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Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë's influence on Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*

An Analysis of *North and South*,
Pride and Prejudice and *Shirley*

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Introduction

Objectives of This Dissertation

In the 1980s Roland Barthes introduced the key concept of intertextuality which has since become one of the founding principles of literature. According to the French critic, any text is an intertext since it shares a relationship with the literary works that preceded it. This dissertation aims at analysing the influence Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë had on Elizabeth Gaskell. To do so, three novels are analysed, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Shirley* and *North and South* in light of the number of similarities that the first two share with the third. Gaskell's work is a Social Problem Novel and according to critics such as John Kucich this category of novels tends to take various aspects from different genres and to exploit them creating a hybrid literary tradition, in some respects. An analysis of the influence of Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë's novels on the domestic plot and the industrial plot of *North and South*, respectively will thus be provided. The three novels were written in Britain between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and all three address the issue of women's place in society, albeit treating the subject each in its own way. The discussions revolving around Gaskell's novel have been numerous and relevant over the years and each has made a significant contribution to the understanding we have today of *North and South*. The novel intertwines two tropes that were common at the time the author was writing, that of domestic fiction and that of the industrial theme. It can be argued that in the first half of the novel the latter prevails, whereas in the second part, the romance plot takes precedence, although there are continuous references to both throughout the course of the story. Each of the plots has its own relevance within the narration and also in relation to the development of characters. The argument brought forward is that Gaskell took some elements from both Austen and Brontë, either voluntarily or involuntarily, and these played an important role in *North and South*.

Structure of The Thesis

The thesis is structured in five chapters and each of them makes a different contribution to the discussion mentioned above. The first one places the debate in time analysing the major social, historical and political changes that took place in Britain between the late XVIII century and just after the mid XIX century. A sub-chapter has also been included to provide a better understanding of the position occupied by Austen, Brontë and Gaskell as women writers. The second chapter aims to provide biographical information on the author of *North and South*, Elizabeth Gaskell, the writing style she used in her works, the themes she dealt with, and concludes by discussing the Social Problem Novel, the literary genre to which the book under analysis belongs. Chapter three is concerned with a detailed analysis of *North and South* and examines the paramount aspects of the book along with those that will be later useful in light of Austen's and Brontë's novels. The next section is a close reading of passages from *Pride and Prejudice* and *North and South* which highlights the similarities between the two works in terms of setting, characters and themes dealt with. Lastly, the final chapter uses the same method as in chapter four to consider the analogies between Brontë's and Gaskell's novels also in light of the two authors' mutual friendship. Here characters will be taken under examination and a comparison will be made between the climax scene in both novels, that is the riot scene.

Chapter 1

A Historical Introduction to The British Late 18th and 19th Centuries

1.1 From the Regency to the Victorian Age: A Period of Great Changes

The years that spanned across the last decades of the eighteenth century and shortly after the first half of the nineteenth century brought about significant changes for Britain. The country had to come to terms with many challenges that included the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, the Industrial Revolution, and substantial political, social, and cultural changes, among others. Also the literary background underwent some major developments that saw the prominent emergence of female novelists that would change forever the opportunities available to women. This chapter provides the relevant historical information of the period in order to give a general understanding of the circumstances that led to the creation of the novels that will be analysed in the following chapters.

1.1.1 From The Georgian Period to Waterloo and Its Aftermath

The so-called Georgian Period (1714-1837) owes its name to the series of kings named George that succeeded one another during these years. George I, the first Hanoverian king acceded to the throne in 1714 after the death of Queen Anne. He was followed by his son, George II in 1727 whose son succeeded to the throne in 1760. George III formally reigned for 60 years, but his declining mental health led to the decision to have his son George, the future George IV, take over the regency from 1811 to the death of his father in 1820. Today the whole late Georgian era is known as the Regency.

On this background, Britain was establishing itself as an international and imperial power all the while undergoing massive changes within its borders and setting itself as a model for all European states. Because of its many major naval victories England gained control of the sea routes and this, combined with its newfound capacity for machine manufacturing, won its hegemony over markets all over the world such as the African and the American. Notwithstanding Britain's hegemony overseas, it had a more difficult time prevailing upon the European one due to the alternating favour dictated by war and politics.

The battle of Waterloo was fought in 1815 and up until that time England's towns were still in a somehow rural state surrounded by a picturesque landscape. The factories were located in a very limited area of the country, but they set out to be the prototype for a more modern England. During these years the textile industries flourished and the demands for goods increased so much so that factories were brought to mass production. This in turn led to the urbanization of towns, especially in the 'industrialized north' that raised widespread concerns regarding issues such as the conditions under which its labourers worked and the healthiness of the surrounding environment. The population was rising, but the rural villages that up to this point provided work for everyone who lived nearby, could not provide it anymore as they absorbed all the manpower they needed. At a deeper level, the significant changes happening in the manufacturing sector meant that many traditional and rural kinds of employment were bound to die out. The domestic industries started to move out of the countryside region and, as a consequence, many people decided to migrate either to the newly discovered territories overseas (e.g., Australia or New Zealand) or to the industrial towns of the north. Rural villages started to become more and more dependent on other entities as they stopped not only to produce goods for themselves but also for the general market, becoming entirely agricultural.

The aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars was "unfavourable to the better development of the grim factory towns of the north and to the relations of the new type of employer to the new type of

employee".[1] Waterloo was followed by a period of hardship characterized by unemployment. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that due to the war, the cost of corn coming from Europe spiked up, thus it became necessary to control the price fluctuations. The people who suffered the most because of the situation were, of course, the poor, but unlike what happened in previous years, at this time poverty became a "group grievance".[2] Conversely, the landed gentry lived a period of prosperity in their lavish country houses like no other, far away from the everyday problems that gripped the lower classes and seemingly untouched by the war.

The new industrial situation, with the manpower that it entailed, meant that the personal relationship that existed before between employer and employee dissolved. In addition, since "the State refused any longer to carry out its old Tudor policy of fixing wages",[3] workers started to feel the need to be somehow represented in order to protect their interests, thus a long process that would eventually lead to the formalisation of trade unions began. Though a small part of employers welcomed trade unions and supported their legalisation, many did not and saw them as something to be fought for. The relationship between employer and employee got even worse since as times moved forward, the masters started to "live apart … in a house of [their] own in a separate social atmosphere".[4] Furthermore, such men, being rather self-centred, were profoundly unsympathetic towards the plight of the people whose lives were ruined by the war once their pockets were filled, underlining the sharp division that separated the world of journeymen and the one of their employers. It is precisely in this period that the use of words such as 'middle class' or 'working class' started to be used more often exacerbating the gap that already existed between, to quote Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, "masters and men".[5] Despite the fact that the men of the rising middle class played

[1] G. M. Trevelyan, *English Social History*, USA and Canada: Penguin Group, (1942), 1986, pp. 476-477.
[2] Ibid. p. 479.
[3] Ibid., p. 495.
[4] Ibid., p. 489.
[5] E. Gaskell, *North and South*, A. Easson (ed.), New York: Oxford University Press, (1973), 2008, p. 110.

a paramount role in "making the new wealth of England",[6] they were utterly shut out from political life by the snobbish higher classes who were resentful of all the power and wealth that they were acquiring.

1.1.2 The Luddites

As mentioned before, the Napoleonic Wars and their aftermath led to a slump that included issues with regard to low wages, unemployment, and famine. As Trevelyan writes in his *English Social History*, these situations haunted in alternating phases the manufacturers of Nottinghamshire, Yorkshire, and Lancashire, in part due to the impact that the employment of new technologies and pieces of machinery had on the overall working conditions.[7] As a response to the hardships they had to face, in 1811 a group of people known as the 'Ludds' or 'Luddites' started to think about the best course of action to pursue in order to fight the machines that replaced a considerable number of workers. The movement was active until 1816 and their acknowledged leader was 'King Ludd'. They usually staged their deeds at night and operated while masked. The government's response to their uprise was simply to suppress the crowds and protect the machines that were the object of the dispute. Furthermore, the Luddites petitioned the Parliament and appealed to have laws that had been in existence since the Elizabethan age, come into effect so that wages between masters and workers could be regulated equitably according to the working hours. Although the request was fair, the Parliament's reply, was to abrogate the sixteenth-century acts that permit magistrates to impose minimum wages.[8] As a result of the threats made to an employer (who was then revengefully assassinated), a group of Luddites was killed in 1812 and in 1813 the government held a mass trial in York that culminated with the hanging or transportation of many of the people implicated with the rebellion. Similarly, the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars led to analogous acts, but the rioters were readily repressed by the State officers.

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[6] Trevelyan, *op. cit.*, p. 481.
[7] Ibid., p. 495.
[8] Ibid., pp. 495-496.

1.1.3 The Victorian Era

After the death of king George IV, his son William IV took the throne for seven years; he was then succeeded by his niece, Queen Victoria who reigned for sixty-four years from 1837 to 1901. During her reign, the country went through a period of prosperity, wealth and power that had never been seen before so much so that at her death the British Empire had reached its maximum expansion. It was also a time of political stability set forth by the democratic reforms, and wide-ranging changes. Nevertheless, the Victorian Age was also a period full of controversies as could be imagined since people had to face challenges in the political, religious, educational, and cultural spheres to quote a few. Even though this period today is widely known under the umbrella term 'Victorian Age', the hasty and continual changes that happened in almost every sphere of everyday life meant that these years were far from having that sort of unity that one might expect by the use of this label and the fact that Queen Victoria sat on the throne for all those years.

During this time, the North and South of England were at the antipodes forasmuch as the South was still a place where the rural beauty of the landscape dominated, and the aristocracy could live undisturbed. As a matter of fact the English society was made up of two opposite social systems. On the one hand, the aristocracy that on some level ruled over the countryside and its provincial districts; on the other hand, the cities that homed and were mainly made up of people belonging to the working-class. This meant that "[t]he counties and the market towns were still ruled and judged by country gentlemen to whom all classes bowed. But the cities were governed by a totally different type of person in accordance with a very different scale of social values which, whether middle or working class, were essentially democratic".[9] The profound economic changes and the essential evolution that concerned means of transport implied that the previously untouched and seemingly unreachable "old

[9] Ibid., p. 540.

society of the country"[10] was now beginning to become available to the "new society of the town"[11] too. The population kept increasing and people started to migrate from the countryside to the newly industrialized cities in order to find a job. To this regard, the census of 1851 turns out to be telling since it indicated that nearly fifty per cent of Britain's citizens were urban. Migration to towns, the population rising, along with the dreadful working conditions especially in the factories underlined the faults at the heart of an archaic political system that had to undergo massive changes. Along with the number of people, also the death rate spiked due to the new living conditions in urban towns in the years between 1810 and 1850. The industrialized towns grew little by little, but so did the slum areas surrounding them setting forth a progressive deterioration of the living conditions in these districts. Moreover, the economy, though thriving in many aspects, had its challenges posed by the turmoil caused by the industrial employees and their employers. Trade unions strengthened their grip and kept strenuously fighting for the rights of workers to ensure that they could have some leverage over their managers. Movements such as Chartism, which employed the workers' claims in order to promote parliamentary reform all the while expanding on working-class consciousness, developed and often gained local support.

The issue of working hours was a crucial one for the journeymen, but the advocates of factory workers thought it would have been easier to achieve results if the humanity of the governing class had been brought to bear on the working conditions of the children. Hence, the 1833 Factory Act regulated children's working time "and its provisions were enforced by the appointment of factory inspectors, with power of entry into the factories".[12] As a matter of fact, masters were not the only ones that needed to be supervised; many parents made their living off their children's wages, and thus they needed to be overseen. This Act paved the way for the Ten Hours Bill of 1847 which set the working time of ten hours for women and young people in the textile industry so that men, unable to

[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., p. 556.

accomplish their tasks by themselves, were forced to stop too. Both the Acts of 1833 and 1847 were paramount achievements for the workers who strenuously fought for their rights and brought about a massive change to such an extent that they could be considered the basis of the "statutory regulation which now governs the conditions and hours of almost all branches of industry".[13] As Trevelyan points out, what strikes the most about the changes that the industry underwent is that "the factory system which at its first coming bade fair to destroy the health and happiness of the race, has been gradually converted into an instrument to level up the average material conditions under which labour is carried on".[14] All the developments that the employees experienced in the years that spanned across the 1850s and 1860s were the product of various factors intertwined: the economic growth of England, the government's decisions through its Bills and Acts, and the action promoted on all fronts by trade unions. It is worth mentioning that by this point, people belonging to the working-class aristocracy were deeply involved in trade unionism.

Extensive improvements also concerned agriculture which thrived as a result of the "abundance of capital and the increasing application of machinery to farm work".[15] Just like many other spheres in contemporary times, agriculture too "had become thoroughly dominated by a business spirit".[16] In 1846 the Corn Laws were repealed, and this act helped steady the prices that spiked up after the Napoleonic Wars due to the ending of the supply of European corn and by 1851 its production resumed achieving excellent results.

In order to meet the high demand for goods that were required also from abroad, the transport network, via both land and sea, had to be further implemented; therefore, quays were built in all significant seaports and shipbuilding grew with the construction of iron ships powered by steam.

[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., pp. 556-557.
[15] Ibid., p. 547.
[16] G. D. Klingopulos, Ford (ed.), *From Dickens to Hardy*, England: Penguin Group, (1982), 1990, p. 18.

Nevertheless, thus far the estuary of the Thames was the heart and soul not only of Britain but also of the world's commercial routes. The emergence of the steam engine in the period between 1832 and 1867 implemented not only maritime means of transport, but for the first time railways were built establishing the train as one of the main symbols of modern Britain. It was what would later be called the 'age of coal and iron' or the 'Railway Age' and England was also known as the 'workshop of the world' given its prominence in the industrial field. According to Trevelyan, in 1843 2000 miles of railway were accounted for in Britain, but by 1848 they were almost 5000.[17] Railways and trains changed completely not only the way in which goods were transferred from one place to the other but also everyday life and the way long-distance travelling would be perceived from this point forth; they were "England's gift to the world".[18] They replaced both roads and canals as the main routes for trade; this is unquestionably due to the new discoveries made, but in part, it also accounted for the conditions, especially of the canals that were ruined after being extensively used for many years. Moreover, the electric telegraph made its entrance into the world and the introduction of the penny postal system in 1840 both made an important contribution to communication. To conclude, it is worth mentioning that the conditions that made it possible for Britain to undergo such a period of relative well-being, prosperity, technological advancements and faith in progress were that, as Trevelyan suggests, the country did not take part in any major conflict after the battle of Waterloo in 1815.

1.2 The Industrial Revolution

The term 'Industrial Revolution' indicates the changes that led the European States, Britain being their beacon, from an economy based on agriculture and craftsmanship to one focused on the production and in which industries, factories, and machine manufacture prevailed. The new technological discoveries changed forever the lives of people and established a new approach not

[17] Trevelyan, *op. cit.*, p. 545.
[18] Ibid., p. 544.

only to work, but also to the way in which it was fundamentally conceived. For the purposes of this dissertation, only the First Industrial Revolution will be addressed, given its relevance in relation to the novels that will be analysed in the following chapters.

The process began in 1760 and lasted until the first half of the nineteenth century, around 1830 and, at least in the first years, remained predominantly localized in Britain. Its confinement to the borders of Great Britain in the first instance is due to the fact that the Britons were conscious of the fact that they were one step ahead of every other nation in the world, hence they discouraged the overseas exportation of their machines and the advanced techniques used by their experienced workers. Nevertheless, eventually, they had to let go of the hold they had in this field first of all because they decided to seize the commercial opportunities that the foreign market presented them, and secondly, because the other European countries wanted to profit from their expertise in the industry.

The Industrial Revolution entailed profound alterations in the technological sphere that was completely revolutionised starting from the use of new materials in factories, such as steel and iron. Moreover, newly discovered energy sources were employed such as coal and electricity. Advanced pieces of machinery were introduced in factories and for the first time in a substantial way, machines replaced humans in carrying out certain tasks. As a consequence, on the one hand, production increased significantly, but on the other hand, many lost their jobs. Furthermore, people had to adjust to a new way of working that was becoming increasingly sectoral and that focused on the assignment of specific tasks to be carried out by everyone. Little by little the latest scientific breakthroughs began to be also applied to the technologies used in factories, hence the increasingly substantial use of natural resources in the industry. Changes of this calibre would not have been possible without the developments that took place also in the spheres of communication and transportation, thus the massive use of steam trains and ships, electric telegraphs, from these years onwards.

Notwithstanding the major developments mentioned above, the technological and industrial sector was not the only one affected by the Industrial Revolution; on the contrary, it also influenced the social, economic, and cultural spheres. For instance, the equipment used in agriculture improved so much that it enabled an increased supply of agricultural food. At the economical level, the overseas trade of goods became fundamental, and wealth was now more widely distributed. Politics adapted to the needs dictated by a newly industrialized State, enacting new laws in order to benefit from all the changes that were taking place. Moreover, towns grew bigger and bigger so that they could house all the labourers working in factories.

In the beginning industrial change seemed only to deepen the state of poverty under which some workers lived. Machines took the place of people hence jobs were lacking, labourers were not protected, and workers were even subjected to abuses; the workplaces were unsanitary environments, and they were paid very little if compared to the number of hours they actually worked. However, as time moved forward, the labourers learnt to demand what was rightfully theirs both in terms of wages and favourable working conditions. The acquisition of these basic benefits in turn led to an improvement in the workers' performances and, consequently, it turned into profit for employers. The First Industrial Revolution undoubtedly widened the gap that already existed between the rich and the poor, but it "also increased the number of middle classes of varying levels of wealth and comfort; and it had raised the standard of life of the better-to-do working classes, such as engineers, far above that of the unskilled labourer and slum-dweller".[19] Lastly, also the psychological attitude of people was altered since now it entailed a newfound confidence in mastering nature and its resources, changing forever human life.

[19] Ibid., p. 559.

1.3 Society

As should be expected, between the late eighteenth century and shortly after the first half of the nineteenth century changes in society went hand in hand with the other developments sweeping Britain. Issues such as religion and education became at the heart of the public debate and some changes were deemed necessary given the circumstances. Since Britain was expanding overseas and was becoming an extremely powerful and wealthy country, solid leadership was required in order to face the challenges that the new situation posed; many more people began to need a more comprehensive education also at a secondary level, hence a few public schools were founded. Despite the fact that primary education became compulsory only in 1880, by the 1860s many optional, free schools had opened thus children, even those from the poorer classes, had access to it and the number of those who did not have access to any sort of schooling became a minority. Moreover, people started to develop a shared set of sentiments that morally brought them close together; "[t]he dominant temper of the early and middle Victorian periods was intensely moralistic, heavy with responsibility and anxiety".[20] The predominant attitude was one that cherished values such as family, charity, frugality and parsimony along with a strong work ethic and the belief in personal growth. However, all the fine sentiments brought forth by the so-called 'Victorian morality' sharply contrasted with some leanings of the period that promoted child labour and the exploitation of those belonging to the working class, unsustainable working hours that translated into poor wages, and unhealthy standards of living for the poor, among others. As G. D. Klingopulos points out, this "tendency to mingle business with moralism … can make 'good' intentions seem hypocritical or brutal"[21] thus leading to questioning the true nature of these attitudes.

[20] Klingopulos, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
[21] Ibid. p. 19.

The men belonging to the rising middle class occupied a paramount place in society and the social evolution of these years owed a great deal to them. As a matter of fact, they were trying to carve out a place for themselves between the higher classes of aristocracy and the lower classes. They shared some commonalities with both these classes since they were extremely wealthy as the aristocracy, but their fortune was acquired by trade, commerce and work, not inherited through a title; in this sense, they participated in the working ethic that distinguished those people who had to earn their living. Furthermore, they wanted to forge the working class in their image and likeness. These people stood out as they counterbalanced the belief circulating according to which men were at a loss against machines and processes detached from their abilities and control, hence they restored faith in humankind and in its capability not to be defined by technological power. As Klingopulos suggests, "Mr. Thornton, the Lancashire industrialist who is the hero of Mrs. Gaskell's *North and South* (1855)"[22] might be considered the epitome of self-help and of a self-made man who was able to climb up the social ladder despite the circumstances of his personal history. It is noteworthy that despite the "new social functions, rendered necessary by new industrial conditions in an overcrowded island … the real strength and felicity of the Victorian age la[id] less in that circumstance, important as it was, than in the self-discipline and self-reliance of the individual Englishman".[23]

Unsurprisingly, the technological improvements that changed forever both the industry and the agricultural sector, entailed also some adjustments with respect to the role that women would play inside and outside the house hence altering the relationship between men and women. Whereas in the past wives would help their husbands in whatever their occupation was, starting from the late eighteenth century they were forced out of these occupations. Some of them, thanks to the large fortune acquired by their husbands, were left with nothing much to do, others became active labourers working in factories or the fields, and still others made a job of caring for the home and family. By

[22] Ibid., p. 25.
[23] Trevelyan, *op. cit.*, p. 522.

detaching themselves from the occupation of their husbands, working-class women gained personal and professional independence for the first time. They were no longer defined in relation to their men but to themselves. Little by little, women also belonging to the higher classes began to yearn for what was perceived as a privileged condition, but despite the new ideas circulating, they still leaned towards the ideals of womanly perfection that were imposed by their husbands and fathers. A solid education which enabled them to broaden their horizons became of primary importance also in the formation process of adolescent girls, thus hiring governesses that tutored young middle- and upper-class ladies at home became customary. However, by the latter part of the Victorian period, women belonging to these social classes, chiefly if they were not married, were encouraged to take up an occupation that served a purpose and that allowed them to respectably earn their living, enshrining a new ideal of womanhood.

The turn of the century also brought about new tendencies as far as cultural life was concerned. With the regulation of the working hours per day and per week, people had more free time, thus the concept of leisure as we know and intend it today started to spread around. The time that was not spent working was now conceived in a recreational way meaning that it was supposed to be a moment of diversion for both the mind and the body. New pastimes began to be enjoyed on a regular basis; for instance, "[p]leasure piers, like those of Margate and Brighton, were … built to attract the crowds of visitors to seaside resorts".[24] These new trends also gave birth to the modern holiday as a relatively prolonged period of time in which to completely disconnect from work and recharge. Popular art started to take root, photography would change permanently how things could be represented and colour printing transformed forever the publishing industry. Revolutionary artistic movements and their respective masterpieces began to take hold and these achievements had a big impact also in architecture and infrastructure so much so that they gave birth to the still clearly recognizable

[24] Ibid., p. 510.

'Victorian style'. Moreover, public culture was now commercialized and accessible to almost everyone. In addition to all mentioned above, the Regency and Victorian Eras functioned as the background of many outstanding intellectual, and scientific achievements. Indeed, people started to question not only facts that before were given for granted but the very essence of human life and how it was perceived.

1.4 Novel Writing and Female Novelists Across The 18th and 19th Centuries

Within the last few years of the eighteenth century, the novel held a paramount place in the English cultural background. By the time Queen Victoria ascended the throne, writers had made a point of representing the moral and political issues as well as the change in taste that was flooding society by means of the narrative form; it was a period in which creativity exceeded and major achievements in the field took place. The accounts that novelists left to posterity prove to be extremely committed to the depiction of the conditions of England at the time, to such a degree that sometimes novels could function as a proper means from which to derive a study on society. As it was previously mentioned, this time was full of deep contradictions that were reflected in the literary production; on the one hand, an urge for feeling was perceived, but on the other, the intellect, scientific facts and the strong belief in humans' capacity to control everything, dominated everyday life. In this instance, the novel played a major role since it was the medium through which these two attitudes merged without negating one another, placing rationality alongside feelings. As G. D. Klingopulos points out:

> The Victorian novel helped to people the imagination, to exercise the moral sympathies and strengthen the feeling of human solidarity at a time of disruptive social change. The growth of a considerate, unhysterical, liberal, and responsible humanism in the course of the century was certainly helped by the work of the novelists. At its best the novel presented, with wonderful inwardness, different kinds of moral possibility and the actuality of choice; it formed an extension of consciousness, and gave life to life.[25]

[25] Klingopulos, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

The novel became the main literary form, and its chief purposes were to educate and entertain the reading public. It is in this background that women found their space to write and establish themselves as successful novelists. In the first instance, authors such as Jane Austen, Frances Burney and Maria Edgeworth carved out their place in the literary world bringing female sensitivity and wit to a predominantly male world and as time progressed so did the worthwhile opportunities available to women. The nineteenth century proved to be an extremely prolific period in terms of both established female writers and their literary output so much so that it could be defined as the "Age of the Female Novelists".[26] However, according to what Elaine Showalter explains in her extremely influential book, *A Literature of Their Own*, in the past critics have encompassed in the range of great women writers just five of them: Jane Austen, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, George Eliot, and Virginia Woolf thus nearly erasing those who are not included. Aside from the fact that in leaving behind some of these writers they did not account for the diversity in genre, style and themes explored by women, the major problem that arose was a feeling of discontinuity in the women's literary canon that separated one 'great' author to the other. This tendency neglected the connections that tied together the successive generations of female writers and all that could have given a sense of unity in their production. Furthermore, what nineteenth-century readers and critics expected from these novels were pieces of writing that praised the values that they deemed befitting a woman. This could not have been further from the truth, since the very essence of female novelists found its space beyond the limits imposed by contemporary society.[27] In one of her letters Charlotte Brontë wrote to G. H. Lewes:

> Come what will, I cannot, when I write, think always of myself and of what is elegant and charming in femininity; it is not on those terms, or with such ideas, I ever took pen in hand: and if it is only on such terms my writing will be tolerated, I shall pass away from the public and trouble it no more. Out of obscurity I came, to obscurity I can easily return.[28]

[26] E. Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, (1977), 1999, p. 3.
[27] Ibid., p. 7.
[28] E. Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, A. Easson (ed.), New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 322.

According to Showalter, women writers who built a career for themselves and were paid for their publications underwent three phases: Feminine (1840s-1880), Feminist (1880-1920) and Female (1920-present). The Feminine stage is characterized by "a prolonged phase of *imitation* of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and *internalization* of its standards of art and its views on social roles".[29] Moreover, women writers can be further split into three other generations: those born between 1800 and 1820, 1820 and 1840, and 1840 and 1860. For the purposes of this dissertation, only the first generation of feminine writers, the so-called "Golden Age of the Victorian authoress",[30] will be dealt with. It is worth mentioning that already from the late eighteenth century women began to take on the profession of writers and identify with it, but in this first instance, the relationship between women and their newly forged role was rather precarious. In fact, it often happened that they sought out the favour of men critics writing about female powerlessness so that they could downplay the affirmation of the self that was implied in taking up a profession, but that was not deemed appropriate for the standards of the time. Many found anonymity or the use of male pseudonyms as the answer to this problem. For instance, Jane Austen published her novels in anonymity making 'A Lady' appear as the author, Elizabeth Gaskell published two of her short stories under the pseudonym 'Cotton Mather Mills' and Charlotte Brontë identified with the name of Currer Bell. Male pseudonyms, in particular, served a precise purpose as they represented everything female writers could not be, everything that was not deemed feminine or appropriate for a woman.

The notion of work as personal development and empowerment was in open contrast with the typical set of qualities associated with femininity. Commonly for women, working entailed the suppression of the self in order to meet the needs of others, thus it was something done for someone else. On the contrary, writing demanded a direct confrontation with feelings that clashed with the repression that was so much desired in women by their contemporaries, which made this job quite

[29] Showalter, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
[30] Ibid., p. 19.

intimidating. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century women found a common ground only in relation to the role that they had in society whether someone's daughters, wives or mothers, but rarely in relation to their own personal identity. Thus, if they wanted to pursue a profession, in this case, a writing career, they had to challenge and defy some principles that held a paramount place in society. The notions of obedience, duty and personal fulfilment were addressed, and women had to ask themselves if the urge for these was so strong as to confront everything their husbands and fathers stood for. The question that puzzled women writers at the time and that became central in many of their novels, including, as Angus Easson notes, Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, is "how far action in defiance of authority can be justified in the name of a higher cause"?[31]

Education was a key issue for women as the vast majority could not receive the same schooling that was granted to their male counterparts only because of their sex. Even though, as previously mentioned, starting from the nineteenth century women belonging to the higher classes of society could receive a home-based education, they could not attend school as their brothers did, for instance. This constituted an obstacle for female writers to overcome as they strove to meet the scholarly standards of men. In addition to not being able to receive the same education, women could not even count on the economic support system that was available to male novelists. Consequently, they were fully committed to their profession, hence explaining the prolific nature of their publications in those years. It is also worth mentioning that writing was one of the few professions accessible to women together with teaching and a few occupations in the publishing world. People started to slowly acknowledge the respectability of women who earned their living and that contributed to the economic sphere of everyday life. Also the educational prospects available gradually shifted and new opportunities arose for women bringing male and female prospects closer.

[31] Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. xxx.

Many questioned the possibility for women to be both wives and mothers on the one hand and successful writers on the other. The fame achieved by female authors was perceived as threatening somehow so much so that people started to feel compassion for their husbands, as happened to William Gaskell, who was known under the punning name 'Mr. Mary Barton'. However, women who succeeded in establishing a professional and domestic identity at the same time often took the responsibilities that each of the roles entailed very seriously and firmly believed that the two were complementary; they each enriched their perception of the world in their own way. Consequently, domesticity and maternity held a paramount place as where men "saw only a conflict of interests, [women] saw the possibility of a balanced life in which the domestic role enriched the art, and the art kept the domestic role spontaneous and meaningful".[32] Furthermore, nineteenth-century people considered women not apt for writing due to the implications related to their bodies that were considered to be fragile, weak, and inferior to the male one; an aura of mystery still surrounded the female body which was considered almost unknowable. The ideas circulating, wrong as they were, entailed age-old prejudices that placed women in a position of direct inferiority; they were thought to have minor brains both in terms of size and related abilities, and they were considered more easily affected by illnesses if compared to men. Added to this is the fact that novel-writing entailed the confrontation with one's feelings. In a world in which women were considered 'celestial beings' who could not exhibit nor possess any kind of emotion, they were not considered suited for the profession of author since they could not provide an exhaustive account of life. However, this did not hold them back and in hindsight today it can be affirmed that during this period many of the finest novels published were written by women. To this regard G. D. Klingopulos writes:

> The work of the women novelists, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, and George Eliot, represents a considerable social deepening of the novel as a portrayal of English life, an increase in its capacity to analyse moral and emotional nuances; it also marks a closer relationship between the activity of novel-writing and the most serious and sincere convictions of writers. The novel in the hands of these four comes close, at times, to the subtle operation and power of poetry.[33]

[32] Showalter, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
[33] Klingopulos, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

Hence, notwithstanding all the difficulties that society provided them with, women novelists rose to the occasion. Not only did they persevere in their ambitions and made writing a profession available to future generations, but they also became role models that modified the aspirations of their fellow readers forever.

Chapter 2

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell

2.1 Biographical Elements

The life of Elizabeth Gaskell puzzled critics for quite some time given that it always retained a mysterious aura in some respects. Notwithstanding the fact that today both her reading public and critics are aware of quite a few elements of her biography, throughout her whole lifetime she struggled to find a balance between private and public life so that she did not reveal too much of her private self. Perhaps the most significant initiative she undertook in this regard is the fact that she customarily asked the receivers of her letters to destroy them. Fortunately for posterity, not everyone fulfilled her wishes, first and foremost her firstborn daughter Marianne kept some of her letters that today constitute one of the major sources useful to extrapolate some facts about her mother's life. To begin with, to get an idea of how Elizabeth Gaskell appeared, one can rely on a physical description that dates back to 1850 when she was spotted at a concert and characterized as a:

> Rather tall, full figure, robust, with black hair and a lively reddish-brown complexion. You would unquestionably take her for an Italian from the shape of her head, the cut of her features, and from her complexion … There is in her appearance such a stamp of vigour and completeness that you do not find the healthy intellectual grasp of things and uniformity of talent exceptional in such a woman.[34]

2.1.1 Early Life

Elizabeth Cleghorn Stevenson was born in London on 29 September 1810 to William Stevenson (1772-1829) and Elizabeth Holland Stevenson (c. 1771-1811). Her mother carried eight pregnancies

[34] *Qtd*. in A. Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, (1979), 2016, pp. 25-26.

during her marriage, but unfortunately, only two of the children reached adulthood, Elizabeth, and her elder brother John, who was born in 1798. Given her mother's premature departure, Elizabeth would never really know her, and either mothers or their absence would hold a paramount place in her future writings testifying to how much the loss of her biological mother scarred her. This was not uncommon since, as Elaine Showalter points out, an aspect shared by many female writers of the first half of the 19th century "is identification with, and dependence upon, the father; and either loss of, or alienation from, the mother. … In the first generation this pattern is particularly striking: the Brontës, George Eliot, Geraldine Jewsbury, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Elizabeth Gaskell had all lost their mothers in early childhood".[35] Unlike what was customary at the time, Gaskell was not provided with anything to remember her by and in a letter to George Hope she expresses her gratitude for receiving some letters written by her mother saying that she has "so often longed for some little thing that had once been hers or been touched by her".[36] The result was that Gaskell "idealized the role of maternity throughout her life".[37]

William Stevenson at first frequented the Unitarian circles, but his conscience prevented him to continue as a clergyman because he was against being paid to preach the gospel.[38] Subsequently, he tried to build a career in farming but with poor results, thus he became a tutor in Manchester where he moved with his wife. Lastly, in 1806 he took up the position of Keeper of the Records of the Treasury in London and he moved into a house in Chelsea. Though he did not make a career out of his writing, he proved to be an effective contributor to several periodicals of the time, setting out a paramount example of professional writing for his daughter. He remarried soon after the death of his first wife, in 1814, and built a second family, but contact between Elizabeth and her father's new family was sporadic, so much so that she met her step-mother, Catherine Thomson Stevenson, and her half-siblings only when she was twelve years old for the departure at sea of her brother John, with

[35] E. Showalter, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
[36] E. Gaskell, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, J.A.V. Chapple and A. Pollard (ed.), Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1966, pp. 796-797.
[37] J. L. Matus, *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 16.
[38] E. Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., pp. xiv-xv.

the Merchant Navy, who set sail to India and was never to return. As a matter of fact, despite the very different upbringing that the two siblings experienced, Elizabeth and her brother shared a deep affection for each other; thus, his disappearance at sea around 1827 came as a shock to his younger sister. The maritime characters that populate Gaskell's stories bear witness to the close bond that united them probably because of their mother's untimely death. William Stevenson died in 1829 due to a stroke and after his passing his widow did not meet with her stepdaughter for more than twenty years.

After the death of her mother, Elizabeth was sent to live in Knutsford with her mother's family, the Hollands, more specifically, with her aunt Hannah Lumb (1768-1837), and visited her father only occasionally. Aunt Lumb was the widow of Samuel Lumb and lived with her disabled daughter. Her foster family cared for young Elizabeth who was raised according to Unitarian principles that allowed her to develop open-mindedness, independence of thought and reasoning. Moreover, the Hollands shared close ties with influential families of the time such as the Turners and the Darwins thanks to a shared set of beliefs, business and familial bonds. Despite the fact that she was affectionately welcomed in her mother's family and that Aunt Lamb proved to be an excellent surrogate mother for Elizabeth who referred to her as her "more than mother",[39] she also felt a profound sense of solitude throughout her childhood and adolescence. Contrary to what one might expect, it was during the visits to her father in Chelsea that she was the most miserable probably due to the presence of his second wife and the only solace that she had was the beautiful natural environment that surrounded her; as she writes to Mary Howitt, "if it had not been for the beautiful, grand river, which was an inexplicable comfort to me … I think my child's heart would have broken".[40] Gaskell had a bright mind and was sent for a short period of time to Stratford upon Avon at Avonbank school where she received a few lessons of Italian and French, drawing, dancing, music and general education. Throughout her life she was always eager to learn and read widely both novels and poetry; her passions included music,

[39] *Qtd.* in Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, cit., p. 3.
[40] Gaskell, *The Letters*, cit., pp. 797-798.

art (she was quite gifted at drawing), science (especially zoology and botany), she spoke French fluently and knew limitedly Italian and German. When she left Stratford, she went to live for a period of time in Newcastle upon Tyne with the Reverend William Turner, thanks to the bonds that existed between families that shared Unitarian beliefs. Elizabeth Gaskell's early life was marked by a rather shielded and comfortable childhood and by a sense of loss and displacement at the same time which established transience as "the dominant rule of her experience".[41]

2.1.2 Marriage

In 1831 Turner's daughter married one of the Cross Street Chapel's ministers in Manchester, James Gooch Robberds, and Elizabeth was invited to stay for a few more days after the wedding. It was on this occasion that she was introduced to Robberds's friend and co-minister, William Gaskell (1805-1884). He was from Warrington, Lancashire and came from a Unitarian family that provided him with an education based on the principle of tolerance dictated by their religious beliefs. He was schooled at the University of Glasgow and at Manchester New College, ending up being a brilliant man of letters. The Gaskells married when she was twenty-one in 1832 and settled in Manchester at 14 Dover Street, then at 121 Upper Rumford Street and subsequently at 42 Plymouth Grove where Elizabeth made their home a vibrant centre for both her private and professional life. Besides being a Unitarian minister, Mr. Gaskell was also Professor of English History and Literature first at Manchester's New College and subsequently, he taught English Literature and New Testament Greek at the Unitarian Missionary College that he helped establish in 1854.

William exerted a very powerful influence over his wife with whom he shared an akin worldview, religious beliefs, and both ethical and intellectual principles. He had a rather serious personality that, however, was mitigated by the cheerfulness typical of his wife. Moreover, through the intertwining of their gifted minds, he contributed to the development of the authoress E. C. Gaskell, always

[41] Matus, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

supporting his wife, and acting as her proof-reader. Unusual as it was for the time being, throughout her marriage Elizabeth Gaskell always preserved her autonomy and was never associated with her husband's identity; William was never an authoritative father and husband and despite the fact that he would be entitled to have his wife's earnings, Elizabeth was the one to have control of her finances a few years after she became famous. As Matus points out, "[l]ooking at the Gaskell marriage closely, we see that it was based not so much on compromise or subordination as on compatibility and an acceptance of parallel lives".[42] In doing so they found a balance in their marital life that "was guaranteed by separation with connection"[43] due to their inclination to conduct "divergent work lives, social schedules, friendships, and travel itineraries".[44]

The marriage to Reverend Gaskell strengthened his wife's faith and established religion as a constant not only in her private life but also in her writings. Here Unitarianism figures prominently as "a presence, rather than a force: she is not a religious novelist, yet there is an informing spirit, brought into fuller play when needed".[45] The Gaskells were Unitarians, they followed the dissenting doctrine that identified God as the only creator of the cosmos, thus rejecting the Holy Trinity and the Divinity of Jesus Christ. This religious belief is based on the development of an inner life that underlined the power of reason and rationality, understanding towards other people and creeds, sympathy aimed at including everyone and equality between all human beings; hence, it tries to combine rationality and feeling at the same time.

2.1.3 Motherhood

Elizabeth Gaskell gave birth to six children, but unfortunately, only four of them survived. Her first child was a stillborn girl, she then had Marianne (1834-1920) and Margaret Emily (1837-1913), affectionately nicknamed 'Meta'. The loss of her firstborn led Gaskell to be a rather apprehensive

[42] Ibid., p. 20.
[43] Ibid., p. 21.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, cit., p. 17.

mother, especially to Marianne whose early years were meticulously documented in a diary. Unlike Meta, who obeyed her mother's request to burn her letters, Marianne saved them so that today they constitute evidence of the loving relationship between mother and daughter. The two sisters had opposing personalities, the eldest longed for love and relied mostly on the people that surrounded her, whereas the younger showed independence of spirit, much like her mother. The two first children were the ones that Gaskell saw grow up, thus they occupy a more significant place in their mother's biography, if compared to their equally adored sisters.[46]

The third child was named Florence Elizabeth (1842-1881) and gave her parents pause for thought because of her immaturity.[47] Conversely, William Gaskell, 'Willie' (1844-1845) did not reach the age of one due to scarlet fever that proved to be fatal for the infant, but he played a key role in shaping E. C. Gaskell's identity as a writer. As a way to cope with the death of her only boy, Gaskell's husband suggested she might start to write, and the result was the novel *Mary Barton* (published in 1848). The youngest child was Julia Bradford (1846-1908) who, along with her sister Florence, were indeed very dear to their mother's friend, Charlotte Brontë.

All four girls were educated according to their aptitudes and strengths, and according to Unitarian principles (though Marianne would later express her sympathies for Roman Catholicism).[48] Elizabeth Gaskell was rather close to her daughters, especially the eldest two as mentioned above, and the letters addressed to Marianne that have survived her bear witness to this. Furthermore, the fact that mothers have a paramount place in her fiction, albeit in an unconventional manner, reflects the importance she attached to motherhood and its relevance in her real life.

[46] Ibid., pp. 35-36.
[47] Ibid., p. 36.
[48] Ibid., p. 11.

2.1.4 Friendships

Throughout her life, and especially after she became famous, Gaskell cultivated numerous friendships that proved to be sincere, full of affection and a testament to her character, as her friend Susanna Winkworth points out:

> She was a noble-looking woman, with a queenly presence, and her high, broad, serene brow, and finely-cut mobile features, were lighted up by a constantly-varying play of expression as she poured forth her wonderful talk. It was like the gleaming ripple and rush of a clear deep stream in sunshine …. All her great intellectual gifts … were so warmed and brightened by sympathy and feeling, that while actually with her, you were less conscious of her power than of her charm.[49]

Elizabeth's letters constitute a precious source by which her dense network of friendships can be put together. Her closest friends, the people who were allowed to address her as 'Lily', include William's sisters, Elizabeth and Anne Gaskell (respectively Mrs. Holland and Mrs. Fox in later life), Eliza Fox ('Tottie'), the Winkworths, her publisher George Smith and Charlotte Brontë. As a result of her numerous trips abroad, she also befriended some people across the Channel like the art historian Charles Eliot Norton and Mary Clarke Mohl. Her friendships, especially the ones acquired in adult life helped her to develop as a writer and to expand her horizons beyond regional and national borders.

2.1.5 Death

As mentioned before, Elizabeth Gaskell always maintained a certain independence in her married life, and this is demonstrated by the house that she secretly purchased in Hampshire. She envisioned the place as a retreat for when she and her husband would retire. Unfortunately, Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell died from a heart attack in this place on 12 November 1865 while she was taking tea and having a conversation, without her husband knowing of the place. Upon her unexpected death, she left her last unfinished novel, which is considered by many to be her masterpiece, *Wives and Daughters*.

[49] *Qtd.* ibid., p. 40.

2.2 Style

Elizabeth Gaskell proved to be a rather prolific and versatile writer; she produced six novels (*Mary Barton*, *Cranford*, *Ruth*, *North and South*, *Sylvia's Lovers*, *Wives and Daughters*), a biography (*The Life of Charlotte Brontë*), and several short stories, but notwithstanding her notable production, she never became a professional writer living off her income. She relied primarily on Chapman and Hall and on her friend George Smith to publish her works, but she also contributed to Dickens's magazine *Household Words*. In writing Gaskell found a purpose and an occupation in life besides mother and wife, it was her identity. She was much appreciated and praised during her time, perhaps more than she is today. Her friend Susanna Winkworth remarks that:

> No one ever came near her in the gift of telling a story. In her hands the simplest incident, – a meeting in the street, a talk with a factory-girl, a country walk, an old family history, – became picturesque and vivid and interesting. Her fun, her pathos, her graphic touches, her sympathetic insight, were inimitable. When, a few years later, all the world was admiring her novels we felt that what she had actually published was a mere fraction of what she might have written …. [50]

Regrettably, Gaskell never professed her declaration of poetics and, unlike many of her contemporaries, she was never chiefly interested in discussions over the form of her writings. Nevertheless, "she appreciated that extending one's imagination to the lives and minds of those in danger of being forgotten might be a moral as well as aesthetic exercise".[51] Furthermore, in one of her letters, she answered back to a young author, Herbert Grey, who was asking for advice in relation to his novel. From her lines, critics have extrapolated some of the principles underlying her prose although they are at times inevitably contaminated by the piece of writing she was referring to. Thus, *Letter 420* can be regarded as a sort of manifesto of Gaskell's style.

> I think you must observe what is *out* of you, instead of examining what is *in* you. It is always an unhealthy sign when we are too conscious of any of the physical processes that go on within {y} us; & I believe in like manner that we ought not to be too cognizant of our mental proceedings, only taking note of the results. But certainly – whether introspection be morbid or not, – it is not \a/ safe {for a

[50] *Qtd.* ibid., p. 42.
[51] Matus, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

> nov} training for a novelist. It is a weakening of the art which has crept in of late years. Just read a few pages of De Foe &c – and you will see the healthy way in which he sets *objects* not *feelings* before you. …
>
> [E]very day your life brings you into contact with live men & women … [t]hink if you can not imagine a complication of events in their life which would form a good plot. … The plot must grow, and culminate in a crisis; not a character must be introduced who does not conduce to this growth & progress of events. The plot is like the anatomical drawing of an artist; he must have an idea of his skeleton, before he can clothe it with muscle & flesh, much more before he can drape it. Study hard at your plot. … [M]ake this sketch of your story a subject of labour & thought. Then set to & imagine yourself a spectator & auditor of every scene & event! Work hard at this till it become a reality to you, – a thing you have to recollect & describe & report fully & accurately as it struck you, in order that your reader may have it equally before him. Don't intrude yourself into your description. If you but think eagerly of your story till *you see it in action*, words, good simple strong words, will come ….
>
> Cut your epithets short. Of two words choose the simplest.[52]

Notwithstanding the lack of an explicit declaration of poetics, during her career, Gaskell developed as an artist and refined her technique. Readers and critics may note the differences between her first and last novels which evolve from "some initial uncertainties to the structural mastery of *North and South* and the finished symphonies of the final novels".[53] Furthermore, at times both her more serious writings and her letters provide some indication of her personal views on the issues that were closest to her heart, derived from her experience of the world thus providing a few clues on her views.

Throughout her life, Elizabeth Gaskell always sought balance, first and foremost between public and private life, between her art and her duties as mother, wife and mistress of the household, but balance was also paramount in her conception of art which she gradually learnt to master and control, and that with time gained complexity without ever losing its spontaneous character. She believed that the writer's experience and observation of the world ought to be the primary source for the topics that she developed throughout her work and thanks to her skills as a keen observer, she mastered her descriptions, granting them a paramount role within her narrations. However, she also thought the plot should be carefully and consciously designed, thus leaving nothing to chance. Furthermore, Elizabeth Gaskell's greatness is not only achieved thanks to her mastery in crafting impressing pivotal

[52] Gaskell, *The Letters*, cit., pp. 541-542.
[53] E. L. Duthie, *The Themes of Elizabeth Gaskell*. Houndmills and London: Macmillan Academic and Professional LTD, (1980), 1990, p. 181. Available: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-05128-1. Accessed 2023, April.

scenes but also, perhaps more importantly, in her power to depict minor ones that serve the purpose of moulding the unfolding of the story. In the writing process, the author should play the roles of "spectator & auditor"[54] without intruding on the narrative, unless deemed necessary. Thus, the letter mentioned above provides readers with Gaskell's attitude of artist/spectator; she was a keen observer, perceptive in seizing what was taking place before her eyes, and reporting on what she saw shrewdly but always sympathetically towards her fellow human beings. Nonetheless, sometimes "[w]here the moral implications of a situation were involved, her concern that they should be correctly understood sometimes betrayed her into a didacticism which brought her into the foreground as a conscious moralist".[55] Her attitude "was intimately connected with her views on the purpose of art, which she saw not only as a pleasure but also as a duty".[56]

In order to make her narration more entertaining, Gaskell uses many variations of tone and compelling dialogues to her own advantage; by means of these techniques, she crafts incredibly powerful portrayals of her characters. She often employs the reported speech so that she can clarify to her readers what the people who populate her writings are thinking and feeling, but she also gives them great space so that they can fully express who they really are through words and actions. When pondering upon her writings, it should always be kept in mind the fact that often what she wrote was the product of experience, and more precisely, her experience. As Duthie remarks, Gaskell proved to be a narrator, historian and sociologist at the same time since she regularly provided studies on customs, traditions and manners and she added an embedded dramatic tension to some of her scenes.[57]

As far as language is concerned, Elizabeth Gaskell appealed to naturalness, a principle she adopts and adheres to in every sphere of her public and private life. In fact, she often lets conversation

[54] Gaskell, *The Letters*, cit., p. 542.
[55] Duthie, *op. cit.*, p. 180.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid., p. 197.

between her characters flow, and she lets them speak in their own regional dialect. Moreover, the authenticity of the exchanges between them underlines the differences between social classes, that by means of the words uttered are highlighted and apparent to readers. She proves to be "versatile in her style" and "in her methods of composition"[58] just as much as she was as a writer. Thus, Gaskell's main aim which was, of course, mirrored in her style, was a faithful reproduction of life in all respects.

2.3 Themes

Although in her writings Elizabeth Gaskell explored a wide range of themes, few of them are quite recurrent and are worth mentioning in order to have a better understanding of her work as a whole. She had the tendency not to write about subjects she believed she did not possess sufficient knowledge; thus, she was not only interested in what she wrote, but often these matters were the closest to her heart. For the purposes of this dissertation, the themes addressed will be the individual, family life, community life, and the industrial and natural setting. Her personal experience was the main source for what she wrote, she felt she had enough understanding of these issues, hence she also felt comfortable enough to put them on her pages.

2.3.1 The Individual

Elizabeth Gaskell's works provide readers with a careful characterization of individuals and their identities. As it was customary in the realist tradition, her characters were ordinary people who were part of a community. In them she prized morality over literacy, however, she always maintained that "a reasonable amount of knowledge was indispensable"[59] for the development of an individual. Elizabeth Gaskell the author, but also the woman, wife and mother valued an education that supplied people with everything they needed to prepare for life and tutored through direct experience. The

[58] Ibid., p. 198.
[59] Ibid., p. 118.

individuals that she analysed more thoroughly are women, of course, as she felt she had a deeper understanding of them along with a sense of kinship. In her works, she portrayed wives, mothers, widows, and single women with all the associated pros and cons typical of her realism. Her heroines often featured strong and vital personalities, they possessed willpower, they were passionate and ambitious; they were their own people as opposed to the role that women usually played within Victorian society. Gaskell appreciated all these traits in real-life individuals, and she tried to faithfully mirror them in her characters.

2.3.2 Family Life

Family always played a paramount role in Gaskell's life, and her works echoed her experience; as Duthie remarks, "she was writing out of her own experience, as well as out of her observation. She could never have been happy without feeling herself to belong both to a community and to that smallest and most closely knit of all communities, the family".[60] Throughout her whole life, she strove to fulfil her duties as wife and mother, along with the ones of author. Despite the untimely death of her mother, Gaskell nevertheless grew up with a motherly figure, her Aunt Lumb, and in turn, she grew up to be an attentive and present mother to her four daughters and she hoped they could build an everlasting bond of sisterhood. As a matter of fact, relationships between mothers and daughters, played a major role in her works, much more than the ones between fathers and their offspring, perhaps due to the fact that she spent little time with her own father. The family held a place of prime importance to her characters, to her and to Victorians, too. It was supposed to represent morality, balance and harmony, although this was not always the case, as pointed out by Gaskell. However, her representation of families subtly challenged the model of the Victorian patriarchal family that upheld the father ruling over the family. Once again, this depiction derived from her own experience since her husband never played the role of "heavy paterfamilias"[61] and she always maintained her

[60] Ibid., p. 88.
[61] Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, cit., p. 33.

autonomy. This attitude was also derived from her religious beliefs that led her to firmly believe that men and women had the same rights and dignity. In Gaskell's stories, family unity is highly valued, it helps to cope during periods of hardships and, in addition, it "exerts a stabilising influence".[62] Moreover, in her stories, she left space for the portrayal of familial bonds outside the actual family, as can be observed in *North and South* with Mr. Bell and Margaret's relationship after the death of her parents. Despite the fact that the portrayal of families she depicted was often moulded by her own life, Gaskell did not limit herself to her first-hand experience, on the contrary, she provided a wide range of scenarios that were the result of careful observation and vivid imagination.

2.3.3 Community Life

Gaskell's writings often provide readers with a study of community and social life which, as Duthie argues, most of the time are narrated from "the standpoint … of the middle-class observer".[63] In her portrayal of the community, she included everyone, from the lower classes to London's gilded society (although the last mentioned played a minor role); in doing so she was guided by the principle of sympathy that belonged to her. She also gave an account of the condition of traders and shopkeepers, who, in nineteenth-century society, still had a long way to go despite their stable and prosperous income. However, most of her characters are taken from the middle class, which was the one she was part of, and therefore knew best. People belonging to this category were often worse off economically than the emerging merchant class but had something they had not, that is, they belonged to the gentry and therefore had access to all the advantages this entailed. Elizabeth Gaskell explored this category thoroughly and her stories featured not only families but also widows and unmarried women, priests, men who had a profession (e.g., lawyers, doctors and such) and their spouses, thus offering a complete account of society. Moreover, she included in her study of social life county families who were still tainted with a reminiscent feeling of *noblesse oblige*, but who were

[62] Duthie, *op. cit.*, p. 94.
[63] Ibid., p. 39.

nevertheless an integral part of the provincial world. Her account also leaves room for rich descriptions of the houses and their interiors, which often reflect the social status of the people living in them.

2.3.4 The Industrial Setting

In her early career, Gaskell gave much space to the treatment of the industrial setting, especially in *Mary Barton* and *North and South*. In these novels, she addressed the problems that factory workers faced in their daily life. *North and South* made self-evident the fact that at the time Gaskell was writing, England was made up of two very different worlds; the industrialized North was pervaded by the greyness from factory fumes, whereas the rural South with its agricultural landscapes was the place inhabited by small agricultural communities and the aristocracy could live undisturbed. Moreover, at this stage, the working conditions in factories led to a period of turmoil that she included in her accounts. Once again, her unfailing descriptive powers convey to readers a precise image of the industrialised towns that the author knew well since she settled in Manchester with her husband. Even though "the drabness of the city streets, the pall of smoke never ceased to oppress her with a sense of the unnatural",[64] Gaskell learnt to find things to love in her new home, much like Margaret Hale in *North and South*, and her works reflected her attitude. Her industrial narratives explored the conditions of life in the newly industrialized towns of the North and the relationships not only between workers but also among employers and labourers and the interactions among different social classes that led to a "better understanding between individuals".[65] Her real-life experience helped her to realize what people were capable to bear in adversities and that technological progress was an indispensable step on the path towards modernity.

[64] Ibid., p. 86.
[65] Ibid., p. 78.

2.3.5 The Natural Setting

Unlike what happened with the industrial setting, the natural one has been one of the most exploited themes throughout Elizabeth Gaskell's whole career. The majority of her works began in a rural and idyllic setting that takes readers back to the author's childhood. Furthermore, her writings made evident that the agricultural world was not governed by class distinctions as all people shared the same goals, duties, and concerns. Contrary to what happened in factories, there was "no social barrier between master and men".[66] Duthie calls the pastoral setting so loved by Gaskell 'Arcadia' echoing the Greek tradition, not to mention the pastoral theme much exploited by authors of all ages. It is also worth mentioning that the natural setting was for her a place where she could go to have a period of respite from her life in Manchester.

One of the most noteworthy natural elements in Gaskell's works and life is the sea, since not only she came from a family (on her father's side) who worked in the maritime field but as was already mentioned, her brother disappeared at sea never to be found. Hence, the sea was an element surrounded by mystery that caused her, and often also her characters and her readers, unease.

Nevertheless, it was in the description of the countryside that Gaskell reached the pinnacle of her artistry, the landscapes that she depicted were the result of "keen observation, … effortless selection of concrete detail, … instinct for composition which blends … into a harmonious unity".[67] In her writing process, the senses too played a major role; in fact, they contributed to the perception of natural elements evoked in her works. Natural life and individual life are inextricably intertwined in Gaskell's works.

> Realism is in the essence of Elizabeth Gaskell's view of nature. It is a poetic realism which allows her to make exquisite use of natural symbolism, as well as to take a Wordsworthian pleasure in the life which animates plants and animals and gives movement to the cosmos. It is also a realism compatible with her belief in an ordered universe where all natural phenomena … are part of the same beneficent

[66] Ibid., p. 17.
[67] Ibid., p. 25.

> design. The accuracy of her descriptions … bears witness not only to her powers of observation but to her sense of the laws inherent in the natural scene.[68]

Moreover, as Angus Easson argued, Gaskell has always displayed a keen interest in traditions and folklore,[69] of which the agrarian communities are permeated. A return to the primordial Arcadia can thus be observed along with a renewal of pastoral traditions. The interest she showed in traditions and regional cultural aspects made her employ, where the text required, a language that closely resembled the dialect spoken in the area to which she was referring. As in every aspect of Gaskell's writing, naturalness is what she looked for and praised, wherever she could find it.

2.4 The Social Problem Novel

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell was a realist writer, but more specifically the novel that this dissertation is concerned about and that will be addressed in the next chapter, is part of the 'Social Problem Novel', also called 'Condition of England Novel' tradition. The aforementioned was a type of fiction that proved to be quite popular in the nineteenth century; it dealt with the plights of factory labourers. These were mainly written by authors who belonged to the middle class and aimed at exposing the strenuous conditions to which the working class was subjected. The hope was that in bringing them to light, the promulgation of laws that would protect workers would ensue. Moreover, they wished for fairer treatment of labourers by their employers and a better understanding between them.

> CONDITION OF ENGLAND QUESTION
> A feeling very generally exists that the condition and disposition of the Working Classes is a rather ominous matter at present; that something ought to be said, something ought to be done, in regard to it. And surely, at an epoch of history when the 'National Petition' carts itself in waggons along the streets, and is presented 'bound with iron hoops, four men bearing it', to a Reformed House of Commons; and Chartism numbered by the million and half, taking nothing by its iron-hooped Petition, breaks out into brickbats, cheap pikes, and even into sputterings of conflagration, such very general

[68] Ibid., p. 31.
[69] Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, cit., p. 24.

> feeling cannot be considered unnatural! To us individually this matter appears, and has for many years appeared, to be the most ominous of all practical matters whatever; a matter in regard to which if something be not done, something will do itself one day, and in a fashion that will please nobody. The time is verily come for acting in it; how much more for consultation about acting in it, for speech and articulate inquiry about it![70]

As Arnold Kettle points out, Carlyle was the first to introduce the expression 'Condition of England' in his essay *Chartism*[71] and this umbrella term includes the early works of Elizabeth Gaskell. Social Problem Novels differ from other fiction as they entail limited involvement on the author's part (from the political, social, emotional, and aesthetic point of view) and a certain degree of abstraction, albeit keeping their roots firmly in Realism. Thus, authors such as Kingsley, Disraeli, and Gaskell, are on some level detached from the social conflicts that take place in their writings. Moreover, they write about the hardships of the working class from a vantage standpoint as they generally belong to and write for the middle class; it is to their conscience that they appeal. Their works were defined by a level of abstraction not entirely blended with the didactic element, along with a keen fascination with the chief human concern of the period.[72] They were also characterized by the fact that they "are more basically class-bound in their whole stance as writers, sharing … fears as well as the challenges which Carlyle's own sentences express".[73] Furthermore, Social Problem Novels can be traced back to a specific time, that of Chartism (1837-1848);[74] it was a period of turmoil across the United Kingdom since social and political problems were rampant.

Although Condition of England novelists were not the first to address social, political, and moral issues, they brought a new perspective to seemingly akin narrations. In fact, they reduced the degree of abstraction that was paramount in their predecessors who did not write about "life but ideas about

[70] T. Carlyle, *Chartism*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1842, p. 1.
[71] A. Kettle, Ford (ed.), *From Dickens to Hardy*, England: Penguin Group, (1982), 1990, p. 164.
[72] Ibid., pp. 165-166.
[73] Ibid., p. 165.
[74] Chartism was a nineteenth-century political movement that came to be in response to the 1832 Reform Bill. The people who adhered to the movement drew up the People's Charter in which they advocated for vote by ballot and universal suffrage among other things.

life".[75] In doing so, they placed themselves between "ludicrously abstract"[76] and "remarkably concrete"[77] authors, thus securing their place within the Realist tradition. The change of attitude was largely brought by the fact that the problems that writers of previous generations had only tackled theoretically were now very concrete, along with the political action in response to the hardships of the working classes.

While writing her Social Problem Novels, *Mary Barton* (1848), *Ruth* (1853), and *North and South* (1855), Elizabeth Gaskell had no political ambition, yet she was genuinely engaged in the everyday life of people, not to mention sympathetic with their feelings. Her approach was thus less philosophical and more concrete if compared to writers of previous generations. Notwithstanding the fact that her novels' strengths and flaws were closely linked to her aesthetic values, they provided readers with "an accurate and humane picture of working-class life in … large industrial town[s] in the forties"[78] and she explored thoroughly what it was like to live in Manchester in those years. *Mary Barton* was the result of her coping mechanism for the loss of her son, William, and consecrated her to fame. In it, she explored the challenges that the working classes had to face in a newly industrialized Britain, but also the values that people held dear at the time, however different they may be from those of today. *North and South* deals with similar topics, but the perspective is different. In fact, the story is told entirely from the point of view of a middle-class young woman and the main conflict it presents is that between the rural South and the industrialized North of England, which symbolically leads back to two completely opposite societies and the set of values they believed in. However, a more specific discussion will follow in the next chapter.

[75] Ibid., p. 167.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid., p. 173

As Arnold Kettle argues, The Social Problem Novel did not cease to exist in 1848 with the end of Chartism, "but the peculiar set of circumstances which produced Carlyle's Condition-of-England Question and writers' attempts to cope with it altered"[79] despite this, they are still significant nowadays both from the point of view of literary theory and history, and for their ability to convey powerful messages.

[79] Ibid., p. 180.

Chapter 3

North and South

North and South first came out as a serialized publication in *Household Words*, Charles Dickens's weekly periodical, between 2 September 1854 and 27 January 1855. Dickens himself solicited Elizabeth Gaskell's participation in his magazine, as he felt that her contribution could be precious. His attitude is reflected in one of the letters he addressed to her, in which he wrote that "I do honestly know that there is no living English writer whose aid I would desire to enlist in preference to the authoress of Mary Barton, … I venture to ask you whether you can give me any hope that you will write a short tale, or any number of tales, for the projected pages".[80] Gaskell faced some difficulties in meeting Dickens's writing schedule especially given that even at the height of her fame she never abandoned her duties as mother, wife, and mistress of the Gaskell household, thus her writing time was always somehow limited by everyday life. Moreover, Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell were united by the themes they explored in their works; they developed, each in their own way, the industrial theme, issues of class and the workings of personal relationships within a community. As a matter of fact, Gaskell felt almost intimidated by her fellow writer and she was relieved when she found out that *Hard Times* would not include a strike. The finished job earned her the sum of £250, but she never hid the fact that the serialized format posed a challenge for her who, shortly into the process of writing, felt "depressed about it [and] meant it to have been so much better".[81] This feeling was the result of her trying "to shorten & compress it, … to get it into reasonable length, but there were … a whole catalogue of events to go over".[82] *North and South* was later published as a novel in

[80] *Qtd*. in A. Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, cit., p. 86.
[81] E. Gaskell, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, cit., p. 323.
[82] Ibid.

two volumes and in two different editions also in 1855. The first edition was already a substantial departure from the episodic nature of publication that had been adopted in *Household Words*: it featured a few changes that adapted the story to the novel form together with the addition of new material. In addition, a second revised edition came out in the same year. The story is set around the time of writing in a manufacturing town in Darkshire named Milton-Northern which stands for Manchester.

3.1 A Narrative of Progress

Elizabeth Gaskell's novel addresses several issues, often in opposition to each other, which nevertheless have a distinct function within the narrative. Indeed, all of them serve a purpose not only in relation to the events but above all to the progress of the heroine, Margaret Hale.

3.1.1 The Title

The title, *North and South*, implicitly provides a possible reading key; the novel sets out to be one of oppositions and contrasts. Elizabeth Gaskell, like many of her contemporaries, puts into paper the clash between past and present that in the novel are epitomized by the places where most of the action takes place, that is Helstone and Milton-Northern. The former stands for a world of old glories that is bound to fade out and, in open contrast, the latter brings about new ideologies, technologies and advancements that will introduce a new way of life. In this respect, the title juxtaposes *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) since both Gaskell and Austen hint at a literary world built on the oppositions the titles suggest that set out to be "multiple and overlapping",[83] instead of fixed. However, it is worth mentioning that this was not Gaskell's original idea for the title which she wished to be, the heroine's name, 'Margaret Hale' in line not only with what she did for *Mary Barton* (1848) and *Ruth* (1853),

[83] Matus, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

but also with what many of her predecessors did, such as Daniel Defoe's *Roxana* (1724), Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), Fanny Burney's *Evelina* (1778), Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), and so on. Unfortunately, Charles Dickens did not like "Margaret Hale" thus *North and South* took its place even though it is not yet clear who came out with it. Furthermore, bearing in mind the plot, Gaskell wrote to Dickens towards the end of the serial publication in his periodical, asserting that "I think a better title than N. & S. would have been 'Death & Variations'. There are 5 deaths, each beautifully suited to the character of the individual".[84] Despite the fact that, according to Angus Easson, "'Margaret Hale' insists in a central human drama – the mental and emotional conflict of a single person, whose fate is bound up with her experience",[85] *North and South* proves to be the title that explicitly accounts for the geographic diversity of the North and the South of England, but that at a deeper level introduces all the other polarities that the story will address and will inextricably entwine (e.g., landed upper class and merchant class, mill workers and mill owners, social class and gender, masculine authority and feminine culture that encroach on the broader question of the role each person is called upon to play in society).

3.1.2 Conflicts

Like the title, the story revolves around a series of opposition such as that between mill workers and their employer, Mr. Thornton and that between the two main characters, Margaret and Mr. Thornton. Notwithstanding these two major ones, the novel is permeated by conflict and at some point, each character has to face ethical conundrums that are narrated by Elizabeth Gaskell with the realism typical of her storytelling. She presents everyday problems as honestly as she can and if a real solution cannot be accepted, she does not try to provide readers with one. Before anything else, characters must be true to themselves, and an example of this can be found in Mrs. Thornton's response to a dying Mrs. Hale who asks her to be a friend to Margaret once she is gone:

[84] Gaskell, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, cit., p. 324.
[85] Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, cit., p. 90.

> ‘Margaret – you have a daughter – my sister is in Italy. My child will be without a mother; – in a strange place, – if I die —– will you’ —– …
> ‘You wish me to be a friend to Miss Hale,’ said Mrs. Thornton, in her measured voice, that would not soften with her heart, but came out distinct and clear.
> Mrs. Hale, her eyes still fixed on Mrs. Thornton’s face, pressed the hand that lay below hers on the coverlet. She could not speak. Mrs. Thornton sighed, ‘I will be a true friend, if circumstances require it. Not a tender friend. That I cannot be,’ – (‘to her,’ she was on the point of adding, but she relented at the sight of that poor, anxious face.) – It is not my nature to show affection even where I feel it, nor do I volunteer advice in general. Still, at your request, – if it will be any comfort to you, I will promise you.’ …
> ‘I promise that in any difficulty in which Miss Hale’ —– …
> ‘In which she comes to me for help, I will help her with every power I have as if she were my own daughter. I also promise that if ever I see her doing what I think is wrong’ —– …
> ‘If ever I see her doing what I believe to be wrong – such wrong not touching me or mine, in which case I might be supposed to have an interested motive – I will tell her of it, faithfully and plainly, as I should wish my own daughter to be told.’[86]

The passage is illustrative in that it highlights the fact that even in the face of death, Mrs. Thornton promises only what her beliefs allow her to do, even if her behaviour can be considered tough and lacking in compassion. This does not deny the presence of emotions within the novel, on the contrary, *North and South* features the whole range of feelings that each person experiences in everyday life from the fulfilment deriving from meaningful personal interactions and the liveliness felt at the sight of a charming natural scenery to the grief and helplessness felt at the loss of a loved one.

3.1.3 Suffering

As a matter of fact, suffering is an influential part of the novel, but Gaskell is so skilful in her treatment of the “crisis of human existence”[87] that it does not become the predominant part. Mr. Hale has to face his doubts about his career path in the clergy and moves his entire family to Milton causing his wife’s health condition to deteriorate, eventually leading to her death. Margaret first has to cope with the move to the industrial North and, later, not only with her parents’ deaths but also with the one of Mr. Bell’s, her guardian. Mr. Thornton has to deal with his workers’ strike and towards the

[86] Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., pp. 241-242.
[87] W. A. Craik, *Elizabeth Gaskell and the English Provincial Novel*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, (1975), 2013, p. 90.

end of the novel with his bankruptcy. Bessy Higgins dies due to the unsanitary working conditions of cotton mills and her father must endure the pain caused by her loss. Each character bears a striking resemblance to real-life people, they all have merits and flaws, they are all human and imperfect, and the events of the plot are designed to test them and to account for their reactions when faced with difficulties. Suffering is alienated from a single character, Edith, whose presence in the novel is mostly limited to the letters she writes to Margaret, her cousin. *North and South* presents readers with seven deaths Bessy Higgins, Mrs. Hale, Leonards, Boucher, Mrs. Boucher, Mr. Hale, and Mr. Bell's; they are all considered part of the natural course of life and the one event which cannot be escaped, just like in everyday life. As Craik argues, "[t]he result is that, while, when the reader looks back on the novel after shutting it, there may seem an unconscionable amount of dying, in the actual experience of reading, deaths come in with the inescapable movement of felt life, not the evident contrivance of art".[88] Gaskell moulds the personality of her main characters, making grit one of their most engaging traits (with all the distinctions and differences that single out a character) so that they can use it as a resource to face the challenges that life regularly throws at them, be it ethical decisions, physical fortitude, or strength of character. In doing so, the author also provides another stark contrast that features on one side characters such as Margaret, Thornton and Higgins, and on the other Boucher, Fanny and Edith, for instance, that adhere to the definition of inept for the purposes of the story. Furthermore, as Craik points out, in *North and South* Elizabeth Gaskell "is not creating a 'world' … but rather … she is rendering the substance and texture of actual life in all its complexity and detail, with the … minimum of selection or distortion".[89] He also points out the unobtrusive nature of her authorial being which allows her to deal with private and public conflicts at the same time, and to better control the content of her writing since her main source is everyday life.

[88] Ibid., p. 100.
[89] Ibid., p. 92.

3.1.4 Time

North and South makes evident the novelist's dedication to the topics she deals with and sheds light on some of the social issues that plagued people individually and as a society in the nineteenth century. In thinking about her story, Gaskell attached great importance to the role of time so that it could go hand in hand with the actual pace of life. In this respect, the five deaths mentioned above, and the past play a key role. The deaths in that, each of them in its own way, become a catalyst for the evolution of Margaret's character. The past in that the novel reveals its paramount role in making the characters who they are when readers meet them. Moreover, "the reader is made to feel how heredity,[90] upbringing and environment have worked upon even the most minor characters, whose consciousness is not only in the present of the novel but made up of a lifetime of experiences, which lie behind".[91] The influence of the past is strong in both major and minor characters alike. Only when they accept they no longer live in the past and embrace the future with all that comes with it can the action can progress, eventually leading to Margaret and Thornton's marriage.

3.2 Intertwining Multiple Plots and Subplots

North and South presents various plots and subplots that intertwine until they organically and symbolically conclude with the marriage between Margaret and Mr. Thornton. The two major ones can be identified in the romance and the industrial plots that are equally important and will be addressed below; to these it must be added at least the maritime plot featuring Frederick, Margaret's brother, but which, for the purposes of this dissertation, will not be taken into consideration.

[90] It is worth mentioning that the years in which Gaskell was writing were immediately before the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species* (1859), thus issues of heredity have some resonance within the novel. Not only was Elizabeth Gaskell very fascinated by biology, but the Gaskells and the Darwins also shared relations.
[91] Craik, *Elizabeth Gaskell and The English Provincial Novel*, cit., 122.

3.2.1 The Meeting Between the Romance Plot and The Industrial Plot

As mentioned earlier[92] *North and South* is part of the tradition of the Social Problem Novel, also called Condition of England novel which "routinely relocate[s] existing generic conventions of many kinds".[93] In this way, Elizabeth Gaskell exploited the whole range of possibilities offered by the Domestic Fiction and the Industrial Novel to achieve a broader objective. The insertion of elements of one into the other serve respectively to privatise the public sphere and to politicize the domestic realm. Hence, the heroine is at the same time faced with her own personal challenges in the private sphere that will help her mature and become more aware of the world around her, but also play an active role in society by tackling relevant problems on a social scale.

The industrial plot is driven forward by the events surrounding the mill owner Mr. Thornton and his workers on a small scale, and the search for a balance between masters and men on a larger scale. This conflict, but also the intertwining of different plots, culminate with the riot scene in chapter XXII, in which the Marlborough Mills' workers protest against the arrival of workers from Ireland as a result of falling wages. Gaskell once again welds her roots in the realist tradition not only because she takes her cue from a real event, the 1853-1854 Preston strike,[94] but also because her depiction of the uprising mirrors the concern of the nineteenth century middle-class who felt menaced by losing their only recently acquired position of privilege within Victorian society by a hypothetical revolt at the hands of the working class. However, the narration of this scene is peculiar in that she makes extensive use of metaphorical lexicon referring to workers in bestial terms since they seem to lack the ability to speak. They are described as "wild beasts …, gaunt as wolves, and mad for prey"[95] they are only able to produce "wild beating and raging against the stony silence that vouchsafed them no

[92] See section 2.4 "The Social Problem Novel".
[93] J. Kucich, "*Political Melodrama Meets Domestic Fiction*: *The Politics of Genre in* North and South", *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 52, no. 1 (2019), 1-22, p. 4. Available: https://doi.org/10.1215/00295132-7330056, Accessed 2023, February.
[94] Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. xvii.
[95] Ibid., p. 177.

word"[96] and a "rolling angry murmur".[97] Thus, they prove incapable of engaging through the typically human medium of speech, instead, they behave like "a troop of animals".[98] However, this scene turns out to be highly interesting not only because it is the culmination of the workers' discontent, but also because it introduces the possibility of romance following Margaret's reaction when trying to protect Thornton.

Just a few lines after having used utterances belonging to the bestial imagery setting up a wild atmosphere, Elizabeth Gaskell makes a sharp change and uses a slightly sexually connoted language marking the introduction of romance into the narrative. "Margaret's own role in this scene is characterized by a complete absence of the self-control she normally prides herself in maintaining".[99] In fact, she makes a very physical gesture, "she threw her arms around him; she made her body into a shield from the fierce people beyond"[100] and she is described as if in a "trance of passion".[101] These lines mark a turning point in the novel as they inextricably combine the social conflict with the class struggle at its centre with the interpersonal conflict involving the two main characters. As Angus Easson argues:

> At the basic level of the plot, *North and South* seems to operate a series of displacements: the fundamental class conflict between the workers and their employers is translated into an issue of gender, as Margaret, the defender of the workers, clashes with Thornton. Beneath these fierce conflicts between female culture and masculine power lies a fundamental attraction …. The union of Margaret and Thornton at the end of the novel stands in metonymically for the union of classes they have come to represent: class issues have been displaced into those of gender, to be resolved by the most symbolic of all unions, marriage.[102]

[96] Ibid., p. 178.
[97] Ibid., p. 177.
[98] Ibid., p. 178.
[99] Ibid., p. xxviii.
[100] Ibid., p. 179.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid., p. xii.

As a matter of fact, Margaret who, at the beginning of the novel has only just been introduced to the industrial world and therefore has a fresh look on it, takes up the plight of the mill workers with their employer. Consequently, the union of the two at the end of the novel is not just an end to itself but becomes a symbol of the hope of reconciliation between classes, another indicator of how the two storylines intersect. The novel also structures the confrontations between Margaret and Thornton in such a way that the arguments outline each other's vision for the working conditions in his mill. In the course of these socially committed dialogues, both positions are mediated until they reach a meeting point that will lead to their eventual marriage. Elizabeth Gaskell thus makes a middle-class young woman spokesperson for the working class and in doing so, she "elides class and gender concerns, to offer a symbolic resolution of class conflict through marriage".[103] However, readers are left wondering what the future of this couple will look like and how the two will coexist in their newly discovered harmony. Consequently, this question can also be transposed to the macro scale and can be applied to the class dynamics of Victorian society. "Gaskell's difficulties in representation mirror the ideological problems within the text. The central question of how far individual 'freedom in working' should be allowed to override 'obedience to authority' remains unanswered".[104] As Angus Easson points out, the novelist explores a wide range of topics that prompt readers to ask questions either directly or indirectly but, aware of the complexities that lie at the foundations of the situations she narrates, she leaves these questions unanswered.[105]

3.2.2 Characters

THE HALES

Margaret Hale is the undisputed heroine of *North and South*. At the beginning of the novel, readers are under the impression that she is a snobbish and haughty person who does not "like shoppy

[103] Ibid., p. xxxiv
[104] Ibid.
[105] Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, cit., p. 87.

people".[106] Concerning her figure, Gaskell writes "Margaret could not help her looks; but the short curled upper lip, the round, massive up-turned chin, the manner of carrying her head, her movements, full of a soft feminine defiance, always gave strangers the impression of haughtiness".[107] However, as the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that she is a bright and intuitive young woman who has only a limited knowledge of the world dictated by the circumstances of her upbringing. As Craik points out, "she is in the common line of those heroines who acquire wisdom and triumph in marriage that reaches back to the eighteenth century".[108] Milton-Northern provides Margaret with the knowledge she lacked before, here she gets to know those "shoppy people"[109] she previously despised and finds in them "a human interest".[110] Furthermore, she experiences the struggle of not having a secure income to support her and the pain of losing dear ones, all events that will help her mature into a sympathetic woman full of human compassion who has found her purpose in the world. All the events that complicate the regular course of her life thus find a function in the development of her character. Despite Patsy Stoneman's argument that "the novel presents Margaret from the beginning as a strong woman",[111] Margaret's personality undergoes substantial changes during the course of the novel that help her become a well-rounded person who has been shaped by the events she had to face during the course of her life. For this reason, limited to Margaret's story, *North and South* can be read as a *Bildungsroman*. Although not the only one, Margaret's point of view is the main one through which the story is presented and perfectly embodies what Duthie calls "the standpoint … of the middle-class observer".[112]

The other members of the Hale family certainly play a minor role compared to Margaret's, but they are still important. Mr. Hale functions as the agent that sets the plot in motion with the move to Milton because of the doubts that grip him with respect to "how far the individual has the right to set personal

[106] Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 19.
[107] Ibid., p. 62.
[108] Craik, *Elizabeth Gaskell and The English Provincial Novel*, cit., p. 126.
[109] Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 19.
[110] Ibid., p. 74.
[111] P. Stoneman, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, (1987), 2006, p. 84.
[112] Duthie, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

conscience above the demands of an institution to which he subscribes"[113] and to the conflict that he feels exists between "duty to individual conscience, and duty to one's family".[114] In one of her letters to William Fairbairn, Gaskell clarifies Mr. Hale's position:

> Mr Hale is not a 'sceptic'; he has doubts, and can resolve greatly about great things, and is capable of self-sacrifice in theory; but in the details of practice he is weak and vacillating. I know a character just like his, a clergyman who has left the Church from principle, and in that did finely; but his daily life is a constant unspoken regret that he did so, although he would do it again if need be.[115]

Even though Angus Easson argues that "Mr. Hale's throwing up of his ministry is not linked directly to William Stevenson's relinquishing of his",[116] it is rather "an Anglican rejection of the Trinity, the 39 Articles, and a parliamentary religion",[117] the author's reference here could still be addressed to her father. William Stevenson left the clergy because he did not feel comfortable being paid for sermonizing and became a tutor in Manchester. Despite the fact that there is "no overlap in personality"[118] between Mr. Hale and Elizabeth Gaskell's father, the two bear a striking resemblance. In fact, Mr. Hale too becomes a tutor in Milton-Northern following his withdrawal from the clergy, albeit it is not clear to readers the nature of his "smouldering doubts by the authority of the Church".[119] Mrs. Hale was born into the wealthy Beresford family, but "had married the man of her heart"[120] thus giving up a more than comfortable life to become the wife of a preacher. In the narrative, she is presented from the outset as a weak woman, whose health is endangered by her husband's-imposed move to Milton, which will ultimately prove fatal. Besides Margaret, she also has another child, Frederick who joined the navy a few years back but found himself at the centre of a mutiny that ended with the overthrowing of the despotic captain of his ship. Therefore, he cannot go "back to England

[113] Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. xiv.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Gaskell, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, cit., p. 353.
[116] Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, cit., p. 17.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. xv.
[119] Ibid., p. 34.
[120] Ibid., p. 15.

because of that terrible affair"[121] as he is considered guilty. He built a new life in Spain with his wife Dolores Barbour and converted to Catholicism.

THE THORNTONS

"The wealthy manufacturer"[122] John Thornton is a major figure within the plot, not only in relation to Margaret but also in relation to his position as master, thus being at the same time the hero of the romantic plot and the mill owner of the industrial plot. When we meet him, he is described by Margaret "[a]bout thirty – with a face that is neither exactly plain, nor yet handsome, nothing remarkable – not quite a gentleman".[123] The circumstances of his upbringing prove to be crucial in order to fully understand his character. In fact, his father committed suicide due to debts that burdened him, and he was forced to work at a very young age to support his sister Fanny and his mother. The latter, a "firm, severe, dignified woman"[124] acts as *materfamilias* in the novel and appears chiefly for the sake of her relationship with her son, which is extremely strong and extends to such extent that in some situations it could be considered her son's business partner. Mr. Thornton undergoes a profound change within the novel that brings him to become a much more considerate master to his men and a much more sympathetic human being.

THE HIGGINS

Nicholas Higgins is a millworker who can be considered the "working-class hero"[125] of the novel. He is a socially active personality who fights for what he believes in; he is also intelligent and sympathetic towards the plight of those less fortunate than him. He has two daughters, Mary and Bessy. The latter is severely ill due to the fluff she has inhaled while working and is bound to a painful death. The sentence "North and South has both met and made kind o' friends in this smoky place"[126]

[121] Ibid., p. 16.
[122] Ibid., p. 65.
[123] Ibid., p. 64.
[124] Ibid., p. 76.
[125] Ibid., p. xviii.
[126] Ibid., p. 73.

which Higgins utters in his and his daughter's first encounter with Margaret who befriends them, is the first instance in the novel in which the clear-cut division separating the North and South of England is explicitly voiced. As the narrative progresses, he will prove to be an asset for Thornton as he manifests the needs of his fellow workers; "Thornton is a good master, Higgins is a good worker, and so they can cooperate".[127] Higgins's character is also interesting stylistically in that the sentences he utters are very often in dialect, thus testifying to Gaskell's ability to work with different linguistic registers.

In the portrayal of her characters Elizabeth Gaskell often covertly defies the role conventions of nineteenth century Britain. The figure in which this aspect is most evident is Mr. Hale who is presented throughout the narrative as a weak person who does not have the strength to confront his wife concerning the implications of his decision to leave the ministry. Thus, the burden falls on Margaret who, not only has to tell her mother they will be moving to another town but also who is basically left alone to deal with the tasks that a relocation entails. This pattern repeats itself several times throughout the narrative. Noteworthy is Mr. Hale's reaction to Margaret's request to go and inform Mrs. Boucher of her husband's death; he "was indeed unable [,] … trembling from head to foot".[128] As a result, the father takes on almost childlike features, whereas the daughter those a parent should have in a rather peculiar role reversal. However, Mr. Hale is not only opposed to his much stronger daughter but also to John Thornton. The two are physically juxtaposed in chapter X and the description emphasises their diametrical opposed figures, which at a deeper level also suggests two completely different personalities; "[m]asculine decisiveness is set against feminine emotionality":[129]

> The lines in her father's face were soft and waving, with a frequent undulating kind of trembling movement passing over them, showing every fluctuating emotion; the eyelids were large and arched, giving to the eyes a peculiar languid beauty which was almost feminine. … [I]n Mr. Thornton's face the straight brows fell low over the clear, deep-set earnest eyes, which, without being unpleasantly

[127] Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, cit., p. 93.
[128] Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 295.
[129] Ibid., p. xv.

> sharp, seemed intent enough to penetrate into the very heart and core of what he was looking at. The lines in the face were few but firm, as if they were carved in marble, … [he had] the severe and resolved expression of a man ready to do and dare everything.[130]

The novel seems to attribute to the two young protagonists the characteristics lacking in the Hale family, setting them up to be determined and tenacious human beings capable of adapting and reacting even in situations in which they find themselves in difficulty, aware of their role in society and with a clear purpose in mind.

3.3 The Geography of The Novel

As can be inferred from the self-evident title, geography plays a paramount role in *North and South* and Elizabeth Gaskell uses this element to her advantage. Each of the wide range of places she mentions in the story is imbued with symbolic meaning; indeed, the names of the two main towns, Milton and Helstone, can be considered as archetypes of any northern and southern town respectively. However, these two are set in a context that gives readers the impression of reality as places that are familiar to most are often mentioned, such as London and Oxford, but also Corfu, Spain and Scotland. The importance that the writer attaches to the geographical element is also evident from the fact that since she wants to paint a world that feels as real as possible, she makes her secondary characters speak in the Lancashire dialect, which she proves skilful in using. In this instance, it is noteworthy, as Craik maintains, that "Elizabeth Gaskell's dialect speakers … tend to speak from positions of greater extremity than others, on deeper subjects, with more pith and point, and with almost poetic insight".[131] As a matter of fact, one of the characters whose dialogues are most accomplished, insightful and full of feeling is Bessy Higgins, who, like her father, generally uses dialect to communicate with others:

[130] Ibid., p. 80.
[131] Craik, *Elizabeth Gaskell and The English Provincial Novel*, cit., p. 109.

> I used to think once that if I could have a day of doing nothing, to rest me – a day in some quiet place like that yo' speak on – it would maybe set me up. But now I've had many days o' idleness, and I'm just as weary o' them as I was o' my work. Sometimes I'm so tired out I think I cannot enjoy heaven without a piece of rest first. I'm rather afeared o' going straight there without getting a good sleep in the grave to set me up.[132]

Gaskell, however, adds a degree of mastery in that she ensures that the characters who use dialect to communicate are well aware of their interlocutor and consequently the linguistic register is adapted if necessary.

The first chapters of the novel prepare readers for the event that will disrupt the life of the protagonist (that is her arrival in the North) by building up the idyll of Margaret's life in the countryside through her biased eyes. The action of the novel takes place in London, Helstone, Oxford, and most importantly in Milton. In order to get a glimpse of the symbolic meaning of these places, Craik argues that "London reveal[s] conventional upper-middle-class standards and behaviour; Helstone the natural life of the country and the old rural standards; Oxford the life of the mind …; and Milton a new world still in the process of creating itself … with the power to develop and grow which the others lack".[133] London is where the story opens, but Gaskell cleverly makes her readers understand that it is only a small window that prepares for the real action. Readers are offered a glimpse of the fashionable London society that portrays "conventional upper-middle-class standards and behaviour"[134] whose main exponents in the novel are Edith and her mother, Aunt Shaw. The author highlights the futility of the occupations of the gentry and the inadequacy of that lifestyle when Margaret goes back to the city after she has lived in Milton for three years and has acquired a different awareness of the world surrounding her. Oxford, instead, represents a place of knowledge that enriches the intellect, and its major representative is Mr. Bell. He talks about Oxford "with its beauty

[132] Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 101.
[133] Craik, *Elizabeth Gaskell and The English Provincial Novel*, cit., p. 112.
[134] Ibid.

and its learning, and its proud old history"[135] as a place to "glory in",[136] thus reinforcing the idea that it is the place where the mind thrives. Helstone and Milton bear more significance both in allegorical and literal terms and thus deserve a more in-depth treatment.

3.3.1 Helstone

> ' …. Is Helstone a village, or a town, in the first place?'
> '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 have 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.'[137]

Although the very first scene of the novel takes place in London, it is Helstone that represents the ideological starting point for both the physical and inner journey of Margaret. This rural town is located in the South of England and, more specifically, near the New Forest and in the first description that is provided to readers it looks like an idyllic, almost bucolic and otherworldly countryside. In the lines above the protagonist outlines to an incredulous Henry Lennox the very best features of her hometown so much so that her interlocutor finds it hard to believe that such a place could ever exist in the real world. Notwithstanding Lennox's doubts, since the narrative is mainly filtered through Margaret's eyes, readers do not question the veracity of her account, at least at first. In fact, her move to Milton will make her and readers realise the limitations of her initial outlook. Through Margaret's person, Helstone exists both as an actual entity, but also as a foil to her fervent and genuine nature, it perfectly embodies her personality in the early stages.

> The forest trees were all one dark, full, dusky green; the fern below them caught all the slanting sunbeams; the weather was sultry and broodingly still. Margaret used to tramp along by her father's

[135] Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 333.
[136] Ibid., p. 331.
[137] Ibid., p. 12.

> side, crushing down the fern with a cruel glee, as she felt it yield under her light foot, and send up the fragrance peculiar to it, out on the broad commons into the warm scented light, seeing multitudes of wild, free, living creatures, revelling in the sunshine, and the herbs and flowers it called forth. … She took a pride in her forest. Its people were her people. She made hearty friends with them; learned and delighted in using their peculiar words; took up her freedom amongst them; nursed their babies; talked or read with slow distinctness to their old people; carried dainty messes to their sick; resolved before long to teach at the school, … she was continually tempted off to go and see some individual friend – man, woman, or child – in some cottage in the green shade of the forest. Her out-of-doors life was perfect.[138]

Here too Helstone is praised for its natural beauty, but as it will happen for Milton, besides its natural features also the people are mentioned as an integral part of the place. For most of the narrative the countryside is simply remembered and idealised by Margaret who places it in direct opposition to the greyness and squalor she attributes to Milton. However, with the passing of time, the protagonist realises that she had a perception of the place linked more to the happy memories of her childhood than to the actual characteristics of the place:

> 'You must not go to the South,' said Margaret, 'for all that. You could not stand it. You would have to be out all weathers. It would kill you with rheumatism. The mere bodily work at your time of life would break you down. The fare is far different to what you have been accustomed to.'
> '…. You would not bear the dulness of the life; you don't know what it is; it would eat you away like rust. Those that have lived there all their lives, are used to soaking in the stagnant waters. They labour on, from day to day, in the great solitude of steaming fields – never speaking or lifting up their poor, bent, downcast heads. The hard spade-work robs their brain of life; the sameness of their toil deadens their imagination; they don't care to meet to talk over thoughts and speculations, even of the weakest, wildest kind, after their work is done; they go home brutishly tired, poor creatures! caring for nothing but food and rest. You could not stir them up into any companionship, which you get in a town as plentiful as the air you breathe, whether it be good or bad – and that I don't know; but I do know, that you of all men are not one to bear a life among such labourers. What would be peace to them, would be eternal fretting to you. Think no more of it, Nicholas, I beg. Besides, you could never pay to get mother and children all there – that's one good thing.'[139]

This feeling of heavily biased perceptions is a symptom of Margaret's changing attitude and is reinforced by her visit to Helstone with Mr. Bell three years after she and her family left. She finds the place changed, but more importantly, she finds herself changed and grown up:

> The parsonage was so altered, both inside and out, that the real pain was less than she had anticipated. It was not like the same place. The garden, the grass-plat, formerly so daintily trim that even a stray rose-leaf seemed like a fleck on its exquisite arrangement and propriety, was strewed with children's things; a bag of marbles here, a hoop there; a straw-hat forced down upon a rose-tree as on a peg, to

[138] Ibid., p. 17.
[139] Ibid., p. 306.

> the destruction of a long beautiful tender branch laden with flowers, which in former days would have been trained up tenderly, as if beloved.[140]

The author inserts Margaret's return to Helstone to reinforce the concept that the protagonist's idea of the place of her childhood is by no means flawless, instead, it is to be placed within the faulty memory of a young Margaret. Moreover, it is only after Thornton visits Helstone and understands its significance for his beloved that the reconciliation between the two can take place. By the end of the novel Helstone has become the "village in a tale"[141] Henry Lennox was talking about; it embodies both Margaret and England's past.

3.3.2 Milton-Northern

> There was the secret motive, as Margaret knew from her own feelings. It would be different. Discordant as it was – with almost a detestation for all she had ever heard of the North of England, the manufacturers, the people, the wild and bleak country – there was this one recommendation – it would be different from Helstone, and could never remind them of that beloved place.[142]

As mentioned above Milton-Northern is the place where most of the action in *North and South* takes place. Elizabeth Gaskell builds this newly industrialized town in the North of England as a mildly veiled Manchester, the place where she resided after her marriage and thus knew very well. Milton stands for what was new in nineteenth century Britain, it is a place that is economically thriving thanks to the efforts of the middle-class who became enriched through trade and the advancements of industry and technology. At the same time, it is a place where the living conditions of the working class were appalling and the controversies between workers and employers were at their peak; thus, it represents a mixture of admirable and abhorrent qualities at the same time. Furthermore, just like the two main characters who undergo major changes brought about by the events that shaped them, by its ending, the novel lays the foundation for readers to realise that there are changes in the horizon for Milton as well, this time brought about by the people that live in it.

[140] Ibid., p. 392.
[141] Ibid., p. 12.
[142] Ibid., p. 39.

However, Margaret's first impression of the town is far from being a positive one, on the contrary, it possesses gloomy characteristics:

> 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 whirled 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 …. As they drove through the larger and wider streets, from the station to the hotel, they had to stop constantly; great loaded lurries 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 waggon 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.[143]

Her first impression is, on some level, similar to the one the readers have, since it is the one of an outsider who sees before her eyes an unknown place from which she does not know what to expect. The description above, however, is interesting in that not only it gives a first glimpse of the environment surrounding the town, but also it specifically refers to the people the protagonist meets on her way. As the narrative proceeds, Margaret will warm up to Milton and to its inhabitants, and this behaviour is symptomatic of her changing attitude and of her growing awareness of the possibilities that they have to offer her:

> She liked the exultation in the sense of power which these Milton men had. … [T]hey seemed to defy the old limits of possibility, in a kind of fine intoxication …. If in her cooler moments she might not approve of their spirit in all things, still there was much to admire in their forgetfulness of themselves and the present, in their anticipated triumphs over all to inanimate matter at some future time which none of them should live to see.[144]

By the end of *North and South*, she understands that Milton, oppressive as it might seem at first glance, represents the future of a new age, whereas Helstone loses the appeal it had symbolizing a

[143] Ibid., p. 59.
[144] Ibid., pp. 163-164.

past to which Margaret could never return. For Thornton and Margaret, Milton-Northern is a place that confronts them with many trials and hardships but which, at the same time, strengthens their characters and makes them ponder upon broader social issues. As Preston argues, "[b]y writing about these things from the heart of the provincial experience in the mid-nineteenth century [Gaskell] creates above all an image of Manchester … as a place in whose streets there walk living, suffering human beings".[145] Elizabeth Gaskell uses estrangement to provide as truthful a depiction as possible of the societies she presents within *North and South*, "whether it be the harshness of the northern masters or the shallowness of London gentility".[146]

[145] P. Preston, "Manchester and Milton-Northern", in Peter Preston and Paul Simpson-Housley (ed.), *Writing the City*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 31-57, p. 56. Available: https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.sydney.edu.au/10.4324/9780203213360, Accessed 2023, April.
[146] Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. xiii.

Chapter 4

Jane Austen's Influence on *North and South*

> [T]he Victorians cast Austen as a heroine who could further their own nationalist agendas … in recapturing a specific version of Englishness that is marked by historical nostalgia and set in an idealized pastoral world. … [F]or many Victorian writers, this interest was not entirely uncritical, and Austen provided a means to give voice to complex questions about nation, culture and history.[147]

Jane Austen's reception during the nineteenth century is nothing short of a success, "[s]he was "England's Jane" for the Victorians",[148] and was considered one of England's champions on a par with the heroines of her novels. Since it is known that Elizabeth Gaskell was an avid reader, it is likely that she also read *Pride and Prejudice* given the success it had in her years. However, she left no written record or comment about it, and her letters mention neither the work nor the author. According to Janine Barchas, this choice might have to do with the fact that Charlotte Brontë was a dear friend of Gaskell's[149] and her strong feelings about Austen's novel became no secret when the letters she wrote to G. H. Lewes were published in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*:

> 'Why do you like Miss Austen so very much? I am puzzled on that point. What induced you to say that you would have rather written "Pride and Prejudice" … than any of the Waverley Novels?
>
> 'I had not seen "Pride and Prejudice" till I read that sentence of yours, and then I've got the book. And what did I find? An accurate daguerreotyped portrait of a commonplace face; a carefully-fenced highly-cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers; but no glance of a bright vivid physiognomy, no open country, no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny beck. I should hardly like to live with her ladies and gentlemen, in their elegant but confined houses. These observations will probably irritate you, but I shall run the risk.[150]

[147] C. A. Wilson, *Jane Austen and the Victorian Heroine*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan (Springer Nature), 2017, p. 167.
[148] Ibid.
[149] J. Barchas "Mrs. Gaskell's *North and South*: Austen's Early Legacy." *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal*, vol. 30, n. 30 (2008), 53-66, p. 61. Available: link.gale.com/apps/doc/A199801398/AONE?u=usyd&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=fce2d170, Accessed 2023, February.
[150] Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, cit., p. 274.

Notwithstanding Charlotte Brontë's attitude towards *Pride and Prejudice* and the friendship between her and Elizabeth Gaskell, it is undeniable that in *North and South* a few hints to Jane Austen can be found and, more specifically, to the aforementioned novel so much so that today it becomes very difficult to overlook or to consider coincidences the aspects that the two novels share. Therefore, it is likely that this is the most telling evidence that Gaskell not only read her fellow writer but that she also might have appreciated her. It might be argued that Austen was not an overtly political writer, but, to this regard, both Matthew Sussman and Claudia L. Johnson remark that she actually "discusse[d] politics all the time without making announcements about it beforehand"[151] and that her novels are full of references to "how the private is political".[152] Thus, Elizabeth Gaskell demonstrates "how the marriage plot and other 'domestic' relationships … provide a formal and thematic model for the dialectical engagements that are necessary for navigating social change".[153] This chapter will try to make sense of a few elements that *North and South* and *Pride and Prejudice* share and that make the reading of the former more thorough in light of the elements it shares with the latter.

4.1 Diverse Settings: Contrasts Between Austen's Agrarian Past and Gaskell's Industrial Present

As already mentioned,[154] both *Pride and Prejudice* and *North and South* present an opposition in the title, and both hint at what the two novels will focus on. This is not to say that in *North and South*, the geographical opposition takes precedence over the importance of dialogues and character growth, but rather that these elements are spurred by it. On the other hand, the title of Jane Austen's novel features two major characteristics, or better flaws, of the protagonists hinting from the outset what

[151] *Qtd.* in M. Sussman, "Austen, Gaskell, and the Politics of Domestic Fiction." *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 83, n. 1 (2022), 1-26, p. 3. Available: https://doi.org/10.1215/00267929-9475004, Accessed 2022, December.
[152] Ibid.
[153] Ibid., p. 4.
[154] See section 3.1.1.

they will have to overcome in order to become fully developed individuals. Thus, the title lacks any kind of geographical mention and very little space is actually left in the narrative for descriptions of the characters' surroundings. However, it can be inferred that *Pride and Prejudice* is set in a rural environment, much like the one of Helstone, the place that Margaret leaves behind in *North and South*.

As is well known, Jane Austen is among the most relevant authors in the field of the Novel of Manners and of the *Bildungsroman*, a type of fiction that focuses on the social, family and personal growth events that affect the characters in these novels. As a consequence, conversations that lead to the development of the self have a prominent role within them, seemingly much more than the descriptions of the places where the action takes place, and which serve as the background against which characters carry out their actions. The author of *Pride and Prejudice* herself tries to make her attitude very clear in the course of the narrative as, when presented with the opportunity to give space to the geographical element, she often relegates it to a position of lesser importance, if compared to other details:

> 'Are you pleased with Kent?'
> A short dialogue on the subject of the country ensued, on either side calm and concise – and soon put to an end by the entrance of Charlotte and her sister, just returned from their walk.[155]
>
> It is not the object of this work to give a description of Derbyshire, nor of any of the remarkable places through which their route thither lay.[156]

As is evident from the above passages, to a lengthy natural description that would have the power to transport readers to the places mentioned, Austen prefers to leave room for personal interactions so that they never forget what the driving force of action is. However, as Anne Toner remarks, by explicitly underlining what she wants to overlook, the author merely directs the readers' attention to this aspect, or lack thereof, employing apophasis, a rhetorical figure that "draws attention to that

[155] J. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, James Kinsley (ed.), New York: Oxford University Press, (1980), 2019, p. 135.
[156] Ibid., p. 179.

which it claims to pass over".[157] It is thus significant that what Austen claims to dismiss, actually comes back as a relevant element if a closer look is paid to the novel as a whole. The readers' attention is tickled by the remarks made by the narratorial voice which suggests they might want to know something more about the places where the scenes are set.

Nevertheless, *Pride and Prejudice* features three natural descriptions that are worth mentioning and that do not draw attention away from the focal point of the novel; the first one is shorter, and it focuses on Elizabeth's route across Rosings's park along with the natural changes that occurred as the season progressed whereas the second and third ones are lengthier and illustrate the surroundings of Pemberley, Darcy's estate, which is set in a pastoral environment. The former passage occurs in chapter XII of the second volume when Elizabeth is walking across the park:

> [I]nstead of entering the park, she turned up the lane, which led her farther from the turnpike road. The park paling was still the boundary on one side, and she soon passed one of the gates into the ground. After walking two or three times along that part of the lane, she was tempted, by the pleasantness of the morning, to stop at the gates and look into the park. The five weeks which she had now passed in Kent, had made a great difference in the country, and every day was adding to the verdure of the early trees.[158]

In these few lines, Elizabeth notices the changes that have taken place in the weeks she has spent in Kent and how in the open countryside these are particularly evident in the verdant trees that surround her which provide a convenient environment for the reading of Darcy's letter. The first chapter of the third volume, on the other hand, is the one that presents both the last two descriptions and thus has a more extensive range of substantial passages directly recalling the natural elements of the scenery that the protagonist notices in the vast estate of Pemberley:

> Elizabeth, as they drove along, watched for the first appearance of Pemberley Woods with some perturbation; and when at length they turned in at the lodge, her spirits were in a high flutter.

[157] A. Toner, "Landscape as Literary Criticism." *Critical Survey*, vol. 26, n. 1 (2014), 3-19, p. 9. Available: https://www.jstor.org/stable/24712586, Accessed 2023, July.
[158] Austen, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

> The park was very large, and contained great variety of ground. They entered it in one of its lowest points, and drove for some time through a beautiful wood, stretching over a wide extent. … They gradually ascended for half a mile, and then found themselves at the top of a considerable eminence, where the wood ceased, and the eye was instantly caught by Pemberley House, situated on the opposite side of a valley, into which the road with some abruptness wound. It was a large, handsome, stone building, standing well on rising ground, and backed by a ridge of high woody hills; – and in front, a stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater, but without any artificial appearance. Its banks were neither formal, nor falsely adorned. … They descended the hill, crossed the bridge, and drove to the door …. The hill, crowned with wood, from which they had descended, receiving increased abruptness from the distance, was a beautiful object. Every disposition of the ground was good; and she looked on the whole scene, the river, the trees scattered on its banks, and the winding of the valley, as far as she could trace it, with delight.[159]

> They had now entered a beautiful walk by the side of the water, and every step was bringing forward a nobler fall of ground, or a finer reach of the woods to which they were approaching; … They entered the woods, and bidding adieu to the river for a while, ascended some of the higher grounds; whence in spots where the opening of the trees gave the eye power to wander, were many charming views of the valley, the opposite hills, with the long range of woods overspreading many, and occasionally part of the stream. … [T]hey pursued the accustomed circuit; which brought them again, after some time, in a descent among hanging woods, to the edge of the water, in one of its narrowest parts. They crossed it by a simple bridge, in character with the general air of the scene; it was a spot less adorned than any they had yet visited; and the valley, here contracted into a glen, allowed room only for the stream, and a narrow walk amidst the rough coppice-wood which bordered it.[160]

What passes before Elizabeth's eyes constitutes a perfect example of a rural idyll where nature is pervasive. All the above natural descriptions refer to the concept of the picturesque first introduced by William Gilpin who found a word to describe a "peculiar beauty, which is agreeable in a picture".[161] As Anna Burton remarks, for the first time Gilpin outlined a series of criteria through which the aesthetic framework could be applied "both to the scrutiny of art and to the means to view the natural landscape".[162] The picturesque thus describes a concept suited both in aesthetic terms, but also whenever the description of a natural scene, which falls within the terms delineated by Gilpin, occurs in literature. It is known for a fact that Austen was familiar with this conception as she makes her heroine utter the words "stay where you are. – You are charmingly group'd and appear to uncommon advantage. The picturesque would be spoilt by admitting a fourth."[163] In reference to this sentence, James Kinsley remarks that "Elizabeth seems to have in mind William Gilpin's advice on

[159] Ibid., pp. 181-182.
[160] Ibid., pp. 187-188.
[161] *Qtd.* in A. Burton, "Remarks on Forest Scenery", *Gaskell Society Journal*, vol. 32 (2018), 37-54, p. 38. Available: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48518862, Accessed 2023, July.
[162] Ibid.
[163] Austen, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

the proper arrangement of cattle in a picturesque landscape"[164] hence explicitly proving the novelist's awareness of her fellow author's writings.

Elizabeth Gaskell shares with Jane Austen the picturesque aspect of her descriptions of the New Forest so much so that she uses the term coined by William Gilpin too:

> 'These are the cottages that haunted me so during the rainy fortnight, reproaching me for not having sketched them.'
>
> 'Before they tumbled down and were no more seen. Truly, if they are to be sketched and they are very picturesque – we had better not put it off till next year. But where shall we sit?'
>
> 'Oh! You might have come straight from chambers in the Temple, instead of having been two months in the Highlands! Look at this beautiful trunk of a tree, which the wood-cutters have left just in the right place for the light. I will put my plaid over it, and it will be a regular forest throne.'[165]

The scene draws back explicitly to the aesthetic world, not only because it mentions the picturesque, but also because Margaret is outdoors sketching with Henry Lennox. When the protagonist is removed from the countryside in order to follow her father, she begins to aestheticize her previous home giving it almost dreamlike features:

> Margaret had never spoken of Helstone since she left it, except just naming the place incidentally. She saw it in dreams more vivid than life, and as she fell away to slumber at nights her memory wandered in all its pleasant places. But her heart was opened to this girl: 'Oh, Bessy, I loved the home we have left so dearly! I wish you could see it. I cannot tell you half its beauty. There are great trees standing all about it, with their branches stretching long and level, and making a deep shade of rest even at noonday. And yet, though every leaf may seem still, there is a continual rushing sound of movement all around – not close at hand. Then sometimes the turf is as soft and fine as velvet; and sometimes quite lush with the perpetual moisture of a little, hidden, tinkling brook near at hand. And then in other parts there are billowy ferns – whole stretches of fern; some in the green shadow; some with long streaks of golden sunlight lying on them – just like the sea.'[166]

In these lines for the first time, Margaret explicitly opens up to a Milton inhabitant about Helstone; her longing for the place is evident from the way she speaks about it and the place looks like

[164] Ibid., p. 308.
[165] E. Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 25.
[166] Ibid., p. 100.

something out of a fairy tale, as Henry Lennox has pointed out a few chapters earlier.[167] Margaret's characterization emphasises the role of light, which changes shades slightly according to the season and time of day, and the noises that characterize the forest that remind her so much of her home. Furthermore, all the natural descriptions in the novel highlight the pivotal role that the heroine's relation has with her surroundings, to such an extent that "[s]he took a pride in her forest. Its people were her people".[168] This aspect unites Gaskell's and Austen's heroines in that they both find their dimension in the open air. *Pride and Prejudice*'s narrator informs readers that Elizabeth "had often great enjoyment out of doors",[169] whereas *North and South*'s remarks that "[s]he was so happy out of doors"[170] and even goes as far as to say that "[h]er out-of-doors life was perfect".[171] Moreover, along with their fascination for natural environs, Elizabeth and Margaret share another aspect that was rather unusual at the time of the setting of their respective novels, that is to say, their fondness for walks, regardless of the weather:

> Elizabeth continued her walk alone, crossing field after field at a quick pace, jumping over stiles and springing over puddles with impatient activity, and finding herself at last within the view of the house, with weary ankles, dirty stockings, and a face glowing with the warmth of exercise.[172]
>
> And walk Margaret did, in spite of the weather.[173]

Walking was not considered within the canons of femininity at the time, and it was usual for women to move around in carriages or horseback. It is thus significant that both heroines choose to walk, even in adverse weather conditions, in the two instances mentioned above since it could have been seen as subtly defying contemporary society.

[167] Ibid., p. 12.
[168] Ibid., p. 17.
[169] Austen, *op. cit.*, p. 127.
[170] E. Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 19.
[171] Ibid., p. 17
[172] Austen, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
[173] E. Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 19.

Notwithstanding Margaret's deep fondness for Helstone, a few chapters from the beginning of the novel she is forced to leave it and move to Milton Northern; the "delicious air"[174] of the countryside leaves its place to the "smoky air"[175] of the industrial town that will be her home for the next years. The heroine resignedly follows her family to the north of England, but the memory of Helstone lingers in her mind, as does the nostalgia with which she remembers it for most of the novel:

> A little breeze was stirring in the hot air, and though there were no trees to show the playful tossing movement caused by the wind among the leaves, Margaret knew how, somewhere or another, by wayside, in copses, or in thick green woods, there was a pleasant, murmuring, dancing sound, a rushing and falling noise, the very thought of which was an echo of distant gladness in her heart.[176]

There comes a time, however, when Margaret realises that she idealised her previous home and all she has told about it is called into question. This moment comes around chapter XXI of the second volume when she goes back to Helstone with Mr. Bell; she finds it radically changed since she last had been there and perceives a sense of alienation:

> And now sharper feelings came shooting through her heart, whether pain or pleasure she could hardly tell. Every mile was redolent of associations, which she would not have missed for the world, but each of which made her cry upon 'the days that are no more,' with ineffable longing. … It hurt her to see the Helstone road so flooded in the sun-light, and every turn and every familiar tree so precisely the same in its summer glory as it had been in former years.[177]

The changes the protagonist sees trigger not only an emotional reaction but also a physical one as, in response to this moment, she cries as soon as her memories shift back to the happiness of her past days. The arcadian perception Margaret had of Helstone inevitably changes after having lived in Milton for a few years and having befriended its inhabitants. She now has a completely different perspective on life from the one she had at the beginning of *North and South*. She is now a grown up woman who has seen the hardships of labourers, who has lost perhaps more than she has gained in

[174] Ibid., p. 41.
[175] Ibid., p. 45.
[176] Ibid., p. 192.
[177] Ibid., p. 385.

human terms and who has become aware of the workings of the world. This is symptomatic of her newly found perception of the pastoral countryside of her memories:

> And, somehow, this visit to Helstone had not been all – had not been exactly what she had expected. There was change everywhere; slight, yet pervading all. Households were changed by absence, or death, or marriage, or the natural mutations brought by days and months and years, which carry us on imperceptibly from childhood to youth, and thence through manhood to age, whence we drop like fruit, fully ripe, into the quiet mother earth. Places were changed – a tree gone here, a bough there, bringing in a long ray of light where no light was before – a road was trimmed and narrowed, and the green straggling pathway by its side enclosed and cultivated. A great improvement it was called; but Margaret sighed over the old picturesqueness, the old gloom, and the grassy wayside of former days.[178]

All the changes that Margaret perceives result from her realising that she has romanticized the place and that she has ended up outgrowing it. Helstone has not remained unchanged throughout time, unlike her perception of it. The heroine notices changes both in the landscape and, perhaps more importantly, in her mind that lead her to have a different attitude towards what surrounds her.

In conclusion, it can be argued that Gaskell's novel mirrors at the level of geographical setting some of the changes that were taking place on a larger scale. Both novels taken into consideration mention briefly the gilded society of the city which include for *Pride and Prejudice* and *North and South* respectively, Bingley's sisters and Edith (just to quote two examples) but strongly reject it as the main setting in which the action takes place. If, on the one hand, Jane Austen sets *Pride and Prejudice* in the countryside in line with the romantic tradition and most of the action takes place there, on the other hand, Elizabeth Gaskell finds that a setting limited only to the countryside is out of tune with what was happening all over Britain, hence she writes about the journey of her heroine who moves from Helstone, a place that shares the picturesqueness of Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice*, to Milton, a modern industrialized town. Gaskell thus makes evident the change in taste that was happening not only at a literary level moving towards the realist tradition, but also as far as Britain society was concerned since her novel features the technological changes, and, more

[178] Ibid., p. 394

generally, the advancements that were disrupting the mid-nineteenth century society who was moving to the towns of the North since they offered more job opportunities.

4.2 Comparing Heroines: Elizabeth Bennet and Margaret Hale

The characters of Margaret Hale and Elizabeth Bennet share a few common traits inasmuch as they are both clever and beautiful (even if this is not made clear to readers, especially at the beginning of each novel); moreover, they share a common family background and they are both aware of what society expects of them though they subtly defy it in order to affirm their identity and to be true to themselves. Both the heroines of *Pride and Prejudice* and *North and South* come from very similarly structured families. Both fathers are educated men who share a fondness for spending time in their respective libraries; in fact, Mr. Bennet is "most anxious … to have his library to himself",[179] whereas Mr. Hale withdraws "into his small library"[180] every chance he gets. In addition to this, neither one of them has spent their money wisely and has left the family struggling because of this. Furthermore, in the Bennet and Hale families, the maternal presence is not particularly strong; for instance, in the former Mrs. Bennet is shown to be a rather frivolous and silly person (like her daughters, except for Elizabeth and partly Jane who are often embarrassed because of her), whereas in the latter Mrs. Hale is very ill and frail throughout the course of the novel until her death shortly after the middle of it. Both parents strongly rely on their respective daughters to manage their household, perhaps too much, given the very strong personalities of the two heroines.

4.2.1 Elizabeth Bennet

Throughout the narration Elizabeth Bennet is described as a fine, witty young woman who, however, at times gets blinded by prejudices. She "has something more of quickness than her

[179] Austen, *op. cit.*, p. 54.
[180] E. Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 19.

sisters"[181] thus bringing her closer to her father with whom she shares a close relationship and at the same time distancing her from her younger sisters, but, above all, Austen often places her in contrast with her mother who is definitely not a sharp wit. In addition to this, she is described as very beautiful, even though Mr. Darcy initially does not give her credit in this regard[182] and Miss Bingley has the same opinion, but unlike him, she does not change it throughout the course of the novel, perhaps out of jealousy:

> 'I must confess that I never could see any beauty in her. Her face is too thin; her complexion has no brilliancy; and her features are not at all handsome. Her nose wants character; there is nothing marked in its lines. Her teeth are tolerable, but not out of the common way; and as for her eyes, which have sometimes been called so fine, I never could perceive any thing extraordinary in them. They have a sharp, shrewish look, which I do not like at all; and in her air altogether, there is a self-sufficiency without fashion, which is intolerable.'[183]

Nevertheless, as the narrative proceeds Darcy's initial perspective is retracted, and readers realise that he was biased in the perception he had of Elizabeth because of her strong opinions and bold manners. Not many pages after his initial remark, Austen states:

> Mr. Darcy had at fist scarcely allowed her to be pretty; he had looked at her without admiration at the ball; and when they next met, he looked at her only to criticise. But no sooner had he made it clear to himself and his friends that she had hardly a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes. To this discovery succeeded some others equally mortifying. Though he had detected with a critical eye more than one failure of perfect symmetry in her form, he was forced to acknowledge her figure to be light and pleasing; and in spite of his asserting that her manners were not those of the fashionable world, he was caught by their easy playfulness.[184]

Darcy is forced to withdraw his previous statement and by the end of the novel, after they both have undergone changes, he even goes as far as saying that she is "one of the handsomest women of [his] acquaintance".[185] The protagonist of *Pride and Prejudice* hence is attributed great beauty; this feature

[181] Austen, *op. cit.*, p. 54.
[182] Ibid., p. 9.
[183] Ibid., p. 201.
[184] Ibid., p. 18.
[185] Ibid., p. 201.

is noticed every time she enters a room and is sometimes even perceived as threatening, as in the case of Miss Bingley.

Moreover, Elizabeth has a very strong personality; she often asserts her independence and refuses to conform completely to the behaviours imposed on women at the time. After having rejected Mr. Collins's proposal she says to him "[d]o not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart"[186] and subsequently she also explicitly and rather harshly rejects Mr. Darcy:

> 'From the very beginning, from the first moment I may almost say, of my acquaintance with you, your manners impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others, were such as to form that ground-work of disapprobation, on which succeeding events have built so immovable a dislike; and I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry.'[187]

Hence, she prizes her independence and her freedom; it is not that Elizabeth does not want to marry, but she wants to do so on her own terms, and a marriage of convenience like that of her parents does not work for her. Regarding marriage, she has a romantic view that opposes her to the pragmatic Charlotte Lucas, who instead accepts Mr. Collins's proposal as she understands that it is a good opportunity for her and that marrying him safeguards her future. Furthermore, she also attaches a great deal of value to her freedom of choice, and she does not let anyone push her around, not even the rich and titled Lady Catherine de Bourgh who strongly opposes the marriage between her nephew and Elizabeth. In the conversation the two women have about this, Elizabeth asserts her own identity proving to be utterly unashamed of who she is and of her low-connected family and that titles and money do not determine the value of a person:

> 'If you were sensible of your own good, you would not wish to quit the sphere, in which you have been brought up.'
>
> 'In marrying your nephew, I should not consider myself as quitting that sphere. He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal.'[188]

[186] Ibid., p. 83.
[187] Ibid., p. 145
[188] Ibid., p. 265.

To Lady Catherine's further remarks, she replies "I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to *you*, or to any person so wholly unconnected to me".[189] As a consequence, Elizabeth Bennet, more than being extremely beautiful, proves to be a resolute, determined, independent young lady who is not afraid to challenge the standards imposed by society how she can.

4.2.3 Margaret Hale

Margaret Hale is described as having a "tall, finely made figure"[190] and at the same time:

> Sometimes people wondered that parents so handsome should have a daughter who was so far from regularly beautiful: not beautiful at all, was occasionally said. Her mouth was wide; no rosebud that could only open just enough to let out a 'yes' and 'no', and 'an't please you sir'.[191]

The fact that Gaskell endows her with a wide mouth helps to understand Margaret's personality: she has opinions, and she is not afraid to voice them. Her perhaps a little unconventional beauty, arouses fascination in people who see her; in fact, "the wide mouth was one soft curve of rich red lips; and the skin, if not white and fair, was of an ivory smoothness and delicacy"[192] and the look on her face looks at the same time "too dignified and reserved" and "bright as the morning, – full of dimples, and glances that spoke of childish gladness, and boundless hope in the future".[193] Whenever she enters a room her physical presence is perceived as particularly strong and these traits make her particularly attractive to such a degree that even Mrs. Thornton is forced to acknowledge "her great beauty".[194] However, in line with the ideology of the time, she is not very comfortable with all the attention she is accorded because of her beauty and after Henry Lennox proposes to her, she feels "guilty and

[189] Ibid., p. 267
[190] E. Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 9.
[191] Ibid., p. 17.
[192] Ibid.
[193] Ibid.
[194] Ibid., p. 86.

ashamed of having grown into a woman as to be thought in marriage".[195] Victorian society expected women not to manifest sexuality in any way and chastity and demureness were considered virtues, thus only the fact that they were considered suitable to be married represented an explicit statement. Shame thus, becomes the attribute associated whenever the sexual sphere comes up in the novel, however veiled this may seem to modern readers. Furthermore, the protagonist of *North and South* is endowed with a very strong personality that makes her resilient and confident with her choices, as Dr. Donaldson thinks to himself:

> That's what I call a fine girl! … What a queen she is! With her head thrown back at first, to force me into speaking the truth; and then bent so eagerly forward to listen. … [I]t's astonishing how much those thorough-bred creatures can do and suffer. That girl's game to the back-bone. Another, who had gone that deadly colour, could never have come round without either fainting or hysterics. But she wouldn't do either – not she! And the very force of her will brought her round.[196]

Margaret is also clever, she is the wisest person in her family and the one everyone relies upon; what is more, eventually she is able to let go of her pride and of the prejudices she had towards Milton and its inhabitants and develop in a fine young woman who first interrogates herself with regard to her place within the society in which she lives and then thrives to be an active member in it while asserting her independence:

> [S]he had learnt, in those solemn hours of thought, that she herself must one day answer for her own life, and what she done with it; and she tried to settle that most difficult problem for women, how much was to be utterly merged in obedience to authority, and how much might be set apart for freedom in working.[197]

As has been demonstrated, the heroines of *Pride and Prejudice* and *North and South* share a few common traits. Both come from a similar background which proves to be crucial in their upbringing. To this, two rather similar physical characterizations must be added highlighting the fact that both

[195] Ibid., p. 33.
[196] Ibid., p. 127.
[197] Ibid., p. 416.

young women are very beautiful, although, at the beginning of the novels, this feature is undermined. However, more importantly, they share a very similar personality that does not leave them blind to the tenets of eighteenth and nineteenth century societies, but that reacts to them. They both assert their independence, their freedom of choice and the will to do things on their own terms. Of course, the period in which the two novels were written plays a key role so Margaret can go slightly further than Elizabeth, which she does in the riot scene, for instance, but both novels prove to be in their own way a journey of growth and development for the two heroines, so much so that they can be considered *Bildungsromans*.

4.3 *North and South*'s Indebtedness to *Pride and Prejudice*'s Courtship Plot

Critics[198] have recently argued that although no explicit reference is made, there are a few instances in which it can be inferred that the plot of *North and South* is indebted to *Pride and Prejudice*. Firstly, Jane Austen's novel had already hinted at some subtle geographical differences between the North and the South of England, which are instead decidedly marked in Gaskell's work. In fact, the North is described as a place where characters are exiled after committing unbecoming acts; it is the place where Lydia and Wickham are "banished to".[199] Thus, the writer drives away to the North those who do not respect the moral conventions befitting the society she describes. However, the more substantial common features concern the courtship plot. In fact, both novels feature two heroines that are at first ill-disposed towards the hero but eventually change their minds and, after a series of misunderstandings, their adverse feelings turn to love by the end of the novels. Nils Clausson argues that "the conflicted romance between Margaret Hale and John Thornton …

[198] Janine Barchas, Ruth Bernard Yeazell, Matthew Sussman, Nils Clausson, Cheryl A. Wilson and Sarah Dredge are the most relevant for the purposes of this study.
[199] Austen, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

reads like the courtship of Elizabeth Bennet and Darcy transposed to mid-Victorian Manchester".[200] Hence, *North and South* borrows some tropes from *Pride and Prejudice* but presents them with a new, more modern approach.

Elizabeth Gaskell opens her novel in a manner that closely resembles her eighteenth-century fellow writer; in fact, special emphasis is placed on the relationship between love and money when the Hale's marriage is introduced. Mrs. Hale is counterposed to her sister, Mrs. Shaw, in that the former "had married the man of her heart"[201] whereas the latter, to a marriage based on mutual affection, preferred a convenient one that allows her to be at the centre of the lively London life. The same dilemma arises a little later for Margaret, who receives a marriage proposal from Henry Lennox. Accepting it would imply a rather comfortable and carefree life for the heroine, but she does not feel the same kind of affection professed to her by the lawyer:

> 'Margaret, I wish you did not like Helstone so much – did not seem so perfectly calm and happy here. I have been hoping for these three months past to find you regretting London – and London friends, a little – enough to make you listen more kindly' (for she was quietly, but firmly, striving to extricate her hand from his grasp) 'to one who has not much to offer, it is true – nothing but prospects in the future – but who does love you, Margaret, almost in spite of himself. Margaret, have I startled you too much? …
>
> 'I was startled. I did not know that you cared for me in that way.
> I have always thought of you as a friend; and, please, I would rather go on thinking of you so. I don't like to be spoken to as you have been doing. I cannot answer you as you want me to do, and yet I should feel so sorry if I vexed you.'[202]

This scene echoes Elizabeth Bennet's rejection of the very first marriage proposal she receives, from Mr. Collins:

> 'Believe me, my dear Miss Elizabeth, that your modesty, so far from doing you any disservice, rather adds to your other perfections. You would have been less amiable in my eyes had there *not* been this little unwillingness; but allow me to assure you that I have your respected mother's permission for this address. You can hardly doubt the purport of my discourse, however your natural delicacy may

[200] N. Clausson, "Romancing Manchester: Class, Gender, and the Conflicting Genres of Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*", *Gaskell Society Journal*, vol. 21 (2007), 1-20, p. 3. Available: https://www.jstor.org/stable/45185937, Accessed 2023, February.
[201] E. Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 14.
[202] Ibid., pp. 28-28.

> lead you to dissemble; my attentions have been too marked to be mistaken. Almost as soon as I entered the house I singled you out as the companion of my future life.'[203]
>
> 'You are too hasty, Sir,' she cried. 'You forget that I have made no answer. Let me do it without farther loss of time. Accept my thanks for the compliment you are paying me. I am very sensible of the honour of your proposals, but it is impossible for me to do otherwise than decline them.'[204]

This passage has some resonance for the readers of *North and South*, especially because it was not usual for women of the time to reject a marriage proposal. Both Margaret and Elizabeth show strength of character with this choice since most marriages in those years were not based on love, but more on economic factors, they were financial transactions. Marrying Mr. Collins or Henry Lennox would be a safe choice since both men, as clergyman and lawyer respectively, would be able to support their wives and give them a comfortable life but both women demonstrate strength of character by refusing a 'traditional marriage' and being true to themselves. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century societies frowned upon the rejection of an eligible man, and this attitude is made clear by Mrs. Bennet, who is not only annoyed at her daughter's choices, especially because she thinks it would impact Elizabeth's sisters' prospects of marriage, but who even goes as far as saying that she "will never see her again"[205] if she decides not to change her mind.

Furthermore, both Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Thornton express negative judgements about their first impressions of Darcy and Margaret, respectively. "I quite detest the man"[206] utters Elizabeth's mother, whereas Thornton's exclaims "I hate her!".[207] In fact, it is precisely the haughty and intimidating impression the two have that gives rise to the first negative impression they seem to have on those who do not know them well:

> Darcy was clever. He was at the same time haughty, reserved, and fastidious, and his manners, though well bred, were not inviting.[208]

[203] Austen, *op. cit.*, p. 80.
[204] Ibid., p. 81.
[205] Ibid., p. 85.
[206] Austen, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
[207] E. Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 79.
[208] Austen, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

> Margaret could not help her looks; but the short curled upper lip, the round, massive up-turned chin, the manner of carrying her head, her movements, full of a soft feminine defiance, always gave strangers the impression of haughtiness.[209]

Initial impressions of the two couples with each other is not exactly positive either, in fact, on the one hand, *Pride and Prejudice*'s hero says that Elizabeth "is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt"[210] him, whereas Thornton "almost said to himself that he did not like"[211] Margaret; on the other hand, all the Bennet sisters think that Darcy is "the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world"[212] and Margaret explicitly says that she does not "like [Thornton] at all".[213] However, this initial mistrust soon turns in the case of Darcy and Mr. Thornton into an awareness of being fascinated with the two young women so much so that they both decide to propose:

> 'In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.'[214]

> 'I choose to believe that I owe my very life to you – ay – smile, and think it an exaggeration if you will. I believe it, because it adds a value to that life to think … circumstance so wrought, that whenever I exult in existence henceforward, I may say to myself, 'All this gladness in life, all honest pride in doing my work in the world, all this keen sense of being, I owe to her!' And it doubles the gladness, it makes the pride glow, it sharpens the sense of existence till I hardly know if it is pain or pleasure, to think that I owe to one … whom I love, as I do not believe man ever loved woman before.'[215]

Unfortunately, Elizabeth and Margaret have not had the same change of heart yet, thus, resentful, they both reject their proposition:

> 'In such cases as this, it is, I believe, the established mode to express a sense of obligation for the sentiments avowed, however unequally they may be returned. It is natural that obligation should be felt, and if I could *feel* gratitude, I would now thank you. But I cannot – I have never desired your good opinion, and you have certainly bestowed it most unwillingly. I am sorry to have occasioned pain to any one. It has been most unconsciously done, however, and I hope will be of short duration. The feelings which, you tell me, have long prevented the acknowledgment of your regard, can have little difficulty in overcoming it after this explanation.' …

> 'And this is all the reply which I am to have the honour of expecting! I might, perhaps, wish to be informed why, with so little endeavour at civility, I am thus rejected. But it is of small importance.'

[209] E. Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 62.
[210] Austen, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
[211] E. Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 63.
[212] Austen, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
[213] E. Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 88.
[214] Austen, *op. cit.*, p. 142.
[215] E. Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 195.

> 'I might as well enquire,' replied she, 'why with so evident a design of offending and insulting me, you chose to tell me that you liked me against your will, against your reason, and even against your character? Was not this some excuse for incivility, if I was uncivil? But I have other provocations. You know I have. Had not my own feelings decided against you, had they been indifferent, or had they even been favourable, do you think that any consideration would tempt me to accept the man, who has been the means of ruining, perhaps for ever, the happiness of a most beloved sister?'[216]

In a similar way, Margaret replies:

> 'Your way of speaking shocks me. It is blasphemous. I cannot help it, if that is my first feeling. It might not be so, I dare say, if I understood the kind of feeling you describe. I do not want to vex you; and besides, we must speak gently, for mamma is asleep; but your whole manner offends me –'[217]

The narrative of both novels is then followed by a series of misunderstandings that will take the heroines and the heroes on different paths for the subsequent chapters; these will play a key role and will be the driving force behind the courtship plot. Elizabeth realizes that she misjudged Darcy and the role he played both in relation to the possible attachment between her sister Jane and Bingley, and in relation to Wickham. She comments upon her previous behaviour:

> 'How despicably have I acted!' she cried. – 'I, who have prided myself on my discernment! – I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity, in useless or blameable distrust. – How humiliating is this discovery!'[218]

Margaret too proves to be the cause of some major misunderstandings in *North and South*. The first one occurs when she tries to protect Thornton,[219] an action that unleashes a chain of gossip centred on her supposedly explicit love gesture towards the mill owner, which in turn spurs him to make the marriage proposal mentioned above. The second originates from the episode in which she is at the station with her mutinous brother who cannot set foot in Britain. The two siblings cross paths with Leonards whose fall down the stairs results in his death and Margaret is recognized by an eyewitness as a potential companion of the man she is with since very few people know who he actually is. While the second misunderstanding that Margaret causes provokes in her a "dead swoon"[220] that befits the

[216] Austen, *op. cit.*, pp. 142-143.
[217] E. Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 195.
[218] Austen, *op. cit.*, p. 156.
[219] E. Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 179.
[220] Ibid., p. 275.

Gothic tradition, the words that she utters in relation to the first one, as soon as she realizes that her behaviour could have been misunderstood even though she had the noblest of reasons for acting that way, sound very familiar to those of Elizabeth mentioned above:

> '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 mêlée, like a romantic fool!'[221]

Both young women, who prized themselves with being rather sharp are taken aback by the consequences of their actions and the remarks they make sound much alike.

In addition, both *North and South* and *Pride and Prejudice* have a strong adult female figure who has strong reservations about the union of the two couples. In Austen's novel, that character is Lady Catherine de Bourgh who not only would like her nephew Darcy married to her own sickly daughter but also objects to the union because of the Bennet family's unfavourable reputation following the episode involving Lydia and Wickham. She says: "And is *such* a girl to be my nephew's sister? Is *her* husband, is the son of his late father's steward, to be his brother? Heaven and earth! – of what are you thinking? Are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted?".[222] In a similar way, Mrs. Thornton worries about the prospect of a still hypothetical attachment between her son and Margaret who she believes has a secret love affair:

> 'At first, when I heard from one of my servants, that you had been seen walking about with a gentleman, so far from home as the Outwood station, at such a time of the evening, I could hardly believe it. But my son, I am sorry to say, confirmed her story. … if Fanny had done so we should consider it a great disgrace – and Fanny might be led away –'[223]

Both women offend the protagonist of their respective novels underlining that their reputation has the potential to taint their protégés, so much so that Mrs. Thornton in relation to her son explicitly says to Margaret that she is "not worthy to know him".[224] In response to the insults they received, the

[221] Ibid., p. 190.
[222] Austen, *op. cit.*, p. 266.
[223] E. Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 315-316.
[224] Ibid., p. 316.

words spoken by both heroines mirror one another since Elizabeth says: 'You can now have nothing further to say,' … 'you have insulted me, in every possible method. I must beg to return to the house''[225] whereas Margaret: 'You can say nothing more, Mrs. Thornton. I decline every attempt to justify myself for anything. You must allow to leave the room.'[226]

Only once all misunderstandings have been resolved, the heroines have asserted their independence and all four protagonists of the two novels have developed as individuals and abandoned their pride and their prejudice, can the marriages take place which symbolically stand for the union of the public and private spheres.

> 'If your feelings are still what they were last April, tell me so at once. *My* affections and wishes are unchanged, but one word from you will silence me on this subject for ever.'
>
> Elizabeth feeling all the more than common awkwardness and anxiety of his situation, now forced herself to speak; and immediately, though not very fluently, gave him to understand, that her sentiments had undergone so material a change, since the period to which he alluded, as to make her receive with gratitude and pleasure, his present assurances. The happiness which this reply produced, was such as he had probably never felt before; and he expressed himself on the occasion as sensibly and as warmly as a man violently in love can be supposed to do. Had Elizabeth been able to encounter his eye, she might have seen how well the expression of heartfelt delight, diffused over his face, became him; but, though she could not look, she could listen, and he told her of feelings, which, in proving of what importance she was to him, made his affection every moment more valuable.[227]

> 'Margaret!'
> Still lower went the head; more closely hidden was the face, almost resting on the table before her. He came close to her. He knelt by her side, to bring his face to a level with her ear; and whispered - panted out the words: –
> 'Take care. – If you do not speak – I shall claim you as my own in some strange presumptuous way. – Send me away at once, if I must go; – Margaret! –'
> At that third call she turned her face, still covered with her small white hands, towards him, and laid it on his shoulder, hiding it even there; and it was too delicious to feel her soft cheek against his, for him to wish to see either deep blushes or loving eyes. He clasped her close. But they both kept silence.[228]

As has been made clear, the courtship plot of *North and South* follows the same pattern as *Pride and Prejudice* so much so that sometimes the dialogues seem to have an Austenian echo. Sarah

[225] Austen, *op. cit.*, p. 266.
[226] E. Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 317.
[227] Austen, *op. cit.*, p. 273.
[228] E. Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 435.

Dredge argues that considering Elizabeth Gaskell's novel as a continuum of Austen's sheds light on it.[229] The nineteenth century writer employs the same structure as her predecessor, but she adapts the story to the time in which she was writing. She also argues that whereas Austen could have never envisaged a husband for Elizabeth enriched through trade, nor a story in which most of it takes place in the North of England, Gaskell can and does so. Thus, she goes beyond the limits 'imposed' on Austen and this is especially evident in the portrayal of the two heroines of *Pride and Prejudice* and *North and South*, Elizabeth and Margaret.

[229] S. Dredge, "Within View of His Own Warehouses': Sites of Change in Pride and Prejudice and North and South." in L. Hopkins (ed.), *After Austen: Renovations, Rewritings, Revisitings*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 43-60, p. 55. Available: https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.sydney.edu.au/10.1007/978-3-319-95894-1_3, Accessed 2023, February.

Chapter 5

Charlotte Brontë's influence on *North and South*

As previously stated, *North and South* defies the traditional genre conventions, and, like other Condition of England Novels, is prone to display different features belonging to different literary categories. The comparison with *Pride and Prejudice* presented in chapter four highlighted the courtship plot that dominates the second part of Gaskell's novel; on the other hand, this chapter aims at shedding light on the other storyline that prevails in it, namely the industrial plot. This will be done by analysing *Shirley*, a novel by Charlotte Brontë that, according to W. A. Craik, is also her least popular one.[230] The novel was published in 1849 but the action takes place in 1811-1812 amid the Luddite attacks in Yorkshire. Throughout the pages of the novel, Brontë breaks away from her usual way of writing and composes a work that tackles historically and socially relevant points.

The friendship between the two authors is now well known; however, despite the relationship between the two, Gaskell made no secret of her opinion of *Shirley* and wrote to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth "I think I told you that I disliked a good deal in the plot of Shirley, but the expression of her own thoughts in it is so true and brave, that I greatly admire her".[231] Notwithstanding her opinion of the novel, it likely had an impact on her. *North and South* and *Shirley* deal with a similar theme, albeit with due differences, and at times it is possible to detect a clear echo to Brontë's pen, whether intentional or unintentional that might offer insight if read in relation to each other. The first that strikes the eye is certainly an analogy at the level of the names. In fact, if on the one hand, the name of one of *Shirley*'s heroines is Caroline Helstone, on the other, Elizabeth Gaskell employs her

[230] W. A. Craik, "Shirley", in W. A. Craik (ed.), *The Brontë Novels*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011, pp. 123-157, p. 156.
[231] Gaskell, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, cit., p. 116.

surname, Helstone, as the name of the place where Margaret comes from and is so dear to her heart. This might be considered just a coincidence, were it not that a similar displacement of a surname for a town happens with Thornton too. In fact, the name of Brontë's birthplace is exploited in *North and South* as the surname of the male protagonist. Nevertheless, other more subtle, but more content-relevant similarities will be analysed in the course of the chapter.

5.1 Brontë and Gaskell's Friendship: *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*

The friendship between Gaskell and Brontë was a source of inspiration and comparison for both of them who, in addition to sharing the status of authoresses in a male-dominated society, also shared interests and passions on an intellectual and personal level. The frequent exchange of letters between the two, as well as the less frequent occasions for them to meet, were therefore certainly a forum for lively discussion and exchange of ideas and opinions that had an impact on both authors. When Gaskell was faced with the task of writing her friend's biography, not only did she use the letters that they exchanged throughout the years and her personal experience of her friend, but she did much deeper research that allowed her to investigate Charlotte Brontë's literary character and her writings. The result is a massive work that offers a detailed analysis of the author and of her works. For the purposes of this thesis, it is therefore of interest to briefly consider the relationship that the two had and, subsequently, to address the additional information on *Shirley* that the biography offers in order to become more acquainted with certain aspects of the novel.

5.1.1 Authors and Friends

"Currer Bell (aha! what will you give me for a secret?) She's a she – that I will tell you – who has sent me 'Shirley'".[232] With these words, Elizabeth Gaskell informs her friend Catherine Winkworth

[232] Ibid., p. 79.

that Currer Bell, the pen behind *Jane Eyre*, whose identity had puzzled the public and critics alike, is a woman. Many had speculated about the identity of the author, but Charlotte Brontë wanted to keep her identity hidden mainly to avoid biased comments about her works. By the time Gaskell wrote to her friend that Currer Bell was, in fact, a woman, she was captivated by her literary personality and by her writings, to such an extent that about *Jane Eyre*, she wrote to a friend "Read 'Jane Eyre', it is an uncommon book. I don't know if I like it or dislike it".[233] This fascination culminated in their first meeting on 20 August 1850 at the Kay-Shuttleworth holiday house where Brontë was a guest. Gaskell gives a fairly detailed account of the meeting in her letters and describes her as:

> [A] little lady in black silk gown, whom I could not see at first for the dazzle in the room; she came up & shook hands with me at once …. She is, (as she calls herself) *undeveloped*; thin and more than $\frac{1}{2}$ a head shorter than I, soft brown hair not so dark as mine; eyes (very good and expressive looking straight & open at you) of the same colour, a reddish face; large mouth & many teeth gone; altogether plain; the forehead square, broad, and rather overhanging. She has a very sweet voice, rather hesitates in choosing her expressions, but when chosen they seem without an effort, admirable and just befitting the occasion. There is nothing overstrained but perfectly simple.[234]

What struck her the most was the helplessness that she detected in Brontë who, for her part, was caught by Gaskell's maternal appeal and by the fact that she led what seemed to her a whole life. They shared a connection not only from the intellectual point of view but also from the emotional one. Moreover, being two extremely popular women writers, they had to deal with many similar problems and try to carve out a place in society for themselves. The two only met on other four occasions (Brontë visited Gaskell in Manchester three times, and Gaskell went to Haworth just once), but their friendship flourished thanks to the letters they sent to each other.

Unfortunately, Charlotte Brontë died prematurely on 31 March 1855 and Gaskell did not know she was ill until she learnt of her death. The news came to her from John Greenwood, the owner of a shop in Haworth who thought it wise to notify her friend. Gaskell was bewildered at the news and

[233] Ibid., p. 57.
[234] Ibid., pp. 123-124.

replied back to Greenwood wanting to know more of the circumstances that led to her friend's death while she was pregnant with her child.

> My dear Sir,
>
> I can not tell you how very sad your note has made me. My dear dear friend that I shall never see again on earth! I did not even know she was ill. I had heard nothing of her since the beginning of December when she wrote to a mutual friend saying that she was well, and happy. … You may well say you have lost your best friend; strangers might know her by her great fame, but we loved her dearly for her goodness, truth, and kindness, & those lovely qualities she carried with her where she is gone.
>
> I want to know EVERY particular. Has she been long ill? What was her illness? You would oblige me *extremely* if you would, at your earliest leisure, send me every detail. … I loved her dearly, more than I think she knew. I shall never cease to be thankful that I knew her: or to mourn her loss.[235]

To cope with the loss Gaskell began to think about how to honour the memory and life of her dear friend, thus the idea of an initially private memoir began to take shape. On May 31, 1855, she wrote to George Smith, Brontë's publisher, telling him of her regrets about her behaviour in the preceding months, but also of how much the loss of such a dear friend upset her and thus of her desire to write something that would honour her memory:

> I had never heard of her being ill; or I would have gone to her at once; she would have disliked my doing so, as I am fully aware, but I think I could have overcome that, and perhaps saved her life. I wrote to her last in October; and she had never replied to that letter, but as she knew I was very busy in completing a task which I extremely disliked, I fancied that her silence arose partly from the sensitive delicacy which always made her hold aloof from even the semblance of interruption or intrusion. Moreover in my last letter I had spoken a good deal of my views of the Church of England, which she knew well enough before, & sympathized in, but which I thought might probably annoy her husband …. And so, – half busy, – half trying to be patient, I never wrote to her again after that October letter; and I do regret it now! …
>
> She often asked me (after her marriage last year) to go over & see her; I never went, partly because it required a little courage to face Mr Nicholls, as she had told me he did not like her intimacy with us as dissenters, but that she knew he would like us when he had seen us. …
>
> It was from finding how much names and dates which she then gave me in speaking of her past life had passed out of my memory, that I determined that in our country-leisure this summer I would put down every thing I remembered about this dear friend and noble woman, before its vividness had faded from my mind: but I *know* that Mr Brontë, and I *fear* that Mr Nicholls, would not like this made public, even though the more she was known the more people would honour her as a woman, separate from her character of authoress. Still my children, who all loved her would like to have what I could write about her; and the time may come when her wild sad life, and the beautiful character that grew out of it may be made public. I thought that I would simply write down my own personal recollections of her …. But (from the tenor of Mr Greenwood's first letter.) you will see that this sort of record of her could not be made public at present without giving pain.[236]

[235] Ibid., p. 335-336.
[236] Ibid., p. 346-348.

However, on 16 June 1855 Patrick Brontë, Charlotte's father, reached out to Gaskell and asked her to "write a brief account of her life and to make some remarks on her works"[237] under the suggestion of Ellen Nussey, one of Charlotte Brontë's oldest friends. The biography would have served to put to rest the malicious rumours that began to circulate after the author's death and to celebrate the remarkable woman that she was. And so, this massive work, which took Gaskell more than a year to finish, began. Gaskell started gathering material on her friend through letters, diverse testimonies, and visiting the places where she had been in order to convey the most accurate portrait of the woman. According to Angus Easson, the model that inspired Gaskell was the *Life of Johnson* by Boswell which "allow[ed] the subject to bear witness and reveal herself through words which spring[ed] from her own personality".[238] This work was monumental and pioneering not only because Gaskell was not familiar with the writing of biographies, but also, perhaps more importantly, because at that time there was no precedent for a noteworthy woman writer's biography, thus it was Elizabeth Gaskell's work that established itself as the model to be emulated in the years that followed.

5.1.2 The Suggestions Offered by *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* on *Shirley*

The Life of Charlotte Brontë is relevant with regard to *Shirley*, as it is for all of Brontë's writings, because it offers some additional information on the novel. In the first place, it informs readers that the subject was taken from real historical facts, that "[s]he was anxious to write of things she had known and seen"[239] and that "she took the idea of most of her characters from life, although the incidents and situations were, of course, fictitious".[240] For instance, Caroline Helstone was "apparently based to some degree on both Charlotte's close friend Ellen Nussey and Charlotte herself"[241] and to remove any doubt Gaskell explicitly asked Charlotte Brontë's friend, "[a]re not *you*

[237] *Qtd*., in Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, cit., p. 134.
[238] Ibid., p. 138.
[239] Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, cit., p. 314.
[240] Ibid.
[241] C. Brontë, *Shirley*, J. Cox (ed.), England: Penguin, (1849), 2006, p. 620.

Caroline Helstone?"[242] in two occasions. However, perhaps the most striking example is the character of Shirley who was modelled on Emily Brontë.

> The character of Shirley herself is Charlotte's representation of Emily. I mention this because all that I, a stranger, have been able to learn about her has not tended to give either me, or my readers, a pleasant impression of her. But we must remember how little we are acquainted with her, compared to that sister, who, out of her more intimate knowledge, says that she 'was genuinely good, and truly great', and who tried to depict her character in Shirley Keeldar, as what Emily Brontë would have been, had she been placed in health and prosperity.[243]
>
> [T]he character of Shirley was meant for her sister Emily, about whom she is never tired of talking, nor I of listening. Emily must have been a remnant of the Titans, – great grand-daughter of the giants, who used to inhabit earth.[244]

Moreover, the biography makes it clear how challenging the writing of the novel was for the author. In fact, while crafting it, she had to deal with the death of her siblings, and these circumstances perhaps account for the grim tone that permeates the novel in its entirety.

> Down into the midst of her writing came the bolts of death. She had nearly finished the second volume that of her tale when Branwell died, – after him Emily, – after her Anne; – the pen, laid down when there were three sisters living and loving, was taken up when one alone remained. Well might she call the first chapter that she wrote after this, 'The Valley of the Shadow of Death'.[245]

To this regard, the comparison between Brontë's and Gaskell's novels is particularly interesting; in fact, although *North and South* has many more deaths in it, the tone of the novel is much less tragic, if compared to *Shirley*. Gaskell stages many passings of some fairly important characters, but these deaths aside from being "each beautifully suited to the character of the individual"[246] have a purpose in relation to the story in general and, specifically, to Margaret's character development thus they find a coherent space within the narration that does not interfere with the readers' overall impression. On the other hand, Charlotte Brontë's novel, despite not portraying so many losses, has a much graver resonance to it which might have to do with the moment in which the author wrote it.

[242] Gaskell, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, cit., p. 378 and ibid., p. 875.
[243] Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, cit., p. 315.
[244] Gaskell, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, cit., p. 249.
[245] Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, cit., p. 315.
[246] Gaskell, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, cit., p. 324.

Charlotte Brontë's biography proved to be an astounding work thought out to the smallest detail so that it would honour not only the author, whose mastery was never in doubt, but also the woman behind the pseudonym Currer Bell. Gaskell skilfully depicts the quest for balance between public and private life that haunted Brontë all her life. This issue was particularly close to the biographer's heart since she struggled with it too. Charlotte Brontë's reputation was the one that sought the public's validation and Gaskell succeeded in her portrayal of a successful author, but most importantly an extraordinary woman.

> 'She thought much of her duty, and had loftier and clearer notions of it than most people, and held fast to them with more success. It was done, it seems to me, with much more difficulty than people have of stronger nerves, and better fortunes. All her life was but labour and pain; and she never threw down the burden for the sake of present pleasure. I don't know what use you can make of all I have said. I have written it with the strong desire to obtain appreciation for her. Yet, what does it matter? She herself appealed to the world's judgment for her use of some of the faculties she had, – not the best, – but still the only ones she could turn to strangers' benefit. They heartily, greedily enjoyed the fruits of her labours, and then found out she was much to be blamed for possessing such faculties. Why ask for a judgment on her from such a world?'
>
> But I turn from the critical, unsympathetic public, inclined to judge harshly because they have only seen superficially and not thought deeply. I appeal to that larger and more solemn public, who know how to look with tender humility at faults and errors; how to admire generously extraordinary genius, and how to reverence with warm, full hearts all noble virtue. To that Public I Commit the memory of Charlotte Brontë.[247]

It is with these words that Elizabeth Gaskell bestows her fellow writer and friend to the memory of the public so that they can form an opinion consistent with the person Charlotte Brontë really was.

5.2 Building Identities

Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell created powerful heroines in their respective novels who assert their identity and strive to create a role for themselves within the community in which they live. This sub-chapter will analyse the characters of the two works in relation to each other and highlight their common traits.

[247] Ibid., p. 457.

5.2.1 Finding a Place in Society

Both *Shirley* and *North and South* offer their readers stories whose protagonists are women in an industrial context and both authors are very careful in building the identity of their heroines who, at times, share some similarities. In the first place, they provide them with a rather uncertain family background. On the one hand, Caroline Helstone (*Shirley*'s best-analysed character) lives with her uncle, Mr. Helstone, after her mother has abandoned her and her father's death whereas Shirley is an orphan heiress; on the other hand, although Margaret has both parents, at least at the beginning of the novel, they are presented as ineffectual characters. She is the strong personality of the family who balances her father's character weakness and her mother's bodily frailty. As a consequence, it can be stated that all three heroines are left to fight for themselves, without having a functional family behind them, as the Bennets in *Pride and Prejudice*'s might be. Moreover, Brontë and Gaskell also thoroughly explore the role that their heroines, and thus women, occupy within Victorian society and they both make sure that Caroline, Shirley and Margaret do not base their future on marriage by making them financially independent by the end of the novels. Leaving Shirley aside, who is already rich from the moment she enters the novel in chapter eleven, Caroline discovers she is the daughter of Mrs. Pryor (Shirley's former governess) who decides to provide for her, and Margaret receives the inheritance of Mr. Bell (Mr. Hale's friend from Oxford). Regarding Caroline and Shirley, Patricia Beer argues that "[t]he fact that the heroines do have a viable alternative to marriage makes their decision and their eagerness to marry more significant"[248] and that "when [they] do decide on the man they want to marry they are absolutely whole-hearted, with no reservation whatever about suitability",[249] but this is also true for Gaskell's heroine, Margaret who at the end of *North and South* is able both to financially help and marry John Thornton; thus, to this regard, the three share a similar status.

[248] P. Beer, *Reader, I Married Him - A Study of the Women Characters of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot*, London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1974, p. 92.
[249] Ibid., p. 93.

Furthermore, all three heroines feel the need to find an occupation within the novels; this comes easy for Shirley who is an heiress who has to manage her estate, but it cannot be said the same for Caroline who would like to be a governess. Notwithstanding her wishes, she finds the opposition of her uncle, Mr. Helstone, who says to her "[w]hile I live, you shall not turn out as a governess, Caroline. I will not have it said that my niece is a governess".[250] Margaret, on the other hand, asks herself the question of what her role is within Milton's society throughout the novel, and these thoughts reach their climax towards the end when the narrator informs the reader that:

> She had learnt, in those solemn hours of thought, that she herself must one day answer for her own life, and what she had done with it; and she tried to settle that most difficult problem for women, how much was to be utterly merged in obedience to authority, and how much might be set apart from freedom in working.[251]

In these lines, one can recognize the dilemma that gripped many nineteenth century women. Gaskell and Brontë themselves had to deal with it and throughout their lives they struggled in order to affirm their identity besides that of daughter, wife and mother. Although similar in theory, the urge that Caroline and Margaret feel to find an occupation to make their lives more purposeful is different in practice. In fact, Caroline would be willing to leave "her relations' home to take up a career"[252] whereas Margaret is able to find what she is looking for exactly where she is. Duthie also provides an explanation for the difference between the two and argues that "Elizabeth Gaskell's women are more maternal than Charlotte Brontë's and therefore less preoccupied with their position with regard to men than with their need to help the helpless of either sex and any age".[253]

In addition, Shirley and Margaret share the fact that their roles in certain circumstances go beyond the traditional gender conventions of the Victorian era. Charlotte Brontë is very explicit in this regard

[250] Brontë, *op. cit*., p. 184.
[251] Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 416.
[252] Duthie, *op., cit.*, p. 128.
[253] Ibid.

since not only does she give Shirley a male name and at times she refers to her as "Mr Keeldar",[254] but she also bestows on her a position that at the time was hardly attributed to women.

> I am indeed no longer a girl, but quite a woman and something more. I am an esquire: Shirley Keeldar, Esquire, ought to be my style and title. They gave me a man's name; I hold a man's position: it is enough to inspire me with a touch of manhood; and when I see such people as that stately Anglo-Belgian – that Gérard Moore before me, gravely talking to me of business, really I feel quite gentlemanlike. You must choose me for your churchwarden, Mr Helstone, the next time you elect new ones: they ought to make me a magistrate and captain of yeomanry.[255]

As Barbara Leah Harman states, "[i]n the character of Miss Keeldar, Brontë imagines … what a woman might do if she were a man of public stature; … [i]n that curios space between being a woman and playing a man, Shirley gains access to public experience even while she refuses direct participation in it".[256] Hence, it can be stated that Shirley is endowed with male and female attributes due to her uncommon status of heiress. In theory, she has the position of a man in society since she owns a mill and an estate, but she is not really a man. For instance, Mr. Helstone on several occasions appeals to Shirley's 'double identity' and addresses her as 'captain'; this also happens in the climax chapter when he tells her that she has a "well-tempered, mettlesome heart under [her] girl's ribbon-sash".[257] For her part, Shirley is aware that she possesses attributes that blur the usual gender conventions and when she has to choose which weapon to use in case she has to defend herself (and Caroline) against the rioters she says, "the carving knife … will suit Caroline, but you must give me a brace of pistols: I know you have pistols".[258] Shirley's role is singular in that it gives her a range of opportunities that otherwise she could not have access to, but at the same time, being a woman limits her authority. On the other hand, Gaskell is less explicit, nevertheless, what appears to be clear is that Margaret too sometimes assumes a role (especially in relation to her family) that "crosses the gender divide".[259] The Hale men, Frederick and his father, are often depicted as having feminine traits, both

[254] Brontë, *op. cit.*, p. 195.
[255] Ibid., p. 193-194.
[256] B. L. Harman, *The Feminine Political Novel in Victorian England*, United States of America: The University Press of Virginia, 1998, p. 23.
[257] Brontë, *op. cit.*, p. 315.
[258] Ibid.
[259] Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. xxvi.

physically and character-related; for instance, Mr. Hale is described as having "soft and waving"[260] lines which "show[ed] every fluctuating emotion; the eyelids were large and arched, giving to the eyes a peculiar languid beauty which was almost feminine".[261] Conversely, Margaret is the one who takes responsibility in the family and shows throughout the novel her strength of character. This aspect is especially evident when, for instance, Mr. Hale cannot bring himself to tell his wife that he has decided to move the family to Milton, thus the task falls upon Margaret.

> 'Poor Maria!' replied Mr. Hale, tenderly. 'Poor, poor Maria! Oh, if I were not married – if I were but myself in the world, how easy it would be! As it is – Margaret, I dare not tell her!'
> 'No,' said Margaret, sadly, 'I will do it. Give me till to-morrow evening to choose my time.'[262]

5.2.2 Communication as a Driving Force

The two main male characters, Robert Moore and John Thornton, share some similarities too, especially with regard to their attitude towards their men which at the beginning is sharply opposed to the one that Shirley, Caroline and Margaret have. While all three protagonists immediately show great solidarity with the workers' cause, it cannot be stated the same for Moore and Thornton who struggle to communicate with them and are perceived as tyrannical employers in the first stance. The working-class attitude is well reflected by William Farren who is very clear about his feelings towards Moore, talking to Shirley and Caroline:

> 'In course, starving folk cannot be satisfied or settled folk. The country's not in a safe condition;– I'll say so mich!'
> 'But what can be done? What more can I do, for instance?'
> '… If ye could transport your tenant, Mr Moore, to Botany Bay, ye'd happen do better. Folks hate him.'
> 'William, for shame!' exclaimed Caroline, warmly. If folks do hate him, it is to their disgrace, not his. Mr Moore himself hates nobody; he only wants to do his duty, and maintain his rights: you are wrong to talk so!'
> 'I talk as I think. He has a cold, unfeeling heart, yond' Moore.'[263]

[260] Ibid., p. 80.
[261] Ibid.
[262] Ibid., p. 39-40.
[263] Brontë, *op. cit.*, p. 308.

In this circumstance, as in many others throughout the novel, one can see how Caroline and Shirley try to mediate between workers and employer. They act as spokespersons for the former with the latter and vice versa so as to find a meeting point favoured by dialogue and communication. Similarly, in *North and South*, Mr. Thornton has a complicated relationship with his workers at the beginning of the novel so much so that he thinks that it is somehow their fault if they find themselves in an unfavourable condition because he believes they lack willpower. According to him, if they wanted, they could reverse their situation, just as he did when he was able to overturn his status in society, starting from working in a draper's shop when he was a boy to make up for debts left by his father and becoming a mill owner:

> 'Now when I feel that in my own case it is no good luck, nor merit, nor talent, – but simply the habits of life which taught me to despise indulgences not thoroughly earned, – indeed, never to think twice about them, – I believe that this suffering, which Miss Hale says is impressed on the countenances of the people of Milton, is but the natural punishment of dishonestly-enjoyed pleasure, at some former period of their lives. I do not look on self-indulgent, sensual people as worthy of my hatred; I simply look upon them with contempt for their poorness of character.'[264]

Much like Shirley and Caroline, Margaret too functions as a mediator between Thornton and his employees (whose main representative is Nicholas Higgins), thus facilitating communication between the two parties. The lack of communication between workers and masters therefore, in both novels, leads to problems (namely the attack on the mill in *Shirley* and the riot in *North and South*) and various misconceptions on both sides. It is Shirley, Caroline and Margaret who, standing firm in their positions, reject the master-slave dynamics and who, through dialogue, succeed in their role as mediators and make Robert Moore and Mr. Thornton realise that they need to change something in the management of their respective mills if they want to keep their business going. Thus, at the end of both Brontë and Gaskell's novels economic and social harmony is achieved by means of effective communication brought about by the heroines. Furthermore, all three protagonists participate in the two riots, yet they behave differently in quite similar circumstances; their actions will be analysed in the next section.

[264] Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 85.

5.3 Riotous Echoes in *North and South* and The Role of The Two Heroines

The central scene in both *Shirley* and *North and South*, in which pathos is at its peak, is surely that of the riot. In Charlotte Brontë's novel, the attacks are violent, and workers enter the mill run by Robert Moore breaking the machinery that is supplanting them, in line with the Luddite attacks that were happening at the time in which the story is set. Caroline and Shirley watch the scene from the background, avoiding taking an active part in it for fear of their involvement in the public scene. As the author was aware of the risks their exposure would entail in the first half of the nineteenth century, she makes her heroines witnesses of the most intense moment in the story in a way that does not exclude them completely but neither compromises them. Conversely, after the first half of the 1800s, Elizabeth Gaskell decides to create a heroine who goes beyond the limits set by Brontë for her protagonist, and who must face the consequences of her actions. *North and South*'s uprising is much less violent than the one depicted in *Shirley,* and it never reaches the inside of the mill. The workers initially just wanted to protest peacefully, but ultimately not all of them can handle the anger they feel towards Mr. Thornton, as if they were animals. It is at this point that Margaret decides to enter the scene by leaving her safe place inside the house of the Thorntons and taking part in the action. What for Shirley represented a risk not worth taking, now comes back to haunt Margaret, but in the end, turns into an opportunity for self-acknowledgement and affirmation of her own identity. In doing so, Elizabeth Gaskell creates a heroine in whom the private and the public spheres coexist in harmony.

Shirley was Charlotte Brontë's only novel that dealt with historical and political facts. Within the work, she employs a third-person omniscient narrator who at times adopts the perspective of the historian in order to make readers aware of what the political and social situation was at the time in which the story is set, between 1811 and 1812:

> The period of which I write was an overshadowed one in British history, and especially in the history of the northern provinces. War was then at its height. Europe was all involved therein. England, if not weary, was worn with long resistance: yes, and half her people were weary too, and cried out for peace on any terms. National honour was become a mere empty name, of no value in the eyes of many, because their sight was dim with famine; and for a morsel of meat they would have sold their birthright. The 'Orders in Council', provoked by Napoleon's Milan and Berlin decrees, and forbidding neutral powers to trade with France, had, by offending America, cut off the principal market of the Yorkshire woollen trade, and brought it consequently to the verge of ruin. Minor foreign markets were glutted, and would receive no more: the Brazils, Portugal, Sicily, were all overstocked by nearly two years' consumption. At this crisis, certain inventions in machinery were introduced into the staple manufactures of the north, which, greatly reducing the number of hands necessary to be employed, threw thousands out of work, and left them without legitimate means of sustaining life. A bad harvest supervened. Distress reached its climax.[265]

The author throughout these lines makes explicit the subject matter with which she is going to deal; this not only includes the social dynamics or the relations between social classes, but also England's, and more specifically Yorkshire's, political and economic situation. Mr. Thornton in *North and South* has a similar attitude, and he places the events of the story within the ones of history:

> 'Seventy years ago what was it? And now what is it not? Raw, crude materials came together; men of the same level, as regarded education and station, took suddenly the different positions of masters and men, owing to the motherwit, as regarded opportunities and probabilities, which distinguished some, and made them far-seeing as to what great future lay concealed in that rude model of Sir Richard Arkwright's. The rapid development of what might be called a new trade, gave those early masters enormous power of wealth and command. I don't mean merely over the workmen; I mean over purchasers – over the whole world's market. … I only name such things to show the almost unlimited power the manufacturers had about the beginning of this century. … But by-and-by came a re-action; there were more factories, more masters; more men were wanted. The power of masters and men became more evenly balanced; and now the battle is pretty fairly waged between us.'[266]

Much like Brontë's narrator, Mr. Thornton too explains to readers the socioeconomic situation that existed at the time of the story, in mid-nineteenth century northern England. It is interesting to remark that he uses the word 'battle', appealing to the semantic field of warfare, to convey the extent of the conflict between masters and men.

[265] Brontë, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-30.
[266] Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 83.

It is in these two historical contexts that the two riots take place and function as major dramatic events in both *Shirley* and *North and South*. Chapter XIX, titled A Summer Night, stages the attack on the mill in Brontë's novel to which both Shirley and Caroline assist.

> A crash – smash – shiver – stopped their whispers. A simultaneously-hurled volley of stones had saluted the broad front of the mill, with all its windows; and now every pane of every lattice lay in shattered and pounded fragments. A yell followed this demonstration – a rioters' yell – a North-of-England – a Yorkshire – a West-Riding – a West-Riding-clothing-district-of-Yorkshire rioters' yell. … Shots were discharged by the rioters. Had the defenders waited for this signal? It seemed so. The hitherto inert and passive mill woke: fire flashed from its empty window-frames; a volley of musketry pealed sharp through the Hollow.[267]

The two heroines watch this scene from the side-lines because, according to Shirley "[m]en never want women near them in time of real danger",[268] but for a moment they indulge in a fantasy and imagine the scene should they take part in it:

> "[H]ow fine to have entered the counting-house 'toute éperdue,' and to have found oneself in the presence of Messrs Armitage and Ramsden smoking, Malone swaggering, your uncle sneering, Mr Sykes sipping a cordial, and Moore himself in his cold man-of-business vein: I am glad we missed it all".[269]

In physically removing themselves from the action, they gain an advantageous position whereby "they could see without being seen",[270] they passively take part in the action and thus are inside and outside the scene at the same time. However, the real reason why the two women do not actively take part in the riot is that they fear the consequences that their participation would entail. It is the "association between public female appearance and unconstrained sexuality"[271] that concerns not only the two heroines but also Charlotte Brontë herself. Conversely, if the two watch from a distance they gain two advantages; as Harman argues, "their invisibility on the scene both protects them from (sexual) misinterpretation and molestation and provides them with a source of power that derives from the imbalance in knowledge to which they may now lay claim".[272] The fear of the author of

[267] Brontë, *op. cit.*, p. 325-326.
[268] Ibid., p. 323.
[269] Ibid., p. 324.
[270] Ibid., p. 327.
[271] Harman, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
[272] Ibid., p. 37.

Shirley that the actions of the two heroines would be interpreted from a sexual point of view should they take part in the public scene is exactly what happens to the heroine of Elizabeth Gaskell. The analogy between the two scenes is striking so much so that "the strike scene in *North and South* could easily be read as a revision of Brontë's riot at the mill …. Gaskell rewrites Shirley's restraint and highlights the physical conspicuousness, and surprisingly bodily openness, of Margaret's action".[273] Margaret, who initially watches the rioters from the safe space of Thornton's home, after noticing that the action is about to precipitate, takes part in the scene physically:

> She rushed out of the room, down stairs, – she lifted the great iron bar of the door with an imperious force – had thrown the door open wide – and was there, in face of that angry sea of men, her eyes smiting them with flaming arrows of reproach.…. She only thought how she could save him. She threw her arms around him; she made her body into a shield from the fierce people beyond. … If she thought that her sex would be a protection, – if, with shrinking eyes she had turned away from the terrible anger of these men, in any hope that ere she looked again they would have paused and reflected, and slunk away and vanished, – she was wrong.[274]

Margaret not only decides to take part in the public scene, but she makes a powerful statement of her own, and to do so she uses her body and physicality to shield Thornton, targeted by rioters. Her action cannot be interpreted as merely instinctive, but since she feels guilty for having told Thornton to confront the workers on the issues that they wanted to talk about, it is possible to affirm that her action is a considered one, that she is aware of the risks that it entails and that she is convinced that by entering the scene the workers will at least set aside physical violence. However, as Harman claims, the "insertion of herself into public space and into the great struggle between masters and men challenges the notion that she will be granted the chivalric protection upon which she depends".[275] In fact, she is hit by a stone that was meant for Thornton, demonstrating that her engagement in public affairs has to be utter and that, by making such a statement, she cannot enjoy the advantageous '"see without being seen"[276] status that Shirley and Caroline had access to. Concerning the attitudes of the heroines of *Shirley* and *North and South*, Patsy Stoneman argues that "Brontë's heroines watch,

[273] Ibid., p. 63.
[274] Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 179.
[275] Harman, *op. cit.*, p. 65.
[276] Brontë, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

invisibly, from a distance …; Margaret, however, risks social opprobrium by appearing in public in response to a complex motivation".[277]

The fear of sexual exposure that Brontë writes about proves to be real in Gaskell's novel since Margaret's gesture is misunderstood by the servants of the Thornton household (and later on by Thornton himself who proposes to her as a result) who report what happened to Fanny and interpret it as an explicit declaration of love since, according to them, she was "hugging him before all the people".[278] Once Margaret has recovered from the incident, she reflects on the events in hindsight and a sense of shame pervades her, both for having exposed herself in a public circumstance, and also for all the misunderstandings that her action has caused. Much like Shirley, Margaret too in the climactic scene of the novel blurs the traditional gender conventions. While on the one hand, she seems to affirm her place in a male-dominated public sphere, on the other hand, she falls back on her feminine role causing the gossip of people who interpret her stance solely in romantic terms. Furthermore, the similarity between the two scenes is confirmed by the language used by Gaskell in two passages which explicitly echoes Brontë's words. *Shirley*'s narrator affirms that "both knew they would do no good by rushing down into the mêlée",[279] whereas Margaret says, "I went down and must needs throw myself into the mêlée, like a romantic fool!";[280] shortly after, Brontë writes "they desired neither to deal nor to receive blows",[281] and Thornton affirms "[n]ot many girls would have taken the blows on herself which were meant for me".[282] Even if each of the sentences makes explicit the different attitudes adopted by the heroines, the four expressions have a resonance marked by the repetition of the same keywords.

In addition, the two novels represent the rioters in a very similar way and attribute to them bestial features that add a layer of meaning to their actions. Brontë writes:

[277] Matus, *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*, cit., p. 138.
[278] Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 183.
[279] Brontë, *op. cit.*, p. 326.
[280] Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 190.
[281] Brontë, *op. cit.*, p. 326.
[282] Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 186.

> Wrath wakens to the cry of Hate: the Lion shakes his mane, and rises to the howl of the Hyena: Caste stands up, ireful, against Caste; and the indignant, wronged spirit of the Middle Rank bears down in zeal and scorn on the famished and furious mass of the Operative Class.[283]
>
> [T]hey could guess that the fighting animal was roused in every one of those men there struggling together, and was for the time quite paramount above the rational human being.[284]

On the other hand, Gaskell characterises them even more explicitly as "wild beasts":[285]

> And the sound of his well-known and commanding voice, seemed to have been like the taste of blood to the infuriated multitude outside.[286]
>
> [I]t was as the demoniac desire of some terrible wild beast for food that is withheld from his ravening.[287]
>
> [S]he could neither see nor hear anything save the savage satisfaction of the rolling angry murmur. … Many in the crowd were mere boys; cruel and thoughtless, – cruel because they were thoughtless; some were men, gaunt as wolves, and mad for prey.[288]
>
> If Mr. Thornton would but say something to them – let them hear his voice only – it seemed as if it would be better than this wild beating and raging against the stony silence that vouchsafed them no word, even of anger or reproach. … [T]here was a momentary hush of their noise inarticulate as that of a troop of animals.[289]

As a consequence, in both novels the representation of the workers during the riot is characterised by attributes reminiscent of the animal world to such an extent that, at times, deprives them of the typically human attribute of speech.

Elizabeth Gaskell thus, mirrors the uprising portrayed in her friend's novel but she does so with a different consciousness. Making Margaret do what Shirley and Caroline did not do, the author of *North and South* "confronts the risk of a bold, and boundary-crossing heroism and, building on the earlier book's innovations, explores much more openly the sexual taint to which female publicity

[283] Brontë, *op. cit.*, p. 325.
[284] Ibid., p. 326.
[285] Gaskell, *North and South*, cit., p. 177.
[286] Ibid., p. 174.
[287] Ibid., p. 176.
[288] Ibid., p. 177.
[289] Ibid., p. 178.

would increasingly find itself attached".[290] Moreover, "she converts public into private shame, and private shame into the acknowledgement of mature sexuality, thus affirming … the inevitable connectedness of public and private life",[291] as Barbara Leah Harman argues. Much like their authors, Shirley, Caroline and Margaret too struggle to find an equilibrium between public and private life, and public and private self. Charlotte Brontë's heroines are given access to information belonging to the public sphere, consistently with Shirley's role as esquire, but they are relegated to the background, and they rarely take an active role within the political situation. On the other hand, Margaret affirms her identity by participating also in the public scene. It can thus be affirmed that despite Gaskell "disliked a good deal in the plot of Shirley",[292] the novel had an impact on her and her writing nevertheless, especially with regard to the riot scene presented in both novels.

[290] Harman, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
[291] Ibid., p. 75.
[292] Gaskell, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, cit., p. 116.

Conclusions

Patricia Beer argues that "Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell all had at least one clergyman in their lives. All three were sincerely religious and presented their heroines as believers who conducted themselves according to Christian principles. But there the resemblance ends"[293] and, as a matter of fact all three did not share many other things. In fact, Austen and Brontë did not have much in common and indeed the latter explicitly said that she did not appreciate *Pride and Prejudice* at all. However, for some reason, whether out of personal interest, friendship, or affinity, Gaskell appreciated the talent of both, and *North and South* can be considered a tribute to her fellow writers. What transpired from this study is that the novel retains a few elements of *Pride and Prejudice* and others of *Shirley*, while at the same time maintaining its own originality. Indeed, it is possible to find some typically romantic and Austenian traits in Elizabeth Gaskell's writing, but, as it has been shown, she adapts them to the time in which she is writing and to her narrative aims. When comparing the two heroines, it would be difficult to overlook certain similarities; in fact, not only do they share certain physical traits, but also some aspects character-wise. Gaskell highlights this similarity firstly by using the same scheme as Austen with regard to the romantic plot, but also by having Margaret Hale utter some sentences that mirror, in a remarkably similar way, the ones said by Elizabeth Bennet. Closer in time to Gaskell's book, on the one hand *Shirley* allows the heroine who gives the novel its title to take her own space and affirm her role within the community in which she lives, but at the same time she is never given the opportunity to participate actively in it. Furthermore, it gives an antecedent as far as the riot scene is concerned, which, as has been shown, shares a few traits with Gaskell's, albeit with due differences. However, despite the analogies between Elizabeth Bennet, Shirley Keeldar and Margaret Hale highlighted in the fourth and fifth chapters, they remain daughters of their respective eras, and this allows the protagonist of *North and South* to go a little further than

[293] Beer, P., *op. cit*., p. 127.

the heroines of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Shirley* were allowed to. For the first time Gaskell lets a heroine take a prominent place in a political scene, which was unthinkable for her predecessors. Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë certainly paved the way in terms of constructing heroines who slowly gained their place in the social and political scene of their period. In Austen this aspect was almost absent, while in Brontë it was established as the main topic. However, neither Elizabeth Bennet nor Shirley Keeldar are able to 'loudly' assert their roles and to actively enter the political arena, which Margaret does. Consequently, given the passages compared throughout this thesis, it is possible to say that the indebtedness of *North and South* to *Pride and Prejudice* and *Shirley* is undeniable and plays a paramount role as it traces some of the evolutions that have occurred over the decades.

Abstract

The years between which the novels under analysis were published and set are the early and mid-1800s. These decades were extremely eventful in Britain and led to a series of revolutionary changes. The consequences brought about by the Napoleonic Wars were extremely heavy and poverty, especially due to unemployment, was rampant. However, the situation changed when Queen Victoria ascended the throne in 1837, and in this period the United Kingdom, then British Empire, reached an unprecedented level of prosperity. The Industrial Revolution took place and turned the world upside down by changing completely industry and the way of working, along with society. In this background, also the way of writing fiction changed, and the novel took hold as the major literary form in which writers tried their hand. For their part, women began to establish themselves as successful authors and demand a role in society beyond that of daughter, wife and mother. The novelists Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell are three prominent examples and, as a matter of fact, this thesis deals with the influence that *Pride and Prejudice* and *Shirley* had on *North and South* and the common traits the three novels share.

Being the writer of the last-mentioned novel, Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell (Stevenson at birth) is the main author this dissertation focuses on. She was born in London on 29 September 1810 and spent most of her childhood with an aunt due to the death of her mother and the alienation of her father. In 1832 she married William Gaskell, her lifelong companion, and the couple gave birth to six children. Gaskell also forged many friendships that proved to be crucial to her development both as a person and as an author since they stimulated her also intellectually. Unfortunately, a heart attack took her suddenly on 12 November 1865 and she left her last novel, *Wives and Daughters*, unfinished. Throughout her life, she wrote several novels, short stories, and the biography of her friend Charlotte Brontë proving to be a multifaceted author able to adapt to circumstances. From the letters that

survived her, it is possible to deduce what principles accompanied the author in the writing process and which values were close to her heart. Some recurring themes can be found in her writings, such as identity, family and community life, and industrial and natural settings. With *North and South* and *Mary Barton*, Gaskell also tried her hand at the Social Problem or Condition of England Novel, a new genre in the first half of the nineteenth century that set out to deal with current social and political elements although authors somehow distanced themselves from the subject matter narrated.

North and South originally came out as a serialized publication in *Household Words* between 1854 and 1855, and in the latter year it was published as a novel. The story is about Margaret Hale, a girl who is uprooted from her birthplace to live in the north of England, more precisely in Milton. Here she will have to face a series of events that will make her question her place in society, make her ponder upon the conditions of mill workers and ultimately make her develop into a mature woman. In the course of the pages, the author develops numerous themes, touching on relevant points in everyday life, but above all, she skilfully interweaves romantic and industrial elements successfully, giving the idea of how the public and private spheres are inextricably connected in her novel. Each of the main characters undergoes a maturing process in the course of the story that makes them reconsider certain aspects of their lives. At the root of *North and South* there is a spatial displacement that acts as a driving force for the action and thus makes geography have a special relevance; in this respect, Helstone, but especially Milton, occupy a place of primary importance within the narration as they trace the heroine's change. The intertwining of the romantic and the industrial plots becomes more significant when the influences of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* respectively are analysed. In fact, it is possible to find some similarities between the two novels mentioned and *North and South*.

The elements of Romanticism clearly present in Austen also have some echoes in Gaskell's fiction, which she uses to her advantage. In fact, both novels can be considered *Bildungsromans* in relation

to the changes that the two heroines undergo. Moreover, it is interesting to consider the use that *Pride and Prejudice* and *North and South* make of the geographical element in order to understand the similarities and differences that underline the changes that have taken place during the course of the years that have separated the two authors. The heroines of the two novels, Margaret Hale and Elizabeth Bennet, also have a few elements in common, not only in terms of physical resemblance but also in terms of personality that distinguishes them from the other female characters in the respective stories. Furthermore, *North and South* is indebted to *Pride and Prejudice* as it parallels its courtship plot so much so that at times Gaskell's dialogues mirror Austen's. Thus, from the comparison of the two novels, it is possible to derive some elements that the two share and exploit for their own purposes also in relation to the time in which each of the authors were writing.

The industrial element, on the other hand, unites *North and South* and Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*. First of all, it is paramount to emphasise that there was a strong friendship that united the two authors, who often confronted and stimulated each other on literary issues too. This is evident from the publication of Gaskell's biography of Brontë, which offers captivating insights along with many helpful elements that can provide a better understanding of her works, including *Shirley*, which apparently Elizabeth Gaskell did not like that much. As with Elizabeth Bennet, Margaret Hale also shares some aspects with the heroines of Brontë's novel, Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar, but especially with the one that gives the novel its name; in fact, both strongly assert their identity within their own story. However, perhaps the episode that has the most similarity with *Shirley* is the riot scene, which is presented in both novels with similar strategies, but that features two very different heroines. In fact, while Shirley (and Caroline) stay in the background, Margaret takes part in the action and is even injured as a consequence. Hence, comparing the two novels allows to consider the elements they share and to see how each author uses them in her own way, asserting the originality of their respective work.

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