting their yarns so onto 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” (Gaskell 144). Gaskell presents the struggles and difficulties of trade to make the readers feel sympathy with the mill owners. She wants to put forward the fact that the workmen are not the only ones who are experiencing troubles, and therefore she provides insights into Thornton’s mind. If Thornton did not explain his behaviour, the whole issue would seem as his proud attempt to keep his post of an indestructible, self-centred master. However, that is not the case, as we get to understand his problems as a mill owner. The situation with the wages does not change, and the workmen’s proceedings get harsher. The power moves from masters to workmen when they start striking. The striking means shortages in production and issues with the customers. The situation gets even worse when the strike turns into a riot. Gaskell portrays the riot as the pure violence of workers, which shows the masters in a vulnerable position. Clausson comments: “the nature images Gaskell uses to describe the strikers’ movement through the streets of Milton to the mill suggests that their collective, mass movement, and so their behaviour, is an uncontrollable *natural force, hence amoral*” (11). Thornton grows anxious about the safety of his newly hired men from Ireland because the great, uncontrollable mass means immediate danger, which cannot be diverted.

The lack of communication between the masters and workmen is a fundamental problem, and Margaret Hale plays a major role in solving it, at least partly. It does not even occur to the masters to try and talk to the workmen, as they do not take their point of view into account. They see them merely as the source of work, not as equal human beings. Thornton unfolds his anxiety to his mother in a comment that also reveals his social arrogance: “It is too bad to find out that fools - ignorant wayward men like these - just by uniting their weak silly heads, are to rule over the fortunes of those who bring all the wisdom that knowledge and experience, and often painful thought and
anxiety, can give” (Gaskell 144). The mill owners complain about the audacity of wanting higher wages, not taking into account their workmen’s everyday struggles. The lack of communication also leads to the misconception that the workmen have some sort of evil plan to take over the masters, which is certainly not the case. The workmen, on the other hand, do not try to explain themselves either, though they present their demands through various means, even extreme methods like going on strike. There is no effort to compromise on either side. Therefore, the real purpose of such conduct gets ambiguous, and the masters are paranoid over losing their status. It is not until Margaret becomes an intermediary between Nicholas Higgins and Thornton that the working class gets insight into the motivations of the masters and vice versa. Parker comments that Margaret “defuses working-class frustrations through her discussion with Higgins and carries many of his complaints back to John Thornton” (Parker 328). Also, Margaret’s involvement in the issue and her determination to help starts the whole process of improving Thornton’s manners towards the workmen and her efforts moreover help to open the eyes of people belonging to both classes. This disclosure subsequently leads to frequent conversations between Higgins and Thornton, and therefore to further understanding of the issues facing both classes.

i. John Thornton

John Thornton has strong opinions about trade, which could be compared to today’s capitalistic approach towards the distribution of financial power. He does not see anything immoral about his behaviour. He always finds a reason and justification for his actions that might not always seem completely adequate. For example, the situation with the Irish workers is not initially supposed to demonstrate his power over his currently striking workmen. The state of trade does not allow him to raise the wages as demanded or to wait longer for the workmen to calm down: “I can give them a fortnight,—no more. If they don’t see their madness before the end of that time, I must have hands from Ireland” (Gaskell 146). He simply needs to take the necessary steps to keep his business alive. Gaskell shows here that the industry owners are not invincible and have to take extreme measures to survive in trade. Furthermore, Thornton supports the idea that everybody is responsible for their own actions, in a very broad sense. According to him, everybody has the same opportunity to grow wealth and should not object to the methods of masters if they do not know what it takes to be a master themselves. Thornton explains the rise of industrialists to Margaret: “men of the same level…took suddenly the different positions of masters and men, owing to the motherwit, as regarded opportunities and probabilities, which distinguished some, and made them far-seeing as to
what great future lay” (Gaskell 83). Gaskell wants to justify the opinions and behaviour of the masters through Thornton’s explanations. Clausson says that “he represents a social type (the new industrialist or capitalist) and a corresponding set of ideas, especially the economic doctrines of lais-
sez-faire, the invisible hand of the market, and buying cheap and selling dear” (Clausson 8).
Thornton surely is a capitalist and is proud of what he has established without anybody’s help. During one of his conversations with Margaret, who is trying to understand the situation between masters and men, Thornton puts forward his love for the system: “It is one of the great beauties of our system, that a working-man may raise himself into the power and position of a master by his own exertions and behaviour” (Gaskell 84). This is a very shallow approach to the issue, yet it is the truth, and by justifying Thornton’s position, Gaskell somewhat admits that the workmen would not have to struggle for decent living if they were as ambitious as Thornton.

Thornton is a great example of a man who has created a prosperous life for himself and his family solely by his actions and willpower. Quite early in the story, Thornton tells his life story to Margaret and her father, and we get insight into his past and mindset. His father died when Thornton was young and he “had to become a man…in a few days” (Gaskell 84). He had to take care of his greatly supportive mother and sister. He continues his story explaining their difficult financial situation at the time: “My mother managed so that I put by three out of … fifteen shillings regularly. This made the beginning; this taught me self-denial” (Gaskell 85). His mother is the only person to whom he gives some credit for his success. Her stern and honest yet supportive ways had a great impact on his future and determination, and he is well aware of this and grateful for it. Her ways made him fit for trade and a prosperous future. Gaskell emphasises that the masters and their families have to sacrifice a lot and invest much of their time and effort in building their position and wealth. Clausson points out that Thornton “is a captain of industry, a self-made, successful man who without any advantages of birth has made his own way in the world and acquired great wealth, in short an independent man in every sense of that word, a self-sufficient male who needs no one” (8-9). Therefore, the reader understands better where the masters are coming from with their opinions and measures. Thornton believes that anybody with the right predisposition could be capable of establishing their future in trade. Therefore, at first, he does not understand nor feel empathy with the employees. He believes that they want to profit from his success more than they deserve for their work. He is convinced that since he was able to succeed, then anyone can, so why should he feel for the working class? Gaskell explains how the industry works through Thornton’s experience and narration. The question of power distribution between masters and men is then more easily understood, and the masters’ behaviour does not seem completely unreasonable.

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Despite Thornton’s firm convictions regarding the issue of social class, he manages to widen his perspective and change his approach towards the workmen. He leads frequent conversations with Margaret Hale, where the topics “are the conditions of the workers in Thornton’s factory and, more abstractly, the proper relations between ‘Masters and Men’” (Clausson 7). These exchanges are a great challenge for him, and he tries to stand his ground and provide Margaret with his reasons. It is, however, not easy to persuade Margaret, and her comments, such as “I see two classes dependent on each other in every possible way, yet each evidently regarding the interest of the other as opposed to their own” (Gaskell 118), leave Thornton with something to think about. However, the change in his behaviour does not come immediately. The breaking point of his concrete convictions comes after he starts having conversations with Higgins, whom he has hired to work in his mill. Here, we witness the beginning of a fundamental change in the relationship between masters and men, which is supposed to inspire actual masters and men to try and work through the challenges that arise together. Thornton admires Higgins’ determination in getting the job, and therefore Higgins becomes interesting to him. They start having conversations and tell each other of their opinions. Higgins comments “he comes here pretty often…and I reckon he’s taken aback by me pretty much as I am by him; for he sits and listens and stares, as if I were some strange beast newly caught in some of the zones” (Gaskell 339). Their reaction to each other signifies that even though they have been working together for a deal of time, they have never understood nor properly talked to one another. The understanding between both sides is evident.

Through Thornton and Higgins’ acceptance of each other, Gaskell attempts to show her readers that there is a way to compromise, and that mutual understanding can be accomplished. Through her fiction she is trying to motivate the actual inhabitants of Manchester to similar proceedings because open communication has a positive outcome for both sides. Later Thornton decides to build a dining room for his workmen after once seeing “such a miserable black frizzle of a dinner—a greasy cinder of meat” (Gaskell 361). Thornton even sometimes dines with the workmen to keep the good relationship growing. The great improvement in the relationship between masters and men is visible also in the way the workmen see their superiors. Higgins feels sorry for the masters when the trade is not in its best condition: “I reckon I know who’d ha’ been sorry for to see our measter sitting so like a piece o’ grey calico! Th’ ou’d parson would ha’ fretted his woman’s heart out, if he’d seen the woeful looks I have seen on our measter’s face” (Gaskell 421). It turns out that neither the masters nor the workmen are ignorant or evil, once they sit down together and listen to what the other one has to say, and that is the impression Gaskell wants to leave on her readers.
ii. Margaret Hale

Margaret Hale is a vital character in *North and South* because as a new inhabitant in Milton, feeling dismayed by the conditions there, she makes an effort to understand the situation between masters and men, and subsequently connects the two classes. She is forced to leave her beloved south, after her father, who was a vicar, changes his opinion of religion. Her living situation has always been above average, both in Helstone with her father and mother, and in Harley Street in London, where she spent a significant part of her life living with her aunt and cousin, who were supposed to teach her proper manners. Clausson says that “Margaret not yet tried and tested, leaves home and travels to a distant and ‘foreign’ land - one where she is repeatedly called a ‘foreigner’ or ‘stranger’” (9). Therefore, Milton is a great shock to her. Due to her unfamiliarity with the place and its inhabitants, we get an impartial description of the social situation. The people and their ways are completely different from what she has been used to, 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…their carelessness of all common rules of street politeness, frightened Margaret a little at first” (Gaskell 71). Gaskell uses Margaret’s unprejudiced opinions to provide the readers with a clearer picture of the situation in Milton. As this is the first time Margaret experiences such an environment, her reactions are not prejudiced, and she provides a more balanced image of Milton. Margaret feels alienated and is grateful for the new acquaintances that she gains among the workmen. The Higgins family provides a great opportunity for Margaret to obtain information about the social situation directly from members of the lower class, and the insights which Higgins brings forth lead Margaret to action. Further, because her father is a private tutor to Thornton, Margaret has a great chance to lead talks with the opposing side of the social spectrum. While Thornton tries to explain the principles of trade and his conduct, Margaret uses the scope of the conversation to present her point of view and explain the motivations of the other side. Her persistence leads to the previously mentioned positive changes in Milton.

Margaret becomes a great friend to Bessy, Higgins’ daughter, who makes her realise the huge gap between their two families that is created by social inequality. This friendship enables Margaret to see the dissimilarities between classes in vivid detail. Even though “Margaret’s visits to the Higgins’s home begin as a gesture of sympathetic condescension from a well-bred lady to a sickly working-class girl” (Parker 328), she becomes fond of these visits. Bessy is grateful for Margaret’s company, as she always manages to lift her spirits despite Bessy’s declining health. Stories of London and nature are Bessy’s favourite and reveal many differences between the girls. Parker comments: “Her conversations with Bessy and her father, Nicholas, increasingly emphasise their
class separation...Bessy usually defers to Margaret, admiring fine clothes and lady-like ways, several interchanges expose the depth of her class bitterness” (328). Margaret realises the severity of the situation and more often reflects on her past life and its idleness, which is in marked contrast with the life that working-class people lead in Milton. Bessy, who is Margaret’s age, is already dying because of the unhealthy working environment, and she is dying without having experienced anything nice in her life. She mentions, that she has never even seen the sea, while Margaret and people of her class live lives full of entertainment where the biggest problems they face are the question of whom to invite to the next dinner or what to wear tomorrow.

Margaret is not afraid to take the initiative and help others, even though she is of a higher social class. She fights for the poor but at the same time defends the misunderstood masters. A great example of such behaviour is her reaction when the riot takes a violent turn. Margaret acts spontaneously and runs outside the house to protect Thornton from the enraged crowd of rioters: “Margaret ... displays her physical courage when she confronts the militant strikers at Thornton’s Mill” (Clausson 8). Her desire to make the situation turn out well for both sides is obvious when she yells into the enraged crowd: “For God’s sake! do not damage your cause by this violence. You do not know what you are doing” (Gaskell 179). Margaret is an important figure in this incident because she connects the two classes and wants to find an outcome which would be of benefit for both sides. She sees the possibility of such connection long before anybody else does, and Margaret’s faith in her cause enables her to be courageous. The whole incident peaks when one of the rioters throws a stone which hits Margaret’s face. Then the whole crowd disperses into the street and leaves the property of Thornton. The whole situation is so severe that the workers are ready to hurt others. However, Margaret’s courageous actions prevent an attack being made on the mill and possibly also prevents physical injuries to the hired Irish men, who are hiding in the mill building. Another instance of Margaret’s courage and desire to help is when Boucher commits suicide. Higgins confesses that he does not have the heart to break the news to Mrs. Boucher. Margaret volunteers to be the one, to tell the widow that her husband has passed away because she understands Higgins’ pain, and his inability to do so. After telling her, Margaret shows a great deal of empathy and patience with the suffering woman, as she “saved her from falling by catching her in her arms. She sat down in the rocking chair, and held the woman upon her knees, her head lying on Margaret’s shoulder” (Gaskell 297). Margaret shares Mrs. Boucher’s pain because death keeps reoccurring in Milton and affects everybody.
III. A Comparison of *Mary Barton* and *North and South*

One of the features which most clearly distinguish *North and South* from *Mary Barton* is that the masters in *Mary Barton* do not have the opportunity to express themselves. In *Mary Barton*, the masters are depicted as a class full of heartless men craving money and wealth, who show no sympathy for the suffering working class. We never get to know the motivations for such behaviour, because the only description of the masters we are given is through the perspective of the disadvantaged working class. Gaskell does not give us an option to choose a side, as there are not many positive traits to be found among the class of the mill owners, and they never get the opportunity to justify or explain their behaviour. Stone comments: “Bourgeois socio-economic discourse in *Mary Barton*, … seems swallowed up in the working-class discourse … This effect results partly from Gaskell’s portrayal of a relatively narrow spectrum of the propertied classes, a feature of her first novel that was strongly criticized” (178). In *North and South*, on the other hand, we get many insights into the mind of an industrialist. Thornton explains the rules of trade and his own opinions. Through Thornton, Gaskell provides commentary on the history of the trade to fill in the necessary information that is missing in *Mary Barton*. Further, Thornton explains the issues, which can occur and jeopardise the business, such as strong competition or strikes. These justifications make the reader at least partly understand the reasons behind harsh measures taken by the mill owners. In *Mary Barton*, the masters seem to be cruel simply because they are in the position of power, whereas in *North and South*, they seem to be harsh out of the necessity to keep their business going.

Another major difference between how the class of masters is represented in *Mary Barton* and *North and South* is that the mill owners in *Mary Barton* do not have any business-related issues. Mr. Carson and other mill owners discuss how to deal with the starving, striking workmen and when one of the masters proposes that they could raise their wages for a shilling or so, the response is: “That’s the very thing I object to. They’ll think do, and whenever they’ve a point to gain, no matter how unreasonable, they’ll strike work” (Gaskell, *Mary Barton* 177). The issue of raising wages is not the business condition, but rather the proud natures of the masters and their fear of losing power. However, in *North and South*, the situation is completely different. Even before the riot emerges, Thornton explains that he plainly cannot raise the wages because of the state of his trade, which is facing a lot of competition, by those able to produce material for less money, therefore being able to offer better prices: “We tell them we may have to lower wages; but can’t afford to raise. So here we stand, waiting for their next attack” (Gaskell, *North and South* 117). Thornton’s father has also experienced problems with his business and Craik compares his success to the success of
Mr. Carson, except the fact that Carson does not lose his position: “Thornton…is a son of a man who succeeded, like Carson…and then failed by becoming bankrupt” (23). And just like his father, young Thornton builds his position and success in the trade out of nothing. Towards the end of the story, we discover that Thornton followed his father’s example almost perfectly, as he is about to lose everything. In Mary Barton, masters do not have to deal with such problems, which is one of the reasons that make the novel less reliable in its depiction of these issues, as the industrialists seem to be living a carefree life.

For the most part, the attitude of masters towards the workmen is very similar in the novels, except that the approach in North and South takes a different direction towards the end of the story. The masters in both novels treat the workmen with a deal of disrespect. They do not make any effort to understand what the workmen are going through, and do not even want to listen to what their employees have to say. In Mary Barton, they even laugh at and mock the workmen for their misery, at a meeting from which the workmen hope for positive results. Young Harry Carson shows his disrespect as he “had taken out his…pencil, and had drawn an admirable caricature of them—lank, ragged, dispirited, and famine-stricken…he passed it to one of his neighbours, who acknowledged the likeness instantly, and by him, it was sent round to others, who all smiled and nodded” (Gaskell, Mary Barton 179). The way the masters refer to their workmen is another instance of their disrespectful attitude. Thornton confesses that he uses inappropriate terms to talk about employees: “Miss Hale, I know, does not like to hear men called ‘hands,’ so I won’t use that word, though it comes most readily to my lips as the technical term, whose origin, whatever it was, dates before my time” (Gaskell, North and South 120). The term “hands” somewhat strips the workmen of their humanity and lowers them to the level of a machine or property. However, the situation in North and South changes, which is one of the most important differences between the novels. Thornton starts having second thoughts about the nature of workmen when he gets to know that Higgins waited in front of his door for many hours in the pursuit of a job. Thornton admires this type of perseverance and determination, and therefore he decides to give Higgins a chance, leading to their later conversations. Thornton realises that the situation of workmen is indeed not ideal and changes his opinion of his employees. Thornton’s change of opinion is the great resolution which is absent in Mary Barton. However, as Craik suggests, “Compared with Mary Barton we seem to be one generation further on” (23). Therefore, it seems natural that these changes occur only in North and South and not in Mary Barton.
This generational gap could be the reason why the working classes (even though they have some similar features) are depicted differently in the two novels. In Mary Barton, which was published in 1848, the working class is facing much more severe conditions than those depicted in North and South, which was published in 1854. The Davenports in Mary Barton are dying of hunger. They have many children who have been hungry for a long time, and when they see that John Barton brought them food, they immediately run to him. Mrs. Davenport “took the bread, when it was put into her hand, and broke a bit, but could not eat. She was past hunger. She fell down on the floor with a heavy unresisting bang” (Gaskell, Mary Barton 60). The terrible “clemming” is the main reason why the workmen go striking in demand for higher wages. On the other hand, in North and South, it seems to be contrariwise. In North and South, people who probably would not die in ordinary circumstances die when there is an ongoing strike because there are no wages for striking men, and therefore not enough money for their families. When Nicolas Higgins plans to go on strike his daughter asks him: “what have ye gained by striking? Think of that first strike when mother died—how we all had to clem—you the worst of all” (Gaskell, North and South 133). The Bouchers, who represent the working class, do not have such critical issues either. They have many children, who are difficult to provide for, just like with the Davenports, but they do not live in a small, dirty cellar and are not dying of hunger. The living situation of poor families is remarkably better in North and South. Nevertheless, the fathers of both families die. Mr. Davenport dies because of hunger and Mr. Boucher commits suicide because he cannot cope with the pressure. The social system kills them both.

The most vital difference between the two novels is that the narrative of North and South is focused on Margaret Hale, who is neither from the class of masters nor from the working class. She is a newcomer to the industrial north, and therefore she provides us with a perspective which is not pre-determined by her origin. She learns about the issues directly from a member of the working class, Nicolas Higgins, and one of the masters, Mr. Thornton. Dredge states: “This is the dominant mode for social change imagined by the novel: the idea that through personal relationships greater understanding occurs that can inspire structural change” (93). Margaret is the character who enables these personal relationships, which then lead to greater understanding. Her relationship with Higgins brings her important information about the life of the working class. Since she is in the position of a newcomer, she can communicate with both classes effectively, because they want to explain the situation to her. She becomes the link between masters and men, which leads to great changes in the relationship between these two groups. In Mary Barton, there is no person who would connect the two classes. Although Mr. Carson starts to somewhat understand the situation of his workers,
the novel ends in no particular resolution regarding the difficult relationship between the mill owners and their workers.

Margaret Hale and Mary Barton are very different types of heroine, with completely different backgrounds. Margaret is from the south, has lived quite a privileged life and she and her family have never had to struggle for money or food, while Mary is from a common working-class family, and has to think about money and what to spend it on. Their origins have an immense influence on their lives. Margaret is accustomed to fancy dinners, beautiful pompous dresses and frequent travels, whereas Mary knows none of these luxuries. She has never been away from Manchester until she makes the trip to Liverpool where Jem’s trial takes place. Craik comments that “Even England can seem remote and exotic” for Mary (20). Another essential difference is the presence of servants in Margaret’s life. Mary has to do everything around the house herself, and at the same time go to work. On the other hand, having servants gives Margaret a good deal of free time, which she can invest in her casual visits to Higgins’ home and conversations with Thornton. Another major difference between Margaret and Mary is education. Margaret has been accustomed to learning and studying classic texts her whole life, and in one of her conversations on classics with Thornton confesses: “I had blundered along it at school; I dare say, I was even considered a pretty fair classic in those days, though my Latin and Greek have slipt away from me since” (Gaskell, North and South 85). Mary also went to school but is by far not as educated as Margaret. In one of her talks with Job Leigh, who has some level of education, she demands “Tell me, Job! Isn’t it called an alibi, the getting folk to swear to where he really was at the time?” (Gaskell, Mary Barton 241). The level of education is important because it enables Margaret to see a problem from a wider perspective and think critically. Therefore, she is able to help transform the whole system of communication between masters and men, while Mary has to take care of the household and go to work.
Conclusion

Elizabeth Gaskell’s novels *Mary Barton* and *North and South* both deal with the issue of inequality between social classes. *North and South*, as her later, more mature work, provides a more reliable picture of the social issues, through its more realistic portrayal of both mill owners and their workers. *Mary Barton* provides a markedly different depiction of mill owners, as they are inflexible, arrogant and self-centred. *Mary Barton* conveys limited information about the social situation because only the thoughts of the working class are provided, and therefore *North and South*, with its diversity of characters who present their opinions on the problematics of social classes, portrays the issue more effectively and reliably than *Mary Barton*. *North and South* provides information about how trade works and shows the masters as vulnerable beings who are anxious about outer influences such as competition and demand for products. Margaret Hale establishes friendship with members of both classes and helps improve the behaviour of the masters by explaining the issues that are a daily battle for the poor workmen. Thornton, in the course of time, starts to see the everyday difficulties of his workers, and as a result modifies his beliefs in order to improve his relationship with them. *Mary Barton* portrays the masters as rich and selfish, especially through John Barton’s ideas. There is no character like Margaret Hale in *Mary Barton* who would try to bring the classes to a mutual understanding. Therefore, *Mary Barton* ends with no resolution to the issue of social class as opposed to *North and South* where masters and men start to understand each other and completely change their relationship. Through *North and South*, Elizabeth Gaskell demonstrates that mutual understanding between masters and men as well as the improvement of their relationship is possible, something which has a positive outcome for both classes.
Works Cited

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