



NORTH AND SOUTH: A CONCEPTUAL COMPARISON BETWEEN TWO WORLDS IN ONE NOVEL

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Abstract

As its title suggests, Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *North and South* depicts two different worlds experienced in England during Victorian period due to industrialization. These depictions are carried out through the protagonists in the novel, Margaret Hale and John Thornton. As Margaret is born and raised in southern England, she has very significant and different ideas and beliefs compared to Mr. Thornton, who is a factory owner in the north. Elizabeth Gaskell skilfully develops conflicts around her characters and constructs the plot to expose their prejudices, especially through Margaret. This paper focuses on exposing the novel to a conceptual comparison through the changes observed in *North and South*.

Keywords: North and South, Change, England, Victorian Novel.

I. Introduction

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell lived between 1810 and 1865. Her time was a period of constant and painful changes in England. The industrial revolution in the second half of 18th century and early 19th century transformed England so drastically that it is no surprise for a literary figure to deal with the issues of industrialism. Mrs. Gaskell is a highly studied writer of her time.

The youngest of eight children; only she and her brother John survived infancy. Her father, William Stevenson resigned his post as a minister on conscientious grounds and moved to London; we can see a parallelism in the novel as Mr Hale resigns his post as a vicar and moves to Milton-Northern. Gaskell's mother died when she was 13, and she was sent to live with her mother's sister; as Margaret in *North and South* spends some time with her aunt Mrs Shaw. After her marriage to William Gaskell in 1832, the couple settled in Manchester, which provided the setting of Gaskell's industrial novels. Gaskell wrote *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* in 1857. She died of a heart attack in 1865 (Matus xx).

Mrs Gaskell is famous for *Mary Barton* (1848), *Cranford* (1853), *Ruth* (1853), *North and South* (1854), and *Wives and Daughters* (1865). Charles Dickens was the publisher of her works in his magazine *Household Words*. *Mary Barton*, 'A Tale of Manchester Life' is the first novel published (anonymously) by Gaskell. It is set in Manchester between 1839 and 1842, and it deals with the difficulties faced by the Victorian lower class. Her next novel, *Cranford*, is a collection of stories portraying changing small-town customs and values. *Ruth* is a social novel, dealing with Victorian views about sin and illegitimacy, along with a compassionate portrayal of a fallen woman. Her last and uncomplete novel, *Wives and Daughters* is a story of romance, scandal, and intrigue within the confines of a watchful, gossiping English village during the early nineteenth century. Elizabeth Gaskell is lately becoming popular for her short stories also published in Dickens' magazine and quite distinct from her "industrial" fiction (Foster 108).

Before analysing the concept of change in *North and South*, it might be a good idea to do a short analysis about its genre. Such an analysis may prove useful for identifying the generic qualities that lead to the changes that will be discussed for the novel. There are possible candidates to be termed as the genre of *North and South*: industrial novel, condition of England novel, Bildungsroman, and romance.

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According to O’Gorman, “(...) the industrial novel (...) might just as aptly be called the insurrection novel. Every major example of the form ((...) Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* and *North and South*(...)) features a riot or related act of violence incited by unscrupulous agitators exploiting working-class discontent (O’Gorman 63). The element of riot in this definition is very crucial when we view *North and South* as an industrial novel. Gaskell places the riot of Milton factory workers in the novel both to depict that industrial problem and to flame the conflict already present between Margaret Hale and John Thornton. The living conditions surrounding Miltoners, the Hales’ concerns and help for them, and the non-existent concerns of the employers are all major problems. However, the riot in *North and South* is not as violent or in the foreground as in *Mary Barton*, although it is still a significant element of the novel. Yet, all the issues related to it are not enough to term *North and South* simply as an industrial novel.

James Richard Simmons, Jr, states that *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* fits in the subject matter of condition of England novel as problems of class conflict and capitalism (326). This definition also falls short for *North and South* as class conflict and capitalism are minor problems for the novel.

Iveta Mikysková defines *North and South* as both an industrial novel and a Bildungsroman; “The industrial novel (...) narrates about a life of working-class people and how the industry influenced them. Bildungsroman is a literary genre which describes social and psychological growth of a character. The character grows from a child to an adult person (27)”. This definition itself means that *North and South* is neither. Gaskell does not relate the story of a working class family, the Hales belong to middle class as Mr. Hale is employed in one of the three learned professions.

Additionally, it is true that one can do a Bildungsroman reading on *North and South*, however, the shortness of the time span of Margaret’s growth as a character is the clear obstacle to define Gaskell’s novel as such. In her book *Elizabeth Gaskell*, Patsy Stoneman admits such a possibility and immediately destroys it as she states that “the Bildungsroman reading suggests growth from immaturity, [yet] the novel present Margaret from the beginning as a strong woman. (127)”. As John R. Maynard finds the term *Bildungsroman* “awkward” (279), and after listing a number of alternatives (novel of growing up, novel of growth, novel of education, novel of development, novel of self-development, novel of socialization, novel of formation, novel of youth, novel of initiation, novel of paideia, novel of adolescence, novel of culture, novel of self-culture), he finds an element connecting them all: something about youth growing up and coming of age (281). This element directs us back to Stoneman’s statement. Margaret Hale is at the age of 17 when the novel starts. It is two or three years of narration that the novel reaches its end. Therefore, the growth in Bildungsroman as from a child to an adult person (Mikysková 27) is not present in *North and South*.

The other possible genre, condition of England novel, has the same problem. As the title suggests, Gaskell’s *North and South* is about the clash of north and south. However, this clash is seen through the experiences and mind-sets of the characters. The train, one of the most important inventions of industrial revolution, takes the Hales from Helstone to Milton along with their hard-to-change world views and perceptions. On the other hand, the clash and all the conditions related to a manufacturing town are again not dominant throughout the novel. Gaskell makes Margaret witness, understand, and then comment on those conditions, but her intention is not to create a novel solely based on them. The emphasis on Margaret as a character doesn’t leave enough space or significance for a condition of England novel.

The conceptual comparison in this paper rests on some subtopics as change of location, change in justice, change in speech and communication, change in honesty, change of personality, change from inaction to action, and change (or rather *course*) of sentimental relationships. When viewed from these points, the changes in *North and South* are evidently clear.

II. Discussion

The first and the basic element of change in the novel is the change of location. It is basically from the agricultural south of England to the industrial north, causing in a north versus south clash. This change is important as Margaret’s ideas on people stem from her southern upbringing. Before going further, it is important to acknowledge Margaret’s time in London and also to dismiss it. The reason for this dismissal is that she never feels homely there. Instead, her ideas on the London life that her relatives Mrs Shaw and Edith lead can be defined as estrangement because she takes certain pains not to attend their social activities. She never inherits their worldview and keeps her southern ideals intact. She never despises the south.



As a southerner, Margaret's perception of good and respectable people includes people who work on land. On the other hand, she creates a certain unrespectable group of people as traders who make money by buying and selling:

Margaret, 'Are those the Gormans who made their fortunes in trade at Southampton? Oh! I'm glad we don't visit them. I don't like shoppy people. I think we are far better off, knowing only cottagers and labourers, and people without pretence.'

'You must not be so fastidious, Margaret, dear!' said her mother, secretly thinking of a young and handsome Mr. Gorman whom she had once met at Mr. Hume's.

'No! I call mine a very comprehensive taste; I like all people whose occupations have to do with land; I like soldiers and sailors, and the three learned professions [divinity, medicine, and law], as they call them. I'm sure you don't want me to admire butchers and bakers, and candlestick-makers, do you, mamma?' (Gaskell 18)

Before moving to the other microcosm, it is important to locate the Hales in Margaret's discourse. Mr Hale is a preacher in divinity profession; Mrs Hale has no profession but is simply a parson's wife; and Miss Hale has no profession and is single. Margaret pays her respects to "learned professions" and therefore excludes her father from the list of the unrespected. In the past, Mrs Hale belonged to an upper class family, but her marriage to Mr Hale brought her social status down, which is also stated by their help Dixon after the announcement of move (Gaskell 19). Margaret Hale is educated, but it cannot be seen as a profession. Therefore, she was unlikely to be a governess - partially due to her upper class family as well-, and the only profession fit for her was to be a wife and mother. Even in the quotation above, we can see that her mother is trying to find candidates for her daughter's future marriage, shaping Margaret's profession and future as hers. The quotation is also significant as it implies that Margaret shows no respect for employers and employees. The reason for this lack of respect may be the fact that she never got in contact with them until their move.

The evident change from a southern setting to a northern one creates the major conflict of the novel. Mr Hale turns a dissenter and needs to leave Helstone. No elaborate reasoning is presented in the novel for this change of belief, but the reason for this lack of reason might be explained as Gaskell invented it as a device for the change of location. It is important to note that the Hales move with their mind-sets. Mr Hale does not have any prejudice against working class. Mrs Hale's first objections are to the location as being dirty and low. Miss Hale is too busy arranging the removal and consoling her mother to comment elaborately on this change. Taking the quotation above in mind, Margaret undergoes the change of perception based on northern people. After she meets Mr. Thornton and the poor family of the Higginses, she glimpses to the working people as hardworking and keeping to themselves even while walking. Therefore, she starts to respect them. Her respect covers the employees and one employer; she grows no sympathy for other employers, as they are indifferent to their hands' problems.

Bringing the transformation of Margaret's ideas, this change of location actually stems from the fact that it also leads to a certain downgrading for the Hales. Margaret was somebody in Helstone, however, as Belgin Elbir states, Margaret "the daughter of a respected parson in the south" is now just "a not so wealthy member of middle-class [family] in a strange town" (206). Therefore, it is this change of location that brings the change of ideas experienced by Margaret. Location effects their class-consciousness and views of others. Even though the location changes, the Hales, especially Margaret, keeps tending for people "lower" than them, retaining their Helstone habits. It might be explained as aristocrats' or landowners' tendency to care for their subjects.

The next subject of the argument is the change in justice. The characters' ideas on justice must be evaluated in terms of two events: Fredrick's mutiny and workers' riot. Fredrick supports fellow sailors against the tyrannical rule of their captain and helps them take control of their vessel. Although this event takes place before the novel starts, Mrs Hale relates it on her deathbed to her daughter as she was kept in the dark about this event. It was sad and very depressing for the parents but not for the press and the public. Fredrick was called as a "traitor of the blackest dye" (Gaskell 102) by newspapers, enforcing the disgrace on the family. On the other hand, workers rioting against poor work conditions and cruel masters are called as brutes (before their attack on the mill). In relation to his mutiny, Margaret takes sides with Frederick and abused sailors, however, she supports abusive mill owner Thornton during the riot, which is justified in the novel as Margaret's being against any



kind of violence. Her perception of justice changes when she stands against mill workers and protects Thornton, compared to her support for mutinying brother and sailors who utilized violence to take their ship as well.

This change is more evident when Margaret puts some efforts for his brother's being tried justly. Letters are sent to Henry Lennox, whose proposal to Margaret in the beginning of the novel was turned down. This is Margaret asking for justice for her brother because she sees a just trial as the only means to exonerate him. Then we have the conflicting change.

Although Margaret asks a trial for her brother, she avoids investigation/trial after the incident involving Frederick, herself, and a strange man at the train station, which leads to the man's death. When an officer asks about her whereabouts, she lies to protect her dear brother. Whether Frederick is guilty for that man's death or not is left unclear, as the incident is swept under the carpet thanks to Thornton. Margaret's two conflicting ideas mean that her concept of justice changes depending on the person who receives it.

However, it is ironic that the same event brings a kind of injustice for Margaret herself. In his perspective, Thornton sees Margaret that night with a man at the station and takes him as her lover. His duty as a magistrate enables him to do good for Margaret by closing the investigation; yet he starts to perceive her as a low woman spending time with a man late at night. It is this event after which he stops openly displaying his affection for Margaret and also after which Margaret develops affection for him, never to be announced. Margaret never makes use of the opportunities to clear her name. Her only attempt at doing so is after her mother and father's death when she asks her father's friend and later her guardian Mr Bell to relate the case to Mr Thornton. Mr Bell dies before doing so, leaving Margaret in doubt and as a low woman in Thornton's eyes. However, they do not talk about and settle the case even before their union at the end of the book. Therefore, Margaret cannot get herself the very justice she seeks for others.

Another element is the change in speech and communication through which we see Margaret's personal development as a character towards an individual. This development occurs in three phases following her mother's death, her father's death, and after Mr. Bell's death. In *Helstone*, she is a confidant of her father, but she has problems in her communication with her mother. She can be identified as a young daughter at this phase. During her mother's illness, she develops closer relationship with her mother (also a brief one with Frederick). After her mother's death, her communication with her father and the Higginsons improves. She starts acting like an individual especially when she acts as a caring landowner with the Higginsons. After her father's death, however, she has less communication with anyone. It can be taken as an expected psychological response. Finally, she matures following Mr Bell's death; the effect of his legacy cannot be denied either.

The change in communication is also applicable to Mr Thornton. Unlike earlier, he begins to communicate as a master with his hands. Mr Thornton and Mr Higgins work hand in hand for the benefit of workers when they provide them lunch at the factory.

The change from inaction to action in *North and South* is significant. There is an important quote for the motto Frederick tells to Margaret: "Thinking has, many a time, made me sad, darling; but doing never did in all my life....My precept is, do something, my sister, do good if you can; but at any rate, do something." (Gaskell, 231). In the beginning of the novel, we see Margaret as playing along. She, simply as a young daughter, follows other's decisions and does what she is asked to do. The change comes when she starts taking care of her own family and helping the Higginsons. She also helps her mother on deathbed and supports her father during and afterwards. Also at the same time, Margaret opposes rioters to protect Thornton, which is a great show of action that cannot be expected from a young girl of the time. Nevertheless, her mental inaction is in contrast with her physical actions. This inaction is in terms of her emotions and relationship with men. Firstly, Margaret rejects Mr Lennox's proposal. Next, she denies Mr Thornton's love and rejects him as well. Yet, she thinks of Mr Lennox in Milton and of Mr Thornton in London after her parents' death. The inaction continues when Margaret urges Mr Bell to announce her innocence to Mr. Thornton; Mr Bell dies leaving her in dilemma. She cannot acknowledge the truth as well as her love for Thornton. As I have stated earlier, the truth concerning the train station sighting is not told to Mr Thornton even after their union. Consequently, her inaction concerning her emotions continues until she confesses her love for Thornton while her physical inaction gradually turns into action.



Another change is seen in honesty. Margaret as a parson's daughter is expected to be honest, and she is depicted early in the novel as valuing honesty and despising hypocrisy. As she arrives at and interacts with the industrialized material society, she loses her honesty in two forms: lies and secret-keeping. First, she keeps her defence of Mr. Thornton against the workers as a secret from her family. Later, she lies to the police officer to protect her brother from prosecution. In relation to the same event, she keeps the truth about her brother a secret from Mr. and Mrs. Thornton, therefore losing her integrity and dignity as a maiden woman. In Freudian perspective, we can see lying and keeping secrets as a learned experience as opposed to children's honesty; therefore we can say that she matures as she changes her concept of honesty.

The last change occurs in sentimental relationships. The change, or the course, of love depicts Margaret as the object of love/desire. However, she is almost never the subject. We can deduct it from the way Mr Lennox and Thornton behaves against her. There are two verbal proposals by Mr Lennox. He is an ambition lawyer and therefore a good candidate. Margaret is the parson's daughter when the first proposal is made, and she is the rich woman thanks to Mr Bell's legacy when the second comes. After she defends Mr Thornton, again a good suitor as a wealthy factory owner/trader, he asks her hand in marriage. Margaret turns both men down because she doesn't love them. Therefore, it can be inferred that she sees love as the primary requirement for marriage. She doesn't simply want to get married to a wealthy or a promising man, unlike her mother's disguised matchmaking attempt.

Her refusal for Mr Lennox's and Thornton's proposals are very important because of the emotional response they arouse in Margaret. She feels as "guilty and ashamed of having grown into a woman as to be thought of in marriage (Gaskell 30)" and "like a prisoner, falsely accused of a crime that she loathed and despised (180)" respectively.

The course of love doesn't come to a full stop even at the end of the book. The union is in the form of an inclined marriage, there is no verbal proposal and acceptance. The readers are given a short period of silence; we do not know if it is a physical union happening meanwhile in the shape of a kiss. Stoneman takes the marriage "as a symbolic reconciliation and at worst a romantic diversion from the industrial theme" (118). Margaret's course of love involves inaction as well because we can find no female announcement of affection towards the male until the last page. Since the moment she develops affection for Thornton, Margaret keeps it a secret. It is because her sentimental announcement can be taken by others as a woman winning over wealthy Thornton to climb the social ladder. Contrastingly, this idea changes when she acquires Mr Bell's money and land. It is when Margaret sees no problem to open her heart. When she finally climbs up the social ladder, she arrives at a position higher than financially-troubled Thornton. That makes her equal to him, solving Margaret's problem of being conceived as a hunter of rich husbands. Additionally, the change of her family bonds might be another reason for this announcement/acceptance of love: there are no parents to judge or comment on her selection of spouse.

The ending of *North and South* also brings some changes. In terms of the industrial aspect of the novel, the readers are previously introduced to the masters as being unwilling to communicate or care for their hands. Later as the novel advances to a close, the masters, or at least one of them, engages in closer relations with his employees. The novel presents this as a proposal for the solution of employer/employee problems of the time. The ending also provides another change in the bildungsroman perspective. The marriage between Margaret and Thornton, who both belong to the middle class but to lower middle and upper middle respectively, is a kind of reconciliation as well. Much before bringing together people in the different subclasses, Gaskell already brings those from lower and middle class as well. In page 216, "Margaret the Churchwoman, her father the Dissenter, Higgins the Infidel, knelt down together. It did them no harm." (Gaskell 216). Religion, or the simple aspect of religious belief as worshipping the one same god, is another method of reconciliation in addition to the previously mentioned marriage. The classes can reach a kind of union and strength through religion.

III. Conclusion

Consequently, the existence of the aforementioned changes not only stem from but also lead to the facts of the new Victorian life and society. These changes are present due to the inevitable requirements of the plot, genre (Bildungsroman, industrial novel, condition of England novel), and



context. As a person, Margaret goes through various phases of life and matures in the end. As a country, England goes through changes and needs to provide order and social stability. As a society, English people experience problems and are divided into new classes and sects; therefore they require reconciliation and respect for each other. North and South deals with and solves these problems through the changes in its microcosm.

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