

**RESEARCH ARTICLE****Review: Mary Barton (1848) – Elizabeth Gaskell****Mohammed Salim Abdulameer**mohammed.salim@atu.edu.iq

Engineering Technical College / Najaf, Al-Furat Al-Awsat Technical University, Najaf, Iraq.

**Article Received: 02/11/2024; Article Accepted: 08/12/2024; Published Online: 09/12/2024****Introduction**

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell (1810 - 1865) remains, along with Charles Dickens, one of the most prominent and preferred Victorian novelists. Gaskell wrote during a period of rapid economic and social change—largely induced by industrialization and urbanization—and part of her legacy is her attention to these changing circumstances and their consequences. Primarily, she was concerned with the ways it affected the country's poor. Gaskell's first novel, *Mary Barton*, appeared in 1848. Subsequently, the Manchester-based publication also published the novel in serial form. *Mary Barton* explores the prejudices and the rising social tension in the industrial capital of England, Manchester, during the early Victorian period.

The novel was published during a period of turbulent unrest in the cities. The uprisings that erupted in towns and cities throughout the 1840s and early 1850s bear witness to the anger of the emerging working class over the corrupt political processes, their social situation redressed, and the political franchise that would allow them representation in the House of Commons. Her novel is an insightful account of the socio-economic setting of the working-class women, children, and men in Manchester in the 1840s and expresses the strands of melodramatic and emotional components. The novel's publication issue is very relevant for Victorian readers and provides essential reading to view Gaskell's awareness and empathy for the world she wrote about. Indeed, she had daily contact with the poor during her stay in Knutsford, as well as in Manchester when her family moved back to town. *Mary Barton* is a strikingly melodramatic story, but not one that its author aimed at very highly. The tone of the narrative and the kinds of judgment that it passes mark it as a piece with many products of a certain kind of late Romantic sentimentality in the 1840s. It is a sort of mix of the misery and crime genres, and some claim that its initial writing drafts were just for society, both literary and salon.

**2. Historical Context of Mary Barton**

Nineteenth-century England experienced an economic revolution, with the Industrial Revolution introducing mechanization, factories, and cheap urban labor. The latter were drawn into the rapidly growing cities, especially those involved in textiles: cotton production alone increased by over seventeen times between 1770 and 1850. Manchester and the surrounding towns grew quickly, both literally — in terms of spatial boundaries — and in population: Manchester's population increased by over two-thirds in the first thirty years of the century. The new industrialism was accompanied by the unfolding of industrial capitalism, known for factory owners' fixation on rapid capital investment, innovative technology, and cheap labor. The exploitation of workers was matched by the lifestyle of the mill owners, a new class at the top of society.

The rapid transformation of agrarian farms into urban centers resulted in newfound wealth for a few but led more to overcrowding and poverty. Urban society was divided decisively along

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

class lines: the propertied few, increasingly affluent, living in relative comfort; the propertyless many, the vast majority, in poverty. It was the situation of the poor that forced the flow of creative talent to focus almost exclusively on slums — on the wretched and the disinherited. Elizabeth Gaskell lived and worked in Manchester, making her an expert in its issues. She was not just a novelist but was also involved in philanthropic initiatives, including suppers at Union Chapel. *Mary Barton* was published serially, where its first installment was under the title "Miss Barton" prior to being replaced by its present form. It is widely acknowledged to be one of the more famous novels of the period, with contemporary reviews focusing on its portrayal of urban poverty and crime.

### 3. Themes in *Mary Barton*

The immense success of *Mary Barton* is owing to the fact that it deals with great social questions, for it is clear from a study of the novel that the ideas do not merely provide a background but form the subject of it. The major problem that concerns Elizabeth Gaskell here is the relationship between the people of one class and those of the superior one, especially in view of the glaring disparities between their conditions. There are snatches, touches, and flashes of life in lower milieux at least: love, struggle, endurance, sentiment, piety; yet these, despite their intrinsic worth, tend to be flattened out to a kind of mannerism, to arouse no surprise, attract no special interest – precisely from their very plenitude and assured universality, and the ready guarantee they directly offer of the stability of the prevailing social order.

Milton is a town of standing: it is very conservative, and the people are prone to live in the past; to resist change and live an artificial life, while London is a common metonym on the move, always seeking life as these working-class people are emigrants. Class conflict between the workers and the capitalists is one prominent theme. Elizabeth Gaskell deals with the struggles of the working poor in their relentless efforts to free themselves from the painful conditions in which they exist. The contrast between the magnificence of trade and the workers' horrific conditions is an articulate explanation of this omnipresent difference in their status. This novel appallingly demonstrates the Lord of Pain. Such social sufferings are aptly revealed in the slow and iterative manner of the novel. It is overall a running antagonistic narrative strategy, consistently peeling off the many unjust and unfair layers of pain that society is burdened with.

#### 3.1. Class Conflict and Social Injustice

In '*Mary Barton*,' Elizabeth Gaskell portrays the divisions between distinct classes developing in a world torn by industrial disputes between men, alienated by a relentless capitalistic system, and the workers, horrified by their inhumane conditions of existence. Gaskell's representation of the working-class characters illustrates a society in which the affluent can live lavishly and the poor operate endlessly for the sake of prolonged subsistence. The story is not only a case of exploitation in industrial society but also of intimacy among individuals and societies. Gaskell shows the prospective influence of social chores at the lower economic level.

The narrative of '*Mary Barton*' touches on the brutal side of life. The lives of the city poor are plagued by sheer want and moral violence and are assembled in small, crowded places where they

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

live crammed together and lack warmth and cleanliness. Class conflict is as much psychological and sentimental as it is structural in her work. Her narrative is about the desperate attempt of the little dreamers below a capitalist structure in which they are penetrated, exploited, and responsible for each other. Refusing to blame themselves for this double devastation, they are unable to prevent themselves from diverting their natural resentment onto someone they know equally well: the other, as intimated as themselves, and a fellow victim of the same tribulations. Mary Barton's narrative focuses on the oppressed community. Mary Barton's Harrisons, for example, work within their means to earn a nominal wage.

**3.2. Industrialization and Urban Poverty**

There is no question that one of the elements of the socio-historical reality presented in the novel is the urban poverty caused by uncontrolled industrial growth. The first novel describes the changes that were taking place in Manchester during the period of the Industrial Revolution. The town was turning into one of the greatest industrial centers in the world. A traditional society was transformed into a commercial city in which only coordination ruled. Moreover, the influx of people from the countryside created overcrowded living conditions, exploitation of the industrial workers at the hands of the industrialists who were out for profits, environmental destruction, social unrest, and growing poverty.

The presence of industrialization in the novel is almost absolute. Factories coexist with homes, and the constant loss of smoke has darkened both the sun and the lives of the main characters, poor people, as the Industrial Revolution has not brought prosperity but a clear brand of inequality between victors and the defeated. For between the great industrialists and their commercial partners, more even than them, a clear gap has been created. Without working in any facility or long hours in uncomfortable and extremely dangerous conditions, families, characters of the worst narrated world and direct recipients of realist speeches, survive as they can in the strictly social sense of the world because they do not live with dignity or peace and can reach even to commit suicide.

**4. Character Analysis**

Mary Barton is one of the principal characters in the novel. The story exemplifies the indomitable power of this young woman's spirit. The vicissitudes of life make her resilient and stoic. A sheltered daughter of a suffering father and a doting aunt, she is propelled into the world outside her parochial domestic surroundings following her mother's death. This dramatic leap towards adulthood and personal growth commences the study of her character sketch. Pain and suffering alter neither her inner beauty nor her integrity of character. Her love for her beloved father blends with an uncompromising love for him.

Mary's reputed lover is the second hero of the novel. Jem Wilson is the exact contrast to John Barton. While the weaver represents anger and despair, the mill worker is the antithesis of everything upper-class people consider objectionable. The factory worker's integrity and hope reflect the fundamental unity of society. Jem Wilson represents vitality, industry, efficiency, and creation. He is able to alter his understanding of love, marriage, and social responsibility and has love for both

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

the rich and the poor. Mary's one-sided attitude towards him cannot alter his generous nature or his love for her. Mary and Jem, made for each other, belong to two spheres of life. The two embrace the growing complexity and differences in their personae. They rise above their personal situations and take on the larger social scenario. They are firm believers in the human capacity to set right the wrongs perpetuated by the hypocrites in society. They have their individual moral responsibilities, and the different acts they perform during the days of the strike only underscore the subtle differences in their values and ethical orientations. They represent the potential for growth in modern man. Jem Wilson, instead of being a victim, rises above pettiness to arrive at moral maturity. His self-reflective activities during the days of the strike take him to a higher level of personality. It is not the external world but our internal attitude towards it that gives finality to life. Jem is responsible for his actions, while Mary is a victim of circumstances. His hopeful nature continues to guide him, and he is not immersed in despair. Jem is more ready to understand and forgive. He is prepared to accept the foolishness of human beings. He cannot comprehend Mary's blind adoration for young Carson. In comparison to him, John Barton represents a decaying phase in human vitality. He is suffering from metaphysical ailments, and no amount of wisdom or optimism can cure him. The return to personal ethos is for him an illusion.

**4.1. Mary Barton****Mary Barton: Subsumed within a Capitalist-Patriarchal System**

Mary Barton, the eponymous figure of the novel, is the young working-class woman around whom the main narrative is woven. Mary is described as being simultaneously plucky and vulnerable. Her relationship with others, especially with her father and her suitor, places particular emphasis on the various ethical forces that serve to bond and stretch relations. Mary is portrayed as being at the conflictual crossroads, both emotionally and rationally, between the apparent necessity of familial duty and her own inner emotional inclinations. The text describes her anxieties and her limitations from page one but presents these in a positive light as expressions of resistance against misfortune and the inhumane caprice of seemingly malign powers. Because of the many contradictions portrayed within Mary's character, she has captivated many critical responses and inspired numerous conflicting interpretations of just how spirited or just how vulnerable she really is.

In keeping with the novel's title, the form and content of the narrative focus largely on Mary's emotional and ethical oscillations. She is portrayed as evolving from a rather naive young woman to a young woman of profound experience. This transformation is incited above all others by suffering endured and love lost (or gained). Mary's development undergoes a transformation from a position of un- and misplaced love or self-love to illumination, learning through loss (of love, a lunatic father, and Mater Gloriosa) to the extent that she identifies herself with other 'sisters' collectively and stands for superiority in social awareness compared to those timid, 'half-informed' ladies who pity her. The petty bourgeoisie is characterized in the novel as having seen only, or mainly, the darker side of working-class life and being patronizing and censorious with regard to personal improvements. Thus defined by the agony of her loss and growing knowledge of other losses in the working classes, Mary now identifies more immediately with the cause of the working-class struggle and despairs of any personal future. The last clear traces of 'birth' and what is ethically due to herself and her parents

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

(before 'sisters') in preferring love vanish with Mary's father. Remaining so and becoming attractive to and actually useful to the movement, she is a masked symbolic embodiment of the working-class spirit, 'hands', hope.

**4.2. John Barton**

The novel begins with a detailed and somewhat romantic portrait of Manchester, a major industrial city in mid-19th-century England, in the opening years of the reign of Queen Victoria. However, we are immediately introduced to John Barton, as the title of the first chapter tells us 'a mysterious murder on which suspicion had fallen.' The murder remains largely in the background as the narrative unfolds, and a large part of this first book introduces us to life and politics in the heavily industrialized town of Manchester.

John Barton, whose childhood has been different from the hard circumstances in which he finds himself during the course of the narrative, is the primary representative of the despair and anger experienced by those born into the English industrial system. His fatal flaw will be his inability to adapt to change, particularly to the strangling poverty that encloses him. Though the novel starts with him, his protagonistic place in the plot is indicative of an impulse that exists outside of John Barton himself. This negative impulse derives from the pressure of collective distress, driving members of the population to extremes of hatred and self-sacrifice. His wife's death from starvation should be blamed primarily on the mill owners and secondarily on the laws that support their right to manage as they see fit. John exhibits despair differently from sadness; generally, he is bitter and prone to anger. John's anger is inspired by the grind of daily deprivation. The narrative occasionally quarters the unfurling plot in long passages that meditate on social conflict and John's own capacity for violence, often becoming preoccupied with different kinds of radicalism. For all his frustrations, John's tale involves sacrifice as well as victimization, especially the handing over of his beloved son Tom to the lieutenant. Tom can work as an errand boy at the depot, and when he grows up, if he behaves himself, he will get to be a soldier. That Tom might in fact like to work for the army is not mentioned.

**4.3. Jem Wilson**

Helplessness and despair persuade Margaret to act inappropriately by spying for a shadowy group led by Job Legh, DeeDee, Mr. Carson, and Harry Carson. Fear and selfishness motivate others to look the other way or treat their neighbors very poorly. Only Jem Wilson chooses not to respond to frustration, anger, doubt, fear, or brooding despair by hating anyone or setting his considerable skills to criminal mischief. Jem is the moral center of the story who is kind to everyone, gives whenever he is asked, and willfully diminishes himself because he refuses to use his considerable talents to acquire things he needs as long as his neighbors are hungry. So he chooses to single-handedly support the poor and hungry with whatever riches he has because he believes that dignity can only be restored by kindness and confidence on the one side, and tender help of our own moments of gladness on the other. Jem says as hard as things may be, he is happy trying to help because that is the principal point of human existence.



**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

It may be no accident Gaskell places Jem directly after the accidental death of Wilson, the son of the former personal village surgeon, in her story. Only Jem has it in him to break the legacy of inherited class attitudes begun by the Wilsons. Coldness and dispassion are more easily passed from parent to child than love and compassion. He is not heartbroken by Wilson's death since no man need be reckless with the health, even the very life, of young beautiful Charley Wilson. He should be steaming with life, filled with color and drink of the young man's life and quick set with spirit and youth. Margaret first senses a wholeness to Jem one October evening. He is a hale man, one to farm at the very least. A few months later, in April, Jem portends a hopeful spring day for the Bartons as Margaret sees him intensely alive. Jem is weathering an apprenticeship with limited exposure to the vivifying inspiration of talking with other men. Living a half-life, Jem's talents suffered but had not entirely deadened, bored, broken, or starved into a torpor leaving his all-around brain to disintegrate into separateness. Gaskell takes him from ignorant arrogance to making a true connection to what lies beyond his simple understanding. By solving an insoluble problem, Jem sees his place in the world clearly for the first time. Jem, portrayed as a simple man others underestimate, manages to transcend his position.

**5. Narrative Style and Structure**

In this chapter, I will discuss the structure and narrative style of Mary Barton. Gaskell's use of vivid descriptions in her novels has been frequently commented on, but it is also her narrative technique - the tender emotiveness of her sympathetic tone which draws readers into the lives of her characters - that enhances emotional engagement with a contemporary social critique. Like Brontë, Gaskell too uses the omniscient third-person narrator's perspective, in Mary Barton often with the penetration of free indirect discourse and analepsis. She adopts a montage of the workaday lives of her characters in an urban industrial setting to engage readers with her world. The narrative is arranged in eight different divisions and progresses from Manchester to Liverpool, and finally to Knutsford so that this episodically structured narrative charts a journey in search of the resolution to the problems established in the opening of the novel.

With a structure like this, readers are able to glean the chaotic nature of the working-class lives depicted in Mary Barton, where opportunities for individual emotional and financial improvement were all too often snuffed out: each section unfolds as a new episode fraught with threat. Although we are aware from the beginning of the novel that Mary and Jem will come together, society refuses them the right freely to act on their love. The narrative indicates the ultimate aim in the autopsy report, but the resolution for all the family there appears incredibly liminal as Mary's 'haggard, hopeless look' is utterly distressing. Her parents, as in an earlier moment when Mary asks her mother not to weep and Mrs. Barton realizes she has been weeping, identify their constraint to act comfortably within society. Just as Plot laments what would make better poor men, the Bartons mourn what they could morally make of Jem. This impotence they feel over their children is horribly shown in the dialogue uttered in an exclamatory and crying style by Mrs. Barton and a hysterical harangue by Mary. The narrative stages social contradictions or negotiates the collapse of perspectives at different junctures in the novel.

**RESEARCH ARTICLE****6. Conclusion and Significance of Mary Barton**

## Section 6: Conclusion and Significance of "Mary Barton"

Now in conclusion, the prime importance of the book "Mary Barton" remains very high. The book is certainly not as good from the literary point of view as a number of other mid-Victorian novels. It is marred by an uncertainty of tone and by some faults in construction. It has unequally, and more sharply than any other such book, provoked the praise of one critic and the condemnation of another. However, such differences of opinion are in themselves a testimony to the several themes and different levels at which Elizabeth Gaskell is working. We may not substitute it for that more loosely organized and over-extended portrait of trade and society. However, both novels illustrate in an exceptional degree the drama of class conflict, and they deal with these problems in their generation in the towns rather than in the country. It was pioneering in its way, the book's explicitness and passion on the subject of social injustice towards the poor.

Moreover, the latent feminist presuppositions are explicit in women's suffering and responsibilities. Subsequent to this book, it was to call it the novel which first revealed the horrors of the Lancashire Cotton Famine, some forty years after the cotton men themselves had forgotten the very existence of the thousands who worked for them. It was a book which helped to turn aristocratic sympathy from lady tourists and literary mill builders towards a very real poverty which seemed on the brink of starvation. In sympathy and sentiment, it made everyone read and weep, even sherry merchants and British empresses. The argument would be endless; indeed, it is endless in many books written on behalf of "Mary Barton." It reached to all and everyone. Only the condition of women was always violent and very wretched. Gaskell herself wrote, very expressly, "I thank Heaven, I had no children" as if to add conviction. The book shows that Gaskell's art was not only broken and painted into a corner by the box-room convention. There were some very daring brush strokes of life in her pen. In another sense, the real Mrs. Gaskell died much later, and her brave public purpose and social justice continued even after her death. We all died. It was in this manner that Mrs. Gaskell's humanitarian pathos gradually grew to become the striking realism of people and their lives, loved and lost and still found by the end. The real justice in her writing is this—a little of faith and much content. It remained as long as Mrs. Gaskell was here, and it went when she departed to fields of truth, dear.

**Reference**

Gaskell, E. (2008). *Mary Barton*. Oxford University Press.