

North and South, by Elizabeth Gaskell

**The Novel Club
February 1, 2022**

Andy and I signed up to do these papers knowing nothing about Elizabeth Gaskell or her novels, and I suspect most Novel Club members read it with a comparable lack of acquaintance. I read without the context of the “received wisdom” we have about the giants of 19th century English writing such as Dickens or the Brontes, Eliot or Austen, and I refrained from reading the 2002 Introduction written by Dr. Patsy Stoneman until after I had finished the book. As it happens, my first-brush opinions line up rather closely with Dr. Stoneman’s, but they were improved by my reading of her commentary.

The opening chapter, titled “Haste to the Wedding,” led me to expect that the novel would unfold with echoes of Jane Austen. The protagonist, Margaret Hale, observes the wedding preparations of her pretty cousin Edith, described as “a spoiled child...too careless and idle to have a very strong will of her own.” Margaret is decidedly not spoiled, careless, or idle and she has a very strong will of her own. That theme runs through the entire novel, unlike the wedding hustle and bustle, which ends abruptly with Chapter Two, when Margaret and her father, himself a modest country parson who had gone to London to assist at the wedding, are on their way home to Helstone in the rural South.

In Chapter One the bridegroom’s brother Henry Lennox appears to be attracted to Margaret, and engages her in conversation about Helstone. He can’t get much out of her, except for the revelation that it is only a hamlet, not even a village, but it is beautiful, and Margaret takes pleasure in walking – “the walks are so beautiful, it would be a shame to drive.” She has told him that her father’s living – that is to say the money they have to live on – is small, too small to own a horse to ride. Margaret is happy to return to the rural quiet of Helstone after the whirlwind of London and the wedding. A short time later Mr. Lennox visits Helstone, where he and Margaret enjoy each other’s company on a pleasant afternoon. Before he leaves he declares his love for her, in effect proposes, and she spurns him on the spot. Very little development – one of several abrupt turns in the narrative.

Her comments about the beauty of Helstone open up another theme, directly related to the title of the novel. The South is still quite rural at the time Gaskell wrote it, and she sets it contemporaneously. In the mid 19th century the Industrial Revolution had begun to effect radical changes between North and South. The South remained largely agricultural, with land being the source of wealth and social status. Landowners collected rents and poor farmers could depend on their *noblesse oblige* for help in time of need. In contrast, the North was a developing industrial center. Wealth and power were wielded

by the “Captains of Industry,” as Thomas Carlyle named them. Workers were “hands,” a commodity of sorts to be used or laid off as the market fluctuated.

Margaret disdains trade of any sort – the “shoppy people” for whom commerce is the main concern, unlike the respectable professional classes – the church, the army, and the law. Gaskell sets up a generational divide as well as a contrast between the lovely agricultural South and the gritty, industrial North where the Hales will soon relocate. The South represents the past, the North a harbinger of the future, and in the course of the novel Margaret discovers how inexorable change works to erase much of what she had thought was everlasting.

Margaret’s father succumbs to grave doubts about his faith as it diverges from Church of England orthodoxy; he gives up his living and moves the family to the fictional Milton, which is Manchester in fact. While Mr. Hale’s doubts are never defined in the passages relating to them, the resulting move to Milton relocates the action of the novel to the center of the industrial North and the challenges it presents to a family accustomed to quiet Helstone. It is one of the abrupt shifts in the novel that I found rather disconcerting, especially because the parson’s doubts, although consequential, remain vague.

Margaret is unhappy and sentimental about leaving beautiful, sunny Helstone, and she worries about her mother’s frail health in the dark and dirty industrial air of Milton. But her father leaves it to Margaret to tell Mrs. Hale, to whom he has not confessed his doubts or his resignation from the priesthood. This is an early instance of how Margaret must compensate for others’ weakness. She not only has to break the bad news to her mother, and tell her they are to move in two weeks, but because her mother cannot cope with the logistics of moving, Margaret is left to arrange everything. “How in the world are we to manage the removal?” exclaims Mrs. Hale. “I never removed in my life, and only a fortnight to think about it!” Of course Margaret has never had to manage a move in her own life, but her mother’s incompetence makes it necessary.

Gaskell describes first impressions of Milton: darkness, smoky air, “long, straight, hopeless streets of regularly built houses, all small and brick. Here and there a great oblong many-windowed factory stood up, like a hen among her chickens, puffing out...smoke, and sufficiently accounting for the cloud which Margaret had taken to foretell rain.” Mr. Bell, an old friend of Mr. Hale’s, owns property in Milton, and he has enlisted the aid of one of his tenants to help the Hales find a house to rent. Enter Mr. Thornton - mill owner and major character in the novel. This wealthy manufacturer represents – and articulates – the management point of view as Margaret observes life in Milton and the circumstances of the working poor.

Their first personal encounter is not promising, and again I noted echoes of Austen in Margaret’s pride and her inclination to prejudice against “tradesmen.” Mr. Thornton has called at the hotel and Margaret is obliged to sit with him while they wait for her father. Conversation falters – Margaret’s pleasantries are met with short, curt

replies. Mr. Thornton is all business. But he is struck by Margaret's beauty, which Gaskell describes in detail through his eyes. Margaret favors plain, simple elegance in clothing and ornament, and while the house they might rent would serve their needs, she finds the wallpaper atrocious. The landlord is unwilling to get rid of it, but we learn later that Mr. Thornton has intervened and had the ugly stuff removed. It's a small anecdote, but it's Gaskell's first hint that Mr. Thornton regards Margaret with some sensitivity and respect.

The Hales settle in to their new life in Milton. Mr. Hale finds the energy of the town dazzling and invigorating, and he enjoys the company of Mr. Thornton, one of his new pupils, one who is interested in the classical subjects he put aside while pursuing business. Margaret is more reflective. She is less impressed with the power of machinery and men, and more inquisitive about the lives of the working class, of the people who suffer while others enjoy the results of their labor.

Mr. Thornton is invited for tea with the Hales, and Gaskell uses the visit to open a dialogue between Thornton, who articulates the manufacturers' point of view, and Margaret, who is critical of what she sees in working men who go about looking "ground down by some pinching sorrow or care." She contrasts what she has observed in Milton with a rather naïve conviction that the rural folk of the South are happy peasants, even poor ones. The two agree that each does not know the other side – North doesn't know South, and vice versa. Their conversation, with Mr. Hale participating, touches on matters familiar to us in the 21st century - competition and fairness, government environmental policy, what system rewards an individual's exertions and inventions? the roots of success – luck, merit, talent or the habits of life that eschew dishonest pleasure and self-indulgence? Mr. Thornton reveals his own history – the rudiments of education interrupted at age 16 by the death of his father and the need to work just to keep his mother and sister alive. A bootstrap story, of which he is proud, but he also credits freedom of opportunity and the resolute character of his mother.

The visit ends on a sour note with the kind of misapprehension that Gaskell uses as a device to keep the reader wondering what next. She frequently uses the adjectives "haughty, cold, and proud" to describe Margaret, and we know that this relationship has a long way to go if the novel is going to end like an Austen story. Unlike Austen's novels, North and South was written as a weekly serial, and that may account for the multitude of sub-plots and themes. Stoneman tells us that Gaskell's life was enriched by important friendships with great thinkers and writers of the day, and the novel cannot easily be described by a standard formula. Instead, she calls it "a system of interconnected webs in which everything gains significance from its connection with everything else." In my opinion a good editor might have imposed more coherence on those webs – the interconnectedness is not always evident.

The dialogue continues in subsequent visits, and in the meantime Margaret befriends a young woman she encounters on the streets of Milton, a girl who is both obviously poor and in poor health. Bessy Higgins and Bessy's father, a mill worker,, provide Margaret with a direct personal connection to the working poor; it is through this relationship that Margaret forms her opinions about the social and economic problems of industrial England. Both Margaret and her father remark on the antagonism they have observed between the employers and the workers. Margaret tells Mr. Thornton that she sees "two classes dependent on each other, in every possible way, yet each evidently regarding the interests of the other as opposed to their own." Mr. Thornton claims that his interests are identical with those of his workers, and vice versa, but a "wise despotism" is needed to govern, the mill workers being in effect infants.

There is talk of a strike as antagonism deepens and each side hardens its resolve. Neither will give in, although each side knows that a strike will be bad for both.

In the meantime, another theme emerges: illness, death, and mourning. Long chapters are devoted to the attendant suffering, as Mrs. Hale, Bessy, and then Mr. Hale die. What could be described as the Victorian obsession with mortal suffering is understandable, given the state of public health in the 19th century and the Queen's long years of mourning for Albert. But many pages are taken up with it. Mr. Hale died suddenly at his friend Bell's house in Oxford, but the two women suffered long, wasting afflictions. The effect on Margaret is profound. Mr. Thornton shows a softer, kinder side by sending a doctor to the ailing Mrs. Hale, who is temporarily helped by the medicines and other comforts, but Margaret finds it impossible to reconcile his kindness "with the hard, reasoning, dry, merciless way in which he laid down axioms of trade."

Mortal illness and a looming strike progress at the same time as – a dinner party! Not a modest dinner party, but Mrs. Thornton's finest production, to which the Hales are invited. Margaret is rather surprised to discover how much she enjoys it, and how favorably impressed with Mr. Thornton's conduct as a gracious host and a man of character. The other guests take note of her great beauty and stately bearing, and she is much admired. But the evening ends sadly. When Mr. Hale and his daughter return home they find the doctor in attendance, Mrs. Hale's condition having worsened alarmingly.

The interconnected plot lines of labor strife, mortal illness, and romance are impossible to summarize. I will assume you read the book and will recall the dramatic episode where Margaret's words and gestures turn the tide of an escalating mob action and lead to passionate declarations of love from Mr. Thornton. And you will know that more obstacles will crop up in this course of true love, if that's what it turns out to be.

The illness and death of Mrs. Hale brings Frederick, Margaret's brother, into the picture. Formerly in the British navy, he has been living in Spain since his involvement in a mutiny against a cruel and irrational Captain. With witnesses dispersed and unavailable he is unable to plead his case, and the odds are stacked against mutineers in any case. If

he sets foot in England he is likely to be recognized and turned over to the authorities, but he risks the visit to see his dying mother.

Frederick manages to leave Helstone and return safely to Spain, but not before Margaret is entangled in a web of misapprehensions, suspicion, and dilemmas brought on by the lie she tells to protect her brother. Mr. Thornton plays a key role in this plot development, as does Mr. Bell, who has become very fond of his god-daughter and assumes responsibility for her happiness and well-being. After Mr. Hale's death they visit Helstone at Bell's suggestion, and Margaret finds the places she so fondly remembers changed markedly. Her nostalgia gets a course correction.

Importantly, during this visit she relates the complicated circumstances and rationale for her lie to Mr. Bell, who is sympathetic. He promises to explain it all to Mr. Thornton, whose respect for Margaret has been compromised by what he does not know. But in another exasperating turn of plot, Bell dies before he can speak to Mr. Thornton and I expected that Margaret would have to screw her courage to the sticking point and explain herself to him. She doesn't, and more than a year passes before they meet again, this time in London, where she is living with the Shaws. Circumstances have changed for both: Mr. Thornton has suffered business losses and cannot keep Marlborough Mills going, but his management concepts have evolved. He envisions a better future for both employers and employees through dialogue, mutual respect and understanding. Mill workers, led by his now-friend Mr. Higgins, have expressed their wish to work for him.

For her part, Margaret is an heiress and the owner of Milton properties, thanks to the generous fortune left to her by Mr. Bell. She and Thornton are brought together by a business deal, closed not by a handshake but by a tender embrace and an amused conjecture about the likely reactions from Margaret's relatives and Mr. Thornton's stony mother. The reader is left to assume a happy marriage and a new model of management in gritty Milton. The end.

Questions for North and South

Did you read the entire novel? Did you watch the BBC film? If you did both, as I did, you will know how much was changed. When you discuss the book, please tell us how much you read, and if you saw the film.

1. Critics generally agree that Gaskell's characters are well drawn. What did you think?

2. Plotting and pace: Gaskell worked with several themes and story lines. What is the principal narrative that holds this “interconnected web” together?

3. Gaskell suggests, in the development of the narrative, that labor/management problems can be resolved if the opposing sides can be persuaded to sit down together to share their points of view. Thornton and Higgins changed their opinions of each other – was this realistic or optimistic, given the narrative context?

4. Dickens was critical of North and South. His books were long and populated with many characters and turns of plot. Why do you suppose that Dickens’ popularity has endured while Gaskell was almost forgotten?

5. Feminist commentators were responsible in part for the revival of interest in Gaskell’s work. “Feminism” can be described in a number of different ways, but does Margaret’s story make her a strong heroine figure? How does Gaskell set up the comparison with other female characters – Mrs. Hale, Edith, Mrs. Thornton, Bessy Higgins?