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The Theme of Working Class Education in Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell's Industrial Novels

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Abstract:

Gaskell feared the power of the uneducated masses principally because she believed that misguided use of that power would result in greater misery and distress among them. Certainly, she does not suggest that it is easy for the working classes to gain knowledge in the face of the inadequacy of the instruction provided for them. Her faith in the possibility of social amelioration rests on her belief in the efficacy of education to make individuals better. The working people who do manage to educate themselves in *Mary Barton* and *North and South* are happier and more responsible than their uneducated counterparts. Gaskell's undisguised didacticism in *Mary Barton* and *North and South* serves to arouse the compassion of her affluent readers for the much-less affluent workers among whom she and her husband worked. Though she expected too much from education, she surely did not view it as a cure-all for the problem-ridden society of her day.

Keywords: Education, Industrial, Social Realism, Victorian, Working Class

The idea of education for all is so deeply ingrained in us that we find it difficult to conceptualize a time when education was a privilege reserved for a few. It was in the Nineteenth Century when the need for women's education and working class education was most strongly felt in Europe as well as in some of the colonies. Novelists of the period responded with avid interest to both of these contemporary social issues. In this paper I would like to make an analytical study of the theme of working class education in the industrial novels by Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell, namely *Mary Barton* and *North and South*. The worst effects of educational hegemony were those endured by the workers themselves. However, children who were too young to work and whose parents could not afford to send them to school commonly did become street urchins and did pick up "a' manner o' bad ways." No doubt contemporary Chartists would have found Job's doctrine much too conservative, but it is an amelioration of the amoral workings of laissez-faire economics. According to the Factory Act of 1833, nine was the minimum age for employment, although children under thirteen were required to attend school two hours a day.

A widow whose husband has recently died of typhoid in a miserably unsanitary basement apartment and who must now support her children by herself, Mrs. Davenport wants to "cheat the factory inspector, and persuade him that her strong, big, hungry Ben was above thirteen" (*MB* 72). A less successful but equally thoughtful character is Nicholas Higgins in *North and South*. Like Mrs. Davenport, Peter Gaskell expressed his preference for work rather than idleness for poor children, "So long as home education is not found for them, and they are left to live as savages, they are to some extent better situated when engaged in light labour." (Peter Gaskell 209) There were probably very few working people who were willing or able to read Newton. Obviously, the important thing is that Carson does submit "to be taught by suffering" (*MB* 374), but it takes the death of his son and the degradation of Barton to make him interested in others.

Gaskell feared the power of the uneducated masses principally because she believed that misguided use of that power would result in greater misery and distress among them. Higgins, Wilson, and Legh are not alone among labouring people in their quest for knowledge. In addition, Carson understands that he cannot successfully manipulate his workers, even if they are as ignorant as machines, for, as Job Legh tells him, “God has given men feelings and passions, which cannot be worked into the problem, because they are for ever changing and uncertain.” (MB 371-2) Uncharacteristically, Gaskell is not quite accurate here, but her main point remains valid. Certainly, Gaskell does not suggest that it is easy for the working classes to gain knowledge in the face of the inadequacy of the instruction provided for them.

Needlewomen like Margaret Jennings and Mary Barton were notoriously overworked and underpaid. Although the mob disperses before it does much damage, Boucher is blacklisted by every mill owner in the area; when the strike is over, he can find work nowhere. Forced to participate in a strike he does not believe in and exasperated by the obstinacy of Thornton, who imports Irish knobsticks to break the strike, Boucher becomes one of the leaders of a riotous demonstration at the gates of Thornton’s mill. As long as Job can pursue his hobby, he is able to distance himself from the harshness of the mill owners and the pressure tactics of labour leaders who force him into their union against his will. On the other hand, individuals such as Job Legh did exist. Gaskell’s faith in the possibility of social amelioration rests on her belief in the efficacy of education to make individuals better.

George Wilson’s wife is permanently crippled by being caught in a machine before factory machinery was boxed in. All of the writers portrayed the violence of uneducated workers and suggested that ignorance played a part in creating that violence. Gaskell remembered this intellectual curiosity displayed by the working classes when she came to write her novels. T. H. Huxley was not exaggerating when he said “the people perish for lack of knowledge.” (Huxley 206) Rather, it makes more sense to encourage in him the growth of that “wisdom that shall guide men and women.” The danger is even greater in the case of John Barton, who is respected by the other labourers, and who has the courage as well as the desperation to commit terrible deeds. In a letter of 1838, Gaskell proudly reported that William had

[. . .] lately been giving four lectures to the very poorest of the weavers in the very poorest district of Manchester, Miles Platting, on ‘The Poets and Poetry of Humble Life.’ You cannot think how well they have been attended, or how interested people have seemed. [. . .] two deputations of respectable-looking men waited on him to ask him to repeat those lectures in two different parts of the town. He is going on with four more this winter, and meanwhile we are *picking up* all the ‘Poets of Humble Life’ we can think of. (LMG 33)

Carson’s re-education in social awareness is accomplished partly through an interview he has with Job Legh and Jem Wilson near the end of *Mary Barton*. When Mr. Hale takes issue with his daughter for her blunt speaking, telling her that she is unaware of “how much is being done for education in Milton” (NS 139), she declares that education involves more than mere literacy:

[. . .] the knowledge and the ignorance of which I was speaking, did not relate to reading and writing, – the teaching or information one can give to a child. I am sure, that what was meant was ignorance of the wisdom that shall guide men and women. I

hardly know what that is. But he – that is, my informant – spoke as if the masters would like their hands to be merely tall, large children – living in the present moment – with a blind unreasoning kind of obedience. (NS 139-40)

For Esther feels that her own degradation is irreversible: even if her family and friends would accept her again, she would still need to drink to forget all that has gone before. When, after the failure of the Chartist petition, the unemployed John Barton is hungry and discouraged, he turns to opium in order to forget the pains of body and mind. Nothing in his previous experience or education has encouraged him to become “largely and philosophically comprehensive in his views.” (MB 366) Mrs. Davenport tells her friend John Barton before his trip to London as a Chartist delegate to do something to repeal the child labour laws.

If factory work was generally better paid than needlework, it was not always healthier. Higgins, who has tried without success to penetrate the jargon of an economics text, agrees to consider the matter further but sturdily refuses to be overawed by impressive-sounding arguments:

If yo’, sir, or any other knowledgeable, patient man come to me, and says he’ll larn me what the words mean, and not blow me up if I’m a bit stupid, or forget how one thing hangs on another – why, in time I may get to see the truth of it; or I may not. I’ll not be bound to say I shall end in thinking the same as any man. (NS 273)

The working people who do manage to educate themselves in *Mary Barton* and *North and South* are happier and more responsible than their uneducated counterparts. Gaskell’s undisguised didacticism in *Mary Barton* and *North and South* serves to arouse the compassion of her affluent readers for the much-less affluent workers among whom she and her husband worked. Jem Wilson, Mary Barton’s sweetheart, is able to escape the demoralizing job insecurity and low wages suffered by most workers by becoming a first-rate engineer and even patenting his own invention. In other words, these “feelings and passions” are not always in harmony with the goals of manufacturers.

Mrs. Davenport in *Mary Barton* is a case in point. When enforced union membership, a policy he supports, results in the downfall of his sometime friend Boucher, Higgins assumes responsibility for the family of the person whose death he has inadvertently helped to bring about. Finally, Gaskell shows the potentially disastrous results of ignorance. Like George Eliot, whom she anticipates, she stresses the need to teach people “the science of consequences” and provides convincing examples of the victims of ignorance. In these novels Gaskell makes a three-pronged attack on the issue of working class education. In *Mary Barton* Mrs. Carson, the wife of the mill owner, is a former factory girl, and Mr. Carson “was in much such a station” when he married her (MB 135).

Even more tragically, Messy Higgins dies of consumption caused by cotton particles which lodge in her lungs when she works in the mill carding room in order to further the educational aims of her family. Chastened by his personal loss, Carson gradually comes to value rationality of the sort displayed by Job as necessary to the peaceful coexistence of employers and operatives. His granddaughter Margaret Jennings tells her friend Mary:

I’m often downright glad grandfather is so fond of his books, and his creatures, and his plants. It does my heart good to see him so happy, sorting them all at home, and so ready to search for more, whenever he’s a spare day. (MB 41)

Yet at the outset of the novel Thornton is not ashamed to act the “autocrat” at his factory; and there is some justification for Higgins’ charge, reported by Margaret Hale, that the masters prefer “to have ignorant workmen – not hedge-lawyers [. . .] who questioned and would know the reason for every order.” (NS 139) Gaskell tells us in an early chapter of *Mary Barton*:

In the neighbourhood of Oldham there are weavers, common hand-loom weavers, who throw the shuttle with unceasing sound, though Newton’s “Principia” lies open on the loom, to be snatched at in work hours, but revelled over in meal times, or at night. Mathematical problems are received with interest, and studied with absorbing attention by many a broad-spoken, common-looking factory-hand. It is perhaps less astonishing that the more popularly interesting branches of natural history have their warm and devoted followers among this class. There are botanists among them, equally familiar with either the Linnaean or the Natural system, who know the name and habitat of every plant within a day’s walk from their dwellings; who steal the holiday of a day or two when any particular plant should be in flower, and tying up their simple food in their pocket-handkerchiefs, set off with single purpose to fetch home the humble-looking weed. There are entomologists, who may be seen with a rude-looking net, ready to catch any winged insect, or a kind of dredge, with which they rake the green and slimy pools; practical, shrewd, hard-working men, who pore over every new specimen with real scientific delight. (MB 37)

Job Legh, the amateur entomologist, is a case in point. Margaret Jennings, for example, goes blind from doing the needlework which helps make her grandfather’s hobby possible. Gaskell carefully explains that Barton’s dedication to his fellow workers may lead him astray because it is not guided by intellect:

But what availed his sympathy? No education had given him wisdom; and without wisdom, even love, with all its effects, too often works but harm. He acted to the best of his judgment, but it was a widely-erring judgment.

The actions of the uneducated seem to me typified in those of Frankenstein, that monster of many human qualities, ungifted with a soul, a knowledge of the difference between good and evil.

The people rise up to life; they irritate us, they terrify us, and we become their enemies. Then, in the sorrowful moment of our triumphant power, their eyes gaze on us with mute reproach. Why have we made them what they are; a powerful monster, yet without the inner means for peace and happiness? (MB 165)

Both physically and spiritually, the people suffered from their ignorance of vital information. Carson summons the two workmen to his house in order to learn all he can from them about the details of his son’s death. In any case, Gaskell hints, Carson was introduced to the Bible too soon: “. . . he had become familiar with the events before he could comprehend the Spirit that made the Life.” (MB 357) Gaskell here dissociates herself from those reformers who would educate the masses simply to make them more orderly and less troublesome to their superiors in social rank.

Gaskell’s industrial novels are both set in Manchester, a city the novelist knew well. But Higgins is not sophisticated enough to foresee that compelling Boucher to join the union will bring disastrous consequences both to Boucher and the union. Hale tells Higgins that his belief in the efficacy of strikes is the result of “ignorance” and that the principles of free trade and free-floating wages are, in the long run, inescapable. First, she establishes the desire of

the workers for knowledge. The subject of Barton's revenge leads to a discussion of the reciprocal responsibilities of masters and workers. When Carson protests that the mill owners have no more control over the state of the economy than do their employees, and that they too suffer financial setbacks, Job points out that these reverses do not bring the masters to the brink of starvation as they do the workers.

In the opposite extreme, people whose cloistered and complacent mode of life rendered them unaware of or indifferent to the struggle of others were equally incapable. Carson is reluctant to admit that his dialogue with Job has served any purpose, but Job knows that the dialogue's having taken place at all signifies progress: "You say our talk has done no good. I say it has. I see the view you take of things from the place where you stand. I can remember that, when the time comes for judging you; I shan't think any longer, does he act right on my views of a thing, but does he act right on his own." (MB 373) It seems unlikely that Jem should have gained his expertise on the job, but in the absence of adequate technical schools in early Victorian England, many young engineers learned their trade "by the rule of thumb." As Peter Gaskell notes, the first great cotton manufacturers "were in many instances men sprung from the ranks of the labourers" (Peter Gaskell 55) and were no better educated than they. Thornton achieves a similar recognition in *North and South* after he comes in contact with Nicholas Higgins, whose perseverance and independence he cannot but respect.

But most young needlewomen had no such alternative. Gaskell does not tell us what sort of school Carson went to as a child, but as "the Gospel had been his task-book in learning to read," (MB 357) it was probably a charity school sponsored by a religious group, possibly only a Sunday School. When Carson, remembering the almost-forgotten lore of his school days, turns to his Bible for help in dealing with his son's remorseful murderer, the pages stick together from lack of use. John Lucas calls Job "a convincing study of the kind of autodidact regularly to be found in working-class life during the nineteenth century." (Lucas 54) *Mary Barton* (1848) takes place during the lean years of the late 1830's and early 1840's, *North and South* (1855) in the contemporary 1850's.

Jem's success means that his mother and his aunt can enjoy financial security for the first time in their lives and that Jem can afford to marry. She adds in the very next paragraph:

It is true they who thus purchase it [opium] pay dearly for their oblivion; but can you expect the uneducated to count the cost of their whistle? Poor wretches! They pay a heavy price. Days of oppressive weariness and languor, whose realities have the feeble sickliness of dreams; nights, whose dreams are fierce realities of agony; sinking health, tottering frames, incipient madness, and worse, the *consciousness* of incipient madness; this is the price of their whistle. But have you taught them the science of consequences? (MB 164-5)

But lower-class activists were not the only uneducated people of power in early Victorian England. If despair at the living conditions of his friends and the work-related death of his daughter make him at times hot-tempered and hasty, Higgins remains one of the more intelligent union members, eschewing violence as damaging to the worker's cause. They could turn only to the factories or to prostitution. He recognizes the desirability of having "educated workers, capable of judging, not mere machines of ignorant men" (MB 374).

Mr. Carson's lack of education is even more serious because it affects not only his own happiness but that of his employees. Gaskell understands Barton's plight and she appeals

on his behalf to her more fortunate readers, “Would you not be glad to forget life, and its burdens? And opium gives forgetfulness for a time.” (*MB* 164) If Gaskell exaggerates the attainments of the workers, it is because she wishes to gain the sympathy of her middle-class readers for these “thoughtful, little understood” people (*MB* 38). Repeatedly, she stresses the sacrifices that have to be made – and often by those least able to bear them – in the quest for knowledge.

In these novels we find no pronouncements on the desirability of compulsory national education; instead, what we find is a recognition of the need for better working class instruction. Working-class education is thematically at the forefront of Gaskell’s industrial novels because of her vision to alleviate the sufferings of the poor and her mission to establish mutual responsiveness between masters and workers as well as between upper and lower social classes. Despite the fact that Gaskell confuses Frankenstein with his monster, her powerful analogy places the responsibility for lower-class violence on the shoulders of those middle- and upper-class citizens who have created huge factory populations but are indifferent to their welfare. Head dressmakers thought nothing of keeping their assistants up half the night to finish large orders for impatient customers.

Nicholas Higgins, who understands the science of consequences better than his friend, vows to die of want rather than agree to destroy sympathy for the union’s cause through violence. After reading Joseph Kay’s pamphlet on the *Condition of the Poor Children in English and German Towns* (1853), Gaskell confessed, “it makes one feel very much ashamed of our boasted civilization as compared with that of other countries.” (*LMG* 230) Instead of helplessly watching the slow starvation of his large family, Boucher drowns himself in a shallow stream, too spent to endure any longer. As long as they are uneducated, the people are a threat to themselves and to the classes above them. And because needlework was considered more genteel than factory work, there was always a surplus number of girls to take the places of those whose health had been enfeebled by the long hours or whose eyes had been ruined by all the close work. Margaret is fortunate in being able to earn money by singing.

The masters cannot expect the workers to respect them if they use the power they have over the workers only for self-aggrandizement: “. . . when God gives a blessing to be enjoyed, He gives it with a duty to be done; and the duty of the happy is to help the suffering to bear their woe.” (*MB* 371) Although factory legislation and reform gradually improved the lot of the nineteenth-century worker, sometimes many lives were lost or bodies maimed before a necessary change was made. Barton’s sister-in-law Esther learns through painful experience that the blandishments of smooth-talking army officers are not to be taken seriously, and she becomes obsessed with the desire to impart her hard-won knowledge to Mary, who appears to be on the brink of making a similar mistake.

Clearly, only the exceptionally bright and ambitious could succeed in such a system. Neither Gaskell nor her heroine makes an attempt to provide a glib formula for achieving this wisdom, but there is no doubt that the greater responsibility which the reformed Thornton is willing to give his workers helps to promote its development. For Ben, idleness is the only alternative to wage-earning: “I han gotten no money to send him t’ school, as I would like; and there he is, rampaging about the streets a’ day, getting hungrier and hungrier, and picking up a’ manner o’ bad ways.” (*MB* 85) An individual who thinks for himself – Higgins, for example – may be an inconvenience at times to the Thorntons of the world, but his independence is not to be suppressed on that account.

In fact, these examples indicate not only the high price of working-class education but also the exploitation made possible by the self-interest of employers and the ignorance of employees. Boucher suffers more for his mistake than does anyone else, but his example indicates the potential danger involved when an ignorant person gains power, even if it is only the transitory power of leading a mob down the street. Elizabeth Gaskell apparently agrees with her kinsman Peter when he says that masters who have risen through the ranks have vulgar wives, for she stresses the point that Mrs. Carson has not “education enough to value the resources of wealth and leisure” and, as a result, suffers from continual sick headaches (*MB* 196). Bessy tells Margaret Hale that she has not been well since the time her work in the factory began, following her mother’s death:

Mary’s schooling were to be kept up, mother said, and father he were always liking to buy books, and go to lectures o’ one kind or another – all which took money – so I just worked on till I shall ne’er get the whirr out o’ my ears, or the fluff out o’ my throat i’ this world. That’s all. (*NS* 119)

Sometimes workers were too ignorant or desperate to appreciate the legislation enacted to protect them. John Boucher in *North and South* is another victim of the law of consequences. Gaskell doubts that increased knowledge will make working people more susceptible to arbitrary control from above, but she does believe that it will make them more rational and more willing to cooperate with employers who have, like Thornton, ceased to be autocrats. She shared the concern of her friend Kay-Shuttleworth and his brother over the inadequacy of the existing educational establishment. The results of allowing children to grow up uneducated or half-educated were numerous and far-reaching. Mr. Hale thinks that an understanding of economics would also help, and Gaskell seems to agree with him. Moved not only by pity for the hardships of the workers but also by admiration for their self-sufficiency, she sought to ameliorate the former and to energize the latter so that it finds its expression through socially constructive ways.

Gaskell, however, was even more intimately connected with working class education through her own experience in the Ragged School and through her husband’s lectures at the Mechanics’ Institute and at the Workingmen’s College. Then, she indicates the prohibitively high cost of education for most workers. John Barton is not the only Gaskell character who could complain that “the right way” is “a hard one for a poor man to find” (*MB* 357). They lacked the education to become teachers. In an age which continually applauded the virtue and efficacy of love, Gaskell insists that the untutored love of the Frankenstein monster is not enough. Higgins reads books and attends lectures when he can, and he is willing to consider points of view besides his own. Her attitude towards the working classes was never adulterated with the middle-class phobia of mob violence, although her status as a solidly middle-class individual remained intact. Bessy dies because her employer refuses to spend the money for an expensive wheel to remove the cotton dust from the air – and because her father fears sending her to an unknown factory more than he fears a known evil. A pathetically ignorant wage-slave was incapable of achieving such responsiveness. Gaskell might have expected too much from education but she surely did not have the undue confidence to view it as a cure-all for the problem-ridden society of her day. Instead, she was progressive to the point of considering education a basic human right.

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