

Intersection of Class and Gender:  
How Elizabeth Gaskell Bends Traditional Gender Roles through the Lens of Class

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Authors of both fiction and non-fiction have been exploring social issues such as class distinction, labor rights, and gender roles for as long as these ideas have been around. Most of the work around these ideas either justifies why the current system works, or advocates for something radically different. Elizabeth Gaskell chose a different path, when writing *North and South* (1854), which addresses all of these issues. Instead, she shows how the traditional ideas can be modified to give greater freedom to the groups they limit, by building off the inherent connections between gender and class in Victorian society. Gaskell illustrates the intersectionality of labor and gender, and gives flexibility to gender expectations by bending, not breaking, tradition.

Gaskell's treatment of gender is as a subdivision of class distinction, not a separate division. This idea has become more common in recent scholarship; Violeta Craina quotes Nead's statement that "The representation of women can never be contained within an investigation of gender; to examine gender is to embark on an historical analysis of power, which includes the formation of class" in her work related to Victorian gender roles (Craina 105). In her novel, Gaskell shows the connection between these ideas in several ways. She refines gender in the economic sphere, which defines what class standing each gender can obtain on their own, and the class standing of a family. She also shows that change is possible without throwing away tradition, giving both genders freedom without ignoring traditions or taking anything from either group. There are also still many traditional views shown in the novel, but she shows ridicule for people trying to resist change by clinging to them. This is evidenced through factors such as the fact that the romance between Margaret and Thornton does not work until he is humble and a business "failure"; Margaret is a loveable character, even with her pride and "unfeminine" behaviors; and Mr. Hale is trying to take responsibility to support his family, but constantly falls short. This all

contributes to Gaskell's idea that gender and class divisions are inherently connected, and flexible within the ideas of society.

In Victorian society, life was divided into separate spheres, domestic and economic. The domestic sphere, also known as the private sphere, revolved around home-keeping and raising children, while the economic sphere was related to everything outside the home, such as financial support, social relations, and position in society. The spheres were paired with each gender, where women were supposed to take care of the domestic, and men would be involved in the economic. This left women in a state of economic dependance, and also trapped them, since they could not travel to the other sphere, but men were able to enjoy both.

Men and women's roles were separated by the notion of the public and private spheres, where women were expected to be content with only their home and family (Freedman 118). Gentlemen were taught that domestic concerns were "beneath their notice" (Houghton 342). If men were not present in this sphere, then women must be, and they already had strong traditional ties to the role of homemaker. For lower class women, the struggle between economic survival and the domestic ideal were in constant conflict. If a woman was working in a factory, she could have to spend more than half the day away from home (Freedman 119). This left these women no time to care for their home, and it impossible for them to nurture the homely virtues expected of them, which threatened their femineity (Houghton 348). Because of the impossibility of this dynamic, it is clear that society invented gender roles for the upper-class, with no concern or expectation for the lower class. Poor women were not expected to achieve Victorian femininity, and Victorian masculinity did not look the same for the working class.

The ideas key to defining Victorian femininity and womanhood, like attitudes towards sexuality and motherhood, had nothing to do with economics and working, leaving women without

part of their identity, and preventing them from supporting themselves (Freedman 127). If they were single or widowed, survival became a struggle and their womanhood suffered as they had to take attention from areas like home-keeping and their children, to give to working (Freedman 132). The home was seen as a place where virtues could be developed safely, as they would be crushed in modern society (Houghton 343). In this way, keeping women at home was seen as a form of protection, keeping them the innocent “angel in the house,” a term created by Coventry Patmore (Houghton 341). Governesses, for families that had them, were a key part of establishing this ideal (Poovey 128). They imparted values to upper-class children and brought them up into their roles in society.

Women were charged with making sure the home was a haven for men to return to after being in the business world. This part of society was seen as lacking heart and warmth, and women were supposed to fill this void at home (Houghton 345). Since the two spheres were seen as opposites, and society eroded the virtues of the home, it was a social necessity that women did not participate in society or business. In the Victorian mindset, the spheres of home and business could not coexist in one person, excluding women from business, and therefore economic independence. Meanwhile, men still enjoyed the comforts of home without having to participate in making it. This put women in a very vulnerable position, where they normally had little opportunity for anything resembling economic independence. They were mostly, or often, entirely dependent on men for their economic standing. Even in the jobs that were open to them, it was highly restricted what was acceptable, and the guidelines for what employment they could find was always directed by men.

Following historical trends, men tend to abandon jobs as more desirable occupations become available, leading women to join the abandoned profession and it becoming feminized.

Likewise, if a “women’s occupation” became desirable they would try to push women out to make space for themselves (Tuchman 12). Part of this was enabled by the idea held by some men that women are not competition for a job, so a profession occupied mainly by women is an “empty field” (Tuchman 5). Jobs such as secretary and type-setter became more female populated as technology made them less skilled. This made them less desirable as men looked for more “exciting” and better-paying work, and employers could pay lower wages for the less-skilled position. Women were forced to accept these conditions because “unlike the former male incumbents, [they] did not have something more powerful, more prestigious, and better paying to do” (Tuchman 13). Tuchman points out the legacy of the former prestige of these positions can be seen in American titles like “secretary of state” that glorify the title of secretary in way not commonly seen. Elementary teaching and childcare were feminine jobs, any men that had previously been in the role left to find something better paying (Tuchman 13).

Similar to teaching, the role of a governess was always a female position, in all of its various forms. One of the confusions of being a governess was the lack of place in society, as these women were stuck between classes (Craina 110). The struggles that governesses faced was acknowledged by authors, essayists, and women during the time, and historians now see their economic and social struggles more clearly (Poovey 126). Men who taught were never called governesses; they were acknowledged as tutors. And while they did not face as stark of a class conflict with finding their place, some of the same dichotomies existed. In order to impart a level of higher education they had to have it themselves, which indicated they at one time had the wealth to be educated. Yet to put themselves out for hire pointed to a fall in status, as gentlemen did not need to work to maintain their wealth.

The term described an overly broad role, from working in a nursery or as a school teacher, to working as a private live-in tutor for rich children (Craina 111). One of the ways this led to muddled social classes is that often the women who were finishing their pupils had once been in that position of privilege themselves. They knew social decorum because they had been born learning it, among the upper-class. Yet becoming a governess put them among the working class. These women were left classless, too high-bred to fit in with the working class, but not distinguished enough to be accepted by the upper-class. Wealthy families preferred to employ governesses born in that class themselves so that they were “well bred,” but their employment lowered their current social standing (Poovey 128). Working as a governess did not provide much, if any, financial stability for women. Poovey describes the position as “above market value but beneath a fair wage” (Poovey 133). This exploitation of women in this position preserved the moral and social standard, as the governess was teaching and serving her students, as she would her children.

In her own life, Gaskell showed a blend of breaking and conforming to traditions. Before marriage she had a couple different positions, similar to jobs, but always without pay. This kept her economically dependent, as was expected for women, but introduced her to having a role in society and responsibilities outside her home. In addition, some of her roles were very domestic, which kept her even further in a Victorian feminine role. However, she carried her charitable experiences further once she married, helping her husband with his role side by side, in a relationship of equals.

Gaskell’s experiences taking care of others started early, leading to a life of service. She moved in with her aunt to be a companion to her aunt’s child, who had recently become a cripple (Stephent 929). This taught her gendered notions of her place in society from a young age, as she

grew up with the responsibility of helping care for someone. After marriage, she devoted some time to volunteering as a teacher, which both fit the accepted role of a woman in childcare, and still was seen as linked to the private home sphere because she volunteered, showing her value of charity (Stephent 929). It was also clearly outside the economic sphere, leaving no other category for it but domestic. These experiences brought her up in the female tradition of home-making and childcare, but also served as an introduction to life in the public, with a role beyond housekeeper.

Her husband supported her literary endeavors, and she was able to consult with him about her writing. She was also able to help him with some aspects of his profession, as he was a minister and she enjoyed participating in charity (Stephent 929). This opportunity to interact with her husband's profession was extremely unusual for a woman, but still fit Victorian expectations because charity was a feminine and homely quality. Additionally, the Gaskells are characterized as people who respected each other as individuals, but also did not try to go against the fundamental ideas of husband, wife, and patriarchal families as prescribed by Victorian mindsets (Wright 177). Much like Gaskell's work, her married life reflected the idea of stretching boundaries without dismantling them.

Despite her skill and success as an author, Gaskell's published works did not have a significant effect on their finances, nor was that the intended purpose when she started. During the time Gaskell was writing, the profession of novelist was starting to switch from female to male. She was first published in 1848, which brought her into the literary field right as publishers started having readers screen books before publishing (Wright 21). Tuchman notes that while most library readers at the time were women, the publisher's readers were often men (Tuchman 66). This helped transition into the "male invasion" in the 1860s and 70s, when novels became more commonly written by men and also perceived as "high culture" (Tuchman 76). Her husband encouraged her

to write to cope with the death of their child, not for financial reasons (Stephany 929). Using writing as a form of therapy meant that neither of them saw it as a career for her, however successful she may be. With this intention, her choice to write was far less rebellious than if she was simply writing to break social norms and gain a reputation and income.

Even though the reason Gaskell started writing did not completely break social norms, the content of her writing was much more controversial. After Gaskell started publishing her work, she was criticized for asking “burning questions of the economy” (Stephent 930). Much of the anger was about how she spoke about manufacturers, which undermined the economic system of industrialization. People were outraged that a woman would venture outside of the domestic sphere to not only participate in, but question the public arena. One comment on Gaskell’s works, made by George Sand, noted that she had done “what neither I nor other female writers in France can accomplish; she has written novels which excite the deepest interest in men of the world, and yet which every girl will be the better for reading” (Stephent 932). Gaskell took advantage of her view of the economic sphere to draw men’s attention, but also show girls how to push boundaries between the spheres. This ultimately allowed more freedom for both genders, but especially for women. They were able to explore areas outside the traditional domestic sphere without completely abandoning or breaking Victorian tradition. This helped them feel more comfortable with exploring these ideas, and made it more acceptable to society. “...she worked toward reconciling tradition and change, depicting traditional values while recognizing the necessity and desirability of new ideas and a new society” (Wright 176). Gaskell saw benefit in both old and new ideas, and used tradition as a bridge to introduce less-familiar concepts to her audience in a powerful way. Victorian society was blind to many problems belonging to women and lower classes, but sensitive to men and upper-class, so Gaskell realized she could give problems to the



opposite group to show how important they were. This helped widen society's mindset about what were actually problems, where previously they had just seen an unchangeable reality.

From the beginning of her novel, Gaskell explores new boundaries for male and female roles, starting with when the Hales move. When Mr. Hale tells his family that they are leaving Helstone, Mrs. Hale feels overwhelmed with the household responsibilities of moving, leaving Margaret to step up. However, her father is also struggling with his roles, so Margaret ends up adopting some traditionally male responsibilities to help her family. In this process, Margaret enters the business sphere of her family's life to learn more about their finances, and assist in the search for the house, and shows herself comfortable around men of business. This expands Margaret's role in the family as a woman, but Gaskell is sure to frame it in a way that does not seem revolutionary, but necessary.

Gaskell's portrayal of Margaret going with her father to look for houses in Milton breaks some aspects of tradition, as this was a responsibility that was not common for women to undertake. All of the other people involved in finding the house— her father, Mr. Bell, Mr. Thornton— are men, as property was usually only the concern of men (Gaskell 59). The presence of the other men not only shows that she is out of place, but gives her more legitimacy in Victorian society, as she is supported by males like her father. While her father is away, Margaret receives Mr. Thornton, who had come to see her father. He is surprised to be met by a woman when he was visiting for business, and was "discomfited" by her presence and apparent ease in the situation (Gaskell 61). He is unsure how to interpret her presence when he was expecting a distinguished, middle-aged man, and he is met with a young lady with an appearance of haughtiness. Gaskell notes that Margaret's features tend to lead people to believe she is haughty, because of her "short curled upper lip, the round, massive up-turned chin, the manner of carrying her head, her

movements, full of a soft feminine defiance” (Gaskell 62). Between this and the command of Mr. Thornton that she shows earlier in the scene, when she calmly and naturally directs him, establishes her as a business equal. However, because she is a woman this was not expected, especially since she was acting without her father present at the time. Earlier in the novel, Gaskell uses Dixon to define Margaret as masculine, setting her up to take on some of these male duties. Dixon says that Margaret has “a touch of the old gentleman about her,” in response to the way Margaret takes command of the situation and of Dixon when she learns they are moving (Gaskell 48). With Margaret’s slightly masculine characterization, it excuses her deviation from feminine behavior, while still acknowledging that she is capable of these tasks as a woman. Overall, Gaskell shows that Margaret’s introduction into the “masculine” sphere is not smooth and welcoming, but that she is more than capable of rising to the task as needed.

Even when looking for a house, Margaret does not entirely abandon the domestic sphere, as most of her concerns with the house are of this nature. Gaskell uses this to preserve some of the traditional aspects, helping her bend them in a way that made it understandable and acceptable to her reader, even if it was atypical. Margaret is the one who thinks about where Dixon and the other help would stay, and is concerned with the wallpaper and other decoration. Gaskell shows that this is mainly out of concern for her mother, as she is too delicate to attend to these things at the time, and Margaret is trying to make the new house as enjoyable as possible for her. Her concerns with the wallpaper are not entirely frivolous, as she specifically mentions they should be concerned with repapering the rooms Mrs. Hale would come in contact with the most. But we do see that Margaret is intimately acquainted with the domestic sphere, as would be expected from her as a woman. When her father comments that he will try to get the landlord to repaper she thinks that she “had never come fairly in contact with the taste that love ornament, however bad, more than

the plainness and simplicity which are of themselves the framework of elegance” (Gaskell 61). This shows her familiarity and opinions on decorations and the home, which situates her more comfortably in this scene to the Victorian reader. They can more easily reconcile her involvement in the business of buying a house if she is still playing the role of the “angel of the house.” Her growing involvement with the business affairs also mirrors the cultural shift where men were becoming more involved at home, spending more time there and becoming more concerned with the futures of their children. Part of the new role for men was to ensure their family was rising the social ladder, which meant sending their sons to the best schools and arranging advantageous marriages for their daughters (Houghton 342). Securing these things required them to be more active in the domestic sphere. Additionally, some professions were starting to take authority in domestic affairs, such as doctors, who were primarily male, becoming authorities on child birth (Freedman 119). Gaskell presents Margaret’s involvement outside of the traditional domestic sphere as a natural mirror to that shift, taking an existing idea in society and reversing it to empower females.

As a part of helping her father find the house, Margaret becomes intimately aware of the family’s finances and budget. Women were not typically involved in family finances, as they did not contribute to them, and it was generally considered too complicated for them (Gaskell 60). While Margaret is no way responsible for or connected to this income, she is still acutely aware of their budget and helps her father sort through the houses to find one that both suits their needs and is affordable. By keeping her out of the responsibility for earning or controlling income Gaskell avoids completely breaking the separate spheres, but she also shows that they are flexible, as Margaret is perfectly capable of finding a house that fits their needs and budget.

Moving serves as the catalyst that introduces Margaret to budgeting and economics. Before her father tells her about his decision to leave the church and move to Milton, Margaret knew nothing about her family's finances. When her father mentions that he needs to "earn bread" for his family, she is surprised and starts to ask about his savings, but stops herself because she feels it is not her place (Gaskell 37). She then restarts the question more delicately, asking if he has money independent of the income, like her Aunt Shaw does. Although subtle, Gaskell reveals through this that Margaret knows more about her aunt's finances than her own family's, as she does not even know if they have independent income. Margaret then shows little comprehension of living expenses, as she believes Frederick needs 70 pounds a year to live by himself, but that the three of them could get by on 100 pounds a year. This is through no fault of her own, as she has no prior exposure to the cost of living and her family's income and expenditures. But it shows how much she increases her responsibility when she quickly goes from knowing nothing about their budget to helping her father pick an affordable house. Her lack of knowledge was not unique, as the general practice was to keep women from obtaining too high an education, which was a step many called for to promote equality with men. The predominating mindset though it was "unwise" to let women have higher education, as they thought it would hurt her "distinctive womanhood," as a shelter for her husband from outside world. Gaskell shows how this mindset impaired Margaret and her ability to help her father, and starts to informally break those boundaries by giving Margaret informal education from her father about how personal economics work.

Gaskell continues to stretch the limits of gender coded roles by placing Mr. Hale in the position of a tutor. While this was a male role in the context of tutoring gentlemen, it has female connotations with the ideas of teaching children and being a governess. Mr. Hale's situation is very similar to what governesses experienced with a missing role in society, where he was above

his pupils in education and breeding, but below them in social standing. This brings the problems that females faced regularly into the public view because they were framed in a new way that society was more prepared to understand, given the predominance of male experiences.

Gaskell highlights the lack of dignity in Mr. Hale's new role through his family's reactions to it. When Mr. Hale first tells Margaret his plans to be a private tutor, she scorns the idea. Part of this scorn comes from the idea of the manufacturers of Milton and her perceptions of their class status, but part of it is from the idea of her father having this occupation (Gaskell 39). She spends a great deal of time trying to convince her father that he could simply not work, which he rejects because he feels it is his duty to provide for this family, as was the Victorian tradition. Gaskell portrays the occupation as potentially demeaning because it puts Mr. Hale in a parallel position to a governess. It is still masculine, and a relatively normal role in society, because he is educating other men on the finer points of being a gentleman, like studying classic literature. But by nature, it is closer to what the Victorians viewed as a feminine role. Gaskell emphasizes this aspect by putting Mr. Hale in the position at the moment of his degradation as he leaves the church. Further shame is added through the perspective of the manufacturers as uncivilized, and Margaret is quick to label the tradesmen who do not fit her ideas of being a gentleman as someone who does not need to work. Since the position of tutor was an accepted male position, Gaskell is not redefining any gender boundaries, but she is showing them in a new light by making it more shameful for Mr. Hale to take this position, similar to the role of a governess. Gaskell does not even have to draw a direct comparison; the circumstances invite the reader to compare it for themselves.

Gaskell is especially interested in people who are misplaced in the classes of society. In addition to the brief introduction that she gives to governesses through Mr. Hale's tutoring, she focuses on the manufacturers in Milton, and how from a traditional perspective they have unusual

class standing. From a traditional perspective, gentleman did not work; jobs were reserved for the lower classes who needed to actively earn their living. But trade was struggling to find a place in this society, where skilled laborers took pride in their work and factory owners accumulated wealth equal to that of traditional gentlemen's. Gaskell introduces skilled laborers' place in society through the Gormans. Their family are coach builders, which Margaret sees as equivalent to a butcher or baker because it is a trade (Gaskell 19). Her mother in turn points out that they are respectable because of the skill involved in their trade, which introduces the conflict of their position, as English society struggled to find a clear answer. Mr. Thornton and the other factory owners have a similar dilemma. Through the industrial revolution they became extremely wealthy by owning factories, but were not fully accepted into the upper-class because they were so closely affiliated with the trade and managed the factories closely enough that it was a job. Here again, Margaret scorns manufacturers for wanting to gain gentlemanly accomplishments, as she does not see them as part of that level of society (Gaskell 39). This time Gaskell defends them through her father, who notes them as people who are eager to learn and aware of their educational deficiencies. He even goes so far as to say that they are better than Oxford, or traditional, gentlemen in this sense. Like skilled laborers, the factory owners struggled to find a defined place in society.

These larger class conflicts and sense of displacement run throughout the novel, and help to frame Mr. Hale's position more clearly as he lands between stations, as a formerly respected gentleman with connections, now in exile from the church and society, struggling to find a sphere where he is accepted and fits in. Simultaneously, Mr. Hale's personal struggle helps introduce the larger struggles, both the thought of governesses, and the dynamic of misplaced tradesmen in society. The parallel position of Mr. Hale and governesses bends and exposes the gender roles of the time and problematic nature of them. To make the problems more relatable and apparent,

Gaskell shows the same problems with people involved in the Industrial Revolution and tradesmen of various standings. Since these areas affected males, readers would be quicker to identify the problems here, and then be able to see how they were also problems for women. Gaskell uses this transition to show how gender expectations are very delicate, and easy to change just by adjusting the perspective of what is a problem for a certain group.

By the end of the novel, Gaskell becomes more explicit in the ways that she is redefining gender roles in the economy, by reversing the economic dependence in Margaret and Thornton's relationship. Even though legally their marriage would give Thornton rights to and possession of everything Margaret had financially, Margaret is the one who brought financial stability to the relationship. Additionally, while the novel ends with them together as a couple, Gaskell never directly says that they get married, leaving the conclusion where Margaret is still in control of the finances, even though the reader assumes they will be married.

The fact that Margaret was in this position of wealth at all was somewhat unusual, especially since her family was not wealthy. A female was not typically the heiress, as it would typically go to the next male in line, but her father had already passed away by the time Mr. Bell died, and her brother was not able to be the heir. Since Mr. Bell had no other family or friends to leave his money to, Margaret was the only choice. It still creates an atypical situation, but it is not barrier-breaking since Mr. Bell has no one else to leave his money to. Typically, women were economically vulnerable before marriage, as they inherited little, if anything, from their families, and had little chance to earn their own wealth. This left them with few choices for stability except marriage (Freedman 121). By giving Margaret an independent inheritance, Gaskell removes this as a factor, helping to solidify the equal relationship between them, and proving that Margaret is not going to him as a last resort of a livelihood. This proves that Margaret is not going to him

blindly or out of weakness; she is choosing him based on merit, a luxury few women had. The reader knows that they did not become a couple for the traditional reasons of convenience and status, and sees that Margaret is empowered by this.

Even though it is Margaret's money, she does not choose to buy the business and own it herself, rather she loans the money to Mr. Thornton. This preserves the traditional idea of keeping women out of the direct business sphere, but also shifts the power dynamic between them that she is the one with the money to make this possible. She also does not simply give him the money; it is a loan and a business agreement where Margaret stands to benefit. She states that he can pay her better interest than the bank does, justifying it from a business perspective. Gaskell makes it clear that Margaret was not directly involved in the business part of the contract, as Mr. Lennox drew it up for her and she "wish[es] he was [t]here to explain it" (Gaskell 435). Gaskell places Margaret in a place of flux where she is both going against and adhering to economic gender norms. She has money and chooses to use it for her and Thornton's mutual benefit in the world of business, but she understands nothing about the deal she is proposing. Gaskell gives Margaret financial power, but is realistic in the fact that she does not understand the legal procedures around it. It also keeps her power from being too radical of a break in tradition, as she is still reliant on men to help her do anything meaningful with her money. This is another example of how Gaskell proves that expanding women's rights would not be such a sudden change as many people believed, and was also quite reasonable given that women are capable of having as good of ideas as men.

Although the contract is drawn initially so that Margaret retains ownership of the wealth, that contract was drawn before Margaret and Thornton expressed their feelings for each other, so it treated them as separate people. The end of the novel implies their marriage, which would join their financial possessions, which Mr. Thornton would have control over, as the head of the house.



This makes the ending much less groundbreaking as far as challenging gender roles, even though the contract was not originally drawn under those circumstances. The fact that Gaskell does not finalize their marriage helps keep the idea of an unusually power dynamic between the genders at the forefront of our minds, but also gives strong indication that it is not so revolutionary as it might seem. One of the more complicated aspects of marriage at the time was how women were expected to be a partner to their spouse, but still the ignorant angel of the house, which Gaskell addresses with this contract (Freedman 122). This was only truly a relevant issue in upper-class marriages where the wife could afford to not have to work, either domestically or professionally. This aspect is reflected in Margaret's relationship to Mr. Thornton, which is finalized by their business partnership where she does not truly understand what is happening, despite being the economically superior one. It also reflects how the idea of gender roles was class specific; the lower classes never had a chance for the wife to be strictly a dependent "angel". While Gaskell's main characters are rich enough to afford this gender division, she also shows many families that would never have the luxury of fully gender-divided labor, again proving the traditional ideas had a lot of flexibility built in.

Before Margaret and Thornton confess their love, Gaskell shows that they both have to overcome flaws for their relationship to work. Thornton learned empathy for his workers, and when he faced economic hardship, he decided to not take the risk of speculating, even though it could save his business, because it was not his money he was gambling; he was risking his creditors' money. When his mother approaches him about it, she asks if his business will be a failure, and he defends his decision by saying "Not a failure. I must give up business, but I pay all men" (Gaskell 423), Gaskell shows a partially deviant perspective here, as men of the business world were expected to be try to get ahead for themselves and their family, but Thornton is looking

out for others with an unbusinesslike, homely compassion. This brings him closer to feminine ideas of behavior, while keeping him in a masculine role. It acts as a reflection of Margaret's shift towards masculine responsibilities while still being decidedly feminine.

Margaret gains better perspective on Thornton and his choices, and recognizes that he faced difficult situations, and sometimes made wrong decisions, but ultimately is trying to do his best. She also steps into the business world to create the contract with Thornton, and becomes completely financially independent. This proves that she is not turning to Thornton in a quest for money or status, as was the basis for many marriages at the time, as women gained these things most easily by marrying up. This reflects Gaskell's own marriage. While she did not have the same economic freedom Margaret had, Gaskell married a husband who was supportive of her literary endeavors, and even suggested that she take up writing when she needed a way to cope with the loss of their child (Stephent 929). Her writing was not intended to provide to their income in a meaningful way, but it still gave her a less domestic job, and stood testament to relationship she had with her husband based on mutual support and power.

Not only does Gaskell personally redefine gender roles, but she also shows how they are inherently based in classism, and that they cannot exist in the lower class. This shows that the ideas that were the foundation of many of the female roles were rooted in the privilege of upper-class families, who could afford to have a person who specifically did not work. Gaskell shows how unrealistic these gendered expectations are for the working class in her novel, and uses it as an introduction for Margaret doing work around her house, and uses it to show how poor women took advantage of these upper-class roles to gain a source of income. The same system that deprived upper-class women of the right to an income provided one to lower class women to keep them from achieving the feminine ideal.

Poor families, in their struggle to survive, often could not afford the typical gendered separation of work. Women were sent to work alongside men, working in the same mills and factories. The Higgins family is a perfect example of this: Bessy worked in the cotton mills until she was literally dying from the fluff in her lungs (Gaskell 102). She was not excluded because she was a female; in fact, many factory workers were women, because poor families could not survive without women working. Gaskell uses this as the framework for introducing upper-class women to the economic, working sphere. On a level of physical labor, Margaret adopts the role of a maid around her house when Dixon cannot find “suitable” help. Margaret bounces between class lines and economic lines, even though she is not earning a salary from her work. From Bessy’s perspective, she is a fine lady in her glowing white dress, but Mrs. Thornton sees her as base and lowly. The juxtaposition of these perceptions shows that the standards were relative, not simple guidelines to meet, and therefore inherently loose and subject to change. Gaskell uses this to argue that the feminine role could be expanded significantly without completely abandoning traditional ideas.

In her work, Gaskell was always concerned with the social problems female characters faced. This was encompassed by both gender and class issues, and the intersection of them (Wright 176). Gaskell was known for raising uncomfortable questions, and writing literature that was accessible to both males and females. Using the conventions of the time in her novels, Gaskell was able to point out the “patriarchal flavor” of society, and used it to advocate for women. Her works are an example of how “her genius contrived to emancipate itself,” Gaskell refused to let society confine her or other women (Stephent 930). Her main goal in writing about female problems was to solve them by liberating women from the strict constraints of Victorian society.

Lower class women had no trouble finding work in the factories because neither gender found it desirable, and lower classes could not afford the traditional gender spheres. Low-income families needed every worker possible, regardless of gender. When Margaret, who belonged to the upper-class, started doing housework it was demeaning and embarrassing to her. It was not an official job because it was in her own house and she had no income, but it was still work that threatened her status. Margaret has to assure her mother that she is still “a born and bred lady through it all, even though it comes to scouring a floor, or washing dishes” (Gaskell 76). Work was a threat to her status and femininity, because upper-class people could afford to maintain the gendered spheres. Gaskell puts Margaret in this position to bend the typical gendered roles by giving Margaret work while maintaining her social status. But she also points out how society itself does not hold fast to gendered spheres, it only applies to the upper-classes. The upper parts of society are the only ones who can afford to keep women out of the economic sphere, meaning that the gender expectations are class dependent, and that much more fragile since they are not universally applied. However, we also see that they are preserved in some ways in the lower class, as men still avoid the domestic sphere, passing those duties on to their children. Additionally, Bessy wishes that Mary had the opportunity to learn domestic arts like housekeeping, which would allow her to retain some femininity in the eyes of society, and have a better job. The relationship between work and gender was very complicated in the Victorian system, as it tried to balance gender roles.

Although women in the lower classes worked in the “male” sphere, men did not enter the female domestic sphere. Lower class women had to work in addition to playing the role of mother and housekeeper, often without any real knowledge of how to do so. Older daughters substituted as parents for their younger siblings, and had to learn how to take care of a house with no time or

resources to do so. This is seen through Mary, the youngest of Higgin's daughters. When Bessy asks Margaret to look after her and Margaret suggests taking her on as a servant, Bessy remarks "Our Mary's a good wench; but who has she had to teach her what to do about a house? No mother, and me at the mill till I were good for nothing but scolding her for doing badly what I didn't know how to do a bit" (Gaskell 103). While Margaret does end up hiring her, this reflects a problem that many women faced. They did not know how to care for their own home, and for many lower-class women the career of housekeeper was higher than they could hope to obtain since they did not have the knowledge for those roles.

In Victorian standards, special emphasis was placed on home life. Society viewed the home as a sacred place, revered as a temple of peace and love (Houghton 346). The expectations that went along with maintaining this ideal were high, and more and more women starting keeping housekeepers to help them manage everything around the house. With this extensive of a task, created so that it needed a support system of servants, it was more than lower class women could keep up with, even if they wanted to maintain a proper Victorian home. Gaskell reveals the classist expectations of gendered roles through Margaret's experiences, both seeing how the Higgin's run their home, and helping Dixon keep their home by taking on chores. Because Margaret was only able to stop these chores when the family took on Mary as a servant, it shows how the ideal Victorian home can only be maintained by the rich. Margaret was able to fill in for her family because they did not need her to work for income. But in the Higgins home, where both the daughters are working and they cannot afford a servant, they are unable to keep a proper home, showing the class division in maintaining the sacredness of the house. Gaskell challenges the idea that the precise way a woman runs her home qualifies her identity as a woman. However, she also keeps Margaret and Mary Higgins in the domestic sphere, without involving men in the domestic

tasks. In this way, Gaskell avoids breaking the social convention of gender identification in the domestic sphere, while also pointing out that it is based in class just as much as gender. With this argument, Gaskell is able to show that Victorian standards have a weak claim to defining the gender of any group.

Part of how Gaskell shows the relation between gender and class is through belief in God, and how it is related to gender rather than class as is the traditional thought. Most of the time the upper-class is associated with believing in Christianity, while the lower class is more skeptical because of their position in life. However, Gaskell represents it as an idea that is divided by gender, reinforcing the idea that gender roles can only exist in a society based on class.

Gaskell portrays religion and the belief in God as a gendered issue, not a class issue, to highlight gender roles while also showing their roots in the class structure. Overall, she portrays women as more likely to be religious while men express doubt, across class lines. This starts with Mr. Hale and Margaret, as he gives up his position because of his doubts in the church, while she holds fast and wonders why he could not have stayed on a bit longer. This same dynamic is seen between Bessy and her father, as Higgins does not believe in the Bible at all and is angry at Margaret when she uses religion to comfort Bessy. Margaret and Bessy relate to each other through their struggles, and both find comfort in the Bible and God's promises (Gaskell 137). These trends show how people throughout society fall into their prescribed roles in various aspects of their life, including religion. Women are taught to depend on the strong male figure, in this case God, and men are told to be independent.

There are some differences in beliefs throughout the novel that are class related. Mr. Hale has an easier time believing in God than Higgins does, because he has had less trauma and suffering. When Mr. Hale tries to approach the topic with Higgins as to if he has started doubting

God, Higgins is outraged that he would try to make the case for a gracious God when he just lost his daughter. Additionally, Bessy's comfort comes from thinking her death is prophesied and the trials of Revelation are hers. Margaret urged her to "read the clearer parts of the Bible" (Gaskell 137). Margaret's upper-class life has afforded her believing in the grace and mercy of the Bible, while Bessy has a harder time seeing that. Likewise, Mr. Hale can afford to have doubts at his leisure rather than as a result of the accumulation of suffering and loss like Higgins. But even within these examples, Gaskell shows that the larger trend of gendered belief transcends the class belief, as even Mr. Hale has doubts and dying Bessy is comforted by the Bible.

Despite the class distinctions, Gaskell makes the predominant trend gender, which breaks common practice of the time that women would follow the beliefs of their father/ husband. Tradition is preserved in that Bessy is conscious of how much she talks about it around her father, and Margaret and her mother have to submit to Mr. Hale's choice to leave the church and move away from their home with him because of his beliefs. But they each keep their own beliefs and hold firm to their ideas despite what the men in their life think. Gaskell was most known for raising issues with gender and labor, and often religion had only a background role if any (Wright 176). However, she was no stranger to asking difficult social questions, and by tying religion to gender, she brings it into her realm of problems in the novel. She explores how different aspects of society are related to class and gender identity, and how these ideas often intermingle, showing that they are not as separate as many people believe.

Even in the times where she breaks from the larger narrative, Gaskell subtly weaves her message into the events. Although Mrs. Boucher wavers for a moment, and Mr. Hale is the one to bring her back, that was in a moment of extreme distress (Gaskell 298). Gaskell shows throughout the book that both genders will do more extreme things when they are experiencing stress. This

negates any gendered effect of this scene, allowing Gaskell's main idea about men and women's ideas about God to stand out more than the more traditional idea of class. Another example of the class divide is when Mrs. Boucher has a moment of doubt when she learns her husband has died, and Mr. Hale is the one to affirm her faith. However, the circumstance support both the class divide, and in some ways the gender divide. The class divide is upheld through the extreme distress that Mrs. Boucher faces when she realizes she is alone, needing to care for her six children, none of whom are old enough to work or provide income. While she expresses that she trusts him, her circumstances as someone in the lower class require a "deal 'o trust" that the upper-class families never have to face (Gaskell 298). Even at their most desperate point, the Hales were never at risk of starvation; they had income, just not as much as they were used to. Gaskell's sharp class divide is emphasized with the gender roles prescribed to the characters in the scene.

The gendered divide of religion is held up through gender roles in this case, not the literal gender of the characters. Mrs. Boucher expresses doubt when she realizes that she has become the sole provider of the house, a typically male role. Since none of her children are old enough to take the place, she is the head of the house, making her into a masculine figure. In contrast, Mr. Hale is there telling her this amidst a group of females. The other people present are his daughter and a female neighbor who do their best to break the news to her gently. Mr. Hale's presence is aligned with this femininity, especially since he is not there as a friend of Mrs. Boucher; he does not know her. When he tells her that God is with her, it is through a feminine lens, and sounds remarkably similar to how Margaret spoke to Bessy before her death. In this role of comforter, Mr. Hale is aligning himself with the female role of "angel in the house," trying to make it a haven (Freedman 118). Women were defined as the empathetic ones who would console others, so by joining the women to comfort Mrs. Boucher he is taking on the role of a female, putting all of his actions in a



female framework. The fact that both he and Mrs. Boucher can take on different gender roles, even if only temporarily, shows that those roles have a lot of flexibility before they are broken, which Gaskell argues should be exercised in society.

Gaskell fit into the Victorian tradition enough to be accepted, but advocated economic freedom for both genders by offering flexibility in their role as a worker and provider. She proves the connection between class and gender, and gender divisions cannot exist outside of the context of class. The lower class cannot afford the Victorian gender distinction, so it is inherently a class issue, invented by the upper-class. She also shows the flexibility in the gender roles by stretching the limits of her characters. Using examples across classes, she has characters adopt behaviors and roles that traditionally belong to the other role, often presenting it as completely natural. All these characters keep the core of their gender identity, showing that the expectations society set up have a lot of room to change without leaving tradition entirely. This erased the fear that changing the roles would bring revolution and complete chaos. Gaskell proves that this is not the case, and the change would be inherently gradual.

Through *North and South*, and her other works, Gaskell proves to society that there was no excuse for clinging strictly to the limits of Victorian culture. To fear the change that was built into the standards of the time, calling it “revolutionary” and “radical,” was to misunderstand how gender roles were constructed, and to ignore the problems of significant portions of the population. Throughout the book, Gaskell provides countless examples of how both genders can adapt to the role given to the other, which has benefit both to men and women. Expanding the limits of gender roles gave both men and women more freedom in society, and made it more comfortable for all parties.

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