MRS GASKELL'S SOCIAL NOVELS:

A COMPARISON WITH CHARLES DICKENS

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By

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PREFACE

In this thesis I discuss the social novels of Mrs Gaskell: Mary Barton, North and South and Ruth. In order to throw light on the conventional elements in her work I compare her novels with those of the most popular writer of such novels in her time, Charles Dickens. Because of the topicality of their subject matter and the pressure of social conditions even upon comfortable, middle-class people, it is instructive to study the use made by Dickens and Mrs Gaskell of stereotyped notions. The fear of industrial riots, or perhaps of a major revolution in England, led to the writing of a number of novels in the 1840s and '50s about industrial conditions. Most of these in some way refer to the possibility of outbreaks of violence. I compare Mrs Gaskell's two industrial novels, Mary Barton and North and South, with Dickens's Hard Times to determine what effect the fear of industrial unrest has upon their presentation of the industrial poor. The clichéd situations and conventional images which portray this popular fear are evident even in the novels of these two reliable and conscientious reporters, both of whom witnessed the conditions they describe.

In the light of the discussion in Chapter I, in the second chapter I look at the portrait of the lower classes, concentrating on the industrial worker in Mary Barton and Hard Times. The third chapter deals with North and South and the impact of the industrial revolution on Mrs Gaskell; I compare her reactions with those of Dickens in a

number of his novels.

The fourth chapter explores the relationship between morality and class prejudice in Ruth. I examine the use Mrs Gaskell and Dickens make of the conventional seduction fable. The way in which they manipulate this fable reveals their attitudes to sexual morality, or at least those attitudes which they would wish to make public. It also reveals their ideas about the relationship between social classes. The use of the stereotyped story reveals the innate prejudices of these two novelists, prejudices which remain in spite of their attempts to be liberal.

Mrs Gaskell is a minor Victorian novelist, a substantial part of whose work is earnestly committed to the examination of moral and social issues. Her achievement in this field illustrates the limits to which criticism and questioning could be carried within the non-conformist, humanitarian tradition of her day.

Dr Ross has supervised the writing of this thesis and I thank him for his help and encouragement.

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THE BOGEY OF INDUSTRIAL UNREST

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Among the novels of social concern written in the eighteen-forties and fifties were a number dealing specifically with industrial problems. These novels not only expressed a sympathy for the poor and oppressed, but also expressed concern at the mounting tension between the rich masters and the poor workers in the industrial cities. The eighteen-thirties and forties saw the rise and fall of Chartism, and the eighteen-fifties the establishment of well-organized trade unions; the first large-scale organization, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, was founded in 1851. The middle classes feared this mass organization of the depressed and discontented labourers as a threat to their security. The inflammatory speeches and statements of policy of more radical members of the Chartists particularly alarmed the public to the possibility in England of revolutions like those on the Continent. Outbreaks like those in Birmingham and Newport in 1839, when twenty-four Chartists were killed, caused further consternation.[1] Because of these fears of violence the industrial novelists display ambivalent feelings toward the workers in their novels. They sympathise with the poor while they see them as oppressed and suffering, but when discussing the unions or organizations which were the active steps the

[1]See E.L.Woodward, The Age of Reform: 1815-1870, pp.150-3; and A.W.Palmer, A Dictionary of Modern History: 1789-1945, p.77 and pp.329-30.

workmen took to alleviate their sufferings, the fear of these middle-class novelists conflicts with their sympathy.

When Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life appeared in 1848, Mrs Gaskell immediately found herself famous, and much of the reason for her sudden popularity was the topicality of her subject. 1848 had been a turbulent year; a series of revolutions on the Continent reminded the public of the possibility of revolution in England, and a Chartist petition presented in April 1848 raised alarm nearer home. The popular and official reactions to this petition, which was actually a failure, illustrate the fear Chartism inspired in the public. Troops were called out, special policemen engaged, and no procession was allowed to accompany the petition to parliament. During that year also many Lancashire mills had closed because of the failure of the American cotton crop. In a year of severe disturbances, threats of revolution, and fear of uprisings among the working men, here was a book set in the industrial North and concerned with the grievances of the workers. To her publisher Mrs Gaskell wrote:

> I think the present state of public events may not be unfavourable to a tale, founded in some measure on the present relation between Masters and Work people.[2]

In her preface to Mary Barton she draws attention to the urgency of her message, echoing the popular alarm in this crisis:

> If it be an error that the woes, which come with ever-returning tide-like flood to overwhelm the workmen in our manufacturing towns, pass unregarded by all but the sufferers, it is at any rate an error so bitter in its consequences to all parties, that whatever public effort can do in the way of legislation, or in the way of "widow's

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[2]The Letters of Mrs Gaskell (no.25), p.56.

> mites" should be done, and that speedily, to disabuse the work-people of so miserable a misapprehension. At present they seem to me to be left in a state wherein lamentations and tears are to be thrown aside as useless, but in which the lips are compressed for curses, and the hands clenched and ready to smite. . . . To myself the idea which I have formed of the state of feeling among too many of the factory-people of Manchester, and which I endeavoured to represent in this tale (completed above a year ago) has received some confirmation from the events which have so recently occurred among a similar class on the Continent.[3]

Mrs Gaskell's earnest and subdued style suggests she could be relied on to give a trustworthy account of the inflammatory situation, about which so many highly-coloured and conflicting rumours must have spread. She emphasises her eye-witness authority, both in her methods of description and in footnotes and asides to the reader. In her preface she intimates that she is a resident of an industrial town and that she is writing of "the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets of the town in which I resided," moreover she is not writing from a political bias but has "tried to write truthfully" of what she herself has seen and felt. She is earnestly accurate in the glossing of dialect terms and Manchester customs, and in her footnotes like the one on pauper graves: "The case, to my certain knowledge, in one churchyard in Manchester. There may be more."[4] Her detailed accounts of the living conditions of Manchester people, the prices of food, the exact furnishings of the houses, weights, measurements and numbers of things, all produce the effect of

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[3]Preface to Mary Barton. 5th ed.(London, 1854), pp.v-vii.

[4]Mary Barton, p.68. All quotations from the text of the novel are from the Everyman's Library edition.

reliable documentary description. She often brings details of industrial conditions rather gratuitously into the story, in an attempt to see topical issues from the perspective of those involved. She refers, among other things, to the dangers of unboxed machinery, women working in factories and child labour.

The disappointment of at least some readers of Dickens's Hard Times is expressed by a writer in the Westminster Review[5] who implies that it is just this trustworthiness and detailed description of industrial life and activities that we find in Mrs Gaskell which he expected, but did not find, in this novel by Dickens. Ruskin is combatting such criticism when he writes:

> The usefulness of that work (to my mind the greatest he has written) is with many persons seriously diminished because Mr Bounderby is a dramatic monster, instead of a characteristic example of a worldly master; and Stephen Blackpool a dramatic perfection, instead of a characteristic example of an honest workman. But let us not lose the use of Dickens's wit and insight, because he chooses to speak in a circle of stage fire.[5a]

The sales of Household Words doubled, then quadrupled during the publication of Hard Times. Dickens then felt his readers could take a second industrial novel, Mrs Gaskell's North and South, which he advertised as "by the author of Mary Barton." This move would seem to attest to the popularity of the industrial novel. In fact, the disappointment of some readers at the lack of detailed documentary description of industrial life in Hard Times only attests to the extreme concern of the reading public with industrial problems:

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[5]See the review of Hard Times in the Westminster Review of October 1854, reprinted in the Bantam edition of Hard Times, p.306.

[5a]Unto This Last and Other Essays on Art and Political Economy, p.121.

> When it was announced, amid the strikes and consequent derangements of commerce, [writes the Westminster Review] that Mr Dickens was about to write a tale in "Household Words" to be called "Hard Times", the general attention was instantly arrested. It was imagined that the main topic of the story would be drawn from the fearful struggle which was being then enacted in the north, in which loss of money on the one side and the pangs of hunger on the other, were the weapons at command. The inner life of those great movements would, it was thought, be exhibited, and we should see the results of the wrongs and delusions of the workman, and the alternations of hope and fear which must from day to day have agitated him at the various crises of the conflict, delineated in many a moving scene. Mr Dickens - if anyone - it was considered, could be intrusted with this delicate task, and would give us a true idea of the relations of master and workman, both as they are and as they might be. Some of this is done in the book now before us, only this purpose is subordinated and made incidental to another.[6]

Notice the popular demand expressed by the reviewer for trustworthy accounts of this delicate problem of the relations of masters and workmen. Alarmed by the hostilities of the situation the public want not only accounts of things "as they are" but wish also to read a hopeful account of things "as they might be."

However, the solutions which both Mrs Gaskell and Dickens offer are religious rather than political; neither wishes to write a political treatise. Despite the topical urgency of her message Mrs Gaskell stresses that her aims are not political, but rather that she is concerned with people and their sufferings:

> I know nothing of Political Economy, or the Theories of Trade. I have tried to write truthfully; and if my

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[6]From a review of Hard Times in the Westminster Review of October 1854, reprinted in the Bantam edition of Hard Times, p.306.

> accounts agree or clash with any system the agreement or disagreement is unintentional.[7]

Her shrewd analysis of the industrial situation in certain passages of Mary Barton shows that she knew a good deal more about Political Economy and the Theories of Trade than she was willing to admit, but obviously she wished to give her novel a wider scope than that of an ephemeral political treatise. She surely also wished to avoid being caught up in the violent political debates of the time, and to avoid aligning herself with controversial political theories and parties. Her dismay when her views were taken up in a politically partisan manner is expressed in this letter to her publisher:

> Half the masters here are bitterly angry with me--half (and the best half) are buying it to give to their work-people's libraries. One party say it will be abused in the British Quarterly, others say it shall be praised in the Westminster; I had no idea it would have proved such a fire brand; meanwhile no one seems to see my idea of a tragic poem; so I, in reality, mourn over my failure.[8]

Her real aim was to "give utterance to the agony which from time to time convulses this poor dumb people" and so promote sympathy.

Dickens in Hard Times is not primarily concerned with the problems of industrial relations, though, he writes to Mrs Gaskell, "the monstrous claims at domination made by a certain class of manufacturers, and the extent to which the way is mafe easy for working men to slide down to discontent under such hands, are within my scheme." His main concern is the harsh inhumanity of the

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[7]Preface to Mary Barton.

[8]The Letters of Mrs Gaskell (n0.37), p.68.

utilitarian "Gradgrind Philosophy" which dominates the relationship of man to man in the large industrial city. He posits no solution to the current political crisis but declares, through Stephen Blackpool, that it is "aw a middle" in which "we mun bear and forbear."[9] Dickens,too, did not seem to want to take sides in an inflammatory political situation; his hero Stephen asserts his individuality by deliberately refusing either to join the union or to align himself with Bounderby. In the context of the story Stephen's deliberately vague reasons for not joining the union show a man in whom love and loyalty are stronger than financial considerations, but this vagueness is also a very prudent way of remaining neutral for Dickens as author.

In North and South Mrs Gaskell continues to remain non-aligned politically, even though in this book she in some measure modifies the sympathy she expressed for the workers at the masters' expense in Mary Barton. Her heroine, Margaret Hale, as a southerner is on neither the workers' nor the masters' parties and acts as a mediator. It is because of her influence that Higgins and Thornton are co-operating in schemes for the promotion of better relationships at the end of the novel. Her wish, like Stephen Blackpool's, is "that aw th' world may on'y coom toogether more an get a better unnerstan'in o'one another."[10]

The employers and workers in these novels are portrayed as two violent forces clashing because of the avariciousness, tyranny and

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[9]Hard Times, pp.290-1.

[10]Ibid., p.291.

inhumanity of the one and the blind anger caused by the suffering and starvation of the other. Throughout these industrial novels there are images which suggest this hostility and tension. The scenery of the industrial town itself suggests the inner turmoil of its inhabitants in Dickens's Coketown, where the effect is deliberately symbolic. The town by day is a "sulky blotch" but at night the furnace fires shine forth. "There seems to be nothing there but languid smoke. Yet when night comes, Fire bursts out." The fire, the rioting crowd and the grimy industrial town impressed themselves on Dickens's imagination. Others of his novels too have the same strain of imagery. In Oliver Twist the fire which Sikes attends is linked with his crimes and with the uncontrollable crowd which pursues him. The description of the industrial town in The Old Curiosity Shop is memorable for the fires and riots at night:

> But, night-time in this dreadful spot! --night, when smoke was changed to fire; when every chimney spurted up its flame; and places, that had been dark all day, now shone red-hot, with figures moving to and fro within their blazing jaws, and calling to one another with hoarse cries--night, when the noise of every strange machine was aggravated by darkness, when the people near them looked wilder and more savage; when bands of unemployed labourers paraded the roads, or clustered by torch-light round their leaders, who told them, in stern language, of their wrongs, and urged them on to frightened cries and threats; when maddened men, armed with sword and fire brand, spurning the tears and prayers of women who would restrain them, rushed forth on errands of terror and destruction, to work no ruin half so surely as their own.[11]

This description of nightmare violence is probably inspired by the torchlight meetings and processions of the more radical factions

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[11] The Old Curiosity Shop, Vol.I, pp.431-2.

of the Chartists, which created consternation, particularly during the depressed years of 1838-41;[12] The Old Curiosity Shop was begun in 1840. In Mary Barton Mrs Gaskell describes trade union meetings which are held stealthily in the night in the glare of the gas-light. In such descriptions she uses the same imagery of night, wickedness and flaming violence as Dickens does in the passage just quoted from The Old Curiosity Shop. The fire in Carson's mill, although Mrs Gaskell makes no direct connection between it and political violence, adds to the suggestion of danger simmering under the grimy surface of Manchester. Mrs Gaskell speaks of:

> The differences between employers and the employed,-an eternal subject for agitation in the manufacturing district, which, however it may be lulled for a time, is sure to break forth with fresh violence at a depression of trade, showing that in its apparent quiet the ashes had still smouldered in the breasts of a few.[13]

As well as expressing the monotony and unnaturalness of the industrial worker's life, Dickens expresses this same contained anger in his image of pistons like melancholy mad elephants imprisoned in the factories, in the workers "frying in oil" in the factories on a summer's day. Stephen's dream, where his repressed grievances flare into a gothic-horror nightmare, reveals his subconscious desire to murder.

This dangerous anger smouldering in the breasts of the wronged workers is one of Mrs Gaskell's central concerns. She describes the effect of the terrible years 1839-41:

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[12] See The Age of Reform, p.131.

[13] Mary Barton, pp.20-1.

> Whole families went through a gradual starvation. They only wanted a Dante to record their sufferings. . . . It need excite no surprise then to learn that a bad feeling between working-men and the upper classes became very strong in this season of privation. . . . The most deplorable and enduring evil that arose out of the period of commercial depression to which I refer, was this feeling of alienation between the different classes of society. . . . In many instances the sufferers wept first, and then they cursed.[14]

The bitterness of John Barton when Parliament refuses to listen to the petition of the working men turns him to atheism and violent action. His bitterness turns to madness. Mrs Gaskell compares his monomania to the state brought about by a cruel Italian form of torture where the walls of the prisoner's cell day by day move in upon him, until he understands that they will eventually crush him to death. This obsession with the persecution and torture the poor man endures recalls Stephen Blackpool's obsessive dream about the bottle of poison which haunts him. John Barton takes opium as a relief from life's cares, and Mrs Gaskell describes its dangerous debilitating effect upon him both physically and mentally:

> It is true they who thus purchase it pay dearly for their oblivion; but can you expect the uneducated to count the cost of their whistle? Poor wretches! They pay a heavy price. Days of oppressive weariness and langour, whose realities have the feeble sickness of dreams; nights, whose dreams are fierce realities of agony; sinking health, tottering frames, incipient madness, and worse, the consciousness of incipient madness . . . .[15]

As she speaks of Chartism she pictures the uneducated rising up like the injured, maddened monster Frankenstein, a maddened-beast image

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[14] Mary Barton, p.79.

[15] Ibid., p.159.

similar to Dickens's melancholy-mad elephants imprisoned in the Coketown factories.

Although in Mary Barton Mrs Gaskell attempts to paint a reliable and sympathetic portrait of the industrial worker, the fear of revolution and violence at times distorts this picture. When he takes active steps to relieve his own plight and that of his fellow-workers, John Barton is turned into a madman and his co-workers into dumb monsters. Even the plot of Mary Barton is affected by these prejudices. Mrs Gaskell sets out to tell the story of John Barton, the suffering worker who is "my hero"[16] in "the tragedy of a poor man's life,"[17] but her feelings for him are alienated by the violent events which are the basis of the plot. Even though the murder of a master by one of his hands had a precedent,[18] the event was atypical of the period as a whole, and so also was the episode of vitriol-throwing during a strike-breaking. That Mrs Gaskell bases her plot on these violent events reveals her underlying fears:

> John Barton, a political murderer appointed by a trade union, is a dramatization of the fear of violence which was widespread among the upper and middle classes at the time, and which penetrated, as an arresting and controlling factor, even into the deep imaginative sympathy of Mrs Gaskell. This fear that the working people might take matters into their own hands was widespread and characteristic, and the murder of Harry Carson is an imaginative working out of this fear, and of reactions to it, rather than any kind of observed and considered experience.[19]

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[16] The Letters of Mrs Gaskell (no.42), p.74.

[17] Mary Barton, p.351.

[18] See The Letters of Mrs Gaskell (no.130), p.196.

[19] Raymond Williams, Culture and Society, p.90.

As Barton becomes involved in the trade union movement Mrs Gaskill melodramatically distorts her portrait of him; he takes opium and develops a moroseness that turns to madness. He is not seen as a man trying to alleviate the lot of his fellow-men, but as one who has a grudge against the rich. "Their vindictive feelings exhibited themselves in rabid politics"[20] is how Mrs Gaskell explains Unions and Chartism. Her trade union members behave with the cloak-and-dagger secrecy of stage villains:

> Strange faces of pale men with dark glowing eyes peered into the inner darkness, and seemed desirous to ascertain if [Mary Barton's] father were at home. Or a hand and arm (the body hidden) was put within the door, and beckoned him away. He always went. And once or twice, when Mary was in bed, she heard men's voices below, in earnest, whispered talk.
>
> They were all desperate members of trade's unions, ready for anything; made ready by want.[21]

Mrs Gaskell's trade union meeting savours too of melodrama; a visiting union leader dispenses liquor and tobacco and inflames the men by his oratory. In such a mood the men draw lots to determine who is to murder one of the masters:

> Deeper and darker grew the import of their speeches, as they stood hoarsely muttering their meaning out, and glaring, with eyes that told the terror their own thoughts were to them, upon their neighbours. Their clenched fists, their set teeth, their livid looks, all told the suffering which their minds were voluntarily undergoing in the contemplation of crime, and in familiarising themselves with its details.
>
> Then came one of those fierce terrible oaths which bind members of trades' unions to any given purpose.

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[20] Mary Barton, p.79.

[21] Ibid., p.110.

> Then, under the flaring gas-light, they met together to consult further. With distrust of guilt, each was suspicious of his neighbours; each dreaded the treachery of another. A number of pieces of paper (the identical letter on which the caricature had been drawn that morning) were torn up, and one was marked . . . they were shuffled together in a lot. The gas was extinguished; each member drew out a paper.[22]

It is unlikely, of course, that Mrs Gaskell, a genteel minister's wife, had ever attended a union meeting even as a spectator. She reproduces the wild imaginings of a middle class person, stimulated by popular rumour and literary cliché. The documentary care usually evident in her descriptions has gone, and she has relapsed into the conventional horrors of melodrama and crime stories.

However, Mrs Gaskell is not the only novelist to paint trade unions in such a melodramatic fashion. Even so politically knowledgeable a writer as Benjamin Disraeli resorts to such stage villainy in his account in Sybil of Dandy Mick's initiation into a trade union. Until they were repealed in 1824, the Combination Laws of 1799 and 1800 made trade union meetings and, in fact, the combination of one worker with another in any way in order to get an increase in wages, illegal. The laws made unionists criminals. They were forced to adopt the solemn oaths, passwords and ritual that terrified those upper and middle class people who heard tales of them. The Home Office hired spies during these years to ferret out these secret societies, so that the men and women who belonged must often have felt the terror and suspicion of each other that Mrs Gaskell's

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[22] Mary Barton, p.179.

union members show in Mary Barton.[23] But Mrs Gaskell's novel is set in the period after the repeal of these acts. Her meeting is not actually a criminal offence, but the fear and distrust of the activities of unionists and the popular conception of unions as criminal societies evidently persists. Mrs Gaskell's men are not technically criminals merely by their meeting together, but she perpetuates this popular conception of a trade union by portraying them as planning a crime.

Mary Barton and Sybil, like Dickens's Barnaby Rudge, in which he describes rather similar secret societies of apprentices, were written in the 1840's. By the 1850's a new conception of what a trade union was had emerged among the middle and upper classes. Dickens's union meeting in Hard Times, stagey and hysterical though it is, rather pales beside the cloak-and-dagger conspiracy of Mrs Gaskell's. What is curious, is that although Dickens, unlike Mrs Gaskell, had had the opportunity to witness a union meeting, he too relies in his novel on popular clichés rather than on observed phenomena. During his visit to Preston while planning Hard Times, Dickens saw at least two gatherings held by trade unions which he describes in an article in Household Words. The bulk of the business appears to have been the raising of money to support strikers, and at both meetings, although the men had been on strike a month or two, Dickens describes the behaviour and procedure as very orderly. However, like Mrs Gaskell, he cannot accept that bargaining power is of importance to the workers.

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[23]See J.L. and Barbara Hammond, The Town Labourer, pp.103-110 and p.225.

While he recognises in his article that labourers should have the same right to organize as their employers, he still believes the strike to be a mistaken action. "I left the place," he writes, "with a profound conviction that their mistake is generally an honest one." In Hard Times Dickens's workers make the same "honest mistake." They are discontented men who, though earnest and in good faith, allow their discontent to lead them astray:

> That every man felt his condition to be, somehow or other, worse than it might be; that every man considered it incumbent on him to join the rest, towards the making of it better; that every man felt his only hope to be in allying himself to the comrades by whom he was surrounded; and that in this belief, right or wrong (unhappily wrong then), the whole of the crowd were gravely, deeply, faithfully in earnest; must have been as plain to anyone who chose to see what was there, as the bare beams of the roof, and the whitened brick walls. Nor could any such spectator fail to know in his own breast, that these men, through their very delusions, showed great qualities, susceptible of being turned to the happiest account; and that to pretend (on the strength of sweeping axioms, howsoever cut and dried) that they went astray wholly without cause, and of their own irrational wills, was to pretend that there could be smoke without fire.[24]

Dickens in his description of the meeting in Hard Times fosters two popular misconceptions about trade unions: that union leaders were demagogues and frauds, and that unions violated human liberty and tyrannized workers by forcing them to join. His union leader, Slackbridge, is the popular stereotype. Like Mrs Gaskell's "gentleman from London" and George Eliot's Mr Johnson, the radical party organiser in Felix Holt, he is an outside agitator, an insincere, flashy,uncouth man. Mrs Gaskell's agitator declaims in a

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[24]Hard Times, p.171. All quotations from the text of the novel are from the Penguin English Library edition.

"forced theatrical voice"[25] while Slackbridge, delivering himself of "froth and fume"[26] declaims until he is hoarse and sweating. Both Mr Johnson and "the man from London" dispense liquor liberally, inflaming the smouldering discontent of the workmen and on these agitators falls much of the responsibility for the violence which follows. Slackbridge with cheering and gesticulation intoxicates his hearers with his oratory. Dickens describes the meeting he visited at Preston as an orderly assembly quite without any trace of the sea of emotion which rises and falls at Slackbridge's direction. In fact, he describes an incident in which the chairman of the meeting quietly and politely asks a party agitator of the Slackbridge variety to refrain from speaking. Dickens perpetuates the steriotype of the dumb, discontented workers led on by an outside agitator despite his Preston experience. In his novel Dickens is not so much concerned with describing what he saw, but the discontent which he believed lay smouldering beneath the orderly surface, ready to burst out at the touch of the agitator or any such inflammatory agent:

> 'Misheevous stranger!' said Stephen, with an anxious smile; 'when ha we not heern, I am sure, sin ever we can call to mind, o' th' mischeevous strangers! 'Tis not by <u>them</u> the troubles made sir. 'Tis not wi' <u>them</u> 't commences. . . . 'tis hopeless an useless to dream o' takin' them fro their trade, stead o' taking their trade fro them!'[27]

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[25] <u>Mary Barton</u>, p.175.

[26] <u>Hard Times</u>, p.170.

[27] <u>Ibid.</u>, p.181.

Slackbridge, with his inflammatory langaage and persecution of Stephen, is the embodiment of Dickens's fears of industrial violence, of the unprincipled forces which inflame the discontent of the worker. The second appearance of Slackbridge is almost solely for the purpose of representing his persecution of Stephen, and here in his person Dickens embodies the tyranny of the unions. The men are kind to Stephen of their own accord, but as union members, dominated by Slackbridge, they tyrannize him as a non-union member. Stephen meets his death as a result of this persecution by both men and masters, for his reputation as a union traitor marks him as a likely man to commit a robbery. Outcast from society, he wanders through the city outskirts among abandoned mineshafts and rotting buildings and falls to his death. His death is in some ways similar to that of Boucher in North and South who, abandoned by both men and masters as a traitor to his union, drowns himself in despair. Both Mrs Gaskell and Dickens, having no concrete evidence of the harm done to workers by the unions' tyranny, resort to these suggestively poignant deaths.

In North and South Mrs Gaskell's views about unions and the violence of the workers are slightly more moderate than in Mary Barton for she is not writing with the same urgent concern. North and South is an analysis of the whole industrial setting, made by comparing and contrasting people and their points of view. Her hero and heroine, Margaret Hale the Southemer and Thornton the Northemer, are not poor suffering workers, and most of the discussion and action takes place in middle-class drawing rooms. The whole effect is much calmer.

However, even in this novel her fear of the danger of industrial riots emerges. Instead of the conventions of crime and violence in Mary Barton she uses the conventions of war and adventure stories. The major "adventure" in North and South is the strike at Marlborough mills, and associated with this is Mrs Thornton's account of events in her life in Milton. Margaret asks Mrs Thornton whether the workers are striking for higher wages, and Mrs Thornton goes on to describe a picture of Milton which has the romance of a city in a state of siege:

> Milton is no place for cowards. I have known a time when I have had to thread my way through a crowd of white, angry men, all swearing they would have Mackinson's blood as soon as he ventured to show his nose out of his factory; and he, knowing nothing of it, some one had to go and tell him; and it needed to be a woman--so I went. And when I had got in, I could not get out. It was more than my life was worth. So I went up on to the roof where there were stones piled ready to drop on the heads of the crowd, if they tried to force the factory doors. And I would have lifted those heavy stones, and dropped them with as good an aim as the best man there, but that I fainted with the heat I had gone through. . . . South country people are often frightened by what our Darkshire men and women only call living and struggling. But when you've been ten years among a people who are always owing their betters a grudge, and only waiting for an opportunity to pay it off, you'll know whether you are a coward or not, take my word for it.[28]

The conventions of Romance heighten the account of Thornton's facing the strikers. The workers, like a besieging army, are at the gates, pounding and clamouring. At length the fortifications fall and they swarm in. Spurred on by the woman he loves, Thornton bravely faces the invading hordes to plead for peace, and to save the lives of his Irish workers who are huddled together like fearful slaves. The

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[28] North and South, p.110.

final romantic touch comes when our heroine, perceiving the hero to be in danger, throws herself between him and the crowd to save him and sustains an injury which appears for a few moments as if it could be fatal. The dismayed crowd retreat as Thornton, in a final act of bravery, stands unarmed among them.

Perhaps it is in the context of tales of adventure such as these that one ought to read Dickens's disappointed account of Preston during a strike:

> I am afraid I shall not be able to get much here. Except the crowds at the street corners reading the placards pro and con; and the cold absence of smoke from the mill chimneys; there is very little in the streets to make the town remarkable.[29]

Dickens goes to Preston believing he will find something suitably remarkable for material for his novel. But his experience of an industrial town during a strike is disappointingly mundane, and he does not write about strikes in Hard Times. On the other hand, the fears of Mrs Gaskell, who actually lived in Manchester, can turn Milton during a strike into a very remarkable place.

In his article "On Strike" Dickens describes what he saw when a master like Thornton hired knob-sticks to continue working in his mill during a strike:

> Mr Hollin's Sovereign Mill was open all this time. It is a very beautiful mill, containing a large amount of valuable machinery, to which some recent ingenious improvements have been added. Four hundred people could find employment in it; there were eighty-five at work, of whom five had "come in" that

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[29]Letter to Charles Knight (January 18, 1854). Source mislaid.

> morning. They looked, among the vast array of motionless power-looms, like a few remaining leaves in a wintry forest. They were protected by the police (very prudently not obtruded on the scenes I have described), and were stared at every day when they came out, by a crowd which had never been large in reference to the numbers on strike, and had diminished to a score or two. One policeman at the door sufficed to keep order then. These eighty-five were people of exceedingly decent appearance, chiefly women, and were evidently not in the least uneasy for themselves. I heard of one girl among them, and only one, who had been hustled and struck in a dark street.[30]

Dickens finds nothing ominous in this scene. There is little fear of violence on the part of the knob-sticks or the masters. Mrs Gaskell is portraying the exception rather than the rule, it would seem. Thornton's Irish workers eat and sleep huddled in fear in an inner room of the mill. Her description of the strike would seem to be the conventional one which Dickens's article explains carefully was not the case in his experience, and quite small incidents are heightened by her fear.

Mrs Gaskell describes through Margaret her fear of large groups of factory people:

> In the back streets around them were many mills, out of which poured streams of men and women 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 laughs and jests, particularly aimed at all those who appeared to be above them in rank or station.[31]

The Irish knob-sticks are threatened by a horde of savage rebels which

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[30] "On Strike", Household Words, February 11, 1854.

[31] North and South, p.66.

sweeps down upon them like an invading barbarian army. Margaret arrives at the mill-yard gate on an errand, and is let in by the porter as if to a fortified castle, or a Milton version of the Bastille in a North-country French Revolution:

> She looked round and heard the first long far-off roll of the tempest - saw the first slow-surging wave of the dark crowd come, with its threatening crest, tumble over, and retreat, at the far end of the street, which a moment ago seemed so full of repressed noise, but which now was ominously still; . . . there was no near sound - no steam-engine at work with beat and pant - no click of machinery, no mingling and clashing of many sharp voices; but far away, the ominous gathering roar, deep-clamouring.[32]

The Irish workers are terrified, they cringe abjectly and huddle together like animals.

> The gathering tramp . . . was heard just right outside the wall, and an increasing din of angry voices raged behind the wooden barrier, which shook as if the unseen maddened crowd made battering rams of their bodies, and retreated a short space only to come with more united steady impetus against it, till their great beats made the strong gates quiver, like reeds before the wind.[33]

This same image of a sea breaking against closed gates is used by Dickens in his descriptions of the sieges of Newgate Prison in Barnaby Rudge and the Bastille in A Tale of Two Cities. This image of the workers as a sea, calm and obedient in good times but liable to rise in an angry tidal wave to overwhelm society, reflects the middle class fear of a workers' uprising. In this description Mrs Gaskell emphasizes the surge and roar as the men flow up the street, and of the battering effect, like breakers, as they force the gates. An

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[32] North and South, p.166.

[33] Ibid., p.167.

ominous undercurrent in Dickens's description of his trade's union meeting in Hard Times is the manner in which Slackbridge whips up troubled waters: "Slackbridge, the orator, . . . holding out his right hand at arm's length (as the manner of all Slackbridges is), to still the thundering sea, waited until there was profound silence." In Hard Times Dickens does not portray Coketown overwhelmed by the tidal wave of a riot, but in such images as that quoted above he hints at the ominous undercurrent of discontent among the workmen which is too easily excited and can at any time break forth into uncontrollable activity. Even Slackbridge, in the above passage, is not controlling the sea; he merely waits while it subsides of its own accord.

In the interval between Mary Barton (1848) and North and South (1854) Mrs Gaskell's change in attitude toward trade unions reflects the development of popular opinion. In Mary Barton trade unions are described as if they were robbers' gangs. Their leaders are men with loose morals who incite their gangs with liquor and empty, violent speeches. In North and South the committee of the trade union is made up of earnest, if mistaken, men who have enough sense to wish to keep popular opinion on their side by non-violent actions. There is no unscrupulous outside agitator in this novel. However, Higgins, like Barton, is an atheist, a fact that would not have made the unions, in which these men played a prominent part, more sympathetic to most of Mrs Gaskell's readers. In North and South the cause of the riots is Boucher, a traitor to the union, a feckless man with Irish blood in him and none of the "granite" of the northern worker. Boucher, "weak

wi' passion and wi' clemming,"[34] and the men in the angry rioting crowd, "gaunt as wolves, and mad for prey,"[35] represent Mrs Gaskell's fear of the uncontrollable, bestial anger of the starving masses. Margaret Hale looks at these rioters and speaks for Mrs Gaskell:

> She knew how it was; they were like Boucher - with starving children at home - relying on ultimate success in their efforts to get higher wages, and enraged beyond measure at discovering that Irishmen were to be brought to rob their little ones of bread. Margaret knew it all; she read it in Boucher's face, forlornly desperate and livid with rage.[36]

Although the union does not begin the riots, Mrs Gaskell's fear of the uncontrollable bitterness of the poor workers makes her argue that strikes are wrong:

> The workmen's calculations were based (like too many of the masters') on false premises. They reckoned on their fellow-men as if they possess the calculable powers of machines, no more, no less; no allowance for human passion getting the better of reason, as in the case of Boucher and the rioters.[37]

Mrs Gaskell believes one cannot negotiate about men as if they are so many bales of merchandise or hands for mechanically working. Her conclusions are the same as those of Dickens, who shows Stephen Blackpool caught between the inhumanity of his master on the one hand and of the union on the other. She despairs of the cut and dried solutions of Political Economy or trade negotiations, and hopes that men may discover the Christian love which can turn conflict into

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[34] North and South, p.193.

[35] Ibid., p.171.

[36] Ibid., p.171.

[37] Ibid., p.220.

peace. The influence of her Non-Conformist religious background emerges in the attitude of resignation she advocates. The Reverend Hale assures Higgins that a strike may have a temporary effect, but eventually "wages find their own level, and . . . the most successful strike can only force them up for a moment, to sink in far greater proportion afterwards, in consequence of that very strike."[38] What is worse to Mrs Gaskell is that these mistaken strikes may do actual harm, building antagonism between men and masters and lending occasion for the expression of the violent feelings of the starving workers:

> "Oh!" [says Mr Hale to Higgins, with a sigh] "Your Union in itself would be beautiful, glorious - it would be Christianity itself - if it were but for an end which affected the good of all, instead of that of merely one class as opposed to another."[39]

This is the same message as Dickens enunciates when he describes the earnest men led astray in Hard Times, and when in his article "To Working Men" he exhorts men to turn their power of union to improving sanitation and housing.[40]

Union is a powerful weapon at the disposal of the worker. The Union, Higgins explains, is

> . . . a great power: it's our only power. I ha' read a bit o' poetry about a plough going o'er a daisy, as made tears come into my eyes, afore I'd other cause for crying. But, the chap ne'er stopped driving the plough, I'se warrant, for all he were pitiful about the daisy. He'd too much mother-wit for that. Th' Union's the plough, making ready the land for harvest-time. Such as Boucher - 'twould be settin' him up too

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[38] North and South, pp.221-2.

[39] Ibid., p.225.

[40] "To Working Men", Household Words, October 7, 1854.

> much to liken him to a daisy, he's liker a weed lounging over the ground - mun just make up their mind to be put out o' the way.[41]

One of the advantages of Mrs Gaskell's method in North and South is that she can put forward conflicting views not necessarily her own as her characters debate among themselves. Her greater sympathy with trade unions in this novel is seen in the following explanation of Higgins's of the necessity for some means to enforce law and order within the union:

> I'ld not deny but what th'Union finds it necessary to force a man into his own good. . . . once i' th' Union, his interests are taken care on better nor he could do it for himsel', or by himsel', for that matter. It's the only way working men can get their rights, by all joining together. More the members, more chance for each one separate man having justice done him. Government takes care o' fools and madmen; and if any man is inclined to do himsel' or his neighbour a hurt, it puts a bit of a check on him, whether he likes it or no. That's all we do i' th' Union. We can't clap folk into prison; but we can make a man's life so heavy to be borne, that he's obliged to come in, and be wise and helpful in spite of himself.[42]

But to the minds of the middle and upper classes this power of the unions was a dangerous power, carrying with it the threat of revolution and their own overthrow. Mrs Thornton expresses this fear when she explains how the workers "want to be masters, and make the masters into slaves on their own ground."[43] The middle classes conveniently saw the powerful union as a tyrant, violating the liberty of the workers by forcing them to join. "Once banded together, yo've

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[41] North and South, p.283.

[42] Ibid., pp.282-3.

[43] Ibid., p.110.

no more pity for a man than a wild hunger-maddened wolf,"[44] Boucher complains. Having given Higgins's defence of the trade unions, Mrs Gaskell shows how forcing Boucher to join made him into the maddened rascal he is. In desperation he starts a riot against the union's wishes, because he is forced to join when he does not believe in the union, and then he attempts to turn Judas. "Don't you see how you've made Boucher what he is, by driving him into the Union against his will--without his heart going with it," Margaret tells Higgins. At this moment, as if to further illustrate the extent of the union's tyranny, Boucher's body is carried up the street. In his despair he has drowned himself. The tyranny of the union has driven him to his death, just as the tyranny of the union in Hard Times is partly responsible for Stephen's death.

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These three novels reflect the fear of revolution among the middle-classes as they saw continual clashes between workers and masters. To them, it seemed as if the two factions had reached a deadlock. They were afraid of strikes because they worsened the situation. The economic calculations of the masters were also responsible in the eyes of many middle class people for making the situation worse. Writers like Dickens and Mrs Gaskell deplored the way masters considered workers as so many valuable hands in their commercial venture. Dickens concentrates in Hard Times on this aspect of the situation as he outlines the effect of the Gradgrind

[44] North and South, p.149.

Philosophy. Mrs Gaskell claimed that the only solution to the deadlock was love and mutual understanding, for both parties to see beyond their social and commercial positions as masters and hands and to recognise that they were brothers. Mary Barton and North and South end with Barton and Carson, and Higgins and Thornton, recognizing the common humanity in each other. John Barton learns to see the employer he has revenged himself upon as a man, as father of a family like himself:

> To intimidate a class of men, known only to those below them as desirous to obtain the greatest quantity of work for the lowest wages, . . . this was the light in which John Barton had viewed his deed; . . . But now he knew that he had killed a man, and a brother.[45]

Mr Thornton's new humanitarian schemes and consideration for his workers came about because he "got acquainted with a strange kind of chap,"[46] with the worker Higgins.

Mrs Gaskell's purpose, particularly in Mary Barton, is essentially a religious one. Throughout Mary Barton runs the theme of the Dives and Lazarus parable. Mrs Gaskell's Manchester is a place where:

> The rich man dines, while the poor man pines,
> And eats his heart away,
> "They teach us lies," he sternly cries,
> "Would brothers do as they?"[47]

John Barton is driven to desperate Chartism and murder because "You

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[45] Mary Barton, p.346.

[46] North and South, p.351.

[47] Mary Barton, p.358; epigraph heading Chapter 37.

see he were sadly put about to make great riches and great poverty square with Christ's Gospel."[48] In her preface, Mrs Gaskell emphasizes that the conditions of life for the poor in Manchester create bitterness between worker and employer, and that something must be done to lessen the isolation that the workers feel. Her workers have real cause for bitterness, especially in bad times:

> When he would bear and endure much without complaining, could he also see that his employers were bearing their share; he is, I say, bewildered and (to use his own word) "aggravated" to see that all goes on just as usual with the mill-owners. Large houses are still occupied, while spinners' and weavers' cottages stand empty because the families that once occupied them are obliged to live in rooms and cellars. Carriages still roll along the streets, concerts are still crowded by subscribers, the shops for expensive luxuries still find daily customers, while the workman loiters away his unemployed time in watching these things, and thinking of the pale, uncomplaining wife at home, and the wailing children asking in vain for enough 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?[49]

To be the possessor of such unequally distributed wealth must have worried an earnest, sensitive and pious Victorian like Mrs Gaskell. Job Legh tells Mr Carson, "I'll pray for you, and think on you and your trials, both of your great wealth, and of your son's cruel death."

Mrs Gaskell writes in her preface:

> It is enough to say, that this belief of the injustice and unkindness which they endure from their fellow-creatures, taints what might be resignation to God's will, and turns it to revenge, in too many of the poor

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[48] Mary Barton, p.362.

[49] Ibid., p.21.

uneducated factory workers of Manchester.

The bitterness of the poor is a threat to the safety of the rich:

> At present they seem to me to be left in a state wherein lamentations and tears are to be thrown aside as useless, but in which the lips are compressed for curses, and the hands clenched and ready to smite.[50]

Through such passages emerges Mrs Gaskell's concern for the stability of society, which can be guaranteed, she believes, only by Christian sympathy between fellow men. The religious purpose of Mary Barton comes out more clearly in Mrs Gaskell's stress on resignation to God's will; a theme in North and South also. Her mouthpiece in Mary Barton is Job Legh, who like his biblical namesake bears suffering and is patient. The stories in North and South of Bessie Higgins's endurance and Boucher's weak passion make the same point by contrast as those of Job Legh and John Barton. The dying Stephen leaves a similar message to the poor in Dickens's Hard Times: "In our judgements, like as in our doins, we mun bear and forbear."[51] The motif of the final scenes between Carson and Barton, representatives of wronged and angry master and worker, is the words of Christ while suffering on the cross, "forgive them, for they know not what they do." The seemingly insuperable task of uniting workmen and masters in sympathy, even in the midst of their anger, is brought about by their accepting this Gospel message and following Christ's example of forgiveness.

By the end of Mary Barton suffering has taken on a positive

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[50]Preface to Mary Barton.

[51]Hard Times, pp.290-1.

value:

> Hence the beautiful, noble efforts which are from time to time brought to light, as being continuously made by those who have once hung on the cross of agony, in order that others may not suffer as they have done; one of the grandest ends which sorrow can accomplish; the sufferer wrestling with God's message until a blessing is left behind, not for one alone but for generations.[52]

Mrs Gaskell tries to argue that the suffering all about her can be turned to good, that suffering as such need not cause bitterness and conflict. She carefully emphasizes that it is lack of sympathy, to her mind, and not phydical suffering by itself, that causes the bitterness of the workers. In a way this perhaps is the self-defence of a sensitive and pious middle-class Dives disturbed by a sense of her own guilt.

Dickens does not turn suffering into a blessing. Stephen dies for no purpose in a world that is a hopeless purgatory and "aw a muddle." Dickens's characters can do nothing positive about industrial conflicts in this world but can only radiate love, like Sissy, in their own family sphere or wait for a world that is not a muddle to come. Stephen believes that not even "drawin' nigh to fok" will solve the industrial situation.[53] Mrs Gaskell is less despairing and shows her protagonists taking steps at least toward a better world. Her two novels end with enlightened masters attempting to create better conditions for their workers and understanding developing between the

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[52] Mary Barton, p.366.

[53] Hard Times, p.182.

two parties. Because of her fear of political upheaval and workers' uprisings Mrs Gaskell is distrustful of any measures to alter the structure of society. The duty of the poor as she sees it is to be patient, to trust God and to try to love their betters as brothers. The masters must learn to love the poor, to treat them as fellow-men, to help them and show them that they do care. Job Legh reminds Carson, the rich man, of his duty:

> Now, to my thinking, them that is strong in God's gifts is meant to help the weak, . . . the masters has it on their conscience, . . . sir, to answer for to God whether you've done and are doing all in your power to lighten the evils that seem always to hang on the trades by which you make your fortunes. It's no business of mine, thank God. John Barton took the question in hand, and his answer to it was No! Then he grew bitter and angry, and mad; and in his madness he did a great sin, and wrought great woe.[54]

The duty of the poor man is to be patient when he suffers injustice, and to follow Christ's example of forgiveness. "I tried to live Gospel-wise," says John Barton, "but everyone else said, 'stand up for they rights, or thou'lt never get 'em." The resignation and forgiveness preached in the Gospel is to Mrs Gaskell's way of thinking incompatible with any movement of the lower classes to alleviate their depressed conditions. Unlike Dickens, who criticizes the whole philosophy on which society is based in Hard Times, Mrs Gaskell sees nothing drastically wrong in the present economic and social situation save a lack of sympathy between classes. For Mrs Gaskell, God is ordering this world as well as doing justice in the next, and she has

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[54] Mary Barton, p.364.

a confidence about the outcome of earthly events which Dickens, who feels that man has turned this world into a nightmarish muddle, seems unable to share. Job Legh, her ideal workman, voices what she believes the best of the labouring classes feel:

> If we saw the masters try for our sakes to find a remedy, . . . even if they could find no help, and at the end of all could only say, 'Poor fellows, our hearts are sore for ye; we've done all we could, and can't find a cure'--we'd bear up, like men through bad times. . . . If fellow-creatures can give nought but tears, and brave words, we take our trials straight from God, and we know enough of His love to put ourselves blind into his hands.[55]

[55] Mary Barton, p.365.

II

MARY BARTON: MRS GASKELL'S PORTRAYAL OF THE INDUSTRIAL WORKER

The most striking feature of Mrs Gaskell's industrial novels is her portrayal of humble life; she shows extraordinary sensitivity in realizing the poor as strongly individuated persons, and is able to record their everyday lives and feelings with striking fidelity and sympathy. If one compares the labouring people in Mary Barton with those in Dickens's Hard Times, one can see the clarity and freshness of her perception. Such a comparison is, of course, rather unfair to the strengths of Dickens's novel, for he is only incidentally concerned with the plight of industrial workers in Hard Times. The titles for his story, listed before it was properly begun, According to Coker, Prove It, Stubborn Things, Mr Gradgrind's Facts, The Grindstone, Hard Times, Two and Two are Four, Something Tangible, Our Hard-headed Friend, Rust and Dust, Simple Arithmetic, A Matter of Calculation, A Mere Question of Figures, The Gradgrind Philosophy,[1] show that he is attacking a whole philosophy rather than a specific situation. Hard Times is not so much a discussion of specific industrial issues as an allegorical fable exposing the mechanical hardness of the Utilitarian philosophy which had penetrated to all areas of British life. Dickens's characters have a simplified nature in keeping with their

[1] John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, Dickens at Work, p.201.

allegorical function, and it suits Dickens's purpose to adopt certain stereotyped notions. Mrs Gaskell's aims on the other hand are rather narrower: "What I wish to impress is what the workman feels and thinks"[2] and to this end she gives us a detailed account of his living conditions and reactions to life. What is an overlay of factual detail and topical application in Dickens is the central concern of Mrs Gaskell. When Mrs Gaskell indulges in general theorizing in her novel, she quickly draws the reader back to the reactions of her particular characters to the problem she is discussing.[3] It is by focusing on people that Mrs Gaskell gives her novel its special quality.

Dickens's description of the labouring poor in Hard Times is generally agreed to be the weakest part of his novel. His working people are almost entirely stereotyped. The writer of a contemporary review praises Dickens's portrayal of his simple labouring people in just the sort of cliché that Dickens himself is perpetuating:

> The most successful characters . . . are those which are simplest and least cultivated . . . Stephen Blackpool, with his rugged steadfastness, sturdy truth, upright bearing, and fine Northern England accent, smacking strongly of the old Saxon, is a noble addition to the gallery which already contained the bluff John Browdie, the Yarmouth boatmen, and so many other fine portraits. The gentle lovely grace of Rachael and her undeviating instinct of what is right and good, make her a fit companion to the worn and much-wronged Stephen. The story

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[2] Mary Barton, p.21.

[3] For example, see Mary Barton, pp.160-3, where Mrs Gaskell outlines an industrial dispute, and then, saying "So much for generalities. Let us return to individuals," follows John Barton's part in the struggle.

> of their unfulfilled love, and its sad catastrophe, is a truly pathetic episode of humble life. . . . In humble life, different occupations, dfferent localities, produce marked and distinct hues of character: these differences are made more apparent by the absence of those equalizing influences which a long-continued and uniform education, and social intercourse subject to the invariable rules of etiquette, produce upon the cultivated classes. Original and picturesque characters are therefore much more common among the poorer orders; their actions are simpler, proceeding from simpler motives, and they are principally to be studied from without.[4]

In his portrait of Stephen, as in the portraits of the Pegottys and Joe Gargery, Dickens relies on the literary convention of the ignorant upright rustic labourer. This conventional figure has its origin in the contrast of the sophistication of the court with the innocence and honesty of rustic life in the Pastoral. In early nineteenth-century literature this contrast between the wealthy sophisticate and the honest labourer is seen in the rustics of Wordsworth, Burns and Scott. In later nineteenth-century novels the industrial labourer and town worker are also often seen in this conventional character. Toodles, in Dombey and Son, the stoker on a railway train, is an outstanding example in Dickens's novels. Rachael, Stephen's female counterpart, is remarkable for "lowly grace" and goodness which come from "undeviating instinct" rather than knowledge or holiness; to praise her "lowly grace" is to approve of her because she is submissive and knows her place. Such a description would not fit Mrs Gaskell's women; Mary Barton does not want to be a servant, and Margaret Jennings's humility

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[4]The Westminster Review, October 1854, reprinted in the Bantam edition of Hard Times, pp.307-8.

and patience are shown to come from strength of mind rather than from instinct.

Dickens's industrial poor, once he has described the local colour of their trade and region, are all the same. They all look alike, like people of an unfamiliar race. They have no social life. The reviewer with his assumption that the characters of the poor lack the complexities gained from "social intercourse subject to the invariable rules of etiquette" is upholding the same stereotype. Mrs Gaskell is able to see past this, and one of her most delightful scenes, very reminiscent of the genteel economy of Cranford, is old Alice's tea party. The politeness and social grace of old Alice with her borrowed cup, perched on her candle-box seat on which she endures agonies of discomfort for etiquette's sake, shows her to be as genteel as any of the Cranford ladies. Mrs Gaskell shows that even in a two-roomed house politeness is possible. The Wilsons graciously pretend to be busy with the children while the Bartons, with a long whispering and a clinking of money, give directions to Mary as to what to buy for their guests for supper. Unlike Mrs Gaskell's proud, polite families, the slum dwellers in Dickens's Hard Times and Bleak House are described as if they were animals and their homes lairs. In this conventional description of a squalid worker's dwelling the worker shows no pride in his home, which is usually drab and perhaps dirty and untidy. Often a drunken, disabled creature is lying on the floor. The hovels in Tom-all-Alones, the brickmakers' cottages and Stephen's home all fit this stereotype. Those lower class people who live in such hovels seem creatures of another kind, never

free from some stigma of their class; ignorance, shambling servility, crime, drunkenness or slovenliness. Perhaps his shame about his own lowly ancestry and childhood poverty compels Dickens to emphasize class distinctions, whereas Mrs Gaskell in her secure social position, with eminently respectable ancestry, can afford to be more detached. There is, however, another stereotype of the poor man's dwelling; the clean cottage of the honest and thrifty worker. The home of Crabbe's honest couple in The Parish Register, Burns's labourers' cottages, Mrs Gargery's house and the Peggotty's home are of this type, and this is more the tradition Mrs Gaskell follows.

Dickens's reliance on stereotypes is not entirely due to his lack of acquaintance with the people and conditions in industrial towns. Before writing Hard Times he took a trip to Preston, then in the midst of strikes and altercations between workers and employers, to gather material for his novel. However, he seems to have chosen to ignore much of what he saw there. In the article in Household Words in which he describes this visit, he records the banter and frivolity which accompanied the serious business of raising money for the strikers. But the labourers in Hard Times have no vital social life and are chiefly distinguished by their earnestness. His industrial labourers are all alike and move in and out of their houses at the sound of the factory bells as if they also were part of the factory machinery. Dickens intentionally paints the workers as dull and lacking individual colour; this stereotype suits his allegory of the dulling effect of mechanical Gradgrindery. Mrs Gaskell, however, sets herself the task of seeing beyond such stereotypes.

Mrs Gaskell's experience of humble life seems to have been fairly extensive and was probably gained while fulfilling the duties of a minister's wife. Both husband and wife took an active part in social work, and among the activities she took part in, Mrs Gaskell organized sewing-rooms and visited the sick and the prisons. Her husband, as well as being active in religious affairs, was on committees for social welfare. In addition to these practical duties the Gaskells shared an interest in literature about the poor. In 1838 Mrs Gaskell writes of a series of lectures her husband was giving on "The Poets and Poetry of Humble Life," and adds that she is helping him to find material for these lectures. "As for the Poetry of Humble Life," she adds, "that, even in a town, is met with on every hand. We have such a district. . . . In short, the beauty and poetry of many of the common things and daily events of life in its humblest aspect does not seem to me sufficiently appreciated." The Gaskells had "once thought of trying to write sketches among the poor, rather in the manner of Crabbe . . . but in a more seeing-beauty spirit."[5] A glance at the chapter headings of Mary Barton reveals that a good deal of its ancestry lies in the Gaskells' interest in the poetry of humble life. There are quotations from Ebeneezer Elliott, famed for his Corn Law Rhymes, Thomas Hood, Burns, who like the Gaskells saw beauty in humble dialect, and Samuel Bamford, a humble working-class poet with

[5] The Letters of Mrs Gaskell (no,12), p.33.

whom the Gaskells were personally acquainted.[6]

Like Dickens, Mrs Gaskell turns the circumstances of her own life into the material of her fiction, and vanquishes her personal sufferings by projecting them onto a problem of wider social implications. "Three years ago [she writes in her preface to Mary Barton] I became anxious (from circumstances that need not be more fully alluded to) to employ myself in writing a work of fiction." The circumstance that turned her to writing was the death of her only son, and grief for the death of a son is a recurring theme in this novel. Dickens, who suffered from the shame of being a "little labouring hind" as a child, rewrites his experiences in the stories of suffering children or persecuted child-like men. In Hard Times Dickens identifies with Stephen in the bondage of his poverty and his humiliating treatment by those above him. His extreme degree of identification with such characters as Stephen is illustrated by this

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[6]The Letters of Mrs Gaskell (n0.59), p.94. This is a particularly interesting relationship, because it illustrates Mrs Gaskell's kindly pastoral interest in the poor. She procured an autographed copy of Tennyson's poems for the old poet, and visited him to make the presentation. Here is her description of his house: "First of all we went to Blakeley, to his little whitewashed cottage at the end of a row, bordered round, close under the windows with wall-flowers, some of which were yet in bloom. His pretty wife (don't fancy her young because she's not, but she is so womanly, sweet and pretty she makes one think of hawthorn blossom,) was cleaning, and our visit would have been ill-timed to anyone but a lady, as she is; but she put away pail, and dusters and all, and welcomed us heartily in her gentle way. . . .She showed us a present they had had of two birch-wood rocking chairs, with 'Mima' and 'Sam' carved in old English on the back of each. They were evidently her pride; and the only ornament of the little whitewashed room, with the exception of a pair of stag's horns. She gave us bread and butter, and many kind gentle words."

It is interesting to compare such a description with those of her fictional characters' homes in Mary Barton.

letter:

> I have been looking forward through so many weeks and sides of paper to this Stephen business that now - as usual - it being over, I feel as if nothing in the world, in the way of intense and violent rushing hither and thither, could quite restore my balance.[7]

Mrs Gaskell, the grieving parent, sees the world of the poor from the perspective of a sorrowful onlooker. Her point of view is that of a parent grieving for her suffering family.

A story is told of a visit of Mrs Gaskell's to a poor family which may have been a crucial stimulus to the writing of her novel. She was trying to bring comfort and "allay those bitter feelings against the rich which were so common with the poor, when 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?' "[8] The death of the man's child seems to have struck a chord, and when Mrs Gaskell identifies with John Barton in his misfortunes the most bitter of all, and the one she describes with the greatest surge of emotion, is the death of his little son. While she identifies with John Barton in his bereavement she can even sympathize with his desire to steal. There are hard times at the mill and the mill-owner, Mr Hunter, has stopped work. Barton is out of work and his infant son is ill with scarlet fever, the very disease Mrs Gaskell's

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[7]Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph, p.799.

[8]G.De Witt Sanders, Elizabeth Gaskell, p.16, quoting Miss Mat Hompes's article in The Gentleman's Magazine, iv, 124ff.

infant son died of:

> His life hung on a gossamer thread. 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. Mocking words! when the commonest food in the house would not furnish one little meal. Barton tried credit; but it was all worn out at the little provision shops, which were now suffering in their turn. He thought it would be no sin to steal, and would have stolen, but he could not get the opportunity in the few days the child lingered. Hungry himself, almost to an animal pitch of ravenousness, but with the bodily pain swallowed up in anxiety for his sinking lad, he stood at one of the shop windows where all edible luxuries were displayed; haunches of venison, stilton cheeses, moulds of jelly--all appetising sights to the common passer-by. And out of this shop came Mrs Hunter! She crossed to her carriage, followed by the shopman loaded with purchases for a party. The door was quickly slammed to, and she drove away; and Barton returned home with a bitter spirit of wrath in his heart, to see his only son a corpse![9]

The motif of shared grief at the death of a son occurs at the end of Mary Barton. "Oh my God! comfort me," Carson cries aloud in fresh grief at the memory of his son.

> The eyes of John Barton grew dim with tears. Rich and poor, masters and men, were then brothers in the deep suffering of the heart; for was not this the very anguish he had felt for little Tom.[10]

Mrs Gaskell appeals in Mary Barton for sympathy between rich and poor; she appeals to the hearts of her middle-class readers for sympathy with the sufferings of the poor and tries to make them see the inherent beauty in the everyday lives of humble people.

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[9] Mary Barton, p.22.

[10] Ibid., p.345.

The centre of the novel is the story of John Barton, a poor man who is "doomed . . . tossed to and fro by circumstances"[11] culminating in his death which ends "the tragedy of a poor man's life."[12] Her principal concern is to make the reader come to love and understand John Barton, to see him in a "seeing-beauty" spirit. It was a revolutionary idea to raise a working-class trade unionist to the stature and dignity of a tragic hero.[13] Mrs Gaskell does not quite succeed because of her own middle-class prejudices and fear of controversy. She writes that it was a "London thought coming from the publisher" that the novel must be called Mary Barton rather than John Barton.[14] This change allows Mrs Gaskell to emphasize the Mary Barton romance in later chapters. It must have been some relief, however, to focus on the conventional theme of the young girl's decision between a wealthy admirer and a poor but honest lover, on the dramatic chase for a missing witness, and Mary's part in the murder trial, for Mrs Gaskell's portrayal of the Chartist elements in Mary Barton shows her uneasiness with her task.[15] Mrs Gaskell is unable to find any of the poetry of humble life in Chartism and describes Barton's chartist activities with melodramatic horror. Barton, for instance, cannot go

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[11] Preface to Mary Barton.

[12] Mary Barton, p.315.

[13] See The Letters of Mrs Gaskell (no.42), p.74.

[14] Ibid. (nos.39 and 42), p.70 and p.74.

[15] Raymond Williams discusses this in Culture and Society: 1780-1950, pp.88-90.

to the scaffold a hero as Sidney Carton does; but in a dastardly fashion, quite conflicting with his earlier generosity, lets the blame for the murder settle on a close friend. When she begins to describe the Chartist movement, Mrs Gaskell's sympathy for the poor and her ability to see them as complete, intelligent human beings disappears, and she begins to voice the fears she shared with most middle-class people:

> The actions of the uneducated seem to me typified in those of Frankenstein, that monster of many human qualities, ungifted with a soul, a knowledge of the difference between good and evil.
>
> The people rise up to life; they irritate us, they terrify us, and we become their enemies. Then, in the sorrowful moment of our triumphant power, their eyes gaze on us with a mute reproach. Why have we made them what they are; a powerful monster, yet without the inner means for peace and happiness?[16]

Such a portrait of the poor as monsters, without souls, without the inner means for peace and happiness, conflicts with the earlier portrait of God-fearing Margaret coping with her blindness, or intelligent and patient Job. Immediately the actions of the poor threaten the rich, they become creatures of another kind. Mrs Gaskell paints a picture of the terrible sufferings of Barton but will not allow herself to come to the conclusion that a poor man should seek ways to alleviate the sufferings of his fellow men. Unfortunately Mrs Gaskell's sympathies are pulling one way and her middle-class prejudices another; but despite the unevenness caused by this conflict, when she does describe the poor as she actually knew them her portrait is very impressive in its detailed accuracy and sympathetic humanity.

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[16] Mary Barton, p.160.

Mrs Gaskell shares with the poets of the poor a sense of the dignity of mankind, especially among the humble and poor. The dignity, perseverance and beauty in the poverty and bodily decrepitude of Wordsworth's leech gatherer is seen in Mrs Gaskell's portrait of old Alice Wilson with her patience and faith, her folk-lore and her herbal remedies. Unlike Dickens', Mrs Gaskell's scenes of vice, poverty and suffering are notable for their absence of sensationalism and literary cliché. There are exceptions, of course, which occur when Mrs Gaskell's prejudices influence her imagination, as when she describes Chartism. Dickens relies heavily on popular journalism for his topics; his novels often extend the significance of subjects currently under discussion in the press; for example, the strikes and divorce laws in Hard Times. This journalistic influence is seen in his descriptions. When he describes scenes and people he is usually using them, as a popular journalist does, to illustrate a theory. Mrs Gaskell, like the poets she admired, Crabbe and Wordsworth, turns to the mundane world about her, not to gather facts to support a theory, but to look for poetry. She attempts to recapture the beauty of God's creation which exists even in the most unlikely places.

Mrs Gaskell's descriptions are full of accurate detail and she seems to see everything afresh. Her best effects are obtained in descriptions of minutiae; cherished triangles of pretty glass used to keep cutlery from dirtying the table-cloth, the quality of a length of bombazine, candle boxes which support an improvised seat. She shows the concern with number and homely detail which Wordsworth displays in a poem like "We are Seven"; Alice lives at "14 Barber Street," Mary is

to buy "fresh eggs at Tippings, one apiece, that will be five pence." There is no reason for Mrs Gaskell to tell the reader, in her description of Barton's house, about such details as that there are two, unpruned geraniums, or to describe in detail the rather garish tea-tray, except for the experience of imagining such things; to experience the beauty of an everyday, rather humble sight and to feel the value such things have for their humble owners. Even the brightly coloured oil cloth which extends from the coal-hole to the fireplace has a pathos and loveliness in its own setting.

To the normal middle-class reader the working-class suburbs of an industrial town

> contained . . . many small streets . . . like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours with the same sound upon the same pavements to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next.[17]

When Mrs Gaskell describes Barton's house she draws attention to the details which show how the Bartons live inside one of these monotonously similar workers' houses, but the details are very specific and show the Bartons as individuals rather than as representative poor people. She describes their japanned tea tray, and its importance in individualizing the scene is seen later when the Bartons suffer hard times, and she does not forget to tell us that this particular item is one of those pawned. She takes pains to describe the oil-cloth which extends from the coal-hole to the fire-place. It is a cheap piece of

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17 Hard Times, p.65.

material, for a very mundane use, but its brightness, and its very existence, point to the care Mrs Barton takes with her housekeeping. Mrs Gaskell's workers are people who take a pride in themselves and their homes. Mrs Davenport, whom we see in the squalor of a cellar, cares about wearing a decent black dress for her husband's funeral. Mrs Gaskell is not only able to see the poor with sympathy, but to put aside those prejudices which determine what she believes to be there, and describe what actually is there.

The very emphasis on detail, on the function and number of articles, seems to assume an unfamiliarity on the part of her readers. The ordinary novel reader in the mid-nineteenth century knew of poverty, of course, but probably in a rather second-hand way. If she did not stop her ears like Dickens's "dainty delicacy" she probably read accounts of crime and disease in the newspapers. She might perhaps have come across some statistics of the Gradgrindery kind in blue-books or documentary reports in journals. Most probably she had read in the poetry and novels about the poor the cliché description of the poor man and his hovel. She probably knew, having read Hood's "Song of a Shirt," that seamstresses starved in cellars, but she had no clear idea of what such cellars looked like and most probably, for all her tears shed when reading the poem, found such women disgusting creatures if ever she saw them. The reading public, very naturally, did not enjoy descriptions of the sordid facts that they would rather forget, and this is why writers like Dickens, who wish to make an impact on the mind of the dainty reader, describe poverty in terms of acceptable literary clichés. Mrs Gaskell takes real pleasure in

describing those curious details which are usually left out of more conventional descriptions, but which explain the mechanics of an unfamiliar way of life. We learn where the Bartons do their washing, how slum-dwellers manage without toilets, how paupers are buried in mass graves, and exactly how the starving eke out their money and food. However, she is never offensive, because of the tact with which she selects details which are of genuine interest. Like Wordsworth in the Lyrical Ballads, who can find poetry in Harry Gill's chattering teeth and Simon Lee's swollen ankles, she turns what could be sordid and distasteful into material which shows the grandeur and beauty of God's world, even in the squalor of an Ancoats cellar.

But Mrs Gaskell's descriptions of the squalor of extreme poverty are unsensational. Her description of the Davenports' cellar and the worst slums of Manchester show that she can notice the real horror of such places without flinching, and record it in minute detail:

> the street 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 overflowed and stagnated. Heaps of ashes were the stepping-stones, on which the passer-by, who cared the least for cleanliness, took care not to put his foot. Our friends were not dainty, but even they picked their way till they got to some steps leading down to a small area, where a person standing would have his head about one foot below the level of the street, and might at the same time, without the least motion of his body, touch the window of the cellar and the damp muddy wall right opposite. You went down one step even from the foul area into the cellar in

> which a family of human beings lived. It was very dark inside. The window-panes of many of them were broken and stuffed with rags, which was reason enough for the dusky light that pervaded the place even at mid-day.
>
> 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 foetid as almost to knock the two men down. Quickly recovering, as those inured to such things do, they began to penetrate the thick darkness of the place, and to see three or four little children rolling on the damp, nay wet, brick floor, through which the stagnant, filthy moisture of the street oozed up; the wife sat on her husband's lair, and cried in the dank loneliness.[18]

The Davenport cellar is inhabited by "a family of human beings," a family with crying toddlers rolling about on the floor and a lonely weeping wife, pictured amid the grim conditions of the cellar. Mrs Gaskell with her "family of human beings" seems to be deliberately setting out to contradict the stereotype of the disgusting, slovenly, criminal, sub-human creatures who are imagined to inhabit such lairs.

In Bleak House Dickens's slums are described in terms of literary conventions; in his horror he resorts to hysterical clichés from stories of mystery, horror and crime. Tom-all-Alone's is inhabited by a crowd of stunted gremlins with names like those of criminals in a Newgate fiction. "Carrots, or the Colonel, or Gallows, or Young Chisel, or Terrier Tip, or Lanky, or the Brick," and haunted by a crowd which "hovers round the three visitors, like a dream of horrible faces, and fades away up alleys and into ruins, and behind walls; and with occasional cries and shrill whistles of warning, thenceforth flits about them until they leave the place." He does not

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[18] Mary Barton, pp.54-5.

show us ordinary human beings like ourselves suffering amid these squalid conditions, but figures emblematic of one facet of human existence only; "a drunken face tied up in a bundle of rags on the floor of a dog-hutch which is her private apartment," and a mother and child who remind the onlooker "of another infant, encircled with light, that he has seen in pictures."[19] Mrs Gaskell's factual horror and amassing of detail has quite another kind of power. Her description relies for its impact on pictorial rather then emotional horror. One steps over the piles of ashes with Barton and Wilson, and is knocked down by the smell. With her calm accumulation of detail, Mrs Gaskell creates a powerful impression, and at the same time convinces the reader of her authenticity and reliability.

Even when Dickens provides a more prosaic description he is not usually concerned with the place for itself. The details which describe Stephen Blackpool's lodgings are chosen to show that he is a careful, considerate, neat and literate man. The narrow little street, the mean little shop, the black ladder and the tainted atmosphere describe poverty in symbolic terms. The tainted atmosphere has an emotional and symbolic significance, whereas Mrs Gaskell's "foetid smell" assails the senses. Stephen is trapped in mean and tainted surroundings from which the only escape appears to be the black ladder of death. Part of the squalid scenery which surrounds him is the

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[19] All quotations in this paragraph are from Bleak House, pp.310-2.

conventional foul drunken creature.[20] Stephen's wife steps from a melodrama with her stereotyped gestures, dangling the bonnet and pointing, for example, and her incoherent babbling:

> Such a woman! A disabled, drunken creature, barely able to preserve her sitting posture by steadying herself with one begrimed hand on the floor, while the other was so purposeless in trying to push away her tangled hair from her face, that it only blinded her the more with the dirt upon it. A creature so foul to look at, in her tatters, stains and splashes but so much fouler than that in her moral infamy that it was a shameful thing even to see her.[21]

Her disgusting appearance is emblematic of her internal foulness, conveying Dickens's repulsion and scorn for such shaming stigmas as drunkenness among the lower classes. Dickens identifies with Stephen's feelings of shame and bondage, while Mrs Gaskell's feelings are of pastoral sympathy as she tries to recreate the physical conditions poor people live in. One could compare this picture with the impression of the pure physical squalor of Davenport's dwelling, which, though repellent to the senses, has not the suffocating emotional repulsion contained in Dickens's use of "dirt," "foul," "stain," and "moral infamy."

An interesting manifestation of Mrs Gaskell's concern for detail is her use of the dialect and folk songs of Manchester, which

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[20]The foul drunken creature in the poor man's hovel is a convention found also in Tom-all-Alone's and the brickmakers' hovels. It has special symbolic value in Dickens's description of Mr Mell's mother's home in David Copperfield, where the ugly and incoherent, though perfectly sober, Mrs Fibbitson has taken proprietorship of the fireplace as if she cannot be got rid of. She adds to Mr Mell's shame in front of the genteel young David.

[21]Hard Times, p.106.

she carefully annotates. In her use of dialect she follows the tradition of writers like Burns and Scott whose humble, dialect-speaking characters are a source of folk-loric wisdom.[22] Such characters are raised to an elemental dignity, not laughed at because of their clumsy and inferior means of expressing themselves, like a countryman in a humorous sketch. Mrs Gaskell's comment on the ballad "The Oldham Weaver," which she carefully copies out and annotates, illustrates her serious appreciation of the traditions of the poor:

> The air to which this song is sung is a kind of droning recitative, depending much on expression and feeling. To read it, it may, perhaps, seem humorous, but it is that humour which is near akin to pathos, and to those who have seen the distress it describes, it is a powerfully pathetic song.[23]

An article of the Reverend Gaskell's, "The Lancashire Dialect, Illustrated in Two Lectures," is appended to some editions of Mary Barton, and Mrs Gaskell's glosses show the influence of her husband's research.[24] Mrs Gaskell in her footnotes compares the dialect idioms

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[22]Edgar Wright, in Mrs Gaskell: The Basis for Reassessment, pp.258-64, discusses dialect in Mrs Gaskell's novels. He points out Mrs Gaskell's originality in this matter despite precedents--for her Manchester mill-hands were hardly the picturesque material that Scott's peasantry were. He shows that her dialect is not always consistent, and is dropped as such emotional climaxes as Barton's dying confession, which require "dignity of expression as well as dignity of emotion." Carson, once a mill-hand, does not use dialect--"his speech indicates his social position." "The reader is given continuous hints from the language to keep the speakers firmly placed in class and locality, ... It is a symbolic dialect rather than true dialect."

[23]Mary Barton, p.33.

[24]The Letters of Mrs Gaskell (no.25), p.56: "It is so difficult living in Lancashire to decide upon words likely to be unintelligible in another county; but my husband has put notes to those we believe require them."

to the usages of "classic" writers--Chaucer, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson. Such comparison tends to stress that the dialect has equal literary and cultural potential to "proper English." Mrs Gaskell's annotations suggest that the dialect idioms derive from the same ancient traditions as the contemporary standard English, and that such idioms, found in the language of Shakespeare and Chaucer, are not the mark of an inferior intelligence. The speech is not considered low and vulgar, but gains in nobility and a kind of antiquarian interest.[25]

Dickens made use of the Lancashire dialect in Hard Times, but as he was less well acquainted with the dialect one would expect his conception of its dialect to be mainly instructed by the stereotype of the "stage Lancashire-man." Certainly he lacks the picturesqueness of Mrs Gaskell, who uses such delightful expressions as "baggin-time," "gloppened," "pobbies." One of the features of Dickens's novels, from the appearance of Sam Weller and Jingle in Pickwick Papers onwards, is his talent for creating characters who are memorable and delightfully alive because of their peculiar quirks of speech. Naturally when Dickens's industrial novel, set in Lancashire, appeared, his readers would have expected him to recapture the dialect. However, Dickens recaptures only the conventional idea of the depressed and sorrowful Lancashire mill-hand, and his local colour is a poor imitation of the pathos contained in songs like "The Oldham Weaver" which Mrs Gaskell quotes in her novel.

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[25]It is interesting to notice here the Westminster Review comment on Stephen's dialect, "the fine Northern England dialect, smacking strongly of the old Saxon," which reveals a condescending attitude towards dialect.

In both Mrs Gaskell and Dickens the dialect is symbolic of rank, for Bounderby and Carson, though of lowly birth, both speak proper English. However, the quality and use of dialect in both authors show certain differences in their notions about rank, especially their notions of what is implied by inferiority of rank. In moments of crisis when extra dignity is required, Mary and John Barton speak in proper English. This convention implies that their sayings are as intelligent and dignified as those of more cultivated heroes and heroines in similar situations in novels. Stephen, however, delivers his most important speeches in his thickest dialect, and these speeches are apt to consist of strings of folk-sayings and adages:

> But in our judgements, like as in our doins, we mun bear and forbear. . . . I ha' seen more clear, and ha' made it my dyin prayer that aw th'world may on'y coom toogether more, an get a better unnerstan'in o'one another, than when I were in't my own weak sel'n.[26]

Such speeches are given pathos by his own admission of his own weakness, his inability as a poor worker to understand things clearly, to express himself clearly or to do anything about the muddle he sees around him. The pathos is enhanced by the impediment of his incorrect English. In Hard Times the wisdom comes "out of the mouths of babes and sucklings," Sissy confronting Harthouse, Sleary lisping, and Stephen the ignorant workman who is so honest he often behaves with the candour of an innocent child. Dickens wishes, of course, to show these babes confounding the learned Gradgrind philosophers. It suits

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[26] Hard Times, p.73.

Dickens's purpose in this novel to portray his ideal workman as a wise child.

Mrs Gaskell's workers on the other hand are definitely adults, and though perhaps they are ignorant and untrained, they do not lack intelligence and shrewdness. Of the factory girls of Manchester she writes:

> The only thing to strike a passer-by was an acuteness and intelligence of countenance, which has often been noticed in a manufacturing population.[27]

Job Legh is introduced by an anecdote from the life of Sir J.E.Smith which credits his type with an intellectual stature which would enable him to converse intelligently with a scientist in his field of interest. Mrs Gaskell's dialedt speakers are as shrewd as those who speak "proper English." She emphasizes that dialect is not the mark of simple inarticulate men.

It is interesting to compare the articulateness of the workers in front of their masters in these two novels. Job Legh and Jem Wilson at the close of Mary Barton talk on almost equal terms with their employer, presenting opinions he finds worth challenging. Not only does Dickens partly avoid this issue by his portrayal of Bounderby, but Stephen in his second interview has not even the shrewdness to understand when to be quiet and blunders into his martyrdom like some poor animal. Wilson, when he goes to ask for an infirmary order for Davenport, is ill at ease in his surroundings at the wealthy Carson's house and stands sleeking down his hair nervously, but he is alert and

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[27] Mary Barton, p.5.

polite, though shy. In both Stephen's interviews with his employer his dumb earnestness makes him a perfect butt for Bounderby's jibes, and in the second he takes his cue in matters of social decorum from Louisa's look, much as a child looks to a mother to see that it is behaving in the correct way. If the hands of the factories of Lancashire were as ignorant and inarticulate as Stephen, then clearly it would be fruitless to attempt the reconciliation and communication between men and masters which Mrs Gaskell advocates in her novel. Bounderby sneers at Stephen: "Now perhaps you'll let the gentleman know, how you would set this muddle (as you're so fond of calling it) to rights." Stephen, in his child-like honesty, lacking the shrewdness and pride of Jem or Job Legh, falls into the trap laid for him, and answers this question with pathetic candour:

> I dunno, sir. I canna be expecten to'it. 'Tis not me as should be looken to for that, sir. 'Tis them as is put ower me, and ower aw the rest of us. What do they tak upon themseln, sir, if not to do't.[28]

His language is inarticulate, his manner submissive, and like a simple and good child he leaves it to his masters to make decisions and suggestions.

Mrs Gaskell credits her labourers with a more adult shrewdness and independence. She agrees that it is the masters who must direct, but they must realize that the workers are brother men with a certain amount of self-respect, who deserve at least to be told what is going

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[28] Hard Times, p.181.

on:

> I'm loth to vex you, sir, just now; [says Job Legh in an interview with the employer Carson, showing an adult sense of etiquette which Stephen lacks] but it was not want of power I was talking on; what we all feel sharpest is the want of inclination to try and help the evils which come like blights at times over the manufacturing places, ... You say, our talk has done no good. I say it has. I see the view you take of things from the place where you stand . . . . I shan't think any longer, does he act right on my views of a thing, but does he act right on his own. [29]

Mrs Gaskell believes that masters and workers must meet as men and share their ideas and understand each others' positions. Dickens's portrait of the workers in Hard Times precludes such a situation; he seems to suggest that the relationship of master to man is like that of a parent to an ignorant young child. Stephen, with proper humility, stresses that with his "little learning" and his "common way" he cannot presume to tell his masters what they should do. Like a good child he can only tell the truth whenever he sees that something is wrong.

Mrs Gaskell's workers are lively individuals portrayed in a vital social milieu. The complexities of social relationships penetrate in her novels to the very lowest strata of society. She makes no such distinction as the writer in the Westminster Review between the simplicity of the humble character and the complexity of the more cultivated members of society. Even an ignorant working man has his personal idiosyncracies:

"I've one plan I wish to tell John Barton," said a

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[29] Mary Barton, p.365.

> pompous, care-ful speaking man, "and I should like him for to lay it afore the honourable house. My mother comed o' Oxfordshire, and were under-laundry-maid in Sir Francis Dashwood's family; and when we were little ones, she'd tell us stories of their grandeur: and one thing she named were, that Sir Francis wore two shirts a day. Now he were all as one as a Parliament man; and many on 'em, I han no doubt, are like extravagant. Just tell 'em John, do, that they'd be doing th'Lancashire weavers a great kindness, if they'd ha' their shirts a'made o'calico; 'twould make trade brisk, that would, wi' the power o' shirts they wear.[30]

The sketch is a delightful portrait of a pompous man and the care with which he propounds his eccentric idea; he is a type who might be found at any level of society. The sketch has its pathos too in the great gap between the rich and poor it displays and in the complete impossibility, alas, of John Barton's making any such human and personal contribution in the confrontation of Chartists and Parliament. The same sly satire on the nice ties of polite society and its insensitivity to the thousands who starve is apparent in Mrs Gaskell's description of the Ogden funeral. Margaret, who is aggravating her oncoming blindness by sewing black garments, is unable to finish mourning dresses of an expensive fabric, which the widow can ill afford, for the funeral of her husband, a no-good drunkard whom she had not particularly loved while he lived. This funeral brings to mind the simple dignity of the Davenport funeral. Mrs Gaskell comments ironically:

> Owing to the fire, [which Mary and Margaret leave the sewing to watch] the two younger Miss Ogdens were in such grief for the loss of their excellent father, that

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[30] Mary Barton, pp.81-2.

> they were unable to appear before the little circle of sympathizing friends gathered together to comfort the widow, and see the funeral set off.[31]

Mrs Gaskell is at her best in such ironic comments about apparent trivia. However, a whole complex of social relationships centres round this incident, a humorous tragedy of everyday life surrounding two half-finished mourning dresses of expensive bombazine.

Mrs Gaskell's portrayal of the humble people of Mary Barton differs very little from her descriptions of the genteel society in Cranford. In both novels she describes with irony the mixed humour and pathos of everyday events. People, their homes, and social events are of particularly vital interest to her, and it is through these everyday particulars that she makes her social comments. She not only sees the poor as fully human and socially-conscious people, but wishes to persuade her reader that this is so. She wishes to share her discovery of the vital lives of the ordinary men in the streets:

> Living in Manchester, but with a deep relish and fond admiration for the country, my first thought was to find a framework for my story in some rural scene; and I had already made a little progress in a tale, the period of which was more than a century ago, and the place on the borders of Yorkshire, when I bethought me how deep might be the romance in the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets of the town in which I resided. I had always felt a deep sympathy with the care-worn men, ...[32]

It is this sympathy for the poor that she hopes, in the words of the Carlyle quotation with which she precedes her work, that her "fictitious Biography" may "instill."

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[31] Mary Barton, p.51.

[32] Preface to Mary Barton.

III

NORTH AND SOUTH: AN ANALYSIS OF INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY FROM THE DRAWING-ROOM

North and South is the most successful of Mrs Gaskell's three "novels with a purpose," for in this novel she confines her setting to a world she knows well, the world of polite social intercourse in the drawing-room. The interest of the book is in the exchange of conflicting points of view and the contrast of personalities. The effects of the world of factories and tradesmen are brought into the calm, polite world of the drawing-room and laid before us in the characters and sayings of people. Her method is, of course, very different from that of Dickens in Hard Times, which is also an analysis of industrial society; in a starkly symbolic fable Dickens expresses the harsh philosophy which motivates the industrial society, and the social effects of this philosophy are only part of his plan. Mrs Gaskell takes as the centre for her story a character whose views and experiences are similar to her own, and follows her thoughts and activities outside the drawing-room. Only occasionally does Mrs Gaskell present and analyse the thoughts of other characters except through conversations with Margaret.

North and South is a search for an understanding of the true nature of industrial society. We follow Margaret Hale's growing understanding from her formative years in London and Helstone, which

give her an experience of the world by which to judge her new environment, and with her discover the new kind of civilization which lies under the smoky haze which is her first glimpse of Milton. Margaret's growth from childhood in rustic simplicity, to girlhood in the sophisticated city, to womanhood in the industrial town, is rather like a history of the development of English society up to the Victorian era in an allegorical form. Mrs Gaskell carefully points out the faults and virtues of each stage.

North and South, in which we follow the experiences of middle-class Margaret Hale, is more about the masters than the workers, and Mrs Gaskell would appear to be trying to correct any impression she gave in Mary Barton of being overly sympathetic to the workers and thus rather unjust to the masters. Her hero is not a suffering worker, but a wealthy industrial magnate. The factory owner seems to have become a much maligned stock-figure. Mrs Gaskell's contemporaries appear to have imagined him as a vulgar self-made upstart who is unable to see any relationships but those of the cash-nexus. Dickens's portrait of Bounderby follows this stereotype. He is a brassy upstart, whose very name on his brass name-plate and whose stories of his rise to wealth illustrate his vulgar self-advertising. The remarks of the genteel Hale ladies as they contemplate moving to Milton show the typical abhorrence of vulgar people who have made their way by trade:

> Fancy living in the middle of factories, and factory people! though, of course, if your father leaves the church, we shall not be admitted into society anywhere. . . . at any rate, the Gormans [neighbours whom both ladies look down upon as "shoppy people" engaged in trade] made carriages for half the gentry of the county,

> and were brought into some kind of intercourse with them; but these factory people, who on earth wears cotton that can afford linen?[1]

Margaret assures her mother that they will have "little enough to do with them." The novel follows Margaret's growth as she learns to understand and accept the men and women of this new culture from her first condescending impressions of Thornton, until her realization of her love and admiration for him and her acceptance of his offer of marriage. Her first impressions are disdainful:

> Not quite a gentleman; but that was hardly to be expected.[2]

> And as to Mr Thornton's being in trade, why he can't help that now, poor fellow, I don't suppose his education would fit him for anything else.[3]

Mrs Gaskell is determined to do justice to this group of people, and the society they have built, but she herself, like Margaret Hale, comes to the society as an outsider. Throughout the book her ambivalent attitude is portrayed in the tussles of Thornton and Margaret. Thornton stands for the power and efficiency of this Northern society. His powerful physique, his straight-forward speech and resolute action represent to us in the drawing-room situation the power and efficiency of the machine, the progress of industry, and the prowess of England as a manufacturing nation which the efforts of such energetic men, running efficient machines, are building. Margaret Hale stands for the slow-moving, gentle, aristocratic world which is fast

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[1] North and South, p.41.

[2] Ibid., p.59.

[3] Ibid., pp.70-1.

fading. She, with her flowers, work baskets, coconut cakes and gentle dignity, is the person through whom Mrs Gaskell portrays her nostalgia for a lost, individual, more organic way of life. The metaphor of the plough going over the daisy, which Higgins borrows from Burns to express the power of the Union, is also an appropriate one for Mrs Gaskell's feelings about the rise of industrial society. Like Higgins, Mrs Gaskell is aware that, for all his pity for the flower, the ploughman with any sense does not stop for it. She recognises this society as one with many good points, and one which is emerging triumphant. Margaret Hale must learn to accept the good changes it brings, and to try to incorporate the old values she cherishes if she does not wish them to fade away.

In North and South Mrs Gaskell makes her analysis of society by a series of contrasts of personality and region, as these are revealed in the drawing-room conversations which form the greater portion of her book. Mrs Gaskell's first contrast appears to be the conventional one of the frippery and sophistication of the city with the simple bliss of a pastoral paradise. The trivial concerns of conversation at Aunt Shaw's house, shawls, trousseaus, weddings and marriage for money and position, are contrasted with the simple amusements of Margaret at Helstone, reading, walking and making friends with simple country people. Yet the first chapter devoted to the little paradise of Helstone is called "Roses and Thorns," and the pastoral perfection is marred by sadness and strife. Little social exchanges capture the contrasts of town and country life. Margaret at

London is nostalgically remembering only the beauty of Helstone, and her mood of earnest simplicity is discordant with that of Lennox, who persists in being witty. Back home in the country, Mrs Hale tries to provide, from the genteel poverty of her vicar's wife's larder, the proper London after-dinner ceremonies of biscuits and marmalade, and is disappointed because everyone moves out into the sunshine to enjoy fresh-picked pears arranged on a beetroot leaf. Mrs Gaskell points to the luxury, the subtle dishonesty, and the cynicism of London, but we learn that even in the Eden of Helstone Mr Hale is troubled by problems of conscience. Mrs Gaskell wants to disprove the stereotyped notion that a simple and beautiful way of life is passing and giving way to a sordidly commercial and vulgar type of society. She carefully qualifies and compares these three ways of life epitomised in the three regions, Helstone, London and Milton, to show that each has its advantages and disadvantages.

A little later in the novel the societies of London and Milton are contrasted. The parties at Edith's and Mr Thornton's bring out the differences between the emerging industrial society and the hereditary aristocratic society. Margaret's superior poise contrasts with Fanny's continual smoothing down of her dress, and the sophistication of London menus with the vulgar lavishness of Mr Thornton's. However, the honest earnestness and purposefulness of these Milton people emerges well beside the empty wit of Margaret's London friends. She finds herself having enjoyed her Milton evening, despite her prejudices, and having been stimulated by the conversation, while she

is only bored in London. The contrast of the society of Milton and London is recaptured in the contrast in character of Margaret's two lovers. Thornton is energetic, earnest and open, though "not over-brushed, nor over-polished."[4] Henry Lennox is intelligent but this intelligence is turned to making himself comfortable and to a sarcastic criticism of others. The non-conformist Thornton feels an "interest in the case of a clergyman who had given up his living under circumstances such as those of Mr Hale."[5] He is interested in helping such a man. Henry Lennox on the other hand sees it this way:

> There was no call upon Mr Hale to do what he did, relinquish the living, and throw himself and his family on the tender mercies of private teaching in a manufacturing town.[6]

It is typical of Thornton's integrity and energy that he boasts:

> I won't deny that I am proud of belonging to a town - or perhaps I should rather say a district - the necessities of which give birth to such grandeur of conception. I would rather be a man toiling, suffering - nay, failing and successless - here, than lead a dull prosperous life in the old worn grooves of what you call more aristocratic society down in the south, with their slow days of careless ease. One may be clogged with honey and unable to rise and fly.[7]

Mrs Gaskell praises the integrity of the northern industrialists. It is appropriate that Mr Hale comes to Milton as a result of a new effort and conscientiousness on his part.

The very physiognomy of Thornton reveals the strength and

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[4] North and South, p.57.

[5] Ibid., p.57.

[6] Ibid., p.369.

[7] Ibid., p.76.

business-like quality of his society. Margaret looks at the contrast this vigorous young man makes with her dreamy, scholarly but elderly father:

> Her father was of slight figure, which made him appear taller than he really was, when not contrasted, as at this time, with the tall massive frame of another. The lines of her father's face were soft and waving, with a frequent modulating kind of trembling movement passing over them, showing every fluctuating emotion; the eyelids were large and arched, giving to the eyes a peculiar languid beauty which was almost feminine. The brows were finely arched, but were, by the very size of the dreamy lids, raised to a considerable distance from the eyes. Now, in Mr Thornton's face the straight brows fell low over the clear, deep-set earnest eyes, which, without being unpleasantly sharp, seemed intent enough to penetrate into the very heart and core of what he was looking at. The lines in the face were few but firm, as if they were carved in marble, and lay principally about the lips, which were slightly compressed over a set of teeth so faultless and beautiful as to give the effect of sudden sunlight when the rare bright smile, coming in an instant and shining out of the eyes, changed the whole look from the severe and resolved expression of a man ready to do and dare everything, to the keen honest enjoyment of the moment, which is seldom shown so fearlessly and instantaneously except by children.[8]

This is the same sort of contrast as Dickens makes between Twemlow and Podsnap in Our Mutual Friend or Sir Leicester Dedlock and Rouncewell in Bleak House; that of ineffectual gentility and the powerful moneyed merchant class.

As the Hales approach the outlying towns about Milton the atmosphere becomes more brisk and business-like. Margaret notices this as she observes the things any woman traveller might notice:

> The country carts had more iron, and less wood and leather about the horse-gear; the people in the streets,

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[8] North and South, pp.74-5.

> although on pleasure bent, had yet a busy mind. The colours looked greyer--more enduring, not so gay and pretty. There were no smock-frocks, even among the country-folk; they retarded motion, and were apt to catch on machinery, and so the habit of wearing them had died out. In such towns in the south of England, Margaret had seen the shopmen, when not employed in their businesses, lounging a little at their doors, enjoying the fresh air, and the look up and down the street. Here, if they had any leisure from customers, they made themselves business in the shop--even, Margaret fancied, to the unnecessary unrolling and re-rolling of ribbons.[9]

These business-like people are making a strong new England. We are presented with a picture of the indolence of the army officers in Corfu, and of the corruption and injustice in the navy which caused Frederick Hale to mutiny. In Mrs Gaskell's polite drawing-room conversations, which seem so innocuous, is implied an outspoken criticism of those genteel professions filled by the smaller aristocracy, the army, the navy and the church. In contrast to the subtle corruption of these professional gentry are the busy Milton people whose progressiveness and energy are conquering the old order:

> Far away in the East and in the West, where his person would never be known, his name was to be regarded, and his wishes to be fulfilled, and his word pass like gold. That was the idea of merchant-life which Mr Thornton had started. "Her merchants be like princes."[10]

Mrs Gaskell shows the same enthusiasm in Mary Barton:

> Jem worked with one of the great firms of engineers, who send from out their towns of workshops engines and machinery to the dominions of the Czar and the Sultan.[11]

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[9] North and South, p.53.

[10] Ibid., p.407.

[11] Mary Barton, p.25.

Margaret Hale, and we with her, see the full importance of these "shop-men" when Edith Lennox, fashionable London hostess, finds to her surprise that "that Mr Thornton of Milton," who she hopes is "able to sound his h's" properly, is well known and admired by her guest of honour, the M.P. Mr Colthurst. "Her dinner was going off well."[12]

The inevitable conquest of the old corrupt society by the brisk new merchant and his machine is a common theme in Victorian literature. Dickens shows a similar contrast when he compares Sir Leicester Dedlock and the Coodles and Doodles of Parliament with the effectiveness of the new ironmaster M.P. Rouncewell. In Dombey and Son the stagnation of aristocratic society is captured in Mrs Skewton who decays as she tries to stop time, enthusing about medievalism, and sitting forever in the elegant pose in which she was immortalized in her youth, in a painting. Meanwhile the relentless power of the railway ploughs through Staggs Gardens and eats up mile after mile of countryside. Although Mrs Gaskell can only praise this new energetic society, she cannot help her nostalgia for the past when she describes the encroachment of this efficient civilization on her beloved rural Helstone. The picturesque cottage is replaced by a modern, more sanitary dwelling and the quaint old folk-customs are quelled by an efficient clergyman and a drill-like education. She tries to show that this is really for the good, and in some detail she exposes a quaint but barbaric old folk-custom of roasting a cat alive. She contrasts the working conditions of the farm labourer with those of the

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[12] North and South, p.418.

industrial worker and shows that if indeed a more picturesque kind of life is being driven away, a new age with better conditions for the lower classes is being ushered in. Yet one feels she criticizes the vicar with his large window overlooking the fields which deprives the workers of their relaxation and probably well-deserved pot of ale with their lunch, and the repressive atmosphere in the classroom depriving the children of any spontaneity. Mrs Gaskell's classroom scene in the vicar's wife's school is reminiscent of the M'Choakumchild system, but in the end she decides that even this is better than roasting cats alive.

Throughout North and South Mrs Gaskell extols the power of the machine:

> The magnificent power, yet delicate adjustment of the might of the steam-hammer, which was recalling to Mr Hale some of the wonderful stories of subservient genii in the Arabian Nights--one moment stretching from earth to sky and filling all the width of the horizon, at the next obediently compressed into a vase small enough to be borne in the hand of a child. [Thornton loses himself in enthusiasm for his subject:] "And this imagination of power, this practical realization of a gigantic thought, came out of one man's brain in our good town. That very man has it within him to mount, step by step, on each wonder he achieves to higher marvels still. And, I'll be bound to say, we have many among us who, if he were gone, could spring into the breach and carry on the war which compells, and shall compel, all material power to yield to science."[13]

Such indomitable energy is seen in the train, the "remorseless monster" in Dombey and Son, which breasts all natural obstacles with indifference and dwarfs the puny artifacts of an older society:

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[13] North and South, p.75.

> Breasting the wind and light, the shower and sunshine, away, and still away, it rolls and roars, fierce and rapid, smooth and certain, and great works and massive bridges crossing up above, fall like a beam of shadow an inch broad, upon the eye, and then are lost. Away, and still away, onward and onward ever: glimpses of cottage-homes, of houses, mansions, rich estates, old roads and paths that look deserted, small and insignificant as they are left behind: and so they do, and what else is there but such glimpses, in the track of the indomitable monster.[14]

There is only one thing to Dickens as powerful and as unconquerable as the machine--Death. The comparison between the machine and death, however, reveals that Dickens's wonder at the marvels of his age is mixed with an awe of their ominous and threatening power; this is absent in Mrs Gaskell's optimistic enthusiasm.

In North and South we do not actually see the machines, but we have them described in the drawing-room, and in this way we see the effect of mechanical marvels on people. Thornton is the epitome of the machine-age man and his efficiency. However, he is at his most likeable when he weakens and gives way to human impulses. It is this lack of human impulse in the machine-dominated society which Mrs Gaskell most severely criticizes. Her solution is the marriage of Margaret and Thornton, of humanity and efficiency. The hardness of the industrial society is illustrated by a description of Mrs Thornton's drawing-room and the contrast it makes with that of the Hales. Mrs Thornton's room is spotlessly clean, but cold and unwelcoming and showing no sign of personality and loving care. The Hale room, on the other hand, is filled with a clutter of pictures and mirrors,

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[14] Dombey and Son, p.281.

work-baskets, chintzy chairs and flower arrangements. What Thornton needs is the influence of some womanly warmth and "graceful cares" in his efficiently run life. Before he can become the ideal pioneer of an ideal industrial society he must undergo the softening influence of Margaret and see men in other than hard commercial relationships.

At first Thornton runs his business with machine-like inflexibility. In fact, he sees the cotton trade as regulated by machinery, not just the machinery of wood and iron, but the rules of political economy. He controls his men as he runs his machines, and looks on strikes and discontent as mechanical hitches to be got rid of by efficient repairs:

> What a pity [Margaret says of him on first acquaintance] such a fine nature should be tainted by his position as a Milton manufacturer. . . . by that testing everything by the standard of wealth. When he spoke of the mechanical powers, he evidently looked upon them only as new ways of extending trade and making money. As to the poor men around him . . . [they were] out of the pale of his sympathies because they had not his iron nature, and the capabilities that it gives him for being rich.[15]

Central to the love story of Margaret and Thornton is the interaction of these two upon each other. Margaret learns of the new social freedom in the emerging society and adopts a new set of social values. Effort and personal worth are more to be admired than hereditary power and prestige. Thornton learns to temper his mechanical Political Economy with the message of brotherly love religion teaches. Finally he can say:

I have arrived at the conviction that no mere institutions,

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[15] North and South, p.82.

> 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. A working man can hardly be made to feel how much his employer may have laboured in his study at plans for the benefit of his work people. A complete plan emerges like a piece of machinery, apparently fitted to every emergency. But the hands accept it as they do machinery, without understanding the intense mental labour and forethought required to bring it to such perfection. But I would take an idea, the working out of which would necessitate personal intercourse; it might not go well at first, but at every hitch interest would be felt by an increasing number of men, and at last its success in working come to be desired by all, as all had borne a part in the formation of the plan; and even then I am sure that it would lose its vitality, cease to be living, as soon as it was no longer carried on by that sort of common interest which invariably makes people find means and ways of seeing each other, and becoming acquainted with each other's characters and persons.[16]

Thornton progresses from a Bounderby who sees his hands as economic objects, forever threatening to claim higher wages, to one who sees them as brother men. Mrs Gaskell's solution to the industrial crisis is to mingle a little brotherly love and Christian regard for one's neighbour into the relations of industry.

When Mrs Gaskell describes the machine-dominated landscape of Milton she sees both achievement and deformity. In Mary Barton, where Manchester is seen from the workers' point of view, she sees all its cramping disfiguring qualities. She makes the contrast of the town with the country and gives free rein to her natural love for the country and dislike of the dirty town. When gentle rain falls on Manchester it brings dirt and slush. She describes the stunted growth

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[16] North and South, pp.419-20.

of the factory people, Mrs Wilson crippled in an industrial accident, children dying of disease and malnutrition, and the warped minds of the hungry hands which lead them to desperate and anti-Christian actions. Her novel opens in the fields about Manchester, where she shows Manchunians escaping for awhile from their troubles, but too soon they return to the depressing town in which they live.

In North and South too Mrs Gaskell approaches the smoky town from a peaceful country landscape and the dirt and grime of Milton is made more obvious by contrast with the pretty Helstone scene. The workers too have lives stunted by the factory conditions; Bessie dies from the effects of the fluff of the carding rooms and Boucher is maddened by the industrial conditions. Even middle class Mrs Hale's death is hastened by the foul air:

> For several miles before they reached Milton, they saw a deep lead-coloured cloud lying over the horizon in the direction in which it lay. It was all the darker from the contrast with the pale grey-blue of the wintry sky; for in Heston there had been the earliest signs of frost. Nearer to the town, the air had a faint taste and smell of smoke; perhaps, after all, more a loss of the fragrance of grass and herbage than any positive taste or smell. Quick they were whirled over long, straight, hopeless streets of regularly-built houses, all small and of brick. Here and there a great oblong many-windowed fadtory stood up, like a hen among her chickens, puffing out black "unparliamentary" smoke, and sufficiently accounting for the cloud which Margaret had taken to fortell rain.[17]

Each detail suggests the unnaturalness of the landscape: uniform houses, clouds that do not foretell rain, no clean nippy frosts or smells of grass. The "keynote" of Dickens's Coketown is this same

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[17] North and South, p.54.

dirty unnaturalness. Coketown is a nightmare landscape of noise, smoke, dirt, weird chimneys and monotonous streets of regular houses, and a river that runs purple dye.

In one of Mrs Gaskell's typical drawing-room conflicts in North and South Thornton, the manufacturer, is explaining the mysteries and technicalities of his fine machines, while Mrs Hale, the southerner, breaks into the conversation criticizing the ugliness and dirt they make. Both are describing their world as they see it; Mrs Hale with womanly abhorrence of the unnatural and disfigured landscape, Thornton with a masculine awareness of the need for the commercial progress of the nation and the fine luxuries which such dirty machines are the means of providing. "Milton is a much more smoky, dirty town than you will ever meet with in the South," Mrs Hale complains. Thornton begins to explain the technicalities surrounding this problem:

> ['My chimneys] were altered by my own will, before Parliament meddled with the affair. It was an immediate outlay, but it repays me in the saving of coal. . . . But all laws which depend for their enforcement upon informers and fines, become inert from the odiousness of the machinery. I doubt if there has been a chimney in Milton informed against for five years past, although some are constantly sending out one-third of their coal in what is called here unparliamentary smoke.'
>
> 'I only know it is impossible to keep the muslin blinds clean here above a week together; and at Helstone we have had them up for a month or more, and they have not looked dirty at the end of the time. And as for hands--Margaret, how many times did you say you had washed your hands this morning before twelve o'clock? Three times, was it not?'
>
> 'Yes, mamma.'[18]

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[18] North and South, pp.76-7.

And so Mr Hale and Thornton return to their talk of Acts of Parliament and Political Economy.

The ugliness and pollution which are the attributes of an industrial town are inseparable from the work which is carried on in it. Dickens makes this point also in Hard Times. However, both Mrs Gaskell and Dickens point out that against these deficiencies must "be set off, comforts of life which found their way all over the world, and elegancies of life which made, we will not ask how much of the fine lady, who could scarcely bear to hear the place mentioned."[19] To be measured against the smoke and dirt of Milton is the "great future [which] lay concealed in that rude model of Sir Richard Arkwright's"[20] and the great trading possibilities now open for the enrichment of the nation.

Mrs Gaskell realizes that the loser in the industrial age is the worker:

> After the quiet life in a country parsonage for more than twenty years, there was something dazzling to Mr. Hale in the energy which conquered immense difficulties with ease; the power of the machinery of Milton, the power of the men of Milton, impressed him with a sense of grandeur, which he yielded to without caring to enquire into the details of its exercise. But Margaret went less abroad, among machinery and men; saw less of power in its public effect, and, as it happened, she was thrown with one or two of those who, in all measures affecting masses of people, must be acute sufferers for the good of many.[21]

However, the effect of the industrial situation on the worker which

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[19] Hard Times, p.65.

[20] North and South, p.77.

[21] Ibid., p.64.

distresses Mrs Gaskell is not the grinding of workers into automatons which Dickens criticizes with his "people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work."[22] In Hard Times men are turned into Hands, mere machines for working, who seem to be switched on and off with the machinery: "the looms, and wheels, and Hands, all out of gear for an hour."[23] Mrs Gaskell criticizes the masters of the machine age only for not caring for the personal needs of the worker. She sees only commercial tyranny which causes starving and disease and factory accidents as the great evil of the age.[24] In fact, in one passage in North and South she even glories in the worker whose energy and perseverance match that of the machine:

> Meanwhile at Milton the chimneys smoked, the ceaseless roar and mighty beat and dazzling whirl of machinery struggled and strove perpetually. Senseless and purposeless were wood and iron and steam in their endless labours; but the persistence of their monotonous work was rivalled in the tireless endurance by the strong crowds, who, with sense and with purpose, were busy and restless in seeking after--what?[25]

Dickens paints a deliberately biased picture of the worker in Hard Times to show the soul-destroying nature of machine society.[26] Not only is Coketown grey and monotonous as the beat of its machines

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[22]Hard Times, p.65.

[23]Ibid., p.108.

[24]Herbert L.Sussman, Victorians and the Machine, makes this comparison between Dickens and Mrs Gaskell in his second chapter, "The Industrial Novel and the Machine."

[25]North and South, p.406.

[26]The following remark about the social and intellectual lives of

and fouled by the smoke from its chimneys, but the very inner lives of its workers are similarly deformed. Mrs Gaskell's workers, on the other hand, have the same indomitable energy as masters and machines. Even if they rebel, they do so with vigour. Margaret Hale finds the energy of the workmen as they come out of the factories almost frightening:

> 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 common rules of street politeness, frightened Margaret Hale 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 article which they particularly admired. . . . She did not mind meeting any number of girls, loud spoken and boisterous 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.[27]

These are very different people from the dull streams of Coketown workers ground down by their daily monotony. Mrs Gaskell perversely reserves the dull drudgery of monotonous labour for her description of the southern agricultural labourer. Margaret tells Higgins:

> You would not bear the dulness of the life; . . . They

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workers which he does not choose to describe would tend to show that this bias is deliberate: "Old Stephen might have passed for a particularly intelligent man in his condition. Yet he was not. He took no place among those remarkable 'Hands' who, piecing together their broken intervals of leisure through many years, had mastered difficult sciences, and acquired a knowledge of most unlikely things. He held no station among the Hands who could make speeches and carry on debates." (Hard Times, p.103.) Dickens deliberately chooses for his hero a man who is merely a "good power-loom weaver, and a man of perfedt integrity."

[27] North and South, p.66.

> labour on from day to day, in the great solitude of steaming fields--never speaking or lifting up their poor, bent, downcast heads. The hard spadework robs their brain of life; the sameness of their toil deadens their imagination; they don't care to meet to talk over thoughts and speculations, even of the weakest, wildest kind, after their work is done; they go home brutishly tired, poor creatures! caring for nothing but food and rest. You could not stir them up into any companionship, which you get in a town as plentiful as the air you breathe, ...[28]

The new society breeds a new sort of independent worker. The dumb, subservient, unthinking labourer is a thing of the feudal past. The labourer of the future is a strong, fearless man like Higgins. The boldness of the manufacturing workers is again seen when Margaret looks for a suitable servant:

> Not but what Margaret was repelled by the rough uncourteous manners of these people; not but what she shrunk with fastidious pride from their hail-fellow accost, and severely resented their unconcealed curiosity as to the means and position of any family who lived in Milton, and yet were not engaged in trade of some kind. . . . She found the difficulty of meeting with anyone in a manufacturing town who did not prefer the better wages and greater independence of working in a mill.[29]

Margaret is at first appalled by the way people judge each other's position by his or her wealth. She is used to the standards of gentility and birth of the South. One of the things she must learn is to change many of her prejudices regarding class. Margaret, the genteel Southerner, not only has to learn to accept the equal, if not greater, worth of tradesmen, but to rid herself of the old benevolence

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[28] North and South, p.296.

[29] Ibid., p.65.

and kindly condescension of the aristocrat to the very poor. The faithful servant Dixon is a thing of the past; the new servant generation is much more independent. Margaret is surprised to meet a rebuff when she assumes the southern upper-class privilege to invite herself to the poor man Higgins's house. In this new society Thornton, who was once a shop-boy, can marry Margaret Hale, the grand-daughter of Sir John Beresford:

> It is one of the great beauties of our system [Thornton explains] that a man may raise himself into the power and position of a master by his own exertions and behaviour; that, in fact, everyone who rules himself to decency and sobriety of conduct, and attention to his duties comes over to our ranks.[30]

Mrs Gaskell likes to make piquant contrasts of social classes brought together. One such occurs when poor scholarly Mr Hale is forced to entertain a "drunken infidel weaver" to tea in his study. Mrs Gaskell's method of presenting industrial society in the interaction of character and social differences is particularly suited to the portrayal of the social effects of the industrial revolution.

In The Atlantic Monthly of March 1877, a reviewer writes of Hard Times:

> It is to be observed here that all the cheery views of amelioration of the condition of the race come from the hard thinkers whose benevolent impulses push them to investigation of natural and economic laws. Starting from the position of sentimental benevolence, and meeting unforeseen intellectual obstacles at every stay in his progress, Dickens ends "in a muddle" by the necessity of his method.

This is an ignominious conclusion to the mind of the reviewer, who

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[30] North and South, p.78.

deplores the "economic nonsense" written by such educated men as Carlyle, Ruskin and Dickens:

> The great field for the contest between the head and the heart is the domain of Political Economy. The demonstrated laws of this science are often particularly offensive to many good men and good women who are pained by the obstacles which economic maxims present to their diffuse benevolence.[31]

Dickens's attitude to the science of Political Economy is represented in his report of a conversation in "On Strike." Mr Snapper cannot see what Mr Dickens would have "in the relationships between Capital and Labour, but Political Economy." He only laughs when Dickens replies:

> I believe . . . that into the relations between employers and employed as into all the relations of this life, there must enter something of feeling and sentiment; something of mutual explanation, forbearance and consideration; something which is not to be found in Mr McCulloch's dictionary, and is not exactly stateable in figures; otherwise those relations are wrong and rotten at the core and will never bear sound fruit.[32]

This belief in the need for feeling, for mutual explanation and forbearance in trade relations, Dickens shares with Mrs Gaskell. However, in Hard Times his views are even more radical. He quite ridicules any attempt at controlling the world by mechanical laws and science. Thus Sleary confounds Gradgrind with the marvellous account of how Merrylegs must have found him:

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[31]From a review article by Edwin P. Whipple in The Atlantic Monthly, March 1877, reprinted in the Bantam edition of Hard Times, pp.312-3.

[32]"On Strike", Household Words, February 11, 1854. Quoted in the Bantam edition of Hard Times, p.339.

> 'It ith athtonithing. The way in with a dog'll find you--the dithtanthe he'll come!'
> 'His scent,' said Mr Gradgrind, 'being so fine.'
> 'I'm bletht if I know what to call it,' repeated Sleary, shaking his head, 'but I have had dogth find me, Thquire, in a way that made me think whether that dog hadn't gone to another dog, and thed, "You don't happen to know a perthon of the name of Thleary, do you? Perthon of the name of Thleary, in the Horthe-Riding way--thtout man--game eye?" And whether that dog mightn't have thed, "Well, I can't thay I know him mythelf, but I know a dog that I think would be likely to be acquainted with him." And whether that dog mightn't have thought it over, and thed, "Thleary, Thleary! O yeth, to be thure! A friend of mine menthioned him to me at one time. I can get you hith addreth directly." In conthequenth of my being afore the public, and going about tho muth, you thee, there muth be a number of dogth acquainted with me, Thquire, that I don't know!'[33]

These haphazard wayth of the dogth are like the ways of love, by which Dickens would order the world.

Hard Times is, in fact, more pessimistic than Dombey and Son in its comments on law-making. Harthouse is a representative of the corrupt aristocracy, but there is no progressive Rouncewell in this novel. Even earnest and methodical Mr Gradgrind is unable to make any real contribution to the convocation of the "national dustmen." Mrs Gaskell shares with Dickens and Carlyle a feeling of the hopelessness of mere laws and organizations for solving social problems, and stresses the need for individual action and benevolence. Particularly poignant is the hopelessness in Mary Barton surrounding Barton's visit to London; the hopelessness, even under the most favourable conditions, of his being able to convey to sympathetic ears the real nature of the problems of the poor, and the tragic irrelevance of the heartfelt

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[33] Hard Times, p.307.

talks in his house before he leaves. However, she is not as extreme as Dickens. The solution she puts forward is Political Economy, tempered by Christ-like love and brotherly feeling. Dickens, in his portrait of the "voluntary" features of Coketown, the mechanical churches, schools and social institutions, shows that the mechanical hardness has penetrated even those institutions which should spread human benevolence. Mrs Gaskell believes such a school as the M'Choakumchild one to be better than no school at all and tries to show Thornton coming to a compromise between business and Christian relationships in the reforms he institutes in his factory.

In North and South Mrs Gaskell shows the whole of society turned upside down by the industrial revolution and its social aftermath. She searches for new standards, based on Christianity, to guide conduct in this new situation. Dickens is more pessimistic. He sees society dominated by machines and mechanical attitudes which grind men into a depressing uniformity and inhumanity. In Coketown the inner realities have been excluded by a society that caters only for the external man. It is an "ugly citadel, where Nature was as strongly bricked out as killing airs and gasses were bricked in."[34] The inner realities can only be glimpsed through loopholes in the barrier which shuts them out, as the Gradgrind children peer at the forbidden circus. Dickens can only offer private solutions, hope of a better life to come, and the small reform worked by Sissy in the Gradgrind household or the endurance of Stephen and Rachael's love under

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[34]Hard Times, p.102.

difficulties. Mrs Gaskell, on the other hand, believes that there is a great deal of good in this new social order. The old rural and aristocratic societies had their own corruption and drawbacks. The new society is progressive and vital, and only wants to have the spirit of Christianity infused into it:

> [Thornton] was but like many others - men, women, and children - alive to distant, and dead to near things. He sought to possess the influence of a name in foreign countries and far-away seas--to become the head of a firm that should be known for generations; and it had taken him long silent years to come even to a glimmering of what he might be now, to-day, here in his own town, his own factory, among his own people. He and they had led parallel lives - very close, but never touching - till the accident (or so it seemed) of his acquaintance with Higgins. 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 recognize that "we have all of us one human heart."[35]

The empty power of the mill-owner and his cash-nexus relationship with his men, are potentially capable of being the basis of a new vital society.

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[35] North and South, pp.407-8.

IV

"SHE WAS POOR BUT SHE WAS HONEST":

THE FABLE OF SEDUCTION IN RUTH

She was poor but she was honest,
And her parents was the same,
Till she met a city feller
And she lost her honest name.

It's the same the whole world over,
It's the poor wot gets the blame,
It's the rich that gets the pleasure.
Ain't it all a bloomin shame?[1]

So runs the song, and so ran the story of seduction in the nineteenth-century novel. A beautiful, innocent young girl from the country is seduced by the local gentleman's son and carried off to London, where the pair live together in sin. Soon the girl's lover is tired of his new play-thing, and, having had his pleasure of her, he abandons her. With her character lost, and perhaps a child to support, she is forced to go out on the streets for a living. Eventually, her health and happiness destroyed in the pursuit of her profession, she throws herself from London Bridge, or perhaps Waterloo Bridge, into the rolling Thames:

In she plunged boldly
No matter how coldly
The rough river ran,
. . . . . .

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[1]This is a First World War version of the popular ballad. I have come across one in which the "city feller" is a gentleman's son.

One more Unfortunate
Weary of breath,
Rashly importunate,
Gone to her death![2]

This stereotyped history is, either wholly or in part, the basis for nearly every story of a fallen woman in nineteenth-century novels, melodramas and verse. A synopsis of the stories of a number of Dickens's and Mrs Gaskell's fallen women reveals the reliance of these two novelists on this stereotype. Dickens's Little Em'ly, the orphaned daughter of a fisherman, is lured away and abandoned when her lover tires of her. She spends the rest of her life in a state of penitent spinster-hood atoning for her sin with good works. Lizzie Leigh, Esther in Mary Barton and Alice Marwood in Dombey and Son, are all forced onto the streets when they lose their character. All these young women are ravaged by disease so that their former beauty is barely recognizable. The stereotype paints a picture of the life of the prostitute which shows it in the worst possible light. Prostitution is no fun; the prostitute does not gain wealth and admiration, but her beauty is destroyed and she wastes and declines into abject poverty. Martha and Nancy, Dickens's confirmed prostitutes, are addicted to drink, by means of which they relieve their despair, and both contemplate throwing themselves into the Thames.

The story of Mrs Gaskell's Ruth closely follows this stereotype. Ruth, an orphaned farmer's daughter, is apprenticed to a dressmaker. A local gentleman seduces and impregnates her,

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[2]Thomas Hood, "The Bridge of Sighs" vv.14 and 1, from Selected Poems, pp.51-4.

and abandons her without friends in a strange community. In her despair she attempts to commit suicide. The intervention of a charitable minister and his sister allows her to enjoy a useful, though retired and penitent life as a mother and member of a community for some years. However, her fate overtakes her at last, her sin is discovered, and she endures the shaming and condemnation she had escaped for so long by means of a lie. Finally she must expiate her sin by heroically tending fever victims; she tends her former lover and, catching the fever from him, falls ill and dies. Only with her death are we finally assured that her sin is purged. Reducing the story of Ruth to such stark outline of course discounts Mrs Gaskell's careful explanations and qualifications. It does, however, reveal which of the conventional assumptions Mrs Gaskell accepts, even if only in a modified form.

The conventional seduction story is the vehicle for a number of stereotyped moral attitudes; it is a fable in which each character is a figure representing a particular facet of the sin and its consequences. The seducer is always a handsome, cultivated, upper-class cavalier whose whole attitude to the world, and in particular whose attitude towards his inferiors, is one of careless indifference. To him, the human being he defiles and then abandons is a mere plaything. Sometimes he meets a sticky end, but more often the writer records his feeling of the impotence of the middle and lower classes in indicting the upper-class cad, and lets him go free. One writer notes:

> The popularity of seduction as a theme in early Victorian melodrama - the theatre of the people - was probably a reflection of the class bitterness of the times. . . . A shining top hat was the seducing villain's badge; to assault it with catcalls and execrations must have been an enjoyable catharsis for workers who in real life had to salute it humbly.[3]

The girl is usually from the working classes. She is poor but honest, often an unprotected orphan, and an easy victim for the sophisticated and wealthy gentleman. Her innocence stresses his villainy. However, once she has fallen she can never be pure again, and the stereotype condemns her to a downward progress of disease, poverty, and despairing suicide, the wages of her "sin worse than death." The conventional picture is Mrs Gaskell's Esther, "nought but skin and bones with a cough to tear her in two," whose decaying body is mocked by her faded, flimsy finery and her tawdry mask of make-up. Dickens's Martha stands by the Thames "as if she were a part of the refuse it had cast out, and left to corruption and decay." "Oh, the river! Oh, the river!" she cries, and tries to cast herself into its kindred depths:

> I know that I belong to it. . . . It comes from country places, where there was once no harm in it--and it creeps through the dismal streets, defiled and miserable--and it goes away, like my life, to a great sea, that is always troubled--and I feel that I must go with it![4]

If by good chance something intervenes to save the fallen Unfortunate from this downward path, she spends the rest of her life in penance, for she can never be pure enough for marriage, and never

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[3]Cyril Pearl, The Girl with the Swansdown Seat, p.63.

[4]David Copperfield, pp.748-9.

live happily ever after like ordinary human beings. Her story reveals the harshness with which society judges her sin.

There is often a third participant in the story, the illegitimate child of the sinful union, whose life is generally blighted. The child's role is partly to remind its mother of her sin; it is the "badge of her shame." Sometimes the death of this child, depriving the mother of the joy of the one loving person who remains for her, adds to her punishment. The illegitimate child in Dickens's novels is often subjected to a rigorous moral training by its harsh guardians, as are Clennam and Esther Summerson. Dickens protests against the harsh treatment of these unfortunate children, yet he does not seem able to consider the illegitimate child, particularly the illegitimate girl, as quite normal. Rose Maylie's marriage does not happen until she discovers that she is not illegitimate. Esther marries, but only to a husband who can accept her blemished by a disease which seems to brand the stigma of her illegitimacy on her face.

The clichés of the seduction story are concerned with two issues: moral and social. The young girl is not only innocent and sexually violated, but she is also poor and exploited by a representative of the upper classes. The cliché protests against the violation of the humanity of the lower classes by the rich and powerful. The carelessness of the seducer is similar to the kind of attitude of the aristocracy displayed in protecting their game reserves at the cost of the lives of poor men. It is the attitude of James Harthouse in Hard Times who goes in for politics, where his

decisions and actions can affect the lives of thousands of men, merely because he is bored and looking for a "good thing." Mrs Gaskell suggests that Mr Bellingham's political aspirations are similarly shallow. The seducer is usually an aristocrat; Bellingham, Harthouse and Eugene Wrayburn feel themselves superior to the Bradshaws, the Gradgrinds and the Podsnaps of society. He is often the petted son of a widowed mother, and the writer suggests that his pampered life has been one in which he has faced no real trial.

The seduction story was not merely a literary convention, but a fairly common occurrence. William Acton, a nineteenth-century writer on prostitution, notes that:

> It cannot be denied by anyone acquainted with rural life, that seduction of girls is a sport and a habit with vast numbers of men, married . . . and single, placed above the ranks of labour.[5]

Steven Marcus, in The Other Victorians, uses as a fairly reliable indication of the nature of the illicit sex-life of the Victorian period, the memoirs of a gentleman born somewhere in the 1820's. Many of the incidents in these memoirs, called My Secret Life, reveal the very attitudes towards poor girls we find remonstrated against in the Victorian novel. In one of these incidents the author as a very young man comments to a friend:

> "There are half-a-dozen girls in the field I would not mind sleeping with." "Why don't you have them?" said Fred. "I don't want to lose my character here." "That be damned: you can always have a field-girl; nobody cares."[6]

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[5]William Acton, Prostitution, p.199.

[6]This, and the following quotation, is drawn from My Secret Life, an anonymous Victorian autobiography, cited in Steven Marcus, The Other Victorians, pp.136-8.

The author chooses a pretty girl, but is surprised to find her unwilling, and finally rapes her in spite of her protestations and cries. When she threatens to report him he becomes afraid:

> I really had violated her, saw that it would bear that complexion before a magistrate, so would not let her go, but retained her, coaxed, begged, and promised her money. I would love her, longed for her again, would take her from the fields, and every other sort of nonsense a man would utter under the circumstances. She ceased crying, and stood in a sullen mood as I held her, asking me to let her go. I took out my purse and offered her money, which she would not take, but eyed wistfully as I kept clinking the gold in my hand. What a temptation bright sovereigns must have been to a girl who earned ninepence a day, and was often without work at all.

But the young gentleman need not have feared. At this point the farm foreman comes up, sees quite clearly what has happened but refuses to listen to the girl's protests. His advice is that she best say nothing, and the implication is that a protest will only lose her her character and her livelihood in that town.

What is immediately apparent is the complete unconcern of the gentry for the poor girls. Seduction is a "sport and a habit," "nobody cares," "you can always have a field-girl," and nobody's character will be lost but the girl's. If anyone is going to be hurt, it is the lower-class girl, and that, of course, is not really the gentleman's concern; <u>that</u> sort of people live their own kind of life.

Steven Marcus's comment on this extract from <u>My Secret Life</u> is:

> Having read this, one wants again to make some kind of wholesale reference to the Victorian novel. <u>This</u> is the kind of thing that the Victorian novelists

> could not but be aware of - even though their explicit dealings with it were very circumspect - that their work as a whole was directed against. If we read the Victorian novel against the context of such scenes, we get a renewed and increased sense of how humanizing a work that genre was. . . . For the first time in history it could be asserted, before what almost amounted to a mass audience, and in a public way, that persons of the lower social orders were not to be treated in this way. Such treatment was now understood as an intolerable violation of that human nature which - again effectively for the first time in history - members of the lower social orders shared fully with their betters.[6a]

The callous gentleman of My Secret Life describes a woman of the lower classes as if she were a being of another species:

> She was a well-grown, good looking woman of the costermonger class. . . . She was commonly but comfortably clad, not warmly enough perhaps for well-to-do people, but well enough for her class who don't feel the cold as we do.[7]

The same attitude is seen in Steerforth, who regards the lower classes as if they were insensitive animals:

> 'It would be worth a journey . . . to see that sort of people together, and to make one of 'em.'
> . . . . . .
>
> 'That sort of people.' [Miss Dartle goads him] '--Are they really animals and clods, and beings of another order? . . . '
> 'Why, there's a pretty wide separation between them and us,' said Steerforth, with indifference. 'They are not to be expected to be as sensitive as we are. Their delicacy is not to be shocked, or hurt easily. They are wonderfully virtuous, I dare say--some people contend for that, at least; and I am sure I don't want to contradict them--but they have not very fine natures, and they may be thankful that, like their coarse rough skins, they are not easily wounded.'[8]

[6a] Steven Marcus, The Other Victorians, p.138.

[7] Cited in The Other Victorians, p.152.

[8] David Copperfield, p.352.

To Steerforth, the Peggottys are merely "quaint", and he is pleased with their company because they amuse him. He gets Mr Peggotty to sing, then, rather like the villain in a melodrama or an opera, goes off gaily singing this song as he plans to seduce his daughter. Dickens severely criticizes Steerforth and his kind for their arrogant unconcern for people of the lower orders. His sympathetic portrayal of the life of the Peggotty family shows that they are anything but animals and clods with no sensitivity. The story of Little Em'ly's seduction shows a whole family being broken and destroyed to indulge a gentleman's fancy.

In Ruth, Mr Bellingham shows similar arrogance towards "those people," though Mrs Gaskell's treatment of his character is rather different from Dickens's treatment of Steerforth. Bellingham is a more mundane figure and more easily conquered, he lacks Steerforth's fatal charm and aristocratic glamour. Mrs Gaskell is not describing so sinister a social phenomenon as Dickens:

> "What a confounded time those people are in fetching the doctor! [Bellingham complains] . . . It takes so much to knock an idea into such stupid people's heads. They stood gasping and asking which doctor they were to go for, as if it signified . . . ."

As soon as he can, Bellingham leaves the scene of the accident. "I see no use in my staying in this stifling atmosphere," he complains, and entrusts money to Ruth to get the problem off his hands. His parting words are:

> "My good woman . . . could you not keep your place a little neater and cleaner? It is more fit for pigs than for human beings. The air in this room is quite offensive, and the dirt and filth is really

disgraceful."[9]

The poor old widow who owns the house and whose child lies ill is, needless to say, very hurt. Bellingham, unlike Steerforth, does not charm everyone.

Such behaviour, like Steerforth's arrogance towards the Peggottys, is partly a warning to the reader of the danger which threatens the heroine. Such arrogance identifies Bellingham as the heartless villain of the cliché, and warns of the approaching seduction. After all, such signs were rather necessary in the Victorian novel, in which the details of the actual seduction had to be so circumspectly handled. However, the social protest is part of the situation; as in Dickens's portrayal of Steerforth, Mrs Gaskell in the character of Bellingham points to society's great unpunished evil. The villain is condemned both for his moral laxity and his inhumanity.

Mrs Gaskell is not so much concerned with class injustice, as with the corrupt moral standards of a society which allows the poor girl to receive all the shame of a mutually committed sin, while the wealthy gentleman remains unscathed. Mrs Gaskell condemns the attitude of society, represented in her novel by the Bradshaws, which allows Bellingham to be a respected, flattered member of parliament, while Ruth is condemned and cast out from society. From the very beginning we are aware that Bellingham escapes condemnation. Mrs Mason spreads the story of Ruth's undoing, but takes care not to alienate the good-will of one of her wealthiest customers by criticizing her son. As a mother, Mrs

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[9] Ruth, p.23.

Gaskell particularly condemns Mrs Bellingham for being so irresponsible about the upbringing of her son:

> "Of course, [Mrs Bellingham tells her son] it was my wish to be as blind to the whole affair as possible, though you can't imagine how Mrs Mason has blazoned it abroad; all Fordham rings with it; but of course it could not be pleasant, or, indeed, I may say correct, for me to be aware that a person of such improper character was under the same-- . . . ."[10]

Though Ruth spends six years of penitence, haunted by the shame of her sin, Bellingham has all but forgotten the affair:

> Poor Ruth! [he wonders, as the woman in front of him reminds him of her] and, for the first time for several years, he wondered what had become of her, though, of course, there was but one thing that could have happened, and perhaps it was as well he did not know her end, for most likely it would have made him very uncomfortable.[11]

When Bellingham comes to pay for Leonard's education as a sort of compensation for his "youthful folly" Mr Benson turns him out of the house, indignant at the rich man who could attempt to buy up the consequences of his sin: "Men may call such actions as yours youthful follies! There is another name for them with God."[12] Mrs Gaskell condemns Bellingham's moral corruption, and the corruption of a society which is indifferent to the sins of those who can pay for them. What is interesting in the light of the cliché story of seduction is that the poetic justice of the plot of Ruth shows God meting out tribulation to the girl on this earth, despite the attempt to conceal her sin by a lie, while the gentleman escapes detection to

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[10] Ruth, p.88.

[11] Ibid., p.275.

[12] Ibid., p.455.

the end of his life and continues unchecked in his life of luxury and sin.

The social implications of the fable of oppression and violation are seen most clearly when the seducer is presented in contrast with the poor girl's faithful, honest lover of her own class, Mrs Gaskell does this in Mary Barton where her message is orientated toward the social rather than the moral issue. Beside the graceless faithful swain the aristocratic seducer shows to such advantage that the girl, flattered by his attentions, falls easy prey to his heartless manipulation of her feelings. The working-class lover generally fits the literary convention of the simple, ignorant, honest worker--Jem is contrasted with Carson, Ham with Steerforth, and, in a very interesting and differently managed situation, Headstone with Wrayburn. The conventional answer to the dilemma of the poor girl who cannot decide between the two men is that she should not be so vain as to have her head turned by riches above her station, but should be content with the faithful young man of her own class. Either she comes to realize the vanity of her ambitions and the real worth of her loving suitor and marries him as Mary Barton does, or, like Little Em'ly, she is seduced and then abandoned by the glamorous gentleman, ending the novel by dying, or living a penitent spinster. When Ruth rejects the offer of marriage from Bellingham one does not only praise her virtue because she resists the offer which will legitimize her child and to some extent her own situation, believing that to marry a man she does not admire and to expose her son to a man whose morals are so lax is wrong. It is also part of her triumph that she is

impervious to the offer of riches for herself, and firmly rejects the offer of riches and social prestige for her son, and prefers to remain among the respectable people she loves. Though the young and innocent Ruth is blinded by Bellingham's cultivation and charm, the mature Ruth is able to see past the glamorous exterior and reject the shallow and worldly allure of all he represents. Both Esther in Mary Barton and Em'ly fall because of their vanity and ambition to become a lady: it is part of Ruth's purity that she has no personal vanity.

Dickens's version of the story shows him to be influenced by the popular Victorian melodrama. Mrs Gaskell's attitude toward the conflict of the rich and the poor is more influenced by middle-class Non-Conformist piety. Dickens paints a more sinister picture of the rich man taking advantage of the weakness of the poor. He manipulates the stereotype situation in a rather different way to show the crushing sense of frustration of the poor man who sees the rich man take his goods as if by divine right, and of the poor girl, who, though she may be as good in every way but rank, cannot, like her betters, aspire to marry the gentleman who courts her. What hope has the worth of a "chuckle-headed" oaf like Ham Peggotty against the wealth, the superior cultivation and the grace of a James Steerforth? Only a very unimaginative girl could fail to prefer Steerforth, and the seduced heroine is usually remarkably gentle and intelligent for her lowly birth. In Dickens's version of the story we are impressed by the sinister power of Steerforth, his brutal and heartless violation of these poor people, and their inability to combat the evil. They,

like David Copperfield, cannot help being impressed by his glamour. The fatal charm of all that the gentleman Steerforth represents leads to the inevitable consequences of such a confrontation; "Em'ly must fall--there is no hope for her."[13] Ham is allowed his moment of personal triumph when he dies gallantly trying to save the life of the man who wronged him. Like Jem, like Ruth who nurses her seducer, he makes the decision that retaliation is not the answer, that one must love and serve even one's enemy. Yet for all this his action has an air of futility, gaucheness and blindness about it. The villain Steerforth dies with much more aristocratic aplomb.

In Our Mutual Friend the poor man is even more defenceless. The encounters between Bradley Headstone, the poor, honest and faithful lover and Eugene Wrayburn, the corrupt gentleman with his polished ways and careless treatment of the lower classes, are a powerful examination of the helplessness of the poor. Unlike Mr Peggotty when he confronts Mrs Steerforth, or Jem when he confronts Carson, Bradley Headstone is unable even to maintain his dignity, but is reduced by Wrayburn to a foolish spectacle. Wrayburn is an interesting character; he does not deliberately snub and use the poor, but Dickens shows that his careless actions have the same effect as if they were deliberate. Bradley Headstone in his anger and humiliation resorts to murder, but even here he does not succeed. Dickens's moral, like Mrs Gaskell's, is that Headstone's bitterness wreaks his own destruction. He does not go as far as Mrs Gaskell, however, and

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[13]Quoted, from a letter of Dickens, in Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph, p.675.

suggest that bitter suffering is to be accepted as God's lot for the poor:

> I've lived long enough [says Job Legh] . . . to see that it is part of His plan to send suffering to bring out a higher good.[14]

The Reverend Benson's message to Ruth, when she is distressed at the unjust shame her boy will have to bear, is:

> Teach him to bid a noble Christian welcome to the trials which God sends--and this is one of them. Teach him not to look on a life of struggle and perhaps of diaappointment and incompleteness, as a sad and mournful end, but as the means permitted to the heroes and warriors in the army of Christ, by which to show their faithful following.[15]

Mrs Gaskell has Harry Carson murdered and Jem, though actually innocent, blamed for an act which would have been very like poetic justice for him to commit, and which, in fact, he contemplates:

> Mary loved another! . . . It was, perhaps, no great wonder that she should prefer one so much above Jem in the external things of life. But the gentleman; why did he, with his range of choice among the ladies of the land, why did he stoop down to carry off the poor man's darling. . . . Then uprose the guilty longing for blood! --the frenzy of jealousy!

He considers slaying Mary, slaying Carson, or suicide in the heat of his wronged passionate love, but then he makes the right decision:

> Would it not be a goodly thing to serve her, although she love him not; to be her preserving angel through the perils of life; and she, unconscious all the while?
> He braced his soul, and said to himself that with God's help he would be that earthly keeper.[16]

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[14] Mary Barton, p.364.

[15] Ruth, p.354.

[16] Mary Barton, pp.156-7.

Mrs Gaskell is rather more optimistic than Dickens. Jem has a reward for his patience; his Mary, unlike Dickens's heroines, discovers that she prefers her worthy poor man to the wealthy profligate.

Lizzie, in Our Mutual Friend, is a departure from the conventional story of the poor girl who loves a gentleman. She does not choose her faithful lover, nor does she die or devote herself to a spinsterhood of good works. True, she has not been so weak as to fall for his wiles and be seduced; and for her constancy, like Richardson's Pamela, she earns her rewards. However, when at last her upper-class lover makes his belated offer of marriage, she does not cast him off inrighteous indignation as her pious sisters from Clarissa Harlowe to Ruth would have done. She is allowed, waterman's daughter as she is, to make the same decision as any lady would and to choose Wayburn rather than Headstone. However, Dickens is still hampered by the conventions and standards of his times. Her triumph is not complete, and she may not flaunt her position as a lady, but in accepting the wounded Wrayburn she is accepting only a pathetic relic of the once bold and handsome man.

Mrs Gaskell points out the hopeless social difference between Ruth and Bellingham. Ruth, in her ignorance and naïvety, is unable to provide stimulating company for Bellingham. "Can you play écarté, Ruth, or piquet?" he asks. But all she can play is "beggar-my-neighbour." They live in different worlds. After the dance at the shire-hall,

> Ruth felt as if a dream had melted away, and she were once more in the actual world. . . . Those bright, happy people--as much without any semblance of care or woe as if they belonged to another race

> of beings! . . . Here was cold, biting, mid-winter for her, and such as her--for those poor beggars almost a season of death; but to Miss Duncombe, and her companion, a happy merry time--when flowers still bloomed, and fires crackled, and comforts and luxuries were piled around them like fairy gifts. What did they know of the meaning of the word so terrific to the poor? What was winter to them? But Ruth fancied that Mr Bellingham looked as if he could understand the feelings of those removed from him by circumsyance and station. He had drawn up the window of his carriage, it is true, with a shudder![17]

Mrs Gaskell is being ironic; Bellingham's shudder is at his own discomfort, or perhaps in disgust at the depressing sight of the beggars, and Ruth is too simple and ignorant to understand him.

Mrs Gaskell believes it is wrong for a poor girl to allow the attentions, or favour the advances, of a rich lover. Ruth is aware of the warning of "a strange undefined feeling, which made her imagine she was doing wrong in walking alongside of one so kind and good as Mr Bellingham."[18] In the stories of Esther and Mary Barton, Mrs Gaskell shows the foolishness of a poor girl who receives advances from a gentleman; most likely he will only induce her to live in sin, and even should he marry her, the difference between them is so great that such a marriage would be wrong. The ambition of both these girls to become a lady she condemns as false. Mrs Gaskell does not stress the inevitability of Ruth's fall, as Dickens does the inevitability of Em'ly's. A strong-minded, God-fearing and patient lower-class woman can triumph over the wealthy seducer as Mary Barton does, or as Ruth does later

[17] Ruth, p.17.

[18] Ibid., p.39.

when she refuses to marry Bellingham. The proper attitude of the poor girl is to accept with resignation the lot that has been God's will for her, and not to be ambitious for what is beyond her reasonable expectations. Mrs Gaskell's is the message of Non-Conformist piety, the resignation advocated by her husband's hymn:

> Though lowly here our lot may be,
> High work have we to do--
> In faith and trust to follow Him
> Whose lot was lowly too.
> . . . . . .
>
> To duty firm, to conscience true,
> However tried and pressed,
> In God's clear sight high work we do,
> If we but do our best.
>
> Thus may we make the lowliest lot
> With rays of glory bright;
> Thus may we turn a crown of thorns
> Into a crown of light.[19]

However, Bellingham is a minor figure in the novel, and the issues of social injustice and class inequality which his presence raises are peripheral to the central concern of the author. The intensity with which Dickens analyses class issues in David Copperfield and Our Mutual Friend is not found in Ruth, and Bellingham is often merely the cliché seducer. Ruth is at the centre of the novel, and the moral issues of unchastity are the real concern of Mrs Gaskell. This moral concern is highlighted by her continual recourse to religion as a comment on the situation. Dickens is concerned, on the other hand, more with social upheaval and malaise than with sin.

Ruth is an earnestly didactic novel:

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[19]The Church Hymnary, p.620.

> What was meant so earnestly must do some good. . . .
> I could have put out much more power, but that I
> wanted to keep it quiet in tone, lest by the slightest
> exaggeration, or over-strained sentiment I might
> weaken the force of what I had to say.[20]

The central issue of Ruth is the problem of sexual immorality, the subject of a current and increasing concern in England at the time the book was written. She examines the sin of Ruth and Bellingham and the attitudes of society to both. Her central message is not to sinners, but to those they live amongst, and is a plea for charity. The story itself is a mixture of the conventional fable and realism, for while she tries to keep everything unexaggerated and credible, she manipulates the conventions of the moral fable of seduction consciously to highlight her didactic purpose. Around the story of Ruth's seduction are assembled two sets of characters who comment upon it rather in the manner of a chorus; the voice of charity is represented by the Benson household, and the voice of righteous society by the Bradshaws. The device is similar to that in Our Mutual Friend where the events of two love stories gain an extra dimension from the comments of the Voice of Society as it is represented at the Veneering dinner table. With great economy Mrs Gaskell includes only those events which have a bearing on her central moral, and even peripheral activities such as the election and Richard's theft are a comment on the Bradshavian attitude. In the election episode we see Bradshaw, very like Ruth years before, tempted to the sin of bribery and blinded by the insidious manner of Bellingham. This man who falls through a different fault has his

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[20] The Letters of Mrs Gaskell (no.148), pp.220-1.

downfall brought about by the same dishonest man, yet he condemns the much less worldly and innocent Ruth for her fall from virtue. However, Mrs Gaskell too belonged to the middle-class, Non-Conformist society of the Bradshaws, and though she condemns their lack of charity she herself shares their severity in judging Ruth's sin.

Mrs Gaskell's discussion of fallen women is not based entirely on popular literary conventions. In her own life she tried to bring about the reclamation of one fallen girl at least, and in a very practical way. She may have had something to do with a refuge for homeless women, and she visited women in the prisons. In 1849-50, when she came across a young girl in very nearly the same situation as Ruth, she helped her to emigrate. She must surely have foreseen marriage for her, rather than years of penitent spinsterhood, even though this girl, unlike Ruth, had actually gone on the streets for some months.[21] Yet, for all her sympathy toward this girl in real life, and her plea for charity toward the fallen woman in her novels, she seems unwilling in fiction to uphold the compromise of marriage for a fallen woman.

Her lack of conviction about the controversial elements in her story is illustrated by the fact that the book was prohibited in her own household, and her eldest daughter, who was then about the same age as Ruth at the time of her seduction, was only to be allowed to read it with her mother. The actual material of the seduction story is not more shocking than that of Dickens's David Copperfield, and by the

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[21]For these experiences with fallen women, see The Letters of Mrs Gaskell (nos. 61-3), pp.98-100.

general verdict of his day Dickens was considered to have written nothing that could not be read aloud by the most circumspect father to his blushing daughters. Mrs Gaskell is rather more explicit about the seduction; for instance, Dickens never has a scene in which Em'ly and Steerforth are living together illicitly. She is also rather blunter in presenting disagreeable facts; she bluntly announces the shocking fact that Ruth is to have a baby, whereas a "little ship upon the ocean" brings Bella's baby in Our Mutual Friend. The Victorian reticence on such matters might be gauged by Faith Benson's announcement of the birth to her brother: "Something so shocking has just been discovered - I don't know how to word it - she will have a child."[22] However, what was most shocking about Ruth, which led men to burn it or to forbid their wives to read it, was Mrs Gaskell's laxity toward fallen women. It is probably just this laxity, the charitable sympathy which is the whole point of the novel, which made her ban it in her own home.

Dickens had even closer dealings with the problem of fallen women, yet still retained his prejudices when it came to writing about the subject in his novels. From 1846 on he directed almost solely the policies of a home for women established by the Baroness Burdett-Coutts, a wealthy heiress. The home was run on very humanitarian principles. The situation was chosen in the country where the surroundings were pleasant. Dickens suggested that emigration was the best way to make possible a new start for the girls, and that they

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[22]Ruth, p.116.

should have the prospect of marriage ahead to give them hope. Unlike many contemporary homes for fallen women, this was not to be a gloomy penitentiary. The history of their past was to be forgotten, and Dickens, refusing to brand them as Magdalens, called the home Urania College. The girls were to be "tempted to virtue." They wore bright coloured dresses, kept little gardens, and had singing lessons. They devoted their time to recreation as well as usefulness.

Miss Coutts questioned at first the propriety of offering the girls the prospect of marriage, but Dickens assured her that it was for the best:

> As to marriage. I do not propose to put that hope before them as the immediate end and object to be gained, but assuredly to keep it in view as the possible consequence of a sincere, true, practical repentance, and an altered life. A kind of penitence is bred in our prisons and purgatories just now, which is a very pretty penitence inside the walls, but fades into nothing when it comes into contact with worldly realities. In the generality of cases, it is almost impossible to produce a penitence which shall stand the wear and tear of this rough world, without Hope - worldly hope - the hope of one time or other recovering something like the last station. I would make this Hope, however faint and afar it might be, exactly the one that out of the asylum and without its aid seemed (and was) impossible of attainment.[23]

This is Dickens the pragmatist offering worldly hope, the same pragmatic thinker who realized that the "greatest service to the existing male population" of English colonies in the distant parts of the world would be to send them out women to marry, and who described Martha married to a colonial who was desperate for a wife. However, Dickens the novelist had much more rigid principles, and these emerge

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[23]Letters of Charles Dickens to the Baroness Burdett-Coutts, pp.88-9.

in the qualifications and reservations in the letter to Miss Burdett-Coutts. Little Em'ly is not allowed to forget her past history; the fallen woman in Dickens's novels is forever tainted, and if she is heroine enough she regards marital happiness as something she no longer deserves, "that's gone for ever." His portrait of a prostitute is of a woman whose downward progress is the punishment of her profession, yet he must have known that there existed quite a different state of affairs. The mistresses of his friend Collins did not rot away like spoiled fruit, and many a prostitute enjoyed her trade, or at least preferred it to the other openings available to her:

> Another woman told us, [writes Mayhew in his survey] she had been a prostitute for two years; she became so from necessity; she did not on the whole dislike her way of living; she didn't think about the sin of it; a poor girl must live; she wouldn't be a servant for anything; this was much better.[24]

William Acton, in his survey of prostitution, asks:

> How then is the disparition of this class of women to be accounted for, as they are neither striken down in the practice of harlotry, nor by their own hands, nor by intemperance and venereal disease, nor would seem to perish of supervening ills in any notable proportion? Do they fall by the wayside, as some assume, like the leaves of autumn, unnoticed and unnumbered, to be heaped up to rot? Do unknown graves conceal, not keeping green the lost one's memory, and the obscure fallible records of pauper burials at last confound all clue and chance of tracing her? Is she filtered again into the world through a reformatory? or does she crawl from the sight of men and the haunts of her fellows to some lonely spot in time to linger and die?

In this book, first published in 1857, William Acton rejects all these

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[24]Henry Mayhew, London's Underworld, p.46.

[25]The following three quotations are drawn from Prostitution, pp.72-4.

solutions, the stock material of the Victorian novel.

> I have every reason to believe, that by far the larger number of women who have resorted to prostitution for a livelihood, return sooner or later to a more or less regular course of life. . . . We must recollect that she has a healthy frame, an excellent constitution, and is in the vigour of life. During her career, she has obtained a knowledge of the world most probably above the station she was born in. . . . Is it surprising then, that she should look to the chance of amalgamating with society at large, and make a dash at respectability by marriage? Thus, to a most surprising, and year by year increasing extent, the better inclined class of prostitutes become wedded wives of men in every grade of society from the peerage to the stable.

No doubt this account was true of the great number of prostitutes, yet to outline such a hopeful state of affairs for the prostitute in a novel would be considered immoral. Even such hope as Mrs Gaskell promotes in Ruth was considered shockingly lax. In fact, Acton himself goes on in his sociological treatise to deplore the situation he has described:

> I apprehend that if some of our social marriage enactments are not repealed by acclamation or tacitly, I shall live to see a very large increase in concubinage and the marriages of prostitutes. . . . We see more and more of our maidens pining on the stem of single blessedness, more and more of our young men resigning themselves first, for a time, to miscellaneous fornication, then to systematic concubinage, and, of course, for all this none the richer or more eligible in the eyes of society, at last to mésalliance. . . .
>
> All reflective men must appreciate in common the sad distress and shame which may accrue to his family, the depravity of his taste, who could consider it a triumph to bear off a battered prize from other competitors, and his insanity, who should dream of avoiding detection, or indulge in the hope that, after detection, his false step could be forgotten or forgiven by the world. All can compassionate the temporary weakness of a mind which could esteem the permanent possession of a tainted woman worth the sacrifice of

home and social ties.

Even Mrs Gaskell sympathizes with Mr Farquhar for being thankful "that he has escaped a disagreeable position, and a painful notoriety" in not marrying Ruth. Although she contrasts his worldly caution with Jemima's warm, impulsive nature, she suggests that the one is a necessary foil to the other.

The root of these harsh attitudes toward the prostitute was the notion of the sanctity of the home and the purity of womanhood. In the typical Victorian novel the virtuous woman is always a chaste one. The heroine is always extremely pure, and therefore very young, for purity was equated with ignorance and inexperience. Once a woman lost her chastity in such a novel she was conventionally the worst of all women, no matter how loving and generous, how full of other virtues she might be. The most hard-hearted woman, if she is chaste, is to be preferred to such a fallen woman. For example, see what a virtuous maid-servant has to say, in Cassell's Illustrated Family Paper, of one who has fallen:

> "I looks on all sich as the dirt beneath my feet," she said, "and don't want to talk about them sorts of characters. There's only two kinds of women (high or low), and that's those as respect themselves and those as doesn't. Those as does, I respects; those as doesn't, no one respects--and I despises."
> Oh, what a lesson to poor, fond, tempted girls. . . . But Susan was right in one thing, there are differences in rank and station--there are fine ladies and poor, hard working women--rich beauties in drawing-rooms, poor beauties in back kitchens; but there is no real difference after all, so great as that between the frail woman who has fallen, and the virtuous one whom no temptation could

lead astray.[26]

In Ruth Mrs Gaskell utilizes the conventions of the Victorian heroine to show that this severe condemnation of the fallen woman is wrong. The pure heroine of her novel is a fallen woman, and in all respects but one she fulfills the conventional role. The modern reader is apt to become a little impatient with Mrs Gaskell's emphasis on Ruth's almost incredible ignorance, which is a mark of her innocence. She is witless enough to explain, rather like the heroine of a Sunday School tale, that she wasn't actually working diligently, so should not have the reward of going to the shire-ball, when a more sophisticated girl could have seen that it was not her diligence which won her the honour. She is ingenuous enough to admit that she is beautiful, yet humble enough not to be vain about it. She is so naive as to believe Bellingham to be sympathetic to the poor, and not to know why she treasures the camelia he gave her. When Mr Bellingham asks her to go home with him through the meadows:

> at first she declined, but then, suddenly wondering and questioning herself why she refused a thing which was, as far as reason and knowledge (her knowledge) went, so innocent, and which was certainly so tempting and pleasant, she agreed to go the round. . . . She was not conscious as yet, that Mr Bellingham's presence had added any charm to the ramble.[27]

Even while living as Bellingham's mistress in the Welsh inn, after she has been with him some two months, Ruth is "quite unconscious of being the object of remark," is quite innocent of the world's name for what she is doing.

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[26]Quoted in Margaret Dalziel, Popular Fiction 100 Years Ago, p.98.

[27]Ruth, pp.39-40.

When Mrs Gaskell portrays such extreme innocence she wishes to make the point that loss of chastity does not necessarily involve the loss of all virtue, and that even the fallen Ruth is no hardened sinner. One of the clichés of the story of the fallen woman contrasts her with one of her pure sisters, or with the untainted innocence of childhood. Dickens uses this in such tableaus as that of Nancy standing beside Rose Maylie:

> When she heard a light step approaching the floor opposite to that by which she had entered, and thought of the wide contrast which the small room would in another moment contain, [Nancy] felt burdened with the sense of her own deep shame, and shrank as though she could scarcely bear the presence of her with whom she had sought this interview.[28]

The contrast is again referred to as Nancy dies holding Rose Maylie's little white handkerchief. A similar tableau occurs when Little Dorrit is mistaken for an innocent child by a prostitute on London Bridge, who, conscious of the gulf of sin that separates them, says: "I never should have touched you, but I thought you were a child," and she vanishes with a strange, wild cry.[29]

Mrs Gaskell purposely reverses this tableau; the little children who form part of her contrast of innocence and sin are already corrupted by the ways of the world. Ruth, in a moment of impulsive love, goes to kiss a baby, and its little brother, already indoctrinated in the ways of hatred, stops her. It is Ruth, paradoxically, who is innocent here--so innocent that it had not occurred to her that such an interpretation could be put on her

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[28] Oliver Twist, p.360.

[29] Little Dorrit, pp.217-8.

actions. A little later Mrs Gaskell comments:

> Ever since her adventure with the little boy and his sister, Ruth had habitually avoided encountering these happy--innocents, may I call them? --these happy fellow mortals![30]

Mrs Gaskell's principal aim in Ruth is to criticize the uncharitable condemnation of fallen women. The idea that such a woman might taint innocent people by contact with them was a common one; wet nurses were carefully screened because people believed that an unmarried woman might defile the child she fed. This is probably one of the reasons Miss Tox lines up the entire Toodles family as a testimonial to Polly's respectable married state.[31] The Bensons allow Ruth to teach little girls in their Sunday School, and encourage her to accept the position of governess to the Bradshaw children. The attitude of righteous society to such charity is that of Mr Bradshaw:

> My acquaintance has not lain so much among that class of sinners as to give me much experience of the way in which they are treated. But, judging from what I have seen, I should say they meet with full as much leniency as they deserve; and supposing they do not--I know there are plenty of sickly sentimentalists just now who reserve all their interest and regard for criminals--why not pick out one of these to help you in your task of washing the blackamoor white? . . . why were my innocent children to be exposed to corruption? . . . It is too much to talk in that way when the usefulness was to consist in contaminating my innocent girls.[32]

To Mr Bradshaw and the righteous people for whom he is a mouthpiece, charity is interpreted as laxity toward a very great sin. Mr Benson's

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[30] Ruth, p.94

[31] Dombey and Son, Ch.2. See also William Acton, Prostitution, p.13.

[32] Ruth, pp.345-6.

reply is Mrs Gaskell's message:

> Now I wish God would give me power to speak out convincingly what I believe to be His truth, that not every woman who has fallen is depraved; that many--how many the Great Judgement Day will reveal to those who have shaken off the poor, sore, penitent hearts on earth--many, many crave and hunger after a chance of virtue--the help which no man gives to them--help--that gentle, tender help which Jesus gave once to Mary Magdalen.[33]

However, for all her charitable intentions Mrs Gaskell herself seems unable really to believe that Ruth can ever be clean again on this earth. Deep down, the Victorian attitude to the fallen woman seems to have been very like that toward the murderer; there is real fear for the consequences to society should the sinner go unpunished and be treated with too great leniency. One could compare Mrs Gaskell's treatment of John Barton, the murderer who must die for his crime, with her prejudices about Ruth, the fallen woman. In Mary Barton even Jem Wilson, on whom only the suspicion of murder has fallen, is tainted, and he and Mary are forced to emigrate and begin life anew in the Colonies. The Colonies were a great place to rehabilitate sinners safely; Martha, we remember, is allowed to marry out there.

Even a contemporary reviewer noticed that Ruth's sin haunted her more than was entirely compatible with Mrs Gaskell's charitable views about fallen women, and much more than was warranted by Ruth's own fall from virtue, which had been almost unconscious:

This man, [Bradshaw] reeking with the sins Christ most

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[33] Ruth, p.347.

> abhorred, turns upon the unhappy Ruth (who, after six years of exemplary life, has become a governess in his house), as soon as he accidentally learns her history, with a brutal, savage violence and a coarse unfeeling cruelty which we need not scruple to affirm constituted a far greater sin than poor Ruth had committed, or would have committed had her lapse from chastity been wilful and persistent instead of unconscious, transient, and bitterly and nobly atoned for. Something of this very conviction was evidently in Mrs Gaskell's mind; and we can scarcely doubt that she placed Mr Bradshaw's hard and aggressive Pharisaism in such strong relief and contrast by way of insinuating the comparative moral we have boldly stated. In any case, such is the resulting impression which must be left upon the reader's mind. But what we object to in her book is this: that the tone and language habitually adopted throughout, both by Ruth herself and by her friends when alluding to her fault, is at war with this impression and with the tenor of the facts recorded: Mrs Gaskell scarcely seems at one with herself in this matter. Anxious above all things to arouse a kinder feeling in the uncharitable and bitter world towards offenders of Ruth's sort, to show how thoughtless and almost unconscious such offences sometimes are, and how slightly, after all, they may affect the real purity of nature and piety of spirit, and how truly they may be redeemed when treated with wisdom and with gentleness, --she has first imagined a character as pure, pious and unselfish as poet ever fancied, and described a lapse from chastity as faultless as such a fault can be; and then, with damaging and unfaithful inconsistency, has given into the world's estimate in such matters, by assuming that the sin committed was of so deep a dye that only a life of atoning and enduring penitence can wipe it out. If she designed to awaken the world's compassion for the ordinary class of betrayed and deserted Magdalens, the circumstances of Ruth's error should not have been made so innocent, nor should Ruth herself have been painted so perfect. If she intended to describe a saint (as she has done), she should not have held conventional and mysterious language about her as a grievous sinner.[34]

However, it is not only Mrs Gaskell who indulges in such "false morality" when it concerns the issue of the fallen woman.

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[34]W.R.Greg, "The False Morality of Lady Novelists," from Literary and Social Judgements, pp.135-6.

Dickens, too, pleads for charity and hopes that his portrait of Little Em'ly will do some good:

> In all you suggest with so much feeling, about their return to virtue being cut off, I concur with a sore heart. I have been turning it over in my mind for some time, and hope, in the history of Little Em'ly (who must fall--there is no hope for her), to put it before the thoughts of people in a new and pathetic way, and perhaps do some good.[35]

But once she has fallen, Em'ly can never be the same again; there is a great gulf between the fallen woman and the chaste one. Em'ly returns to virtue in one sense, but it is a penitent, self-sacrificing virtue which atones for the loss of another kind of virtue which can never be regained. She lives an exemplary life for one of her kind:

> 'She might have married well, a mort of times, "but, uncle," she says to me, "that's gone for ever." Cheerful along with me; retired when others is by; fond of going any distance fur to teach a child, or fur to tend a sick person, or fur to do some kindness tow'rds a young girl's wedding (and she's done a many, but has never seen one); fondly loving of her uncle; patient; liked by young and old; sowt out by all that has any trouble. That's Em'ly!'[36]

This is quite a different existence from that which Dickens planned for the girls of Urania College, who wore bright clothes and sang, who gardened and went for walks in the country. Such was the Victorian fear and hatred of immorality that in the moral novel the reclaimed prostitute or fallen woman is not permitted to ask for, or to receive, happiness. Continual infliction of pain is the punishment her sin brings and her attitude must be one of patient endurance.

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[35]Letter to Cerjat (December 1849), quoted in Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph, p.675.

[36]David Copperfield, p.942.

Em'ly tortures herself by helping girls with weddings, but will never marry. Ruth lives a life of usefulness and submission, wearing the plainest clothes and seeking no other joy than to promote happiness in others, especially in Leonard, on whom she is conscious her sin falls most heavily. Mrs Gaskell has the Bensons tell a lie so that Ruth and Leonard can live happily ever after. Mr Bellingham may change his name with impunity for the sake of receiving an inheritance, but Ruth's change of name is something very different. To Mrs Gaskell it is a false putting aside of the penance Ruth should undergo for her sins. The lie is discovered, and Ruth must endure all the punishment she had been saved from during the years. The Reverend Benson's advice when the punishment falls is:

> Can you accept all this treatment meekly, as but the reasonable and just penance God has laid upon you--feeling no anger against those who slight you, no impatience for the time to come (and come it surely will--I speak as having the word of God for what I say), when He, having purified you, even by fire, will make a straight path for your feet?[37]

There are a number of conventional endings for the heroine of the Victorian novel. She may marry and live happily ever after, a perfect wife and mother. She may, from generosity or penitence, live an honoured spinster, devoting her life to others. She may make a graceful exit in a tear-jerking death-bed scene, suffering from the conventional emotional decline, dying from childbirth or expiring as a result of escaping from a too persistent lover. Mrs Gaskell chose a yet more noble ending for her heroine: she dies the death of a saint

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[37] Ruth, p.353.

and martyr, giving up her life for others. The death serves two purposes. It is an appropriate ending for Ruth, for to live happily ever after in married bliss, despite the fact that she can barely be twenty-five and is still very beautiful, would conflict with the portrayal of her as forever penitent and conscious of her sinfulness. Mrs Gaskell chose the saint's death both because it is appropriate for Ruth to end in tribulation and tragedy, and because she wishes to show that the once sinful woman may rise to be even a saint, that the unchaste woman may die a heroine. The double purpose is seen in the following conversation between two fever victims:

> "They say she has been a great sinner, and that this is her penance," quoth one. . . .
> "Such a one as her has never been a great sinner; nor does she do her work as a penance, but for the love of God, and of the blessed Jesus."[38]

Mrs Gaskell wants to have it both ways. Ruth makes a very suitable ending for one who has been a great sinner, yet Mrs Gaskell protests that it is not her sin but her virtue which calls her to this heroic act. It is both an act of penitence and an act of heroism.

The portion of scripture the Reverend Benson reads at Ruth's funeral stresses neither the bravery of her action nor the saintliness of her life. It describes Ruth as one purified for the Lord's presence by tribulation:

> And he said to me, these are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.[39]

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[38] Ruth, p.425.

[39] Ibid., p.453.

She cannot rest in peace until her sin has been atoned for with the tribulation of her life and the self-sacrifice of her death. With her death her sin is wiped out and she can die surrounded by adoring friends and honoured by a medal from her city. Mrs Gaskell's novel is a plea to men not to hound and make an outcast of the fallen woman but to give her charity and help. However, the plot of the novel shows a just and wrathful God dealing out suffering and tribulation to the same woman, as the wages of her grievous sin.

Mrs Gaskell is able to write more straightforwardly on the problem of illegitimacy. The illegitimate child is conventionally the "badge of shame" which reminds the mother of her sins. Even Ruth's child has this function, but in a less harsh fashion. Like Dickens, Mrs Gaskell revolts against the idea of setting such a child apart as wicked and contaminated. Dickens's description of Esther Summerson's upbringing shows the kind of thing both condemned:

> My birthday was the most melancholy day at home, in the whole year Esther's Godmother tells her . 'It would have been far better, little Esther, that you had had no birthday; that you had never been born!' . . . 'Submission, self-denial, diligent work, are the preparations for a life begun with such a shadow on it. You are different from other children, Esther, because you were not born, like them, in common sinfulness and wrath. You are set apart.'[40]

In Ruth the Bensons tell their lie so that Leonard will not grow up to feel contaminated and set apart. Benson prays at the Christening:

> This child rebuked by the world and bidden to stand apart, thou wilt not rebuke, but wilt suffer it to

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[40] Bleak House, pp.16-8.

come to thee and be blessed with thine almighty blessing.[41] Leonard is a very normal little boy. He has to be persuaded to give up a stranger's present by the bribe of new-made jam for tea, and tells lies not because he is born wicked but because it is a "stage through which most infants, who would have lively imaginations, pass."[42] The child of sin is to have all the advantages of a normal little boy, the badge of shame is rather "the little innocent babe, who may be God's messenger to lead her back to Him."

In "Lizzie Leigh" and Mary Barton the problem of the illegitimate child is also raised, and Mrs Gaskell pleads that these children are as beautiful and innocent as any other children. However, her endings are rather defeatist. Both children die, though they bring about the salvation of their mothers. The problem of the future of the illegitimate child, and of marriage for the illegitimate girl, is not discussed. By making Leonard a boy, Mrs Gaskell sidesteps this problem again in Ruth. A boy can quite respectably devote his life to serving other people in his role as a surgeon. We notice that Mrs Gaskell was not brave enough, however, to have Leonard follow in the footsteps of Mr Benson and become a clergyman; the offer from the surgeon is a very nice way out of her problem.

One weakness in Mrs Gaskell's portrait of Leonard is his oversensitive reception of the news of his mother's sin and his illegitimate birth. In Ruth not only the mother must endure the retribution

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[41] Ruth, pp.181-2.

[42] Ibid., p.200.

the world deals out for her sins, but, when the lie is discovered, the child must suffer too. This, of course, adds to Ruth's suffering; the unmarried mother receives double punishment for her sin. Leonard, who is no more than eight years old, falls into the typical decline of a Victorian heroine during an emotional crisis. It is almost as if the little boy must undergo the tribulation which is the desert of his unfortunate beginning before he can emerge, purified, a normal human being.

Throughout Ruth the influence of the attitudes of middle-class, Non-Conformist piety is present. In the hands of Mrs Gaskell the stereotyped story of seduction makes only the obvious social comments, and her conclusions are of a very conservative nature. She would give sympathy to the wronged, and God's hope, to give them patience in their adversity. She concentrates, however, on the moral implications of the fable. She pleads for an attitude of charity towards the sinner, towards the unmarried mother and her illegitimate child in particular. She holds up, as an example, the attitude of Christ towards Mary Magdalen, or towards the woman at the well of whom he said, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." Yet for all her plea for charity she seems to remain convinced that Ruth's is a sin which taints for ever, and if the pleading of the sentiments and actions of characters in the story beg to let Ruth live in peace and usefulness, the plot line shows her expiating her sin in the tribulation of her life and the self-sacrifice of her death.

CONCLUSION

In Mary Barton, North and South and Ruth, the three novels in which Mrs Gaskell tackles topical social problems, her use of clichés of character and plot reveals her ambivalence about the social issues she discusses. There is a tension in her work between criticism of cliché ideas on the one hand, and acceptance of them on the other. This element of contradiction in her novels is caused by her fear of disturbing the existing social order, and her horror of questioning the ways and dispensations of God. Such conservatism conflicts with her ardent desire for reform where she sees injustice and harsh conditions. Her fear of social upheaval mirrors the popular anxiety of her age, when the pressures of the industrial workers' demands seemed to be about to lead to revolutions such as were occurring on the Continent.

Mrs Gaskell's purpose in her social novels is to foster sympathy and understanding for the outcast and the oppressed: for the fallen woman, the industrial labourer and the slum dweller. She attempts to describe the feelings of the unfortunate, and to recreate for the wealthy the conditions which the poor endured. Her careful descriptions, almost of the nature of documentaries, in which she focuses on the details of the daily lives of these people, are extremely powerful. While she concentrates on presenting in detail the feelings and the living conditions of the suffering, she can identify with and have sympathy for them. However, when she extends her focus and portrays her

sufferers within the existing social order, taking account of their rank and position in society, she is inclined to revert to cliché and melodrama as her fears of social upheaval intrude. When she concentrates on minutiae she can build up a vivid vignette of the interrelationships of people within society and the injustices and indignities society imposes upon some of its members.

Dickens does not attempt such minute realism of character and setting, but portrays both in vivid theatrical sketches. He uses clichés and literary formulae to convey his social criticism, often imbuing his characters and scenery with symbolic significance. In Dickens's novels, as in Mrs Gaskell's, there is a tension between the implications of the conventional plot formulae and the sympathy he wishes to generate for his oppressed characters. But on social issues, as can be seen in his use of the seduction fable, he is less conservative than Mrs Gaskell. On religious and moral issues, moreover, his treatment of this fable shows him to be, often, rather trite and conventional when it is set beside the earnest and outspoken analysis of Mrs Gaskell.

Mrs Gaskell and Dickens share a distrust of the inhuman economic fetters that bind men together in the industrial society. They despair of laws and mechanical means of healing social disorder, proposing rather the apolitical solution of Christian love and human affection. Mrs Gaskell is a deeply religious novelist, as religion was defined by Victorian Non-Conformity, whose message is of the need for Christian charity and brotherly love. However, her Christian beliefs also led her to condemn any restlessness or discontent on the part of the suffering, and to advocate resignation to the tribulations life brings

and acceptance of one's lowly lot. She is at her best when her political fears and religious conservatism do not conflict with what she is presenting, when she focuses on the small incidents and apparent trivia of domestic life. Without the wide social scope of a George Eliot or the vivid theatricality of a Charles Dickens she is, nevertheless, an effective voice in the world of the Victorian social novel.

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