

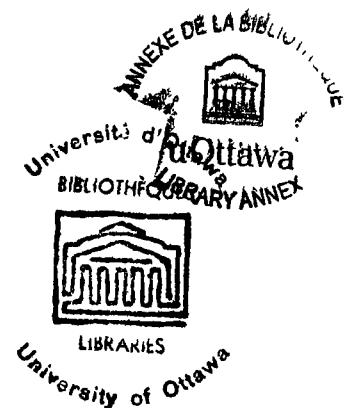
A READING OF SYMBOLICAL ASPECTS OF
MRS. GASKELL'S NORTH AND SOUTH

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I. INTRODUCTION

Mrs. Gaskell, in Cranford, may claim to have reached perfection by one finished achievement; which embodies the ideal to which we conceive that the work in fiction peculiar to women had been, more or less consciously, directed from the beginning. Probably the art would have been less flawless, if applied--as it was by sister novelists--to a wider range of persons and subjects. Nothing of quite this kind has been again attempted, and it is not likely that such an attempt would succeed.

We should only notice, in passing, that Mrs. Gaskell left other admirable, and quite feminine, work on more ordinary lines. Wives and Daughters is a delightful love story; while North and South and Mary Barton are almost the first examples of that keen interest in social problems, and the life of the poor, in legitimate novels (not fiction-tracts), which we shall find so favourite a topic of women from her generation until today. ¹

For a good many years after her death, this was the accepted critical opinion of Mrs. Gaskell. By a sort of accident, she happened to write one good novel, Cranford; it had not even been planned originally as a novel, since it started

¹R. Brimley Johnson, The Women Novelists (1919; rpt. Freeport, N. Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1967), p. 162-3.

out as a series of sketches for Household Words. Indeed, apart from its narrator, Cranford does not settle down to one set of characters until half way through. Hence, the genteel charm of Cranford misled readers into a false view of Mrs. Gaskell's work. They assumed that it was typical, or that it should have been so; the other novels were more of interest to social scientists and historians than to students of literature. North and South and Mary Barton, therefore, suffered the fate of being passed over with a sort of patronizing air. Modern critical opinion has been much kinder. The passage of time has led to recognition of the stature of Mary Barton and North and South; critics have realized that they are novels of considerable power, both in the depiction of character and the invention of episode. This change has led to close studies of these works. The general consensus with regard to North and South is that it has a didactic intent, but there is no general agreement as to what the message may be.

J. McVeagh views the essential theme of North and South as the facing of "life's grim realities and urging the superiority of the human spirit over accident."² This is an interesting idea, but he offers no explanation of how it operates in North and South; indeed, he goes on to state

²John McVeagh, "Notes on Mrs. Gaskell's Narrative Technique," Essays in Criticism, 18 (1968), 466.

that this is also the theme of Cranford, Cousin Phillis, and Wives and Daughters. It is, perhaps, a little too broad an idea to be of use as a basis for the analysis of a specific work.

John Sharps places his emphasis upon a different area of the story:

It would falsify to call Mary Barton a working-class love story, yet there is truth in describing North and South as a middle-class romance. This at least serves as a warning not to place it too readily alongside Mrs. Gaskell's first two novels, each recognized by her contemporaries as having been written with a purpose; for it is upon the personal relationship between the heroine, Margaret Hale, a country-parson's daughter, and John Thornton, a self-made captain of industry, that the plot hinges.³

Thus, for Sharps, the love theme is central.

Martin Dodsworth takes another, although related, aspect of this question and states that the point of the whole story is Margaret's growing consciousness of love.⁴ Gerald Sanders would have agreed that Margaret is central, but he felt that the novel is the story of her fortunes and that the need for co-operation is the dominant theme.⁵ By way of contrast, Annette Hopkins thought that the

³Mrs. Gaskell's Observation and Invention (Fontwell, Sussex: Linden Press, 1970), p. 207.

⁴"Introduction," in Elizabeth Gaskell, North and South, Dorothy Collin, ed. (Third Edition; Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 16.

⁵Elizabeth Gaskell (1929; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1971), p. 65.

character and education of Thornton was central to the book.⁶

The most interesting analysis of the ~~theme~~ theme of North and South is that offered by Edgar Wright, who states,

The obvious major theme, worked out chiefly in the relationship between Margaret Hale and John Thornton, is the reconciliation of the attitudes and social values of North and South, with the acceptance of the valuable qualities in both and the recognition of faults and prejudices on both sides. But it is doubtful whether this is really the controlling idea of the novel. To begin with, the basic contrast is only one of a number, not always represented by the North-South opposition. The beauty of Helstone, for example, is contrasted with the ugliness of Milton, but the values of both are contrasted to the idle luxury of London. The importance of religion is common to both sides of the conflict and has its own theme of conscience and dissent. The conflict between masters and men is purely a Milton affair, although northern independence is set against southern paternalism.⁷

The opening statement combines the views of the critics quoted above into a comprehensive whole and describes the process of developing contrasts used in the book. The remaining statements, however, can be profitably examined in detail. A complete interpretation of North and South must pay close attention to setting; briefly, however, there do seem to be grounds for connecting the values of London and Helstone. Fundamentally, they are linked by blood relationships; Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Shaw are sisters, Edith and Margaret are cousins. Mrs. Hale spends her idle

⁶"Liberalism in the Social Teachings of Mrs. Gaskell," Social Service Review, 5 (1931), 64.

⁷Mrs Gaskell: The Basis for Reassessment (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 134.

life in Helstone developing hypochondria while Mrs. Shaw occupies her time in London in the same manner. Mr. Hale abandons his vocation, while Captain Lennox gives up the army. The pastoral romance of Helstone and the urbane gentry of London form parts of the same world, the same Southern culture. As to questions of religion, this is not an area where Mrs. Gaskell is attempting to develop extensive contrasts: Margaret is Church of England; her father is a dissenter; Frederick is converting to Catholicism; Thornton shows no particular religious affiliation; Higgins is an atheist; and his daughter, Bessy, is fanatically devoted to the Apocalypse.

Otherscritics have sought to evade the question by recounting the publishing history of North and South; they seek to advance general understanding of the book by revealing the difficulties of its creation. North and South was Mrs. Gaskell's fourth novel; Mary Barton was published in 1848, Ruth in 1853, and Cranford was published serially in 1853-4. The ease of publishing Cranford in Household Words led Mrs. Gaskell to offer to its editor, Dickens, North and South for serial publication; it was a move that she would regret before very long. She submitted the idea to Dickens late in 1853 and, following his approval, sent the first manuscript pages. Problems developed: Dickens estimated the length of the text and his printer confirmed

this estimate; however, it proved to be seriously in error. On the nineteenth of August, 1854, Dickens wrote to his sub-editor Wills, "I am alarmed by the quantity of North and South. It is not objectionable for a beginning, but would become so in the progress of a not compactly written and artfully devised story. It suggests to me (but I may be wrong) that the Whitefriars casting-off was incorrect."⁸ Therefore, at the beginning of publication it was discovered that North and South was longer than anticipated. This error on Dickens's part was complicated by one of Mrs. Gaskell's, for she thought that she would have more space than she was actually allowed:

. . . I made a half-promise (as perhaps I told you,) to Mr. Dickens, which he understood as a whole one; and though I had the plot and characters in my head long ago, I have often been in despair about the working of them out; because of course, in this way of publishing it, I had to write pretty hard without waiting for the happy leisure hours. And then 20 numbers was, I found [,] my allowance; instead of the too scant 22, which I had fancied were included in 'five months'; and at last the story is huddled & hurried up; especially in the rapidity with which the sudden death of Mr. Bell, succeeds to the sudden death of Mr. Hale. But what could I do? Every page was grudged me, just at last, when I did certainly infringe all the bounds & limits they set me as to quantity. Just at the very last I was compelled to desperate compression. 9

⁸R. C. Lehmann, ed., Charles Dickens as Editor (1912; rpt. New York: Haskell House, 1972), p. 141.

⁹J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard, eds., The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), p. 328-9.

This necessity for compression led Mrs. Gaskell into considerable frustrations and rather ruined her relationship with Dickens. Thereafter, although she continued to write for Household Words and All the Year Round, she attempted to avoid them if at all possible. Her better work was sent to the Cornhill, and only the things which she considered inferior went to Dickens. This compression was partly remedied in the publication of the complete volume by the inclusion of four new chapters (44-48), making the various deaths and the marriage of Margaret and Thornton more plausible. They also restore the originally intended balance of the book by including Margaret's visit to Helstone. Nonetheless, Mrs. Gaskell felt obliged to include a short preface to the first edition, explaining the difficulties caused by the circumstances of publication:

On its first appearance in Household Words, this tale was obliged to conform to the conditions imposed by the requirements of a weekly publication, and likewise to confine itself within certain advertised limits, in order that faith might be kept with the public. Although these conditions were made as light as they well could be, the author found it impossible to develop the story in the manner originally intended, and, more especially, was compelled to hurry on events with an improbable rapidity towards the close. In some degree to remedy this obvious defect, various short passages have been inserted, and several new chapters added. With this brief explanation, the tale is commended to the kindness of the reader;

'Beseking hym lowly, of mercy and pite,
Of its rude makyng to have compassion.' 10

¹⁰ Elizabeth Gaskell, North and South, Dorothy Collin,

This suggested a point of attack for her contemporaries; a review published in Cornhill states that, "It seems to be more unequal in merit than most of Mrs. Gaskell's stories, the latter part especially bearing some traces of hasty composition."¹¹ However, substantial portions of the book were rewritten, and it is necessary to presume that the novel is largely in the form that Mrs. Gaskell desired it to have. J. A. V. Chapple carries this view to its extreme by claiming that this compression is a positive virtue.¹²

The views of these critics form parts of consistent and valid interpretations which they advance; however, it is possible to derive a new interpretation of North and South by the use of some of their ideas. There is a general consensus among critics that North and South is a didactic novel; therefore, it contains a moral lesson. One of the favourite literary forms for the conveyance of a moral lesson is the allegory. An examination of North and South for the presence of such traditional allegorical devices as symbolism and personification promises to supply a new basis

ed. (1855; rpt., third edition, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 35. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be given in parentheses following the quotation. See "A Note on the Text", p. 96.

¹¹G. B. S., "Mrs. Gaskell and Her Novels," 29 (Feb. 1874), 207.

¹²"North and South: A Reassessment," Essays in Criticism, 17 (1967), 461-2.

for the interpretation of Elizabeth Gaskell's novel. There are, of course, inherent limitations to this approach. First, it is impossible to establish that such a view is consistent with Mrs. Gaskell's original intentions; the original manuscript has been lost, and the bulk of Elizabeth's personal papers were destroyed. Intent is, naturally, a factor with such a sophisticated form as allegory. Such an approach also tends to stress personal relationships rather than broad social questions. Personification in North and South is chiefly a device for easily indicating the personal natures of characters. Thus, the use here differs from that of conventional allegory where personifications are usually vices or virtues engaged in a contest over the central characters. Hence, its role is limited.

II. SYMBOLIC SETTINGS OF NORTH AND SOUTH

The action of North and South occurs in a wide variety of settings, both in terms of geography and social status; the range extends from an elegant Harley Street drawing-room to a rural cottage to the parlour of a factory hand in Milton. Every one of these locales, such as the drawing-room of Mrs. Thornton, is depicted in careful and attentive detail, suggesting that each has an important role; they are not simply places for things to happen, but rather functional parts of the book. This suggestion is reinforced by the frequent allusions made to particular places; Oxford, London, Helstone, among others, are continually recurring in conversations. The title itself refers to two of the places of the novel. An examination of the function of setting in North and South promises an advance towards an understanding of this novel. One of the major elements of the moralistic tradition, symbolism, is to be discovered in the settings of North and South.

As the title itself implies, although it must be borne in mind that the title may not be Mrs. Gaskell's own, the novel is much concerned with place and contrast. The two great places of the novel are, of course, North and South themselves. The book opens in the South, in the city of London. This, however, is not the London of Dickens, nor is it the London of the poor; rather, it is comfortable upper-middle-class London. This opening passage, remarkable for its irony, immediately sets the view Mrs. Gaskell wants the reader to take of the whole Southern world:

'Edith!' said Margaret gently, 'Edith!'

But as Margaret half suspected, Edith had fallen asleep. She lay curled up on the sofa in the back drawing-room in Harley Street, looking very lovely in her white muslin and blue ribbons. If Titania had ever been dressed in white muslin and blue ribbons, and had fallen asleep on a crimson damask sofa in a back drawing-room, Edith might have been taken for her. Margaret was struck afresh by her cousin's beauty. . . . They had been talking about wedding dresses, and wedding ceremonies; and Captain Lennox, and what he had told Edith about her future life at Corfu, where his regiment was stationed; and the difficulty of keeping a piano in good tune (a difficulty which Edith seemed to consider as one of the most formidable that could befall her in her married life), and what gowns she should want in the visit to Scotland, which would immediately succeed her marriage; but the whispered tone had latterly become more drowsy; and Margaret, after a pause of a few minutes, found, as she fancied, that in spite of the buzz in the next room, Edith had rolled herself up into a soft ball of muslin and ribbon, and silken curls, and gone off into a peaceful little after-dinner nap. (35).

The reference to Titania suggests the Pastoral-romance view of the South which is meant to be in the reader's mind throughout the novel. Furthermore, the ironic tone prepares

the reader for the novel's ultimate judgement of that world as attractive and rather charming, but inadequate. The Southern world as presented in the novel can be divided into four parts: London, Helstone, Oxford, and Corfu.

The world of London is the world of the idle rich. It is more important to have money than to get it, and if one does get it, it can only be through the respectable professions. Mrs. Shaw is the wife of a general, and her daughter is marrying a captain. Her sister, Mrs. Hale, married a clergyman. Henry Lennox is a lawyer. The three professions are the only suitable employments for a gentleman in this world. It is not, however, a world where work ever actually appears. It is known that one does something, and it is even known what that something is, but the exact nature of that task is never discussed. Servants, although ever-present, are never seen.

Social events are strongly emphasised in the world of London. The novel opens with Edith's wedding and closes with frequent references to her dinner-parties, although these are never described in detail:

The elements of the dinner-parties which Mrs. Lennox gave, were these; her friends contributed the beauty, Captain Lennox the easy knowledge of the subjects of the day; and Mr. Henry Lennox and the sprinkling of rising men who were received as his friends, brought the wit, the cleverness, the keen and extensive knowledge of which they knew well enough how to avail themselves without seeming pedantic, or burdening the rapid flow of conversation.

These dinners were delightful; but even here

Margaret's dissatisfaction found her out. Every talent, every feeling, every acquirement; nay, even every tendency towards virtue, was used up as material for fireworks; the hidden, sacred fire exhausted itself in sparklè and crackle. They talked about art in a merely sensuous way, dwelling on outside effects, instead of allowing themselves to learn what it has to teach. They lashed themselves up into an enthusiasm about high subjects in company, and never thought about them when they were alone; they squandered their capabilities of appreciation into a mere flow of appropriate words. (497).

This is the world of London as seen at the end of the novel: a world of surface refinement and surface glitter. It is a world incapable of growth or change, for even its concern with the higher realms of thought is merely intended as subject matter for dinner table conversations. The shallowness of this world is made clear by the death of Mr. Bell. Margaret misses the first train because Edith and Mrs. Shaw are discussing the propriety of a young lady visiting the rooms of a single gentleman, even if he is a good many years older and her father's best friend. The irony displayed at the beginning of the novel makes it clear that London is not the standard for evaluating the events of the book, while Margaret's explicit rejection of this world at the end makes it, at best, a neutral meeting place for her reconciliation with Thornton.

Corfu functions as a more caustic version of the world of London. It features the same set of characters and the same idle, luxurious style of life. However, it has an important functional role in the novel; during Margaret's

period in Milton, Edith's letters continually serve to remind the reader of the Southern world, making a powerful contrast with Margaret's everyday life. Such a letter arrives just after Bessy Higgins's death and the session of consolation which followed upon it:

. . . I'm sure it [going to Corfu] would be the very best thing for Aunt Hale's health; everybody here is young and well, and our skies are always blue, and our sun always shines, and the band plays deliciously from morning till night; and, to come back to the burden of my ditty, my baby always smiles. . . . Oh, it is this--Dearest Margaret!--you must come and see me; it would do Aunt Hale good, as I said before. Get the doctor to order it for her. Tell him that it's the smoke of Milton that does her harm. I have no doubt it is that, really. Three months (you must not come for less) of this delicious climate--all sunshine, and grapes as common as blackberries, would quite cure her. . . . But you have no idea of the heat here! I tried to wear my great beauty Indian shawl at a pic-nic. I kept myself up with proverbs as long as I could; "Pride must abide"--and such wholesome pieces of pith; but it was of no use. I was like mama's little dog Tiny with an elephant's trappings on; smothered, hidden, killed with my finery; so I made it into a capital carpet for us all to sit down upon. (298-99).

This is the world of Arcadian romance, the world of our contemporary Harlequin novels. The sun always shines; the sky is always blue; the band murmurs meaningless musical fluff in the background; fruit grows abundantly; the whole world is young and healthy; and in the foreground, a happy mother is having a delightful picnic where nothing so vulgar as an ant would dare to intervene. The contrast between this world and Margaret's situation is drastic; Margaret, having spent the previous day at the bedside of a dying girl, goes

from reading Edith's letter to the sick room of her own mother. The most horrible part for Margaret is that she knows Edith is right: the smoke of Milton is killing her mother, and a visit to Corfu might very well save her. Such a trip, however, is impossible; there is no money. The question of money never occurs to Edith, and it is this innocence which makes her invitation so cruel in the circumstances. The South is here shown to be a society where one tells the doctor what to recommend; a static society, devoted to leisure and pleasure, where nothing ever really happens and nothing ever will. Corfu is like the Elysian fields, an island of perfection beyond the seas.

Oxford has a small role as a setting, but it frequently turns up in conversation; it is inextricably bound to Mr. Bell, who represents it. Oxford is the home of the life of the mind. Margaret, Mr. Bell, Mr. Hale, and Thornton discuss this world:

'It is not every one who can sit comfortably in a set of college rooms, and let his riches grow without any exertion of his own. No doubt there is many a man here who would be thankful if his property would increase as yours has done, without his taking any trouble about it,' said Mr. Hale.

'I don't believe they would. It's the bustle and the struggle they like. As for sitting still, and learning from the past, or shaping out the future by faithful work done in a prophetic spirit--Why! Pooh! I don't believe there's a man in Milton who knows how to sit still; and it is a great art.'

'Milton people, I suspect, think Oxford men don't know how to move. It would be a very good thing if they mixed a little more.'

'It might be good for the Miltoners. Many things might be good for them which would be very disagreeable for other people.' (409-10).

.....
 'I am not sure whether to consider that as a compliment or not. I should like to be the representative of Oxford, with its beauty and its learning, and its proud old history. What do you say, Margaret; ought I to be flattered?'

'I don't know Oxford. But there is a difference between being the representative of a city and the representative man of its inhabitants.' (413)

.....
 'If we do not reverence the past as you do in Oxford, it is because we want something which can apply to the present more directly. It is fine when the study of the past leads to a prophecy of the future. But to men groping in new circumstances, it would be finer if the words of experience could direct us how to act in what concerns us most intimately and immediately; which is full of difficulties that must be encountered; and upon the mode in which they are met and conquered--not merely pushed aside for the time--depends our future. Out of the wisdom of the past, help us over the present. But no! People can speak of Utopia much more easily than of the next day's duty; and yet when that duty is all done by others, who so ready to cry, "Fie, for shame!"'

'And all this time I don't see what you are talking about. Would you Milton men condescend to send up your to-day's difficulty to Oxford? You have not tried us yet.' (414).

This is the portrait given of Oxford in the novel. It is a world of static intellect, very much opposed to the life of Arnold's "Scholar-Gipsy." The theoretical approach to theoretical problems is the sole concern of these men. Although they are unlike the Scholar-Gipsy in the physically static life they lead, they resemble him in the obsessions which they pursue. They exist in a world of abstractions, devoted to the cultivation and preservation of the past. It is these qualities of Oxford in which Mr. Bell exults;

he rejoices in its static beauty.

The most important place in the South is undoubtedly the town of Helstone in the New Forest. The name of Helstone is derived from Charlotte Bronte's Shirley,¹ where it is the name of two of the major characters in the book: Caroline Helstone and the Reverend Helstone. Mrs. Gaskell wished to pay tribute to her fellow-novelist and close friend by borrowing a name from Charlotte's only industrial novel. It is a useful allusion to keep in front of the reader, since the industrial problems of the Luddites are solved in that work by a sort of imposed compromise. The name of the town is usually considered to be derived from Caroline Helstone. She is a shy, genteel lady, no great beauty, in love with a man who does not return her affection. Excluding vaguely romantic associations, there are no good grounds for supposing that Caroline is the source of the town's name. There are, however, logical reasons for attaching the town name to her father. First, and most obviously, Helstone is strongly identified with religion in the minds of both the characters and the reader, since it is there that Mr. Hale is pastor and develops his doubts. There are frequent references to the church and vicarage of Helstone, but few to the village

¹Andrew and Judith Hook, eds. (1849; rpt., Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1974).

itself. Helstone is a firm, inflexible man, capable of using violence to preserve the social order. The emphasis in all the symbolic use of Helstone, as will be demonstrated, is upon its static rigidity and social order. Furthermore, Caroline pines under the care of her uncle, just as Mr. and Mrs. Hale pine under religious doubts and ill-health in Helstone. Identifying the Rev. Helstone as source also offers the advantage of suggesting from the beginning the ultimate rejection of the Southern life as a universal *modus vivendi*.

Helstone represents the very epitome of the old squirarchy and the old Southern way of life. Margaret describes Helstone quite early in the book:

'Oh, only a hamlet; I don't think I could call it a village at all. There is the church and a few houses near it on the green--cottages, rather,--with roses growing all over them.'

'And flowering all the year round, especially at Christmas--make your picture complete,' said he.

'No,' replied Margaret, somewhat annoyed, 'I am not making a picture. I am trying to describe Helstone as it really is. You should not have said that.'

'I am penitent,' he answered. 'Only it really sounded like a village in a tale rather than in real life.'

'And so it is,' replied Margaret, eagerly. 'All the other places in England that I have seen seem so hard and prosaic-looking, after the New Forest. Helstone is like a village in a poem--in one of Tennyson's poems. But I won't try and describe it any more. You would only laugh at me if I told you what I think of it--what it really is.' (42-3).

Thus, early in the book is struck the characteristic note of Helstone; it is 'a village in a poem,' suited to the frolics

of nymphs and shepherds, a miniature Arcadia. As W. A. Craik has pointed out,

Helstone and Milton are both 'invented' in that they have neither the names nor all the attributes of actual places, and are therefore more representative than an actual southern English village, or actual Manchester could be. They bear the same relationship to the actual that George Eliot's Middlemarch, Trollope's Barchester, or Hardy's Casterbridge do to their originals, giving the author the freedom to develop their significance and symbolic qualities, alongside the sense of reality of an actual place with which the reader can have some familiarity. ²

Helstone's initial symbolic role is that of the perfect country village, which is the usual import of its reappearances in North and South.

This function is seriously shifted towards the end of the book, as Margaret's perceptions shift. Indeed, it is important to note that Helstone is an idyllic place as conceived of by Margaret; most of the descriptions of it are given by her and reflect her views. Her extended stay in Milton is one of the causes of her altered perception, but a second cause is the return visit which she pays in chapter forty-six. The idea of such a visit is first proposed in the preceding chapter by Mr. Bell, and that chapter begins with a description of a dream of his youth:

The idea of Helstone had been suggested to Mr. Bell's waking mind by his conversation with Mr. Lennox and all night long it ran riot through his dreams. He

²Elizabeth Gaskell and the English Provincial Novel (London: Methuen & Co., 1975), p. 111-2.

was again the tutor in the college where he now held the rank of Fellow; it was again a long vacation, and he was staying with his newly married friend, the proud husband, and happy Vicar of Helstone. Over babbling brooks they took impossible leaps, which seemed to keep them whole days suspended in the air. Time and space were not, though all other things seemed real. Every event was measured by the emotions of the mind, not by its actual existence, for existence it had none. But the trees were gorgeous in their autumnal leafiness--the warm odours of flower and herb came sweet upon the sense--the young wife moved about her house with just that mixture of annoyance at her position, as regarded wealth, with pride in her handsome and devoted husband, which Mr. Bell had noticed in real life a quarter of a century ago.

The dream was so life like that, when he awoke, his present life seemed like a dream. (468).

Even this late in the book, the idyllic dream of Helstone is still being stressed by Mrs. Gaskell. However, she has begun to prepare the reader for his disillusionment by emphasizing the unreality of this world. The complete revelation, when it does ultimately come, is quite brutal. Margaret finds that almost everything in her changeless ideal village, static as the printed word of Tennyson's verse, has altered radically. The innkeeper at Helstone reveals the extent of the alterations in Margaret's old home:

'Aye!' said Mrs. Purkis, smoothing down the bed, and despatching Jenny for an armful of lavender-scented towels, ~~hitimes~~ is changed, miss; our new Vicar has seven children, and is building a nursery ready for more, just out where the arbour and toolhouse used to be in the old times. And he has had new gates put in, and a plate-glass window in the drawing-room. He and his wife are stirring people, and have done a deal of good; at least they say it's doing good; if it were not, I should call it turning things upside down for

very little purpose.' (474).'

Margaret is so fortunate as to be given a tour of these "improvements," and finds everything so altered as to be unrecognizable. Even more, however, than the actual physical world is different; Margaret is invited to give a class in the local school and discovers that "a" is no longer an indefinite article, but rather an adjective absolute. (479). The reader finds by this chapter, which was added after serial publication was complete, that the static idyll of Helstone existed only in Margaret's mind; the South is as suddenly changed as the North.

A moment of real horror occurs in this added chapter, which serves to completely dispell any lingering visions which the reader may harbour as to the happy ignorance of the inhabitants of that pastoral world. Margaret visits the mother of one of the children whom she had befriended during her life in Helstone. The woman is no longer on speaking terms with one of her neighbours, because that neighbour stole her cat and roasted it alive, for, "According to one of the savage country superstitions, the cries of a cat, in the agonies of being boiled or roasted alive, compelled (as it were) the powers of darkness to fulfil the wishes of the executioner. . . (477?) a horrible enough vision for a pastoral idyll to be sure. This superstition formed part of the Guy Fawkes celebrations in some regions of England.

Not only does this serve to destroy Margaret's nostalgic view of Helstone, it also destroys the reader's.

The total view of the South is quite varied; but, for reasons of thematic contrast, the reader continually faces the idyllic, pastoral-romantic perspective. However, whenever this world is discussed in detail, reservations crop up.³ Edith, for example, reveals her opinion that Margaret's beauty and eligibility will draw young men to her dinners; Margaret replies that Corfu life has taught "Just a shade or two of coarseness" (499). Higgins suggests at one point that he will go South with the Boucher family, "where food is cheap and wages good, and all the folk, rich and poor, master and man, friendly like" (381). Margaret quickly disillusioned him: food is as expensive, wages are very low, hours are long, the work is wet and dirty, the men are mind-numbed and ignorant, and the life is nasty, brutish, and short (381-2). Mrs. Gaskell skillfully plays between notions of the ideal South which she keeps in the foreground and a real South, warning the perceptive reader of the unsatisfactory nature of that world.

The other great world of the novel is the North, represented by Milton Northern. Here again is a name which may well be intentionally symbolic. There is, unfortunately,

³J. A. V. Chapple, "North and South: A Reassessment," Essays in Criticism, 17 (1967), 466.

no evidence extant to reveal how Mrs. Gaskell came to choose this name. The obvious and simple solution is that it is a contraction for "mill town;" there are several towns in England bearing this name. However, it is reasonable to presume that a woman of Elizabeth Gaskell's education, culture, and intelligence would be aware of the fact that such a name inevitably suggests the poet John Milton. She may, therefore, have intended to use this for her purposes. W. A. Craik has pointed out that, "For both of them [Margaret and Thornton] Milton is a place of testing, possibly uncongenial, undoubtedly hard, but able to call out and temper the virtue and strength of the individual, and make him face and answer the questions about his or her own nature, and about duties and links with fellow-men."⁴ In view of this testing theme, nothing could be more natural for Mrs. Gaskell than to choose the name of her town as a passing allusion to Paradise Regained. Elizabeth Gaskell lived in an environment where the reading of such semi-scriptural works as Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained, and Pilgrim's Progress was a frequent activity; she was married to one of the leading dissenting clergymen of Manchester and she herself was one of the leading members of the Manchester literary world. The diaries of lesser figures

⁴Craik, p. 119.

of that world, such as the poet Edwin Waugh, reveal the frequency with which these works were read, re-read, and discussed.⁵

It would thus be reasonable for Mrs. Gaskell to make such an allusion to Paradise Regained and reasonable for her to assume that her contemporaries would easily recognize it. Passages from Paradise Regained so perfectly represent the function of Milton Northern in North and South that it is difficult to believe that there is no intentional allusion:

But first I mean
To exercise him in the Wilderness;
There he shall first lay down the rudiments
Of his great warfare, ere I send him forth
To conquer Sin and Death the two grand foes,
By Humiliation and strong Sufferance:
His weakness shall o'ercome Satanic strength,
And all the world, and mass of sinful flesh.⁶ I: 155-62

All the characters of the novel undergo the exercise and test of their virtues in the wilderness of Milton; it is a place for the working out of salvation, where the ultimate questions of sin and death must be faced. Mr. Hale humiliates himself by becoming the tutor to an ignorant northern businessman after abandoning the work of his youth in his beloved Helstone; he suffers out his time there, bearing the death of his wife, the fleeting visit of a son

⁵Edwin Waugh, Diary (Manchester Public Library: Archives Dept., MS. Q. 928. 28 W87, c. 1850).

⁶John Milton, Complete Poems and Major Prose, Merritt Hughes, ed. (New York: Odyssey Press, 1957), p. 486.

whom he knows he will not see again, and the everyday regrets of ever having resigned. His wife changes from a complaining hypochondriac into a declining invalid who suffers her fate without complaint. Margaret, who has prided herself on her purity and virtue, is humiliated by telling a lie which the one man whose good opinion matters to her knows to be a lie. She is further humiliated by the fact that everyone who knows~~them~~ believes that she is attempting to entrap Thornton into marriage. She then must suffer in Thornton's all-graces, deprived of her parents, and eventually, to all appearances, deprived even of the opportunity of reconciling herself to Thornton. Hence, Milton's Wilderness and Milton Northern have a good deal in common; they are both places for facing temptation, achieving repentance, and working out lives. Unfortunately, there is no factual evidence available to support the hypothesis that Mrs. Gaskell intended such a connection. Rather, it must be considered as an interesting and illuminating possibility. It offers the advantage of suggesting the role of Milton Northern from the beginning, just as the role of Helstone is explicit from the start. The wary reader would, therefore, be able to avoid being taken in by the distaste expressed by several of the characters for Milton. He would realize that it would not prove to be as bleak as it was painted.

On the most basic level, Milton exists in contrast to

the Southern towns.⁷ It is continually compared either in the text or in the reader's mind to the South. The opening description of Milton reveals something of this duality, although the homey image of the hen mitigates the effect:

For several miles before they reached Milton, they saw a deep lead-coloured cloud hanging over the horizon in the direction in which it lay. It was all the darker from contrast with the pale gray-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 hurled over long straight, hopeless streets of regularly-built houses, all small and of brick. Here and there a great oblong many-windowed factory stood up, like a hen among her chickens, puffing out black 'unparliamentary' smoke, and sufficiently accounting for the cloud which Margaret had taken to foretell rain. As they drove through the larger and wider streets, from the station to the hotel, they had to stop constantly; great loaded luries blocked up the not over-wide thoroughfares. Margaret had now and then been into the city in her drives with her aunt. But there the heavy lumbering vehicles seemed various in their purposes and intent; here every van, every wagon and truck, bore cotton, either in the raw shape in bags, or the woven shape in bales of calico. People thronged the footpaths, most of them well-dressed as regarded the material, but with a slovenly looseness which struck Margaret as different from the shabby, threadbare smartness of a similar class in London. (96-7).

The scene is, indeed, bleak and dull. The village of Heston, a seaside resort visited by Margaret and Mrs. Hale on their way to Milton, is quickly mentioned to provide a Southern contrast to "hang over" the rest of the description. Beyond

⁷John Lucas, "Mrs. Gaskell Reconsidered," Victorian Studies, 11 (1967-8), 533.

this, the reader himself can be counted upon to continue the contrast through the rest of the passage.

There is an unfortunate tendency among critics of North and South to leap to the conclusion that Milton is really Manchester. They then compound this error by speaking of Manchester throughout their discussions of the novel. An example of this is Arthur Pollard's discussion of Mrs. Gaskell's novels, where he states that, "Another [of her strongest qualities] is the essential verisimilitude in her portrayal of Manchester life and people."⁸ This sentence appears in the middle of his analysis of North and South; it gives the deliberate impression that the novel is about Manchester. This is inaccurate and misleading; had Mrs. Gaskell wanted to write a novel about Manchester, she would not have scrupled to call it by its proper name. Indeed, she had done so in Mary Barton (1848). Milton-Northern is more than simply Manchester, for it is a symbolic industrial city and not a specific place. As well, the name of the county is altered to Darkshire to place it further beyond the bounds of identification.

The view of Milton, like the view of Helstone, proves to be less absolute than it initially appears. This initial view gives it the odour of being a lesser mechanized version

⁸"The Novels of Mrs. Gaskell," Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, 43 (1961), 416.

of hell. This would be the typical Southern view of a factory city. Not only is it a bleak world from the material point of view; there are flaws both in the spiritual and intellectual aspects of the North, as the South would see it. It would be difficult for a Southerner to conceive of the North as having any sort of intellectual life whatsoever. "'A private tutor!' said Margaret, looking scornful: 'What in the world do manufacturers want with the classics, or literature, or the accomplishments of a gentleman?'" (72). Manufacturers, being mere tradesmen, can hardly want such things. This particular prejudice was undoubtedly held by a majority of the reading public of the Victorian period, and Mrs. Gaskell could rely on the widespread nature of this idea; indeed, even today factory owners are not regarded as men of culture and erudition. As John Lucas, remarked, such an attitude results from two nineteenth-century truisms: culture requires leisure; manufacturers work hard. As a result, they would not have the time to become cultured; the logical consequence is that the only intellectual pursuit of Milton Northern is the cold, hard facts of political economy.⁹ This is what the people of Milton think learning to be; it

⁹"Mrs. Gaskell and Brotherhood," in Tradition and Tolerance in Nineteenth-Century Fiction, David Howard, John Lucas, and John Goode, eds. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 195.

is the only intellectual discussion for both masters and men.

'Yo' needn't trouble yoursel', sir,' said Nicholas. 'Their book-stuff goes in at one ear and out at t'other. I can make nought on't. Afore Hamper and me had this split, th'overlooker telled him I were stirring up th' men to ask for higher wages; and Hamper met me one day in th' yard. He'd a thin book i' his hand, and says he, "Higgins, I'm told you're one of those damned fools that think you can get higher wages for asking for 'em; ay, and keep 'em up too, when you've forced 'em up. Now, I'll give yo' a chance and try if yo've any sense in yo'. Here's a book written by a friend o' mine, and if yo'll read it yo'll see how wages find their own level, without either masters or men having aught to do with them; except the men cut their own throats wi' striking like the confounded noodles they are.'" (292)

There are no traces of the pursuit of refinement and culture other than the presence of the Hales.

The spiritual confusion of Milton can be shown through the situations of several of the main characters. Bessy Higgins is an extreme Methodist. She follows an apocalyptic view of Christianity, which leads her to feel entitled to announce the damnation of everyone in this sphere:

'Don't speak so!' [of the expense of Thornton's dinner while children starve because of the strike] said Margaret. 'You'll make me feel wicked and guilty in going to this dinner.'

'No!' said Bessy. 'Some's pre-elected to sumptuous feasts, and purple and fine linen,--may be yo're one on 'em. Others toil and moil all their lives long--and the very dogs are not pitiful in our days, as they were in the days of Lazarus. But if yo' ask me to cool yo'r tongue wi' th' tip of my finger, I'll come across the great gulf to yo' just for th' thought o' what yo've been to me here.' (201-2)

This is certainly a charming method of telling someone who is performing one of the works of corporal mercy that she is destined for perdition; as a final message from a dying soul, it certainly has no equal. Nicholas Higgins himself is a further example of the religious deficiencies of Milton. He has no particular religious beliefs whatsoever. He is a self-confessed atheist and is described at one point as an "Infidel;" (297). Thornton, although the soul of morality and rectitude, has no defined religious beliefs. There is no trace of any beneficial religious spirit in Milton. It is portrayed as an arid land, both in terms of the mind and the soul.

As one would expect, the chief characteristic attributed to most of the inhabitants of Milton is the love of money. This is reflected in such details as their fascination with political economy; but it is even shown in such things as the description of places and rooms. The depiction of Mrs. Thornton's sitting-room has been much admired in this context:

There was no one in the drawing-room. It seemed as though no one had been in it since the day when the furniture was bagged up with as much care as if the house was to be overwhelmed with lava, and discovered a thousand years hence. The walls were pink and gold; the pattern on the carpet represented bunches of flowers on a light ground, but it was carefully covered up in the centre by a linen drugget, glazed and colourless. The window-curtains were lace; each chair and sofa had its own particular veil of netting, or knitting. Great alabaster groups occupied every

flat surface, safe from dust under their glass shades. In the middle of the room, right under the bagged-up chandelier, was a large circular table, with smartly-bound books arranged at regular intervals round the circumference of its polished surface, like gaily-coloured spokes of a wheel. Everything reflected light, nothing absorbed it. The whole room had a painfully spotted, spangled, speckled look about it, which impressed Margaret so unpleasantly that she was hardly conscious of the peculiar cleanliness required to keep everything so white and pure in such an atmosphere, or of the trouble that must be willingly expended to secure that effect of icy, snowy discomfort. Wherever she looked there was evidence of care and labour, but not care and labour to procure ease, to help on habits of tranquil home employment; solely to ornament, and then to preserve ornament from dirt or destruction. (158).

This intricate passage functions on several interesting levels. Fundamentally, it is simply a description of a rather unpleasantly ostentatious room; it is this surface level to which John Sharps draws attention in his volume on Mrs. Gaskell's Observation and Invention.¹⁰ Mrs. Gaskell has claims to being a perceptive prose artist of considerable ability, and it is the depths of such passages as that quoted above which justify her claims. John Lucas shows one of these layers, for he realizes that the room described here is a deliberate effort to reject any possibility of leisure and luxury.¹¹ It reflects the gap between the North and the South, the gap between the working man and the gentleman of leisure. Even books, the symbol of the Southern gentleman of

¹⁰Sharps, p. 237.

¹¹Lucas, "Mrs. Gaskell and Brotherhood," p. 198.

culture and leisure, are only decorative in this room since they have been chosen only for their appearance, for the attractive colours of their bindings. Their very arrangement on the table is mechanical. The room asserts the wealth and taste of its owners.

There is, however, yet a third level operating implicitly here, for the room represents an extended metaphor describing the characters of its owners. The cold chill of Mrs. Thornton's pride is symbolized by the icy whiteness of the room. At the same time, the garish colouring reflects her parvenue lack of refinement. The whole room was planned for effect and not for use, just as her frigid appearance, presented to the whole world, disguises her passionate devotion to her son.

A further example of the Northerner's devotion to riches can be found in Margaret's description of the ladies' conversation at the Thornton's dinner party:

'Why, they [the ladies] took nouns that were signs of things which gave evidence of wealth,--housekeepers, under-gardeners, extent of glass, valuable lace, diamonds, and all such things; and each one formed her speech so as to bring them all in, in the prettiest accidental manner possible.' (221)

This ostentatious parade of wealth is certainly vulgar, but it is one of the commanding keys of the Northern harmony.

Mr. Bell eventually puts the crucial question to Thornton:

"'You are all striving for money. What do you want it for?'

Mr. Thornton was silent. Then he said, 'I really don't

know' "4(412). This is, ultimately, what it comes down to: although the North is obsessed with gaining money, it does not really know why.

The North has its symbolic role in the novel, as does the South. The North is a world of dirt, noise, factories, work-related deaths, hard men, smoke, violence, and work itself. It is these horrible aspects which are constantly brought to the reader's attention whenever the North is mentioned, and Mrs. Gaskell skillfully reinforces this view as the novel progresses. Nonetheless, for all its faults, the North is a world that alters, constantly moving forward but not always for the better. Hence, the characters of the novel must come here to work out their salvations, for no change is possible in the stagnant South. It is this basic situation which underlies the symbolic values of North and South. If there is to be any hope for a peaceful solution to the problems of the rich and the poor, it must be found here. Neither world offers a solution for the other, since one is too fixed and the other is too harsh, but there is hope in between; hence the title is North and South, not North or South. This compromise is symbolically achieved in the marriage of Margaret and Thornton.

One of the settings of North and South shows that compromise in action: the communal dining-hall established by Thornton in his factory. It offers an opportunity for

masters and men to work together and come to understand one another. Mr. Bell and Thornton discuss this:

'I should think you were rather a restraint on your hosts' conversation. They can't abuse the masters while you're there. I suspect they take it out on non-hot-pot days.'

'Well! hitherto we've steered clear of all vexed questions. But if any of the old disputes came up again, I would certainly speak out my mind next hot-pot day. But you are hardly acquainted with our Darkshire fellows, for all you're a Darkshire man yourself. They have such a sense of humour, and such a racy mode of expression! I am getting really to know some of them now, and they talk pretty freely before me.' (446).

This spirit of brotherhood and understanding is the ultimate meaning of the book. It is the humanizing influence of the South operating through Margaret upon the hard men of the North. The war between masters and men is sure to be ultimately destructive to both as is shown by the strike; the ultimate hope for both is that they will arrive at a method of living in harmony so that class will not fight against class. The South achieved such an understanding, but only at the price of the virtual suppression of the lower orders into the dirt of ignorance, subservience, and endless hard labour in order that a few might live in luxury and ease. The North offers a better hope for all the men of England through a combination of Southern humanistic ideals and Northern vigour. This combination is symbolized by the dining hall in Thornton's factory.

As shown above, setting is of considerable importance

in North and South. It is used mainly as a symbolic device; each of the major places has a set meaning, both for the characters of the book and for the reader. This symbolic function assists in carrying out the thematic intent of the novel. The two most important of the locales depicted are North and South themselves; each has its representative towns displayed to the reader. Those of the South are London, Helstone, and Oxford, a world which is superficially attractive but fundamentally stagnant. The glory of the North is Milton Northern, the great manufacturing metropolis, remarkable for its vigour, but coldly inhuman; it is dedicated only to the accumulation of money. Within these macrocosms, there are microcosms which reflect the faults of the large world in intimate detail. The sitting room of Mrs. Thornton shows the wealth, inhumanity, and ostentation of the North. The community dining hall established in Thornton's factory shows the possible future and the hope of harmonious days ahead to replace the present strife, the new world of Margaret and Thornton. Thus, setting is used as a means of conveying one of the traditional elements of allegory, symbolism.

THE RIOT

The riot is one of the great central events of North and South. A considerable amount of the book is devoted to discussing the strike and its consequences for the people of Milton. As it turns out, the major consequence of the strike is the riot. The violence of the riot shows the results of the paternalistic attitudes of the masters and, therefore, implies the utter failure of that approach. It demonstrates the need of a new system and makes a major contribution to the theme of the book.

By modern standards, the riot is rather a tame affair; no property is damaged, and the only person hurt is Margaret. However, in Victorian England, even the peaceful assembly of workers was thought of as tantamount to a revolution. The reaction to the Chartist movement well testifies to this state of mind. In 1848, just six years before the publication of North and South, the Chartists made their

final effort to present the great petition, which allegedly contained over six million signatures. The presentation was to follow a rally at Kennington Common. However, at this rally the troops and police easily outnumbered the Chartists; there were two hundred thousand special constables alone. This excessive reaction was shown earlier as well: "On November 5, 1839, an actual if minuscule insurrectionary rising occurred at Newport on the border of Wales. It was easily put down (and its leaders transported), but the government and the middle classes were convinced that the rising was planned by the extremists as a signal for general and bloody revolution in the North."¹ The government reacted by having most of the Chartist leaders in the country arrested and imprisoned.

There is ample literary evidence of this reaction in operation: passages of George Eliot's Felix Holt (1866) and Charlotte Bronte's Shirley (1849) illustrate the effect. The mob was regarded as a dangerous body, bent on the destruction of property; it was thought of as being composed of a group of excitable but rather simple men (in both senses of simple) led by dangerous radicals.

Mingled with the more headlong and half-drunken crowd there were some sharp-visaged men who loved the irrationality of riots for something else than its own

¹ Steven Marcus, Engels, Manchester, and the Working Class (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 25.

sake, and who at present were not so much the richer as they desired to be, for the pains they had taken in coming to the Treby election, induced by certain prognostics gathered at Duffield on the nomination-day that there might be the conditions favourable to that confusion which was always a harvest-time. It was known to some of these sharp men that Park Street led out towards the grand house of Treby Manor, which was as good--nay, better for their purpose than the bank. While Felix was entertaining his ardent purpose, these other sons of Adam were entertaining another ardent purpose of their peculiar sort, and the moment was come when they were to have their triumph. 2

North and South offers a similar observation, although not at such length: "Their reckless passion had carried them [the strikers] too far to stop--at least had carried some of them too far; for it is always the savage lads, with their love of cruel excitement, who head the riot--reckless to what bloodshed it may lead!" (234).² The usual reaction to this phenomenon is to send for the army to disperse the rioters, and this is exactly what happens in all three of these novels.

The riot in North and South is the natural and almost inevitable consequence of the strike itself. The concept of striking is presented throughout as a futile gesture, for the reader is continually faced with the bleak maxims of political economy.³

²George Eliot, Felix Holt, Peter Coveney, ed. (1866; rpt. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 430.

³Pages 163 and 196 of North and South are but two examples of this.

In its simplest terms, that theory [of wages proposed by Ricardo, Mills, McCulloch, and others] says that the rate of wages depends chiefly upon the supply of workers and the demand for their labour. Strikes can have no permanent effect on working-class earnings: only declines in population and increases in capital can raise the general rate of wages. ⁴

This view is expressed by every member of the educated classes who appears in the novel or, at least, discussed in his presence, and none of them denies it or objects to it. Margaret herself seems to accept this theory; her only objection is that the workers have a human right to have the situation explained to them when a decline in trade will result in their being forced to accept a cut in wages (164). Mr. Hale accepts it and offers Higgins a book explaining it (292). Thus, the humanitarians accept this view of the wage system as valid, and the reader is clearly meant to accept it as well. Margaret proposes the curious nature of Milton's situation to Thornton:

I don't know [why the situation seems strange]-- I suppose because, on the very face of it, I see two classes dependent on each other in every possible way, yet each evidently regarding the interests of the other as opposed to their own; I never lived in a place before where there were two sets of people always running each other down. (165).

The division between masters and men is not the only problem revealed by the strike. The union itself is shown in the novel as a threat to the workers of Milton. It forces

⁴Patrick Brantlinger, "The Case Against Trade Unions in Early Victorian Fiction," Victorian Studies, 13 (1969), 45.

workers who either do not wish to strike or cannot afford to be out of work into joining against their employers. It is the case of Boucher which exemplifies this in the form of a case history more horrifying than any Royal Commission statistics could be. Boucher has eight children and is barely able to support them at the best of times. He is a willing enough worker, but not especially competent. After describing the slow starvation which his family is undergoing, Boucher says to Higgins that,

'Yo' know well, that a worser tyrant than e'er th' masters were says, "Clem to death, and see 'em a' clem to death, ere yo' dare go again th' Union." Yo' know it well, Nicholas, for a' yo're one on 'em. Yo' may be kind hearts, each separate; but once banded together, yo've no more pity for a man than a wild hunger-maddened wolf.' (207).

It is this state of ~~mindless~~ despair which leads Boucher to panic and throw the stone which ultimately results in the breakdown of the strike. He wishes to strike out in his desperation, and this act of rage costs the workers any popular support that they may have had and justifies the masters in any measures taken against their hands. The Union forced Boucher to join them against his own will: "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" (366). Such is Higgins's description of the Union's coercion; but Margaret asks the germane question, in relation to Boucher, who wrecked the

strike, "Then would it not have been far better to have left him alone and not forced him to join the Union? He did you no good; and you drove him mad!" (366-7).⁵ Boucher finds that both men and masters are leagued against him for his act and, in the ultimate act of bewildered despair, kills himself. He broke the strike, but the strike broke him. Mr. Hale utters the final condemnation of the Union, for it ". . . 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 merely of one class as opposed to another" (296). The Union is a false solution to the problems of Milton; it offers co-operation, the co-operation so necessary for the continued life of the North, but only for the negative purpose of defeating the masters. It only destroys and does not build; therefore, it is rejected.

Juxtaposed ~~with~~ the story of the riot is the tale of Frederick's mutiny. Although the Union has been rejected, Frederick's mutiny makes it clear that the strike itself is not unjustified. "It is nevertheless clear that Mrs. Gaskell views the strike as an understandable response to the callousness of the masters and the insecurity of trade, and she juxtaposes the mutiny of Frederick Hale and the strike in order to give her heroine a kind of yardstick."⁵ The story

⁵Brantlinger, 45.

of Frederick Hale, an honourable man and the heroine's own brother, rejecting the petty tyranny of his captain parallels the hands rejecting the equally petty tyranny of the masters who conspire to keep their employees subservient and ignorant, less than men. The same quantity of honour is present in both acts, the same revulsion of men treated as beasts. Frederick can hope for no more justice and aid from London and the government than is available for the workers; all they receive is the army to suppress their strike. Both have justice in their respective causes, and the linking of Frederick's tale with the strike serves to remind the reader of this. It, therefore, serves to counterbalance the negative impression made by the riot.

The riot ends the ~~strike~~. Critics have generally regarded the riot as a rather contrived event:

Let it be said that what leads up to the climax [the riot] is indeed superbly managed. The fact remains that the climax itself is silly, because it evades the complex reasons for the strike. In having Margaret hit by a stone, Mrs. Gaskell deflects attention away from these reasons to a simple feeling that the strikers are bad (and wrong) for hurting an innocent girl. ⁶

Although the strike is necessary for human reasons, it is destined to fail from the beginning. Furthermore, in the Victorian novel and undoubtedly in the minds of the middle-class at the time, the assembly of workers for such a purpose would inevitably

⁶Lucas, "Mrs. Gaskell Reconsidered," 530.

result in violence.

'The soldiers will be here directly, and that will bring them [the rioters] to reason.'

'To reason?' said Margaret, quickly. 'What kind of reason?'

'The only reason that does with men that make themselves into wild beasts,' (232).'

The only inference possible from Thornton's remarks is that the reason to which he refers will be that of the sword and the gun. It is a reason of violence, a reason to which both sides respond. How else can one deal with 'wild beasts'?

The riot in North and South is the unavoidable reaction of desperate men faced with the prospect of starvation for themselves and their families. The climax is, therefore, entirely prepared by Mrs. Gaskell and should in no sense come as a surprise to the perceptive reader. Only two people face the mob: Margaret and Thornton. Since the crowd is seeking a release for its hostility, it is inevitable that one of them should be hurt; Thornton is one of the hated masters and, logically, their attack will be aimed at him. Margaret intervenes, as a result of feeling guilty for persuading Thornton to face the crowd, and is hit by a stone meant for him.

For all that the events of chapter twenty-two are foreordained by the plot, it is undeniable that they are rather melodramatic. It is this effect of melodrama which has distressed critics in considering this passage.

Margaret's last speech before being struck by the pebble is deliberately reminiscent of Christ's words on the cross: "For God's sake! do not damage your cause by this violence. You do not know what you are doing" (235). Another example of this exaggerated style is Thornton's words after the blow, "'You do well!' said he. 'You come to oust the innocent stranger. You fall--you hundreds--on one man; and when a woman comes before you, to ask you for your own selves to be reasonable creatures, your cowardly wrath falls on her! You do well!'" Such passages, especially when considered out of context, jar the sensibilities of the modern reader. They seem stilted, over-formal, and overly heroic, even if one allows for the greater Victorian acceptance of sentiment. However, if one accepts Martin Dodsworth's analysis of this passage, these statements are necessary and consistent with the meaning of the passage:

In retrospect, then, the scene of the riot is important mainly as it gives rise to a situation specifically sexual. Even as the scene is enacted the ground is being prepared for this interpretation. The crowd is associated with large forces of nature, its first sounds are the 'long far-off roll of the tempest', it moves like a 'slow-surg-ing wave', and so on--and all this is horrible because it is a manifestation of nature in the wrong place: 'Every now and then, the wind seemed to bear the multitudinous sound nearer, and yet there was no wind!' The men's cry is an 'unearthly groan', because it is the expression of natural feelings that ought not to be known in nature. The men are denatured in this false alliance with nature; they become 'savage', they utter fierce growls, their voices have a 'ferocious murmur of satisfaction'; all this is taken up in the yell that greets Mr. Thornton's

appearance at the window--'. . . as the demoniac desire of some terrible wild beast for the food that is withheld from his ravening'. This animal note recurs, and anticipates the sexual interpretation of the scene as one in which Margaret and Thornton are brought face to face with animal passion. For it is passion that the rioters represent--after Margaret has been hit, they are wakened from 'their trance of passion'. Indeed, the whole riot is replete with associations of orgasm, whether these be the rhythmical thrusts of the crowd, their inarticulate cries, or Margaret's own fear that: '. . . in another instant the stormy passions would have past their bounds, and swept away all barriers of reason, or apprehension of consequence'. 7

The characters of the book also accept Margaret's actions in the riot scene as symbolic of physical love. Thornton's servant, Jane, reports that ". . . she saw Miss Hale with her arms about master's neck, hugging him before all the people" (239). Fanny, the fatuous daughter of Mrs. Thornton, characterizes such an action as "bold and forward." "'A girl in love will do a good deal,' replied Mrs. Thornton, shortly" (243). Margaret herself is rather shocked to realize that this is the interpretation which her actions will bear; analyzing the scene later in private, she says,

'I, who hate scenes--I, who have despised people for showing emotion--who have thought them wanting in self-control--I went down and must needs throw myself into the melee, like a romantic fool! Did I do any good? They would have gone away without me, I dare say.' But this was over-leaping the rational conclusion,--as in an instant her well-poised judgement felt. 'No, perhaps they would not. I did some good. But what possessed me to defend that man as if he were a helpless child! Ah!' said she, clenching her hands

⁷Dodsworth, p. 18-19.

together, 'it is no wonder those people thought I was in love with him, after disgracing myself in that way. I in love--and with him too!' Her pale cheeks suddenly became one flame of fire; and she covered her face with her hands. When she took them away, her palms were wet with scalding tears.

'Oh how low I am fallen that they should say that of me! I could not have been so brave for anyone else, just because he was so utterly indifferent to me--if, indeed, I do not positively dislike him. . . . Let them insult my maiden pride as they will--I walk pure before God!' (247)!

Margaret acted simply to ensure fair play, and as a result, the whole world thinks that she loves Thornton. Still worse, Thornton is under the same impression and comes to propose to her. A sexual construction is, therefore, placed upon the actions of the heroine by all the other characters; Margaret herself concedes that her actions are liable to such a construction. The irony is that although the reader knows before the riot that Thornton loves Margaret and suspects that Margaret is attracted to him, Margaret herself is not yet aware of this and considers herself obliged to refuse Thornton, not only because she does not think that she loves him, but also because her pride forces her to refuse and to consider herself insulted by the proposal. This element adds an extra significance to the riot, for it is the first time that the reader sees Margaret and Thornton as linked characters, occupying the centre stage of the novel against all comers. The riot as an event is symbolic of the presence and release of passion; it is the

passionate nature of man which is stressed, both in the actions of the crowd and in those of Margaret and Thornton. The presence of Freudian elements serves to emphasize passion and encourages the reader to think of Margaret and Thornton as linked by their passions. As such, it is a remarkable triumph of Mrs. Gaskell's art, whether or not it is a conscious triumph.

IV. CHARACTERIZATION

Elizabeth Gaskell makes an extensive and varied use of her created figures. The most notable of these uses is that assigned to Margaret and Thornton themselves; beyond their position as the love interest, they also carry the thematic weight of the book. An analysis of their position in the novel can, therefore, be expected to be quite productive in terms of generating an understanding of North and South. Other characters have "their exits and their entrances," and make their contributions to the total effect of the novel. A unified interpretation of North and South must consider their roles and natures. These lesser figures in several cases are personifications, thereby supplying another allegorical technique in the novel.

Margaret Hale is undoubtedly the central figure of North and South, and it is necessary, therefore, to come to some understanding of her role, position, and nature in order

to comprehend properly the structure of the book. Although she herself is not the narrator, she is the focal point of the narration. She is present in almost every scene of the book, and most describe either her actions or her feelings. Margaret is one of the most fascinating heroines of the Victorian novel and, in many ways, more human than the others. She is not as forcefully moral as Jane Eyre, not as pliable as Isabella Archer, neither as practical as Gwendolen Harleth nor as sentimental as Nelly Trent. She falls somewhere between these extremes. Margaret treats the concept of the grand heroine with some irony, but almost in spite of herself, she is the heroine of North and South.

The heroic nature of Margaret represents rather a new idea for the Victorian novel, for her heroism is the result of her situation as much as her character.¹ John Reed's study of Victorian conventions divides the heroines of the novel into six types: the saint, Griselda, destructive women, Magdalenes, Magdalenes redeemed, and sentimental Magdalenes.² Margaret belongs in the destructive women category: she is motivated by a combination of pride and physical passion, while her beauty is of a stately variety. Such traits are the distinguishing marks of the destructive

¹Craik, p. 91.

²John Reed, Victorian Conventions (Ohio University Press, 1975), p. 34-78.

woman.³ Margaret is beautiful, but not more beautiful than her cousin Edith. She is not rich and she is not unusually intelligent. Margaret is, in most ways, simply an ordinary woman in an unusual situation. She meets this situation with the resources available to anyone of her background, and her triumph over it is not certain until the very end of the book. Margaret had viewed herself, romantically, as a moral heroine:

On some such night as this she remembered promising to herself to live as brave and noble a life as any heroine she ever read or heard of in romance, a life sans peur et sans reproche; it had seemed to her then that she had only to will, and such a life would be accomplished. And now she had learnt that not only to will, but also to pray, was a necessary condition in the truly heroic. Trusting to herself, she had fallen. It was a just consequence of her sin, that all excuses for it, all temptation to it, should remain forever unknown to the person in whose opinion it had sunk her lowest. (502).

Margaret's failure as a moral heroine is, however, unusual and interesting.

The central role of Margaret is swiftly made clear. North and South has a set of false beginnings, a set of places where one expects the plot to start, but it does not. The story opens in Harley Street, a setting typical of the Silver Fork novelists of the period. It then shifts to Helstone, and finally to Milton, where events really begin

³Reed, p. 44.

to take shape. These false starts are linked by the presence of Margaret and each introduces a section of the theme and plot. The first section establishes the frivolous gentility of the Southern world, and the third sets up the contrasting Northern world of Milton. The second has the function of placing the theme firmly in the sphere of morality, for it introduces Mr. Hale's doubts which drive Margaret out of her paradise of Helstone. Hence Margaret has a structural role for the novel; she is the central consciousness, the focus around which events revolve.

Margaret develops beyond this functional condition into the major character of the novel; indeed, she was so important in Mrs. Gaskell's mind that the novel was titled Margaret Hale throughout its writing.⁴ Exactly what sort of a character Margaret is has raised a certain amount of controversy among critics. Philip Furbank suggests that Margaret herself is the victim of some passages giving the effect of mild satire aimed at the normal heroine; however, this effect is unintentional, for it results from a conspiracy of deceit between the author and her creation. As an example of this process, consider this passage of description:

⁴For example, see Chapple and Pollard, letter 192, p. 282.

⁵"Mendacity in Mrs. Gaskell," Encounter, 40 (1973), vi: 54.

So Margaret went down laden with shawls, and snuffing up their spicy Eastern smell. Her aunt asked her to stand as a sort of lay figure on which to display them, as Edith was still asleep. No one thought about it; but Margaret's tall, finely made figure, in the black silk dress which she was wearing as mourning for some distant relative of her father's, set off the long beautiful folds of the gorgeous shawls that would have half-smothered Edith. . . . Occasionally, as she was turned round, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror over the chimney-piece, and smiled at her own appearance there--the familiar features in the unusual garb of a princess. She touched the shawls gently as they hung around her, and took ~~app~~ pleasure in their soft feel and their brilliant colours, and rather liked to be dressed in such splendour--enjoying it much as a child would do, with a quiet pleased smile on her lips. (39-40)

This passage is intended to reveal a variety of things and has been carefully written to achieve its effect, for it is intended to tell the reader that Margaret is very beautiful when elegantly dressed, but that she is not vain and is not aware of her own beauty. The fact that this information is given in the narration reveals a close identification between the heroine and the narrator, an identification which the reader must watch closely.

The first impression that some critics have derived of Margaret is that she is a snob: "The persons described as gentlemen are generally snobs, and among the women we have a particularly fine specimen of the genus in Margaret Hale in North and South."⁶ However, this is a misreading of the

situation. Margaret's remarks about manufacturers around the time of her arrival in Milton are perfectly natural for someone of her background from the South. Her involvement in the life of Milton should quickly dispell any notions of her snobbishness. She visits as an intimate friend the working family of the Higgins, speaks to them as perfectly respectable equals, and prefers their company to that of the Thorntons who are more nearly her equals in terms of class and education. The life that Margaret is proclaiming by her condemnation of manufacturers and the manufacturing life is a life of fellow-feeling, of affinity for her fellow creatures. She condemns the life of buying and selling because it is concerned only with the financial side, with hands only as producers of goods and not as human beings.⁷ When she speaks of cultivating a connection beyond "the mere cash nexus," it is to this that she refers. This attitude, which lies behind her initial condemnations of the manufacturing system, gives her the appearance of being a snob.

The true elements of Margaret's character are easy to perceive. The first quality which strikes the reader is her clear intelligence, as shown by her deprecating attitude

⁶[Lewis Benjamin] Lewis Melville, "The Centenary of Mrs. Gaskell," The Nineteenth Century and After, 68 (1910), 477.

⁷Patricia Spacks, The Female Imagination (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), p. 263.

towards the feminine follies and fripperies which surround Edith's wedding. Her compassion and humanity are shown by her reaction to her father's announcement of his doubts; although she is initially shocked and surprised, she quickly comes to her father's assistance in telling her mother and comforting him in his doubts. This quality is further shown by her visits to Bessy Higgins and the care which Margaret takes of her sick mother. Practicality is another of Margaret's outstanding characteristics, for it is she who organizes the details of their move to Milton Northern, arranges the visit of Frederick, and disguises his departure. She is a humanitarian in the broad sense, for she is deeply interested in the condition of her fellow men and actively desirous of helping them. It is this quality which leads her to goad Thornton into facing the crowd during the riot. The most important quality, the one of which she is most proud, is her truthfulness, and it is this quality which fails her in her moment of utmost need. A man who knew of her brother's past, Leonards, happens to see Frederick during his visit and is injured by Frederick in a scuffle. This injury proves to be a contributing factor to Leonards's death, and Margaret was seen at the station in the company of the gentleman who inflicted the blow. The police therefore come to ask her questions, and she lies by denying any knowledge of the events, since she fears that Frederick

might be discovered and arrested before he could leave the country. Mr. Thornton, however, knows that she has lied, for he himself saw her at the station. Although he quashes any inquiry, he has reason enough to doubt her, and this poisons their relationship. In spite of its melodramatic qualities, the lie is in many ways an effective moment; it represents an emotional crisis central to Margaret's character and to the book as a whole. Margaret is liable to the charge of pride, for her qualities have led her to perceive herself as being superior to the common herd. She feels herself above the Thorntons by virtue of her class and her sympathy for ordinary people. She feels superior to the ordinary people in background and intelligence, but is able to relate to them without being condescending. In general, she radiates the confidence of a Christian with four aces. This moral certainty is completely undone by her lie. Margaret here realizes that she is not perfect. Mrs. Gaskell wrote to a friend, as follows; "Tell me what you think: M H has just told the lie, & is gathering herself up after her dead faint; very meek & stunned & humble."⁸

This is the effect of Margaret's lie: she is humbled. This humbling is necessary for the conclusion of the novel, for if she is to marry Thornton, it is important that she

⁸Chapple and Pollard, letter 211, p. 310.

not think herself to be better than he is. Their marriage must be a marriage of equals if it is to have its full symbolic value as the union of the best qualities of North and South. Neither party must think itself better than the other if true harmony is to result. Margaret realizes her sin and that her vision of herself as a storybook moral heroine without flaws is not true. (502). She even denies herself any comforting excuses:

She stood face to face at last with her sin. She knew it for what it was; Mr. Bell's kindly sophistry that nearly all men were guilty of equivocal actions, and that the motive enobled the evil, had never had much real weight with her. Her own first thought of how, if she had known all, she might have fearlessly told the truth, seemed poor and low. . . . she prayed that she might have strength to speak and act the truth for evermore. (502-3).

Margaret has ceased to rely upon herself and come, instead, to rely upon others.

The role of Margaret in North and South is many-faceted. On a basic structural level, she is used as a focus for the narration since all the events are related to her, either in that they occur in her presence or happen to those who affect her, as in the death of her father. Thematically, the book represents a process of education for Margaret. She is brought to the realization that she is an ordinary human being possessed of no special divine favours. Beyond this, she has a special symbolic significance for Thornton; he inextricably connects her with passion.⁹ At their very

first meeting, we learn that, "Mr. Thornton was in habits of authority himself, but she seemed to assume some kind of rule over him at once" (99). Even at that stage, she could overpower his reason and get him to stay against his will. The later effects come to be more powerful, for when he is invited to tea, he finds himself unable to stop watching Margaret. Thornton wished to make her serve as his sugar tongs as she did for her father. (120). This reflects the extent to which Margaret had intoxicated his senses. The significance of the riot, a scene of intense passion and Freudian symbolism, is thereby strengthened. In the aftermath of the riot, his thoughts turn only to her: "He went to his Irish people, with every nerve in his body thrilling at the thought of her, and found it difficult to understand enough of what they were saying to soothe and comfort away their fears." (237). Hence, there is an underlying symbolism in Margaret as a figure of physical passion for Thornton.

Thornton is an important figure in the book, although not as important as Margaret. His character is relatively straight-forward, for he is not extensively developed in the course of the book. Since he is intended to represent the better qualities of the North in his relationship with

⁹Arthur Pollard, Mrs. Gaskell: Novelist and Biographer (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1965), p. 124.

Margaret, as will be discussed later, it is necessary to examine his character as a part of the solution of the book. Mrs. Gaskell herself described his character in a letter to a friend: "But hitherto Thornton is good; and I'm afraid of a touch marring him; and I want to keep his character consistent with itself, and large and strong and tender, and yet a master."¹⁰ The character and education of Thornton are of no little importance to the book; he is clearly intelligent and well even if narrowly informed, and can accept and understand new ideas. Thus, one of the central elements of North and South is "Thornton's education in the moral if not legal justice of humane treatment of his employees."¹¹ He develops in the course of the novel, making him more than a conventional hero-lover. There is a definite progress in his beliefs from the strict paternalism he advocates as his method of relating to his workers to a more apt partnership between masters and men. This new relationship is the result of Margaret's influence.

The character of Thornton is most forcefully marked by his rectitude. He is fundamentally honest, and this is the real base for his character.¹² Throughout the book, actions

¹⁰Chapple and Pollard, letter 218, p. 321.

¹¹Hopkins, 64-5.

¹²Sharps, p. 210.

and events are judged by the standards of his reactions. His first reaction to Higgins's story requesting employment is that it is wildly improbable, but Thornton verifies it nonetheless. "But if he [Thornton] dreaded exposure of his tenderness, he was equally desirous that all men should recognize his justice; and he felt that he had been unjust, in giving so scornful a hearing to anyone who had waited, with humble patience, for five hours, to speak to him" (403). Higgins had told other owners his story, but they had not believed him and did not see fit to attempt to investigate any part of it. Thornton refused to undertake an opportunity for a potentially profitable speculation which might have saved his business from ruin, because the failure of that venture would have left him unable to pay his creditors (516). He refuses such small temptations as the chance to avoid mentioning the failure of his mill during a conversation (524). Thornton's concern with his honour and good name is overwhelming. It is to this figure that Margaret feels her sin must be justified, and this need reinforces his role as a figure of rectitude. "It was a just consequence of her sin, that all excuses for it, all temptation to it, should remain forever unknown to the person in whose opinion it had sunk her lowest" (502).

Thornton's character remains basically the same throughout the book. The only important alteration which

occurs is one of understanding and not of nature. He comes to understand his employees as human beings through his relationship with Margaret. This new comprehension is to be the future hope of England:

'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, and even tricks of tempers and modes of speech. We should understand each other better, and I'll venture to say we should like each other more.'

[Mr. Colthurst] 'And you think they may prevent the recurrence of strikes?'

'Not at all. My utmost expectation only goes so far as this--that they may render strikes not the bitter, venomous sources of hatred they have hitherto been. A more hopeful man might imagine that a closer and more genial intercourse between classes might do away with strikes.!(525-6).

These sentiments of Thornton express the hope for a peaceful, harmonious England, achieved through the union of the best elements of Northern and Southern societies, as symbolized by the marriage of Margaret and Thornton. Each has learned from the other to become a better being and part of a better world.

The marriage of Margaret and Thornton, even though it does not occur in the course of the book, is a major symbolic event; it is the event which represents the theme.

This has been realized since the first appearance of the book, for Emile Montegut in his review of the novel at its original appearance, states that:

L'idée de mistress Gaskell a été de montrer que cette barbarie extérieure qui règne dans le nord et cette dureté que personne ne songe à combattre, parce que tout le monde y est habitué, disparaîtraient bien vite, si, par un procédé quelconque, on pouvait introduire dans le nord un peu plus de la civilisation du sud. Le représentant du sud est ici Marguerite Hale, qui, par sa seule influence féminine, suffit à apaiser bien des haines et à guérir bien des douleurs. L'emblème de cette union désirable est représenté comme dans les contes de fées par un mariage, le mariage de Marguerite, la fille de la civilisation aristocratique du sud, avec M. Thornton, le type accompli des manufacturiers du nord. 13

Tempting as it is to agree entirely with this view, there are certain dangers in the way it is expressed above. The chief of these is the implication that the South is a superior world; however, as pointed out earlier, this is not so. Rather, the North and the South are different worlds, neither of which is inherently superior to the other. Each has qualities from which the other may benefit. Southern humanitarianism and Northern drive may, in combination, result in a better life for all England. The marriage of Margaret and Thornton is to be the proper emblem of this union. It is to provide a new harmony between the classes.

It has been felt that the ending of North and South is somewhat hurried; indeed, Mrs. Gaskell thought so herself.

13 However, "Le roman des mœurs industrielles en Angleterre," La revue des deux mondes, 25 (October 1, 1855), 144.

However, she later changed her mind:

Just at the very last I was compelled to desperate compression. But now I am not sure if, when the barrier gives way between 2 such characters as Mr. Thornton and Margaret it would not go all smash in a moment,--and I don't feel quite certain that I dislike the end as it now stands. 14

There is, indeed, a certain effectiveness in the hurry of this affair. Even if the ending is hurried, it still succeeds in conveying its symbolic meaning:

What was new by then in North and South was the wider implication concerned in Margaret's capitulation to the masterful Thornton. Though that would have been better done by a Bronte, what Mrs. Gaskell achieved was not merely to show the solution to an unpromising love-affair, but a possible solution to jarring cultures, standards, prejudices--in a truce between conflicting interests, in a victory for both sides in the conciliation of Masters and Men. 15

The use Elizabeth Gaskell makes of her other characters is rather different; since their roles are less central, she can afford to employ them differently. These figures, excluding Higgins, are largely personifications: they have a specific quality or virtue which is firmly attached to them, so that the reader will think of them exclusively in terms of this attribute. They thus provide a means of viewing the main action of the book, the relationship between Margaret and Thornton and its solution for the problems of the Northern and Southern worlds, from a fixed perspective. They offer

¹⁴Chapple and Pollard, letter, 226, p. 329.

¹⁵Winifred Gerin, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 152.

different understandings of these worlds, with differing degrees of reliability. This cross-perspective enables the reader to gain an objective view of these worlds without obliging the narrator to state it explicitly. The reader is able to derive it for himself. Each character, depending on the world to which he belongs, adds a different shade of meaning to his comments upon the brave new world of Milton, giving the reader by a process of accretion a total view of Milton as Mrs. Gaskell wishes it to be understood. This approach differs significantly from the narrative techniques current at the time of North and South; Dickens, for example, makes use of expressions in his "objective" description of Coketown which force the reader to a particular view of that world.

The most important of Mrs. Gaskell's supporting cast is Mr. Hale. He is defined chiefly in terms of his doubts, which are revealed shortly after his first appearance:

I can meet the consequences of my painful miserable doubts; but it is an effort beyond me to speak of what has caused me so much suffering. . . . You could not understand it all, if I told you--my anxiety, for years past, to know whether I had any right to hold my living--my efforts to quench my smouldering doubts by the authority of the Church. (66-7).

The exact nature of these doubts is never defined and it need not be; it is sufficient for the book that they exist. It is possible to make a reasonable guess as to the subject of these incertitudes. Mrs. Gaskell was the wife of a

clergyman, and the mid-nineteenth century was a time of considerable religious ferment, as witnessed by the Oxford movement and other similar phenomena of the time. Mrs. Gaskell knew several clergymen who had resigned their posts over scruples concerning the propriety of a paid ministry.¹⁶ She may have had such waverings in mind when she created the character of Mr. Hale. There are advantages for the novel in keeping these doubts undefined, and her perception of these advantages reflects the increasing assurance of Elizabeth Gaskell's art. The loose episodic nature of Cranford shows the gifts Mrs. Gaskell possessed in the invention of incidents, but it also shows that she often did not resist the temptation to introduce matters which have no direct bearing on the subject at hand. Here in North and South, however, she maintained control of her focus; realizing that any discussion of these weaknesses of Mr. Hale would induce her readers to false expectations, she keeps the references to them at the absolute minimum by merely indicating that they exist. Even so, intelligent and perceptive readers such as Charlotte Brontë were led to believe that this was a central issue of the book:

The subject seems to me difficult; at first, I groaned over it. If you had any narrowness of views or bitterness of feeling towards the Church or her Clergy, I should groan over it still; but I think I see

¹⁶Sharps, p. 219-20.

the ground you are about to take as far as the Church is concerned; not that of attack on her, but of defence of those who conscientiously differ from her, and feel it a duty to leave her fold. Well--it is good ground, but still rugged for the step of Fiction; stony--thorny it will prove at times--I fear. 17

Evading this issue offered the advantage of preventing any public outcry such as accompanied the publications of Mary Barton and Ruth. Indeed, the outcry over Ruth would have been quite fresh in Mrs. Gaskell's mind since it was published just the year before. For the wife of a dissenting minister to write about a Church of England clergyman who was abandoning his profession and his faith would almost certainly have been a cause célèbre; neither Dickens nor Mrs. Gaskell would have much relished the controversy. She spared herself this trouble by only using the questioning of beliefs as a motivating incident and not as a central episode. His state of doubting is more important than the uncertainties themselves.¹⁸

These waverings do help to define the character and role of Mr. Hale as a figure of conscience. His actions are motivated principally by his conscience. It is this that causes his doubts and which prevents him from telling his wife of them: "I think I could do anything but that: the

¹⁷Quoted in Dorothy Collin, "The Composition of Mrs. Gaskell's North and South," Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, 54 (1971), 84.

¹⁸Craik, p. 97.

idea of her distress turns me sick with dread" (70). He blames himself for his wife's death, for the narrator states that, "Her father had just entered the room, and she was most anxious that the faint impression she had seen on his mind that the Milton air had injured her mother's health, should not be deepened,--should not receive any confirmation" (302). The narrator's description of him is quite apt:

To his speculative mind all kinds of doubts presented themselves at such a time, pleading and crying aloud to be resolved into certainties, and that he knew she [Margaret] would have shrunk from the expression of any such doubts--nay, from him himself as capable of conceiving them--whatever was the reason, he could unburden himself better to Mr. Thornton than to her of all the thoughts and fancies and fears that had been frost-bound in his brain till now. (347).

Mr. Hale is a man who feels intensely every little uncertainty which runs through his system. His mind works overtime to find new problems to worry him. Thus, his name is ironic; he is anything but free from the diseases and infirmities of the mind. Though he is a clergyman, he is unable to comfort the widowed Mrs. Boucher; the very idea sets him "trembling from head to foot" (369). He is a weak figure, and the reader is meant to pity and respect his infirm mind.

Arthur Pollard has stated that Mr. Hale's function in the book is that of an investigator and commentator.¹⁹ This fits in well with his largely passive role in the novel.

¹⁹Mrs. Gaskell, Novelist and Biographer, p. 130-1.

The only action taken by Mr. Hale is his initial resignation from the ministry. The arrangements for his move and employment in Milton are undertaken by Mr. Bell, while Margaret has to supervise the move itself. Thereafter, Mr. Hale appears only as a commentator upon events from the security of his own home; he ceases to be an active participant in the world. However, the reader, knowing the depths of his feelings and respecting the reflective power of a scholar in his study, is meant to accept these observations as the truth. He is a reliable narrative figure, but one whose sensibilities are such that he cannot bear contact with the world. Similarly, the human conscience exists in seclusion within every man and is notoriously deadened by contact with the world. Mr. Hale's observations supply a guide for the world of North and South, just as conscience is a guide for the normal world of human beings. Mr. Hale is a conscience-figure for the fictional world.

Mrs. Hale is altogether a weaker and less central figure. Her dependence upon Margaret and Dixon is absolute and she turns to Mrs. Thornton as a protectress for Margaret. Mrs. Hale provides a permanent device for contrasting the worlds of North and South, since she is the product of a long-vanished country gentry to whose memory she is eternally faithful. In her heart, she is still the young, graceful lass, daughter of a baronet, who captured the attention of

all the world at balls and parties, and then threw herself away for love on a penniless young cleric. (80). She contrasts continually with the world of Milton Northern; her genteel past clashes violently with their harsh present. It is ironic that a woman of such feeble health should be named Hale; she is sick throughout the novel: "Mrs. Hale said that the near neighbourhood of so many trees affected her health" (49), and no sooner does she arrive in Milton than her health sets into a fatal decline. (210). Part of the character of Mrs. Hale is defined by contrast with Mrs. Thornton:

Mrs. Thornton is not wholly contemptible. She certainly shows up the deficiencies of Mrs. Hale, genteelly incapable of coming to terms with the North and feebly expiring in its smoke: Mrs. Hale's pathetic complaints are interspersed with vigorous pronouncements by the other mother, who positively gloried in the signs of Milton manufacturing. . . . In these chapters such contrasts and correspondences are employed in a complex manner with, it must be admitted, some lack of subtlety. Mrs. Gaskell obviously wanted to impress upon us the enormous discords to be found in a manufacturing town, and this she managed through the Hales, who quite credibly reacted with the shocked sensibilities of newcomers from the South. To some extent, then, Mrs. Gaskell's crude colouring can be seen as a local aesthetic device; and also as a striking part, but only a part of a larger and more delicately handled pattern. 20

Although the role of Mrs. Hale is limited in terms of the number of appearances she has, her importance as a foil cannot be underestimated. As part, to a certain extent, of

²⁰Chapple, p. 463.

her contrast with Mrs. Thornton, Mrs. Hale is opposed to progress.²¹ She disapproves of the use of factory slang: "But Margaret, don't get to use these horrid Milton words. 'Slack of work:' it is a provincialism"(301). As Margaret observes, "And if I live in a factory town, I must speak factory language when I want it"(302). Her very presence, her old-fashioned habits, and her continuing decline in the face of Milton, remind the reader constantly of the Southern world and keep it freshly juxtaposed with Northern strength and practicality. Implicitly, her death is a rebuke to the industrial world, for its very air kills her, and yet she was quite harmless. She is thus a highly useful narrative device, for she spares the author the necessity of making frequent and obtrusive comparisons between these worlds.

The character of Mrs. Thornton is the foil for Mrs. Hale; Mrs. Thornton's strength and energy make the strongest possible contrast. However, there is more to her position than simply this, for she is described in relation to her pride. Terms normally applied to the proud occur regularly when she is mentioned: "she walked proudly among women" (137), "she was talking in her stately way" (139), "a look of black sternness" (228), "so sharply-cut and decided" (224), and "came a stately note from Mrs. Thornton" (336), to give but a few examples. This quality is reinforced by the

²¹Craik, p. 118.

symbolic description of her drawing-room discussed above; as demonstrated, the room is a reflection of its owners, for its snowy-cold, painful cleanliness reflects the icy pride of Mrs. Thornton. The force of her pride has impressed a number of critics, such as Arthur Pollard,²² Edgar Wright,²³ and W. A. Craik, who described her as the embodiment of courage and pride.²⁴

Mrs. Thornton offers the reader another view of the world of Milton Northern, for she is fiercely proud of that world. She represents another extreme view of progress in contrast with that presented by Mrs. Hale. In the eyes of Mrs. Thornton, Milton is the perfect sphere for human endeavours, a sphere where such a man as her son can rise from the position of an office clerk to become a master of men. She chooses to live next to the factory and entirely spurns the South and all its accomplishments:

'I have no doubt that classics are very desirable for people who have leisure. But, I confess, it was against my judgment that my son renewed his study of them. The time and place in which he lives, seem to me to require all his energy and attention. Classics may do very well for men who loiter away their lives in the country or in colleges; but Milton men ought to have their thoughts and powers absorbed in the work of to-day. At least, that is my opinion.' This last

²²Mrs. Gaskell, Novelist and Biographer, p. 129.

²³p. 133.

²⁴p. 118.

clause she gave out with 'the pride that apes humility.'

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 'Having many interests does not suit the life of a Milton manufacturer. It is, or ought to be, enough for him to have one great desire, and to bring all the purposes of his life to bear on the fulfilment of that. . . . Of course, it is unknown in the fashionable circles,' she continued, scornfully. 'Idle gentlemen and ladies are not likely to know much of a Milton manufacturer, unless he gets into parliament, or marries a lord's daughter.' (159-60).

Mrs. Thornton condemns the South and defends the North. All of the former world is corrupt, all in the latter, perfect. Thus, she presents a new view of these worlds, and the reader must add her opinions to those offered by other characters in order to arrive at a total understanding of the universe of North and South.

Even though the appearances of Mr. Bell are brief, his role in North and South is quite important. He functions as a sort of deus ex machina, organizing and structuring the events of the novel. It is he who suggests Milton as a new home for the Hales; it is he who arranges for Mr. Hale to be employed as a tutor; and Mr. Hale dies while visiting Mr. Bell in Oxford. Thornton's factory is rented from Mr. Bell. Mr. Bell becomes Margaret's guardian and takes her on the return visit to Helstone. It is he who removes her to London, and it is his death and legacy to Margaret which make possible her ultimate reconciliation with Thornton. The business connections of Bell and Thornton make it necessary for Margaret to contact Thornton, thus renewing

their intimacy and friendship. It gives them both the needed opportunity to explain and resolve everything. Therefore, Mr. Bell has an important function as a vehicle for the fulfilment of the plot.²⁵

Beyond this, Mr. Bell has a certain symbolic importance resulting from his position as a tutor in Oxford. As indicated above in the discussion of symbolic places, one of these places is Oxford and it is kept before the reader's mind in the person of Mr. Bell. Indeed, the question of how far Mr. Bell is representative of Oxford is explicitly discussed in the course of the novel. (412-4, quoted above). It is generally concluded there that Mr. Bell is the embodiment of Oxford.²⁶ "Bell has to do with one of the novel's strengths, its fine and attentive inquiry into the meaning and relevance of 'culture' for the manufacturing middle class."²⁷ This is his function as the representative of Oxford: to contrast Southern ideas of culture with Northern ideas of utility. A fundamental contrast between these worlds is made simply by Bell's presence in the novel.

Mr. Bell offers added advantages to the structure of North and South in that he ties together the worlds of the novel. He himself was born in Milton, albeit before it

²⁵Coral Lansbury, Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis (London: Paul Elek, 1975), p. 110.

²⁶Craik, p. 120.

²⁷John Lucas, "Mrs. Gaskell Reconsidered," p. 530.

became an industrial centre. Educated in the Southern world and its gentility, he came to identify with that world's principles. His birth helps to identify him more intensely with these ideals, for he is a product of a pre-industrial past. Although Mr. Bell unites the two worlds in his physical body, he is not a satisfactory form of compromise for their problems; he lives solely in one from the proceeds of the other, living in Oxford from the revenues of Milton. He has totally rejected the world of his birth to live in another sphere. He does, nonetheless, provide the means for a new combination of these worlds. Thus, his functional role in the novel is imperative: he represents the Southern intellectual world, ties together physically the two worlds of the novel, and supplies the opportunity for a new and harmonious state of being to develop.

Frederick Hale, although not as important as Mr. Bell, is not quite as useless as Gerald Sanders has argued.²⁸ Frederick is, in many ways, a rather melodramatic figure: the lost son who gallantly supported mutineers against the injustice of their captain and is exiled as a result. All that would be needed to complete his story would be belated recognition by the government of the justice of his actions, and his safe return to England. This would be in line with

²⁸p. 69.

the conventional Victorian use of the outcast's return.²⁹ Mrs. Gaskell, however, chooses to emphasize the vast gulf which divides the world of North and South from the worlds of polite, genteel fiction. There is no happy homecoming, no hero's welcome for Frederick; instead, he returns in secret to witness his mother's death and then he must flee the country in fear of his life. During this visit, he learns of the absolute impossibility of gaining any pardon from the government. He does not really care very much about getting a pardon, for he has set down new roots in Spain. Thus, in the world of reality, the heroic figure does not simply wait offstage until he returns in triumph; his life must continue and does continue. Denied the old life, he starts a new one. Frederick, therefore, serves to emphasize the gap between Margaret's heroic aspirations and reality, a split crystallized in Margaret's lie, discussed above. Admirable as such intentions are, they have no place in the real world and cannot successfully function there. Frederick is really the passionate hero of a melodrama, living in a far-away country, loving a sultry Spanish beauty who is the boss's daughter, and leading a strangely different life from that of Margaret. He does not belong in the realities of Northern England in 1854.

²⁹Reed, p. 223.

Frederick serves another purpose in the novel as well. As indicated in the discussion of the strike, he gives Margaret a perspective for understanding that situation. Frederick led the lower classes of the ship in rebelling against unjust and inhuman authority, just as Higgins leads his fellow workers in a similar cause. This same perspective influences the reader as well, who can accept a mutiny caused by injustice, but might object to the idea of the workers having any similar cause for rebellion. The event of Frederick's past is contrasted with that of Margaret's present to enable both the characters and the reader to come to some understanding of these events.

Frederick has a bearing on the religious aspects of the plot, for he is planning to convert to Roman Catholicism. This serves to mitigate the shock expressed by Margaret and her mother when they learn of Mr. Hale's doubts, for Frederick's opinions have been turning High Church while his father's have been going Low.

Frederick himself was Roman Catholic in fact, though not in profession as yet. This was, then, the reason why his sympathy in her extreme distress at her father's leaving the Church had been so faintly expressed in his letters. She had thought it was the carelessness of a sailor; but the truth was, that even then he was himself inclined to give up the form of religion into which he had been baptized, only that his opinions were tending in exactly the opposite direction of his father. How much love had to do with this change not even Frederick himself could have told. (325)

Frederick represents an opposite polarity from his father, thereby serving to weaken any criticism which might be made of the father's change in faith. Mr. Hale's change, at least, was the result of his principles; that of Frederick is more the product of his affections. This tendency to passionate actions has led some critics, most notably Martin Dodsworth, to view Frederick as a representative of passion:

But Mrs. Gaskell had to make him [Leonards] villainous because Frederick's blow would otherwise be more emphatically culpable. Frederick would lose our sympathy, and it is important that he should retain it, because, like the workers, he is a representative of passion, and the agent of Margaret's reconciliation to the brute fact of its existence. Not only does she witness Frederick's passion at work in the killing of Leonards; she also lives out its consequences and accepts some of the responsibility for it. It was her impulsiveness, at her mother's bidding, that brought Frederick to England, and it was her planning that brought him to Outwood. She has to accept the consequences of all this, and, in particular, to allow herself to be 'degraded' in the eyes of Mr. Thornton by her lie concerning her whereabouts on the night of Leonards's death. Furthermore, Margaret's involvement in violence, as in the riot scene, has sexual implications. This time she has to acknowledge that Mr. Thornton at least may reasonably impute sexual feeling to her, even though in fact her companion on the evening stroll was no lover, but her brother. In other words, the scene at Outwood railway station is complementary to the riot scene, and is the means by which Margaret comes to acknowledge her own nature (partly manifested in the actions of her brother, one who shares her blood) and the generosity and good breeding of Mr. Thornton. 30

Thus, Frederick has a symbolic place in the novel as well as

a functional role. Symbolically, he is a representative of passion, which helps to account for the melodramatic aspects of his situation. Functionally, he is an important device for the growth of Margaret's self-knowledge, helping to bring her to terms with the world that surrounds her. Frederick is really the most important catalyst in this process, for he provides the occasion for the development of Margaret's awareness by accidentally killing Leonards. But for this, Margaret would not have been faced with the necessity of lying, and would not have lost her exalted self-perception.

Leonards is an almost direct incarnation of the traditional allegorical figure of vice. Just about everything which could possibly be wrong with him is: he is a drunken impudent scamp who toadies to his superiors. He had served with Frederick aboard the "Orion" and was there at the time of the mutiny; thus, he represents a threat to Frederick's life and freedom for as long as Frederick remains in Milton. Leonards is certainly the most melodramatic figure in the book, for he is almost a storybook villain, all unspoken and undefined nastiness and horror. Mrs. Gaskell never does reveal the exact villainies of Leonards; the closest anyone comes to describing him is Frederick, who says, "A worse sailor was never on board ship--nor a much worse man either" (322). This is not a particularly informative comment, but aside from some vague references to

Leonards having been a trial to his father in his youth (320), that is all there is. Simply the fact that anyone would turn in the heroine's brother for money is enough to inspire the reader with indignation. There is something almost picturesque in the frequent references to Leonards's drinking, as if this were the worst conceivable thing that a man could do:

The information he [the inspector of police] had received was very vague; one of the porters, rushing out to be in readiness for the train, had seen a scuffle, at the other end of the platform, between Leonards and a gentleman accompanied by a lady, but heard no noise; and before the train had got to its full speed after starting, he had been almost knocked down by the headlong run of the enraged, half intoxicated Leonards, swearing and cursing awfully. . . . Leonards had gone, half-mad with rage and pain, to the nearest gin-palace for comfort; and his tipsy words had not been attended to by the busy waiters there; . . . On his way, overcome by pain or drink, he had lain down in the road, where the police had found him and taken him to the Infirmary: . . . (343-4, emphasis mine)

This repeated emphasis on his drinking habits seems ludicrous by modern standards, redolent as it is of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and other such groups. However, drink was strongly disapproved of by middle-class Victorians:

But the most notorious of all the excesses common among the laboring classes was intemperate drinking. The exhausted laborer could most easily forget his miseries and throw off his fatigue in the public house. . . . Then too, liquor was very easily obtained. The number of pubs was estimated by the Committee on Drunkenness in 1834 to be so great that one such place existed for every twenty families in the United Kingdom. Easy access to pawnbrokers also contributed to intemperance. Thousands of articles were pledged

at sums from 3d. to 1s., seldom more than 1s. 6d. Most of such pledges were made to buy liquor, largely by women who had pawned personal or household effects, to be redeemed shortly at fantastic rates of interest. Laborers were forced to admit that they spent far more on liquor than on the education of their children or than they deposited in savings banks. In the years when the poor were given relief in money almost one-third of the amount was spent for liquor on the same day that it was received. 31

Even today, being drunk in such public places as train stations is still thought deplorable; the only difference is the moral weight attached to it. Mrs. Gaskell certainly disapproved; the narrator in North and South states that:

She [Margaret] saw unusual loiterers in the streets: men with their hands in their pockets sauntering along; loud-laughing and loud-spoken girls clustered together, apparently excited to high spirits, and a boisterous independence of temper and behaviour. The more ill-looking of the men--the discreditable minority--hung about on the steps of the beer-houses and gin-shops, smoking, and commenting pretty freely on every passer-by. (180).

As indicated above, it is necessary that Leonards be depicted as entirely depraved so that the reader will not blame Frederick for Leonards's death. Mrs. Gaskell attempts to strengthen Frederick's innocence by having Leonards die of internal complications rather than the blow itself. Thus, it is important that Leonards survive the blow for some hours, but that he never sufficiently regain sobriety as to be able to state who hit him or to be able to pursue

³¹ Bernard Schilling, Human Dignity and the Great Victorians (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946), p. 22-3.

Frederick. He is, therefore, sent off to a gin-palace to become completely drunk. Although the episode involving Leonards can be justified in terms of the needs of the book and his own character, it still seems to be jarringly discordant. It is a false climax, built in a rather hurried manner. It seems to be rather too convenient a coincidence when Leonards appears as a threat to Frederick; one has the distinct impression that of all the crewmen of the "Orion," the only one who would want to threaten Frederick is Leonards. This makes his arrival seem almost too fortuitous.

The position of Henry Lennox in North and South is far more satisfactory. He represents a false lover for Margaret, a rejected suitor. This is something of a convention in romance novels, and since the main plot of North and South is a romance, it belongs here as well; for example, Jane Austen always contrasts a suitable lover with an unsatisfactory suitor. The problem of Lennox is his want of real passion.³² He is attracted to Margaret against his better judgement; marriage with her would not be suitable for a rising young man, because she is neither rich nor of a higher social station. The studied manner of his activities is continually stressed:

He [Henry Lennox] was not quite sure whether she [Margaret] heard this latter sentence before she went to the brook to wash her palette. She came back rather flushed, but looking perfectly innocent and unconscious. He was glad of it, for the speech had slipped from him unawares--a rare thing in the case of a man who

³²Sharps, p. 208.

premeditated his actions so much as Henry Lennox. (57). It would be unfair, however, to be too hard on Henry Lennox for his cleverness; there are grounds for supposing him to be an important agent in effecting the reconciliation of Margaret and Thornton. His hopes of gaining Margaret were raised in the penultimate chapter: "His eye brightened with exultation. How she was learning to depend upon him! It seemed as if any day now might give him the certainty, without having which he had determined never to offer to her again." (527). This hope was swiftly dashed, for after speaking to Margaret and learning of her plan to place her money at Thornton's disposal, Lennox realized the depth of Margaret's attachment to Thornton. Lennox then arranged an appointment to finalize this plan and did not appear; in conversing with his sister-in-law, Edith, he states that:

'The only detail I want you to understand is, to let us have the back drawing-room undisturbed, as it was to-day. . . .' No one ever knew why Mr. Lennox did not keep to his appointment on the following day. Mr. Thornton came true to his time; and, after keeping him waiting for nearly an hour, Margaret came in looking very white and anxious. (528).

It is reasonable to assume that Thornton and Margaret were deliberately thrown together by Lennox. It shows that, for all his cleverness, Lennox's regard for Margaret was real and that his nature is not quite so cold as is often thought.

Several of the characters of North and South are used as representative figures of particular classes. The most

notable of these are Higgins and the Shaws. Higgins is a representative of the working classes.³³ He is a moderate figure, with a justified sense of resentment at the treatment which he and his fellow workers have received from their masters. His reason is contrasted with the rashness of Boucher, who caused the failure of the strike by throwing a stone at Margaret; his rashness leads to violence (235). Finding himself unemployable, Boucher commits the most rash of acts, suicide (368). The reader is led to the belief that, while there are dangerous, uncontrollable workers like Boucher, the majority of Northern workers are like Higgins and will respond well if treated as they deserve; nonetheless, Mrs. Gaskell preserves the balance of her view of this world by introducing Boucher as a contrast to Higgins. There is, however, more to the character of Higgins than simply this. Mrs. Gaskell's fine portrayal of the drawbacks of Northern industrialism is very much connected with Higgins. Higgins is one of the leading members of the union, a group which uses coercion on its own members. He is a leader of the strike and responsible for its failure. However, the strike is justified in human terms; it is, therefore, unjust for him to lose his job as a consequence of the strike. His responsibility for the strike makes him ultimately responsible for the riot which was its downfall, and for Boucher's violence, loss of work, and suicide. The system

³³Pollard, Mrs. Gaskell, Novelist and Biographer, p. 127.

must share this guilt, for it was the injustice of the system by its denial of the basic human identity of the workers and their right as human beings to know why they are going to be asked to starve that drove them to strike. The system would have done nothing for those who suffered; Higgins would have been driven out of Milton to live as best he could elsewhere, and Boucher, with his many children, would have been left to starve. Higgins progresses in the course of the book; he ceases to be the lone wolf of the beginning of the novel and arrives at personal relationships with Margaret and Thornton. He is willing to accept their help and advice. He undertakes to raise Boucher's family and to make a new life. These changes, as well as the fact that he is the first worker to develop an understanding with a hard Northern master and a Southern girl, mark Higgins as being more than a stock character.

There are rather more class-figures in the South, which serves to emphasize the stratified classes of that world. Edith and Mrs. Shaw are the most striking of these, representing the leisured upper middle-class of the South. They are idleness incarnate; the very idea of someone working seems grossly improper to them. Henry Lennox has a place here as the rising young man. He is all cold brilliance and dinner-party witticisms. These figures of the South do not develop; they remain frozen in their original moulds throughout the novel. By contrast, the

Northern figures do come to a greater understanding of the world and of the need for co-operation. The South thinks of the North as a vulgar, dirty world to be sealed off for fear of contamination. The North, however, is willing to learn something from the South, particularly the gentle virtues of humanitarianism.

As shown above, Elizabeth Gaskell makes an extensive and intricate use of her characters. She uses the major characters to convey the didactic theme of the book. With some of the minor characters, she stresses a particular quality, such as pride, and uses the character as a partial personification; the reader views the character in terms of the stressed aspect in preference to the other sides of that character. These same characters often serve additional functions for the development of the plot. As representatives of particular classes, they help to develop the essential conflict of the novel, giving the reader meaningful terms to comprehend the situation: that of human conflict.

UNIFYING THEMES

Mrs. Gaskell uses a variety of devices to unite the plot of North and South. Each of these has a significant place in the structure of the book and contributes to its total effect. Several have already been seen in passing, but it is now necessary to assess their positions in isolation and as a part of the whole book.

The first of the unifying themes in this novel is the question of marriage. The book opens with Edith's wedding and then shifts to Henry Lennox's pursuit of Margaret. The move to Milton introduces Thornton, and the reader quickly realizes that Thornton is a potential suitor for Margaret's hand. The rest of the book is, on one level, the story of their developing relationship. Matchmaking is one of the more common activities in the Victorian novel and its presence confirms this book as part of the conventional mainstream in terms of plot structure.¹ However, there are several unusual

¹Reed, p. 120.

aspects to matrimony here which separate this novel from the run of the mill. First, it begins in a wedding and ends in an engagement, thus reversing the usual pattern of the wedding as climax, as in Jane Eyre and Mary Barton.

Margaret and Thornton, for all the importance of their relationship to the novel, do not get married in the course of it. Another interesting element is the strong implication that Margaret and Thornton are not going to live happily ever after. Both of them have strong opinions which neither of them is afraid to express. Parthenope Nightingale, Florence's sister, observed that she doubted whether Margaret would be happy with Thornton, though she had no doubt as to his future bliss.² Margaret Hale is too strong to want a typical Victorian husband of the type common in novels, who will overwhelm her with chivalry and mouth platitudes about "a woman's place." When she learns of Thornton's failure, she does not rush to throw her money and herself at his feet in the usual romantic manner; instead, she has a proper contract drawn up and will turn her money over to him as part of this contract. Margaret is going to be an equal partner in all aspects of their relationship.³ The progress towards their wedding is one of the important links in North

²Quoted in Elizabeth Haldane, Mrs. Gaskell and her Friends (1931; rpt. Freeport, N. Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), p. 105.

³Lansbury, p. 114 and 116.

and South.

Religious figures and religious questions have a prominent role in Elizabeth Gaskell's works, and North and South is no exception. Beginning with Mr. Hale's uncertainties, the aspect of religion appears early and runs throughout the novel. Mr. Hale's doubts lead him towards Low Church views, while his son, Frederick, is gravitating to Roman Catholicism. Margaret, for her part, remains strictly Church of England. The extreme dissenting groups have their opinions represented by Bessy Higgins, who is passionately devoted to the Apocalyptic visions of Saint John. Her fiery belief is contrasted with the atheism of her father, who is interested only in what he "can see, and no more;" (133). Thus, all shades of religious thought in Christian England have their representatives. These characters are continually involved in the necessity of putting their respective religious opinions to work. Mr. Hale resigns his position as a minister. Frederick is in the process of conversion. Margaret performs the works of mercy appropriate to a Christian, such as visiting the sick, attempting to assist the belief of others both by her example and words, and intervening to try and prevent others from suffering physical harm; she is even at one point, as discussed earlier, explicitly compared to Christ. Margaret is very much the Christian heroine of North and South. Bessy Higgins, as a

result of her illness, is prevented from actively leading her faith, but she still speaks of it to anyone who comes to see her. Higgins ~~vigorously~~ spurns all religion, but Margaret is able to prevail even upon him so far as to get him to pray for the repose of his daughter's soul. (297). The questions of active Christian life are one of the themes of the book.

North and South also proposes a series of moral questions, and these situations provide one of the links of the plot. The earliest of these is the propriety of Mr. Hale's resignation of the ministry. Thornton's rights over his workers is another area of study. The strike and the use of violence therein figure largely in the book. Frederick's mutiny is held up for the reader's consideration, as is Margaret's lie. Each of these areas is thoroughly examined and emphasizes Milton as the place for working out both personal and universal salvation. It is a place for the manifestation of the active life, for the resolution of broad moral questions. These questions occupy a large portion of the subject matter of the book and are one of the most important unifying devices. The resolutions are reminiscent of the morality play in the determination of the nature of Christian life and salvation.

There is a great deal of travelling present in this book, and the device itself serves to unite various elements.

The plot opens in London. Margaret and her family then go to Helstone; following her father's resignation, the family visits Heston on their way to Milton Northern. After his wife's death, Mr. Hale visits Oxford and dies. Margaret then returns to London, visits Helstone with Mr. Bell; after his death, she visits Oxford. The finale of the novel takes place back in London. This pattern of motion is somewhat unusual for the Victorian novel; few of them are quite so restless, especially considering the very different natures of each of the places visited. London is the home of idle society, Helstone a quiet country village, Heston a sea-side resort, Milton a manufacturing town, and Oxford the temple of thought. Each of these places, as demonstrated, also has a significant meaning for the novel as a whole. For so brief a novel to visit so many locations and lavish such detail on their description is certainly unusual. It has more in common with the traditions of such allegories as Pilgrim's Progress, where the hero is on a quest and visits a number of meaningful locations in the course of seeking his goal. The goal for Margaret, as it was for Christian, is salvation gained by preparation and development in this world. Each of these places offers different attractions, but none save Milton is acceptable ~~by anyone~~ as a place for a Christian to gain the kingdom of heaven. The other locales are stagnant, devoted only to the pursuit of their own pleasures.

Milton alone gives the scope necessary for salvation through the unimpeded mixing of classes, thereby giving the opportunity to exercise Christian virtue.

This operation of Christianity leads to the great didactic theme of North and South: the need to unite the virtues of these two worlds for the future of England and its people. The Southern virtues reside mainly in the area of culture and humanitarianism. For all the static nature of the South, it has ideas as to the worth of the individual, ideas totally lacking in the North. The North has vigorous life and is free of the social order which ties down the inhabitants of the South. The old Southern power is fading and dying, as Margaret's return visit to Helstone shows. Progress generated in the North is beginning to sweep across the land. If this progress is to mean any real improvement in the lot of the working man, if it is to escape strikes and violence, it is necessary that the South make this progress human and Christian. Margaret introduces these ideas to Thornton, just as he turns her Christianity into an active process, rather than simply the genteel occupation of a parson's daughter. This central theme is developed through personal relations in the small part of the Milton Northern world that we are shown, but promises hope for the rest of England and its society as a whole.

The significant use of names also has a certain unifying effect on the novel. As seen earlier, the place names of

Milton and Helstone have significance in terms of their sources. The names of characters have meaning as well. Margaret, as Mrs. Gaskell was aware, is derived from the Greek for "pearl" (418). Margaret is the pearl of North and South, remarkable for her purity and worth. The name of Thornton suggests something of the natures of both the man and his mother. "Thorn," of course, suggests the rose; although Thornton has a hard exterior, he has genuine warmth and virtue within. The "Hales" are ironic, for they are not hale at all; Mrs. Hale dies of a lingering illness connected with the air of Milton, Mr. Hale suffers from mental doubts and dies of a heart condition, while Margaret is morally unwell because of her lie. The name "Frederick" is something of a conventional name for a Victorian hero; it was used as early as Jane Austen's Persuasion (1818), and it was eventually parodied by Gilbert and Sullivan, who named the hero of the Pirates of Penzance (1879) Frederick. Mr. Bell suggests the old world by his name, for the most common bell towers in England are in the Gothic style. The name "Shaw" suggests something of the implicit condemnation of the South in the novel, for the expletive "pshaw" is a natural expression of rejection. Leonards is another ironic name, derived as it is from "lion"; he is anything but leonine. It may be that these associations were placed in the novel unconsciously by Mrs. Gaskell;

however, their very prevalence argues against such a possibility. It is more likely that she deliberately intended a good many of the names to have an added significance through association. The use of such names is very much a part of the allegorical tradition.

Deaths are remarkably common in North and South, and references to death and sickness form one of the unifying strands of the novel. Mrs. Gaskell herself suggested, no more than half-facetiously, that the novel should be titled "Death and Variations."⁴ This implies the presence of a connecting link in these deaths. The spirit of death appears quite early in the novel. The reader is informed that Mrs. Shaw is a widow, and she continually reminds us of how she sacrificed herself in marrying her husband (36). Within the novel itself, "There are 5 deaths, each beautifully suited to the character of the individual."⁵ The first is that of Bessy Higgins. Her death comes from the ~~life~~ she has led as a factory worker: the fluff she swallowed while working on the machines eventually chokes her to death. The manufacturers could protect the workers from this, but many of them do not; thus, her death reveals another aspect of the deficiencies of the North as a pattern of life. It is apt that a believer in predestination should die without any visible cause of

⁴Chapple and Pollard, letter 221, p. 324.

⁵Chapple and Pollard, letter 221, p. 324.

death; it is apt that a believer in the parable of Dives and Lazarus should die largely ignored while the rich banquet. Boucher, a figure of rashness in the novel, commits the most rash of deeds, suicide. Mrs. Hale, who has been a fretful hypochondriac in Helstone, develops a real illness in Milton and is taken off through a slow decline. Each of these three is connected with the others by the fact that they are all the result of the industrial system of Milton. Both Bessy and Mrs. Hale die as a result of the air of Milton, while Boucher kills himself because he has been blacklisted for his part in the strike. Mr. Hale, who has always been infirm of purpose, matches his mental delicacy with a physical weakness of the heart; he dies without a struggle in his sleep, showing no more purposeful fight in his death than he did in his life. His life in Milton has filled him with unspoken regrets for his abandoned profession, and these regrets, like a worm in his very heart, have finally killed him. Thus, his death is also connected to some extent with Milton, for he blames himself for his wife's death. Mr. Bell's death comes suddenly, but not unexpectedly. He has lived a life of leisure until he has become quite "a stout and florid fellow" (432), exactly the type one would expect to die of a sudden seizure. His death is also matched to his situation. He has become fat on the profits drained from Milton until this fat kills him. All these deaths are related to Milton.

Beyond these appropriate deaths, it is interesting to note that the novel is thickly strewn with widows and widowers. Mrs. Shaw is a widow, as is Mrs. Thornton. Mr. Higgins is a widower. The two Lennox brothers appear to have no surviving parents. Quite a few of the relationships in the novel have been maimed in this way. Death is a common allegorical figure; virtually all of the morality plays end with the death of the hero. Death is shown by this process to be an essential part of life, and its eternal presence demands that we be prepared for the hour of its arrival by leading a proper Christian life. Thus, the stress North and South places on developing a proper Christian life relates to these frequent deaths and the theme of the book to reinforce the moral growth of the major characters.

North and South can be seen to be a well-constructed tightly unified work of art when interpreted in the manner suggested above: it has a didactic purpose, introduces a variety of moral questions, studies the social order, and makes an interesting use of death. It has such conventional allegorical devices as symbolism and personification. As M. H. Abrams observes, "An allegory undertakes to make a doctrine or thesis interesting and persuasive by converting it into a narrative in which the agents, and sometimes the setting as well, represent general concepts, moral qualities, and other abstractions."⁶ North and South functions in a

similar manner and is, therefore, something of a modern allegory. The various allegorical aspects contribute to the complete effect of North and South as a unified representation of the world that is and the world that might be, were the thesis of the novel accepted. Such an interpretation is subject to the limitations stated in the opening section of this thesis. It stresses the relationship between Margaret and Thornton above all of the other relationships in the novel. It cannot prove authorial intent. It tends to understate the genuine social problems which industrial life has caused in the North, while overstressing the role of personification. In comparison with other readings, this one makes less of the role of Higgins. However, it does offer a complete and unified interpretation of an unjustly underestimated work, North and South.

⁶A Glossary of Literary Terms (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1957), p. 2.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

Mrs. Gaskell's North and South was originally published as a serial in Household Words commencing on September 2, 1854. The first hardcover edition was published by Chapman and Hall in 1855 and included several new chapters which contained, amongst other material, Margaret's return to Helstone. This edition contained a large number of misprints, some of which were corrected in the second edition the same year. The text most often cited is that edited by Dr. A. W. Ward for The Knutsford Edition of Mrs. Gaskell's works (London: Smith, Elder and Company, 1906. Rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1972). However, the publication of Mrs. Gaskell's letters has led to a more detailed knowledge of the difficulties which she encountered in writing North and South, necessitating a new edition. Two of these have been published recently, one edited by Angus Easson for the Oxford University Press (London, 1973), and the other by Dorothy

Collin for Penguin Books (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1974). I have chosen to draw my citations from Dr. Collin's text, since her recent article on "The Composition of Mrs. Gaskell's North and South," cited above, shows her knowledge of the difficulties Mrs Gaskell encountered in writing this work. The edition also contains an interesting introduction by Martin Dodsworth and is readily available. Thus, all quotations are drawn from it.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis suggests a new interpretation of Elizabeth Gaskell's North and South. The fact that the novel is derived from the moralistic tradition and that it has a didactic theme, suggests the possibility of examining the text for elements derived from the major literary form of that tradition, the allegory. These elements can be found in the three major areas of a novel: plot, characterization, and setting. These allegorical elements interrelate and serve to unify the novel. Thus, it is possible to interpret the novel in terms of these elements, which centre upon the didactic theme of the necessity for unifying the best elements of Northern and Southern culture as symbolized by the marriage of Margaret and Thornton.