

would stand about the inn-yards, and look mournfully at every one who passed; a proceeding which generally terminated in the landlady's ordering one of the post-boys who were lounging about, to drive that strange boy out of the place, for she was sure he had come to steal something. (51)

This account vividly conveys how nineteenth-century society has criminalized poverty, even within the very young. The large boards reveal that the legal system has quashed compassion, with the suggestion that anyone, regardless of circumstances, will be punished for trying to survive if they resort to the demeaning act of begging. The signs represent a blanket enforcement of the law, with no attempt to understand the circumstances that might have given rise to the desperate act. Furthermore, the landlady's assumption that Oliver must be a criminal is at odds with what we have previously learned about the beauty and innocence of the young boy's face. Oliver's poverty effaces the visible signifiers of his good breeding and moral rectitude, so that those he meets on the way to London are unable to see beyond the beggar.

## **Gaskell, the working poor and the lady visitor**

While *Oliver Twist* explores the criminal underworld as a way of examining urban poverty and providing a critique of existing welfare provisions, Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* is much more concerned with the working poor and their living conditions. Like Dickens, Gaskell uses the device of placing a genteel character in a working-class world so that her readers are not completely overwhelmed and alienated by her portrait of an industrial city. *North and South* is a novel of reconciliation and adaptability, in which Gaskell attempts to bridge the gaps between the North and the South, the rich and the poor, the masters and the workers. As an educated, well-bred woman, reduced to conditions of genteel poverty, Margaret Hale is ideally situated to mediate between these different worlds.

In economic and social terms, Margaret moves from the centre of society to its margins. The fact that she is clearly a southerner and has obviously been used to a more comfortable standard of

living means that she cannot be neatly assimilated into the northern working class and, as I shall discuss in more detail in the section on ‘class’, she remains separate from those around her. Pamela Corpron Parker has noted that Margaret maintains an anomalous position in relation to the impoverished factory workers that stems from her identity as a parson’s daughter, accustomed to visiting the sick and needy. As a minister’s wife, Elizabeth Gaskell regularly undertook charitable visits to her husband’s parishioners, positioning herself as a genteel philanthropist (Corpron Parker, 1997: 322). Household visiting was a responsibility enthusiastically embraced by a large number of well-intentioned upper- and middle-class women, who wanted to make a difference to the community. Indeed, *The Englishwoman’s Yearbook* reported that as many as five hundred thousand women were engaged in philanthropic acts of this kind in 1893 (322).

While for some, the lady visitor was a welcome figure, spreading the gospel and distributing aid in the forms of food or money, for others she was little more than a patronizing nuisance. Dickens famously parodied the forceful, undaunted philanthropist in *Bleak House’s* Mrs Pardiggle, who invades the homes of the poor with her terrifying brand of religion. In *North and South* Margaret’s friendship with the Higgins family demonstrates the potentially fraught nature of the unsolicited visit from the lady philanthropist. Without considering the possible distinctions between Northern and Southern etiquette, and forgetting her own newly reduced circumstances, Margaret casually invites herself to visit the invalid Bessy Higgins. While her proposed visit would be considered the norm in her father’s rural parish in the South of England, Bessy’s father initially regards the suggestion as an unwelcome imposition, responding, ‘I’m none so fond of having strange folk in my house’ (74). Higgins relents almost immediately, however, demonstrating a sensitivity to Margaret as one whom he terms a ‘foreigner’ in recognition of her cultural difference.

Margaret’s excursions take her far beyond her usual sphere, into the public streets, where her presence raises interesting questions about gender, class and the politics of space. While her family is poor, Margaret has been raised in the household of her wealthy aunt and is accustomed to a life of privilege. Having acted as a type of companion to her spoiled cousin, Edith, Margaret returns to her parents when Edith is married. Although they have little material

wealth, Margaret's father's position as a clergyman allows him some status and respect within the community. When the change in his beliefs forces him to leave the Church, Mr Hale still commands some esteem, since he has been educated and has the manners of a gentleman. A number of other characters express confusion at the Hales' circumstances, finding it difficult to 'place' these people whose conduct belies their lack of material wealth. Margaret, though, is not intimidated by her poverty and continues to behave as though she is the daughter of a curate.

While they are a solace to the dying Bessy, the most important purpose of Margaret's visits for us as readers is to introduce us to the factory workers who underpin Milton-Northern's prosperity. Bessy's broken body is a reminder of the dangers involved in working in a factory, and her presence within the novel signals Gaskell's participation in a broader debate about factory conditions and legislation, such as the Factory Acts of 1850 and 1856, which sought to regulate working hours for women and children. The novel appeared in weekly parts in Dickens' journal, *Household Words*, which regularly ran articles on factories, strikes and industrial accidents. These articles would have added to the reader's understanding of the novel's social context, explaining conflicts between masters and workers and offering readers a sense of factory life.

*North and South* was preceded in the journal by Dickens' own attempt at writing an industrial novel, *Hard Times*, and since the journal's circulation doubled during this period, it is safe to say that readers were developing an appetite for industrial fiction and stories about the North of England. Gaskell, who had difficulty adhering to the rigid constraints of writing in serial format, seems to have been concerned that Dickens would impinge on her territory, to the extent that he had to reassure her that there would be no strikes in his novel. However, Gaskell's writing is in many ways much more authentic in its depiction of the North than Dickens', not least because she lived among the people she depicts in her novels and understood the difficult conditions in which factory hands lived.

Bessy Higgins is Gaskell's attempt to draw her readers into the discussion about the need to regulate factories. Sent out to work at an early age, by the time Margaret meets her, Bessy is dying because her lungs are congested with cotton fluff. Anxious to

capture and respect the working-class voice and the Manchester dialect, Gaskell allows Bessy to tell the story in her own words:

Some folk have a great wheel at one end o' their carding-rooms to make a draught, and carry off th' dust; but that wheel costs a deal o' money – five or six hundred pound, maybe, and brings in no profit; so it's but a few of th' masters as will put 'em up; and I've heard tell o' men who didn't like working in places where there was a wheel, because they said as how it made 'em hungry, at after they'd been long used to swallowing fluff, tone go without it, and that their wage ought to be raised if they were to work in such places. So between masters and men th' wheels fall through. I know I wish there'd been a wheel in our place, though. (102)

What is particularly horrific about this scene is the knowledge that some workers are so ravenously hungry that the fluff they inhale has become a part of their diet, acting to suppress their appetites. Gaskell doesn't romanticize the workers and here exemplifies how they are, at times, complicit in their own undoing.

Gaskell takes care to allow the people to speak in their own voices. Her ear for Mancunian accents may not always catch the cadences of her characters' speech, yet Bessy's practical, matter-of-fact account evokes sympathy for the young woman, without oversentimentalizing her plight. Bessy is a flawed human being, who is prone to melancholy and who clings to apocalyptic visions of the afterlife. Margaret certainly does not approve of her yearning for the afterlife, but Bessy's feelings highlight the utter misery of her present existence. Unable to find physical or psychological comfort in the present, death is the only solace available to Bessy.

Gaskell uses *North and South* as a way of highlighting the divisions between masters and workers, but in the end she wishes to stress a shared humanity and attempts to show how there might be unity between the two groups. As a clear-sighted outsider, Margaret is able to point out the dependency between the factory owners and the 'hands' who work for them, expressing her deep surprise at the lack of connectedness between the two factions:

I see two classes dependent on each other in every possible way, yet each evidently regarding the interests of the other as opposed