

Workers' Sickness, Death, and Suffering: A Historical Reading of *Mary Barton* by
Elizabeth Gaskell

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a historical and socio-political analysis of the novel Mary Barton, by Elizabeth Gaskell, where the novel is seen as an eloquent expression of defalcation, morbidity and mortality of workers in the factory, industrial Manchester, in the Victorian period. Placing the story in the framework of the Chartist Movement, the paper examines the growing distance between the owners of factories and the working populations and the role of economic exploitation and political disregard in the growth of the tension between classes. With a theoretical background on Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Louis Althusser, the paper will examine how the novel reveals the structural dynamic of inequalities of industrial capitalism such as low wages, unemployment, starvation, diseases, and degradation of housing and health of the working classes. Characters like John Barton portray disappointments as well as ideological realization of industrial proletariat and the story shows how deprivation and alienation may lead to social turmoil and violence. Meanwhile, the human price of industrialization is also preempted in the novel in the sections about malnutrition, death of children and psychological hopelessness among the factory families. Even though the novel eventually leads to reconciliation between the workers and the masters, the study posits that the picture presented by Gaskell of industrial Manchester is still a very powerful criticism of the capitalist system and its dehumanizing nature. Through recounting the leading life experiences of the working people, Mary Barton acts as a literary expression of the plight of industry as well as a moral call to social sensitivity, discourse, and change.

Keywords: *Mary Barton; Elizabeth Gaskell; Chartist Movement; class conflict; industrial society*

Fredrich Engels and Karl Marx believe: "human nature is not absolute, but historical; a product of changing social institutions and material configurations" (Leitch 759). In the industrialist England, there is a chasm between the haves and have-nots which gives birth to the confrontation in the social setting of the time. In *Mary Barton*, the life of Manchester people is described as one of the most distressed cities. The labouring class receives less appreciation for the hard work and dedication they put in the development of the industries. Though *Mary Barton* ends with a slightly positive note on the condition of the laborers, it will take a long time for their emancipation. As presented in the novel, though the expectations of reforms are meek, that the agitation plays a vital role in the definition of the workers' rights. The labourers are outside the confinement of the gentility, struggling to survive, are the focus of the plot.

Ohmann comments that literature “takes shape through a troubled historical process” (1983), and “make us 'see', 'perceive' or 'feel' the reality of the ideology of that age (Althusser 1481). In Gaskell’s novels, the author illustrates the state of English society, in particular, the novelist concentrates on working class through the depiction of their lifestyle, living condition, work environment, health and financial issues and above all the disparity between them and the bourgeoisie. The industrial change came through hard, slow and steady fluctuations through decades at the time of Gaskell’s career. Critics praise her depiction of the work conditions at the time; Brodestsky Tessa mentions that Gaskell concentrates on the pathetic conditions of the lower and working class, the ones working in the factories. importantly, she drew the attention of the higher authorities to the serious issue. (67)

Gaskell’s lived her life in the age of transformation or the Victorian era which went through significant socio-economic and political shifts. Her book focuses on these developments. She comes forward to bring a consensus on the troubles asserting, though development is desirable, the approach to it must be different. As a whole, the monetary conditions in society alter the condition of the social structure following a crisis. Shinwell mentions that Gaskell lived the world reflected in her fiction; it is a response to the transitions taking at that place. She takes different personalities into her narrative, principally focusing the women and the struggling class. (56) Critic Robin B. Colby notes that “Gaskell lived in a century that was riddled with change; her fiction is, in many ways, a response to changes that were occurring in her lifetime and at the same time is an agent of change” (qtd. in Nash 96)

In *Mary Barton* Gaskell’s individually motivated characters are meticulous and willing to fight for their ideas. These figures do not display one specific party but, as Francoise Basch says, Gaskell deals with as many occupations and activities, ranging from the lower class to the upper class. (43) However, in this work the emphasis is on the weakest members of the society: the workers in the factories. Jennifer Uglow points out that Gaskell used her narrative to draw attention to the predicament of the factory worker in Manchester and she argued for rapprochement between employers and workers. (89)

One of the central figures is John Barton, and the entire plot revolves around this character. His speech presents the beginning of the conflicts. He believes that the owners are insensitive to the sufferings of the workers. The workers’ sickness, death and sufferings of their children, the hard times for their incomes and when it is cold and black frost, all are matters of no consideration for the owners. They have their wine, good food, warm clothes and homes. (10) John Barton appears to recuperate Althusser’s ideas that workers receive nothing above their extreme needs and at the hard times the matters worsen and life becomes more miserable, for them (Althusser, *Norton Anthology* 1484).

Gaskell seems to introduce Victorian experiences while talking about these predicaments in the industrial towns. She paints a grim picture of working life in which mill owners grow rich on the back of their long-suffering workers. The novel shifts from a drama of class conflict into an examination of human nature. She derives many characters and scenarios in her fiction from real persons and events she observed or heard about. She often defended her writing by saying she had to tell the truth to represent life as she knew it despite the social repercussions. Her Unitarian faith mandated her truth-telling approach and led her to craft the kinds of plots that allow characters to engage in evidence gathering (184-197). This period of transaction helped Gaskell understand the minute delicacies of the affairs. Hunger and haplessness lurk in the city of Manchester where there are no adequate means of providing themselves with food or comfort “of others sleeping upon the cold hearthstone for weeks in succession, without adequate means of providing themselves with food or fuel” (83)

In *Mary Barton*, the concept of hard work and determination overlap almost everything. It talks about the members of the society to take part in the quest for the bread and butter on daily basis. The concentration appears to be the acquisition of meals and nothing beyond that falling in the category of comfort. However,

at the time when there are no jobs, it gets too difficult to arrange for the needs of one's family. Gaskell describes the condition of the unemployed "workman loiters away his unemployed time in watching these things [food and other stuff in the market], and thinking of the pale, uncomplaining wife at home, and the wailing children asking in vain for enough of food, —of the sinking health, of the dying life of those near and dear to him. The contrast is too great. Why should he alone suffer from bad times?" (24) The writer further adds that these bad economic conditions are bad for the factory owners but life-threatening for the workers as they starve to death. (64) When fire engulfs a factory and destroys it thoroughly, it seems of no consequence for the owner. However, to the owner's favour, he receives the insurance money. When the economy is stumbling and the workers out of the factory, it upholds advantageous aftermaths for the owners as they do not have to pay any wages. However, the workers feel the blow; "no work to be had, and no wages to pay for the bread the children cried aloud for in their young impatience of suffering" (56). The workers are bound in a vicious cycle beginning with the yearning fundamentals of life. Louis Althusser in his *From Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* affirms that "the lengthening of the working day and against the reduction of wages" (Althusser Norton Anth.1484). In other words, though, working under suppression, the working class will continue the struggle in a cyclic manner, receiving nothing above their ultimate needs. That is how "Reproduction of Labor" (Althusser 1484) is attained. In other words, the retribution of the working emerges as a result of an excessive exploitation.

The working-class housing seems pathetic for it is nearly impossible to live in such ill-kept surroundings. Gaskell believes that the condition of such abodes was the grave-like influence; slowly covering the innocent souls living inside them. They could not feel either the merriments of life or the miseries anymore, "by any hope of better fortune, living, moreover, or rather starving, in a crowded garret, or damp cellar, and gradually sinking under the pressure of want and despair into a premature grave; and when this has been confirmed by the evidence of their careworn looks, their excited feelings, and their desolate homes,—can I wonder that many of them, in such times of misery and destitution, spoke and acted with ferocious precipitation?" (83) Gaskell's own first-hand experiences find a place in this work, Gaskell in her letter to Mrs Greg mentions the condition of the workers: "The tale was formed, and the greater part of the first volume was written [...] when I took refuge in the invention to exclude the memory of painful scenes which would force themselves upon my remembrance" (74). She further mentions that "during a visit to a labourer's cottage, she tried to comfort the poor family and reduce their bitterness towards the rich, but 'the head of the family took hold of her arm and grasping it tightly, said, with tears in his eyes: "Ay, ma'am, but have ye ever seen a child clemmed to death?" (x) Similarly, John Barton advocates similar ideas when identical words replicate in Barton's question, in Chapter VI, "Han they [the factory owners] ever seen a child o' their'n die for want o' food?" (64)

Gaskell advocates the perspective of the working class about the chartist movement¹. In *Mary Barton*, it flashes as an idea now springing up among the workers, that originated with the Chartists "but which came, at last, to be cherished as a darling child by many and many a one. They could not believe that the government knew of their misery: they rather chose to think it possible that men could voluntarily assume the office of legislators for a nation ignorant of its real state; as who should make domestic rules for the pretty behaviour of children without caring to know that those children had been kept for days without food.(83) Adding to it, the writer mentions besides, the hungry crowds had heard, that they had denied the existence of their distress in Parliament; and though they felt this strange and incomprehensible, yet that

¹ Chartist: The Chartist movement began in the 1830s, leading up to the presentation of the 'People's Charter' in May 1838. This made six specific demands, including annual parliaments, universal male suffrage and secret ballots. In June 1839, delegates from all over the country met, and on the 14th presented to Parliament a petition in support of the Charter. This was rejected on 12 July. After increased unrest, further petitions were presented in 1842 and 1848

their desolation had still to be publicized in all its complexities, and that then some answer would be found, mollified their achy sentiments, and kept down their rising anger. So a petition was outlined, and endorsed by thousands in the bright spring days of 1839, entreating the Parliament to hear eyewitnesses who could affirm to the incomparable impoverishment of the industrial regions. Nottingham, Sheffield, Glasgow, Manchester, and many other towns, were busy employing representatives to take this plea, who might speak, not only of what they had perceived, and had heard, but from what they had endured and underwent. Life-worn, scrawny, apprehensive, hunger-stamped men, were those ambassadors. (83-4) Julie Nash in her work, *Servants and Paternalism in the works of Maria Edgeworth and Elizabeth Gaskell* (2008) says: Gaskell refrains from presenting any sustained vision for social change. Instead she retreats to the paternalistic idea that masters should be kinder to their workers in order to mitigate their anger and earn their respect. Rather than throw up her hands and declare herself at sixes and sevens, she prescribes a new surprisingly intimate relationship for masters and workers. Despite these differences in approach, however, Gaskell depends on servant characters in both novels to help articulate the economic and social issues that concerned her. (96)

The concern for Gaskell, appears to be the disparity between the wages and earning of the workers and their masters and she “makes clear that her depiction of class strife and suffering in Manchester was not merely invention or theorizing but was inspired by and based on personal observation and interpretation.” (Foster viii) The word “wages” appears over eighteen times in the novel. Gaskell questions that why should factory hands work so much with no reward? (85). And unfortunately, no one thought of treating the workmen as brethren and friends, and openly as appealing to reasonable men, stating exactly and fully the circumstances which led the masters to think it was the wise policy of the time to make sacrifices themselves and to hope for them from the operatives (167). Gaskell warns the readers of similar outcomes if they do not solve the problems and do not consider their genuine problem. If the concerns go unattended great depression of mind and body could be caused (60), leading to grave consequences.

The feeling of being totally negated by the owners and the lawmakers appears time and again in the novel. John Barton seems to be the face of the matters concerning the life affairs of the factory workers in the quest for equal wages and rights. His following words reflect the miserable condition the workers are through because of low incomes.

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, or hiding their want i’ some hole o’ a cellar till death come to set ’em free; and when they hear o’ all this plague, pestilence, and famine, they’ll surely do somewhat wiser for us than we can guess at now. Howe’er, I han no objection, if so be there’s an opening, to speak up for what yo say; anyhow, I’ll do my best, and yo see now, if better times don’t come after Parliament knows all. Nor could a human being, much less a pig, have lived there many days. (62)

The workers are going through a process of self-awareness for their rights and well-being. Though the realization and its culmination with the murder of young Mr Carson take long, there are certain occasions to identify the simmering issues. The workers knew that they are doing the greatest quantity of work for the lowest wages (353). They are delirious about the long hours they work for their “Flesh and blood get wearied wi’ so much work” (85). These matters are a part of discussions at the teatime and other social gatherings. By describing the issues in such a manner, the writer develops an argument and tries to convince the readers of the existing problems. In such cases, as Engels opines that ultimately workers will stand up against the rulers when they are left without any other option. They have the least wages to meet the expenses of their large families (Engels qtd in Althusser *Norton Anth.*1484). Moreover, at certain points the writer takes the minutes details of the working-class language into consideration, as reflected in the references. Mikahil M. Bakhtin terms it “Heteroglossia”² may rightly be ensued as a relatively implicit but

² Heteroglossia, the term Bakhtin famously uses to describe the "internal' stratification" of language: the interplay, among its social dialects, class dialects, professional jargons, languages of generations and age groups and of passing

quite well-presented linguistic difference among the speaking classes, “the conflicts of classes and groups in society produce what Bakhtin famously called” “Heteroglossia” (Leitch Norton Anth. 14)

John Barton is the symbol and face of the agitation. He feels the pain he has been through throughout his life immeasurable. The inability to have enough food for the family and to treat health issues accompany him till the day he dies in the hands of Mr Carson seeking forgiveness. One may question whether murdering a human being justifies the means, when that is to get the attention of the indifferent owners like Mr Carson. His questions echo throughout the novel: “If you think so, tell me this. How comes it they’re rich, and we’re poor? I’d like to know that. Han, they done as they’d be done by for us?” (64). Though not celebrated as a sign of victory for the workers, murder appears to be a moral defeat for the owners. Importantly, the workers are living like animals and the agitation is all but natural. It seems to be an animal instinct forced by the circumstances. “They’n screwed us down to th’ lowest peg, in order to make their great big fortunes, and build their great big houses, and we, why we’re just clemming, many and many of us. Can you say there’s nought wrong in this?” (64)

In the town of Manchester food is scarce and the deaths are mostly because of the malnourishment and starving to death. Young children sob, weep, tremble and starve to death while their parents seem mere spectators. John Barton’s young son also dies in such an environment. He describes it as everything the doctor said, depended on good nourishment, on generous living, to keep up the little fellow’s strength, in the prostration in which the fever had left him. And Mr John Barton was at the time in a dilemma; he had hesitated between the purchase of meal or opium and had chosen the latter, for its use had become a necessity with him. He wanted it to relieve him from the terrible depression its absence occasioned. (120) Engels describes the pathetic condition of workers’ life in Manchester. They lived without convenience and had no blessings of enjoyable family life under the available meager material conditions. As under such conditions, “in such dwellings only a physically degenerate race, robbed of all humanity, degraded, reduced morally and physically to bestiality, could feel comfortable and at home” (Engels, *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*)

Jill L. Matus in the book *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*, considers Elizabeth Gaskell among the writers who devotedly braced the call for reforms through their canons. Gaskell’s oeuvres emerged as of real weight in the sphere of the Victorian literary studies considering that she produced pieces of great variety and scope in her shining career as a writer for about twenty years. Likewise, nurtured by rich and religious context of the nineteenth century Unitarianism³, Gaskell is typically open-minded in response to social transformations. Gender and class relations, in the mise-en-scène of the provincial life and emerging town life, are magisterially introduced. Accordingly, contemporary critics overwhelmingly recognize her intellectual caliber, her familiarity with the scientific, economic and theological inquiry, and her narrative brilliance (1). Gaskell seems to encourage the readers to realize that the welfare of the populace living in the town is in the hands of the owners. They need to feel the miseries of suffering souls. She believes that the problems are negotiable and could be resolved with the participation of both the parties. Wages and facilities not the concern for the owners. It was their interest to buy cotton as cheaply and to beat down wages as low as possible. And in

fads, “languages” that serve the specific socio-political purposes of the day, even of the hour.” Heteroglossia, which Bakhtin hails as, the characteristic stylistic feature of the novel, celebrates not, as structuralism does, the systematic nature of language but the multiplicity, of all those. “centrifugal” forces at work in language, the variety of social speech types, and the diversity of voices interacting with one another (*Norton Anthology of English Literature* 1188)

³ The belief affirming individual freedom of belief, the free use of reason in religion, a united world community, and liberal social action.

the long run, the interests of the workmen would have been thereby benefited. Distrust each other as they may, the employers and the employed must rise or fall together. (166)

In the sociopolitical sphere, the failure of Parliament to listen to the Chartist agitators' grievances is paralleled locally in the lack of communication between factory masters and men. In the latter case, the breach is because of a refusal to speak as much as a failure to listen: the masters will not 'tell' the real facts of the situation (167), John Barton "became a Chartist, a Communist, all that is commonly called wild and visionary. Ay! but being visionary is something. It shows a soul, a being not altogether sensual; a creature who looks forward for others, if not for himself." (165) Gaskell appears on the stage with some solutions and suggestions. As Leitch says, the process of literature takes a complicated shape. Certain works embody contradictions in the reflection of the broader social milieu other than its author's personal inclination and philosophy: "From a Marxist perspective, artistic works frequently, present fugitive, alternative, and counter hegemonic images sometimes suggesting laboratory possibly and lending them a socially critical undertone (15). Though Gaskell cannot be labelled as the beacon holder for the workers, her work unhesitatingly reflects the brute of the time in Manchester for the working class.

The workers have less or no voice in the affairs of the parliament. After feeling that the leaders have failed to ease their agony, the workers take the law in their hands and plan revenge on the owners. by killing Mr. Carson's son. Though Mr Carson is rich and wants to spend to arrest the culprit, he cannot bring back his son. Thus it brings the story to the most poignant part of the story when the lost child cannot be brought back — showing Mr. Carson's helplessness. His conversation with the official displays his sheer desire to punish the culprit. He says that "Spare no money. The only purpose for which I now value wealth is to have the murderer arrested, and brought to justice. My hope in life now is to see him sentenced to death. Offer any rewards. Name a thousand pounds in the placards. Come to me at any hour, night or day, if that be required. All I ask of you is, to get the murderer hanged. Next week, if possible—to-day is Friday. Surely with the clues you already possess, you can muster up evidence sufficient to have him tried next week." (206). However, when John Barton confesses his crime, Mr Carson feels no need for vengeance. This factor brings in the need for reconciliation for both sides on purely humanitarian grounds.

The working class is more aware of the situation and circumstances than one would expect. They talk about the miseries they faced and they agitate. There were members of the society from professions and amusements. Mary Barton learns tailors' art. And as mentioned in the novel's introduction Margaret's role in the novel, for example, is partly to demonstrate the importance of music in Lancashire working-class communities, while the depiction of Job Legh, with his extensive botanical and zoological knowledge, is a reminder that the working-class auto-didact was a not uncommon phenomenon. In the novel, the working class are, "actual working-class culture of self-development and self-improvement. (xxxii)

When Mr Wilson meets the owner Mr Carson at his house, the reader can identify the respective differences of their lives. In Carson's house, food in abundance, coffee steaming upon the fire tempted Wilson yearned for food to break his fast, which had lasted since dinner the day before. The cook roasted steaks, and the kitchen-maid toasted bread, and boiled eggs and altogether the odours were so mixed and appetizing, If the servants had known this, they would have willingly given him meat and bread in abundance; but they were like the rest of us, and not feeling hunger themselves, forgot it was possible another might. (66) Whereas in the previous chapter a man starves to death at his home, there is not a single cup of tea. Gaskell mentions his eagerness when he sees tea in the words that "of steaming tea, intended for the poor wife; but when the delirious husband saw drink, he snatched at it with animal instinct, with selfishness he had never shown in health. (61) Meager food provided as a means of energy does not help in any other way but enough for sustenance to live as worker for the masters. In other words, their life is devoted to their masters. A capitalist care is neither for the life nor for the well-being of laborers. On the contrary, he focuses on the labour power as a fuel that is required for proper functioning of the factories (Engels qtd in Leitch 783).

Mr Carson and Mr Barton represent their respective standpoints; one is the owner, and the latter is the agitator. As mentioned earlier, though John Barton's action of committing the murder is not justified by the writer, the continuance of such conditions expected such an outcome. At the end Mr. Carson wishes that nobody should suffer the miseries he faces and that a perfect understanding, and complete confidence and love, might exist between masters and men; that we might recognize the truth that the interests of one were the interests of all, hence it was most desirable to have educated workers, capable of judging, not mere machines of ignorant men; and to have them bound to their employers by the ties of respect and affection, not by mere money bargains alone; to acknowledge the Spirit of Christ as the regulating law between both parties. Many of the improvements now in practice in the system of employment in Manchester, owe their origin to short earnest sentences spoken by Mr Carson. Many and many yet to be carried into execution, take their birth from that stern, thoughtful mind, which submitted to be taught by suffering. (374) In fact, the foundation of industrialization aspires to have human working as machines without any individual ideology. In order to build it stronger and for a far longer period of time, the bourgeois use different tactics forcing individual submission or dominated class ideology to the dominant ideology. Henceforward, schooling plays a vital role in the formation of dominant ideology. (Balibar, Macherey 134)

CONCLUSION

Elizabeth Gaskell in *Mary Barton* gives a vivid image of the brutality that the working classes had to endure in the industrial Manchester. The novel unfolds the social and economic inequalities that rose to the surface of the Victorian England through the hunger, disease, unemployment, and the poor living conditions. The lives of factory labourers confirm the existence of a society between the rich industrial masters and the poor workers who find it hard to make ends meet. In his life, Gaskell emphasizes the human price of the industrial advancement and shows how oppression and lack of attention influence the ordinary life of the working classes. The personality of John Barton is turned into the main symbol of frustration and despair of workers. His turn into a radical leader is indicative of the rise in the political awareness of the workers in the times of the Chartist Movement. The collective requests of the workers to receive decent wages, human working conditions and political representation can be seen as the expression of the greater justice struggle in the unequal social order. Based on the novel, indifference and silence of the ruling classes enhance resentment and lead to tragic consequences like murder of Harry Carson.

Simultaneously, Gaskell does not depict conflict only; she also suggests the option of reconciliation between masters and workers. Mutual understanding and compassion are possible solutions to the social divisions of industrial society that are realized at the end of the novel. The healing of John Barton and Mr. Carson is an allusion to the possibility of understanding and empathy when it comes to uniting people of various classes. In the end, *Mary Barton* works as a literary depiction of the industrial life of the Victorian days as well as a social comment on the injustices meted on the working classes. The story written by Gaskell describes sickness, suffering, and deaths of employees and, in addition, raises awareness of the pressing necessity to reform. The novel, by revealing the results of economic inequality and social negligence, urges the readers to see the similarity of humanity between the classes and to distribute the idea that the well-being of the society, as well as that of the employers and the labourers, relies on mutual collaboration and comprehension.

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