

THE INDUSTRIAL MILIEU AND EXPLOITATION OF POOR WOMEN IN ELIZABETH GASKELL'S *Mary Barton*



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ABSTRACT

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This paper sheds light on the deplorable conditions of the working class in the early years of the nineteenth century, the change in the social structure as a result of the industrial revolution and the factory system which fostered what came to be known as the great social evil. In *Mary Barton* she portrays a realistic tableau of the industrial milieu, and reflects the feeling of hostility between workers and employers and the stark wretched living conditions of the working class. She also takes a feminine interest in the appalling conditions of working women and the deception, seduction, and the sexual exploitation to which they were subjected in harsh economic situations. Moreover, the paper tries also to answer the accusations of lack of unity and to show how Gaskell's clever concoction of the tale of industrial conflict and the story of deception and seduction reflects her originality and makes *Mary Barton* an admirable and remarkable book.

Contribution/ Originality: This paper, tackles Mrs Gaskell handling of some sensitive issues that occupied the social and literary circles of her time. It highlights her belief in female agency and her attempt to reverse the stereotyped picture of neglected and down-trodden women and their move from the private to the public arena.

1. INTRODUCTION

While poverty and the deplorable conditions of the poor, in the early years of the nineteenth century, ranked first on the list of causes of what came to be known as the great social evil, the industrial revolution and the factory system, helped to create the climate which fostered it. Acute poverty caused more women to enter the labour force and led to the corruption of their morals (Strachey, 1978). Stripped of their human dignity, working women were herded within the walls of congested mills where they were often sexually accosted by both employers and male fellow workers. In 1828, a visitor to the Lancashire mills was told by the owner to take "his choice among the mill girls", Epton (1960) and in his study of *The Manufacturing Population of England*, Gaskell (1833) referred to the "almost entire extinction of sexual decency", as "one of the darkest stains upon the character of the manufacturing population". He wrote of the masters' lascivious indulgence with the "females brought under their immediate control", and how working girls were "successively taken from the mill" by "young men purposely for the prosecution of their illicit pleasures" (Gaskell, 1833).

The employers' and factory masters' exploitation of working-class women not only led to their moral corruption, it placed them also in a position in which more immediate concerns than morality were uppermost. Women's strength was taxed by long working days and excessive childbearing and it was further weakened by a scarcity of food and lack of nutrition in what was available. They were miserably underpaid, and what they could earn from their work was usually not enough to live on. To supplement that income, many frequently resorted to the only marketable item they had, their bodies. Writing on the causes of the problem in 1840, William Tait noted that wages were "reduced to the lowest rate" and that working girls were forced to "recourse to some unlawful or immoral means to make up the deficiency for the supply of their wants" (Tait, 1840). This view was later emphasized by William Acton, who wrote that the lowness of the wages paid to:

workwomen in various trades is a fruitful source of prostitution; unable to obtain by their labour the means of procuring the bare necessities of life, they gain, by surrendering their bodies to evil uses, food to sustain and clothes to cover them. (Acton, 1870)

Morality meant very little to women in conditions like these, and prostitution was no fall for them, for they were at the bottom of the social heap already. Friedrich Engels charged industrialization with being the instrument of "social murder", and injuring the "bodily, intellectual and moral conditions" (Engels, 1958) of working people.

Paradoxically, the strict moral standards and discipline associated with the Evangelical strain in nineteenth-century Christianity played a part in fostering this evil. Evangelicalism sought "the reform not of the Church but of the national morality" (Halevy, 1924). The conjunction of the middle class and Evangelical ideals created "a sexual morality which destroyed, at any rate overtly, the libertine morality of the previous century" (Henriques, 1968). In this value system no sin was worse than that against chastity. The importance given to the woman's role as a wife and a mother made her the angel of the house. Middle class revulsion at unchaste women was in proportion to this strained adoration of female purity. Simple loss of chastity, regardless of the circumstances, rendered the sinner "morally depraved". Whether the maidens slipped, were pushed or jumped, they all had "fallen" and were generally doomed to a common fate. Once a woman committed a moral offence, she "fell" into the degrading social category of "outcast" in which she became morally, spiritually, and physically unrecognizable. No decent person would risk the slightest contact with her, and her "touch, even in the extremity of suffering", was shaken off "as if it were pollution and diseases" (Greg, 1850). The only course left open to her to maintain herself was to sink deeper into a world of misery and endless suffering.

No less damaging was the middle class attitude towards early marriages. Young men of the middle class who were asked to repress their passions, sometimes sought the available cheap pleasure, and consequently the "bought red mouth" became a substitute for marriage. Notorious houses were established in different parts of London with "women and children to suit most tastes and all pockets, but the poorest" (Chesney, 1970). Both lower and middle classes were equally involved in this trade—for if the one supplied the prostitute, the other provided the customer who kept her in business.

These factors, taken together, contributed to a system of prostitution so extensive that it blighted the country. The absence of official statistics of girls who took up prostitution, and the fluctuating and clandestine nature of the profession made it difficult to arrive at the exact figures of prostitutes, but Talbot, Ryan, and the Bishop of Oxford all placed the number of prostitutes in London alone in the late 1830s and early 1840s at 80,000 (Sigsworth and Wyke, 1980). Michael (1972) notes that in "1857, the medical journal *The Lancet* had estimated that one house in every sixty in the capital was a brothel and that one woman in every sixteen was a whore - which if true - meant that there were roughly 6,000 brothels and 80,000 prostitutes in London, which conforms roughly with other sources". More important than the actual numbers of prostitutes was "the fact that they were so much in evidence, openly soliciting and crowding the streets in certain notorious areas ... not only in London but in all Britain's growing industrial cities and ports, Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow and so on" (Calder, 1976) and according to

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Dickens took a very pessimistic view of the English moral standards, and described him as suggesting that "if his own son were particularly chaste, he should be alarmed on his account, as if he could not be in good health"; even Carlyle assumed that "chastity in the male sex was as good as gone in our times" (Sealts, 1973). Early Victorian moral squeamishness and society's preoccupation with chastity made a great part of the population turn in disgust from the subject of illicit sex. Respectable people shrank from facing it and generally adopted an ostrich-like attitude toward the problem. Commenting on society's indifference, Bulwer (1833) wrote:

Our extreme regard for the chaste induces a contemptuous apathy to the unchaste. We care not how many there are, what they suffer or how far they descend into the lower abysses of crime And thus, by a false or partial notion of morality, we have defeated our own object, and the exclusive intolerance to the unchaste, has cursed the country with an untended and unmedicated leprosy of prostitution.¹⁵

Though the growth and spread of this evil may have caused some Victorians in the early decades of the century great anxiety, yet "any deliberate inquiry into it in England in 1830s" was "considered shameful" (Harrison, 1967). This attitude of ignoring the problem and refraining from any practical and effective handling helped it to grow and spread. In a long article on the problem published in the Greg (1850) remarked:

No ruler or writer has yet been found with nerve to face the sadness, or resolution to encounter the difficulties. Statesmen see the mighty evil lying on the main pathway of the world, and, with a groan of pity and despair, "pass by on the other side". They act like the timid patient, who, fearing and feeling the existence of a terrible disease, dares not examine its symptoms or probe its depth, lest he should realise it too clearly, and possibly aggravate its intensity by the mere investigation. Or, like a more foolish animal still, they hide their head at the mention of the danger, as if they hoped, by ignoring, to annihilate it.¹⁷

2. DISCUSSION

Such public hypocrisy affected the literary fashion of the early Victorian period and made it difficult for any popular yet respectable novelist to deal with the problem directly or refer to it openly. It has been said that it is typical of this evasive era that readers learn more about the actual state of affairs, as was the case with Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837) from prefaces than from the novels themselves. Philanthropists, writers, and moralists, having experienced the effects of denying the problem and ignoring it, decided that something must be done. Mrs Gaskell tried to lift a corner of the veil of secrecy that shrouded the existence of this social evil. Living among the poor of Manchester and fulfilling her duties as wife of a Unitarian minister, she perceived with some first-hand knowledge the living conditions of the working class, their relationship with their employers, and the growing disparity between the few rich and the many poor and working. She led an astonishingly varied life and became a highly popular novelist working with a team of philanthropists to alleviate the misery of the masses in Manchester's slums, factories and prisons. She gave evening classes to working-class girls and came to the aid of the weaving widows and daughters by giving them sewing lessons so that they could earn a living. Her charitable activities brought her into direct contact with unmarried mothers and victims of the social restrictions under which women lived, and the sexual exploitation to which they were subjected in early Victorian Britain. In her "Preface" to *Mary Barton*, she described the novel as exploring "the romance in the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets of the town in which I resided" (xxxv). This brings to mind the picture of a busy street where women and men are forced into close proximity and reflects the changing make-up of industrialized Victorian Britain.

Gaskell's interaction with working-class inhabitants of Manchester motivated her to write *Mary Barton* in which she relies heavily on her first hand experience in the city. She personally concerned herself with the issues of

female employment, the education and rehabilitation of lost women and their plight. She was committed to using her works for the purposes of highlighting those social issues which she knew to exist in the hope of improving public attitudes. In the same "Preface" to the book, she wrote "I know nothing of Political Economy, or the theories of the trade. I have tried to write truthfully". The "truth" of "*Mary Barton*" is not political or economic, but the truth of the human heart. The novel is not about industrial conditions as much as about the harrowing plight of the poor with hunger, disease, and death by starvation.

In *Mary Barton*, Mrs Gaskell deals with the temptation of Mary, the daughter of a mill-worker, by the son of a wealthy industrialist which brings her to the verge of seduction, and the betrayal of her aunt Esther, a factory girl, by an army officer and her degrading descent into prostitution. Mary, a poor girl of sixteen, starts her practical life as an apprentice to a dressmaker. She is conscious of her beauty and attractiveness, and always tries to be dressed with a certain regard to appearance. While very young, her aunt has put into her head the idea of making a lady of her, and as she grows up, "the old leaven, infused years ago by her aunt Esther" (Gaskell, 1849) ferments in her bosom producing vanity and ambition. She shows an aversion to "going out to service", and entertains an ambitious intention of rising socially on the wing of her beauty. She knew "she was very pretty and with this consciousness she had early determined that her beauty should make her a lady" (3:26). Left motherless at an early age, Mary is in danger of abandoning domestic duties and family ties for the empty flattery and temptations offered to her by Harry Carson, a gallant, handsome young man, and the son of a mill-owner. Ignorant of his sexual designs on her, she meets with him thinking he intends to marry her. She sees in Carson the man who can offer her a better life, and the instrument of achieving her dreams. Carson is rich, prosperous and, she believes, will "place her in all circumstances of ease and luxury, where want could never come" (11:145) The luxuriant bunch of roses from her rich lover fill her little dingy bedroom with nice smell and "make the whole room fragrant and bright" (8:90). Cherishing her fantasies of becoming one day Carson's wife, she refuses Jem Wilson's offer of marriage, a man of her own class who loves her truly— who she, too, really loves.

Mary's visits to the pawn-shop grow more frequent and her mind "wandered over the present distress, and then settled, as she stitched, on the visions of the future, where yet her thoughts dwelt more on the circumstances of ease, and the pomps and vanities awaiting her, than on the lover with whom she was to share them" (10: 127). Carson's flattery charms her and her fantasies revolve around the seeming impossibility of plentiful food and wealth. Poignantly, she tries to escape the woes of her family and class by withdrawing mentally from the battlefield of sorrow:

One of Mary's resolutions was, that she would not be persuaded or induced to see Mr. Harry Carson during her father's absence. There was something crooked in her conscience after all; for this very resolution seemed an acknowledgment that it was wrong to meet him at any time; and yet she had brought herself to think her conduct quite innocent and proper, for although unknown to her father, and certain, even did he know it, to fail of obtaining his sanction, she esteemed her love—meetings with Mr. Carson as sure to end in her father's good and happiness. (8:98)

While Mary's dreams of romantic triumph involve possessions rather than passions, Harry Carson is a hard-hearted son of a rich employer, so far from feeling pity for the weavers that he turns their sufferings to caricature. Like the other masters who see the labourers as hands by which they can make money, young Carson sees in the lower-class Mary a mere object to be used to satisfy his lust. He looks at Mary as an arrant flirt little hussy; but very pretty (15: 196), and feels that "he must have her", therefore he embarks on his plan of sexual seduction and viciously plans to "obtain her as cheaply as he could" (11:149). To achieve his scheme, he allures her into stolen meetings and evening strolls during which he tries to pour sweet honeyed words into her ears. He tells her "you see

how willing I am to— to sacrifice a good deal for you He pulled her towards him. To his surprise she still resisted." (11:152). Harry purposefully attempts to engage her in sex and convert "her initial unwillingness to willingness to have sex based on sex desire" (Damasio, 2016). Mary, out of innocence or ignorance, believes his intentions honourable and urges him "to bring matters more to a point" (10:127). Confronted by her unexpected request, Carson reveals himself to be a cad when he easily confesses: "You know ... how little my father and mother would like me to marry you. So angry would they be, and so much ridicule should I have to brave, that of course I have never thought of it till now. I thought we could be happy enough without marriage" (11:152). With these words, the truth flashes across Mary mind. She divines his intentions, denounces him and saves herself: "you meant to ruin me; for that's the plain English of not meaning to marry me Now I scorn you, sir, for plotting to ruin a poor girl" (11:153). The fact that Mary does not fall is due partly to her strong-mindedness and determination, and partly to the fact that her would-be seducer is shot before accomplishing his designs.

Though in this story of seduction Mrs Gaskell warns that female frivolity and aspirations are the seeds of ruin, she skillfully exposes the demoralizing role of upper-class young men and shows working-class women and poor girls as sexual victims. Harry Carson's blindness to human considerations, his relentless intention to seduce Mary "at any price" (11:149), and the materialistic and hypocritical attitude of the wealthy manufacturer, old Mr Carson, who in the words of his own son "would have forgiven any temporary connection, far sooner than my marrying one so far beneath me in rank" (11: 154) are all in line with the evidences of Engels, who claims that most working-class women were never safe from sexual exploitation (Engels, 1958) or the author of *My Secret Life* who describes the reception a young worker meets upon complaining to her foreman:

None o' that gal; an I hears more on that, you won't work here any more, nor anywheres else in this parish ... the squire won't harm you; I think you be in luck if he loikes you (Marcus, 2008).

Equally important to this story of seduction is Mrs Gaskell's portrayal of Esther, the factory girl-turned-prostitute. While Mary's realization of Carson's scheme plays an effective role in saving her from ruin, Esther is completely ignorant of the nature of her seducer's intentions, and innocently falls into his trap. Esther has the same vanity and ambition as her niece. She despises factory work and spends her money on "dress, thinking to set off her pretty face". Barton then prophetically warns her: "you'll be a street-walker" (1: 6). Motivated by her love of finery and aspiration to transcend her class, she elopes with a lover in the hope of fulfilling her dreams. Like Catherine in James Froude's *The Lieutenant's Daughter*, her lover does not marry her, and she becomes his mistress. After three years of what seemed happiness to her, he leaves her with a baby and a fifty-pound note.

With vanity and ambition established as a common ground between niece and aunt, Esther's betrayal and its consequences becomes an ominous example hanging over and threatening to be a pattern for Mary. Esther moves downward on the road of degradation. While her fantasies and false aspirations make her an easy victim, desertion and financial necessity leave her to face the alternative of prostitution or starvation. Her baby falls ill and though she writes to the father for help, she "never [gets] an answer" (14:179). Suffering from poverty, starvation and desperation, and driven by her love and desire to save her sick baby, she goes on the street. In her meeting with Jem, she describes the conditions that pushed her to her degradation:

It was winter, cold bleak winter; and my child was so ill, so ill, and I was starving. And I could not bear to see her suffer, and forgot how much better it would be for us to die together; —oh, her moans, her moans, which money could give the means of relieving! (14:180)

Esther is not portrayed as a bad woman who readily takes to prostitution, nor does she seem to get any sexual pleasure from it. Her guilt, for the reader, is softened as much as possible and she is shown as forced to a life of suffering and misery, and "has to dull her senses" (Wright, 1965) with the constant stupefaction of drink to carry on. Mrs Gaskell makes of her a figure whom readers (or she herself) look at with sympathy instead of

condemnation. Suffering and humiliation do not harden her heart. Her wish to do good and to sacrifice herself for her child shows that she still has virtue. Like Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, who saves Oliver from the underworld gang, Esther shows a well-intentioned concern for Mary's fate and tries to save her from the same trap that brought her down, though her shame and disgrace hamper her good intentions. She approaches John Barton, as he returns home late one rainy night, trying to tell him about Mary's activities; Barton hears a step behind and feel a touch on his arm:

He turned, and saw, even by the darkness visible of that badly-lighted street, that the woman who stood by him was of no doubtful profession. It was told by her faded finery, all unfit to meet the pelting of that pitiless storm; the gauze bonnet, once pink, now dirty white, the muslin gown, all dragged, and soaking wet up to the very knees; the gay-coloured barege shawl, closely wrapped round the form which yet shivered and shook. (10:137)

At first he attempts to shake her off in disgust without even recognizing her. But then her voice arrests him, he drags her to the lamp-post and holds her face to the light, and at once in

her large, unnaturally bright grey eyes, her lovely mouth, half open, as if imploring the forbearance she could not ask for in words, he saw at once the long-lost Esther Much was like the gay creature of former years; but the glaring paint, the sharp features, the changed expression of the whole! (10:137)

Convinced that Esther's original elopement contributed much to the death of his own beloved wife, John Barton curses her, pushes her into the mud, and leaves her crying for help. The only one to heed her is a policeman who picks her up and has her sentenced to a month in jail for disorderly vagrancy. This scene, which describes Esther's reappearance in Manchester, is in fact important in Mrs Gaskell's treatment of the ruined woman theme, and in her effort to excite the reader's sympathy. On the one hand, it portrays the miserable suffering which the outcast undergoes. John Barton sees in Esther's face the "lovely mouth" and 'the gay creature of former years' that reminds him of the virginal Esther, and the use of the contrastive element 'but' which follows directly refers here to a change. The 'sharp features', the "unnatural bright grey eyes" and the "glaring paint" testify to her degraded position, while the "gay creature of former years" refers to the happy Esther of the past and not this present Esther. The description of her clothing and her faded finery, and the contrast between the "gauze bonnet, once pink" now "dirty white" reflects this contrast between her past and miserable present. The effect is one showing emphatically that with every step Esther has gone to new depths of wretchedness and degradation. On the other hand, it exposes the self-righteous cruelty of John Barton and society at large against her. She is avoided and rebuffed by everyone. No one will even let her approach him for fear of contamination. Even John Barton, representative of the only family she has, curses and refuses her when she applies to him, not for help for herself, but for his daughter. Here at this point in the book, the narrator pleads for sympathy and pity and attacks collective condemnation:

To whom shall the outcast prostitute tell her tale? Who will give her help in the day of need? Hers is the leper-sin, and all stand aloof dreading to be counted unclean. (14:176)

Esther is a creature of the night. The disgrace she has fallen to has stamped her with a mark similar to Hester's stigma of degradation in *The Scarlet Letter* and sets her on the pedestal of shame against which the righteous and the respectable cast their contempt and condemnation. She dogs Mary's steps like a grotesque guardian angel hoping to keep her from harm, but she never lets her see her. When it becomes essential for her to meet Mary face to face, she has to disguise herself and hide her "disgraced mark" from "the glorious light of day, which was only for the happy" (21: 256). She poses in borrowed clothes as a mechanic's wife. Like Edith in *Dombey and Son*, who shrinks away from the touch of pure and innocent Florence, Esther refuses to allow Mary to kiss her: "Not me. You must never kiss me. You! She rushed into the outer darkness of the street, and there wept long and bitterly" (21:265).

Esther meekly "accepts society's view of herself as an outcast, she is filled with remorse and grief over her own sinful life, but makes no attempt to regain respectability".²³ Like Hester, she accepts her fate and refuses Jem's offer to help her come home: "I cannot. I could not lead a virtuous life if I would. I should only disgrace you ... you can do nothing for me. I am past hope" (14:183). Mrs Gaskell's attitude towards her is embodied in Jem's pity and in Mary's loving and forgiving response which demonstrates the necessity for unselfish human sympathy and help for the sinner "If anyone would lend her a helping hand. Don't old me, Jem; this is just the time for such as her to be out Oh, bring her home, and we will love her so, we'll make her good" (38:420).

Like Alice in *Dombey and Son*, Esther follows an apparently conventional path from seduction to prostitution and death, and her portrayal shows in every way that she is the typical lost woman outcast of the period who is seduced, later deserted, and eventually left to rot. Rejected by family and society, she finds no decent place to sleep nor any institution to which to apply for help. She is known to the local police as "the Butterfly"; though this nickname might have been derived "from the gaiety of her dress a year or two ago" (38: 420), yet it also suggests her unsettled life and frequent move from one place to another. When she is not in jail, she passes her nights on street corners and in door-ways, and her days in a low lodging-house in "a large garret where twenty or thirty people of all ages and both sexes lay and dozed the day, choosing the evening and night for" their trade of beggary, thieving, or prostitution" (38: 420). Even the language she uses, according to W. A. Craik, is the "stereotyped rhetoric of the fictional "fallen woman" (Craik, 1975). She says to Jem:

And do you think one sunk so low as I am has a home? Decent, good people have homes. We have none. No, if you want me, come at night, and look at the corners of the streets about here. The colder, the bleaker, the more stormy the night, the more certain you will be to find me. (14:183)

Beyond the book's plea for pity and sympathy, Esther is given no chance of possible reconciliation with society. Her prostitution "symbolizes the blighting moral effect of society in which she is found. Her suffering is irremediable" (Pollard, 1965). Although the idea of taking her back to respectable society and life is hinted through Jem's "interior monologue":

But before he reached the end of the street, even in the midst of the jealous anguish that filled his heart, his conscience smote him. He had not done enough to save her. One more effort, and she might come. Nay, twenty efforts would have been well rewarded by her yielding. He turned back, but she was gone. (14:184) Yet we find that this is not developed.

In accordance with the literary conventions of the fictional world of the 1840s, Esther refuses the offer of recovery and accepts her fate. There is no reformation for her; she has to die. She accepts the sanctuary Jem offers only at her dying hour, and comes back like "a wounded deer" returning to its "lair ... to die" (38:421). As Nancy dies, raising the white handkerchief as an emblem of repentance, Esther dies "with a soul reverting to innocence".²⁶ She "held the locket containing her child's hair still in her hand, and once or twice kissed it with a long soft kiss. She cried feebly and sadly as long as she had any strength to cry, and then she died" (38:422). She is buried in the same grave with John Barton, the murderer, under the inscription, "For He will not always chide, neither will He keep His anger for ever" (38:422), which, according to Patricia Beer, "carries the whole weight of Victorian sorrowful wrath"; Beer (1974) nevertheless, it is ultimately forgiving. Esther's story is intended to convey the same symbolic truth about women's lives as the novel itself, indeed the same truth that Victorian society heartily endorsed that true fulfillment comes from the emotional and spiritual ties that bind a woman to hearth and family. It aims "to suggest the existence of a feminine community of interests which differ radically from those of men, a community which supports and gives validity to the act of feminine fiction making"²⁸.

Mrs Gaskell attempted not only to analyze the forces at play in the life of a workingman, but also the conflicts which exist between worker and employer. The book illustrates the feeling of hostility between them and depicts

the wretched living condition of the workingman and his family. In the second half of the novel, Mrs. Gaskell focuses on John Barton's daughter Mary involvement with Harry Carson, and the miserable condition of her wretched aunt Esther. This move was seen by some readers as a weakness attributed to lack of unity resulting from the shift in focus from father to daughter and aunt. According to Elaine Showalter

much of the second part of the novel is similarly doubtful. It is not that it is boring, for the suspense story of the end of the murder plot is grippingly told. It is rather that one feels the second part to be in quite a different and a lesser genre from the first. It seems as if a complex re-creation of events, scenes and problems concerning the real circumstances of the 1840s has given way to a more simple fable which ends in a moral tableau (Showalter, 1997).

Mrs Gaskell concentrates largely on the humanitarian and moral questions affecting individuals and their families, and on understanding and peaceful reconciliation between alienated groups of society, using her novels to expose abuses, and to promote reform. Esther's chronicle of seduction and descent into prostitution is positioned between the industrial plot and that of romance and seduction. She links the two stories, and outstandingly represents what Mary will become if she succumbs to her upper-class seducer. Esther desperately seeks out John Barton, the father, and later, Jem Wilson to tell them about the secret rendezvous, the empty flattery, and false temptation offered to Mary by Harry Carson in the hope that they can stop and prevent a similar fate from befalling Mary. Though she remains a shadowy figure in the novel, she plays an important role in the construction of the narrative, Her miserable story seems typical of the Victorian "seduced and ruined woman" narrative that appears in many Victorian novels, yet Mrs Gaskell does not only use her plight as a warning tale, but also makes of a character who has a great influence on narrative events. She tells Jem about Carson's attempts to seduce Mary, and before the trial, she brings Mary the "paper that had served as wadding for the murderer's gun" (21:256). It is owing to her that Jem is spared from being sentenced as a killer. Esther functions as a middle ground between the two parts of the story and the bridge which unifies the narrative.

3. CONCLUSION

Mrs Gaskell originality in dealing with these issues makes of *Mary Barton* an extraordinary work. By connecting between the industrial tale of conflict among classes, and the story of the planned seduction of Mary and the miserable and grim fate of her aunt Esther, Mrs Gaskell was able to prod the national conscience and successfully convey her message that the sins of the upper classes are visited on the lower. The officer who betrays Esther, or Harry who would cheerfully have seduced Mary Barton, are thoughtlessly responsible for the sufferings of others. The book is a call for love, tolerance, and forgiveness. It ought to be possible to forgive the murderer of one's son, be it by bullet or starvation. By mixing industrial and sexual exploitation, Mrs Gaskell equates the seduction and ruin of poor girls in seriousness with murder.

Early reviews of *Mary Barton* were very favorable, and the novel's successful reception turned the unknown Gaskell into a celebrity. Other writers wrote about industrialization and its effects on the working class, and about the sexual exploitation of poor and working class women and their inescapable descent into prostitution – Charles Kingsley, Benjamin Disraeli, and Dickens – but none has "the overwhelming well of human sympathy which floods through Gaskell's work" (Sutherland, 2014). The book was not only popular with readers, but also garnered praise from such literary notables as Charles Dickens and Thomas Carlyle the sage of his age, and according to Annette B. Hopkins *Mary Barton*, is not only superior to similar examples of the social problem genre but it "made the social novel respectable (Hopkins, 1948). How Gaskell's clever concoction of the tale of industrial conflict and the story of feigned love and attempted seduction reflects her originality and makes *Mary Barton* an admirable and remarkable book.

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What is new about this study:

This paper sheds light on the industrial relationships between masters and laborers, the sexual manipulation of working girls, the cruel and ugly results of the rich men toying with young factory girls, the spread of the great social evil that plagued Victorian Britain, and Elizabeth Gaskell's urgent message to act.

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