

ELIZABETH GASKELL AND CHARLES KINGSLEY: THE CREATIVE
ARTIST'S INTERPRETATION OF A WORKING CLASS WORLD

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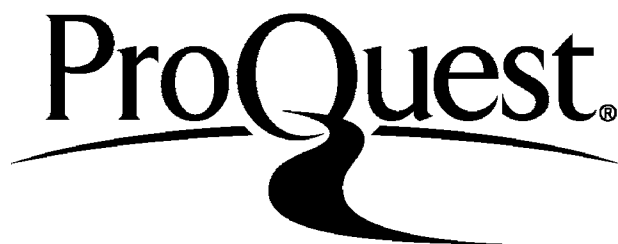
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Abstract of a Thesis for a Ph.D. Degree in English

ELIZABETH GASKELL AND CHARLES KINGSLEY: THE CREATIVE
ARTIST'S INTERPRETATION OF A WORKING CLASS WORLD.

by John Simpson Cartwright

The dissertation examines the particular skills of Charles Kingsley and Elizabeth Gaskell as writers of fiction in their attempts to present a view of the working classes in Yeast, Alton Locke, Mary Barton and North and South.

The introduction provides a short account of the social background and examines the concepts and methods used in this study.

The first chapter briefly shows a selection of alternative approaches to fictional representation of the working class in other contemporary minor novelists.

Chapter two considers those aspects of Charles Kingsley's intellectual development which were most significant in the formation of his views of the working class.

Chapter three provides a detailed examination of Yeast and considers the way in which Charles Kingsley first attempted to incorporate working class figures in his novels.

Chapter four discusses the development of Charles Kingsley's writing on the subject and analyses the treatment of the working class milieu of Alton Locke.

Chapter five examines Mrs Gaskell's first novel, Mary Barton, which also presents a working class environment.

Chapter six shows the further development of Mrs Gaskell as a writer in this area, by an examination of the way in which the working

class is seen in relation to other social groups in North and South.

Chapter seven analyses a particular aspect of Mrs. Gaskell's treatment of the working class by a consideration of her use of dialogue in the two novels.

The conclusion briefly compares and contrasts the individual approaches of the two authors to the writing of novels about the working class.

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to examine the way in which Charles Kingsley and Elizabeth Gaskell have presented a working class milieu in some of their novels and to draw attention to their sensitivity in creating, within their novels, an account of a culture in which the working class norms, values and patterns of behaviour are seen to be distinct from a middle class view of them - a view held by the majority of readers and writers in the first half of the nineteenth century. My references throughout the thesis to the 'art' of Charles Kingsley and Elizabeth Gaskell will refer to those techniques and skills which they have used to interpret this particular aspect of their work.

The purpose of this dissertation is not so much to attempt to establish the accuracy with which the novelists have recorded historical events and facts - although this has a part to play - but to examine the way in which the writers have used their creative skills in making fiction out of life amongst the working class and have given expression to its attitudes, feelings and behaviour. The dynamic aspects of their work therefore cannot be reduced to factual accounting. To include factual detail in a novel does not necessarily enhance its quality as a piece of literature, nor does it inevitably contribute to a greater understanding of a world which the writer has chosen for his fictional background. Taine, one of the earliest writers to adopt a sociological approach to the interpretation of literature, attempted to apply the methods of the natural sciences to the social sciences and treat the novel as though it were an object which was capable of scientific analysis. Because Taine believed that literature was a reflection of society, he felt that it could thus be used as an historical document. Modifications of Taine's approach, particularly in the

analysis of certain types of nineteenth century fiction, have persisted and led P.J. Keating, fairly recently to lament that:

Too often individual working-class scenes in Victorian novels are praised for their historical accuracy, while the total pattern and effect of the novel is either ignored or excused. When we look more closely at how exactly working-class characters are treated in relation to characters of other classes, we find time and time again that the novelist has unconsciously set in motion a process of avoidance which prevents him from dealing with his professed subject - the working classes.¹

In attempting to avoid such simplistic accounting, the emphasis throughout the thesis is upon the examination of the awareness of social interaction of particular social groups in the novels of Charles Kingsley and Elizabeth Gaskell, and their understanding, in part, of the social structures and growth of class consciousness amongst the working class of the nineteenth century. This necessitates an examination of the dialectical nature of the relationship between the writer and his subject, in this case the working class, which contributes to the understanding and interpretations revealed in the novels. Clearly there is an important relationship between the social context and the creative work of the writer, as Malcolm Bradbury and Bryan Wilson have pointed out:

while the ideal portrait of the creative process is of an act pursued in freedom, solitude and without constraint, the fact remains that

¹ P.J. Keating, The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction (London, 1971), pp.4 -5.

by another definition the writer is neither solitary nor autonomous. He is bound into his time, and lives within its horizons and potentials for thought and vision. He is also bound into a body of practices, conventions, and precepts - bound by the language he uses, which is never alone personal; by the orders and structures with which he shapes and designs his material; and by much more practical conventions of his profession and his craft.²

The relationship of the writer to his environment is extremely complex and the sources of his materials and ideas almost impossible to identify in any direct sense. Although there obviously existed a world which, in part, can be accounted for objectively in terms of historical evidence and one which was clearly experienced by the working classes themselves, these novelists are more often concerned with the interpretation of experience within this society. Therefore in discussing these novels, it is not always easy to speak categorically of 'the working class world of the 1840s and 1850s', and more frequently the interpretations of a working class image are dependent upon the degree of access which the observer had to certain types of information, his contact with groups of workers and his own attitude of mind. Martin Bulmer, writing on the subject of research into class imagery says:

the problems associated with the nature of imagery are generalisable to the study of culture more generally. The variety, diffuseness and lack of precision evident in the study of imagery does not mean that the investigation of the social sources of their variation is misconceived. Rather it underlines the point that subjective aspects

² Robert Escarpit, Sociology of Literature, translated by Ernest Pick with an introduction by Malcolm Bradbury and Bryan Wilson (London, 1971), p.7.

of social action and social relations are by definition idiosyncratic, particularistic and relatively formless.³

In speaking of the problems of interpretation for sociologists, Martin Bulmer is also making a very relevant comment on the difficulties facing novelists when they attempt to interpret social situations.

If, for example, consideration is given to the working class of Manchester, the way in which the image of the worker is constructed will vary from observer to observer. Although the same events and places were accessible to all those wishing to examine the area, the way in which these primary sources were used and interpreted depended upon the individual. Hence the different interpretations that were produced by, say, W. Cooke Taylor⁴ and Frederick Engels⁵, when they explored situations which were superficially similar.

But if we can be faced with problems of interpretation created by the underlying ideologies or presuppositions of historians, then it must be seen that the use made by novelists of historical facts can also present difficulties. However, the novelist must eventually choose to record accounts in a way which he believes will be most convincing to his audience, and this raises the question of the nature of representation. Engels, writing to Margaret Harkness on the subject of her working class novel City Girl, discusses this essential point and provides a solution by introducing the concept of typicality:

³Working Class Images of Society, edited by Martin Bulmer (London, 1975), p.165.

⁴W. Cooke Taylor, Notes of a Tour in the Manufacturing Districts of Lancashire (1842), new edition (London, 1968).

⁵Frederick Engels, The Condition of the Working Class in England translated by W.O. Henderson and W.H. Chaloner (Oxford, 1958).

If I have anything to criticise, it would be that perhaps, after all, the tale is not quite realistic enough. Realism, to my mind, implies, besides the truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances.⁶

This contention that particular social situations could be most effectively exemplified through representations of typicality was more extensively developed in the work of Lukács, where he insists that: what makes it a type is that in it all the humanly and socially essential determinants are present on their highest level of development, in the ultimate unfolding of the possibilities latent in them⁷

In this sense it can be argued that in John Barton or Nicholas Higgins or Alton Locke, Mrs Gaskell and Charles Kingsley are attempting to create working class types who will be, in their estimation, representations of men faced with the essential difficulties of an emerging industrial working class.

With the coming of industrialization there was a growth of a new kind of class identity, which threatened the estate system where social position was essentially ascribed, because it made demands which tended to promote individual merit. The required specialization and efficiency of performance created new social classes in which there were no legal or sacred barriers to mobility. Karl Marx argues that classes are defined in terms of their relationship to the instruments of production and the distribution of wealth. Because industrialization caused wealth to be used and distributed in a different way, it created new social groupings which were more and more referred to as social 'classes'. As Asa Briggs

⁶Marx and Engels, On Literature and Art (Moscow, 1976), p.90.

⁷Georg Lukács, Studies in European Realism (London, 1972), p.6.

has pointed out:

The newly rich began, in time, to consider their social position not in terms of order and degree, but in terms of class, a new concept in English social thinking; the new workers, or at least the most militant amongst them, began to think of themselves not as permanently established 'lower orders', the necessary broad base for the tapering social pyramid, but as 'labouring or working classes', a group far from homogeneous but with realizable ambitions as a group and not as a mere collection of individuals.⁸

Society required the use of a new terminology to express the change which had taken place and, as Raymond Williams has shown, it has been possible to identify with some precision the appearances of the new terms associated with the concept of class:

It is only at the end of the eighteenth century that the modern structure of class, in its social sense, begins to be built up. First comes lower classes, to join lower orders, which appears earlier in the eighteenth century. Then, in the 1790s, we get higher classes; middle classes and middling classes follow at once; working classes in about 1815; upper classes in 1820s. Class prejudice, class legislation, class consciousness, class conflict and class war in the course of the nineteenth century.⁹

It has been argued by many that the changes in the structure of society not only brought about an alteration in the way in which

⁸Asa Briggs, The Age of Improvement 1783 - 1867 (London, 1959), p.65.

⁹Raymond Williams, Culture and Society 1780 - 1950 (London, 1958), p.xv.

people were employed, but also caused them to view the relationships between the social groups differently. Industrialization had created a new order which was questioned because it was new. In the past changes had taken place so gradually that they were regarded as inevitable. But the change from rural and domestic work to large-scale manufacture of goods had been a fairly rapid transfer from the small, close-knit relationship of master and man to a large-scale employment of labour, where links between employer and employee were simply those of work and wages. The whole relationship was based on a 'cash-nexus'.

Economists like Ricardo and Adam Smith were well aware of the problems related to the creation of a new social order and spoke strongly on the subject. But they saw class conflict essentially in monetary terms and not as the interaction of social groups brought about by historical forces, as the sociologists were later to conceive it. The concept of class was defined in a number of ways and interpretations of social relations varied considerably, but there are two major aspects of the concept of class in a Marxist point of view, which are important here, that is, the concept of class 'in itself' and 'for itself'. The growth of industrialization brings about the development of large-scale industry, and gathers together groups of workers and unites them by their relationship within the mode of production, but it is only in their struggles that they become aware of their common purpose:

Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The domination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle . . . this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a

class for itself: The interests it defends become class interests.¹⁰

In addition to the factual level of social structure, involving the formation of associations, there was also the very important ideological level of social structure which involved the expression of class consciousness. Ralf Dahrendorf, in his examination of this class model of Marx, defines class consciousness as:

the transformation of "objective" class interests into subjectively conscious, formulated goals of organized action. The complete class is characterized not by a common though unconscious direction of behaviour, but by its conscious action towards formulated goals.¹¹

Similarly E.P. Thompson in his analysis of the making of the working class emphasises the importance of the growth of a cultural identity in the form of class consciousness:

the outstanding fact of the period between 1790 and 1830 is the formation of 'the working class'. This is revealed, first, in the growth of class-consciousness: the consciousness of an identity of interests as between all these diverse groups of working people and as against the interests of other classes. And, second, in the growth of corresponding forms of political and industrial organization. By 1832 there were strongly based and self conscious working-class institutions . . . working-class intellectual traditions, working-class community-patterns, and a working-class structure of feeling.¹²

¹⁰The Poverty of Philosophy in The Collected Works of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 12 vols (London, 1976), VI, 211.

¹¹Ralf Dahrendorf, Class and Class Conflict in an Industrial Society (London, 1959), p.25.

¹²E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (London, 1963), pp.212-213.

Charles Kingsley and Elizabeth Gaskell both, in varying degrees, demonstrate in their writing, as I intend to show, an awareness of class consciousness in their working class characters which was much greater than was usually found in the work of their contemporaries. This is not to imply that they found solutions in revolutionary terms, but that this intense awareness of what they felt to be a growing problem led them to explore situations where class consciousness manifested itself and to offer solutions which they thought may be found within the existing political framework. Thus the radical nature of their perceptions, as writers of fiction, lies in the recognition that the creation of a new social class by the industrial revolution had brought into being a group which interpreted the world in a significantly different way from the bourgeoisie.

Disraeli, for example, was conscious of the existence of what he called the two nations of the rich and the poor, but his concept of a social group was crude and when he came to write his novels, he was unable to come to terms with the idea of a social class which possessed a distinctive culture with its own norms and values. He was unable to see the possibility of a class existing which possessed a collective consciousness, making it view the world differently from other classes. Similarly, Dickens was essentially concerned with individuals or members of an occupational group rather than a class and in this sense he was fascinated with the enormous variety of occupations created by the industrial urban society, as was Mayhew in his classification of occupations in London Labour and the London Poor (1861). Dickens's lack of interest in social class as such can be seen, for example, in the way in which he responded to his visit to Preston at the time of a serious strike and his subsequent interpretation of worker and owner

relationships in Hard Times (1854).¹³ Obviously so significant a writer cannot be summarily dismissed, but my intention is to direct attention to what is included in the work of Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Kingsley, rather than to attempt to establish what is absent from that of Charles Dickens.

Before commencing to examine the four novels in detail I would like to consider briefly the way in which the two novelists chose to structure their work in order to present their views of working class characters and working class behaviour. Charles Kingsley, whose initial interest lay in the plight of the agricultural workers, tackled the problem of examining this stratum of society as a distinct group in his first novel, Yeast (1848). The technique used in the book was to make use of a working class character, Tregarva, through whose eyes the reader is shown the worker's predicament. But, as both Charles Kingsley and Elizabeth Gaskell realised, the choice of a working class hero presented great difficulties and there was no easy solution which would be both credible and acceptable to the general reader. The essential problem was how to represent what Kingsley felt to be a largely inarticulate group through a character who was capable of speaking in an informed manner about the working class, without appearing to be unrepresentative or false in his behaviour. In choosing Tregarva, a self-educated gamekeeper who in many ways was an atypical example of the working class, Kingsley sought to provide a bridge of communication which would enable Lancelot Smith, the more conventional protagonist, to cross over into the working class world of the village labourer. Kingsley demonstrates his awareness of the difficulties of entering such a world by, for example, showing the need for disguise when Tregarva and Lancelot visit the village revel.

¹³For a discussion of this see Geoffrey Carnall, 'Dickens, Mrs. Gaskell and the Preston Strike', Victorian Studies, VIII (1964), 31-48.

But, as Kingsley pointed out in the epilogue to Yeast, the novel had been something of an experiment, and when he came to write Alton Locke (1850), his examination of the working class was much more ambitious. In Alton Locke the reader is confronted with a working class world in which the representatives of the middle class participate very little. On this occasion his interests centred upon the more specific problem of tailors. Again faced with the problem of creating a working class hero, Kingsley chooses a member of the trade who, having gained some education through self-help, eventually achieves a certain amount of fame as a poet. The method used in this novel is fictional autobiography. As a result of having developed his intellect, Alton Locke is able to reflect upon his past experiences with a degree of sophistication not possible for his fellow workers.

Mrs Gaskell's experiences in Manchester brought her in close contact with the difficulties experienced by industrial workers and she starts her examination of the working class in fiction at a point where Charles Kingsley leaves off in Alton Locke. Mary Barton (1848), like Kingsley's second novel, attempts to present a total working class world, in which the middle class take very little part, in spite of their domination over the lives of the characters involved in the plot. Mrs Gaskell also faces the same problems as Kingsley in the creation of a working class heroine and, in order to overcome some of the difficulties, makes Mary Barton more educated than one would expect an apprentice dress-maker to be, especially one whose father is a millhand. In her efforts to give a clear account of the working class view of the world she also frequently resorts to the use of the authorial voice. When she comes to write North and South (1854-5), Mrs Gaskell advances beyond the presentation of a working class world as a totality in the novel to a more complex and sophisticated approach of showing the interaction between

the classes and thus pointing up the distinction between them by juxtaposition and contrast. Repeatedly Mrs Gaskell shows us parallels or contrasts where different classes are responding to the same or similar events yet perceiving them in very different ways.

Because of the nature of the novels considered and the arguments advanced in the thesis, I have adopted a longitudinal approach to the critical analysis of the works. I am only partly concerned with the problems of style and structure of the novels as artistic wholes and I am more essentially concerned with the interpretation of certain limited aspects of the novelists' work. This has led me to examine the scenes related to the perception of the working class and their problems in the order in which they occur in the novels, rather than attempting the more 'spatial' approach of dealing with one theme or issue at a time. This approach also comes closest to the experience of the reader and to the cumulative effect which the writer, from the way in which he and she ordered the scenes, seems to have intended. I have on the whole considered the individual merits of the two authors separately, but some comparison has been made between the two and there have been brief references to other minor writers. It is hoped that by the use of this methodology I have been able to analyse and discuss the authors' art in the most unbiased manner possible.

But to begin with I shall offer some discussion of the treatment of the working class given by some other contemporary minor novelists and select representatives from contrasting thematic approaches - commercial, religious, socio-economic and political - in order to put in perspective the achievement of the two writers under consideration.

Chapter 1: The Working Class in the works of other contemporary minor novelists.

The working classes as a subject for fiction provided a great deal of interest to many other writers during the period when Charles Kingsley and Elizabeth Gaskell were working on the subject. The production of novels had accelerated during a period when interest in the working classes generally had also increased and many novelists chose to include representatives of the poor in their work¹. However, it is not possible within the limits of this thesis to make an exhaustive study of all the novels that deal with the poor, therefore I will first concentrate my attention upon that kind of novel in the period which Louis Cazamian called a 'roman-à-thèse'². That is a novel which aims at directly influencing human relations, either in general, or with reference to one particular set of circumstances. From this group of novels I shall consider those middle class novelists³ who attempt to examine the relationship between employer and worker under the new factory system and the related problems of worker and employer in a rural situation affected by the changing social structure. By discussing the achievement of these writers it is hoped to point up the particular qualities which Charles Kingsley and Elizabeth Gaskell displayed when working in this sphere. With this in mind I shall devote

¹ Myron Brightfield has clearly indicated the extent of the problem in Victorian England and its Novels (1840-1870), 4 vols (Los Angeles, 1968).

² Louis Cazamian, Le Roman social en Angleterre (Paris, 1904), p.6.

³ To include novels by working class writers, like Thomas Wheeler's Sunshine and Shadow (1849), would introduce another dimension because I am concerned with the way in which middle class writers are aware of patterns of behaviour which are different from those in their own social group.

the chapter to examining a selection of novels which I have taken as representative of commercial, religious, socio-economic and political interpretations of the subject of the working class. These are Mrs Trollope's Michael Armstrong (1840), Charlotte Elizabeth (Tonna's) Helen Fleetwood (1841), Harriet Martineau's A Manchester Strike (1832) and Disraeli's Sybil (1845).

Dickens has not been included in this chapter for two major reasons. He is neither a minor novelist nor was any of his novels concerned with these particular problems, apart from Hard Times which will be dealt with in more detail in its relationship to Mrs Gaskell's North and South. Dickens knew very little about the new factory system or those who were involved in it and he almost always concerned himself with those who belonged to the non-industrial urban working class. There are references to the exploitation of factory children in Oliver Twist (1838), Nicholas Nickleby (1838-9) and The Old Curiosity Shop (1840-1) but apart from Hard Times (1854) it does not become a major theme. He also makes no real reference to the problem of rural workers apart from the brief sketch of Will Fern in The Chimes (1844). It could not be denied that Dickens was intensely concerned with the social problems of the age⁴, but his work was related very largely to areas outside the realm of Mrs Gaskell and Charles Kingsley. This was mainly due to his expressed concern for individuals rather than a wish to comprehend the values and patterns of behaviour associated with a particular group or class.

⁴ This theme in Dickens's work has been fully explored in a number of works, for example: Humphry House, The Dickens World (London, 1941), W.W. Crotch, Charles Dickens: Social Reformer (London, 1913), P. Collins, Dickens and Crime (London, 1962) and P. Collins, Dickens and Education, (London, 1963).

Dickens, however, did have a substantial influence on Mrs Trollope and the success of Oliver Twist must have encouraged her to make the hero of her next novel another working class little boy called Michael Armstrong. Mrs Trollope was a lady of middle class origin who had been reduced to straitened circumstances by the inability of her husband to support the family adequately. She was a woman of great energy and determination and she attempted a number of unsuccessful schemes before she finally hit upon the idea of becoming a writer.

Her first interest in writing was stirred by Basil Hall's Travels in North America (1829), which had been a great success.⁵ She saw the possibilities of using her own experiences of America and Domestic Manners of the Americans (1832) was the result. Mrs Trollope was essentially a commercial writer, and she chose themes which would arouse public interest and sell well. After her initial publishing venture, she wrote a number of books of all kinds. It was not long before she realised that the conditions of children working in factories had become an important subject of public interest and she was determined to use it to advantage.

As Eileen Bigland tells us, she set off for the north of England with characteristic energy 'on a tour which provided her with information so horrifying that she sat up half each night writing in a white-heat of fury that such things could be'.⁶ These efforts eventually produced The Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong (1840). The story

⁵ Basil Hall was an English naval officer, who had published a book on his travels. This had taken America by storm. Although Americans severely criticised the book, they bought it in vast numbers, mostly in order to condemn it.

⁶ Eileen Bigland, The Indomitable Mrs Trollope (London, 1953), pp. 195-96.

concerns a little factory boy who is adopted by Sir Matthew Dowling, the factory owner. This gesture was made to please Lady Clarissa, whom he later marries, and to enhance his reputation as a public figure of great charity. Michael Armstrong is merely a tool in this exercise and when Sir Matthew grows tired of the scheme he sends the child away to the Deep Valley mills. This is a factory where unwanted children are bound by a kind of apprenticeship to work for the owner of the mill. Meanwhile a local young heiress, Mary Brotherton, has taken a genuine interest in the boy and his family. The rest of the book is taken up with her attempts to rescue Michael Armstrong and her efforts to help his crippled brother. Sir Matthew is given a melodramatic bad end and he dies financially ruined and haunted by the ghosts of dead workers from his factory.

If Mrs Trollope was genuinely concerned about the conditions of the factory workers, the nature of the plot and the doubtful credibility of the characters fail to convey this message. The initial scene of Michael Armstrong's introduction in the novel is very contrived. Many other situations could have been used more effectively than Michael's mock rescue of Lady Clarissa from a cow and his subsequent adoption by Sir Matthew Dowling.

A very small portion of the whole novel is taken up with factory life and the visits to factories are rather unconvincing in their description. Even the street where Michael Armstrong lived is described in very general terms:

The very vilest rags were hanging before most of the doors, as demonstration that washing of garments was occasionally resorted to within. Crawling infants, half-starved cats, mangy curs, and fowls that

looked as if each particular feather had been used as a scavenger's broom, shared the dust and the sunshine between them, while an odour, which seemed compounded of a multitude of villainous smells, all reeking together into one, floated over them.⁷

Mrs Trollope uses Mary Brotherton, perhaps the most sympathetic character in the book, to explore the conditions of the factory workers. Mary confesses to a complete ignorance of the factories but claims to be eager to learn about them.

'What a sad thing it is,' continued Miss Brotherton, 'that we all of us know so little of the poor people employed in the factories! I believe they are said to be exceedingly well paid, but still I don't think it is quite right for the rich people in a neighbourhood to take no notice whatever of the poor.'⁸

By using this method Mrs Trollope can examine the conditions of the poor and at the same time disguise her own ignorance. Any deficiency that Miss Brotherton has in this respect can be attributed to the lack of knowledge of the character, rather than any implied weakness on the part of the novelist. Thus much of the book is seen through Mary Brotherton's eyes and scenes are interpreted by her conception of them. This confession by leading characters of ignorance of the facts concerning the social conditions became something of a standard feature in the social problem novels. It is made by Egremont in Sybil, Margaret Hale in North

⁷ Frances Trollope, The Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong (1840) new imp. Frank Cass (1968), p.35.

⁸ Ibid. p.106.

and South and Lancelot Smith in Yeast.

Mrs Trollope also expressed the commonly felt contrast between the hateful factory conditions and the idyllic conception of country life. This is revealed in the novel in a number of places. For example, Sir Matthew Dowling's treatment of his gardener, Macnab, is contrasted with his treatment of factory workers. It is illustrated in the kindness shown by Miss Brotherton to her estate workers. But principally, it appears in reference to Michael Armstrong's work as a shepherd in the Lake District, after his escape from the Deep Valley Mills.

Once he had asked, and obtained leave to mount to the top of Helvellyn, and once to make a sabbath-day's journey over the mountain-tops to Ulswater; these were the only occasions on which he had expressed any wish to wander beyond the immediate neighbourhood of the farmer's sheep-walks, and, in truth, this immediate neighbourhood included so many mountain torrents, glassy lakes, stupendous crags, and sylvan solitudes, that there was little need to go beyond it, in order to gratify a passion for the picturesque.⁹

Charles Kingsley had a much clearer understanding of the rural situation and did not describe it in such rosy terms in Yeast.

Generally Mrs Trollope shows very little real concern for the factory problems or the people involved in them. A very small proportion of the book is devoted to the time when Michael Armstrong is in the factory and even his long stay at the cotton mill at Deep Valley is

⁹ Frances Trollope, Michael Armstrong, p.305.

passed over fairly quickly. Her greatest deficiency is her inability to comprehend the attitudes of the working classes. She is able to reproduce neither their thoughts nor their own perspective on the world. An example of this can be found in the conversation that ensues when Michael returns to his mother after being adopted by Sir Matthew:

'so sit down dear boy, and tell me all.'

'Why mother 'tis like a story-book - and it's very fine to be sure - but yet -' And the boy stopped short.

'But yet you don't like it, Mike?' rejoined his mother.

'That's what you was going to say. Tell the truth, my child, and don't go keeping nothing from me.'

'That was it,' said Mike . . .

'Poor fellow! poor dear Michael!' exclaimed the woman, soothingly.

'It was hard to go to sleep without kissing mother, wasn't it?'¹⁰

Most of the time we are completely unaware of Michael Armstrong's lack of education and the way in which his personal experience may have shaped his view of the world. In the final reunion with his brother, and with Fanny and Mary Brotherton, he merges into the new setting without the slightest difficulty. It does not seem to occur to Mrs. Trollope that her hero might perhaps feel clumsy or inadequate when faced with a new social situation or that his lack of education might create problems of expression for him. In a conversation with Mary Brotherton towards the close of the book, Michael says:

¹⁰ Frances Trollope, Michael Armstrong, p.38.

'the greatest wish I have on earth is to become such as you might approve, and if I shrink from the dear and precious familiarity which must make Edward and Fanny so happy, think not that I am incapable of loving you as perfectly as they do; but remember, dearest lady! that however humble their origin, the very circumstances of their having been your honoured companions for years, is of itself sufficient to raise them to such a tone of thinking and of manners, as may, in some sort, justify their using the privilege you so graciously afford.'¹¹

As Cazamian¹² has rightly pointed out, the novel suffers from being a clumsy imitation of Dickens. Most of the characters, particularly the upper classes are overdrawn without any compensating wit or skill and many of the scenes : evoke a feeling of disgust rather than pity or concern. Its contribution to the examination of the social problems connected with the factory system was severely limited and it did not approach the possibility of presenting an understanding of the working class either as individuals or as members of distinctive social groups.

Harriet Martineau's interest in the relationships between employers and workers is very different from Mrs Trollope's. Miss Martineau had a genuine interest in all kinds of social problems, which the briefest glance at her works will show. To take but one example, the fact that her translation of Auguste Comte's The Positive Philosophy has become something of a standard work amongst sociologists, indicates that her interest was much more than a passing phase. Among her earliest writings are nine volumes of what she called Illustrations of

¹¹ Frances Trollope, Michael Armstrong, p.380.

¹² Louis Cazamian, Le Roman social en Angleterre, pp. 427-28.

Political Economy (1832-34). These were brief tales which were constructed in order to illustrate a particular political or economic point. There were tales like The Farmers of Budge Row which advocated direct taxation and tales like A Tale of the Tyne which was a protest against government interference in industry and depicted the cruel activities of the Press Gang. She was greatly concerned about people simply reading them as stories and she felt the need to press home the major political and economic points by providing a summary at the end.

In the tale A Manchester Strike she approaches most closely the examination of the social problems of industrialization. She looks at the stresses placed on the relationships between worker and worker, employer and employer, and worker and employer. This tale, as Vera Wheatley says, was: 'inspired by a bundle of documents from Manchester operatives, and was so successful that many people thought she had spent her life in a cotton mill.'¹³ Although this may be something of an exaggeration, she does present a much more realistic approach to the factory system than Mrs Trollope was capable of. Early in the tale Harriet Martineau makes her position clear. She accepted the theories of Adam Smith and Ricardo and used the conversations between workers and employers to illustrate them. In a discussion with Clack, one of the workers, Mr Wentworth, the employer, says: 'If ever Parliament passes a Bill to regulate wages, we must have a rider put to it to decree how much rain must fall before harvest.'¹⁴ He then goes on to develop his argument on the theory of supply and demand of labour by an analogy with Adam. This argument of a free market of labour is clearly supported by

¹³ Vera Wheatley, The Life and Work of Harriet Martineau (London, 1957), pp. 103-104.

¹⁴ Harriet Martineau, Illustrations of Political Economy, 9 vols (London, 1832), Volume III A Manchester Strike, p.34.

Ricardo's The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation (1817):

'Like all other contracts, wages should be left to the fair and free competition of the market, and should never be controlled by the inference of the legislature.'¹⁵ Later at the public meeting Mr Wentworth again develops his theme:

'They [the employers] do what they can for you in increasing the capital on which you are to subsist; and you must do the rest by proportioning your numbers to the means of subsistence. But see how the masters are met! In Huddersfield the masters are doing their utmost to extend their trade; but the multitudes who are to subsist by it increase much faster. There are now thirteen thousand workpeople in that place who toil for twopence half-penny a day. At Todmorden, the most skilful work fourteen hours a day for the pittance of one shilling. In the fair county of Kent there are thirty thousand who earn no more than sixpence a day. Compare this state of things with the condition of skilled labour wages in London, and see how much depends on the due proportion of labourers, and the capital by which they are to be fed.'¹⁶

Here is a much more careful analysis of the economic situation than is to be found in any other fiction writers of the time. It is closely argued and supported by factual evidence. But it is also clear that the examination of the economic problem is given greater priority than any consideration of the human situation. This reduces the discussions that take place to a kind of Socratic dialogue where it becomes almost

¹⁵ David Ricardo, The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation Everyman's Library (London, 1973), p.61.

¹⁶ Harriet Martineau, A Manchester Strike, p.101.

irrelevant which character is given a particular speech, so long as the discussion is continued in dialogue form. This lessens the impact of what could have been a worthwhile piece of fictional writing.

Mr Wentworth is shown as the personification of the ideal employer, but his charisma is taken beyond the bounds of credibility when the workers are supposed to listen with quiet attention, while he puts forward his rather difficult arguments:

Some of them had become a little tired of the weekly meetings at which their orators had said the same things over and over again, and were pleased to be reasoned with by one whom they esteemed, and to obtain, by these means, a better insight into their affairs than was given by leaders who were all of one party. The more the present meeting assumed the character of a conference, the more eagerly the most thinking men in the crowd pressed towards the waggon, and cheered the questions and replies.¹⁷

The tale is too short for an effective development of a successful plot and the failure to link the ideas and thoughts to particular characters is a serious weakness. However, Harriet Martineau is able to make explicit, to a certain degree, her understanding of the distinctions which exist between the different social groups and this is clearly demonstrated in the behaviour of the children. The world of work substantially influences their behaviour and attitudes and this is seen in the activities of the unemployed factory children who play at working in a mill. This is contrasted with the usual concept of play

¹⁷ Harriet Martineau, A Manchester Strike, pp.104-105.

as illustrated by Hannah Bray, the itinerant musician's daughter. The factory children, unless there is a strike, never have the time nor the energy to learn normal children's skills, like catching a ball.

Considerable importance is attached by Harriet Martineau to the failure of the strike, with the implication that the workers are wrong-headed in their views of the economic situation. Allen, the workers' leader, loses his job and applies to Mr. Wentworth's factory for a place. The reasons Mr Wentworth gives for not employing him, however, seem almost too rational and logical. Nevertheless, and almost paradoxically, the intense concern for the political and economic problems which were uppermost in Harriet Martineau's mind, give a strength to the tale which it otherwise might not have possessed.

Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna has the same deep interest in the subject of the factory system as Harriet Martineau, but her concern is religious rather than political or economic. Her novel, Helen Fleetwood (1841), is centred on the adverse effect that the factory system has on the morals of the workers, due indirectly to the appalling conditions under which the factory operatives live and work. The plot of the novel is a very simple one. Old Mrs Green lives in a seaside village where the people are partly farmers and partly fishermen. At the opening of the book her son and daughter-in-law are both dead, as are the parents of Helen Fleetwood. Disease and the sea take a heavy toll of the lives of the inhabitants. Mrs Green struggles bravely on, looking after the four grandchildren and the orphan Helen. But when the cottage rent is raised the struggle becomes too much. She must make a choice between the workhouse or seeking work for the family in a factory. Partly prompted by what she thinks is the best under the circumstances and partly persuaded by others, she takes her family

and Helen Fleetwood to work in the town, leaving the eldest grandson behind to work locally. When they arrive in the town, they spend the first few days with Mrs Wright, Mrs Green's daughter who has lived under the factory system for a number of years since she left home. The rest of the novel is taken up with the problems, both moral and economic, which the family have to face under the factory system.

Throughout the novel a contrast is drawn repeatedly between the town and the country. The country is seen in almost idyllic terms, in spite of the threat of the workhouse. The whitewashed seaside cottage with its honeysuckle is contrasted with the dirty, uncared-for home of Mrs Green's daughter in the town. She also emphasizes the godless attitude in the towns compared with the country. This is true not only in the home, but also in the church. The town clergy do not match up to Mr Barlow, the country vicar, and the attitudes in the Sunday schools compare very unfavourably with those in the country schools. The lack of religious knowledge amongst the Wright children is a subject of grave concern to Mrs Green, and she questions her daughter about it:

'I know that very well, mother,' answered the other, somewhat softened; 'and I'm sure no children ever had kinder or better parents than we; but a country life makes things come easy enough that one can't think of doing in a town.'

'If you mean those things that I have alluded to, scriptural teaching, prayer, and watchfulness over the young; surely they are rendered even more necessary where temptations abound, as they plainly do here.'

'Ay, but you can't keep your eye on the children, as you do in the country.'¹⁸

¹⁸ Charlotte Elizabeth (Tonna), Helen Fleetwood (London, 1841), p.105.

When Mary and Helen Fleetwood return home from their first day's work, we are given a detailed description of what working in the mill involved, with the separate tasks of piecers, scavengers and spinners. This description is far more precise than in other novels of the time and clearly Charlotte Tonna must have taken considerable pains to ensure an accurate picture. Later she stresses not only the physical hardships but also the mental ones. Helen Fleetwood works in the same room as Mrs Green's granddaughter, Phoebe Wright, and Phoebe hates the moral uprightness of Helen and sets the other workers against her by telling lies about her. Mrs Green reflects that:

The system, the factory system, under which Phoebe Wright had imbibed the peculiar wickedness that now pervaded her character, also fed the evil, guarded it, and armed it with power to wound whatever excited its enmity. The factory system surrounded her with associates, by whom she had been encouraged in the ways of daring sin, and who were in turn encouraged by her to unite against any one whose uprightness of principle should tacitly condemn them. ¹⁹

But although Mrs Green believed implicitly that God would take care of them, she nevertheless felt obliged to seek every means of obtaining justice both for Mary and for Helen Fleetwood. There is, therefore, a considerable portion of the book devoted to the examination of the worker's rights, and we are shown Mrs Green at interviews with managers, the owner, and the Rector. Mr South, a neighbour, also describes to her in detail the almost hopeless task of the factory inspectors. This

¹⁹ Charlotte Elizabeth, Helen Fleetwood, p.165.

investigation is given additional dramatic effect when Mary, who has been beaten by an overseer, brings her case before the court. This scene, where the little girl is humiliated, is witnessed by her brother. He had come to the courtroom by accident, having just arrived from the country.

Richard's visit from the country again helps to stress the contrast between town and country. In this part of the book, Charlotte Tonna looks at the nature of the relationship between employer and worker in the different situations of town and country. Richard is taken to what is thought to be a 'model' factory and he is appalled by what he sees:

it is the peculiar features that strikes a visitor whose attention is in any measure directed to the countenances of the mill-people. Seen at their work, they are a community of automata. Nothing seems to animate them. The cold listlessness of their looks sends a chill to the heart of the spectator, who, if he feel rightly, must feel it a degradation to his species to be chained, as it were, to a parcel of senseless machinery, confused by its din, and forced to obey its movements with scarcely an interval for thought or for repose.²⁰

These lifeless beings, who are treated as additional pieces of machinery, whose social welfare is completely disregarded, are contrasted with the country workers, for whom the local squire shows concern. The author demonstrates the psychological need for social occasions outside the work situation. The worker must not only be paid for his work, but

²⁰ Charlotte Elizabeth, Helen Fleetwood, p.369.

must be praised in order to maintain his self-esteem. She uses, for example, the time of the harvest celebrations, to tell us that:

Each, both old and young, enjoyed that peculiar feeling, the value of which the poor are seldom aware of until they experience its absence, 'My employer knows me; I am not in his sight a mere piece of machinery, regarded only while it works in his service. There's a tie between us that he, though a rich man would not disown. If he is everything to me, I and mine are something to him.'²¹

Although Charlotte Tonna is genuinely concerned about the problems of the industrial workers, she nowhere indicates how their conditions may be alleviated, except through moral improvement and better relationships between workers and management. However, she does express what was present in the minds of many people at that time: the intense fear of Chartism or any form of socialism. This is the very opposite of the attitude of Charles Kingsley, a man who was proud to publicly announce himself as a Chartist. She is almost fanatical in her condemnation of socialism, as the language of the following quotations indicates most clearly:

Socialism is the ne plus ultra of six thousand years' laborious experience on the part of the great enemy of man - it is the moral Gorgon upon which whomsoever can be compelled to look must wither away.²²

²¹ Charlotte Elizabeth, Helen Fleetwood, pp.239-240.

²² Charlotte Elizabeth, Helen Fleetwood, p.398.

and

The Beast of Socialism fails not indeed to stalk over our fields, and to lay in wait for unwary stragglers among the rural population; but it is in the manufacturing town he nestles, and builds around him huge trophies with the bones of his slain. There the Chartist is taught secretly to whet his pike ...²³

The novel ends with the death of Helen Fleetwood and the return of the Green family to the country. Mrs Green enters the workhouse and the children find jobs. The success of the novel is weakened considerably by the intense goodness of Helen Fleetwood, who becomes a martyr to the evils of the factory system. She is never allowed any weaknesses and continues steadfastly in the Christian path until her death. Not enough humanity is given to any of the characters in the Green family. They often are figures merely representing Christian principles.

Disraeli's writing is also included in this chapter because although he is generally considered to be a novelist of greater merit than those I have already considered, the aspects of his work which relate to the fictional treatment of the working class display similar weaknesses.

The novels which Disraeli wrote on the subject of the social problems of industrialization form part of a larger political project which was referred to at that time as Young England. According to Muriel Masfield:

In the autumn of 1843 Disraeli and Smythe were both the guests of Henry

²³ Charlotte Elizabeth, Helen Fleetwood, p.403.

Hope, a sympathiser, at Deepdene, and he suggested that Disraeli should embody the ideals of Young England in some literary form. This was the origin of Coningsby, the first of a trilogy of novels in which he dealt with the ferment of the period which opened with the Reform Bill, from the political, social and religious points of view.²⁴

Coningsby (1844) is concerned with the description of the political scene and it contains a number of characters who are clearly drawn from Disraeli's contemporaries. It is partly a political manifesto presented in debate form and partly a novel depicting scenes of fashionable life. There is a brief description of Coningsby's first impressions of Manchester, but even these are presented in a style and imagery which belong more closely to the 'silver fork' school of writers:

He had passed over the plains where iron and coal supersede turf and corn, dingy as the entrance of Hades, and flaming with furnaces; and now he was among illumined factories, with more windows than Italian palaces, and smoking chimneys taller than Egyptian obelisks.²⁵

There is no real attempt to consider the social problems in Coningsby and this is left until the second novel, Sybil, or the Two Nations (1845). The two nations are the rich and the poor and this concept is presented dramatically in the novel in a discussion between Egremont and a young socialist called Stephen Morley. Morley says:

²⁴ Muriel Masfield, Peacocks and Primroses: A Survey of Disraeli's Novels (London, 1953), p.128.

²⁵ Benjamin Disraeli, Coningsby; or the New Generation (1844) 12 Vols., The Bradenham edition (London, 1927), VIII, 162-3.

'Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws.'

'You speak of - 'said Egremont, hesitatingly.

'THE RICH AND THE POOR.'²⁶

This comment on the lack of knowledge which each class has of the other and the remarks concerning the differing 'life styles' of the two classes shows remarkable understanding for a man of that period. Indeed, as Muriel Masfield tells us, he spent some time in the industrial North gathering material both from observation and research:

Disraeli studied the report of the Children's Employment Commission (1842) and other documents, and a friend arranged for him to see the correspondence of Feargus O'Connor, a fiery Chartist leader who set the north of England almost literally aflame with his Chartist newspaper the Northern Star.²⁷

But the insight that he displayed in the speech of Stephen Morley's quoted above, was not fully used. Whether this was through lack of knowledge or from political motives is not clear, but Disraeli is very often content to copy extracts from the Blue Books with little or no

²⁶ Benjamin Disraeli, Sybil: or the Two Nations (1845), IX, 77.

²⁷ Muriel Masfield, p.171.

alteration, as Cazamian²⁸ pointed out with reference to the factual Willenhall of the report and the fictional Wodgate of the novel. However, he does think it important to offer an explanation of his position and says in a preface that:

while he hopes he has alleged nothing which is not true, he has found the absolute necessity of suppressing much that is genuine. For so little do we know of the state of our own country, that the air of improbability which the whole truth would inevitably throw over these pages, might deter some from their perusal.²⁹

The plot concerns a young aristocrat, Egremont, who dissatisfied with the way in which his friends waste their time, sets out to discover a new approach to life. This eventually turns out to be the new Toryism. He travels through England, meeting people of all kinds of social backgrounds and examines the Whigs, the old Conservatives and the new Socialists. During his travels, he meets and marries Sybil, who is the daughter of a factory foreman, Gerard. Gerard and his friend Stephen Morley are used to present the Chartist and the socialist case. But socialism is condemned and the novel ends with a large number of improbabilities, including the discovery that Sybil is really the heiress of the de Mowbray title and estates.

The treatment of the hero and heroine of Sybil contains many faults of over-writing which Disraeli was well known for and which

²⁸ Louis Cazamian, p.366. See also Sheila Smith, 'Willenhall and Wodgate: Disraeli's Use of Blue Book Evidence', Review of English Studies XIII, 1962, where parallel texts of the Report on the Children's Employment Commission (1842) and Sybil are compared.

²⁹ Benjamin Disraeli, Sybil: or the Two Nations, Advertisement.

Dickens made familiar in the parody Lady Flabella, the novel Kate is required to read aloud in the Wititterly household in Nicholas Nickleby³⁰. Fortunately, these characters are overshadowed by a number of vivid scenes which sustain the interest. One of the most memorable is the description of the tommy-shop, where workpeople receive part of their wages in goods supplied by the employers.

The door of Mr. Diggs' tommy-shop opened. The rush was like the advance into the pit of a theatre when the drama existed; pushing, squeezing, fighting, tearing, shrieking... For the first five minutes Master Joseph Diggs did nothing but blaspheme and swear at his customers, occasionally leaning over the counter and cuffing the women in the van or lugging some girl by the hair.³¹

His descriptions of individual workers are generally over-drawn, for example, Dandy Mick, who is far too slick, and his friend, Devilsdust, who is depicted as an orphan who was thrown out on to the street at the age of two to fend for himself. Nevertheless, Disraeli is able to breathe a certain amount of life into their conversations and make their lives partially credible.

'Dying! she's only drunk,' said the youth.

'And if she is only drunk,' rejoined Mrs. Carey, in a passion,

'what makes her drink but toil? working from five o'clock in the morning to seven o'clock at night, and for the like of such as you.'

³⁰ Charles Dickens, Nicholas Nickleby (1839), Chap. XXVIII.

³¹ Benjamin Disraeli, Sybil: or the Two Nations, IX, 183-84.

'That's a good one,' said the youth, 'I should like to know what my mother ever did for me, but give me treacle and laudanum when I was a baby to stop my tongue and fill my stomach'.³²

The novel is generally uneven and it is most successful in the descriptions of the rich, with whom Disraeli was familiar, rather than the poor. With the poor he is much less at ease and only occasionally presents scenes which are convincing. As John Lucas has pointed out:

A good deal of the trouble with Sybil springs from the explicit nature of its assertions, which are never really woven into the novel's fabric. It is not difficult to see what Disraeli 'means', in a discursive way; and such meaning is frequently made clearer by our knowledge of his attachment to the Young England movement. But Sybil too easily becomes a repository of fragmented manifestos.³³

It is in the characterization of the heroine, Sybil, that the novel appears at its weakest. In a conversation with Egremont on the subject of her father's involvement with the Chartists, she says:

I thought the People all felt as I feel; that I had nothing to do but to sustain and animate him; to encourage him when he flagged, to uphold him when he wavered. I thought that moral power must govern the world, and that moral power was embodied in an assembly whose annals will be a series of petty intrigues, or, what is worse, of violent machinations.³⁴

³² Benjamin Disraeli, Sybil: or the Two Nations, IX, 102.

³³ Tradition and tolerance in nineteenth-century fiction, edited by David Howard, John Lucas and John Goode, (London, 1966), p.155.

³⁴ Benjamin Disraeli, Sybil: or the Two Nations, IX, 341.

It is very difficult to imagine how we could be convinced that this is a portrait of a daughter of a factory worker. Disraeli seems to make no effort to present her ideas or her thoughts in a form which could be attributed to a girl of her social class. Even the final revelation of her aristocratic origin does not in any way excuse this.

All these novelists provide, in various ways and for various reasons, an examination of the social problems of industrialization. Yet they fail to present us with an understanding of the working class point of view. This is even true of Charlotte Tonna who has the knowledge but lacks the skill as a novelist to make her characters credible. These writers, in trying to show the thoughts and conversations of the working classes, fail for two major reasons. First, they are unable to comprehend the view of the world from this under-privileged group's position. This traps them into supposing that all views of the world are the same, that is the upper and middle class, educated view, and this is patently not so. Secondly, there is no real attempt to reproduce the language of the working class, and language is essential to their viewpoint. The failure to comprehend fully the difficulties of depicting working class attitudes and behaviour separates these writers from Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Kingsley. Mrs Gaskell and Charles Kingsley may not always have succeeded in portraying working class characters and situations adequately but at least their intimate knowledge of these people made them sensitive to the difficulties involved in such a portrayal.

Chapter 2: The Influences upon Charles Kingsley's early intellectual development

The novels of Charles Kingsley, far more than those of Elizabeth Gaskell, are a direct reflection of their author's intellectual development. In some ways they are a record of the works he had read and the ideas that had impressed him. This is particularly true of Yeast and Alton Locke. It would be difficult to divorce, therefore, Kingsley the man from Kingsley the novelist and social reformer. Because of this I shall attempt to give a brief summary of some of the more important elements of his intellectual growth before proceeding to examine his novels in detail.

As a small boy he developed a passionate interest in the natural sciences and spent many hours collecting and identifying specimens. This was more than a passing phase of childhood and it became a life-long preoccupation. His knowledge of science, unlike that of many of his contemporaries, gave support to his faith, as Powles, a school friend at Helston Grammar School, pointed out:

His passion was for natural science, and for art. With regard to the former I think his zeal was led by a strong religious feeling - a sense of the nearness of God in His works.¹

A similar attitude is expressed by the fictional character of the Dean in Alton Locke. Alton's first academic task with the Dean is to label specimens which have newly arrived from Australia.

¹Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memories of his Life, edited by Frances E. Kingsley, 2 vols (London, 1877), I, 26-27.

At King's College, London, Kingsley studied Greek, Latin and Mathematics in preparation for entry into Magdalen College. At Cambridge he did not enjoy reading and found the rigid curriculum of classical and mathematical studies boring. In a letter to Fanny Grenfell in February 1841 he complains of being

forced to drudge at the acquirement of confessedly obsolete and useless knowledge, of worn-out philosophies, and scientific theories long exploded... I wish I were free from this university system, and free to follow such a course of education as Socrates, and Bacon, and More, and Milton have sketched out²

Kingsley had met Fanny Grenfell in his first summer vacation when he went with his family to stay at the rectory at Checkenden in Oxfordshire. She was to exert a great influence upon him both from an emotional and intellectual point of view. After his return to Cambridge she sent him a number of works which she hoped would provide him with inspiration and comfort. Among these books there were, in particular, Carlyle's Miscellanies, Past and Present and French Revolution and Maurice's Kingdom of Christ. Carlyle's historical interpretation of Christianity provided Kingsley with a great stimulus. The belief that God was revealing himself in the events of our daily lives is central to Kingsley's fictional exploration of social ills: translated into the novel form, it becomes fictional biography developed against a contemporary social setting.

² Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memories of his Life, I, 51.

As other writers have already pointed out³, the marks of Carlyle's influence can be seen clearly in both Yeast and Alton Locke. Yeast is in part autobiographical and Lancelot Smith reflects some of the influences that were at work on the young Charles Kingsley. It is significant that when Lancelot Smith becomes seriously interested in the conditions of the poor, he turns for support to Carlyle: 'He took up, with a new interest, Chartism, which alone of all Mr. Carlyle's works he had hitherto disliked.'⁴

Carlyle believed that material conditions must be improved in order that the working classes may have a chance, but that in the end it was the individual's own morality that counted and this could not be remedied by an Act of Parliament. This point of view he repeatedly stresses in both Past and Present (1843) and Chartism (1839).

In Yeast Kingsley sees the close association between deprivation and moral depravity. Because the working classes do not possess the means to improve their physical conditions they have lost all hope of self-respect. The poor conditions had a cumulative effect so that the worse they became the less people felt that they were able to do anything to help themselves, and their loss of self-esteem destroyed any desire to strive for the amelioration of their conditions. Carlyle had attacked the way in which poverty was dealt with because, he argued, most forms of charity took away the dignity of man. Typically he comments sarcastically on the sterile contribution of the workhouses. He refers to a situation where vast numbers are in

³ See amongst others, C.W. Stubbs, Charles Kingsley and the Christian Social Movement (London, 1899), p.43, M. Kaufmann, Charles Kingsley: Socialist and Social Reformer (London, 1892), pp.175-184, Stanley E. Baldwin, Charles Kingsley (New York, 1934), pp.54-66 and Raymond Williams, Culture and Society 1780-1950 (London, 1958), p.111.

⁴ Charles Kingsley, Yeast (London, 1851), pp.74-75.

workhouses, pleasantly so-named, because work cannot be done in them. Twelve-hundred-thousand workers in England alone; their cunning right-hand lamed, lying idle in their sorrowful bosom; their hopes, outlooks, share of this fair world, shut-in by narrow walls.⁵

Kingsley expresses similar thoughts in the words of Tregarva, when he points out that the law, in attempting to remedy a deficiency, was often passive rather than active. It is often easier to administer handouts than to provide job opportunities, where those who are receiving aid can actually contribute by helping themselves. Carlyle felt work to be of spiritual as well as physical value, and in this sense it was uplifting to mankind. In Chapter XI of Past and Present (1843) he opens by saying:

For there is a perennial nobleness, and even sacredness, in Work. Were he never so benighted, forgetful of his high calling, there is always hope in a man that actually and earnestly works: in Idleness alone is there perpetual despair.⁶

This attitude is echoed by Kingsley and we find examples of it in both Yeast and Alton Locke.

When Crawy in Yeast is reprimanded for being a poacher, his case is sympathetically treated because the social conditions prevented him from obtaining honest work. In both novels Kingsley attacks those responsible for the land for not making better use of it. A more progressive agricultural programme would have provided more work, for

⁵ The Works of Thomas Carlyle, Vol.X, Past and Present, the Centenary Edition 30 vols (London, 1897), p.2.

⁶ Past and Present, p.196.

those who under the existing system were forced to be idle. In Yeast it is the landlords who are content to leave land unused because they have no interest in farming, and in Alton Locke it is the tenant farmers who are too easily content with a yield, inefficiently produced, which provides enough to live on. They would rather neglect their fields than give out more work. Worst of all are those farmers who deny their men the opportunities for cultivating their own small gardens in the belief that it would take some of the energy that they require for their work.

Carlyle, in considering the ways in which the social ills may be overcome, refers in Past and Present to the popular quack medicine for curing all illnesses, called Morrison's Pill:

Brothers, I am sorry I have got no Morrison's Pill for curing the maladies of Society. It were infinitely handier if we had a Morrison's Pill, Act of Parliament, or remedial measure, which men could swallow, one good time, and then go on in their own courses, cleared from all miseries and mischiefs!⁷

He did not believe that there was any easy solution to be found for the problems of society by passing an Act of Parliament. Although he greatly sympathised with the men who wished for parliamentary reform through the Charter, he did not believe that that was the way to bring about any real change. Carlyle's reasoning in the Chapter on Morrison's Pill in Past and Present had directly influenced Kingsley's thinking and he makes specific reference to it in Alton Locke. When Locke is speaking of his change of heart following the failure of the Charter, he says:

⁷ Past and Present, p.23.

About the supposed omnipotence of the Charter, I have found out my mistake. I believe no more in 'Morrison's Pill remedies', as Thomas Carlyle calls them.⁸

In Past and Present Carlyle is not always clear about what should actually be done and in answer to the question regarding remedies, says, 'allow me to reply: By thee, for the present, almost nothing'.⁹ In Chartism, however, he is much more specific and his suggestions influence Kingsley greatly.

Carlyle encouraged the notion of emigration, believing not only that it countered the Malthusan arguments on overpopulation, but also that it would enable men who had been deprived of opportunity in England to have a fresh chance elsewhere:

Overpopulation? And yet, if this small western rim of Europe is over-peopled, does not everywhere else a whole vacant Earth as it were, call to us, Come and till me, come and reap me!¹⁰

In both novels the leading figures emigrate. In Yeast the departure is much more vague and seen in spiritual terms, but it is nevertheless a withdrawal from the social problems, which remain unsolved, in the hope of finding a solution through faith. In Alton Locke the emigration is a more literal and orthodox matter. Both Locke and Crossthwaite set out for Texas on the understanding that they will

⁸ Charles Kingsley, Alton Locke, I, 226-27.

⁹ Thomas Carlyle, Past and Present, p.26.

¹⁰ Thomas Carlyle, Volume XXIV, Critical and Miscellaneous Essays IV, 200.

not return for seven years. Even if these exits are seen as merely a convenient way of concluding the novels in which the central questions remain unanswered, it must also be remembered that Kingsley seriously advocated unions to set up emigration funds, through which members' contributions could be used to send families, chosen by lot, to the colonies.

Carlyle also stressed the importance of education. He argued that it would be a means of social control. Through education it would be possible to bring about changes of attitude and values:

let us observe now that Education is not only an eternal duty, but has at length become even a temporary and ephemeral one, which the necessities of the hour will oblige us to look after. These Twenty-four million labouring men, if their affairs remain unregulated, chaotic, will burn ricks and mills; reduce us, themselves and the world into ashes and ruin.¹¹

Kingsley, in both of the novels under consideration, stresses the need for universal education. In Yeast Lancelot Smith advocates education for the masses, placing no limits other than the capacity of each man to gain from it. Alton Locke approaches the question from a different perspective by attempting to show the struggles which a working man has in order to achieve some kind of education. Kingsley's attitude to this had been influenced by the success which men like Thomas Cooper had been able to attain.

But the idea of universal education was not accompanied by a belief in democracy. Carlyle had little sympathy for a democratic form

¹¹ Critical and Miscellaneous Essays IV, 194.

of government and he did not believe that representatives which were chosen by the people would necessarily be able to bring about the reforms which men like the Chartists hoped for:

'Behold, now I too have my twenty-thousandth part of a Talker in our National Palaver; will not the gods be good to me?'¹²

But he goes on to argue that this is a sham, because the imagined freedom does not exist and what men are able to achieve in this way does not even include the essentials of life.

This liberty turns out, before it have long continued in action, with all men flinging up their caps round it, to be, for the Working Millions a liberty to die for want of food; for the Idle Thousands and Units, alas, a still more fatal liberty to live in want of work.¹³

Carlyle's alternative to democracy is hero-worship, in which the nation would admire and submit to a suitable leader. He envisages a Cromwellian figure who is able to give a lead, provided that he is given adequate support from the people. Therefore the task of the society is not the restructuring of the present political system but finding a suitable leader.

Kingsley agreed with Carlyle to the extent that he believed that the existing structure should not be overthrown. Neither of the two men was able to foresee the far reaching effects which education in its broadest sense would have on the political system.

¹² Past and Present, p.219.

¹³ Past and Present, p.219.

One of the major themes of Alton Locke is the use to which Locke puts his education. Kingsley pointedly shows the reader the sin of misusing education for personal gain or advancement into the middle classes. Whenever Locke is moved by these temptations something unpleasant tends to occur.

But if the old structure is to persist, the qualities of the leaders, or in Carlyle's terms the heroes, must improve. Carlyle saw history in terms of great figures with special qualities which raised them above the masses. One of these special qualities he laid stress upon in the first lecture on the Hero as Divinity:

The thoughts they had were the parents of the actions they did; their feelings were parents of their thoughts: it was the unseen and spiritual in them that determined the outward and actual; - their religion, as I say, was the great fact about them.¹⁴

The impact of this aspect of Carlyle's work is not so direct in Yeast and Alton Locke as it is elsewhere in Kingsley's writing. To consider Kingsley's concept of heroism as inspired by Carlyle, would require a detailed examination of the other novels and prose works - for example, Kingsley's lecture on Heroism and the explanation of the character of Mohammed in his lectures on Alexandria and Her Schools. However, in Yeast the character of Barnakill owes something to the influence of Carlyle, particularly in his rather nebulous expression of faith. Carlyle's own religion was difficult to grasp and it was far from orthodox. Many churchmen found fault with his view, including F.D. Maurice, in whom Kingsley believed so implicitly. Generally,

¹⁴ Thomas Carlyle, Volume V, Heroes, and Hero-Worship, p.3.

the religious influence of Carlyle is less easy to assess in the novels because in part it has been combined with the influence of Maurice in the mind of Kingsley before he gave it expression.

Carlyle had said previously that an age which rated highly the ideals of materialism, utilitarianism and democracy was doomed unless men's hearts and minds were supported by a spiritual awakening. Alton Locke's conversion to Christianity is Kingsley's attempt to give support to Carlyle's ideas. For Kingsley, the failure of the Charter was due to having too high a regard for the material possibilities of the age and insufficient concern for the spiritual. The conversion of Alton Locke symbolically represents the need for a return to a true foundation of faith on which a new society can be built. However, the more orthodox approaches to Christianity in Alton Locke can be attributed more reasonably to the influence of Maurice rather than Carlyle.

Frederick Denison Maurice played a very important part in Kingsley's intellectual development. His unconventional approach to theology helped to provide many of the answers to the questions which were troubling Kingsley at the time. But initially, it was those aspects of Maurice's work which related to Carlyle's ideas that Kingsley responded to most enthusiastically.

Maurice argued that from the doctrine of the Incarnation it was possible to deduce that God had ordained a plan for His work in terms of Order and Progress. Thus according to Maurice the development of civilization is not merely a collection of human facts but it is a vital law, which God has entrusted to man. God has given man the task of developing the Christian ideal society. Thus progress is seen in man's attempts, under God's guidance, to move closer towards the best possible social system.

Throughout his life Kingsley spoke of the Kingdom of Christ as being a book which he owed more to than any other. It was often said that much of Kingsley's preaching was the popularising of the ideas of Maurice, who, though an intensely moving figure to listen to, presented his thoughts in such an obscure way that they were usually above the heads of the congregation to whom he preached. Kingsley, in contrast, was particularly concerned with making his sermons understood and was sometimes criticised for the simple, down-to-earth style which he used for his own parishioners.

Kingsley began a correspondence with Maurice soon after he became the curate at Eversley in 1844 when Maurice was chaplain of Guy's Hospital and Professor of English Literature and Modern History at King's College. When Charles Kingsley published his first work, The Saint's Tragedy (1848), it was Maurice who wrote the preface.

Although the theology of Maurice was very important to Kingsley, it is the application of his ideas which is more significant for the purpose of this study. This is especially true of the development and growth of Christian Socialism and the Co-operative movement. The Christian Socialist movement arose partly from the influence of Chartism and partly from fears of political unrest of the kind witnessed in France.

J. M. Ludlow, a friend of Kingsley's, had been educated in France and had seen the changes which had led to the revolution of 1848. He told Maurice in a letter that there was enormous power in the socialist movements and that this power must be Christianised or it would shake Christianity to its foundation, precisely because it appealed to the higher and not the lower instincts of the men.¹⁵

¹⁵ The Life of Frederick Denison Maurice, edited by Frederick Maurice, 2 vols (London, 1885), I, 458.

Maurice realised the significance of what Ludlow had said and the outcome was a series of tracts, called Politics for the People, which the two of them, together with Kingsley, began publishing on 6 May 1848. Kingsley's contribution consisted of a series of 'Letters to the Chartists' under the pseudonym of Parson Lot. Maurice had produced theological arguments attacking the laissez faire competitive approach and Kingsley expressed those ideas in the 'Letters' in a language that the working man could understand. The first letter gives a good idea of the method Kingsley adopted:

I am not one of those who laugh at your petition of the 10th of April; I have no patience with those who do... Suppose the Charter itself were all stuff, yet you still have a right to fair play, a patient hearing, an honourable and courteous answer, whichever way it may be. But my only quarrel with the Charter is, that it does not go far enough in reform. I want to see you free; but I do not see how what you ask for will give you what you want.¹⁶

Although Politics for the People only ran for a few months, it evoked a great response and soon Maurice was organizing meetings for discussion with groups of Chartists. From these meetings came the idea of the Co-operative movement. Ludlow had previously examined the attempts in labour co-partnerships which Louis Blanc had made in France and it was he who suggested the possibility of a similar venture in England. Neither Kingsley nor Maurice were particularly good at organisation and most of the routine work was left to others, but the movement has always been associated with the names of Kingsley and

¹⁶ Letters, I, 163.

Maurice. It was Kingsley who continued to make the literary contributions and in 1850 a series was published called Tracts on Christian Socialism, followed by Tracts by Christian Socialists. Maurice, in a letter to Ludlow, had defended the use of the title 'Christian Socialism' and argued that it was:

the only title which will define our object, and will commit us at once to the conflict we must engage in sooner or later with the unsocial Christians and the unchristian Socialists. It is a great thing not to leave people to poke out our object and proclaim it with infinite triumph. "Why, you are Socialists in disguise." "'In disguise;' not a bit of it. There it is staring you in the face upon the title page!"¹⁷

Politics for the People thus gave way to a journal which was felt to have a wider appeal and carried the new name of The Christian Socialist. The object of the journal was to provide an organ for the promotion of Working Men's Associations. Kingsley said that its purpose should be to

touch the workman at all his points of interest. First and foremost at Association; but also at political rights as grounded both on the Christian ideal of the Church and on the historic facts of the Anglo-Saxon race; then National Education, Sanitary and Dwelling-house Reform, the Free Sale of Land, and corresponding Reform of the Land-Laws, moral improvement of the Family relation, public places of Recreation.¹⁸

The project lasted for about five years. Its first experiment was with the tailoring trade. Walter Cooper, who had originally come

¹⁷ The Life of F.D. Maurice, II, 35.

¹⁸ Letters, I, 235.

to hear Maurice preach, arranged for some meetings to take place with other Chartists. Eventually Cooper was appointed to manage the first co-operative venture in the group; the Association of Working Tailors in Castle Street. Other co-operatives followed the tailors' and these included shoemakers, builders, pianoforte-makers and bakers. There were also two Associations of Needlewomen. The associations were mainly in London, although there were some started in the provinces, notably the Manchester Working Hatters' Association. Gradually they all failed, although some lasted several years. Maurice attributed their failure to lack of education on the part of the organizers and so he turned his attention to the founding of the Working Men's College, of which he became the first Principal.

The first phase of the Christian Socialist movement came to an end in 1854 and there was no organised movement within the Church until the 1870s. But it was during these exciting early days of his association with Maurice that many of Kingsley's ideas were formed. In both Yeast and Alton Locke Kingsley gives expression to the principles of Christian Socialism, which Maurice and he believed in so strongly. He repeatedly expresses the fear that the working classes mistrust the Church because it is seen as an instrument for maintaining the conservative and aristocratic elements in society. Although he offers the hope that the Church is improving in this respect, he realises, as did all the Christian Socialists, that all too often the clergy were ignorant of the needs and feelings of the working classes and worst of all, they lacked a language with which the priest could communicate with the people. Maurice's influence was strong and Kingsley continued to respond to it long after Yeast and Alton Locke had been completed.

Because Charles Kingsley was involved in a number of interests

and activities he tended to take up and put down a variety of pursuits in quick succession. He was an extremely active man and the vigour with which he pursued a particular project often left him completely exhausted and in need of rest and relaxation when the task was completed. Both Yeast and Alton Locke were written when he was not only fully committed to the work of his parish but also involved in many other political and social reform activities.

From the time when he had met Ludlow on 10 April 1848 - the day of the Charter - he had become an ardent supporter of the working man's cause. As we have seen, he not only attended many meetings but he also wrote articles throughout May, June and July for Politics for the People. For example, 13 May, 'Letters to the Chartists, No.I', 20 May, 'The National Gallery, No.II', 27 May, 'Letters to the Chartists, No.II', 17 June, 'Letters to the Chartists, No.III' and 1 July 'The British Museum'.

From July when he began Yeast in serial form for Fraser's Magazine, he could only manage to keep up the instalments with difficulty. Mrs Kingsley says:

having at that time no curate, every hour was occupied with sermon writing, cottage visiting, and he was forced to write "Yeast" at night, when the day's work was over, and the house was still.¹⁹

Under these conditions careful organization or revision of the work could not be expected. This led, as will be shown later, to the creation of a very loose, almost haphazard, structure to his novel.

¹⁹ Letters, I, 184.

Although Kingsley claimed that his approach to Alton Locke was different, many of the conditions which had affected the composition of Yeast were still present when he came to write his second novel. Again he found great difficulty in arranging a time when he could devote his energies to writing. In this period he chose to rise at five o'clock each morning so that he could work when he was fresh and before the rest of the family stirred. But the writing continued to be done in just as feverish a fashion. In a letter to Ludlow he wrote:

I have hope also of the book which I am writing, the Autobiography of a Cockney Poet, which has revealed itself to me so rapidly and methodically, that I feel it comes down from above, and that only my folly can spoil it - which I pray against daily.²⁰

Ludlow had disapproved of Kingsley writing another novel because he believed that Kingsley's strength lay in poetry.²¹ But Kingsley, who desperately needed money, felt that he could build up a literary reputation more quickly through the medium of fiction. Although Alton Locke was revised before publication, it still shows marks of haste and some of the faults of style which had weakened Yeast recur here.

In both novels characters are often used merely to illustrate certain arguments and in consequence are often ill-formed. The novels tend to be episodic and opportunities for scenes to be linked have sometimes been lost. There is no clear overall structure and there

²⁰ Letters, I, 197.

²¹ Charles Kingsley's poetic drama The Saint's Tragedy (1848) had been highly praised in some quarters. Baron Bunsen had even suggested that Kingsley might undertake the task of continuing Shakespeare's history plays.

are frequent changes of direction and tone. However, these aspects of Kingsley's work will be considered more appropriately in the chapters which follow, on the specific novels.

Chapter 3: Yeast

There were a number of causes which prompted Kingsley to begin writing Yeast, not the least of which was financial. But if money was the spur, it did not detract from other important motives for writing which obsessed him at the time. These motives were in part connected with his own faith, which is reflected in the large autobiographical element in the novel, and partly with a more general concern for the social problems of the farm workers whom he had been trying to help in his own parish. Writing on the subject to Ludlow, he says:

I shall be very hard on the landlords ... they deserve it: but I will promise to invent nothing ... to set forth things as they are, not even to collect evils from many parishes, and concentrate them in one ... but to shew the accursed sloth and folly and tyranny, of the common, respectable, average working of landlordism.¹

The novel was first published anonymously under the title Yeast; or, The Thoughts, Sayings, and Doings of Lancelot Smith, Gentleman. It appeared in serial form in Fraser's Magazine in the issues between July and December 1848. Before the serialisation of Yeast Kingsley had published very little. Earlier that year he had brought out the verse drama of The Saint's Tragedy; or, The True Story of Elizabeth of Hungary, Landgravine of Thuringia, Saint of the Romish Calendar. This had developed from a work previously undertaken as a wedding present for Fanny. His other writing in 1848 was mainly under the name of Parson

¹ R.B.Martin, 'An Edition of the Correspondence and Private Papers of Charles Kingsley 1819-1856' (unpublished D.Phil dissertation, University of Oxford, 1950), p.84, Letter XXXIX, (22 May, 1848).

Lot in the series he had written for Politics for the People.²

Kingsley had known John Parker at King's College and both father and son were in a publishing business which was responsible for, amongst other things, Fraser's Magazine.³ In April they had printed an article of Kingsley's - 'Why Should we Fear the Romish Priests?' - and they seemed quite happy to serialise Yeast when Kingsley suggested it to them. Unfortunately, after the first few issues Parker felt that it was having a disastrous effect on the sale of the magazine and asked Kingsley to make a number of cuts. He was also required to bring it to an end more quickly than he had intended. It was therefore with some reluctance that Parker was finally persuaded to publish it in book form.

It appeared, again anonymously, in 1851 with the title Yeast: A Problem. Reprinted with corrections and additions from Fraser's Magazine. Parker, no doubt, took courage from the knowledge that Chapman and Hall had published Alton Locke for Kingsley the year before.

Although Kingsley had originally intended the work to be longer, he did not substantially change it when it was issued in book form. The additions include chapter V, which continues Lancelot's theological debate with his cousin Luke; chapter VII, where Lancelot and Argemone

² The writings for Politics for the People were: 6 May, 'Workmen of England' (anon.), 'The National Gallery, No.I' (Parson Lot); 13 May, 'Letters to the Chartists, No.I' (Parson Lot), 'Old and New - a Parable' (verse) (anon.); 20 May, 'The National Gallery, No.II' (Parson Lot), 'Old Saws New Set, No.I A Greek Fable to an English Moral' (verse) (anon.); 27 May, 'Letters to the Chartists, No.II' (Parson Lot), 'Old Saws New Set, No.II England for the English No.III The Golden Goose' (verse) (anon.); 17 June, 'Letters to the Chartists, No.III' (Parson Lot); 1 July 'The British Museum' (Parson Lot); 22 July 'Letters to Landlords, I The Game Laws' (anon.); 29 July 'Letters to Landlords, II' (anon.)

³ John Parker, the son, was editor of Fraser's Magazine, but the fact was not generally known to those who contributed to the journal.

have a greater opportunity to become more acquainted with each other after the coach accident, and chapter XV, which develops further some ideas concerning the artist when Lancelot contemplates becoming a painter after being financially ruined. Thus in total this amounted to an increased attack on the Oxford Movement and a further development of Kingsley's theories of aesthetics, but structurally the novel remains unchanged.

Kingsley's ideas at this time seem to have been only partially formed and he had at one point thought of writing a novel trilogy.⁴ The sequel to Yeast was to have been called The Artists and it was to have been dominated by discussions of art, science, social life and Christianity. In this work Kingsley intended to reveal that Argemone had not really died but had lived to inherit Whitford and carry out the necessary reforms in the district. The two lovers, Lancelot and Argemone, would eventually be reunited and together they would work towards a society of the future. However, all these plans came to nothing and his thoughts concerning art were incorporated in chapter XV of Yeast instead.

In spite of John Parker's pessimism and the very mixed reviews in contemporary journals, the novel was well received by a variety of people. Many young men saw it as a helpful examination of some of the problems which they themselves had struggled with. On a visit to Oxford, Kingsley was surprised to find how many of the undergraduates had read it with enthusiasm. He also received a number of letters praising the novel, including one from George Meredith, who wrote:

⁴ For a discussion of this project see Kingsley's letter to Ludlow: R.B.Martin, pp.108-110, Letter L (16 November 1848).

I am driven with a spur to tell you the delight and admiration with which I read your last book Yeast, and the positive 'Education' I have derived from it. It was the very book I was in want of and likely to do me more good than any that I know.⁵

There were a number of contemporary reviews of the novel; some, like the Guardian,⁶ concerned themselves with the religious elements and attacked Kingsley for excusing the earlier excesses of Lancelot, while other critics found delight in the love scenes which were of course absent from Alton Locke. One of the most balanced reviews of the novel occurred in the Spectator,⁷ which found the author to be too concerned with preaching but praised the descriptions that Kingsley had given of the social injustices and made special reference to the success achieved in the chapter on 'The Village Revel'.

There are three largely distinct methods of examining the works of Charles Kingsley which have grown up in the century following his death. First, there are those critics who have concerned themselves with an analysis of his ideology and religious beliefs and have, in general, concentrated on his connection with the Christian Socialist movement. Secondly, there have been a number of biographies, the two most recent of which were published in 1975 on the occasion of his centenary, containing varying amounts of criticism of the novels but usually of a rather limited kind. Thirdly, there are works of literary criticism, but of this category there is very little.

Kaufmann, writing in 1892, on Charles Kingsley as a social

⁵ The Collected Letters of George Meredith edited by C.L.Cline, 3 vols (London, 1970), I, 14.

⁶ 7 May 1851.

⁷ 22 March 1851.

reformer, gave considerable praise to Yeast and made a detailed comparison between it and Disraeli's Coningsby. He felt that the novel had exercised a marked influence on the reforms that eventually took place:

The publication of Yeast was one of the factors, and a very powerful one at the time, though less so since, in the general movement for the amelioration of the working-man's lot in town and country.⁸

Stubbs, writing at the turn of the century on Kingsley's place in the Christian Socialist movement, similarly found Kingsley's achievement to be in the realm of social reform rather than in literature. Of Yeast he said that the novel as literature:

must be judged not to be a great work of art by a consummate artist, but a political pamphlet, written . . . by a great spiritual teacher, by a very real, though perhaps minor, prophet.⁹

The latest addition to this form of criticism of Kingsley is the work of Allan Hartley, which places great emphasis on the religious aspects of the works. Speaking of the novels in general terms, he says:

Contrary to the opinions of many unwitting contemporary reviewers, Kingsley's novels are relatively strong in plot, largely because they are built on the phases in religious conversion.¹⁰

⁸ M. Kaufmann, Charles Kingsley: Christian Socialist and Social Reformer (London, 1892), p.113.

⁹ C. W. Stubbs, Charles Kingsley and the Christian Socialist Movement (London, 1899), p.62.

¹⁰ Allan John Hartley, The Novels of Charles Kingsley: A Christian Social Interpretation (Folkestone, 1977), p.19.

Louis Cazamian in Le Roman Social en Angleterre shows the great merit of the novel when he says that Kingsley's point of departure was a good one because of his knowledge of the rural workers:

il possédait un élément du problème, la connaissance du prolétariat agricole. Instinctivement, il se tourna de ce côté. Yeast est un effort pour illustrer la nécessité d'une action sociale énergique, d'après la condition des paysans du Sud. Mais la substance du roman n'est point descriptive; elle est polémique.¹¹

The most detailed critical account of Charles Kingsley's work as a novelist occurs in Stanley E. Baldwin's Charles Kingsley (1934). Of Yeast he has this to say:

Frankly a social treatise, the book does not fulfil the artistic requirements of the novel. The author is too much the preacher and not enough the storyteller... The book is what it pretends to be - a problem narrative - and as such it becomes subjective.¹²

Margaret Thorp writing three years later is slightly more charitable about Kingsley's achievement but points to the looseness of the plot as its greatest weakness:

All the novel's purposes, disjointed though their treatment appears, are fused into a kind of unity in the mind of the young man Lancelot

¹¹ Louis Cazamian, Le Roman Social en Angleterre (Paris, 1904), p.461.

¹² Stanley E. Baldwin, Charles Kingsley (New York, 1934), p.77.

Smith, but Kingsley has not yet learned to knit a story together even in the large loose-jointed fashion of the day; he expects the reader to do it for himself.¹³

In more recent times Kingsley has only received very brief reference in Guides to English Literature and the comments on Yeast have been even more brief.

The two latest biographies of Charles Kingsley have not concerned themselves with examining the novels in any detail. Brenda Colloms¹⁴ avoids criticism of Yeast and offers the assessment of other writers only. But the most superficial comment on Yeast occurs in Susan Chitty's biography The Beast and the Monk (1974):

Yeast is chiefly of interest to the modern reader for the self-portrait it contains of Kingsley as a young man. 'What a horrible ugly face!' says Argemone to herself after the meeting at the chapel, 'but so clever and so unhappy.'¹⁵

It is against this background of criticism that I now wish to examine the strengths and weaknesses of Yeast as a novel in which Charles Kingsley first attempts to introduce to the reader the idea of a separate working class view of the world.

Kingsley had begun Yeast as a direct response to the appalling conditions which he had observed in his visits to his parishioners, as

¹³ Margaret Thorp, Charles Kingsley: 1819-1875 (New York, 1937), p.57.

¹⁴ Brenda Colloms, Charles Kingsley (London, 1975).

¹⁵ Susan Chitty, The Beast and the Monk (London, 1974), p.114.

rector of Eversley. He was a passionate man who was capable of developing great enthusiasms. Much of the novel was written in a state of great excitement because he was anxious to get his message across to the public as quickly as possible. The novel is essentially a polemic: the plot only very thinly disguises and weakly supports the thematic arguments that are being delivered. In addition, he is not content to devote the work to a single theme of poor agricultural living conditions, but feels obliged to deal at the same time with a number of other controversial topics about which he felt strongly.

A further complication arises from the tone of the novel which has elements of realism and romanticism side by side. This is in part due to the nature of the author himself, in which these elements appear to have been mingled. The seemingly incredible relationship between Lancelot Smith and Argemone bears strong similarities to the protracted courtship of Fanny Grenfell by Charles Kingsley. It is almost certain that this is why Fanny found the novel so attractive and wished to have a copy buried with her at her death. The first meeting in the opening chapter recalls the meeting at Checkenden, and even the same expression of 'eye-wedlock' occurs which he used in connection with his own personal experience.¹⁶

But the meeting with Argemone in the first chapter is only a brief interlude in a lengthy and vivid description of the hunt in which the protagonist participates rather half-heartedly. Kingsley, anxious to convey the thoughts of his characters, quickly turns to digress on Lancelot's education and state of mind. So that we are told:

16

'On the 6th of July [1839], Charles and his future wife met for the first time. "That was my real wedding day", he said, some fifteen years afterward.' Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memories of his Life, edited by Frances Kingsley, 2 vols (London, 1877), I, 44.

Lancelot had found Byron and Shelley pall on his taste, and commenced devouring Bulwer and worshipping Ernest Maltravers. He had left Bulwer for old ballads and romances, and Mr. Carlyle's reviews; was next alternatively chivalry-mad and Germany-mad; was now reading hard at physical science, and, on the whole, trying to become a great man, without any very clear notion of what a great man ought to be.¹⁷

This is something of a self-portrait, which reviews Kingsley's early intellectual development. However, by the rather clumsy device of showing us that Lancelot Smith is reading St. Francis de Sale's Introduction to a Devout Life, as it falls from his pocket when his horse throws him, we are prepared for his religious re-education, which will be undertaken later by Argemone.

A second fall and accident places Lancelot under the same roof as the Squire and his two daughters, Argemone and Honoria. During the period of his recovery he is nursed by the worldly Colonel Bracebridge and he experiences his first clash with Argemone, when he is confronted with her High Church principles. Kingsley also introduces a doctrinal debate in the form of a correspondence between Lancelot and his cousin, 'the Tractarian curate', but this study is not concerned with the religious issues directly, so these themes will be set aside.

Lancelot makes a rapid recovery and in chapter three he is able to hobble down to the river's edge in the grounds of the Squire, where he meets two of the gamekeepers. This is our first introduction to Kingsley's perception of the working class. The two gamekeepers are very different. The elder of the two, Harry Verney, is described with precise knowledge and skill:

¹⁷ Yeast, pp. 2-3.

He was a short, wiry, bandy-legged, ferret-visaged old man, with grizzled hair and a wizened face tanned brown and purple by constant exposure. Between rheumatism and constant handling the rod and gun, his fingers were crooked like a hawk's claws. He kept his left eye always shut, apparently to save trouble in shooting; and squinted and sniffed and peered, with a stooping back and protruded chin, as if he were perpetually on the watch for fish, flesh, and fowl, vermin and Christian.¹⁸

His main function in the novel is to act as a foil to the ideas of the younger keeper, Tregarva. Verney is conservative and truly the Squire's man, but Tregarva, the tall, strong Cornishman, is a radical.

As Charles Kingsley began to develop his ideas on the subject of working class conditions in Yeast, he also realised that there existed a different view of the world which was exhibited by members of the working class. Tregarva is his first attempt to present a character who is distinguishable from the other (middle and upper class) characters of the book by his values and attitudes. In choosing a spokesman for the working classes, like Tregarva, the writer is faced with certain difficulties. Kingsley experiences these difficulties again with Alton Locke and Mrs Gaskell has the problem with Mary Barton. The more skilful the author is in making the character articulate the experiences of the working class, the more difficult it becomes to accept the character as being of that class. Kingsley achieves a partial success in choosing a member of the working class who is atypical and one with whom the upper and middle classes would be familiar. This strategy enables him to establish

¹⁸Yeast, p.33.

a link between the reader and the inarticulate workers whom we meet later in the novel. In doing so, however, he makes Tregarva a man apart. His association with Lancelot Smith increases the distance between himself and the workers as the novel progresses but essentially it is his speech which distinguishes him. Kingsley, in writing Tregarva's speeches, makes no attempt to go beyond a certain simplification of expression and vocabulary and he allows him too easily to become a commentator on social ills at the expense of developing his personality. This is immediately and clumsily revealed in the first speech of Tregarva's. Kingsley cannot wait to get to the point of his argument. Thus the opening conversation between Lancelot and Tregarva takes a sudden turn, which appears unnatural, in the first moments of contact:

'Beautiful stream this,' said Lancelot, who had a continual longing - right or wrong - to chat with his inferiors; and was proportionately sulky and reserved to his superiors.

'Beautiful enough, sir,' said the keeper, with an emphasis on the first word.

'Why, has it any other fault?'

'Not so wholesome as pretty, sir.'

'What harm does it do?'

'Fever, and ague, and rheumatism, sir.'¹⁹

In this way Tregarva introduces the idea of the grim state of the agricultural workers' living conditions, which are worse than those provided for pigs. Once he has established the truth of this to the

¹⁹ Yeast, pp. 35-36.

unbelieving Smith, the next point is why so little has been done to relieve so obvious a wrong. Tregarva explains that the Vicar, who is a good man, can do little as the major part of the tithes is collected by the Squire. This was a very serious issue for Kingsley and he had constant battles with Sir John Cope on this very subject.²⁰ Here Kingsley points to the basic problem which is created to a large extent by the structure of the rural community. The complex relationships between the squire and his employees and the vicar and his parishioners promoted divided loyalties.

'Besides, sir, you must remember that a man can't quarrel with his own kin; and so many of them are their squire's brothers, or sons, or nephews.'

'Or good friends with him, at least.'

'Ay, sir, and, to do them justice, they had need, for the poor's sake, to keep good friends with the squire. How else are they to get a farthing for schools, or coal-subscriptions, or lying-in societies, or lending libraries, or penny clubs? If they spoke their minds to the great ones, sir, how could they keep the parish together?'²¹

But the reluctance on the part of the Squire to help goes beyond stubbornness and fear of additional expense. It is related to his inability to accept that there exists a problem as such. Kingsley argues that those who are in a position to act and possess the power are unable to see the necessity for changing that which they have accepted

²⁰ Susan Chitty, The Beast and the Monk, p.106.

²¹ Yeast, p.38.

traditionally. Thus Tregarva speaks with the voice of Carlyle when he says: 'A man's eyes can only see what they've learnt to see.'²² Kingsley is trying to show that the distinctions existing between the middle classes and the working classes are often closely related to the way in which various social groups have observed the same circumstances from different points of view. Therefore it is not only those people in the community who refuse to act, like the Squire, who perceive the situation in this way. Even those, like Honoria, who are very keen to help people in distress, cannot appreciate the need for fundamental changes in the structure of society. Her charity is short term. It is an attempt to alleviate some of the existing ills rather than concern herself with major changes.

Tregarva argues that those who help can only see the problem in simple economic terms and by pulling out their purses they think they can solve it. But it goes much deeper and the extreme poverty destroys the people's moral fibre and degrades them mentally and spiritually. He says of those who offer charity that:

'When they see poor folk sick or hungry before their eyes, they pull out their purses fast enough, God bless them; for they wouldn't like to be so themselves. But the oppression that goes on all the year round, and the want that goes on all the year round, and the filth, and the lying, and the swearing, and the profligacy, that go on all the year round, and the sickening weight of debt, and the miserable grinding anxiety from rent-day to rent-day, and Saturday night to Saturday night, that crushes a man's soul down, and drives every thought out of his head but

²² Yeast, p.38.

how he is to fill his stomach and warm his back, and keep a house over his head, till he daren't for his life take his thoughts one moment off the meat that perisheth - oh, sir, they never felt this.²³

Kingsley is able to put his concern for the villagers forcefully in the mouth of Tregarva. The cumulative effect of this long speech is to create a total world in which the farm labourers live and it stresses the complexity of the problem and the difficulties which exist in finding a solution. Each aspect of their condition impinges on the others so that economic, moral and social ills are inextricably linked. But Tregarva does not feel that talk is enough, people are unwilling to believe what he calls hearsay, and therefore he urges that Lancelot goes to see for himself. Tregarva leaves him to think about it and with the arrival of Claude Mellot, the artist, and the Squire's two daughters, the discussion turns to religion and art. The chapter ends with the rescue of Honoria's dog from the river by Tregarva, in which the gamekeeper is nearly drowned.

Because of the accident Lancelot goes to visit Tregarva the next day. Kingsley shows us that Tregarva is a close relation of Mrs Gaskell's Job Legh. The chapter is headed 'An Inglorious Milton' and we learn how he makes flies in his spare time to earn money to buy books. He has Pilgrim's Progress²⁴ open in front of him and he has read some of

²³ Yeast, p.39,

²⁴ 'Pilgrim's Progress is, with Rights of Man, one of the two foundation texts of the English working-class movement: Bunyan and Paine, with Cobbett and Owen, contributed most to the stock of ideas and attitudes which make up the raw material of the movement from 1790-1850. Many thousands of youths found in Pilgrim's Progress their first adventure story, and would have agreed with Thomas Cooper, the Chartist, that it was their 'book of books'.' (34). E.P.Thompson discusses in detail the part this work played, see The Making of the Working Class, pp.34-38.

Harriet Martineau's work. But, as Kingsley points out, his reading has been desultory and lacks the organization of a formal education.²⁵ Nevertheless, the chapter is an attempt to show how a working class character might be able to articulate a serious concern, and the attractive nature of the gamekeeper portrayed by Kingsley gives considerable support to the arguments he wishes to put forward.

During Lancelot's visit the discussion returns to the previous day's subject of the plight of the poor. Tregarva now argues that you can demand very little from men and women who have lost all self-respect. Their living conditions are less than human and they have no hope or opportunity to become different.

'For I'm beginning to fancy strangely, in spite of all the preachers say, that, before ever you can make them Christians, you must make them men and women.'

'Are they not so already?'

'Oh, sir, go and see! How can a man be a man in those crowded styes, sleeping packed together like Irish pigs in a steamer, never out of fear of want, never knowing any higher amusement than the beershop?'

²⁶

Again Kingsley stresses that poverty and poor living conditions are responsible for much of the immorality which exists among the working class. As a rector of Eversley he records authentically what must have been a familiar experience to him:

²⁵ This subject is explored in greater detail in Alton Locke, see below p. 108.

²⁶ Yeast, pp.60-61.

'You ask the rector, sir, how many children hereabouts are born within six months of the wedding-day. None of them marry, sir, till the devil forces them. There's no sadder sight than a labourer's wedding nowadays. You never see the parents come with them. They just get another couple that are keeping company like themselves, and come sneaking into church, looking all over as if they were ashamed of it - and well they may be!'²⁷

Lancelot's willingness to listen is not enough for Tregarva and the meeting ends with the gamekeeper's request that they should both visit a country fair in the near future in order to observe the social behaviour of the poor.

After a chapter devoted entirely to the correspondence between Lancelot and his cousin concerning their religious beliefs, Kingsley returns to the theme of social problems. Lancelot, having fully recovered from his hunting accident, had returned to his rented shooting box, where he had the opportunity to read and think. He, like his author, is interested in Carlyle and it is significant that he now turns his attention to a work that he had previously avoided - Chartism. Kingsley assumes the reader's familiarity with Carlyle's works and expects us to realise how one might be affected by such a reading.

In a letter written on 1 April 1844 he indicates what change of attitude we might read into Lancelot's study of Carlyle, when he says of Carlyle's Miscellaneous Essays and Past and Present:

²⁷Yeast, p.61. Parish records of the time provide clear evidence to support these arguments.

More and more I find that these writings of Carlyle's do not lead to gloomy discontent - that theirs is not a dark but a bright view of life; in reality, more evil speaking against the age and its inhabitants is thundered from the pulpit daily, by both Evangelical and Tractarian, than Carlyle has been guilty of in all his works.²⁸

Lancelot's interest in Carlyle at this stage in the novel shows a willingness to turn away from the carefree irresponsible attitude of his undergraduate days to more serious considerations and again it is a thinly disguised record of Kingsley's own intellectual development:

He took up, with a new interest, Chartism, which alone of all of Mr. Carlyle's works he had hitherto disliked, because his own luxurious day-dreams had always flowed in such sad discord with the terrible warnings of the modern seer, and his dark vistas of starvation, crime, neglect, and discontent.²⁹

But his thoughts are soon interrupted by a visit from Colonel Bracebridge and arrangements are made to dine at Lord Minchampstead's.

One of the weaknesses of a novel as short as this one, is the brevity with which characters are introduced and dismissed. Kingsley is aware of this and even says of Lord Minchampstead: 'I sketch him here once and for all because I have no part for him after this scene in my corps de ballet'. But awareness does not give justification, and a number of straw figures are created merely to illustrate some stereotype characteristics. Lord Vieuxbois is shown as the progressive

²⁸ Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memories of his Life, I, 119.

²⁹ Yeast, pp. 74-75.

landlord who has concern for the needs of the poor and is generous towards charitable projects. Yet in spite of having some sympathy with Christian Socialism, he retains his aristocratic aloofness. Thus he is used to represent a particular group of people, who are attempting to alleviate the ills of the poor, but who in Kingsley's eyes are not approaching the core of the problem. Lord Minchampstead also is simply a representative of the new Whig nobles, who have risen from the successes gained in the industrial revolution. Their aim is economic efficiency and in this sense the agricultural worker benefits more on their lands than on those of the squire Lavington's. Thus Lord Minchampstead's efforts to rebuild labourers' cottages and to provide gardens and pigs is in the interests of an efficient labour force rather than in any concern for the people themselves. Kingsley uses the dinner party where they all meet, therefore, to indicate the various conflicting forces at work in the area of agriculture.

The after-dinner conversation turns to education and Lancelot is asked what limits he would put on the education of the masses.

'The capacities of each man,' said Lancelot.

'If a man living in civilised society has one right which he can demand it is this, that the State which exists by his labour shall enable him to develop, or, at least, not hinder his developing, his whole faculties to their very utmost, however lofty that may be.'³⁰

These are advanced views on education of the masses to be expressed in the middle of the nineteenth century, but they are not the result of a

³⁰ Yeast, p.86.

careful consideration of the implications and appear only as a rather idealistic dream. This becomes clear when the problem of social mobility is raised. Lancelot is willing to defend the advancement of the working classes through education and this subsequently causes him to be jokingly labelled a Communist. Kingsley himself was not prepared to go as far as this and it is somewhat confusing to find him apparently arguing for education yet at the same time expecting the working classes to be content with their station in life. In the novel he cuts short the debate when the men return to join the ladies after dinner. However, the most important ideas raised during the conversation are on the subject of communication:

'But I am sorry to say that, as far as I can find from my agents, when the upper classes write cheap publications the lower classes will not read them.'

'Too true,' said Vieuxbois.

'Is not the cause,' asked Lancelot, 'just that the upper classes do write them?'

'The writings of working men, certainly,' said Lord Minchampstead, 'have an enormous sale among their own class.'

'Just because they express the feelings of that class, of which I am beginning to fear that we know very little.'³¹

In this exchange Kingsley points to the difficulties that he, as a middle class writer, has in trying to describe working class behaviour and it is the examination of the 'feelings of that class' which is central to his exploration of a working class world.

³¹Yeast, p.84.

There is a slight accident to the Lavingtons' coach on the journey home after dining out. This brings Argemone and Lancelot together when they are obliged to walk. Argemone is going away for the summer and Lancelot says that he intends 'to examine a little into the real condition of English working men.'

Kingsley at this point hastily surveys the three months in which the Lavingtons are away at Baden-Baden, and attempts to show Lancelot getting to grips with some of the contemporary social problems:

[he] buried himself up to the eyes in the Condition-of-the-Poor question - that is, in blue books, red books, sanitary reports, mine reports, factory reports; and came to the conclusion, which is now pretty generally entertained, that something was the matter - but what, no man knew, or if they knew, thought proper to declare. Hopeless and bewildered, he left the books, and wandered day after day from farm to hamlet, and from field to tramper's tent, in hopes of finding out the secret for himself.³²

However, he does not describe what Lancelot sees at this point in the novel, but sidesteps the issue rather curiously. He says that the reader must be familiar with the articles in the Morning Chronicle, and that therefore it would be unnecessary to describe the scenes. If he did he argues, he would be accused of borrowing from this source, in spite of having investigated these scenes for himself two years earlier. This comment seems particularly incongruous as he not only goes on to describe them later in the book but also

³²Yeast, p.98.

makes full use of the articles in the Morning Chronicle when he writes both Cheap Clothes and Nasty and Alton Locke.³³

Lancelot in his failure to find a solution to the social problems of the time, returns to Carlyle and reads: 'The beginning and the end of what is the matter with us in these days is - that we have forgotten God.'³⁴ With this as a possible answer he turns to the one man whom he thinks is a believer out of conviction rather than convention -

Tregarva. Lancelot visits him but their discussion is soon interrupted with the discovery of a poacher. Kingsley was interested in the problem of poaching because he saw it as being related to the more general evils of society. He argued that men were forced into poaching because they had no alternative, if they wished to survive. The difficulties of obtaining a job in the country districts were great. Even those who were strong, healthy and young found it hard but as the men grew older the opportunities grew fewer and fewer.

Having caught the man in the act of poaching, Tregarva demands that the tackle he uses be handed over.

'I must have those night-lines Crawy,' quoth Tregarva, at length.

'Then I must starve. You might ever so well take away the dog. They're the life of me.'

'They're the death of you. Why don't you go and work, instead of idling about, stealing trout?'

³³ Although there had been some articles previously on the subject of working class conditions, Henry Mayhew commenced his series of letters in the Morning Chronicle on 18 October 1849.

³⁴ Yeast, p.99.

'Be you a-laughing at a poor fellow in trouble? Who'd gie me a day's work, I'd like to know? It's twenty year too late for that!'³⁵

But in spite of Kingsley's efforts to give Crawy some kind of background by attempting to explain how he got his nickname as a young boy, he remains, like Lord Vieuxbois and Lord Minchampstead, a stereotype. He is used by Kingsley merely to illustrate certain arguments and is only loosely woven into the plot.

His inclusion in the novel enables the author to attack the fallacy prevailing amongst contemporary economists that there was work available for all if only people were willing to look for it; first, on the ground that even if it were true, society fails to inform those in need of work where the jobs are available and secondly, even if the jobs exist, the unemployed lack the means of travelling to them.

Kingsley also makes use of this occasion to point out that there is much land that is wasted which could be made available for production, if the profit margins were reduced:

'Well, as for employing him, one would have thought that there was a little work waiting to be done in those five miles of heather and snipe-bog, which I used to tramp over last winter - but those, it seems, are still on the "margin of cultivation", and not a remunerative investment - that is, to capitalists.'³⁶

But if Kingsley has sympathy for the local poacher, who sees food in plenty going to waste, when he is starving, he has no such

³⁵ Yeast, p.107.

³⁶ Yeast, p.108.

feeling for the organised gangs of poachers which come down periodically from London to raid the countryside. Crawy is presented as a deliberate contrast to these men and in response to the kindness shown by Lancelot to him, he warns of their presence in the neighbourhood.

The following chapter is concerned with the confrontation with these London poachers. Kingsley gives a very lively description of the events which include a fight with the intruders and the murder of the old gamekeeper, Harry Verney. Before he dies, however, he confesses to Tregarva that he has placed a 'bit of writing' in the squire's fly-book. Harry Verney's jealousy of the younger gamekeeper will eventually cause Tregarva to lose his job, because the verses, which have been written against the game laws, will be considered as a personal attack on the squire. But the reaction is delayed, for it is several weeks before the squire finds the offending poem.

Meanwhile the relationship between Lancelot and Argemone develops. As with the first meeting, the courtship seems to be highly romanticised and unreal, but on closer examination it is found to be a fairly truthful record of Charles Kingsley's own courtship of Fanny Grenfell. This has been revealed in considerable detail by Susan Chitty, who has recently made use of hitherto unpublished letters.³⁷ Thus references to Lancelot's undergraduate behaviour, Argemone's intention of becoming a nun, or at least join a chaste sisterhood, and the illustrations which Lancelot sketched for her are all thinly disguised autobiography.

Later, when the squire eventually discovers Tregarva's verses on the game laws, he is sent for and the poem is read out. Kingsley had often claimed that he felt more at home in writing poetry than

³⁷ Susan Chitty, The Beast and the Monk (London, 1974) pp. 65-86.

prose and certainly the force of his arguments comes through very clearly and succinctly in the Gamekeeper's poem:

'''You have sold the labouring man, squire,

Body and soul to shame,

To pay for your seat in the House, squire,

And to pay for the feed of your game.

'''You made him a poacher yourself, squire,

When you'd give neither work nor meat;

And your barley-fed hares robbed the garden

At our starving children's feet;

'''When packed in one reeking chamber,

Man, maid, mother and little ones lay;

While the rain pattered in on the rotting bride-bed,

And the walls let in the day;

'''When we lay in the burning fever

On the mud of the cold clay floor,

Till you parted us all for three months, squire,

At the cursed workhouse door.

'''We quarrelled like brutes, and who wonders?

What self-respect could we keep,

Worse housed than your hacks and your pointers,

Worse fed than your hogs and your sheep?''',³⁸

This poem manages to catch the atmosphere of the farmworker's helplessness and the utter hopelessness of his existence. Kingsley conveys the

³⁸ Yeast, pp. 149-50.

feeling of fatalistic acceptance of the things which people feel can never be changed. But, as we have seen earlier, Kingsley is not only concerned with the material deficiencies but also with the way in which the conditions of life are destructive of moral behaviour:

'''Our daughters with base-born babies,
Have wandered away in their shame;
If your misses had slept, squire, where they did,
Your misses might do the same.'''³⁹

Kingsley maintained that there remained a deep feeling amongst many contemporaries that different standards applied to the working classes and in no sense should they be treated as equals. This was borne out in both Dickens's and Mrs Gaskell's attack on the kind of charity which made no attempt to change the conditions but was often a very superficial, immediate gesture which served to quieten the consciences of the benefactors as much as anything else.

'''Can your lady patch hearts that are breaking
With handfuls of coals and rice,
Or by dealing out flannel and sheeting
A little below cost price?
'''You may tire of the gaol and the workhouse,
And take to allotments and schools,
But you've run up a debt that will never
Be repaid us by penny-club rules.'''⁴⁰

³⁹Yeast, p.150.

⁴⁰Yeast, p.151.

In a lecture on 'Woman's work in a Country Parish', Kingsley develops the idea that it is important to create the right response in charitable actions, so that the gesture does not take away the self-respect of the poor. He stresses the need to treat these people as human beings and not things in need of reform. He makes a particular point of the behaviour on a charitable visit, so that a poor woman shall feel as little discomfort as possible.

Piety, earnestness, affectionateness, eloquence - all may be nullified and stultified by simply keeping a poor woman standing in her own cottage while you sit, or entering her house, even at her own request, while she is at meals. She may decline to sit; she may beg you to come in: all the more reason for refusing utterly to obey her, because it shows that that very inward gulf between you and her still exists in her mind, which it is the object of your visit to bridge over.⁴¹

Naturally, Honoria reacts strongly against the gamekeeper's ballad because not only is she responsible for charitable acts among the poor but also because she believes that only those who are not of the working classes have the right to express such feeling. If the workers themselves protest then it is a sign of dangerous radicalism which cannot be endured.

In consequence of the controversial verses, Tregarva is dismissed as expected. However, before he leaves the district Lancelot reminds him of his former promise to take him to a local village fair and this he agrees to do. On the way to the revel, Tregarva explains

⁴¹ Charles Kingsley, Sanitary and Social Essays, (London, 1880), p.15.

to Lancelot, who has been suitably disguised as a farm-labourer, the conditions of rural working life. Lancelot has been asking why the workers do not spend their leisure time more fruitfully and use the knowledge they have gained from school in order to read. Tregarva says:

'but did you ever do a good day's farm-work in your life? If you had, man and boy, you wouldn't have been game for much reading when you got home; you'd do just what these poor fellows do, - tumble into bed at eight o'clock, hardly waiting to take your clothes off, knowing that you must turn up again at five o'clock the next morning to get a breakfast of bread, and perhaps a dab of the squire's dripping, and then back to work again; and so on, day after day, sir, week after week, year after year, without hope or a chance of being anything but what you are, and only too thankful if you can get work to break your back, and catch the rheumatism over.'⁴²

This stark treatment of the farm-labourer's day conveys Kingsley's conception of the harsh realities of rural life. He avoids the sentimental view of many of his contemporaries and strikes at the core of the matter. The apathy which is revealed both in personal interests and political concern can be related to the continual drudgery which wears down a man's will-power so that he loses all interest beyond surviving from day to day. Kingsley's experience of meeting these mendicants in the fields around the parish of Eversley is no doubt reflected in this clear description.

Kingsley was also critical of the legislation concerning poverty and argued that this was a contributing factor in destroying

⁴²Yeast, p.170.

man's struggle for independence. The financial relief came to be expected as a right.

'But', said Lancelot, 'I thought this new Poor Law was to stir them up to independence?'

'Oh, sir, the old law has bit too deep: it made them slaves and beggars at heart. It taught them not to be ashamed of parish pay - to demand it as a right.'⁴³

Lancelot attempts to defend those that sincerely work hard for the improvement of the conditions of the poor, saying that there are many thousands of landlords and clergymen who are doing a great deal. But Tregarva is not convinced, because he maintains that they are unable to get at the root of the problem:

'Ay, sir, they see the evils, and yet they don't see them. They do not see what is the matter with the poor man; and the proof of it is, sir, that the poor have no confidence in them. They'll take their aims, but they'll hardly take their schooling, and their advice they won't take at all. And why is it, sir? Because the poor have got in their heads in these days a strange confused fancy, maybe, but still a deep and a fierce one, that they haven't got what they call their rights.'⁴⁴

Charity is itself destructive because it is not a means but an end. It is a sop to Cerberus; an attempt to pacify without amelioration.

⁴³ Yeast, p.171.

⁴⁴ Yeast, pp.172-173.

The conditions are not changed or the structure of society altered in the way in which Tregarva thinks is important. He condemns Lord Vieuxbois, in spite of his kindness, because he feels that his charity has severe limitations. It reduces the farm workers to pet animals but animals nevertheless. 'He fats prize-labourers, sir, just as Lord Minchampstead fats prize-oxen and pigs.'⁴⁵

By the time the discussion has ended Tregarva and Lancelot have reached the fair. Kingsley's description of the scene is depressingly portrayed, far removed from the common notions of English village fêtes. Lancelot complains that there is very little to be seen, to which Tregarva replies that that is the most significant point:

Two or three apple and gingerbread stalls, from which draggled children were turning slowly and wistfully away to go home; a booth full of trumpery fairings, in front of which tawdry girls were coaxing maudlin youths, with faded southernwood in their button-holes; another long low booth, from every crevice of which reeked odours of stale beer and smoke, by courtesy denominated tobacco, to the treble accompaniment of a jiggling fiddle and a tambourine, and the bass one of grumbled oaths and curses within - these were the means of relaxation.⁴⁶

Because Kingsley maintains that the poor physical conditions have disastrous consequences for the morality of the workers, he allows himself to condemn more than would perhaps be necessary if he were an impartial observer. The girls do not have to be 'tawdry' nor the

⁴⁵ Yeast, p.174.

⁴⁶ Yeast, p.175. This description is in marked contrast with the picture of the village fair shown in the Illustrated London News, 27 May 1843.

youths 'maudlin', and it would be reasonable to expect that some of their behaviour was relatively innocent. It would also be fair to assume that flowers which had been worn in the button-hole all day would be rather faded. In this respect Kingsley is sometimes less willing than Mrs Gaskell to allow for alternative patterns of behaviour in the working class culture. He clearly recognizes the existence of differences but cannot approach them from the working class point of view. This leads to the condemnation of popular songs and music and other forms of entertainment along with more serious moral problems because he sees them as inextricably linked. This is even more revealed when Kingsley uses the depressing state of the occasion to describe the people.

There are large numbers of young girls, undersized and underfed, who give birth to illegitimate children before they are grown up themselves. There is also a lack of any kind of self respect or human dignity in their brutish behaviour. Inside the booth Lancelot saw fifty or sixty men:

wrangling, stupid, beery, with sodden eyes and drooping lips - interspersed with more girls and brazen-faced women, with dirty flowers in their caps, whose whole business seemed to be to cast jealous looks at each other, and defend themselves from the coarse overtures of their swains.

Lancelot had been already perfectly astonished at the foulness of the language which prevailed; and the utter absence of anything like chivalrous respect, almost of common decency, towards women. But Lo! the language of the elder women was quite as disgusting as that of the men, if not worse.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Yeast, pp. 176-177.

Tregarva argues that these attitudes and patterns of behaviour are created by the way in which these people are obliged to live. Both husband and wife work in the fields in order to survive and the children are left to fend for themselves, until they too are old enough to be employed. Therefore, poverty is destructive both to the individual and to the family as a whole.

As Lancelot and Tregarva listen to the talk of the locals, their conversation turns to Chartism. A pedlar remarks that they need some leader to stir them up to revolt, but the farm workers feel that this would serve no purpose as they would soon be cut down by the soldiers. Kingsley understood the factors relating to the formation of farm-worker unions very well. These had always been fraught with difficulties, the most notorious of which was a small group who had attempted to form a union in the village of Tolpuddle. This had led to their arrest in 1834 and subsequent sentence to transportation. The furor created by the treatment of the 'Tolpuddle Martyrs' was still very fresh in the minds of the people when Yeast was written. But the very nature of the work was the greatest handicap. Farm work is often solitary and workers are scattered over very large areas. This makes communication hard, the possibility of enthusiasm being generated by large meetings slender and the chance of taking swift action almost nil. These conditions have meant that the union activities by farm labourers have always lagged far behind those formed from the close association of workers in the towns. But Kingsley felt that more than the physical conditions was involved and he implies that it is the psychological attitudes that the work engenders, which form the key to the problem. Lancelot finds this attitude difficult to comprehend:

It would not be apathy, for he heard nothing but complaint upon complaint bandied from mouth to mouth the whole evening. They seemed rather sunk

too low in body and mind, - too stupefied and spiritless, - to follow the example of the manufacturing districts; above all, they were too ill-informed. It is not mere starvation which goads the Leicester weaver to madness. It is starvation with education, - an empty stomach and a cultivated, even though miscultivated, mind.⁴⁸

In Kingsley's anxiety to get across to the reader all the burning issues that are in his mind he packs events in the novel too closely. Thus, before the two men leave the revel, he very briefly introduces Mary, 'a coarse, handsome, showily-dressed girl'⁴⁹ in order to use Colonel Bracebridge's immorality to deliver an attack on those middle class men who take advantage of working class girls. He then quickly turns his attention to class distinction and divorce, where only those with money can avail themselves of the opportunity. Then leaving these themes unexplored he switches to the problem of sanitary conditions in the villages, which he develops at somewhat greater length.

Lancelot and Tregarva on their walk home meet a woman, who is standing at the door of one of the cottages. She is anxiously awaiting the arrival of the Lavington sisters to attend a girl with typhus:

'No wonder you have typhus here,' said Lancelot, 'with this filthy open drain running right before the door. Why can't you clean it out?'

'Why what harm does that do?' answered the woman peevishly. 'Beside, here's my master gets up to his work by five in the morning,

⁴⁸ Yeast, pp. 180-81.

⁴⁹ Yeast, p.184.

and not back till seven at night, and by then he ain't in no humour to clean out gutters. And where's the water to come from to keep the place clean? It costs many a one of us here a shilling a week the summer through to pay fetching water up the hill. We've work enough to fill our kettles.⁵⁰

Kingsley was much concerned with the need for education which must be part of any scheme for sanitary reform. If people are not aware of the dangers resulting from dirty drains, they are not likely to make any serious effort to clean them. But, in addition, even if this necessity could be brought home to the farm labourers, they still faced the difficult and expensive problem of obtaining pure water. Therefore there was a double difficulty of removing stagnant effluent and preventing the contamination of the drinking water. The problems of sanitation were a life long concern of Kingsley and he devoted a great deal of energy to solving them. He wrote essays on the subject, gave lectures and, as we shall see below, returned to the subject in Alton Locke.⁵¹

The chapter on the revel is a long and very full one. Kingsley's anxiety over so many social problems at once causes him to pack too much

⁵⁰ Yeast, p.191. Disease was common among country people and they suffered from a number of illnesses, which are almost unheard of today in England. Not only were there frequent cases of cholera and typhus but also malaria was often found. Chadwick quotes an example from one medical officer's report: 'A total absence of all provision for effectual drainage around cottages is the most prominent source of malaria; throughout the whole district there is scarcely an attempt at it. The refuse, vegetable and animal matters, are also thrown by the cottagers in heaps near their dwellings to decompose; are sometimes not removed, except at very long intervals.' (pp.88-89). Edwin Chadwick, Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain (1842) edited by M.W. Flinn (Edinburgh, 1965).

⁵¹ Charles Kingsley, Sanitary and Social Lectures and Essays (1880), Alton Locke pp.204-206, and Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memories of his Life, I, 215-218.

into too small a space. Thus many of the points are not developed and his desire to instruct the reader often outweighs the considerations of the novelist. However, in spite of these faults, he is very successful in presenting a picture of rural life. He is capable of generating an atmosphere in which the reader is able to feel the depression and hopelessness of the workers' daily lives, so that it is possible to sympathize with the petty and brutish behaviour to which they have sunk.

After the visit to the village revel, events move very fast. Lancelot discovers the next day that his uncle's bank has collapsed and he has been left penniless. His sudden change of fortune makes him uncertain what to do. He makes some attempt to become a journalist and after this fails he seeks out the help of Claude Mellot in order to become an artist.

At this point in the novel, not only is there a change of pace, but there is also a change of direction. The book is now much more concerned with the mystic, Barnakill, than with the amelioration of social conditions, although the two remain loosely connected.

Lancelot's association with Tregarva grows and through this Kingsley continues to explore his class theories. Tregarva says:

'I want to rise; I want those like me to rise with me. Let the rich be as rich as they will. - I, and those like me, covet not money, but manners. Why should not the workman be a gentleman, and a workman still? Why are they to be shut out from all that is beautiful, and delicate, and winning, and stately?'⁵²

⁵² Yeast, p.219.

This naive idealism is in direct contrast to the stark realism of the village revel scene and to a certain extent devalues the success of the latter. In the chapter concerned with the villager's social life, Kingsley is revealed as a man who possesses a knowledge and understanding of the working man's existence but here his perception is limited. He is arguing for a radical change in working class education and attitudes with the vain hope that the new perception of the world will not bring about a demand for change in other spheres of their existence. How can he expect a man who is educated in the arts either to be contented with the drudgery of his daily life or, to be in a position where he can gain access to culture when his long tiring day's work is done? Kingsley is here choosing to ignore what he knows to be true. The conservative is in conflict with the social reformer. He wishes to educate the working classes yet also retain the old hierarchical structure. Those contemporaries who saw education as a threat to the existing social order were more realistic than Kingsley was able to be at this point.

As the novel draws to a close the mystical and symbolic elements increase. As Marmo has already pointed out:

The death scene of Argemone is highly significant. The daughter of Squire Lavington, who permits his labourers to lead their wretched existence in foul cottages, dies just of the typhus actually contracted while visiting a patient.⁵³

Her death is also accompanied by a scent-fiend, reference to the Nun's pool curse and the irony of Argemone's demands for water to quench her thirst.

⁵³ Macario Marmo, The Social Novel of Charles Kingsley (Salerno, 1937), p.47.

Argemone's death had followed quickly on that of Lancelot's friend, Colonel Bracebridge, who, in an uncharacteristic fit of conscience, had committed suicide when he learnt of the fate of his illegitimate child. These events brought Lancelot to the depth of despair. Unable to find comfort in conversation with his friend, Tregarva, who had gone on a tour of the North, he turned to Barnakill. Barnakill's aid is vague and unconvincing but it does contain the conventional demand for a journey to a strange land. Combining the spiritual theme with the theme of social integration Kingsley arranges that the novel ends with the working class Tregarva and the middle class Lancelot Smith accompanying Barnakill towards a new beginning in the land of Prester John.

In the Epilogue Kingsley makes an attempt to forestall some of the criticism of the novel by justifying the type of book he has written. Any criticism must obviously take into account the intentions of the author, and we cannot have expectations about a novel which he did not write or intend to write. However, his justification of 'the very mystical and mysterious dénouement of a story which began by things so gross and palpable as field-sports and pauperism',⁵⁴ is rather weak. He argues that we are constantly surprised by social change, therefore it is unpredictable and anything may happen. It is of course true that we are frequently confronting social events which take us by surprise, but Kingsley's reason is too facile to excuse his treatment of events in the novel. That men do not think in an orderly way and that they have a variety of thoughts which are conflicting and contradictory is also true, and one is reminded of T S. Eliot's view of various and

⁵⁴ Yeast, p.268.

conflicting impulses which stimulate the creative mind.⁵⁵ But in Eliot's view these disparate elements have to be fused and formed into a newly created whole before the end product can be considered art, and in Kingsley's Yeast they have not been so formed. Part of his justification for writing the book is an attempt to make sense of the social problems which concern him. An inability to provide solutions, which are recognizably difficult, cannot exempt him from his responsibility to his readers to provide a plausible framework within which the social problems may be understood and explored. In accepting the apparent unpredictability of daily life the reader nevertheless has expectations of the novel which include order and structure.

In addition, the object of the book is, in part, as Kingsley suggests and the title 'Yeast' proclaims, to start chains of thought which are to be explored by the reader, rather than to offer any solutions. This may well be so but the result is a very uneven novel, where the interest varies from stimulating and original treatment of the conception of contemporary social ills to the trite and ill-formed comment. It is clear that Kingsley has narrative and descriptive skills as we witness in the opening scenes of the hunt. The chapter containing the account of the village revel is also remarkable because it is not only vivid and convincing, but the image it creates is also in strong contrast to the notion of rural life which many of his contemporary writers firmly held. He is feeling his way towards an understanding of the working class community, but he is never able to give the reader a sense of being anything more than a rather distant observer. Kingsley fails to provide any real depth in the working class scenes and Tregarva stands apart as an individual dissociated from the class he is supposed to represent.

⁵⁵T.S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', in Selected Essays (London, 1969), pp.281-291 (p.287).

The main weakness is that no situation or theme is allowed to develop sufficiently to create a feeling of authenticity. There are too many stereotypes, like Lord Vieuxbois and Lord Minchampstead, who are introduced to illustrate a point of view, and then disappear. This is also true of the working class characters like Crawly and, to a certain extent, Harry Verney.

Much of the novel gives the impression of haste, where excited thoughts are jotted down rather than being integrated within the development of the characters and there is too wide a range of contentious subjects. For example, the long debate between Lancelot and his cousin Luke could easily have been left out and it appears to be present only because of Kingsley's personal animosity towards the Jesuits. Some of the faults are due to Kingsley's confusion as to the real intention of the novel. In this sense he is rather like Harriet Martineau in her Illustrations of Political Economy, because both are uncertain of the extent to which the arguments should be interwoven in the fictional life of the novel's characters. In varying degrees it is a difficulty which is common to all polemical novelists. But Kingsley is also confused by the nature of the social problem itself. He wishes to provide some indication of how the rural workers' conditions may be ameliorated but a conflict between his ethical and political notions prevents him recognizing the consequences of change. His Christian desire for equality of treatment of the workers is in conflict with the political consequences with which he refuses to come to terms. The idea of a radical restructuring of society is inconceivable and even the question of change within the existing hierarchical structure makes him uneasy. However, Kingsley learnt a great deal from the writing of Yeast, and in Alton Locke, which followed very quickly afterwards, many of the faults relating to the presentation of a convincing account of a working class community were overcome.

Chapter 4: Alton Locke

The writing of Alton Locke followed very closely upon the serialisation of Yeast in Fraser's Magazine and the novel was in fact published before Yeast came out in book form, as we have already seen.¹ Early in 1848 Kingsley had become very interested in the Chartist poet Thomas Cooper, to whom he wrote on 19 June 1848:

Ever since I read your brilliant poem, 'The Purgatory of Suicides', and its most affecting preface, I have been possessed by a desire to thrust myself, at all risks, into your acquaintance.²

Kingsley was very keen to know more about working class people by closer contact with them. His interest, however, was also practical, as he hoped that he would be able to find some suitable material which would form the basis of a new novel. Later in the same letter he makes this point very clear when he says:

I want someone like yourself, intimately acquainted with the mind of the working classes, to give me such an insight into their life and thoughts, as may enable me to consecrate my powers effectively to their service.³

Kingsley obtained a detailed knowledge of the Chartist poet which he used in his fictional autobiography of Alton Locke. Cooper later published

¹ See above, pp. 56-57.

² Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memories of His Life, I, 183.

³ Ibid., I, 184.

his own biography,⁴ and Kingsley's debt to him can be established by a reference to this source. This aspect of his work has already been examined by a number of writers, principally Louis Cazamian⁵ and Macario Marmo.⁶

Cooper was a shoemaker who educated himself and became both a poet and a political speaker. Locke was a tailor who followed a similar pattern. They both had only the Bible and Pilgrim's Progress as their early reading, but whereas Cooper obtained books from travelling book-sellers, Locke got his from Sandy Mackaye. They were both obliged to study under extreme difficulties at night and fight against the cold. Both men were asked to omit passages from their work in order to publish and Cooper was asked by Chapman and Hall not to refer to himself as a Chartist on the title page of his autobiography. They were both obliged to earn their living by becoming hack writers at certain times in their lives. Both were offered a scholarship to Cambridge. Locke had the chance of a sizarship if he would give up his political interests and Cooper was also tempted in a similar manner, while he was in Stafford Gaol; but neither of them would accept. Both were sent to prison after similar trials, and their prison thoughts are also very alike. They both emerged from prison hardened in their political views and both became atheists but were later re-converted to Christianity. These parallels and many lesser details are so close when a comparison between Alton Locke and Cooper's Autobiography is made that there can be little doubt that it was Thomas Cooper who provided the source material for Alton Locke.⁷

4. Thomas Cooper, The Life of Thomas Cooper, written by Himself (London, 1872).

5. Louis Cazamian, Kingsley et Thomas Cooper, Etude sur une Source d'Alton Locke (Paris, 1903).

6. Macario Marmo, The Social Novel of Charles Kingsley (Salerno, 1937), pp. 60-61.

7. It has been suggested that Kingsley also used the models of Gerald Massey, a working class poet, and Robert Lowery, a tailor, see Allan John Hartley, The Novels of Charles Kingsley: A Christian Social Interpretation (Folkestone, 1977), p.63.

However, there were other influences at work on Kingsley's mind while he was developing Alton Locke. He had become very concerned with the need for sanitary reform and had spent a great deal of time and energy studying Blue Books and Reports and gathering statistics on the subject. But his interest was not only in the theory and he is known to have visited many of the worst places himself. In a letter to his wife he says:

I was yesterday with George Walsh and Mansfield over the cholera districts of Bermondsey; and, oh, God! what I saw! people having no water to drink - hundreds of them - but the water of the common sewer which stagnated full of ... dead fish, cats and dogs, under their windows. At the time the cholera was raging, Walsh saw them throwing untold horrors into the ditch, and then dipping out water and drinking it!!⁸

Kingsley had also about this time been moved by the plight of tailors. Henry Mayhew had been writing a series of articles on London traders for the Morning Chronicle in the form of letters, three of which had dealt with the subject of tailors.⁹ The conditions of the workers which Mayhew described so incensed Kingsley that he wrote an aggressive pamphlet called Cheap Clothes and Nasty (1850) on the subject and this was widely read. After the work on this article, it was natural for him to make his 'hero' a tailor.

Of the wider issues, Chartism played a big part. Ever since the

⁸ Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memories of his Life, I, 216.

⁹ See below p. 104.

events of the 10th April, Kingsley had been involved in finding ways of helping those men who had been defeated by the failure of the Charter, and it was to be expected that many of these thoughts and ideas would be committed to paper when he commenced his new novel.

Alton Locke, Tailor and Poet: An Autobiography was eventually published anonymously by Chapman and Hall in two volumes in 1850. It had seen Carlyle who had recommended him to Chapman and Hall, and he gave the novel substantial praise, although not entirely without reservation:

At the same time, I am bound to say, that the book is definable as crude; by no manner of means the best we expect of you - if you will resolutely temper your fire. But to make malt sweet, the fire should and must be slow.¹⁰

As was to be expected, the novel found little favour in the contemporary press. It was attacked in the Quarterly Review¹¹ and by the Edinburgh Review,¹² where, in an article by W.R.Greg, the author was accused of confusing the problems related to the feudal society with those of Chartism and misinterpreting the behaviour and motives of the upper classes. The Times suggested that: 'Alton Locke is not the labour of a working man with a smattering of learning, but of a scholar with an inkling of Chartism.'¹³ However, Mrs. Kingsley¹⁴ informs us that her

¹⁰ Letter written on 31 October 1850 to Charles Kingsley and quoted by Mrs. Kingsley in Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memories of His Life, I, 244.

¹¹ 'Revolutionary Literature', Quarterly Review, September 1851,

¹² W. R. Greg, 'Christian Socialism' Edinburgh Review, XCIII (1851), 1-33.

¹³ The Times, 18 October 1850.

¹⁴ Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memories of His Life, I, 244.

husband received many letters of congratulation from working class men who praised it highly. When the novel was reprinted in 1856 it contained a Preface Addressed to the Working Men of Great Britain.

In Kingsley's lifetime the works that followed overshadowed the first two novels and his popularity rested very largely upon Westward Ho! He also became much more closely associated with the Establishment and was given recognition by the Queen. In 1862, the year he was made Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, Macmillan published a new edition of Alton Locke with a New Preface - 'To the Undergraduates of Cambridge'. This contained a number of small revisions which may have been prompted by his new position. The changes were made with particular reference to the Cambridge scenes where he felt that he had unjustly represented the conditions. He maintains that he had described the state of the university as he had seen it when he was an undergraduate rather than as it was during the period when Alton Locke was supposed to have visited his cousin in Cambridge. This led him to suppress an account of a riotous supper party and substantially modify the attack made upon the university in chapter XIII.

Most of the studies of Charles Kingsley undertaken towards the end of the nineteenth century were with special reference to his work as a social reformer, as we have seen in the examination of Yeast. Kaufmann, Marriott and Stubbs all see the achievement of Alton Locke in terms of the contribution it was able to make towards influencing social change. But as with Yeast, Alton Locke did not receive a detailed examination as a social problem novel until the publication of Le Roman Social en Angleterre. In this work Cazamian pinpoints the weakness of Kingsley's creative ability in writing a fictional autobiography, when he says:

Kingsley, en effet, n'avait pas assez le don de la création dramatique, pour reproduire le développement d'une pensée opposée à la sienne, sans la juger constamment et la corriger de son point de vue personnel.¹⁵

But he also accepts that it is essential to keep a clear point of view before the reader if the didactic intentions of the novel are to be fulfilled. In general he approved of the novel, claiming that:

Elle résume en images éclatantes la générosité de son idéalisme, et ce rêve du socialisme chrétien où l'Angleterre religieuse avait mis le meilleur d'elle-même.¹⁶

Stanley Baldwin, in a careful study of Alton Locke, feels that the strength of the novel lies in its passionate revelation of the evils of the time but that its weakness is in the unreality of many of the characters like Lillian and Eleanor who serve only to influence the behaviour of Alton Locke by pulling him in different directions. He sums up his view when he says:

This is probably Kingsley's best book, in the sense that it is most representative of the man and his message, though it is not his most artistic creation.¹⁷

Margaret Thorp felt that the success of the novel was directly related to the use which Kingsley had made of his model, Thomas Cooper. When

¹⁵ Le Roman Social en Angleterre, p.487.

¹⁶ Le Roman Social en Angleterre, p.514.

¹⁷ Stanley E. Baldwin, Charles Kingsley, p.96.

he is accurately reporting the life of the Chartist poet, then, she says, he is at his best:

It is not without significance that his most propagandistic novel should be also his most artistic, that the closer he stays to his model the nearer he comes to truth.¹⁸

As I have already said with reference to Yeast, most of the recent criticism of Kingsley is of a very limited kind and occurs almost incidentally in the biographies. Martin's comments are clear and to the point, but are given with no supporting evidence of their truth.

Much of the book is lacking in form; the characters, with the exception of Mackaye, are unbelievable; the plot is sometimes unmotivated and melodramatic; many of Kingsley's ideas are poorly assimilated into the action.¹⁹

His praise for the novel is given for the ability which Kingsley displays in dramatic presentations of the life of the poor and he sees the novel's status in terms of a social document.

Alton Locke received a very brief reference in the chapter on 'The Industrial Novels' in Culture and Society 1780-1950, where its art is examined in relationship to the broader issues of the book as a whole:

A very large part of it is like reading old newspapers, or at least old pamphlets. The issues are there, but the terms are arbitrary and the

¹⁸ Margaret Thorp, Charles Kingsley: 1819-1875, p.73.

¹⁹ Robert Martin, The Dust of Combat: A Life of Charles Kingsley (London, 1959), p.117.

connexions mechanical. The book is not an 'autobiography' but a tract.²⁰

Alton Locke has also been commented upon by Arnold Kettle in connection with the subject of 'The Early Victorian Social-Problem Novel'. He says that in terms of the accepted standards of literature it contains a vast number of faults, yet it has a certain vitality which is capable of moving us when it is read today. This he maintains stems, in part from the autobiographical method of narration, which forces on Kingsley an order of imaginative effort uncommon in this group of novels, and gives the book a certain unity of tone and sensibility.²¹

In spite of 1975 being the centenary of Charles Kingsley's death and the revival of interest shown in the biographies by Susan Chitty and Brenda Collums, new critical response has been limited to the work of Allan Hartley, who has concentrated upon the importance of the religious elements of the novels.²²

In terms of perceiving and interpreting the working class as a distinctive culture the writing of Alton Locke was a much more ambitious project for Charles Kingsley. In Yeast the reader observed the working class through the eyes of Lancelot Smith with a commentary provided by Tregarva and the visit to the country fair was something of a set piece rather than a view of a society to which Tregarva belonged.

²⁰ Raymond Williams, Culture and Society 1780-1950 (London, 1958), p.111.

²¹ Arnold Kettle, 'The Early Victorian Social-Problem Novel', The Pelican Guide to English Literature, edited by Boris Ford, vol 6 (Harmondsworth, 1958), p.184.

²² Allan John Hartley, The Novels of Charles Kingsley: A Christian Social Interpretation (Folkestone, 1977).

In Alton Locke Kingsley tries to get inside the total world of the working man by creating a protagonist who is completely involved with the working classes at all levels: only the Dean's household and Locke's cousin at Cambridge are outside this environment. The almost complete world which we observe through Locke's eyes increases the credibility of Kingsley's conception of the working class and enables us to understand the distinctive features he is attempting to present.

In order to provide the reader with a comprehensive view Kingsley is again obliged to face the problem experienced in Yeast. How is it possible for a spokesman to comment accurately and in detail upon the working class yet still remain part of it? We have already seen Kingsley's difficulties with the character of Tregarva in Yeast and later we shall observe the same problems occurring for Mrs Gaskell in creating Mary Barton and Margaret Hale. Kingsley finds the solution in part by creating a working class character who has educated himself and is thus able to reflect articulately on the events of his past.

Alton Locke is a fictional autobiography of a self-educated tailor. It is supposed to have been written towards the end of the protagonist's life so that Kingsley was entitled to assume that he had a command of language which his success as a poet had obviously given him. Locke's background is, in fact, depressed lower middle class, as his father was a shopkeeper before he died and left the family very poor. Mrs Locke retains many of her middle class values and strives to maintain an atmosphere of respectability for her family. Kingsley also makes use of the contrast between the success of Locke's uncle and the relative failure of his father so that he may trace the parallel course of Alton Locke's career and that of his cousin who goes to Cambridge.

The opening chapter describes Alton Locke's earliest remembrances and the way in which his imagination was awakened. Kingsley makes us aware of the separateness of this working class environment when Locke describes the vegetable carts bringing food into London:

I used to listen, with pleasant awe, to the ceaseless roll of the market-waggons, bringing up to the great city the treasures of the gay green country, the land of fruits and flowers, for which I have yearned all my life in vain. They seemed to my boyish fancy mysterious messengers from another world.²³

Truly they are 'messengers from another world' because the Surrey Hills are no more accessible to him than the Antipodes. His class has created a barrier almost as strong as a physical one and Kingsley makes his readers conscious of this from the first page.

However, Locke does not become fully aware of the horrors of his environment until later when the discovery is made by the contrast he experiences between the dreams of the lands visited by missionaries of his mother's church and the reality of the life he lived:

all of a sudden the horror of the place came over me; those grim prison-walls above, with their canopy of lurid smoke; the dreary, sloppy, broken pavement; the horrible stench of the stagnant cesspools; the utter want of form, colour, life, in the whole place, crushed me down.²⁴

He tries to escape into dreams of converting the natives in foreign lands, but again reality destroys his illusions when a most unpleasant

²³ Charles Kingsley, Alton Locke, I, 107.

²⁴ Alton Locke, I, 117.

missionary comes to tea with his mother. Because his childhood is heavily dominated by religion he turns from the idea of missionary work to David as a model for his dreams and attempts to write poetry. Thus the pattern of his future life is set in this first chapter of early childhood.

Kingsley covers these early stages of Alton's development very quickly in order to get to the social comment he is anxious to make in the second chapter. When Alton becomes a tailor's apprentice, it is because Mrs Locke had no idea of the conditions under which tailors worked and was therefore quite happy to be persuaded to accept the suggestion made by her brother-in-law, in the belief that it was a good occupation. Henry Mayhew's articles for the Morning Chronicle had vividly described the working conditions of tailors and they had provided a source of information for Kingsley on the subject, as can be seen from his letter to Ludlow:

Borrow, or at worst, buy . . . these Morning Chronicle articles, and send me them and I will reimburse you . . . at least send me the Tailors one, by return of post.²⁵

However, these articles were not published until part of Alton Locke had been written,²⁶ so it is not clear how much influence they had on

²⁵ R.B.Martin, p.192, Letter XXXVIII (November/December 1849?). Reference made to articles of 6,9,13,16,20,23 November and 11,14,18 December 1849 in the Morning Chronicle.

²⁶ It is very difficult to establish precisely when Kingsley began writing Alton Locke but in a letter to Ludlow in February 1849 he speaks of being fully involved with work on the Autobiography of a Cockney Poet. Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memories of His Life, I, 197.

him and it is likely that Kingsley's access to the relevant facts was also much more direct. Early in 1849 Kingsley had got to know a Chartist tailor called Walter Cooper²⁷ and he is most likely to have been the person who gave Kingsley the material regarding the 'sweating system' and helped to supply some of the details necessary for writing the pamphlet, Cheap Clothes and Nasty (1850).

The description of the tailor's workshop is among some of the most vivid in the novel. Alton is taken from the ground floor, where gentlemen are being advised on the latest cuts and styles of clothes, to a garret at the top of the shop where the clothes are made. Alton says:

I recoiled with disgust at the scene before me; and here I was to work - perhaps through life! A low lean-to room, stifling me with the combined odours of human breath and perspiration, stale beer, the sweet sickly smell of gin, and the sour and hardly less disgusting one of new cloth. On the floor, thick with dust and dirt, scraps of stuff and ends of thread, sat some dozen haggard, untidy, shoeless men, with a mingled look of care and recklessness that made me shudder.²⁸

The initiation of the young boy which follows is lively and comprehensible, but the language used to form the dialogue displays only a very superficial grasp of the way in which the workers actually spoke. For example, one tailor who is describing how the workers on different floors suffer different diseases, says:

²⁷ Walter Cooper's part in the Co-operative Movement has already been referred to. (see pp. 51-52, above).

²⁸ Alton Locke, I, 128.

First floor's Ashmy Ward - don't you hear 'um now through the cracks in the boards, a-puffing away like a nest of young locomotives? And this here most august and uppercrust cockloft is the Conscrumptive Hospital. First you begins to cough, then you proceeds to expectorate - spittoons, as you see, perwided free gracious for nothing - fined a kivarten if you spits on the floor.²⁹

This is the kind of theatrical cockney speech we tend to associate with characters like Sam Weller. It is clear that Kingsley felt ill at ease in writing it and the choice of such words as 'august' and 'expectorate' shows a lack of familiarity with this social group. But in spite of the speech deficiencies, Kingsley succeeds in creating a feeling of the atmosphere in which these men worked and its accuracy of description may be verified easily, for example, from the work of Chadwick.³⁰

Soon after becoming an apprentice, Alton Locke develops a great desire for knowledge. In this part of the biography Kingsley displays a great understanding of an uneducated man striving for some kind of intellectual growth. He skilfully reveals the confusion that exists in Alton's mind between knowledge, wisdom, intellectual disciplines and books. Kingsley shows that the intellectual structures, which most people take for granted, having received a formal education, are entirely

²⁹ Alton Locke, I, 130.

³⁰ Chadwick quotes a tailor who worked under conditions like those described in Alton Locke: 'The place in which we used to work at Messrs. Allen's was a room where 80 men worked together. It was a room about 16 or 18 yards long, and 7 or 8 yards wide, lighted with skylights; the men were close together, nearly knee to knee. In summer time the heat of the men and the heat of the irons made the room 20 to 30 degrees higher than the heat outside; the heat was then most suffocating, especially after the candles were lighted. I have known young men, tailors from the country, faint away in the shop from excessive heat and closeness.' Edwin Chadwick, Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain (1842) edited by M.W.Flinn (Edinburgh, 1965), p.167.

absent from the ignorant mind of Alton Locke. He has no means of knowing what to read, what it is necessary to know or how to proceed to acquire knowledge. The intellectual world is a vast, confusing maze with no coherent pattern or system that revealed itself to him. Coupled with this confusion is the guilt feeling that had been created by his mother, that all secular literature was sinful.³¹ It was in this state of mind that he approached a bookshop which he passed daily on his way to and from work. Kingsley describes the fervent desire mixed with complete absence of method that accompanied his first attempts to educate himself:

here [the bookshop] I at last summoned courage to stop, and timidly and stealthily taking out some volume whose title attracted me, snatch hastily a few pages and hasten on, half fearful of being called on to purchase, half ashamed of a desire which I fancied every one considered as unlawful as my mother did. Sometimes I was lucky enough to find the same volume several days running, and to take up the subject where I had left it off; and thus I contrived to hurry through a great deal of 'Childe Harold', 'Lara' and the 'Corsair' - a new world of wonders to me. They fed, those poems, both my health and my diseases; while they gave me, little of them as I could understand, a thousand new notions about scenery and man, a sense of poetic melody and luxuriance as yet utterly unknown.³²

Thus Kingsley constructs a view of the world which would be entirely beyond the experience of most of his readers, yet he is able

³¹ Often the working classes were as strongly opposed to learning as the ruling classes, although their reasons varied. A good example of this is in Mrs Thornton's opposition to her son learning the classics in North and South.

³² Alton Locke, I, 136.

to convey the sense of strong desire, frustrated by the lack of ability to orientate oneself to what is required to gain access to certain kinds of knowledge. I am referring here to knowledge as organized experience. Part of Kingsley's achievement at this point is that he is arguing that knowledge is accessible to us in relation to our social environment. Not only do we have different stocks of knowledge in relation to our different tasks in society, but the way in which knowledge is acquired is closely related to our social situation. One of the ways in which knowledge is made available to us is through the highly structured processes of our education system. One of the functions of the education system is to define those areas of knowledge which are desirable and valuable at a particular point in time. This is often implicit in the way in which our teachers perceive their disciplines and sometimes explicit in the use of certain methods and techniques. Obvious examples of this would be scientific experimental processes, reference books, libraries and choice of curricula. Locke struggles to read but he also tries to establish what knowledge is of high and low status and he attempts to place his newly acquired information into some kind of meaningful structure. Because Kingsley is aware of this intellectual structuring, his presentation of Alton Locke's mind, which has been deprived of formal education, is more striking.

While Alton Locke is snatching brief moments to read he is surprised by the owner, Sandy Mackaye, and asked to come into the shop. It is at this point in the novel that Locke's education really begins. As we have already seen in Yeast, Kingsley had definite ideas about the education of the working classes and believed that it was a process which involved strong personal commitment: 'a man kens as much as he's taught

himself'.³³ He stressed the need for self-restraint and method, and through Sandy Mackay criticises formal education which often fails to provide the necessary stimulus and contribute as a fully integrated part of man's development.

It's only gentlefolks and pair aristocrat bodies that go to be spoilt wi' tutors and pedagogues, cramming and loading them wi' knowledge, as ye'd load a gun, to shoot it all out again, just as it went down, in a college examination, and forget all about it after.³⁴

Kingsley was particularly critical of the university system and he returns to the subject later in the novel, when Alton visits his cousin at Cambridge. However, at this point Kingsley is stressing the social implications of knowledge and the way in which its purpose is determined by different social groups. In this particular instance it is associated with the institutionalized ritual of upper class upbringing rather than the acquisition of knowledge as knowledge. In exploring these epistemological aspects he succeeds in giving greater depth to both the characters of Alton Locke and Sandy Mackaye.

Kingsley also captures the atmosphere of delight and delicious satisfaction which Alton Locke feels on the entry into this fascinating new world of the intellect. He gives the reader the experience of understanding the sensations which the young boy feels when he first possesses the Latin books, which in Alton's mind are symbols of the learned man. Kingsley describes the extreme difficulty which accompanies

³³ Alton Locke, I, 141.

³⁴ Alton Locke, I, 141.

the boy's attempts to study, the sacrifice of sleep and the problems he faced in obtaining the basic necessities of light and heat. In Alton's case the difficulties were increased in attempting to keep his studies a secret from his mother, but the other problems and frustrations were typical of many working men who tried to educate themselves at this time. This we have already seen with reference to Thomas Cooper, who must have influenced these particular events in the novel.

Mackaye, who exerts so much power over Locke's education, is one of the most fully developed characters in the book. It is maintained by a number of writers that he was based upon Thomas Carlyle. Certainly the Scotsman found much to praise in him and was impressed by the accuracy with which Kingsley had been able to reproduce the Scottish dialect. In a letter to Charles Kingsley, he said:

My invaluable countryman... is nearly perfect; indeed I greatly wonder how you did contrive to manage him - his very dialect is as if a native had done it, and the whole existence of the rugged old hero is a wonderfully splendid and coherent piece of Scotch bravura.³⁵

The obvious success which Kingsley achieved with the language can be seen in the following brief example where he handles the Scottish dialect with confidence. Of the offer of books to Alton, Mackaye says:

'Keep them till ye die, gin ye will. What is the worth o' them to me? What is the worth o' anything to me, puir auld deevil, that ha' no half a dizen years to live at the furthest. God bless ye, my bairn; gang hame, and mind your mither, or it's little gude books'll do ye.'³⁶

³⁵ Charles Kingsley: Letters and Memories of His Life, I, 244.

³⁶ Alton Locke, I, 148.

In view of this ability of Kingsley to present the language of this character so effectively it is disappointing that he fails to achieve a similar success with the cockney working class characters in the novel.

As Locke had expected would happen, one day his secret studying is discovered by his mother and he is forbidden to speak to Mackaye. Completely cut off from any form of intellectual stimulus, Alton turns to Crossthwaite, the militant Chartist tailor, with whom he worked. Crossthwaite presents the young man with a different set of values from Mackaye and insists that someone of his intelligence should not be satisfied with education through self-help but that he had a right to the kind of education which was only available to the upper classes. Crossthwaite attacks the Church, which he sees as having control over education, by being in a position to determine who shall be educated and how much education they shall receive. The Church is shown to be an instrument in the social distribution of knowledge, in which it sees itself as an arbiter of what should be made accessible to the masses. Alton Locke in his ignorance, says:

But I thought the clergy were doing so much to educate the poor. At least, I hear all the dissenting ministers grumbling at their continual interference.

'Ay, educating them to make them slaves and bigots. They don't teach them what they teach their own sons. Look at the miserable smattering of general information - just enough to serve as sauce for their great first and last lesson of "Obey the powers that be" - whatever they be, leave us alone in our comforts, and starve patiently.³⁷

³⁷ Alton Locke, I, 157.

Crossthwaite sees this form of education offered by the Church as pernicious because it is used as a means of social control of the working classes. What up until this point Alton Locke had seen as a privilege of the upper classes is now argued by Crossthwaite as a right of all. The desire for self-improvement which possesses Alton Locke brings increased friction with his mother and eventually obliges him to leave home.

At this stage in the novel Kingsley returns to the subject he had difficulty in dealing with in Yeast. It is the problem of social mobility. Alton Locke's conflicts are used by Kingsley to project his theme of educational advancement within the existing social structure. This argument, as we have already seen, was strongly influenced by Carlyle,³⁸ and it neglects the total effects of education. In this respect Kingsley oscillates in his views, sometimes viewing the education of the masses in terms of the development of a limited number of skills, at other times condemning this restricted view in favour of a more broadly based approach. Thus in the end he is guilty of supporting those very same methods to educate the masses which he made Crossthwaite critical of. This causes him to present a rather prejudiced alternative between becoming middle class and remaining with the working class:

If he will desert his own class; if he will try to become a sham gentleman, a parasite, and, if he can, a Mammonite, the world will

³⁸ See above pp. 45-46.

compliment him on his noble desire to 'rise in life'. He will have won his spurs, and be admitted into that exclusive pale of knighthood, beyond which it is a sin to carry arms even in self-defence. But if the working genius dares to be true to his own class - to stay among them - to regenerate them - to defend them - to devote his talents to those among whom God placed him and brought him up - then he is the demagogue, the incendiary, the fanatic, the dreamer.³⁹

Kingsley disapproves of the willingness with which society accepts those who aspire to rise socially and the haste with which they condemn, as agitators, all those who remain to help improve the lot of their fellow workers. But in seeming to defend the working class man who is wrongfully called an 'agitator' by praising him for remaining true to his class, Kingsley is also confining the educated worker by wishing to prevent him making practical use of his education to improve his life style.

Having left home, Alton Locke settles in with Sandy Mackaye and begins to read in earnest, no longer restricted by the need to study in secret. Kingsley was aware of the way in which many working class writers tended to develop and this is revealed in Alton Locke's susceptibility to romantic notions as his education progresses. These are additionally stimulated when, on a visit to his uncle he meets Lillian in an art gallery. Following this meeting, Alton produces a large output of romantic verse closely imitative of Byron and Tennyson, to whom he was greatly attracted. The problem of imitation was a particular difficulty which most aspiring working class poets faced. Having no genre of their own, they imitated, often very clumsily, through poetic figures and diction alien to them, themes of which they had little

³⁹ Alton Locke, I, 162.

knowledge rather than attempting to speak more directly of those things which were closest to them. Martha Vicinus discusses some of these aspects of the working class writer in The Industrial Muse.⁴⁰ Kingsley's perceptiveness made him aware of these problems and so enhances the development of the character of Alton Locke.

Kingsley uses Mackaye's efforts to get Alton Locke to write about real subjects near at home to give the reader the first glimpse of the terrible conditions of working class existence in London. Mackaye tries to make Locke see with new eyes that which he had been surrounded by since the day of his birth. This is an attempt by Kingsley to try to find a new solution to the old problem of describing to the reader things which are already familiar to the characters involved. However, the device of using the increased sensibilities of a new young poet is a very effective one and greatly an advance on the descriptions of working class scenes in Yeast. The first area that Mackaye visits with Alton Locke is Clare Market and St. Giles's:

Fish-stalls and fruit-stalls lined the edge of the greasy pavement, sending up odours as foul as the language of sellers and buyers. Blood and sewer-water crawled from under doors and out of spouts, and reeked down the gutters among offal, animal and vegetable, in every stage of

⁴⁰ Martha Vicinus, The Industrial Muse (London, 1974) 'verse by working men, was awkward in phrasing and veered between a stilted literary language and the vernacular giving the work an odd tone and inconsistent form' (p.51) and Chapter 4 'Literature as a vocation: The Self-Educated Poets'. See also Alton Locke, I, 272. The Dean's comments upon Alton Locke's poetry:
'One never opens a book written by working men, without shuddering at a hundred faults of style. However, there are some very tolerable attempts among these - especially the imitations of Milton's Comus.'

putrefaction. Foul vapours rose from cow-sheds and slaughter-houses, and the doorways of undrained alleys, where the inhabitants carried the filth out on their shoes from the backyard into the court, and from the court up into the main street.⁴¹

This is a description of an area already made familiar to the public by Dickens,⁴² and in spite of Mackaye's concern we tend to feel that Kingsley is preaching social reform at us rather than allowing the character to express himself through the framework of the novel.

When Mackaye takes Locke to visit a family who are barely able to survive by needlework, although they work almost constantly, Kingsley's style of writing is more successful in presenting a scene of frustration and helplessness:

On a broken chair by the chimney sat a miserable old woman, fancying that she was warming her hands over embers which had long been cold, shaking her head, and muttering to herself, with palsied lips, about the guardians and the workhouse; while upon a few rags on the floor lay a girl, ugly, small-pox marked, hollow-eyed, emaciated, her only bed-clothes the skirt of a large handsome new riding-habit, at which two other girls, wan and tawdry, were stitching busily, as they sat right and left of her on the floor.⁴³

In this description Kingsley introduces his favourite ironic contrast which he associates with tailor's work. Often an article of clothing

⁴¹ Alton Locke, I, 200.

⁴² Charles Dickens, Sketches by Boz, (London, 1833) Scenes, Chap.V.

⁴³ Alton Locke, I, 203.

which is pure luxury to the customer is used as the only available covering to provide necessary warmth. It also has a strange unreal aspect because the sumptuous satins and velvets with which the garments are made clash with the drab, dirty surroundings in which the work is done. For Kingsley it is symbolically much more, because these clothes are a means of carrying disease back to the home of those who exploit the system. So that the coat that is used by the tailor Jemmy Downes to cover his dead family eventually brings death to Alton Locke's cousin, who is living in luxury.

Kingsley's purpose in describing this home is to show that these kind of workers were so exploited that they could not earn enough to survive, no matter how hard they worked. As we have already seen in Yeast, he argues that such conditions are destructive to moral values. This he brings out by depicting a struggle which the family has in trying to prevent one of the daughters using prostitution as a means of providing the food for the family to live.⁴⁴

This particular family's difficulties had been increased by an old mother, who had to be supported, because she refuses to go into a workhouse, and a daughter who is dying from consumption. It is an effective cameo, yet it is only partially woven into the story. It is used as an illustration of working class conditions, which, although accurate, does not become completely integrated into the novel in spite of its intended influence upon Alton Locke's writing. Kingsley, through Mackaye, argues for a poetic form which expresses the sufferings of the poor. A poet is needed who will write on subjects which had hitherto been regarded as 'unpoetic':

⁴⁴ On the subject of prostitution among needlewomen see Henry Mayhew's letter to the Morning Chronicle on 'Slop-workers and Needlewomen', letter VI, 6 November 1849.

'That puirlassie, dying on the bare boards, and seeing her Saviour in her dreams, is there na poetry there, callant? That auld body owre the fire, wi' her "an officer's dochter," is there na poetry there? That ither, prostituting hersel' to buy food for her freen - is there na poetry there? - tragedy - ⁴⁵

In the following months Alton Locke tries to develop a poetic style and give expression to those events around him as Mackaye had suggested. A chapter devoted to what Kingsley describes as democratic art makes reference to a number of painters and poets who he feels to be in this tradition. He mentions the painting of Landseer and Fielding, the poetry of Crabbe, Burns, Wordsworth and Hood and the novels of Dickens. But he thinks that the most important contributors to this genre are Tennyson and Carlyle, whose French Revolution he refers to as a prose poem. Although he defends this chapter by calling it a digression, he is still guilty of stepping outside of the character and talking in his own voice about a particular subject that interests him. In this case he is interested, as most poets are, in the problem of finding one's own poetic voice, but he also adopts the same tactics when he is particularly concerned about some social evil he wishes to see redressed. It is one of the major weaknesses of the novel that the character of Alton Locke is frequently overshadowed by his creator, when Kingsley's enthusiasm allows him to forget that he is writing and speaking through the mind of a working class cockney poet. Even allowing for the education that Alton Locke had received, these didactic digressions cannot be entirely justified.

The death of his old employer places Locke and his colleagues' jobs in jeopardy. The son wishes to modernise the shop and place the

⁴⁵ Alton Locke, I, 207.

work outside and make use of the 'sweating' system.⁴⁶ Crossthwaite rightly argues that it is a pernicious system and that it ought to be resisted. He calls a meeting to discuss this but he does not receive enough support. Already Jemmy Downes sees the possibilities of becoming a 'sweater' himself and turns against Crossthwaite. As the meeting continues Crossthwaite tries to explain that the 'sweating' system enables groups to be divided so that they have no means of redress. They are no longer dealing with the employer but the middleman, the sweater, and their wages will inevitably be depressed below a level which will make it possible to live. He suggests that they attempt to make a stand, but the other workers feel that this must only lead to starvation. In giving this account Kingsley displays a clear understanding of the problems that faced the working man in attempting to fight back at the system which was crushing him.

Locke innocently proposes that appeals should be made to the Government, but as Crossthwaite accurately points out, the Government were the worst offenders:

'You a tailor and not know that Government are the very authors of this system? ... the police clothes, the postmen's clothes, the convicts' clothes, are all contracted for on the same infernal plan, by

⁴⁶The tailoring trade was divided into two groups which were described in contemporary terms by the workers as 'honourable' and 'dishonourable'. The 'honourable' part of the trade was relatively small. It was the type of trade which was operated on the premises. The 'dishonourable' part was that which was subcontracted out to groups who were employed at less than the standard rate and were referred to as 'sweaters'. The abuses of the trade stemmed from the middle men. These men competed with one another for contracts. This reduced the possibility of paying a fair wage to tailors who were obliged to work for them. The workers had no say in the prices agreed for the garments or the conditions under which they worked.

This subject was fully discussed by Henry Mayhew in Letters XVI, XVII, XVIII, Morning Chronicle 11, 14, 18 December 1849.

sweaters, and sweaters' sweaters, and sweaters' sweaters' sweaters, till Government work is just the very last, lowest resource to which a poor starved-out wretch betakes himself to keep body and soul together? Why, the Government prices, in almost every department, are half, and less than half, the very lowest living price.⁴⁷

When Crossthwaite has persuaded Locke that the Government will not help, he then encourages him to become a Chartist. Unfortunately, Kingsley cannot leave it at that. He has convincingly presented a series of developments that could easily persuade an impressionable young man like Alton Locke to become caught up in a political movement but he then comes strongly through the character in an attempt to offer the reader an analysis of Chartism. He attacks the way in which the Charter was used as a prop and an excuse for inaction by the individual who is too easily persuaded to rely on empty words:

'If we had but the Charter' - was the excuse for a thousand lazinesses, procrastinations. 'If we had but the Charter' - I should be good, and free, and happy. Fool that I was! It was within, rather than without, that I needed reform.

And so I began to look on man (and too many of us, I am afraid, are doing so) as the creature and puppet of circumstances - of the particular outward system, social or political, in which he happens to find himself.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Alton Locke, I, 221-22.

⁴⁸ Alton Locke, I, 226.

Kingsley was here very far sighted in that the determinist view which he refers to has formed a large part of the theory of modern social policy, where the social factors are seen as a major determinant sometimes at the expense of the individual's personal responsibility.

Kingsley, of course, found support for his arguments in Carlyle and he points to the Charter as having the weakness of Carlyle's 'Morrison's Pill remedy'.⁴⁹ Kingsley maintains that an Act of Parliament has to be supported by a genuine desire on the part of the people to bring about change, otherwise it becomes meaningless words on the statute book. He argues that material change must be accompanied by moral change. You do not make men good by a Charter. This argument parallels the earlier one. Poor physical conditions produce a lowering of morals but improved physical conditions unaccompanied by moral growth are equally damaging. 'The Charter will no more make men good, than political economy, or the observance of the Church Calendar.'⁵⁰

Having been sacked for trying to resist the 'sweating' system, Crossthwaite and Alton Locke find themselves unemployed. Alton, who has a considerable amount of verse in MS., decides, on Mackaye's advice, to visit his cousin at Cambridge in the hope of getting his poems published.

The journey is a memorable one because Kingsley succeeds in conveying some of the excitement that the young cockney poet feels when, for the first time, he travels beyond the streets and houses where he had spent all his life:

'I recollect lying on my face and fingering over the delicately cut leaves of the weeds, and wondering whether the people who lived in the

⁴⁹For a discussion of Carlyle's ideas on the subject see p.43 above.

⁵⁰Alton Locke, I, 227.

country thought them as wonderful and beautiful as I did; - and then I recollected the thousands whom I had left behind, who, like me, had never seen the green face of God's earth; and the answer of the poor gamin in St. Giles's, who, when he was asked what the country was, answered, 'The yard where the gentlemen live when they go out of town'.⁵¹

Despite the sentimentality of the comment at the end, the passage is still successful in presenting a view of the world from the working class perspective. If a life has been spent in the slums then it is comprehensible that even the weeds which are taken for granted by the average reader can be objects of beauty to those whose experience of this kind is almost non-existent. Kingsley's insight is revealed in the emphasis he places on the examination of the weeds rather than a more obvious and general appreciation of the total scene and it is this sensitive response that gives greater depth to his working class hero.

As Alton Locke continues on his journey he meets a farm-labourer and questions him about rural conditions. This scene is weakened when Kingsley again allows his polemical interests to override the considerations of the artist. At first he succeeds in giving a believable account of this rather reticent worker who, like those in Yeast, seems to have no wish for conversation. They were so cowed by the system that they became reluctant to communicate about anything which might be seen as controversial. Only after the labourer had established that Alton was a complete stranger to the district was he prepared to offer a comment upon anything:

⁵¹ Alton Locke, I, 235.

He seemed, like almost every labourer I ever met, to have something on his mind; to live in a state of perpetual fear and concealment.⁵²

But eventually, when he is persuaded to talk, a reversal takes place and he is shown to speak too freely. Although he retains some of the East Anglian dialect, it is essentially Kingsley's voice that we hear describing the distribution of wealth in the rural community. When he is asked about the local parson, he says:

'Oh, rich enough to the likes of us. But his own tithes here arn't more than a thirty pounds we hears tell; and if he hadn't summat of his own, he couldn't do not nothing by the poor; as it be, he pays for that ere school all to his own pocket, next part. All the rest o' the tithes goes to some great lord or other - they say he draws a matter of a thousand a year out of the parish, and not a foot ever he sot into it.'⁵³

All these comments and the ones which follow are a collection of undigested material thrust into the mouth of a character who is used solely to report on the conditions and is never heard of again.

The next character that Locke meets on his journey is more fully integrated within the plot, as it is later revealed that his son is trapped in a sweater's den. Unfortunately this yeoman farmer is used in much the same way as the labourer, because the possibility of his son having become involved with a sweater serves only to allow Kingsley to hold forth on the evils of this aspect of the tailor's trade. Alton Locke says:

⁵² Alton Locke, I, 238.

⁵³ Alton Locke, I, 238-39.

'there's many a man who, after working seventeen or eighteen hours a day, Sundays and all, without even time to take off his clothes, finds himself brought in in debt to his tyrant at the week's end ... I've known half a dozen men imprisoned in that way, in a little dungeon of a garret, where they had hardly room to stand upright, and only just space to sit and work between their beds, without breathing the fresh air, or seeing God's sun, for months together, with no victuals but a few slices of bread and butter, and a little slop of tea, twice a day, till they were starved to the very bone.'⁵⁴

Although this report is perfectly accurate, as we may see from the work of Henry Mayhew,⁵⁵ its clumsy insertion into the novel detracts from its effectiveness and emphasises the deficiencies of Kingsley's knowledge of the craft of fiction.

After the conversation with the farmer and a promise to keep a watch for his son, Alton arrives at his cousin's college in Cambridge. Kingsley had mixed feelings about Cambridge, as we have already seen with reference to the revisions he felt obliged to make to this part of the book in later editions.⁵⁶ However, at the time of actually writing the novel he was very concerned about the University as a place of privilege, particularly as he felt that the original intentions of the founders had been so abused by recent members of the colleges.

⁵⁴ Alton Locke, I, 245-46.

⁵⁵ In the year 1844 there were at the West-end 676 men, women and children working under 'sweaters', and occupying ninety-two small rooms, measuring 8 feet by 10, which upon average was more than seven persons to each apartment. This number of individuals was composed of 179 men, 85 women, 45 boys, 78 girls and 256 children - the latter being members of the sweater's family.' Henry Mayhew, 'Letter XVIII', Morning Chronicle 18 December 1849.

⁵⁶ For a discussion of this see above p. 93.

The description of the scene where Alton first visits his cousin's rooms is very successful. The feelings which the poor tailor has when he is confronted with an entirely new social milieu are very effectively described. This is shown more skilfully in his meeting with his cousin's scout than in the more dramatic and consequential scene with Lord Lynedale. It is worth looking at in some detail because it shows Kingsley at his best in perceiving and interpreting working class attitudes and behaviour:

While I was staring about the room, at the jumble of Greek books, boxing-gloves, and luscious prints of pretty women, a shrewd-faced, smart man entered, much better dressed than myself.

'What would you like, sir? Ox-tail soup, sir, or gravy-soup, sir? Stilton cheese, sir, or Cheshire, sir? Old Stilton, sir, just now.'

Fearing lest many words might betray my rank...

I answered, 'Anything - I really don't care', in as aristocratic and offhand a tone as I could assume.

'Porter or ale, sir?'

'Water,' without a 'thank you', I am ashamed to say, for I was not at that time quite sure whether it was well-bred to be civil to servants.⁵⁷

This is a very effective piece of writing, in which Kingsley illustrates the way in which it is more important to impress one's own class, if it is possible, than to attempt to impress a superior class, where one's deficiencies are in any case more obvious. In this little sketch he shows great sympathy and understanding of a working man like Alton Locke.

⁵⁷ Alton Locke, I, 248-49.

Kingsley continues to develop the issue of class conflict with skill in the next two chapters. Alton reacts strongly against his cousin when he makes the suggestion that Alton should somehow be manipulated into the university and become a member of the established church in order to advance himself. But his cousin cuttingly points out that success can only be obtained by accepting the rules of the establishment. If he wishes to get his poems published then he must bow to those whom he at present detests.

Alton Locke attacks the universities and argues that there has grown up a division within the church which has made it a religion for the aristocracy. This in turn causes the working classes to lose interest. But, he says, this is not the reason why they have been excluded from Cambridge. The major reason for their rejection is because they are poor.

'No! the real reason for our exclusion, churchmen or not, is, because we are poor - ... because we could not support the extravagance which you not only permit, but encourage - because, by your own unblushing confession, it ensures the university "the support of the aristocracy"'.⁵⁸

However, Locke's problems of class conflict increase. It was relatively easy for him to reject the offers of his cousin, but when the conflict involves Lillian, the girl with whom he was infatuated earlier in the novel, the problem is different. While he is at Cambridge he does some translations for Lord Lynedale and it is through this that he meets Lillian. He also sees her again when her uncle examines his poems.

⁵⁸ Alton Locke, I, 259.

It is because he wishes to be seen in a favourable light by Lillian that he becomes more willing to compromise his principles on subjects that he would previously have resisted.

Kingsley at this point in the novel brings out effectively the unconscious condescension the rich give to the poor when they try to help them. As we have already seen in Yeast,⁵⁹ it was a subject about which he had strong feelings. The disconcerting way in which the rich assumed a knowledge of what they felt was best for the poor and thus failed to consult them about their own desires, disturbed Kingsley greatly. This kind of action frequently caused members of the working classes to be treated like objects:

But the most absurd thing was, how everybody, except perhaps the dark lady, [Eleanor] seemed to take for granted that I felt myself exceedingly honoured, and must consider it, as a matter of course, the greatest possible stretch of kindness thus to talk me over, and settle everything for me, as if I was not a living soul, but a plant in a pot.⁶⁰

Locke reluctantly accepts the restrictions which the Dean, Lillian's uncle, places upon the political elements of his work and remains in Cambridge with his cousin until the Dean is able to see him again at his home. While Locke stays at Cambridge Kingsley continues to explore the mind of the self-educated man by showing the difficulties that Alton experiences in conversing with undergraduates. Kingsley again emphasises, as he had done earlier in the novel, that education is

⁵⁹ See above pp. 80-31.

⁶⁰ Alton Locke, I, 273. See also the treatment of working class poets by their patrons in The Industrial Muse, pp. 168-79.

dependent upon pre-established structures, norms and values. It was not that Locke lacked knowledge or intelligence but that the way in which he had accumulated his knowledge caused him to have a different perspective. Not only did the undergraduates have access to different texts but even those with which Locke was familiar were interpreted in a different way. What was significant were the modes of thought which were acceptable to the intellectual world of Cambridge at that time rather than the texts themselves. Without that contact he remained an outsider:

I was doubly afraid of these men; not because they were cleverer than I, for they were not, but because I fancied I had no fair chance with them; they had opportunities which I had not, read and talked of books of which I knew nothing; and when they did touch on matters I fancied I understood, it was from a point of view so different from mine.⁶¹

When the anticipated visit to the Dean takes place, Alton is persuaded to take an interest in the sciences as the Dean feels that this is essential to any further intellectual development. To this end he sets Alton to work classifying specimens which he has just received from Australia. Kingsley uses this opportunity to continue his defence of education for the masses. He maintains that all would be capable of benefiting in some degree if they were given the chance. Because of this ability they must be entitled to the political equality which would make it possible for them to participate fully in elections.

⁶¹ Alton Locke, I, 276-77.

The mere fact, that I could understand these things, when they were set before me, as well as anyone else, was to me a simple demonstration of the equality in worth, and therefore in privilege, of all classes.⁶²

One of the worst failings of Kingsley as a novelist is his inability to handle female characters effectively. In Yeast both Honoria and Argemone had been poorly drawn and in Alton Locke he experiences difficulties with Lillian and Eleanor. Lillian is given the role of Alton's dream figure, who causes him to deviate from his socialist principles in order to be in a position to approach her in the future. Her charm and beauty which attract Locke so much are meant to be a sham. This is demonstrated in part by her marriage to his unscrupulous cousin George. But Kingsley is unable to show adequately the faults in Lillian's character. We are left with the feeling of a simpering, pampered creature, who cares little about anything, but not of one who is positively evil which Kingsley assumes the reader will believe. Similarly, Eleanor is also an unbelievable character, because Kingsley overemphasises the contrast between the two girls. Eleanor is shown as an arrogant, aggressive person whom Alton is obliged to react against strongly. At one point he says that he hated her as a 'proud, harsh, and exclusive aristocrat.'⁶³ This is much too strong if we are ever going to accept the change that she undergoes in the second half of the book or be able to accept Alton's willingness to come to terms with such a change. Kingsley is too fixed on using these two women to perform certain functions in the novel, to allow for the necessary flexibility in the creation of a believable character. Typical of this use is Eleanor's support of Carlyle's views in her arguments concerning

⁶² Alton Locke, II, 14.

⁶³ Alton Locke, II, 15.

the relationship between the Church and socialism. In this respect Eleanor becomes a very thinly disguised Kingsley. Kingsley, like Carlyle, believed that the aristocracy and the priesthood were the true leaders of the people.⁶⁴ He felt that, as a Christian Socialist, his task was to repair the link between the Church and the people which had been broken. On the one hand he thought that the Church was not fulfilling its duties but on the other hand the workers, by turning to immorality and violence, were pursuing a course which was destructive to their cause. He makes Eleanor say:

Your class has told the world that the cause of liberty, equality, and fraternity, the cause which the working masses claim as theirs, identifies itself with blasphemy and indecency, with the tyrannous persecutions of trades-unions, with robbery, assassinations, vitriol-bottles, and midnight incendiarism.⁶⁵

She maintains that the slackness in the clergy is also present in the people. It is not a simple case of cause and effect; the interrelationship is much more complex. The weaknesses of the one are reflected in the other, but the Church is the true leader and it must be given the opportunity to maintain its rightful position of leadership.

'Mark my words, Mr. Locke, till you gain the respect and confidence of the clergy, you will never rise. The day will come when you will find that the clergy are the only class who can help you. Ah, you may shake your head. I warn you of it. They were the only bulwark of the poor

⁶⁴ See above pp. 47-48.

⁶⁵ Alton Locke, II, 22-23.

against the mediaeval tyranny of Rank; you will find them the only bulwark against the modern tyranny of Mammon.'⁶⁶

Kingsley is directly sermonizing here. He has either forgotten or chosen to ignore that he is speaking through the mouth of Eleanor and these arguments seem to have little relationship with the events which immediately follow. When Alton Locke bows to the pressure put on him by the Dean to remove certain controversial passages and poems from his MS., so that publication might be possible, Eleanor accuses him of being weak. It is difficult to understand Eleanor's position here. It is possible to see that he is being weak in a more abstract way, but hardly so if he is fulfilling her demands for obeying the superior wisdom of the clergy. It is true that Locke experiences a conflict of motives because his compliance with the Dean's wishes is effected partly with the hope of pleasing Lillian. Nevertheless Locke did accept the greater authority of the Church as Eleanor had suggested.

Locke's return home brings him back to reality with a jolt. The dingy surroundings of Mackaye's bookshop, the need to earn money to live on and the death of his mother drag him down with misery. The subscriptions for his poems come in very slowly and he is forced to find a means of getting a living. No longer wishing to be a tailor, he turns to hack writing of the poorest kind, often writing articles for journals and newspapers, the contents of which he despises, in order that he might have enough money to survive.

Locke soon finds himself working for O'Flynn, who is editor of a popular working class paper called the Weekly Warwhoop. O'Flynn is very much a caricature of Feargus O'Connor who edited the Northern Star.

⁶⁶ Alton Locke, II, 23.

O'Connor was a very lively and flamboyant character, who captured the imagination of the working class and exerted a major influence upon the Chartist movement.⁶⁷ He was unreliable and untrustworthy and ready to turn any situation to his own advantage, if it was possible. Kingsley's account of O'Flynn follows a similar pattern. But he presents an inconsistent picture of an inconsistent man. He is given both plentiful praise and considerable blame for the influence he has on the working man:

He had spouted rebellion in the Birmingham Bullring, and elsewhere, and taken the consequences like a man; while his colleagues left their dupes to the tender mercies of broadswords and bayonets, and decamped in the disguise of sailors, old women, and dissenting preachers. He had sat three months in Lancaster Castle, the Bastille of England, one day perhaps to fall like that Parisian one, for a libel which he never wrote, because he would not betray his cowardly contributor.⁶⁸

This seems to be very fulsome praise of the man but his behaviour towards Locke later in the novel does not measure up to this. It is O'Flynn's harsh and unfair treatment of Alton that drives him to take the rash actions which results in a prison sentence. Alton speaks of O'Flynn in this way:

I draw men as I have found them - inconsistent, piecemeal, better than their own actions, worse than their own opinions, and poor O'Flynn among the rest.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ For a discussion of Feargus O'Connor's career see Donald Read and Eric Glasgow, Feargus O'Connor: Irishman and Chartist (London, 1961).

⁶⁸ Alton Locke, II, 41.

⁶⁹ Alton Locke, II, 41-42.

His association with O'Flynn leads him to adopt a more cynical and reckless way of life. Alton justifies his behaviour by claiming that it was because he lacked any form of guidance. Kingsley uses this opportunity to return to the subject of the Church's responsibility to the masses. Kingsley knew that the clergy had lost contact with the people and were unable to help them. The working classes had no faith because what was offered was too remote for them to comprehend:

But the working men, whether rightly or wrongly, do not trust them; they do not trust the clergy who set them on foot; they do not expect to be taught at them the things they long to know - to be taught the whole truth in them about history, politics, science, the Bible. They suspect them to be mere tubs to the whale - mere substitutes for education, slowly and late adopted, in order to stop the mouths of the importunate.⁷⁰

The farmer, whom Alton Locke had met on his way to Cambridge, eventually comes to London in a desperate attempt to find his son. This provides another occasion for Kingsley to explore the hardships experienced under the sweating system. Both Alton Locke and Crossthwaite had been searching for many months in the hopes of finding both the farmer's son and Crossthwaite's brother-in-law, Mike Kelly, but without success. One evening Locke is accosted by Jemmy Downe's wife and offered work. He sees this as an opportunity to get into a sweater's den and look for the two missing men. When he arrives he asks to be shown to the work place at once:

As I had expected, a fetid, choking den, with just room enough in it for seven or eight sallow, starved beings, who, coatless, shoeless,

⁷⁰ Alton Locke, II, 44.

and ragged, sat stitching, each on his truckle-bed.⁷¹

Alton is downcast when he realises that he knows none of the men at work, but immediately afterwards he sees Mike Kelly appearing from the next room in an appalling state of health:

I saw that his hands and feet were all chapped and bleeding. Neither shoe nor stocking did he possess; his only garments were a ragged shirt and trousers; and - and, in horrible mockery of his own misery, a grand new flowered satin vest, which to-morrow was to figure in some gorgeous shop-window!⁷²

The abject misery of the man's suffering is contrasted with the work, which is concerned with wealth and luxury. The expensive garment that he had on his shoulders is used to symbolise again the enormous gulf which existed between the workers and those who employed them.

Alton Locke continues to write articles for the Weekly Warhoop until he is asked by O'Flynn to write on the subject of the universities. He fights hard against doing this assignment because it brings about a direct confrontation between the two worlds that he has so far managed to keep separate in his mind. Bullied into writing it, Locke takes the opportunity to give expression to the ideas which Eleanor had given to him previously. Kingsley as a member of the Church was sensitive to the attacks on Church property and was quick to spring to their defence. Through Locke, Kingsley argues that the Church is justified in keeping its property because it had certain definite functions and duties

⁷¹ Alton Locke, II, 52.

⁷² Alton Locke, II, 52-53.

attached to it. Thus Locke refers to the 'pious intentions of the original founders, and the democratic tendencies of monastic establishments.'⁷³ This attitude is unacceptable to O'Flynn and he re-writes most of the article, which infuriates Locke. The ensuing argument is used by Kingsley to attack the kind of working man's newspaper he disapproved of. Alton Locke tells O'Flynn that he uses his paper to advertise much that was fraudulent and immoral without any concern for the effects it might have on the reader. But his worst fault, is in stressing the importance of the freedom of the press when he is at the same time acting as a censor to his own newspaper. Kingsley implies that not all popular papers are of this kind⁷⁴ and he refers to the alternatives of the Howitt and Eliza Cook school which Alton Locke joins after he has left O'Flynn.

I found both the editor and his periodical, as I should have wished them, temperate and sunny - somewhat clap-trap and sentimental, perhaps, and afraid of speaking out, as all parties are, but still willing to allow my fancy free range.⁷⁵

But, as Locke says, the freedom was only to provide 'scraps of showy rose-pink morality',⁷⁶ and nothing which would be too controversial and attack real social problems.

Meanwhile Alton's poems have had some success and he becomes a familiar literary figure. He feels that he has reached the height of

⁷³ Alton Locke, II, 72.

⁷⁴ On the subject of Chartist writers see Martha Vicinus, The Industrial Muse, pp.94-139.

⁷⁵ Alton Locke, II, 75.

⁷⁶ Alton Locke, II, 75.

his achievement when he is invited to a literary tea at the Dean's house. This not only feeds his literary ambition but it also increases his romantic hopes of Lillian. At the party Locke meets an ambassador.⁷⁷ Kingsley introduces this character to demonstrate the ideal way to rise socially without the need to compromise. The ambassador was of humble origin but we are told:

'He owes his greatness to having dared, one evening, to contradict a crown-prince to his face, and fairly conquer him in argument, and thereby bind the truly royal heart to him for ever.'⁷⁸

Kingsley is very confused regarding the possibilities of social mobility. At times he disapproves of any kind of social advancement which capitalises on education, at others, as in this example of the ambassador, he seems to make certain exceptions. But what these exceptions might be he never makes clear. Kingsley also uses this character to offer his views concerning the revolutionary movements in England and Germany. When speaking on the subject of Locke's volume of poems, the ambassador says:

I shall send it to some young friends of mine in Germany, to show them that Englishmen can feel acutely and speak boldly on the social evils of their country, without indulging in that frantic and bitter revolutionary spirit which warps so many young minds among us.⁷⁹

Alton, flushed with success, writes a poem, which he hopes to give to Lillian the next day. However, when he arrives at the house he

⁷⁷ This is possibly a reference to Baron Bunsen, who gave high praise to Kingsley's poetry.

⁷⁸ Alton Locke, II, 97.

⁷⁹ Alton Locke, II, 98-99.

finds it shut up and the family gone. Lord Ellerton, Eleanor's husband, is dead. He had been thrown from his horse the previous night. Alton Locke's fortunes now begin to decline. After he has had much praise from other journals, O'Flynn's paper now delivers a fierce attack upon him and reveals many personal details of his early life. The article accuses him of being a social climber and one who is willing to desert the People's Cause for money. As these attacks continue, Alton Locke feels more guilty and downcast, until he reaches the point where he breaks down completely, while delivering a lecture on Shelley. He becomes determined to do something which will restore his position in the eyes of his fellow workers.

At this moment there occurs a rising in some of the rural districts and the Chartists wish to send a representative to them to gain their support. In order to justify himself, Locke rashly volunteers to go.

Alton Locke again travels into the country and Kingsley gives the reader a vivid and accurate description of conditions he knew well as a country parson. In order to give his contemporaries a point of reference he mentions the well known articles written on the subject of rural conditions for The Times under the initials S.G.O.⁸⁰ But we do not need this hint because Kingsley gives full force to his passionate concern when Locke speaks of what he observes:

I arrived in the midst of a dreary, treeless country, whose broad brown and grey fields were only broken by an occasional line of dark, doleful

80 The Reverend Sydney Godolphin Osborne was a relative of Fanny Kingsley and he exerted an important influence on Kingsley as a new parish priest, particularly in his concern for the housing conditions of the Dorset farm-workers.

firs, at a knot of thatched hovels, all sinking and leaning every way but the right, the windows patched with paper, the doorways stopped with filth, which surrounded a beer-shop.⁸¹

The choice of language which Kingsley used to describe a rural scene is very different from Mrs Gaskell's. Expressions like 'dreary, treeless country' and 'dark, doleful firs' contrast strongly with the descriptions of Margaret Hale's experiences of Helstone or even Locke's own experiences on his first visit to Cambridge earlier in the novel.

Alton Locke spends the night with a cobbler, who talks of the difficulties which surround any attempt which might be made to improve the living conditions of the farmworkers. The core of the problem, which in a greatly modified form is still familiar today, was the question of tied cottages. The landlords let the cottages out with the farms and the farmers found it unprofitable to attempt to maintain them, but the accommodation is related to the job. The loss of a job could mean the loss of a home and in addition, any complaint about housing conditions is likely to jeopardize the farm-labourer's job.

Thus the poor man's hovel, as well as his labour, became, he told me, a source of profit to the farmer, out of which he wrung the last drop of gain. The necessary repairs were always put off as long as possible - the labourers were robbed of their gardens - the slightest rebellion lost them not only work, but shelter from the elements; the slavery under which they groaned penetrated even to the fireside and to the bedroom.⁸²

The next day Locke travels with his guide to the place where he is to

81 Alton Locke, II, 115.

82 Alton Locke, II, 116.

address the workers. He passes through a landscape hostile and frozen. On his way he meets two small boys:

two little wretches with blue noses and white cheeks, scarecrows of rags and patches, their feet peeping through bursten shoes twice too big for them, who seemed to have shared between them a ragged pair of worsted gloves, and cowered among the sheep, under the shelter of a hurdle, crying and inarticulate with cold.⁸³

The task, which these two lads had, was to cut turnips with a cutter. Unfortunately, on this occasion they could not do the job because the machine was frozen. Locke and the shoemaker stop to help them and discover that they work seven days a week in order to earn a shilling. Kingsley contrasts their condition with those of the warm healthy sheep which surround them. In this period of the nineteenth century many animals were healthier than those rural workers employed to care for them, but Kingsley as a novelist, is exceptional in pointing this out.

The anger which this incident evokes in Locke's mind is not conducive to the calm approach he had intended to take at the meeting. When he arrives he finds the men airing their grievances, as they take turns to speak from a large rock. The argument centres on a key issue, and one which Kingsley had already explored to some extent in Yeast. It was the subject of economic use of land. Increased productivity would benefit both the worker and the farmer, but the lazy farmer could not be bothered to exploit the farm's potential. One worker, speaking of the state of the poor farms, says:

⁸³ Alton Locke, II, 117.

'Why arn't some of you a-getting they weeds up? It 'ud pay 'em to farm better - and they knows that, but they're too lazy; if they can get a living off the land, they don't care; and they'd sooner save money out of your wages, than save it by growing more corn - it's easier for 'em, it is.'⁸⁴

Other speakers complain of the farmers' unwillingness to let them have a garden and keep a pig so that they might help themselves. This is something with which Kingsley was actively concerned. In his own parish he had organised schemes for farm-workers to own their own pigs, through a kind of hire purchase system, which lent money to make the initial purchase. In spite of Kingsley's obvious didactic intentions here the farm-workers' concerns are real and the scene is convincing.

The tension mounts as each speaker gives vent to his feelings until a high pitch is reached when a widow, desperate and almost hysterical, speaks of the plight of herself and her family. She has seven children and when her husband died she asked for help from the parish. She was refused because they claimed she was capable of helping herself.

'Early and late I rep, and left the children at home to mind each other; and one on 'em fell into the fire, and is gone to heaven, blessed angel! and two more it pleased the Lord to take in the fever; and the next, I hope, will soon be out o'this miserable sinful world.'⁸⁵

Not only does Kingsley show his understanding of the suffering of these

⁸⁴ Alton Locke, II, 122.

⁸⁵ Alton Locke, II, 126.

people but he also very effectively creates the feeling of tension and growing anger of the crowd as a result of these speeches so that when Alton Locke tries to talk to the people his task is almost an impossible one. At first he attempts to speak rationally of the London workers' sympathies and the need to unite in promoting the Charter. But he soon realises that these arguments are pointless. The farm-workers are far beyond the reach of a theoretical discussion. Their need is bread and it is this they shout for. In a mixture of compassion and loss of self-control he urges them to go to claim the bread which is rightfully theirs. This rash action results in a riot and Locke being sent to prison as an agitator.

The whole scene is well managed and it is one of the most effective parts of the novel. Kingsley is able to build up the feeling of anger so that we feel the rising tide of emotion and we are also able to feel the sense of defeat and frustration which Alton experiences in his inability to influence the crowd. The riot itself is also well done, as Kingsley is able to show the rapid deterioration in the behaviour of the mob and the way in which pointless destruction and vandalism quickly take over and eliminate all sympathy with their cause.

The invaders returned, cramming their mouths with bread, and chopping asunder fitches of bacon. The granary doors were broken open, and the contents scrambled for, amid immense waste, by the starving wretches. It was a sad sight, Here was a poor shivering woman, hiding scraps of food under her cloak, and hurrying out of the yard to the children she left at home. There was a tall man, leaning against the palings, gnawing ravenously at the same loaf as a little boy, who had scrambled up behind him.⁸⁶

There are also effective snatches of conversation between the rioters in convincing East Anglian dialect:

[Locke:] 'The ale is neither yours nor mine; I won't touch it.'

'Darn your buttons! you said the wheat was ourn, acause we growed it - and thereby so's the beer - for we growed the barley too.'⁸⁷

and arguing about what to do next:

'No! there bain't no time. Yeomanry'll be here. You mun leave the ricks.'

'Darned if we do. Old Woods shan't get naught by they.'

'Fire 'em, then, and go on to Slater's farm!'⁸⁸

By the use of this technique Kingsley gives the reader a feeling of being present rather than being an observer from a distance and is therefore more successful in creating a sympathetic response to the actions of the farm-workers.

Alton Locke is given a comparatively light sentence of three years, because the father of the two boys who were turnip cutting spoke up in his defence. The three years were spent as many others have spent their time of imprisonment, in confirming his revolutionary beliefs by intensive reading. His chaplain was his censor but, because he was ignorant of French, Locke was able to gain access to such writers as Proudhon and Louis Blanc.

Alton Locke is eventually released to return to the political excitement of the weeks before the presentation of the Charter on 10 April 1848. In the chapter called 'The Tower of Babel', Kingsley

⁸⁷ Alton Locke, II, 132.

⁸⁸ Alton Locke, II, 132-33.

reveals his views concerning the Charter and comes out strongly against physical force Chartism. In spite of it being the reflections of a man who later becomes converted to Christianity, the bitter attack is too thinly disguised to be an acceptable part of the character of Alton Locke:

Such was our dream. Insane and wicked were the passions which accompanied it; insane and wicked were the means we chose; and God in His mercy to us, rather than to Mammon, triumphant in his iniquity, fattening his heart even now for a spiritual day of slaughter more fearful than any physical slaughter which we in our folly had prepared for him - God frustrated them.⁸⁹

But having said this much, the rest of the chapter is devoted to defending the Chartists' actions. Kingsley describes the failure of the Reform Act and the unwillingness of the Government to interfere in the relationship between worker and owner. He argues that there is no room for negotiation because the contractors can always appeal to force in the last analysis. A letter written to the Government concerning the exploitation of tailors received a reply that the Government had no power to interfere in wage negotiations. Alton Locke maintains that this was a lie:

the question don't lie between workman and contractor, but between workman and contractor-plus-grape-and-bayonets!⁹⁰

But what was the alternative when the Government refused to acknowledge

⁸⁹ Alton Locke, II, 164.

⁹⁰ Alton Locke, II, 170.

the Charter? Kingsley saw clearly that the working class had no real alternative. They had to fight or starve. He argued that, although what the working class might have done or intended to do was wrong, they were subject to extreme provocation, which made their actions understandable and in part forgivable. This was a very enlightened view of the actions of the working class at that time and contributes extensively to the successful treatment of the working class in the novel as a whole. Paradoxically one of the most unbelievable incidents concerning the presence of police spies and the sale of fake combustible materials to the Chartists is described as fact by Thomas Cooper in his autobiography.⁹¹ This small incident highlights Kingsley's grasp of the social background and helps the reader to appreciate the extent of his realistic treatment of the working class.

As the day for presenting the Charter draws near, we are shown Mackaye taking his stand apart from the mob. He refuses to sign the petition because he knows already, what afterwards became common knowledge, that many of the signatures were silly and unsophisticated forgeries:

'I'll no sign it. I dinna consort wi' shoplifters, an' idiots, an suckin' bairns - wi' long nose, an' short nose, an' pug nose, an' seventeen Deuks o' Wellington, let alone a baker's dizen o' Queens.'⁹²

But Mackaye's real defence of his action in not taking part is that he believes that violence will not bring about the kind of society which the working class wish to have. He says that they must

⁹¹ Thomas Cooper, The Life of Thomas Cooper, Written by Himself (London, 1872), pp.304-6 and Alton Locke, II, 178-81.

⁹² Alton Locke, II, 183.

'learn His lesson that He's beeing trying to teach 'em this threescore years - that the cause o' the people is the cause o' Him that made the people; an' wae to them that tak' the deevil's tools to do His wark wi'!⁹³

For Kingsley, Mackaye is the archetypal working man of the nineteenth century. The virtues of thrift, temperance, honesty and simple dignity are what Kingsley held to be the best in the working classes. The death of Mackaye symbolically represents the death of the Cause. In his delirium Mackaye talks of his past life. He speaks in a confused manner of his early loves, hopes and aspirations and the way in which the ideas of the Chartist movement had been eroded away by the demands of expediency. As the morning of the tenth of April dawns he dies.

The events of this historic occasion are well known, but it was also a very important day in Kingsley's life and it is in part the justification for writing the novel. John Parker had been staying with Kingsley at Eversley and the two men decided to rush up to London on that morning of the tenth. Kingsley, full of enthusiasm, believed that he could do something to avert the bloodshed which seemed inevitable at the time. It had been arranged that they should meet a young barrister named Ludlow in London and together they went towards Kennington in the hope of doing something. However, it is very doubtful if they had any idea what to do if they had ever got there. By the time they reached Waterloo Bridge, they discovered that the meeting had been abandoned in the rain and that the Charter had failed. Kingsley had been impressed by the way in which working men had banded together in Chartism and was convinced that the Church needed to co-operate with

⁹³ Alton Locke, II, 184.

the socialist movement. His great enthusiasm led him to work until four in the morning on the night of the eleventh of April in order to produce posters which spoke of the Church being in sympathy with the worker's cause. It can be appreciated to what extent Kingsley was involved in the events which are described in the novel and the feelings of the men concerned. In the light of this knowledge it is somewhat surprising that he has very little to say about the historic day in Alton Locke: the chapter concerned with the actual events is very brief. His hindsight is less charitable than the enthusiasm with which he greeted the day itself. It is also likely that he had become more cautious after suffering some embarrassment from his first outspoken comment on the situation. In the novel he attempts to distinguish what he calls the common sense of the English and what he considers to be the pernicious influences of the French and the Irish which he felt to be genuinely evil:

We had arrayed against us, by our own folly, the very physical force to which we had appealed. The dread of general plunder and outrage by the savages of London, the national hatred of that French and Irish interference of which we had boasted, armed against us thousands of special constables, who had in the abstract little or no objections to our political opinions. The practical common sense of England, whatever discontent it might feel with the existing system, refused to let it be hurled rudely down, on the mere chance of building up on its ruins something as yet untried, and even undefined.⁹⁴

This is a good example of the way in which Kingsley's views intrude upon

⁹⁴ Alton Locke, II, 195.

the novel. The comments are Kingsley's own. However rational and objective the thoughts of Alton Locke might have become in later years when he is writing his supposed autobiography, it is unlikely that he would have adopted this stance or considered the events from this point of view. One of the weaknesses of the novel is that Kingsley fails to let Locke speak for himself. He has not sufficient confidence or skill to allow the character to make the points authentically and the authorial intrusion mars the total effect.

After the defeat of the Charter and his own humiliation by his cousin, Alton sinks to the depths of despair and contemplates suicide on Westminster Bridge. At this very moment Jemmy Downes appears with the same intentions. Locke changes his mind and dissuades his former colleague also. Then Downes, who is half delirious and a complete wreck of a man, takes Locke back to where he lives on Jacob's Island in Bermondsey.

Kingsley gives a vivid account of the scenes which Alton witnessed. As they enter the hovel where Downes lives

There was his little Irish wife:- dead - and naked; the wasted white limbs gleamed in the lurid light; the unclosed eyes stared, as if reproachfully, at the husband whose drunkenness had brought her there to kill her with the pestilence; and on each side of her a little, shrivelled, impish, child-corpse - the wretched man had laid their arms round the dead mother's neck - and there they slept, their hungering and wailing over at last for ever; the rats had been busy already with them - but what matter to them now?⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Alton Locke, II, 204.

This is a clear and dramatic presentation of the scene, but it is also something more than that because it manages to evoke an emotional response towards those who suffered in their thousands, and it must have particularly impressed the contemporary reader, who was largely ignorant of the conditions in which the working classes lived. It is followed by a description of the ditch behind the Downe's home. Jemmy Downes, half mad with anguish at the death of his family and desperate for drink rushes out and throws himself into this foul ditch to drown:

The light of the policeman's lantern glared over the ghastly scene - along the double row of miserable house-backs, which lined the sides of the open tidal ditch - over strange rambling jetties, and balconies, and sleeping-sheds, which hung on rotting piles over the black waters, with phosphorescent scraps of rotten fish gleaming and twinkling out of the dark hollows, like devilish grave-lights - over bubbles of poisonous gas, and bloated carcasses of dogs, and lumps of offal, floating on the stagnant olive-green hell-broth.⁹⁶

Folly Ditch and Jacob's Island had first been brought to the attention of the reading public in Oliver Twist (1837)⁹⁷ and, as Margaret Thorp⁹⁸ has already pointed out, the description is very similar to the one given by Henry Mayhew⁹⁹, but I do not think that this similarity detracts

⁹⁶ Alton Locke, II, 206.

⁹⁷ Charles Dickens, Oliver Twist (London, 1837), Chapter 50.

⁹⁸ Margaret Thorp, Charles Kingsley 1819-1875 (New York, 1937) pp. 76-7.

⁹⁹ Morning Chronicle 24 September 1849.

The water is covered with a scum like a cobweb and prismatic with grease. In it float large masses of green rotting weed, and against the posts of the bridges are swollen carcasses of dead animals, almost bursting with the gases of putrefaction.

from Kingsley's achievement at this point in the novel. Of course it is true that the conditions had been pointed out before and Kingsley's own concern had led him to follow up Mayhew's report by visits to the actual district. He had also tried hard to alleviate the situation by organizing the provision of fresh drinking water. But the key issue here is not the veracity with which the facts are reported but the way in which Kingsley has succeeded in giving a striking impression of a working class world in which the description of the setting forms only a part.

After the experience of going to Bermondsey, Alton Locke becomes very ill. During a period of his fever he becomes delirious and Kingsley uses this opportunity to create a very strange dream in which Locke relives the history of mankind. It is a platform for his ideas and the message is very clear. Kingsley believes that change brought about by violent means and no spiritual re-birth must only result in the substitution of one evil for another. In his dream Alton says:

when I came back the next evening, the poor had risen against the rich, one and all, crying, 'As you have done to us, so will we do to you'; and they hunted them down like wild beasts, and slew many of them, and threw their carcasses on the dunghill, and took possession of their land and houses ... Then I ran out, and cried to them, 'Fools! will you do as these rich did and neglect the work of God?'¹⁰⁰

The illness and the recovery is symbolic of the spiritual change which Alton Locke undergoes and it is noteworthy that Eleanor, who throughout

¹⁰⁰ Alton Locke, II, 222-23.

the book has been his good angel, should be present to nurse him. The source of the illness, which so dramatically changes Alton Locke, also brings about the destruction of his overambitious cousin. The coat used to cover the bodies of Jemmy Downes's family was the one made for Locke's cousin. When it was delivered to him later it brought the fever with it. Overdramatic as it appears in the novel, it would produce, nevertheless, the right note among the contemporary readers, who knew that disease could be brought easily into their middle class homes by working class servants returning from visits to their own families.¹⁰¹ Obviously germs are carried more readily by people than by clothes, but such spreading of disease was sufficiently common to be acceptable in this case.

As Alton Locke slowly recovers, he learns the details of the failure of the Charter and its aftermath; the disintegration of the Cause and its factions and internal conflicts. But what of the future? Kingsley, searching for a hopeful solution, finds it in emigration. As we have seen,¹⁰² Kingsley under the influence of Carlyle, was a great supporter of emigration for the working classes, and therefore it is not unexpected when Mackaye's will contains this suggestion. Alton Locke's expenses are to be paid if he will go to live in America for at least seven years.

Symbolism is used again in the act of emigration. Through the preaching of Eleanor, Alton Locke and Crossthwaite are to go to seek a new spiritual world which is founded on better principles than those that guided them in demanding the Charter. Eleanor says that they must look for:

¹⁰¹ S.G. Checkland, The Rise of Industrial Society in England 1815-1885 (London, 1964), p.252.

¹⁰² See above pp. 44-45

'a state founded on better things than Acts of Parliament, social contracts, and abstract rights - a city whose foundations are in the eternal promises, whose builder and maker is God.'¹⁰³

Kingsley's solution, because he feels he must offer one, is religious. A novel based upon the events leading up to the presentation of the Charter and one in which the main characters are Chartists must inevitably create the problem of an anticlimax. Kingsley, convinced that all social reform must be accompanied by spiritual growth, assesses the defect of the Charter as due in part to its anti-religious position. As a member of the Established Church it was natural for him to defend the clergy and he claims that the newer generation of parsons are more concerned with social problems. This is an obvious reference to the active support he gave to Christian Socialism. Thus the novel ends on an optimistic note. Alton Locke may have died on the journey to America, but he left behind great hopes for the future.

In the writing of Alton Locke Kingsley was much less confused in his ideas than he was in the creation of Yeast. But his confusion remains in his notion of how the conditions of the working class may be alleviated. From his reading of Carlyle, as we have seen, from a more general fear of French influence, and from a readiness to accept the prevailing attitudes of the time, his views of a possible restructuring of society remain unchanged from the time of writing Yeast. In addition, his own religious views led him to analyse the political situation in a particular way. He took the failure of the Charter to be directly related to a turning away from the Church and this causes him to reveal his hand too often towards the later part of the novel in shaping the fortunes of Alton Locke. This prevents him allowing his hero to develop convincingly. He either did not

¹⁰³Alton Locke, II, 240.

possess, or was unwilling to develop, a creative ability which would enable Alton Locke to be credible on his own account. Hence the early childhood experiences, his first steps in self-education and the accounts of Locke's view of his environment remain the most sensitive of Kingsley's treatment of the working class. When Locke reaches maturity, having gained some education, he comes directly in conflict with Kingsley's deeply felt belief in the rightness of the hierarchical structure of society, where all must know their place. Although he appreciates the injustice of such a position, when, for example, he speaks of the necessity for equality in education, he easily falls back into the traditionally accepted view of social order. Thus the choice of emigration for his protagonist avoids the necessity of having to confront the problem. In this he has advanced very little in his thinking beyond the point he had reached in Yeast. But it is not in the perception of the future of society nor in the understanding of social change that Kingsley's second novel is significant. In Alton Locke Kingsley made a substantial advance in his skill as a writer in this particular genre and he was able to penetrate with considerable success the working class world of Alton Locke. He moved from the brief encounters with members of the working class he described in Yeast to the more ambitious position of placing his hero totally within the world of a class which was alien to both the author and to most of his readers. In part his success was self-defeating, because the more he came to understand the views of the working class, the more he felt the need to change them and the novelist became threatened by the social reformer. It is at this point where Kingsley chooses to leave the subject of the working class, that Elizabeth Gaskell chooses to begin her first novel Mary Barton.

Chapter 5: Mary Barton

Elizabeth Gaskell's intellectual development cannot be plotted in the same way as that of Charles Kingsley because it relates less to the insights gained from the reading of particular authors and more to her direct experiences as a Unitarian minister's wife in Manchester. She not only met members of the working class through church activities and as a social worker with the Manchester and Salford District Provident society but she also had opportunities to meet and discuss social problems with some of the more prominent industrialists of the city. The extent and depth of these personal experiences cannot be determined easily but an attempt will be made to provide more specific examples at the relevant points later in the chapter.

Mrs Gaskell's first novel, Mary Barton, was published in two volumes in October 1848 by Chapman and Hall. There is no author's name on the title page. She began it in 1845 when it was suggested by her husband that an interest in writing might help to take her thoughts from the recent death of her son.¹

Although this was her first novel she had done some writing of various kinds previously. She had kept two diaries, one of which is extant.² It records Mrs Gaskell's observations of the psychological and physiological development of her two girls. But its significance lies in the more important element of attempts to analyse the subjective/objective relationship of mother and child, which she developed later in the various perspectives of observation we encounter in her novels.

¹ Mrs Gaskell's son died on 10 August 1845.

² Elizabeth Gaskell, "My Diary": The early years of my daughter Marianne (London, 1923).

She also wrote with the help of her husband a narrative poem 'Sketches among the Poor, No.1', which was published in Blackwood's January 1837. This was written in an attempt to imitate the style of Crabbe. It was to have been one of a series of poems, but the project came to nothing, as she explained in a letter to Mary Howitt.³ The reference to Crabbe may have prompted Lucien Leclaire's comment⁴ on Mary Barton as a whole. It is clear, however, as John Sharps says⁵, that the main character is a prototype for Alice Wilson. In the poem the character is a country woman who lives in an industrial town. She spends her life helping others yet longs for the time when she can return home. At the close of the poem she is seen as deaf, blind and seeking escape from reality in dreams of her childhood memories. Many of these aspects of the character have a parallel in Alice Wilson in Mary Barton.

In 1838 William Howitt proposed to write a series of sketches called Visits to Remarkable Places and Mrs Gaskell wrote to him suggesting that Clopton Hall might be a subject for one of them. Mrs Gaskell's description greatly impressed Howitt and he encouraged her to make further attempts at writing. This resulted in the production of Libbie Marsh's Three Eras (1847). In these brief tales she first reveals some of the skills which she was to use so successfully in

³ The Letters of Mrs Gaskell, edited by J.A.V.Chapple and A.Pollard, (Manchester, 1966), p.33, letter 12 (18 August 1838).

⁴ Lucien Leclaire, Le Roman Regionalists dan les Iles Britanniques 1800-1950 (Clermont, 1954), p.64: 'Elle avait, entre autres, l'exemple de CRABBE. Et c'est à lui que Mary Barton (1848) fait penser d'abord. La peinture des conditions matérielles et morales de l'existence des ouvriers et de leurs familles est minutieuse et d'un réalisme juste.'

⁵ John Sharps, Mrs Gaskell's Observation and Invention (London, 1970), p.25.

Mary Barton and North and South. Not only is she able to describe vividly the events which take place in a working class household, but her intimate knowledge breathes life and a feeling of authenticity into the scenes she depicts:

"There's love for you! And I tell him I'd rather have him tipsy than any one else sober."

"Oh, Anne Dixon, hush! you don't know yet what it is to have a drunken husband. I have seen something of it: father used to get fuddled, and, in the long run, it killed mother, let alone - oh! Anne, God above only knows what the wife of a drunken man has to bear. Don't tell," said she, lowering her voice, "but father killed our little baby in one of his bouts; mother never looked up again, nor father either, for that matter, only this was in a different way."⁶

Libbie Marsh's Three Eras was published in Howitt's Journal in 1847 under the name of Cotton Mather Mills. She also made some further contributions which include the short stories The Sexton's Hero (1847) and Christmas Storms and Sunshine (1848), using the same name. Thus the initial encouragement to write by her husband after the death of her child on 10 August 1845, was supported by the literary promptings of the Howitts. The major part of the book was written between the end of 1845 and the beginning of 1847. The short stories, therefore, were possibly written after Mary Barton had been started, but their publication before the novel obviously gave her encouragement in seeking the publication of the longer work, when there had been signs that the reception might prove favourable.

⁶ The Works of Mrs Gaskell edited by Adolphus William Ward, 8 vols (London, 1906), I, 484.

In a letter which she intended to send to Mrs Greg (William Greg's sister-in-law)⁷, she reveals that it was with John Barton that her real sympathies lay, but pressure from her publishers caused her to place more emphasis on Mary Barton and the love interest in the novel. As Annette Hopkins has pointed out:

Chapman and Hall, taking the safe and conservative position, no doubt felt that a murderer was not exactly what the public, in that day, would look for in the hero of a novel intended for family reading.⁸

Mrs Gaskell seems to have been quite willing to accept the early suggestions from her publishers but felt much more strongly about the late additions that she was required to make. In the same letter to Mrs Greg, referred to above, she says:

The tale was originally complete without the part which intervenes between John Barton's death and Esther's; about 3 pages, I fancy, including the conversation between Job Legh, and Mr. Carson, and Jem Wilson. The MS. had been in the hands of the publisher above 14 months, and was nearly all printed when the publisher sent me word that it would fall short of the requisite number of pages ... I remonstrated over and over again.⁹

This must in part account for the unevenness of the writing towards the end of the novel.

⁷ The Letters of Mrs Gaskell, p.74, letter 42 (Early 1849).

⁸ Annette Hopkins, Elizabeth Gaskell, Her Life and Work (London, 1952), p.77.

⁹ The Letters of Mrs Gaskell, p.75, letter 42 (Early 1849).

The contemporary response to the publication of Mary Barton varied substantially from high praise to severe criticism. The novel appeared at a time when Chartism was still an important issue, and passions could be aroused easily when the subject of class conflict was raised. Many were impressed by the literary worth of the novel, and the Howitts compared her to Dickens:

How beautiful it all is! how truthful! how affecting! how full of a grand spirit of love and humanity! William says Dickens never wrote anything superior to it, and he never did, because there is no exaggeration, no caricature, and every character appeals to and takes such strong hold upon one's heart.¹⁰

Letters of congratulation came from a number of famous contemporaries, including Carlyle and Kingsley. One letter she must have found most gratifying. It came from Samuel Bamford, who said that:

Some errors may certainly be detected in the details of your work, but the wonder is that they are so few in number and so trifling in effect. The dialect I think might have been given better, and some few incidents set forth with greater effect, but in describing the dwellings of the poor, their manners, their kindness to each other, their feelings towards their superiors in wealth and station their faults, their literary tastes, and their scientific pursuits, as old Job Legh for example, you have been very faithful; of John Bartons, I have known hundreds, his very self in all things except his fatal crime, whilst

¹⁰ Clement Shorter, Correspondence, Articles and Notes Relating to Mrs E.C. Gaskell 2 vols (typescript in the Gaskell section, Brotherton Collection, Leeds University Library) (1927), Mrs Howitt's letter to Mrs Gaskell (no date).

his daughter Mary, who has ever seen a group of our Lancashire factory girls or dress makers either, and could not have counted Mary?¹¹

But the attacks on Mary Barton caused Mrs Gaskell considerable distress and this was particularly true of the carefully prepared and well informed attack delivered by William Rathbone Greg in the Edinburgh Review of April 1849 and subsequently published in Essays in Political and Social Science, Volume I. David Shusterman¹² considers the lasting influence that William Greg had upon Mrs Gaskell and the possible use she made of Greg as a model for Thornton in North and South. But it is sufficient for our purpose here to examine the immediate effect of his attack on Mary Barton. Greg argued that although the novel contained some degree of truth concerning working class conditions, Mrs Gaskell had generally favoured the working classes and had been less than fair to the owners. Greg commences the article with great praise for the work of a novelist publishing a first novel:

The literary merit of the work is in some respects of a very high order. Its interest is intense; often painfully so: indeed it is here, we think, that the charm of the book and the triumph of the author will chiefly be found.¹³

But he sees the work to be very largely a propaganda exercise which will be used to inflame the prejudices of the working classes and reveal the owners in a light which he considers to be unjust.

¹¹ Letters addressed to Mrs Gaskell by Celebrated Contemporaries Now in the Possession of the John Rylands Library edited by Ross D. Waller. Reprinted from the Bulletin of the John Rylands Library Vol.19 No.1, January 1935 (Manchester, 1935), p.8.

¹² David Shusterman, "William Rathbone Greg & Mrs Gaskell", Philological Quarterly, xxxvi (1957), 268-272.

¹³ William R. Greg, Essays on Political and Social Science, contributed chiefly to the Edinburgh Review, 2 vols (London, 1853), I, 345.

Notwithstanding the good sense and good feeling with which it abounds, it is calculated, we fear, in many places, to mislead the minds and confirm and exasperate the prejudices, of the general public on the one hand, and of the factory operatives on the other.¹⁴

He dismisses, as unworkable, Mrs Gaskell's thesis that greater co-operation between masters and men can improve conditions and establish a new harmony. He maintains that real sympathy can only be expressed by people within their own class. He goes to considerable lengths to demonstrate how workers can raise themselves if they are willing to make the effort, and condemns them as a class for 'want of moral courage, of resolute individual will'.

The plain truth cannot be too boldly spoken, or too frequently repeated: the working classes, and they only, can raise their own condition; to themselves alone must they look for their elevation in the social scale.¹⁵

He argues that, contrary to Mrs Gaskell's views, the relationships between masters and men are generally good and that she had greatly exaggerated the contrasts which exist between the rich and poor. Unlike Samuel Bamford, he thinks that John Barton is not typical of the men of the working classes.

These views of Greg worried Mrs Gaskell and had a marked influence on much of her writing on social problems in the future. Not only did she attempt to justify herself to Greg through his sister-in-law, as we have seen, but the change of emphasis in North and South,

¹⁴ William R. Greg, I, 346.

¹⁵ William R. Greg, I, 370.

which I will consider later, must certainly relate to the effect Greg's comments had upon her.

It is, however, the adverse views of the novel which have tended to prevail, although criticism has shifted from the social to the literary level. Some of these criticisms are totally unjustified, as for example, the comments made by David Cecil:

Mrs Gaskell's sex and circumstances limited her range of subjects as they limited her range of mood. Confined as she was to her Victorian drawing-room, there was a great deal of the world that she could not see, a great deal highly characteristic of it; and a great deal that Dickens and Thackeray and the rest of them saw clearly. The world of the common people, for instance.¹⁶

No one would deny that Mrs Gaskell had limitations in her range of subjects and moods, but even a passing acquaintance with her life would reveal that she was not confined to her drawing-room but frequently passed among and conversed with the people of the working classes. Even in 1949 Yvonne ffrench says of Mary Barton:

The book is by no means a work of art. The plot is involved, the characters too numerous, death-beds and anti-climaxes redundant.¹⁷

Kathleen Tillotson found much to praise in both the substance and the form of the novel, in Novels of the Eighteen-Forties (1954), and the last decade has shown a marked change from the earlier critical

¹⁶David Cecil, Early Victorian Novelists (London, 1934), pp.208-9.

¹⁷Yvonne ffrench, Mrs Gaskell (London, 1949), p.25.

attitudes. This has been expressed in the studies by Pollard, Wright and Ganz. It is Edgar Wright who stresses the need for reassessment, however, emphasising the point that Mrs Gaskell's achievements have not always been fully realised in the past.¹⁸

In 1975 two critical works on Mrs Gaskell appeared.¹⁹ Both attempted to place her among the major novelists of the nineteenth century and stressed the significance of Mary Barton and North and South. Dr Craik emphasises the importance of Mary Barton in its relation to the rest of Mrs Gaskell's work:

It is not an ambitious work: the plot is not complicated, it does not have an unduly large number of characters (about twenty of any stature) nor a wide range of scene. It is the more a success because its reach does not exceed its grasp. It establishes its writer as a novelist of stature.²⁰

Coral Lansbury also finds Mary Barton to be a significant novel and particularly emphasises Mrs Gaskell's understanding of social relationships. She also makes the important point that:

Elizabeth Gaskell understood the nature of working-class solidarity long before most social theorists. Families were united by mutual adversity and friends often became closer than family.²¹

¹⁸ Edgar Wright, Mrs Gaskell, The Basis for Reassessment (Oxford, 1965).

¹⁹ W.A. Craik, Elizabeth Gaskell and the English Provincial Novel (London, 1975) and Coral Lansbury, Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis (London, 1975).

²⁰ W.A. Craik, p.45.

²¹ Coral Lansbury, p.32.

But she does not develop the idea in her examination of Mary Barton. The most recent criticism of Elizabeth Gaskell has been made by Angus Easson²², who makes a very deliberate attempt to place Mary Barton and North and South firmly in a social context, but he does not make a close analysis of the formative influences that were at work upon the development of her working class characters. Thus although one is prepared to accept the claims made for Mrs Gaskell by these writers, the evidence seems at times to be lacking.

For me, the most important comments which have been made recently are contained in a reference by Alan Swingewood to Mary Barton. In speaking of the novels which are concerned with the 'condition of England' problem he says;

Mrs Gaskell's Mary Barton remains the best of these novels for its greater feeling for working-class life, language, mores: the characters are set organically within the working-class environment and the way in which the details of the culture are rendered gives the novel its great significance . . . There is nothing in previous fiction which compares with Mrs Gaskell's detailed and sympathetic portrait of the physical and moral depredations of working-class life, the constant anxieties over the basic needs of food and shelter brought about by periodic and lengthy bouts of unemployment and compounded by the ever-present threat of premature death.²³

²² Angus Easson, Elizabeth Gaskell (London, 1979).

²³ Alan Swingewood, The Novel and Revolution (London, 1975), p.41.

It is with the 'feeling for working-class life, language, mores' that I shall be most concerned and the extent to which the characters are 'set organically within the working-class environment' will form the major part of my detailed study of the novel. But first of all I wish to consider the novel from Mrs Gaskell's own point of view.

There are a number of versions of Mrs Gaskell's reasons for choosing such a theme. In her preface to Mary Barton, she says:

I bethought me how deep might be the romance in the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets of the town in which I resided. I had always felt a deep sympathy with the careworn men, who looked as if doomed to struggle through their lives in strange alternations between work and want; tossed to and fro by circumstances, apparently in even a greater degree than other men.²⁴

We are given even greater insight into the way in which she perceived the genesis of her novel in the letter to Mrs Greg:

I can remember now that the prevailing thought in my mind at the time when the tale was silently forming itself and impressing me with the force of a reality, was the seeming injustice of the inequalities of fortune. Now, if they occasionally appeared unjust to the more fortunate, they must bewilder an ignorant man full of rude, illogical thought, and full also of sympathy for suffering which appealed to him through his senses. I fancied I saw how all this might lead to a course of action which might appear right for a time to the bewildered mind of such a one, but that this course of action, violating the eternal laws

²⁴ Works, I, 1xxiii.

of God, would bring with it its own punishment of an avenging conscience far more difficult to bear than any worldly privation. Such thoughts I now believe, on looking back, to have been the origin of the book.

'John Barton' was the original title of the book. Round the character of John Barton all the others formed themselves: he was my hero, the person with whom all my sympathies went, with whom I tried to identify myself at the time, because I believed from personal observation that such men were not uncommon, and would well reward such sympathy and love as should throw light down upon their groping search after the causes of suffering, and the reason why suffering is sent, and what they can do to lighten it.²⁵

I have quoted this letter extensively because it is so important. Here is a very clear picture of the genesis of the novel. Mrs Gaskell deliberately sets out to give a psychological reaction to a social situation and she reveals how her general concern for the social conditions of the workers eventually became focused upon the person of John Barton. Her attitude to the actions of this man, who, though sorely tried by the circumstances of his birth and environment, must inevitably be subject to the greater laws of God, is shown. There is a further comment made by the author which, although in a different context, helps to throw some light on the way in which she chose to treat the subject which was so dear to her heart. In a preface to Mabel Vaughan (1857) by Maria Susanna Cummins she says:

Through the means of works of fiction, we obtain glimpses into American home-life: of their modes of thought, their traditional observances,

²⁵ The Letters of Mrs Gaskell, p.74, letter 42 (Early 1849).

and their social temptations, quite beyond and apart from the observations of travellers, who, after all, only see the family in the street, or on festival-days, not in the quiet domestic circle, into which the stranger is rarely admitted.²⁶

This has been quoted by John Sharps, who pointed out that it could be aptly applied to Ruth, North and South or Mary Barton. It indicates the way in which Mrs Gaskell perceived the social problem novel and helps us to understand the qualities in Mary Barton which makes it superior to other contemporary achievements in the same genre. It is in the understanding and presentation of 'their modes of thought, their traditional observances, and their social temptations' that she excels. She is able to perceive the world of her characters from the inside and in so doing presents it with a conviction which often seems to be lacking in many other writers who attempt to show the problems and conditions of the life of the working classes at that time.

In what follows I shall - as I did when examining the work of Charles Kingsley - concentrate on Mrs Gaskell's interpretation of the working class view, and on the embodiment of this in her fiction rather than on the accuracy of the factual reporting. The historical elements provide a framework in which the creative artist works but they do not in themselves determine the achievement of the novelist as an interpreter of working class consciousness. Bearing this in mind, I shall now attempt to examine in detail the ways in which Mrs Gaskell conceived and presented the working class world so successfully.

²⁶ Maria Susanna Cummins, Mabel Vaughan, edited by Mrs Gaskell, (London, 1857), p.vii.

Like Alton Locke, Mary Barton is a novel in which the writer has attempted to create a total working class environment and, as in Alton Locke, the reader is invited to observe society from a working class rather than the customary middle class point of view. There are political implications with the subject but Mrs Gaskell is essentially concerned with creating psychologically convincing characters, who are members of a particular social group. Mary Barton opens with a scene which is meant to contrast strongly with those that follow, in which the main characters are introduced. They are members of two working class families: the Bartons and the Wilsons. It is a rare occasion when both have taken the opportunity of a pleasant day to stroll in the fields outside Manchester. It was a common practice²⁷ and the pleasure obtained by the factory workers is dwelt on in Mrs Gaskell's description:

Here in their seasons may be seen the country business of haymaking, ploughing, etc., which are such pleasant mysteries for townspeople to watch: and here the artisan, deafened with the noise of tongues and engines, may come to listen awhile to the delicious sounds of rural life: the lowing of cattle, the milk maid's call, the clatter and cackle of poultry in the old farmyards.²⁸

But among such pleasant surroundings a discordant note is soon struck. This occurs in the conversation that the two men have when they have drawn apart from their wives. The subject is the disappearance

²⁷ Bland found it necessary to establish the existence of such country walks for Manchester workers and concluded that Mrs Gaskell was factually correct: see D.S. Bland, 'Mary Barton and Historical Accuracy', The Review of English Studies, N.S.I. (January, 1950), 58-60.

²⁸ Works, I, 1-2.

of John Barton's sister-in-law, Esther. The boom time which they had just experienced had enabled young factory girls to earn high wages. In Esther's case, the extra money had been spent on buying fine clothes, which had given her high expectations. Barton sees it as the reason for her disappearance, and he is right as we learn later in the novel. However, it is not so much with his sister-in-law that Barton is concerned, as with the strong influence that she has exerted on his daughter Mary, before she left:

But as I was saying, she takes Mary in a coaxing sort of way, and 'Mary' says she, 'what would you think if I sent for you some day and made a lady of you?' So I could not stand such talk as that to my girl, and I said, 'Thou'd best not put that nonsense i' th' girl's head, I can tell thee;²⁹

From this hint that Mrs Gaskell gives us in the first chapter, it is clear that the seeds have already been sown and the ease with which Mary later accepts the advances of young Carson, the mill owner's son testifies to this. It is from the aspirations of Mary Barton that one of the major themes of the book arises.

In a discussion about fine young ladies and their habits, it is not long before John Barton gets on to his favourite topic of his hatred of the upper classes:

"Thou never could abide the gentlefolk," said Wilson, half amused at his friend's vehemence.

²⁹ Works, I, 7.

"And what good have they ever done me that I should like them?" asked Barton, the latent fire lighting up his eye: and bursting forth he continued, "If I am sick do they come and nurse me? If my child lies dying (as poor Tom lay, with his white wan lips quivering, for want of better food than I could give him), does the rich man bring the wine or broth that might save his life? If I am out of work for weeks in the bad times, and winter comes, with black frost, and keen east wind, and there is no coal for the grate, and no clothes for the bed, and the thin bones are seen through the ragged clothes, does the rich man share his plenty with me, as he ought to do, if his religion wasn't a humbug? When I lie on my death-bed, and Mary (bless her!) stands fretting, as I know she will fret," and here his voice faltered a little, "will a rich lady come and take her to her own home if need be, till she can look round, and see what is best to do? No, I tell you, it's the poor, and the poor only, as does things for the poor."³⁰

This theme of class hatred is the most important consideration of the book and it leads to John Barton's destruction. The hatred in Barton's mind is a spring from which flow a series of events which culminate in the murder of the young Carson. It also gives some indication of the future, as many of the suggested possibilities in the sentences beginning with 'If' actually occur later in the novel. More significantly the speech introduces the reader to the way in which this working class man thinks and interprets his relationship with other social classes. The difference between the rich and the poor envisaged here is not the simple one seen by Disraeli, in spite of his memorable reference to the 'two nations'. Mrs Gaskell, through John Barton, introduces the idea of

³⁰ Works, I, 8.

a distinct and separate world of the working class,³¹ where the economic considerations form only part of a totally different pattern of behaviour of which the middle class were often completely ignorant.³² As the novel develops Mrs Gaskell tries to bring the reader to a clearer understanding of the behaviour of the working class through an analysis of the thoughts and attitudes of John Barton and those of the same class that surround him.

After the excursion to Green Heys Fields, the two families agree to return to the Bartons for tea and the second chapter introduces a working class district of Manchester. Not only drawing on the dramatic effect of contrast for a second time, but also emphasising the precarious nature of working class existence, Mrs Gaskell shows a relatively prosperous situation, before death and unemployment change it so drastically. The gathering is a cheerful one and it gives Mrs Barton an opportunity to show off her few possessions, which in later time of hardship will disappear one by one:

The place seemed almost crammed with furniture (sure sign of good times among the mills). Beneath the window was a dresser, with three deep drawers. Opposite the fire-place was a table, which I should call Pembroke, only that it was made of deal, and I cannot tell how far such a name may be applied to such humble material. On it, resting against

31 Works, I, 8. 'Yet we are to live as separate as if we were in two worlds.'

32 Benjamin Disraeli, Sybil: or the Two Nations, Advertisement: 'For so little do we know of the state of our own country, that the air of improbability which the whole truth would inevitably throw over these pages, might deter some from their perusal.' Henry Mayhew had expressed a similar view concerning the ignorance of most people regarding the working class in his introduction to London Labour and The London Poor, I, xv.

the wall, was a bright green japanned tea-tray, having a couple of scarlet lovers embracing in the middle. The fire-light danced merrily on this, and really (setting all taste but that of a child's aside) it gave a richness of colouring to that side of the room.³³

This is a clear and detailed account of a working class home in a time of prosperity.³⁴ But it is more than simply factually accurate, because Mrs Gaskell, in dwelling lovingly on the details right down to the design on the tea-tray, combines documentary realism with the creation of an apt 'atmosphere' for the action. It is under these pleasant conditions that Jem Wilson and Mary Barton are first thrust together. It is also a situation which Jem finds attractive but which Mary strongly resists.

Immediately after this happy occasion of the tea-party, disaster strikes the Barton household, when Mrs Barton dies in childbirth. The death is sudden and the 'shock to the system' which the doctor speaks of is attributed, by John Barton in his grief, to the disappearance of Eather. From this point, we are told, he turned his attention to union activities. Mrs Gaskell had emphasised that he is representative, and not an exception, in his views of the relationship which exists between workers and employers.³⁵ The fact that he was driven to the extremity

³³ Works, I, 13.

³⁴ Both William Cooke Taylor and Leon Faucher give similar examples of workers' homes in times of prosperity. See William Cooke Taylor, Notes of a Tour in the Manufacturing Districts of Lancashire (1842) edited by W.H. Chaloner (London, 1968), pp.31-32 and Leon Faucher Manchester in 1844: its present condition and future prospects (London, 1844), pp.105-7.

³⁵ The typicality of Barton as a member of the working class is referred to in Mrs Gaskell's letter 42, quoted above on p.163, this is supported by Samuel Bamford: 'of John Bartons, I have known hundreds, his very self in all things except his fatal crime.' 'Letters addressed to Mrs Gaskell by celebrated contemporaries, now in the possession of the John Rylands Library', edited by R.D.Waller, Bulletin of the John Rylands Library (March, 1935), p.8.

of committing a murder later does not detract from this. The murder may be a sensational element in the novel and real examples of such cases were few,³⁶ but the hatred existed even if it was rarely taken this far. What makes the novel important is the examination of the minds of the working men in which the hatred grew. If Greg had paid due regard to what the author actually said he would have had less reason to criticise her for being unfair to the employers. Mrs Gaskell was not so much concerned with attempting to present the situation in any absolute, objective sense, but she was attempting to show how working men, and in particular John Barton, perceived the situation. She was striving to show the reader that the actions of these men can often be understood more clearly, if we appreciate how they perceive their relationships with the mill owners.

Speaking of the contrast between workers' and employers' conditions of life in hard times, when only the worker seems to be affected, she says:

I know that this is not really the case; and I know what is the truth in such matters: but what I wish to impress is what the worker feels and thinks. True, that with child-like improvidence good times will often dissipate his grumbling, and make him forget all prudence and foresight.

But there are earnest men among these people, men who have endured wrongs without complaining, but without ever forgetting or

³⁶ In addition to the murder of Thomas Ashton, which has strong similarities to the fictional account in the novel, which is discussed below on p. 200, there were several other incidences, like the murder of the Huddersfield manufacturer called Horsfall and the case of William Jobling, a Jarrow miner, who murdered a local magistrate, but the number of the incidents is less significant than the fear created by such acts among the middle classes, as Raymond Williams has pointed out in Culture and Society 1780-1950, p.90.

forgiving those whom (they believe) have caused all this woe.

Among these was John Barton.³⁷

Mrs Gaskell thus indicates that John Barton's motive for grievance is both general and specific. The specific occasion occurred at an earlier period of hard times, when his little boy was ill with scarlet fever. He had no money for food because he had been laid off from work at Hunter's factory. He had sought work elsewhere but because of the depression there was none to be had. The doctor advises him of the need to provide nourishment for the child, but he has nothing with which to buy it:

Hungry himself, almost to an animal pitch of ravenousness, but with the bodily pain swallowed up in anxiety for his little sinking lad, he stood at one of the shop windows where all edible luxuries are displayed; haunches of venison, Stilton cheeses, moulds of jelly - all appetising sights to the common passer-by. And out of this shop came Mrs. Hunter! She crossed to her carriage, followed by the shopman loaded with purchases for a party. The door was quickly slammed to, and she drove away; and Barton returned home with a bitter spirit of wrath in his heart, to see his only boy a corpse!³⁸

This we are shown as an event of the past, a bitterness which is to be stored and added to other personal grievances. But, we are told, the times are good and the problems of hardship for the workers were not immediately present.

³⁷ Works, I, 24.

³⁸ Works, I, 25.

Meanwhile, John Barton has created, inadvertently, more difficulties for himself. In his honest desire to protect Mary and not let her work in a factory he arranges for her to be an apprentice dress-maker. This encourages her in her aspirations to be something above the average - a feeling which had already been stimulated by her Aunt Esther. At this point in the novel Mrs Gaskell persuades the reader to view the situation through Mary's eyes. We are asked by the author to take a particular view of the circumstances. Later Mrs Gaskell is able to make her characters effectively speak for themselves, but here she uses authorial commentary to press the point home:

a dressmaker's apprentice must (or so Mary thought) be always dressed with a certain regard to appearances; must never soil her hands, and need never redden or dirty her face with hard labour. Before my telling you so truly what folly Mary felt or thought, injures her without redemption in your opinion, think what are the silly fancies of sixteen years of age in every class, and under all circumstances.³⁹

Mrs Gaskell had first hand knowledge of the kind of girl Mary Barton was from her experiences of social work⁴⁰ and as shown by description of such a person in a letter to Charles Dickens.⁴¹ She not only understood the aspirations of young working class girls but she also had a clear knowledge of the pitfalls which trapped the fictional character,

³⁹ Works, I, 27.

⁴⁰ Mrs Gaskell was one of the first voluntary visitors of the Manchester and Salford District Provident Society, see Hugh Colley Irvine, The Old D.P.S. A Short History of Charitable Work in Manchester and Salford, 1833-1933 (Manchester, 1933), p.9.

⁴¹ Letters of Mrs Gaskell, p.98, letter 61 (8 January 1850).

Aunt Esther, as we discover later in the novel.

In the next chapter Mary pays a visit to Alice, Jem Wilson's aunt, in order to meet Margaret. The tea party is something of an occasion for Alice, and without condescension Mrs Gaskell shows the reader her understanding of the patterns of behaviour of the working class:

The two chairs drawn out for visitors, and duly swept and dusted: an old board arranged with some skill upon two old candleboxes set on end (rather rickety, to be sure, but she knew the seat of old, and when to sit lightly; indeed the whole affair was more for apparent dignity of position than for any real ease).⁴²

Here Mrs Gaskell not only reveals her accurate knowledge of these people's material possessions,⁴³ but she is able to interpret their response to particular circumstances and the values that they associate with them. One is able to feel the sense of occasion in Alice's behaviour.

Mrs Gaskell is frequently concerned with the stock of knowledge which each of her characters possesses, in order to establish justifiable motives for their actions. She carefully builds a very complex picture of the individual's personal view of the world and shows how

⁴² Works, I, 30-31.

⁴³ For example, Adshead, when he examined the furnishing of some of the poorer working class homes in Manchester offers a similar description: 'Decent furniture there is none, - bricks, logs of wood, and other contrivances being frequently used as substitutes for tables and chairs.' Joseph Adshead, Distress in Manchester - Evidence (Tabular and Otherwise) of the state of the Labouring Classes in 1840-42 (London, 1842), p.14.

each individual perceives the world differently, even within the limits of a particular culture. This very personal interpretation helps to account for the way in which the reader, and often other characters, find discrepancies between expected and actual behaviour in the characters. Mrs Gaskell often presents side by side the view the character has of him or herself and the view another character has of him/her, which is different. For example, Mary smiles in a superior way when Alice describes South America as being on the other side of the sun, but at the same time Mary's own limited geographical knowledge is revealed. In this Mrs Gaskell achieves more than a delineation of the character's text book knowledge and when Alice begins to describe the nature of her childhood landscape she establishes this point most clearly. We are made sharply aware that a young working class girl born in Manchester in the early nineteenth century would have an extremely limited knowledge of the rest of England. Mrs Gaskell is careful to show the limited view of the world which a large number of her characters would have. She is also careful not to attribute their ignorance to stupidity and the special case of the character of Job Legh, with his interest in biology, is used to emphasise that it is lack of opportunity, not lack of ability, which is often the major influential factor in the behaviour and attitudes of the working classes. Later in the book she refers to the factors which are decisive in influencing John Barton's behaviour:

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.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Works, I, 196.

The fire at Carson's factory has a very important function in the novel. Immediately, it provides narrative excitement. The description of the scene is coloured by Mrs Gaskell's understanding of crowd behaviour in tense situations. In this she is particularly able and succeeds again with the mob that confronts Margaret Hale and John Thornton at the mill in North and South. The rescue of Wilson by his son Jem is exciting and full of suspense even if it is somewhat melodramatic. In addition she is able to include a variety of other levels on which the event can be considered. Mary's naïveté is shown in her childlike delight in a fire, which is quickly changed when the possibility of death occurs. She is also made to react to Jem's daring, which partly prepares the reader for events later in the novel. But it is John Barton who makes the most pertinent remarks on the social effects of the fire, when he meets Mary and Margaret hurrying to see it:

"Carsons' Mill! Ay, there is a mill on fire somewhere, sure enough by the light, and it will be a rare blaze, for there's not a drop o' water to be got. And much Carsons will care, for they're well insured, and the machines are a' th' oud-fashioned kind. See if they don't think it a fine thing for themselves. They'll not thank them as tries to put it out."⁴⁵

This sounds like the malicious comment of a man who bears a grudge, but the truth of what he is saying is quickly revealed by the omniscient narrator in the next chapter:

⁴⁵ Works, I, 54.

John Barton was not far wrong in his idea that the Messrs. Carson would not be over-much grieved for the consequences of the fire in their mill. They were well insured; the machinery lacked the improvements of late years, and worked but poorly in comparison with that which might now be procured. Above all, trade was very slack; ... So this was an excellent opportunity, Messrs. Carson thought, for refitting their factory with first-rate improvements, for which the insurance money would amply pay. They were in no hurry about the business, however. The weekly drain of wages given for labour, useless in the present state of the market, was stopped. The partners had more leisure than they had known for years; and promised wives and daughters all manner of pleasant excursions, as soon as the weather should become more genial.⁴⁶

But if, ironically, it provided a pleasant recess for the Carsons, the fire had disastrous consequences for those who were employed at the mill. In the chapter which describes the mill's closure, Mrs Gaskell reveals her awareness of the widespread implications of such a course of action for the working class community. First, she contrasts, in a more general way, the day of the worker with that of the Carson family:

There was no breakfast to lounge over; their lounge was taken in bed, to try and keep warmth in them that bitter March weather, and, by being quiet, to deaden the gnawing wolf within. Many a penny that would have gone little way enough in oatmeal or potatoes, bought opium to still the hungry little ones, and make them forget their uneasiness in heavy troubled sleep.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Works, I, 62-63.

⁴⁷ Works, I, 63.

Then she quickly passes to the personal tragedy of one family: the Davenports. The visit of Barton and Wilson to the Davenport home and the father's decline and death are vividly described in both emotional and factual terms. The living conditions are so accurately presented that they conform almost exactly with the facts given by Engels and Chadwick.⁴⁸ The following account could easily be mistaken for an extract from these writers:

As they passed, women from their doors tossed household slops of every description into the gutter; they ran into the next pool, which overflowed and stagnated.⁴⁹

When the men eventually arrive, she describes their entrance into the Davenports' home:

You went down one step even from the foul area into the cellar in which a family of human beings lived. It was very dark inside. The window-panes, many of them, were broken and stuffed with rags, which was reason enough for the dusky light that pervaded the place even at mid-day.

⁴⁸ For example, Engels gives this description of one of the working class areas of Manchester: 'In the houses one seldom sees a wooden or a stone floor, while the doors and windows are nearly always broken or badly fitting. And as for the dirt! Everywhere one sees heaps of refuse, garbage and filth. There are stagnant pools instead of gutters and the stench alone is so overpowering that no human being, even partially civilised, would find it bearable to live in such a district.' Frederick Engels, The Condition of the Working Class in England, translated by W.O.Henderson and W.H.Chaloner (Oxford, 1958), p.61. A similar illustration is offered by Chadwick: 'Whole streets in these quarters are unpaved and without drains or main-sewers, are worn into deep ruts and holes, in which water constantly stagnates, and are so covered with refuse and excrementitious matter as to be almost impassible from depth of mud, and intolerable from stench.' Edwin Chadwick, Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain (1842), edited by M.W.Flinn (Edinburgh, 1965), p.111.

⁴⁹ Works, I, 65.

After the account I have given of the state of the street, no one can be surprised that on going into the cellar inhabited by Davenport, the smell was so foetid as almost to knock the two men down. Quickly recovering themselves, as those inured to such things do, they began to penetrate the thick darkness of the place, and to see three or four children rolling on the damp, nay wet brick floor, through which the stagnant, filthy moisture of the street oozed up; the fireplace was empty and black; the wife sat on her husband's lair, and cried in the dark loneliness.⁵⁰

After witnessing this scene Barton goes home in order to pawn some of his possessions (a coat and a handkerchief) and buy food and fuel for the family. Wilson, in his efforts to comfort the husband and wife, explores the other room at the back:

He had opened a door, but only for an instant; it led into a back cellar, with a grating instead of a window, down which dropped the moisture from the pigsties, and worse abominations. It was not paved; the floor was one mass of bad smelling mud. It had never been used, for there was not an article of furniture in it; nor could a human being, much less a pig, have lived there many days. Yet the "back apartment" made a difference in the rent. The Davenports paid threepence more for having two rooms.⁵¹

Mrs Gaskell is not attempting to exaggerate or be sensational but she is presenting a brutally frank account of the housing conditions which is

⁵⁰ Works, I, 65-66.

⁵¹ Works, I, 70.

fully supported by contemporary reports. These details of the environment, skilfully made part of the fabric of the novel, help to provide an authentic background to the discussions of the workers and the issues which concerned her most.

When at last the family has been settled down and the father comforted as far as possible under the conditions of his raging fever, the two men, Wilson and Barton, spend the rest of the night quietly talking. Their discussions turn to the relationship between God and the worker's lot.

"Don ye think He's th' masters' Father, too?
I'd be loth to have 'em for brothers."

"Eh, John! donna talk so; there's many and many a master as good or better nor us."

"If you think so tell me this. How comes it they're rich, and we're poor? I'd like to know that. Han they done as they'd be done by for us?"⁵²

Barton is concerned with the extreme limits of a man's life. He is prepared to accept that in the bad times master and man must both be affected, but it is the degree of the distress which separates them. A slack time means restraint and caution for the owners, but to the worker it can often mean something as drastic as death by slow starvation. 'Han they ever seen a child o' their'n die for want o' food?'⁵³

⁵² Works, I, 72.

⁵³ Works, I, 73. This speech echoes the report of an actual conversation which Mrs Gaskell had had with a labourer one evening. 'She was trying hard to speak comfort, and allay those bitter feelings against the rich which were so common with the poor, when the head of the family took hold of her arm, and grasping it tightly said, with tears in his eyes: "Ay, ma'am, but have ye ever seen a child clemmed to death?"' Mat Hompes, 'Mrs.Gaskell', The Gentleman's Magazine, CCLXXIX (1895), 130-131.

The point is pressed home by Mrs Gaskell when she describes Wilson's visit to the Carsons' house in the morning in order to obtain an infirmary order so that Davenport may be admitted to hospital. He is obliged to wait in the kitchen, where he witnesses a scene of plenty which the servants take so much for granted that they do not even think to inquire whether Wilson is hungry.

In the library Carson's youngest daughter is demanding half a guinea for a rose and we are forced to remember what John Barton did to acquire five shillings to preserve the life of the Davenport family. It is the first time we meet the Carsons at home and the treatment of this household is rather superficial and offers only a simplistic view of their life. It is perhaps because she was so concerned with the working class in Mary Barton that, in her impatience to present their world, she offers a stereotyped view of the middle class. After the attacks on the novel by W.R.Greg⁵⁴ her attention was directed to this deficiency and the contrasting perspective of the middle class is much more deeply and sympathetically expressed in North and South. Wilson's visit is a wasted one. He obtains no more than an out-patient order and he returns to find the man dead.

The death in the Davenport home is quickly followed by the death of the twins in the Wilsons' home and the theme returns to the subject of Mary Barton's relation with Jem Wilson and Harry Carson. Mrs Gaskell has often been accused of introducing too many death-bed scenes into the novel⁵⁵ but I feel the criticism is unjust. Not only is she factually accurate, as we can see from Edwin Chadwick's figures of

⁵⁴ See pp. 157-58 above.

⁵⁵ For example, see Yvonne ffrench, Mrs Gaskell, p.25.

working class deaths in Manchester,⁵⁶ but death is also central to her presentation of a working class milieu. Death was a common occurrence with which the Victorians, and especially the working class Victorians, had learnt to live. For Mary Barton, life contains elaborate, naïve dreams in spite of death, and Jem's feelings towards Mary are stirred in spite of the presence of his dead brothers. Mary is not so much selfish as foolish, and this is clearly revealed in her inner conflict and the way in which she reacts to the two men who concern her. Of Jem she says to herself:

"I don't care for him, and yet, unless I'm always watching myself, I'm speaking to him in a loving voice. I think I cannot go right, for I either check myself till I'm downright cross to him, or else I speak just natural, and that's too kind and tender by half. And I'm as good as engaged to be married to another; and another far handsomer than Jem; only I think I like Jem's face best for all that; liking's liking, and there's no help for it. Well, when I'm Mrs. Harry Carson may happen I can put some good fortune in Jem's way."⁵⁷

Mrs Gaskell shows Mary's limited knowledge of the world in the way in which Mary confidently believes that Harry Carson has the honourable intention of marrying her; her daydreams have completely obscured any sense of the real difficulties that confront her aspirations. The ignorance of girls like Mary, coupled with their totally different perception of the world led them, in many cases, to believe that the

⁵⁶ 'Of the 4,629 deaths of persons of the labouring classes who died in the year 1840 in Manchester, the numbers [of the total] who died were at the several periods as follows: under 5 years of age: 2,649 or 1 in 1 7/10; above 5 and under 10: 215 or 1 in 22; above 10 and under 15: 107 or 1 in 43; above 15 and under 20: 135 or 1 in 3.' Edwin Chadwick, Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain (1842) edited by M.W.Flinn (Edinburgh, 1965), p.224.

⁵⁷ Works, I, 89.

offers made to them were genuine. In this respect, Mary Barton and Aunt Esther are aspects of the same character in Mrs Gaskell's mind. Aunt Esther's experiences could easily be Mary's, as the author sympathetically suggests later in the novel.⁵⁸

But Mary's idle dreams and Jem's vain hopes are used by the author to return quickly to the theme of social distress. Jem's visit to the Barton household, in his effort to see Mary, gives John Barton an opportunity to talk about his reading of an old copy of the Northern Star. He attempts to discuss the subject of industrial accidents which it is believed result from the long working day, but Jem is an unwilling listener and hastily departs when he feels that all hope of being able to talk to Mary is gone.

At this point in the novel, Mrs Gaskell feels obliged to make a personal statement about the Chartist movement. Like Charles Kingsley in Alton Locke, she attempts to defend the Chartists on the ground that the movement arose out of the extreme conditions under which the working classes were obliged to live:

In many instances the sufferers wept first, and then they cursed. Their vindictive feelings exhibited themselves in rabid politics. And when I hear, as I have heard, of the sufferings and privations of the poor, of provision shops where ha'porths of tea, sugar, butter and even flour, were sold to accommodate the indigent, - of parents sitting in their clothes by the fireside during the whole night for seven weeks together, in order that their only bed and bedding might be reserved for the use of their large family, of others sleeping upon the cold hearthstone for weeks in succession, without adequate means of providing themselves with

⁵⁸ See The Letters of Mrs Gaskell, p.98, letter 61 (8 January 1850) and below, p.191.

food or fuel (and this in the depth of winter), - of others being compelled to fast for days together, uncheered by any hope of better fortune, living, moreover, or rather starving, in a crowded garret, or damp cellar, and gradually sinking under the pressure of want and despair into a premature grave; and when this has been confirmed by the evidence of their careworn looks, their excited feelings, and desolate homes, - can I wonder that many of them, in such times of misery and destitution, spoke and acted with ferocious precipitation?⁵⁹

However, unlike Kingsley, she interprets the Chartist movement as one which arose from the belief that the Government was ignorant of the worker's plight. She argues that there was a feeling that, if only the legislators could be informed as to the true state of affairs, then a remedy would be shortly forthcoming.

John Barton is one of the delegates chosen to travel to London on behalf of the Chartists to present the petition.⁶⁰ The night before he sets off, various neighbours call on him to express their views as to what should be said and done. In this scene Mrs Gaskell is able to show clearly how each of the characters perceives the world in his own special way but at the same time she demonstrates a more general view held by them all. They are all completely mistaken as to the status John Barton will have as a delegate and assume that he will have opportunities to discuss

⁵⁹ Works, I, 95. The factual accuracy of Mrs Gaskell's statement of the conditions under which the working classes lived has been supported by many researchers, and detailed accounts of similar circumstances can be found in, for example, T.S.Ashton, Economic and Social Investigations in Manchester 1833-1933 (London, 1934), Joseph Adshead, Distress in Manchester - Evidence (Tabular and Otherwise) of the state of the Labouring Classes in 1840-42 (London, 1842) and J.P.Kay, The Moral and Physical Conditions of the Working Classes employed in the cotton manufacture in Manchester (Manchester, 1832; reprinted 1969).

⁶⁰ Mrs Gaskell makes John Barton attend the presentation of the first of the three Charters. This first Charter was considered and rejected by the House of Commons in July 1839.

important topics at length with members of parliament. Mrs Gaskell reveals through their speeches the lack of comprehension of the larger situation of national politics and their inadequate attempts to find solutions which are immediately related to close personal experience. There are those who would favour the old Luddite approach and are naïve enough to believe that Parliament would make a law requiring the owners to destroy their own machines. Mrs Davenport, now a widow with hungry lads to feed, deplores the new factory legislation which prevents her children working in the factory. One man offers the rather novel idea of attempting to persuade the gentry to wear more shirts so as to increase demand. But it is from Job Legh that the most sensible and carefully thought-out comment comes.⁶¹ He offers, in essence, a view of a future consumer society when he speaks of free trade, increases in wages and more consumption by the workers themselves of the goods they help to manufacture.

But regardless of who speaks they all display a note of optimism which confirms their ignorance of the complexities of the problem and the difficulties which the delegate would have to face when he reached London.

The optimism of the Chartists was so great that they had no alternative plan if the petition failed. The presentation of the Charter was a complete disaster because its rejection meant that the movement was virtually destroyed. John Barton returns home a broken and disappointed man: 'Mary, we mun speak to our God to hear us, for man will not hearken; no, not now, when we weep tears o'blood.'⁶²

⁶¹ This attitude is to be expected from what Mrs Gaskell has told us earlier, see Works, I, 40-41.

⁶² Works, I, 111.

It is with great difficulty that Mary is able to draw anything from him but at last, with the help of Job Legh and Margaret, he begins to describe his visit. Here again Mrs Gaskell is brilliant in her ability to make us see London through the eyes of this working class man who had lived all his days until then in Manchester and found great difficulty in establishing a point of reference from which he could make the new experience meaningful to himself. He attempts to express himself on the subject of architecture:

'For yo see the houses are many on 'em built without any proper shape for a body to live in; some on 'em they're after thought would fall down, so they've stuck great ugly pillars out before 'em. And some on 'em (we thought they must be th' tailors' sign) had gotten stone men and women as wanted clothes stuck on 'em.'⁶³

In a lighthearted way he also comments on the carriages and the footmen.

'Carriages themselves were great shakes too. Some o' th' gentlemen as couldn't get inside hung on behind, wi' nosegays to smell at, and sticks to keep off folk as might splash their silk stockings. I wonder why they didn't hire a cab rather than hang on like a whip-behind boy; but I suppose they wished to keep wi' their wives, Darby and Joan like.'⁶⁴

But if he, like the reader, is somewhat amused by this, his efforts to communicate with the policeman who struck him are much more tragic.

⁶³ Works, I, 113.

⁶⁴ Works, I, 114.

"Whatten business have yo to do, that?" said I.

"Your're frightening them horses', says he, in his mincing way (for Londoners are mostly all tongue-tied, and can't say their a's and i's properly), 'and it's our business to keep you from molesting the ladies and gentlemen going to her Majesty's drawing-room.'"

"And why are we to be molested," asked I, "going decently about our business, which is life and death to us, and many a little one clemming at home in Lancashire? Which business is of most consequence i' the sight o' God, think yo, our'n or them grand ladies and gentlemen as yo think so much on?"

"But I might as well ha' held my peace, for he only laughed."⁶⁵

In this speech Mrs Gaskell has captured the feeling of utter confusion in this working man's mind when faced with a world where the values and patterns of behaviour are so alien to him that they are beyond his comprehension. It is not so much the failure of the Charter as such but the sense of being unable to relate to or communicate with those who possess the power to change the worker's conditions, which gives rise to his feelings of frustration and helplessness. This inability to comprehend the true state of affairs preys on his mind. When the world he thought familiar no longer makes sense to him, he loses his grip on it, and ceases to have any hope for the future. This feeling of frustration is aggravated by his inability to find work, when he returns from his journey to London.

He was made aware, by the remarks of fellow-workmen, that a Chartist delegate, and a leading member of a Trades' Union, was not likely to be favoured in his search after employment.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Works, I, 114.

⁶⁶ Works, I, 129.

The little things that his wife was once so proud of are taken one by one to the pawn shop in order to provide food. We see the humiliation of the unemployed in the fierce replies he makes to his daughter when offers of charity are mentioned:

'I don't want money, child! D--n their charity and their money!
I want work, and it is my right. I want work.'⁶⁷

Mrs Gaskell is able to show the destructive effects which loss of work and loss of dignity can have on family life. In John Barton's case it appears in his aggressive behaviour towards his daughter and his increased involvement in the union. This commitment to his fellow workers is essential to the understanding of John Barton's character and the extreme action of murder which he undertakes later in the novel.

In one of his more irritable moods, John Barton accuses Mary of neglecting to visit the Wilsons, and this pricks her conscience and forces her to go, although she is careful not to visit the house when Jem is likely to be at home. Mrs Gaskell uses the occasion to make some social comment as part of Mrs Wilson's conversation. She points to one of the important areas of discontent created by the industrial revolution. This was in the rapid change of status (for a few) which had not been possible in a traditional society.

Mrs Wilson suggests that her husband might easily have married Bessy Witter (Mrs Carson), because, like herself, she was a factory girl at the time.

⁶⁷ Works, I, 131.

"And there was Bessy Witter as would ha' given her eyes for him; she as is Mrs. Carson now, for she were a handsome lass, although I never could see her beauty then; and Carson warn't so much above her, as they're both above us all now."⁶⁸

The sudden rise in fortune of some of the factory workers is one of the sources of dissatisfaction among the other men, like John Barton. Those with traditional power are more readily accepted than those who acquired it within the living memory of the men who were obliged to work for them. In addition, those with newly acquired power are often the hardest masters.

Mrs Gaskell is keenly aware of the changes taking place in the structure of society. As the society had become more open as a result of the industrial revolution, the desire for social mobility and the dissatisfaction caused by it became one of the key issues of the day. We have already seen the difficulties which Kingsley experienced in reconciling education with social advancement, but Mrs Gaskell is much more concerned with the effects of social change on the quality of family life. Through Mrs Wilson's reminiscences, she refers to the popular belief at the time that factory girls were unable to make satisfactory housewives because they had no knowledge of domestic skills.⁶⁹

"If you'll believe me, Mary, there never was such a born goose at house-keeping as I were, and yet he married me! I had been in a factory sin' five years old a'most, and I knew nought about cleaning, or cooking,

⁶⁸ Works, I, 136.

⁶⁹ This view was later supported by the introduction of domestic skills like needlework and cookery into the curriculum of the elementary schools.

let alone washing and such like work."⁷⁰

This in turn leads to a discussion of the destructive effects that working wives have upon home life - a view held strongly by many at that time. The hardships coupled with the increased opportunities for work caused housewives to welcome the chance to bring extra money into the home. Mrs Wilson's view, and possibly Mrs Gaskell's, as Aina Rubenius⁷¹ would have us believe, was strongly against work in a factory which threatened the home:

"I could reckon up" (counting with her fingers), "ay, nine men, I know, as has been driven to th' public-house by having wives as worked in factories; good folk, too, as though there was no harm in putting their little ones out at nurse, and letting their house go all dirty, and their fires all out; and that was a place as was tempting for a husband to stay in, was it? He soon finds out gin-shops, where all is clean and bright, and where th' fire blazes cheerily, and gives a man a welcome as it were."⁷²

Even if Mrs Gaskell is offering her own point of view here, she does not make the mistake, as no doubt Kingsley would have done in a similar situation, of using Mrs Wilson merely as a mouthpiece. She again displays her ability to enter into the mind of her character. This is shown when Mrs Wilson attempts to move from the known to the unknown, in

⁷⁰ Works, I, 136.

⁷¹ Aina Rubenius, 'The Woman Question in Mrs Gaskell's Life and Works' in Essays and Studies on English Language and Literature V, edited by S.B. Libjegren (Upsala, 1950), p.144.

⁷² Works, I, 137.

terms of her own experience. She is able to make a sensible appraisal of the situation when it is within her personal experience, but when she attempts to solve the problem in a more general and abstract way she gets completely out of her depth. Her view of the Queen and Prince Albert is completely naïve.

"Pooh! don't tell me it's not the Queen as makes laws; and isn't she bound to obey Prince Albert? And if he said they mustn't, why she'd say they mustn't, and then all folk would say, oh, no, we never shall do any such thing no more."⁷³

From this point in the story, where Mary Barton has visited Mrs Wilson and Alice, events move rapidly. Mrs Wilson, from pique in response to Mary's attitude to her son Jem, has suggested that he is to marry Molly Gibson. This does not help when Jem eventually plucks up sufficient courage to ask Mary to marry him. However, having rejected Jem, Mary is obliged to reappraise her relationship with Harry Carson. When she decides to break off her association with him, she discovers the truth, as he reveals that he had never intended to marry her. This is a great blow to her pride. Meanwhile, Aunt Esther, who has become a prostitute, returns and attempts to warn John Barton of Mary's danger in her relationship with Harry Carson, but the father will not listen. Later Barton repents of his harsh rebuttal of Esther's approach to him but his attempts to find her are in vain, she has been committed to prison for one month for disorderly vagrancy.⁷⁴

When she is released a month later, Esther decides that it is to

⁷³ Works, I, 138.

⁷⁴ Works, I, 143.

Jem, Mary's childhood friend, that she will apply for help as she feels any further attempt to approach Mary's father is doomed to failure. In order to convince Jem of her fears she feels obliged to narrate her own story. By this means Mrs Gaskell reveals her sympathetic understanding of the plight of the fallen woman. It is a subject she will return to, when she devotes a whole work to the theme in Ruth. But even in the very hurried resumé of Esther's life given to Jem, we are made aware of Mrs Gaskell's concern. She describes the love and trust given in the early stages of a relationship to a man of a higher class, who offers comfort and security, the later birth of an illegitimate child, the subsequent abandonment and the rapid steps of the decline which follows in order to survive:

"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 me the means of relieving! So I went out into the street one January night - Do you think God will punish me for that?"⁷⁵

The task that Esther has given Jem, however, is much more difficult than she could have imagined because of his strong feelings for Mary. Naturally, he is antagonistic to the idea of Mary having a lover, whoever he might be, but Mrs Gaskell lays stress on the importance attached to the differences of social class in this relationship. Not only is there present a danger of the exploitation of a working girl by a man from the upper classes, but Jem is uncertain of his interpretation of the situation:

⁷⁵ Works, I, 186.

Poor Esther's experience had led her, perhaps too hastily, to the conclusion that Mr. Carson's intentions were evil towards Mary ... Harry Carson's mother had been a factory girl; so, after all, what was the great reason for doubting his intentions towards Mary?⁷⁶

Jem is mistaken, not only because of the kind of man the young Harry Carson happens to be in the novel, but more significantly because Harry is typically representative of his class. More often than not these nouveaux riches were social climbers and they were very anxious to avoid any reference to their origins. Even John Thornton in North and South is initially attracted to Margaret Hale because of her superior social class background. In addition to this, Mrs Gaskell had carefully established this attitude earlier in the novel, when we were witness to the way in which Mr Carson conducts the affairs of his household and in particular the indulgent treatment his children received at his hands. Thus the meeting between Harry Carson and Jem Wilson is more than a conflict of personalities or of lovers concerning a girl, it is a conflict between class values. This is also pressed home at the end of the interview when, although blows have been exchanged, the law steps in to favour Carson and offers to remove Jem to the police station.

Shortly before this confrontation Mrs Gaskell feels obliged to use her authorial voice in order to justify the changes which have taken place in John Barton's mind since the failure of the Chartist delegation to London. She attempts to relate the general effects of the industrial depression to the more specific reactions of a man like Barton. In some respects this is one of the weakest passages in the book. In the language used the similes are inappropriate, and fail to create the

⁷⁶ Works, I, 192-193.

precise emotional response required. For example, she compares the thoughts that are pressing on Barton's mind to a punishment attributed to the Borgias:

The supposed or real criminal was shut up in a room, supplied with every convenience and luxury: and at first mourned little over his imprisonment. But day by day he became aware that the space between the walls of his apartment was narrowing, and then he understood his end. Those painted walls would come into hideous nearness, and at last crush the life out of him.⁷⁷

The most inept metaphor is used in the discussion of the general conditions:

The actions of the uneducated seem to be typified in those of Frankenstein, that monster of many human qualities, ungifted with a soul, a knowledge of the difference between good and evil.⁷⁸

The major criticism of the whole passage is that it is superfluous. Mrs Gaskell has already established the deterioration of John Barton, through his behaviour and it was unnecessary to press the point home in the author's own voice. In attempting to prepare the reader to accept the future action of John Barton, she has lessened the credibility of the character by depicting him as a monster rather than an unusual man acting, as any man might, under intense stress.

Her efforts to describe the economic situation are much more

⁷⁷ Works, I, 194-95.

⁷⁸ Works, I, 196.

rational, if somewhat biased, but the essential point here as in other parts of the novel, is that she is not trying to present the facts in any absolute sense but rather to examine the situation from a number of different perspectives: in this case the way the situation looks from the owners' and the workers' points of view, respectively. Essentially she argues that the conflict between the workers and the owners stems very largely from a lack of communication and trust. If the owners had been prepared to explain the precariousness of the economic situation, it would have been seen that their prosperity was more apparent than real. Then, she assumes, the workers would have been more ready to accept cuts in wages, when they occurred. But, she argues, the consequences of mistrust resulted in a hardening of attitudes and the final confrontation of a strike:

So class distrusted class, and their want of mutual confidence wrought sorrow to both. The masters would not be bullied, and compelled to reveal why they felt it wisest and best to offer only such low wages; they would not be made to tell that they were even sacrificing capital to obtain a decisive victory over the continental manufacturers. And the workmen sat silent and stern with folded hands, refusing to work for such pay. There was a strike in Manchester.⁷⁹

Among those masters who were most adamant in holding out against the workers were the Carsons, both father and son. Mrs Gaskell had already stressed the attitudes of those who had newly acquired power and she again emphasises this point when she compares workers who have become owners to converts:

⁷⁹ Works, I, 198.

It is well known, that there is no religionist so zealous as a convert; no masters so stern, and regardless of the interests of their work-people, as those who have risen from such a station themselves.⁸⁰

But in the young Carson, it is also something else. He has not been directly involved in the struggles to succeed as his father has. To him it has the attraction of a game with all the accompanying excitement. It is this irresponsibility and lack of commitment which eventually brings the potentially dangerous situation to its climax.

But if Mrs Gaskell is critical of the behaviour of the owners she does not neglect to point out the faults that exist among the workers. Confrontation between masters and men led to combinations on both sides in order to increase strength and bargaining power. Trades unions help to direct this power which would otherwise have been dissipated amongst individuals. The worst aspect of this can be seen in the treatment of those workers who are prepared to undercut the market and work below the minimum rate of the union members.

In spite of policemen, set to watch over the safety of the poor country weavers - in spite of magistrates, and prisons, and severe punishments - the poor depressed men tramping in from Burnley, Padiham, and other places, to work at the condemned "Starvation Prices", were waylaid, and beaten, and left by the roadside almost for dead. The police broke up every lounging knot of men: - they separated quietly, to reunite half-a-mile out of town.⁸¹

80 Works, I, 198-99.

81 Works, I, 199. Asa Briggs gives a similar example of the way in which the rioters avoided confrontation with the troops in Manchester in May 1829, in Victorian Cities, p.29.

Apart from the evil of the act itself, the attacks on the men who attempt to work at lower rates contribute to the hardening of the attitudes of the owners when they at last agree to discuss terms with the men. Mrs Gaskell, in her anxiety to put forward the situation as fairly as possible, does not trust herself to show differing shades of opinion amongst the owners through their own voices, but again uses her authorial voice to explain, both directly and with snatches of conversation as illustrative quotation, the broad spectrum of their views.

At the meeting between the masters and men at the hotel it is Henry Carson who adopts the hard line. The men make their demands but the owners are only prepared to offer a shilling a week extra. This is rejected by the men. At this moment Henry Carson attempts to force the issue, saying that there should be no concessions and that a return to work must be on the condition that they would no longer be members of the trades unions. This, as Mrs Gaskell well knew, was a burning issue of the time. At the meeting it serves only to create further antagonism. The men withdraw silently, but with aggressive determination to fight on.

During the discussions, the young Carson, not particularly concerned about the outcome, amused himself by drawing a caricature of the workers, in their poor state and worn out clothes. This careless act is not only to contribute substantially to the development of the strike itself but it will also be fatal to the artist himself. The workers are aware of the drawing being made and the amusement that it causes as it is passed from hand to hand. The sting of humiliation is too great. The carelessly discarded sketch is later recovered by one of the men. It is taken as a proof of the implied attitudes of the owners, and shown to the other workers.

The second meeting takes place at the Weavers' Arms, where the union assembles to hear a speaker - supposedly a member of the union executive council - from London. Mrs Gaskell takes a surprisingly condescending approach to him in the novel and sees him rather as a force for evil. She describes him as one who 'might have been a disgraced medical student of the Bob Sawyer class, or an unsuccessful actor, or flashy shopman.'⁸² She condemns this kind of man because he provokes men to actions which must eventually have consequences which are undesirable, if not disastrous. Although Kingsley would agree with the assessment of the consequences, his treatment of Alton Locke in this capacity is much more sympathetic and plausible. In trying to present a strong contrast between the London speaker and the moving speeches of the locals which immediately follow, Mrs Gaskell has unfortunately created a straw figure in the person of the union representative.

After the man from London has left, the workers turn to discuss Harry Carson's caricature of them. In the conversation which follows Mrs Gaskell shows her understanding of their attitudes:

"Well!" said John Slater, after having acknowledged his nose and his likeness; "I could laugh at a jest as well as e'er on the best on 'em, though it tell agen mysel, if I were not clemming" (his eyes filled with tears; he was a poor, pinched, sharp-featured man, with a gentle and melancholy expression of countenance), "and if I could keep from thinking of them at home, as is clemming; but with their cries for food ringing in my ears, and making me afeard of going home, and wonder if I should hear 'em wailing out, if I lay cold and drowned at th' bottom o' th' canal there, - why, man, I cannot laugh at ought,"⁸³

82 Works, I, 214.

83 Works, I, 216.

The whole conception of the caricature as the spring of the action was astute but the variety of tone which she produces in the speeches of these working men is inspired. John Slater, vividly, if slightly sentimentally, portrayed, hovers between good humour and sadness as the joke is contrasted with the background of starvation. But his comments are only part of the response. John Barton, who missed the meeting with the owners, now sees the drawing for the first time. His reactions are markedly different from those of John Slater:

"It makes me more than sad, it makes my heart burn within me, to see that folk can make a jest of striving men; of chaps, who comed to ask for a bit o' fire for th' old granny, as shivers i' th' cold; for a bit o' bedding, and some warm clothing to the poor wife who lies in labour on th' damp flags; and for victuals for the childer, whose little voices are getting too faint and weak to cry aloud wi' hunger."⁸⁴

This is the beginning of a long speech in which Barton gives vent to feelings which he has held pent up for months past. His arguments stir the men and when they are roused he begins to explain the reason for his absence from the meeting that morning. He had been to visit Jonas Higginbotham who had been arrested for throwing vitriol in a 'knob-stick's' face.⁸⁵ Higginbotham, overcome by feelings of pity and

⁸⁴ Works, I, 216-17

⁸⁵ 'The crime of vitriol throwing is a novel feature in the annals of this country. It consists of putting into a wide necked bottle a quantity of sulphuric acid - oil of vitriol as it is commonly called - and throwing this upon the person of the obnoxious individual, being either directed to the face or dress ... This demoniacal proceeding was exceedingly prevalent during the turn out of 1830-1, many masters not daring to stir out during the evening.' Peter Gaskell, The Manufacturing Population of England, p.300n.

shame, gives Barton his watch which he wishes to sell in order to compensate the victim's family. Barton then goes to the hospital to see the man:

"So I did what Jonas wished. But bless your life, none on us would ever throw vitriol again (at least at a knob-stick) if they could see the sight I saw to-day. The man lay, his face all wrapped in cloths, so I didn't see that; but not a limb, nor a bit of a limb, could keep from quivering with pain. He would ha' bitten his hand to keep down his moans, but he couldn't, his face hurt him so if he moved e'er so little."⁸⁶

On the surface, this might seem sensational but, it was a serious contemporary problem and Mrs Gaskell accurately records the events of the time.

John Barton's antagonism towards the owners again comes to the fore:

"Well! every man has a right to his opinion; but since I've thought on th' matter to-day, I've thought we han all on us been more like cowards in attacking the poor like ourselves; them as has none to help, but mun choose between vitriol and starvation. I say we're more cowardly in doing that than in leaving them alone. No! what I would do is this. Have at the masters!" Again he shouted, "Have at the masters!"⁸⁷

Barton is now clearly saying what the others wished to hear but as

⁸⁶ Works, I, 218.

⁸⁷ Works, I, 219.

yet had not dared to voice. They require little persuasion. They do no need the rhetoric of an accomplished speaker, his ardent emotional outburst is sufficient. Mrs Gaskell has constructed Barton's speech with skill.⁸⁸ She uses simple sentences and a limited vocabulary in keeping with his working class background yet she successfully manages to convey both an intelligent appraisal of the situation by this man and an emotional strength which tells on both his fellow workers and the reader. The die is now cast and moments later the group are drawing lots for who should strike the blow against one of the masters. It is interesting to note that they do not discuss the name of the victim nor the methods nor the lengths to which they are prepared to go, although some mention is made of a beating. This appears to be deliberate. Mrs Gaskell wishes to convey a vagueness of purpose in the workers' minds in order that the implications of the deed may be lessened. Only towards the end of the novel will John Barton be forced to face up to the reality of Harry Carson as a person rather than an object of hatred.⁸⁹ The chapter ends, however, on a slightly false note when Mrs Gaskell falls back on her unfortunate melodramatic vocabulary and speaks of 'assassins' and 'murderers', which, in spite of their intentions, seems inappropriate.

That the union should go to the length of resorting to murder has often been cited as an exaggeration on Mrs Gaskell's part. It was not a common event but the murders which did occur greatly disturbed the middle classes.⁹⁰ The murder of Thomas Ashton of Pole Bank after a

⁸⁸For a more detailed discussion of John Barton's speech see Chapter 7 below.

⁸⁹Works, I, 424-25.

⁹⁰See above pp. 169-70.

trade union dispute, was so similar to the one described in Mary Barton that Mary Potter, the sister of the murdered man, fainted when, in 1849, she read the description of Harry Carson's death. Both her son and his uncle, Sir John Potter, blamed Mrs Gaskell for reviving this tragedy and she was obliged to defend herself.

In the letter to Sir John Potter, Mrs Gaskell attempted to explain the circumstances which led her to describe the murder in the particular way that she did. It therefore gives some indication as to how her creative imagination worked. She says:

Of course I had heard of young Mr Ashton's murder at the time when it took place; but I knew none of the details, nothing about the family, never read the trial (if trial there were, which I do not to this day know;) and [that] if the circumstance were present to my mind at the time of my writing Mary Barton it was so unconsciously; although it's [sic] occurrence, and that of one or two similar cases at Glasgow at the time of a strike, were, I have no doubt, suggestive of the plot, as having shown me to what lengths the animosity of irritated workmen would go. I have been exceedingly grieved to find how much pain I have unintentionally given to a family of whom I know nothing but that they have suffered a great sorrow.⁹¹

Mrs Gaskell not only vindicates herself in the letter but she also shows her familiarity with the material which went to make up the kind of realism which the novel displays.

91 The Letters of Mrs Gaskell, p.196, letter 130 (16 August 1852). As J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard have pointed out, the description of the events of the murder of Thomas Ashton are given in Thomas Middleton's Annals of Hyde and District, (Manchester, 1899), pp.85-94.

The death of young Carson is the turning point in the book. Up until this time the main emphasis had been upon the character of John Barton, and Mary had played a minor role. From this point onwards, Mary increasingly takes up our interest as her personality grows in stature, while her father sinks into the background. This change of direction must in part be related to the persuasive efforts of her publishers.⁹²

Convincingly, John Barton on the night of the murder had set off to travel to Glasgow as a union delegate, therefore his disappearance from the novel for a considerable period of time is both convenient and acceptable. He leaves the stage clear for Mary. Mrs Gaskell thus develops, from this juncture, the more conventional romantic theme at the expense of what she considered to be the more important theme of the conditions of the lives of working class men like John Barton. However, she is a sufficiently skilled artist, even in her first novel, not to make the change of direction too abrupt or too obvious. Nevertheless, Mrs Gaskell's attention in this part of the book is no longer focused on the working class milieu but on a subject which cuts across class boundaries - murder. She is intent upon examining the interaction between those characters who are most concerned with the event. But one of those characters is naturally the working class mother of Jem. Mrs Gaskell develops Mrs Wilson's reactions with great skill. She provides us with a masterly account of a simple uneducated mind which is swayed by every changing wind of emotion and opinion. She creates a scene where the poor woman is deeply involved in the care of the dying Alice Wilson and therefore ill-prepared for the arrival of the cunning

⁹² For a discussion of Chapman and Hall's influence on the novel see above p.155.

detective who is seeking to establish the ownership of the murder weapon. Mrs Wilson is quite willing to vouch for Jem's ownership of the gun without thinking who the man was who asked the questions, or what significance the questions might have. After Jem is arrested, a fellow worker comes to see her in an attempt to excuse Jem's absence. First, she attacks Jem for being absent when she needed him, then she attacks the workman and calls him a liar when he says Jem has been arrested. She next accuses him of joking and when Mary Barton's name is mentioned she turns her wrath on her:

"Mary Barton! the dirty hussy! to bring my Jem into trouble of this kind. I'll give it her well when I see her, that I will. Oh! my poor Jem!" rocking herself to and fro. "And what about the gun? What did ye say about that?"

"His gun were found on th' spot where the murder were done."

"That's a lie for one, then. A man has got the gun now, safe and sound. I saw it not an hour ago."

The man shook his head.⁹³

She is shown to be quite unable to cope with the series of events which come upon her so quickly. She will not be comforted by anyone and continually changes from being convinced that Jem will be saved to being convinced that he will hang.

After Aunt Esther has visited Mary Barton and given her the scrap of paper she found at the spot where Harry Carson was murdered, Mary is placed in a position which is almost a classic dilemma. Her task is to attempt to save Jem, whom she knows to be innocent, without implicating her father, whom she knows to be guilty.

⁹³ Works, I, 260.

Mrs Gaskell now shows the former, somewhat flighty, Mary Barton in a new light, as we see her wrestling with her dilemma. (In showing her intelligence and strength of will, Mrs Gaskell gives Mary qualities which she will develop later in the character of Margaret Hale in North and South.) She realises the need for an alibi for Jem and seeks, with Job Legh's advice, the means of obtaining it. The fatal night, Jem had accompanied Will Wilson part of the way back to his ship in Liverpool docks. Therefore Will must be found in order to prove Jem's innocence at the trial on the following Tuesday.

The novel is now not only no longer concerned with working class problems but also moves out of the environment of Manchester. The next part of the book is taken up with Mary's exciting, if melodramatic, pursuit of the elusive witness, Will Wilson. This includes the unexpectedly early sailing of Will's ship and the pursuit of it by a small boat. This is followed by his return in the pilot boat against contrary winds and his eleventh hour appearance in court in order to substantiate Jem's story, added for good measure.

In this part of the book Mrs Gaskell's style undergoes a considerable change. She concentrates on the action at the expense of all else. There is a major shift in the pace of the novel. This is emphasised by the shortness of the chapters, the brief descriptions of events and the frequent authorial comment which is interposed in order to get information across as quickly as possible.

At the conclusion of the trial, when Jem steps from the court a free man, Mrs Gaskell is faced with a structural problem of an anti-climax. This she attempts to offset by returning our attention to Mary Barton, who has succumbed to a fever after having revealed her true

feelings to Jem in a very contrived scene in open court. Her delirium creates further interest as she babbles about the real murderer, her father. This fever serves to remove her from the events of the end of the trial, which would have been difficult for the writer to deal with. To do so would have involved Jem in the difficult emotional response to his mother and Mary at the same time. It would have created problems for Mary in the follow up of her direct confession of love at the trial. Mary's illness also gave an opportunity to get his mother adjusted to the idea of Jem's possible marriage to Mary Barton and time for the romance to develop during the period of Mary's convalescence.

During this time it is made clear that they both know who the real murderer is and this acts as a two-edged sword, strengthening and weakening their relationship at the same time. It strengthens in the sense that it is a burden which they must inevitably share, if they are to remain together; but it is weakening because in this knowledge lie the seeds of the possible destruction of their love. Finally, Mary's illness gives an opportunity for a reasonable period to have elapsed since Barton committed the murder before father and daughter have to face one another again.

When Mary returns to Manchester, Mrs Gaskell is also back on familiar ground, not only geographically but also in dealing with the character with whom she was most concerned - John Barton.

He sat by the fire; the grate, I should say, for fire there was none. Some dull, grey ashes, negligently left, long days ago, coldly choked up the bars. He had taken the accustomed seat from mere force of habit, which ruled his automaton body. For all energy, both physical and mental, seemed to have retreated inwards to some of the great citadels of life, there to do battle against the Destroyer, Conscience.

His hands were crossed, his fingers interlaced; usually a position implying some degree of resolution, or strength; but in him it was so faintly maintained, that it appeared more the result of chance; an attitude requiring some application of outward force to alter - and a blow with a straw seemed as though it would be sufficient.

And as for his face, it was sunk and worn - like a skull, with yet a suffering expression that skulls have not! Your heart would have ached to have seen the man, however hardly you might have judged his crime.⁹⁴

Here we are no longer being given the sensational reporting of the court scenes: Mrs Gaskell has now returned to the sombre seriousness of the criminal in his social setting. It is not by chance that the conditions of the home are introduced when the character is described on his re-entry into the novel. The cold hostile living conditions of the worker, symbolised by the empty grate, are a reminder of the events which led up to the union commitment to the murder. She succeeds in her sympathetic treatment and it is difficult to condemn the murderer without careful reflection upon the conditions under which he, and thousands of others, suffered.

But the contemporary response to John Barton must be viewed differently and Mrs Gaskell lacked the confidence (it was her first novel) to present this man's action without compromise. Instead she unfortunately chooses a way out through the contrived meeting of Barton and Carson and the even more questionable reconciliation in the death-bed scene. Her difficulties were increased because she wished to overlay the scenes with the wider implications of the murder and put forward

⁹⁴ Works, I, 410-11.

her central theme, that understanding and sympathy between masters and men is the key to solving the industrial conflicts.

When John Barton meets Carson and begins to understand what the loss of his son has meant to him, then his sympathy is aroused, as he sees his own earlier loss reflected in Mr Carson's bereavement.

The eyes of John Barton grew dim with tears. Rich and poor, masters and men, were then brothers in the deep suffering of the heart; for was not this the very anguish he had felt for little Tom, in years so long gone by that they seemed like another life?⁹⁵

This is more than an attempt to reconcile the two men, it is an examination of the way in which Barton is obliged to reconstruct his view of reality, when Carson unwittingly recalls the suffering that he experienced at the death of his son, Tom. When the two men's emotional experiences overlap, for a brief period of time they are able to perceive the world from the same point of view. Barton learns to understand the owners as men as well as objects which thwart the workers in achieving their rights. Mrs Gaskell clearly states the view we are to take of Barton's frame of mind at the time of the murder, when she says:

To intimidate a class of men, known only to those below them as desirous to obtain the greatest quantity of work for the lowest wages - at most to remove an overbearing partner from an obnoxious firm, who stood in the way of those who struggled as well as they were able to obtain their rights - this was the light in which John Barton had viewed his deed.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Works, I, 425.

⁹⁶ Works, I, 425.

But in order to give her arguments additional strength, she places her final remarks in the mouth of Job Legh. This character has been carefully built up throughout the novel, so that the reader believes him to be intelligent, rational, cautious in his decisions and moderate in his views. He is a member of a trade union, but he says: "I'm but a sleeping partner in the concern. I were obliged to become a member for peace, else I don't go along with 'em."⁹⁷ Therefore, when we hear his views in the conversation with Mr Carson we are more ready to accept them. He reiterates, in a modified form, John Barton's argument in the earlier part of the novel, and the extra pages required by the publisher were used by Mrs Gaskell to make more explicit arguments which were present in the rest of the text.⁹⁸ He expresses Mrs Gaskell's essential message that economic arguments are secondary to the consideration of social evils in human terms. She is not interested in arguments of supply and demand or profit and loss, she is concerned with man's inhumanity to man; in this sense she is attempting to envisage the future welfare state, with minimum living wages, protection for the old, the young and the sick. She argues that it is the workers and not the masters who are unable to protect themselves from the fluctuations in markets and trade. As Job Legh says:

"though I'm not given to Political Economy, I know that much. I'm wanting in learning, I'm aware; but I can use my eyes. I never see masters getting thin and haggard for want of food; I hardly ever see them making much change in their way of living, though I don't doubt

⁹⁷ Works, I, 228.

⁹⁸ See above, p.155. Ellis Chadwick in Mrs.Gaskell: Haunts, Homes, and Stories p.242, refers to this section as 'a fine "summing up", which affords scope for her well-thought-out gospel.'

they've got to do it in bad times. But it's in things for show they cut short; while for such as me, it's things for life we've to stint. For sure, sir, you'll own it's come to a hard pass when a man would give ought in the world for work to keep his children from starving, and can't get a bit, if he's ever so willing to labour."⁹⁹

Mr Carson tries to parry these arguments by reference to the problems of trade and the use of hard facts, but Job will not accept this. He maintains that human problems cannot be solved with reference to facts alone, because they are inadequate tools to tackle that kind of problem:

"You can never work facts as you would fixed quantities, and say, given two facts, and the product is so and so. God has given men feelings and passions which cannot be worked into the problem, because they are for ever changing and uncertain. God has also made some weak; not in any one way, but in all. One is weak in body, another in mind, another in steadiness of purpose, a fourth can't tell right from wrong, and so on; or if he can tell the right, he wants strength to hold by it. Now, to my thinking, them that is strong in any of God's gifts is meant to help the weak - be hanged to the facts!"¹⁰⁰

In spite of Mrs Gaskell's obvious strong feelings on the subject of the relations between masters and men, she manages to retain control of the medium sufficiently to present her argument through Job as an intelligent working man might have expressed it. Job does not possess the same qualities as John Barton and this demonstrates the extent of Mrs Gaskell's

⁹⁹ Works, I, 447.

¹⁰⁰ Works, I, 448.

perception of working class characters because they are seen as distinct figures and not simply as stereotype representatives of a class.

Mrs Gaskell is much more able to create characters who articulate the author's arguments than Kingsley was.

Mr Carson appears unconvinced by Job's arguments, when they part, but Mrs Gaskell offers some optimism when she refers to the change of attitude which Mr Carson undergoes. In other words we are presented at this stage with the view that Mrs Gaskell holds of an ideal employer and the ideals he might hold in such a situation:

But those who were admitted into his confidence were aware, that the wish that lay nearest to his heart was that none might suffer from the cause from which he had suffered; that a perfect understanding, and complete confidence and love, might exist between masters and men; that the truth might be recognised that the interests of one were the interests of all, and, as such, required the consideration and deliberation of all; that hence it was most desirable to have educated workers, capable of judging, not mere machines of ignorant men; and to have them bound to their employers by the ties of respect and affection, not by mere money bargains alone; in short, to acknowledge the Spirit of Christ as the regulating law between both parties.¹⁰¹

This optimism strikes a false note. It is not in keeping with the character of Carson from our past experience of him, regardless of his supposed conversion, and it is not supported by the general feeling of the novel up to this point. There is also no evidence of change in the

¹⁰¹ Works, I, 451.

concluding episodes of the book. Jem, although declared innocent by the court, is not reinstated in his old job. Many of his fellow workers do not believe in his innocence and will not work with him. For Mary to remain in Manchester is also impossible because she would have to live in fear of being revealed as the daughter of a murderer and consequently being subjected to all kinds of torment. Therefore Mrs Gaskell finds the solution in emigration. Jem and Mary are conveniently found a happy home in Canada. But the problems of Manchester remain unsolved. The heroine may have found a bright future but for the industrial population the sufferings continue.

The two themes of the book, therefore, do not fit easily together. The change of emphasis from John to Mary Barton split the book down the middle and the difference in tone is very noticeable between the first and second half of the novel. In creating a working class environment and developing a working class hero Mrs Gaskell has been original and highly successful. The conception and presentation of John Barton as a product of social forces is so convincing that the desperate extremity of murder to which the man is driven becomes believable, almost justifiable. But the murder brought difficulties. Regardless of whether Mrs Gaskell had accepted the advice of the publishers or not,¹⁰² she would have been faced with the problem of presenting a working class hero who was also a murderer - something that the reading public were likely to find unpalatable, in spite of her sympathetic treatment of the subject. But Mary Barton also presented difficulties because a genuine working class girl like Bessie Higgins in North and South would not have been able to bear the burden of being a leading figure. She could not

¹⁰² For reference to Chapman and Hall's suggestion see above p.155.

have satisfied her audience nor would she have been able to give full expression to the ideas which Mrs Gaskell wished to convey. Intelligent working class men presenting their ideas in a novel had been a radical step but working class girls doing the same would have been too radical to have been accepted. At least Mrs Gaskell seems to have thought so. Mary Barton's character thus acquires a certain false gentility which does not ring true. With the change of emphasis to Mary Barton and the trial of Jem Wilson the novel loses much of its strength, and it is weakened further by the unsatisfactory attempt to bring the disparate themes of love and social concern together at the close of the novel. However, this partial failure in the structure does not undervalue Mrs Gaskell's achievement in her treatment of the working class. In speaking of Mrs Gaskell's achievement in Mary Barton, John Sharps uses the phrase 'imaginative documentation'¹⁰³ and draws attention to her letter on the subject of 'truth' in the novel:

I believe what I have said in Mary Barton to be perfectly true, but by no means the whole truth; I do not think it is possible to do this in any one work of fiction.¹⁰⁴

In creating the working class world of Mary Barton Mrs Gaskell's emphasis had been upon presenting the one class almost to the exclusion of the other. The Carson family is poorly represented and in this respect some of W.R. Greg's comments¹⁰⁵ are justified. The success of presenting a distinctive view of life as seen by the working class is

¹⁰³John Sharps, Mrs. Gaskell's Observation and Invention, p.62.

¹⁰⁴The Letters of Mrs Gaskell, p.119, letter 72a (16 July 1850).

¹⁰⁵William Rathbone Greg, Review of Mary Barton in The Edinburgh Review, LXXXIX (1849), 403-410.

almost paradoxically diminished by the absence of a fully developed middle class dimension. When she came to write North and South the technique of exploring the middle class and the working class worlds side by side enabled her to present more convincingly the contrasting views which they held and each class served to highlight the unique attitudes of the other.

Chapter 6: North and South

Six years elapsed between the publication of Mary Barton and that of North and South. The fame of Mary Barton had drawn Mrs Gaskell into a wider circle of friends and acquaintances. It had given her opportunities to meet other writers and critics. Her admirers included Ruskin, Kingsley, Carlyle and Landor, from whom she had received congratulations on her work. One of the advantages gained by her success was the recognition by Dickens that Mrs Gaskell was a writer of talent. This led to her making a number of contributions to Household Words.

The first story of hers that Dickens published in his Journal was 'Lizzie Leigh' (1850) and it was followed by 'The Well of Pen-Morfa' (1850) and 'The Heart of John Middleton' (1850). It was in response to Dickens's enthusiastic support that Cranford also appeared in Household Words.

It is not part of this study to examine Mrs Gaskell's other works, but it is nevertheless important to remember that both Cranford and Ruth, which appeared before North and South, were major achievements in her development as a writer. Of Cranford, the most popular of Mrs Gaskell's works, her contemporary Charlotte Brontë observed it to be 'pleasurable reading - graphic, pithy, penetrating, shrewd, yet kind and indulgent.'¹ This kind of comment epitomized the general attitude to Cranford, but perhaps what is even more important from the point of view of the examination of Mrs Gaskell as a novelist of social concern is the ability which she displays in Cranford of interweaving fact and fiction. Her daughters commented to her that many of the characters in the book were recognizable from the real models she had used, but she seems not

¹ The Brontës, Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence, edited by Thomas J. Wise and John A. Symington (Oxford, 1932), IV, 76.

to have been consciously aware of this until it was pointed out to her. But there were also real life events which she deliberately included, as, for example, the covering of the new carpet with paper, which she refers to in a letter to John Ruskin.²

With Cranford Mrs Gaskell succeeded in developing characters which are placed in a social structure and cultural setting. The inhabitants of Cranford interact with one another socially and their behaviour is seriously influenced by their concern for their own and other people's social status. In Cranford Mrs Gaskell reveals many of the subtle class distinctions which are the concern of the middle classes. Cranford is an example of a hierarchical structure in miniature. It is this perception of society which is developed in both North and South and later in Wives and Daughters.

She originally intended to write only one episode of Cranford in Household Words, but Dickens persuaded her to write more. In a letter to Ruskin, referred to above, she explains how it happened:

The beginning of 'Cranford' was one paper in 'Household Words'; and I never meant to write more, so killed Capt Brown very much against my will.³

In her development as a writer she here had her first experience of the demands of the artist conflicting with the needs of the journal. There had been some difficulties with Mary Barton but the conflict had been of a different kind. However, at this stage she was very willing to

² The Letters of Mrs Gaskell, edited by J.A.V.Chapple and A.Pollard (Manchester, 1966), p.748, letter 562 (February 1865).

³ The Letters of Mrs Gaskell, p.748.

compromise with her art and Dickens was able to persuade her to write more. She eventually wrote a further seven episodes which were published at irregular intervals between 1851 and May 1853.

It was inevitable that the overall framework should be weak, given the nature of its evolution, but the lessons she had learnt regarding the analysis of social behaviour in one class were readily transferred to the examination of a broader class structure when she began to write North and South.

During the period in which she was writing the episodes of Cranford, she was also working on a novel of a very different kind. Ruth was published by Chapman and Hall in January, 1853. Unlike Cranford, it explored a controversial area. Unmarried mothers, were rarely felt to be a proper subject for conversation, and even less for a novel, in the 1850s. It was a topic which had concerned Mrs Gaskell for some time and was the cause of her initial correspondence with Dickens, before he considered her as a writer.

The reaction to the book was strong on both literary and moral grounds. Some found it to be a very good novel, others felt it to be dull. From the ethical point of view, some found it to have a high moral tone, others thought it dangerous. The adverse reactions to Ruth considerably upset Mrs Gaskell as her letter to Eliza Fox reveals:

I think I must be an improper woman without knowing it, I do so manage to shock people. Now should you have burnt the 1st vol. of Ruth as so very bad? even if you had been a very anxious father of a family? Yet two men have; and a third has forbidden his wife to read it; they sit

next to us in Chapel and you can't think how 'improper' I feel under their eyes.⁴

It was not so much the subject of Ruth which was different, because the seduction of women had been dealt with before. What was new and controversial was Mrs Gaskell's attempt to examine the event as a social problem rather than a crime and to grant Ruth certain virtues rather than simply condemn her. Unfortunately, her intense interest in the problem caused her to misuse her powers as an artist, and there are a number of lapses. This is particularly true of some of the very contrived scenes and coincidences relating to Ruth's lover, Bellingham. These difficulties increase in the latter half of the book, when, during a typhus epidemic, Ruth nurses her former seducer back to health and dies as a result. Nevertheless, the book has power and the concentration on the development of Ruth produces a character of considerable depth.

One of the criticisms levelled at Ruth was the lie used by those who gave the heroine a home, in describing her as a widow. The harmful effects of lying were something of an idée fixe with Mrs Gaskell and it links Ruth to North and South and later to Sylvia's Lovers. Both Ruth and Margaret Hale are obliged to be party to a lie, which appears at the time to be for a very just cause, yet in both instances the consequences are dire. It is clear that Mrs Gaskell placed truth on a very high pedestal and those who lied, for whatever reason, were obliged to suffer.

But if there are superficial likenesses between Ruth, Mary Barton and North and South in that they are concerned with social problems,

⁴ The Letters of Mrs Gaskell, p.223, letter 150 (February 1853).

there are also fundamental differences. Ruth is essentially concerned with the problem of personal morality and the ethics of a society at a particular time, whereas the other two novels are concerned with the complexities of the relationships between social classes and in this respect Mary Barton and North and South are more akin to Cranford.

North and South was first published in a series of weekly parts in Dickens's journal Household Words. It began on 2 September 1854 and was concluded on 27 January 1855. As we have seen, Mrs Gaskell had already made some contributions to Household Words, but the continued pressure of maintaining contributions for a full-length novel was of a different order. In the correspondence between Mrs Gaskell and Dickens it can be seen that the problems of serialization created difficulties both for her as a writer and for him as an editor. The points at issue were: how the novel should be divided for publishing in weekly parts, and what limitations should be placed upon its length.

Mrs Gaskell as a wife and mother had other duties to perform and was unable to devote the sustained effort to the task which serialization, of the kind demanded by Dickens, required. Also her style of writing, which was of a relatively leisurely pace, did not easily respond to the need for swift action and climaxes, which was the style Dickens had led his readers to expect.

Initially the relationship between Dickens and Mrs Gaskell was very cordial. In February 1854 he writes:

Don't put yourself out at all as to the division of the story into parts; I think you had better write it in your own way. When we come to get a little of it into type, I have no doubt of being able to make such

little suggestions as to breaks of chapters as will carry us over all that easily.⁵

Mrs Gaskell began North and South at the same time as Dickens was writing Hard Times. When she became worried that they were covering the same ground, particularly with reference to the use of a strike, Dickens replies in a most helpful manner:

... but I am not going to strike. So don't be afraid of me. But I wish you would look at the story yourself, and judge where and how near I seem to be approaching what you have in mind.⁶

When Dickens received the first part of the novel he was full of praise for its quality:

I have read the MS you have had the kindness to send me, with all possible attention and care. I have shut myself up for the purpose, and allowed nothing to divide my thoughts. It opens an admirable story, is full of character and power, has a strong suspended interest in it (the end of which, I don't in the least foresee), and has the very best marks of your hand upon it.⁷

This apparent easygoing approach in the early stages of writing the novel misled Mrs Gaskell concerning the urgency of keeping to a tight schedule with the constant pressure from the printers. As time passed Dickens also attempted to persuade her to make changes which he felt were necessary for the format of Household Words. Mrs Gaskell for her

⁵ The Letters of Charles Dickens, edited by Walter Dexter, 3 vols (London, 1938), II, 542.

⁶ Ibid, II, 554.

⁷ Ibid, II, 561.

part was less willing to yield than formerly and friction arose. Thus by August of the same year, the tone of Dickens's letters to her on the subject of North and South had undergone a sharp change:

I have just received from Wills, in proof, our No. for the 9th of September containing the Second Part of North and South, as it originally stood, and unaltered by you.

This is the place where we agreed that there should be a great condensation, and a considerable compression, where Mr Hale states his doubts to Margaret. The mechanical necessities of Household Words oblige us to get to press with this No. immediately.⁸

By the middle of October Dickens attitude had become very harsh. Writing to Wills on the subject of North and South, he says:

I am sorry to hear of the Sale dropping, but I am not surprised. Mrs Gaskell's story, so divided, is wearisome in the last degree.⁹

Unfortunately, the letters Mrs Gaskell herself wrote to Dickens on the subject of North and South are lost, so that one tends to get a one-sided view of the correspondence. However, from letters to her friends we do know that the difficulties increased towards the end of the novel when, because of some misunderstanding, she had fewer numbers to complete the story in than she had anticipated. In a letter to Anna Jameson she says:

⁸ The Letters of Charles Dickens, II, 582.

⁹ The Letters of Charles Dickens, II, 598.

though I had the plot and characters in my head long ago, I have often been in despair about the working of them out; because of course, in this way of publishing it, I had to write pretty hard without waiting for the happy leisure hours. And then 20 numbers was, I found my allowance; instead of the too scant 22, which I had fancied were included in 'five months'; and at last the story is huddled and hurried up; especially in the rapidity with which the sudden death of Mr Bell, succeeds to the sudden death of Mr Hale. But what could I do? Every page was grudged me, just at last, when I did certainly infringe all the bounds & limits they set me as to quantity. Just at the very last I was compelled to desperate compression.¹⁰

During the time the novel was being serialized, negotiations had been undertaken with Chapman and Hall for the publication of North and South in two volumes. This created additional problems for her because, although she was not content with the novel as it appeared in Household Words, she did not relish the idea of completely revising the whole work and said so to Anna Jameson in the latter half of the letter quoted above. However, she was so dissatisfied with the final part of the novel that she expanded what had been chapters 44, 45, 46 in Household Words. In the Author's Preface to the First Edition of North and South, Mrs Gaskell gives the reason for the changes and explains the constraints which had been placed upon her by serialization,

the author found it impossible to develop the story in the manner originally intended, and, more especially, was compelled to hurry on the events with an improbable rapidity towards the close. In some

¹⁰ The Letters of Mrs Gaskell, pp.328-9, letter 225 (January 1855).

degree to remedy this obvious defect, various short passages have been inserted, and several new chapters added.¹¹

These chapters are now IIxix and xxii-xxvi. She also added two new chapters, IIxx, xxi. This change permitted her to introduce the chapter concerning Margaret's return visit to Helstone and allow a greater space between the death of Mr Hale and Mr Bell. But it is evident that she was weary of the task and she resorted to patching by slotting sentences and paragraphs from the original into the new material. There are no important structural changes, and in spite of the alterations the novel still gives the impression of haste.

William Greg, who had been harsh in his criticism of Mary Barton, says of North and South, that:

I find no fault in it, which is a great deal for a critic to say, seeing that one inevitably gets the habit of reading in a somewhat critical spirit. I do not think it is as thorough a work of genius as "Mary Barton", - nor the subject as interesting as Ruth - but I like it better than either.¹²

Another contemporary, Sir William Fairbairn, praised its factual accuracy:

Poor old Higgins, with his weak, consumptive daughter is a true picture of a Manchester man. There are many like him in this town, and a better sample of independent industry you could not have hit upon. Higgins is

¹¹ The Works of Mrs Gaskell, edited by Adolphus Ward, 8 vols (London, 1906), IV, xxix.

¹² Clement Shorter, Correspondence, Articles and Notes Relating to Mrs. E.C. Gaskell, W.R.Greg's letter to Mrs Gaskell (no date).

an excellent representation of a Lancashire operative; strictly independent, and is one of the best characters in the piece.¹³

Later critics have responded to North and South in a variety of ways. David Cecil, as we have already seen with regard to Mary Barton, was particularly hard in his attitude towards her industrial novels. He says:

It would have been impossible for her if she had tried, to have found a subject less suited to her talents. It was neither domestic nor pastoral. It gave scope neither to the humorous, the pathetic nor charming. Further, it entailed an understanding of economics and history wholly outside the range of her Victorian feminine intellect.¹⁴

Gerald De Witt Sanders writing five years earlier in 1929 on the same subject, spoke of Mrs Gaskell's work in less emotional and more descriptive terms:

In each book she noted the evils due to misunderstandings between the classes, and proposed ways to eliminate these evils. Her remedy in each novel is the creation of a better understanding between the classes by a closer contact between individuals of both groups. Such co-operation in North and South is shown through the relations between Thornton and Higgins.¹⁵

¹³ Clement Shorter, Correspondence, Articles and Notes Relating to Mrs. E.C. Gaskell, Sir William Fairbairn's letter to Mrs Gaskell (6 June 1855).

¹⁴ David Cecil, Early Victorian Novelists (London, 1934), p.235.

¹⁵ Gerald De Witt Sanders, Elizabeth Gaskell (New Haven, 1929), p.70.

This does not say much about the quality of the novel as art. Real praise for North and South did not come until much later. Raymond Williams looking at the works from a rather special point of view, found North and South less satisfying than Mary Barton:

Mrs Gaskell's second industrial novel, North and South, is less interesting, because the tension is less.¹⁶

Arthur Pollard, on the other hand, in comparing the two novels took entirely the opposite view, arguing that the development that the novelist had undergone between the two novels was substantial:

Unlike Mary Barton, North and South avoids the sensational and the melodramatic. It is also much less patchy, much less dependent on sudden accelerations of excitement. Its pace is more even and purposeful; the whole work is much more unified; the transitions are managed more skilfully and more naturally.¹⁷

Later in the same chapter of North and South, Mr. Pollard goes on to praise a very important development in the quality of Mrs Gaskell's writing:

Her awareness of the way in which characters interact and her representation of this interaction marks the greatest advance in Mrs Gaskell's practice of the craft of fiction in North and South as compared with her previous works.¹⁸

¹⁶ Raymond Williams, Culture and Society 1780-1950 (London, 1958), p.91.

¹⁷ Arthur Pollard, Mrs Gaskell - Novelist and Biographer (Manchester, 1965), p.113.

¹⁸ Arthur Pollard, p.134.

Annette Hopkins also praises her industrial novels and argues that she is the most successful writer in the treatment of this particular genre:

Dickens, Reade, Kingsley, Disraeli, she out-does them all in balance, veracity, freedom from exaggeration.¹⁹

One of the most recent treatments of Mrs Gaskell has been by Dr Craik. She has attempted to assess the achievement of Mrs Gaskell and place her in relation to other great novelists of the nineteenth century. Of North and South, Dr Craik has this to say:

A change in the author's purpose is clearly revealed. She is more concerned now with bringing out the universal human issues, of conflicts of groups and pressures of society within itself, and pressures upon the individuals who compose it.²⁰

However, she makes no substantial examination of Mrs Gaskell's treatment of the relationship between the social classes or discussion of her awareness of class consciousness. Coral Lansbury also promises more in her analysis of social relationships in the novels than is actually achieved, but in her treatment of North and South she makes this important point:

¹⁹ Annette Hopkins, Elizabeth Gaskell, Her Life and Work, (London, 1952), p.328.

²⁰ W.A.Craik, Elizabeth Gaskell and the English Provincial Novel (London, 1975), p.93.

Elizabeth Gaskell is always aware of a fact that seems to elude most historians. It is not what happens that is important, but what people believe has happened.²¹

Thus in more recent years it has been possible to see a growing interest in and appreciation of the qualities of social insight contained in both Mary Barton and North and South.

By the time Mrs Gaskell came to write North and South she had developed a great deal. The result is a much more sophisticated novel than Mary Barton. In place of the simple comparison between town and country at the opening of the earlier novel, she has developed the contrast into a sustained metaphor, which extends over the entire length of North and South. It is more than a simple physical contrast and it embraces the various attitudes and values of a number of families and individuals. The Hales, the Lennoxes, the Thorntons, and the Higgineses and even to some extent, Mr Bell, offer a range of perspectives. She is able to show the reader the different ways in which these groups comprehend the world, and so to reveal the sources of conflict which arise from the possession of diverse views. We do not find a total working class world in the novel as we did for the greater part of Mary Barton. In North and South the strength of her perception and interpretation of the working class relies heavily on contrast. Mrs Gaskell uses the variety of different viewpoints to emphasise what is unique in working class attitudes and culture. She constantly requires the reader to move from the known to the unknown by offering the familiar middle class view and then following it up by a contrasting working class perspective

²¹Coral Lansbury, Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis
(London, 1975), p.99.

on the same or similar events. Therefore, in this chapter it is necessary to give much more space to the patterns of behaviour associated with the other social classes in order to draw out the distinctions which accompany a working class view of the world - distinctions which, in some instances, are explicit but on other occasions are merely implied.

Although the novel is mainly set in the industrial north, it begins in the home of the upper middle class family of the Lennoxes in London. The way in which the character of Margaret Hale is introduced bears some relationship to the treatment of Fanny Price in Mansfield Park. She appears as a minor character in the household of her aunt, where great preparations are underway for the marriage of her cousin. By placing her in this situation, which is in some ways alien, although in others very much part of her life, Mrs Gaskell is able to tell us a great deal about the heroine of the novel. The opening chapters are intended to establish a sympathetic response towards Margaret Hale before she commences her exploration of the very different world of the industrial north.

Most of Margaret's upbringing had been in the hands of her Aunt Shaw, who lived a life of security, comfort and ease in Harley Street. The way in which wealth is regarded in this family is later contrasted with the place money has in the lives of Thornton, Higgins and Bell. The activities of this family also provide a somewhat incongruous background against which the subsequent experiences of Margaret are sharply etched. Margaret is shown as never having become so much part of the family as to be unable to observe it. Mrs Gaskell points up the irony of her being frequently assured that she is part of the family while at the same time she is constantly made use of.

In the first chapter of the novel we learn something of the heroine's character in the preparations that are being made for the wedding and she shows herself to be not only modest but also very practical and sensible. She has a strong attachment to the village where her parents live, and after the wedding she returns home to Helstone.

The second chapter is a preparation for the future events of the novel. Her home is shown to be that of an impoverished middle class family, where her mother complains of the material deficiencies which have accompanied her marriage to an unsuccessful country parson. Her father is torn by spiritual doubts which will eventually persuade him to leave the church. Margaret also has a brother, Frederick, but the reasons for his absence are left obscure at this stage, with a vague reference to his involvement in a mutiny.

In a discussion with her mother about certain acquaintances in the neighbourhood, Margaret reveals her dislike of people in trade:

"Gormans?" said Margaret. "Are those the Gormans who made their fortunes in trade at Southampton? Oh! I'm glad we don't visit them. I don't like shoppy people. I think we are far better off, knowing only cottagers and labourers, and people without pretence."²²

In this way Mrs Gaskell prepares the reader for Margaret's reaction to Thornton when she meets him later in the book. Part of the education of the heroine is her attempts to overcome her prejudices concerning people in trade.

Shortly after Margaret's return to Helstone, Henry Lennox, her

²² Works, IV, 17-18.

cousin's brother-in-law, arrives from London with a proposal of marriage, but Margaret rejects him. This occasion again serves, as did the wedding preparations, to reveal aspects of Margaret's character. She is shown to be sensitive and sensible; keenly aware of conflicting elements in Henry Lennox's nature and her own, which would make such a partnership incompatible, yet she is careful that the rejection is given in a way which is least hurtful to his feelings. This incident will highlight a number of similarities and contrasts in the more important proposal made by Thornton to Margaret later in the novel.

Closely following the proposal Margaret learns from her father that he plans to leave Helstone and go to live in Milton Northern. He does not make entirely clear his reason for leaving the Church, but it is associated with his inability to reaffirm his declaration of conformity to the Liturgy. Ironically, the preferment which Mrs Hale had constantly hoped for had at last been offered, and this would press the vicar to make the very positive reaffirmation of his beliefs at his inception, during a time when he was so greatly troubled with doubts.

Once the decision has been made to leave, the events move quickly. Mr Hale, through weakness, had repeatedly put off telling his wife of his change of heart and it is left to Margaret to break the news to her mother. This cowardice of Mr Hale's behind a number of occasions when additional burdens are placed upon Margaret during the course of the novel. She is given the responsibility of handling her mother's illness, Frederick's secret return and even the crisis of Boucher's suicide; all of which are normally part of the father's role, but in this case add to the strength of Margaret's character.

When Mr Hale leaves the Church the family are forced upon relatively hard times. The father must eke out the little money they have by giving

private tuition. Mr Bell, who is an old friend of Hale's from Oxford, owns property in the industrial town of Milton Northern and has a tenant who is keen to have a tutor. Mr Hale happily accepts the recommendation of Milton Northern by Bell because he believes it will be a contrast with Helstone both physically and spiritually and it will not serve to constantly remind him of former times. The pupil he agrees to accept is John Thornton.

Mrs Gaskell, by contriving these changed circumstances, creates a heroine who can assume the role of a poor person, with some of its attendant circumstances, without being working class. By this means she is able to overcome some of the difficulties she experienced in creating the character of Mary Barton. In Margaret Hale, Mrs Gaskell offers a character who has some of the problems of the poor yet at the same time is required to understand the working class and view the conditions of hardship with a fresh mind. In addition, she is a girl from the south, who, in coming to live in a northern town, is obliged to examine accustomed values with a new eye. Thus the points which Mrs Gaskell wishes to make to the reader, which she anticipates will be new, will, at the same time, be new to her heroine. Because she will be able to express the necessary reactions through the mouth of her heroine, the clumsy use of the authorial voice made in Mary Barton can be more easily avoided. Margaret, by being of middle class origin, also forms a more conventional and acceptable heroine for contemporary readers.

Mrs Gaskell in the early chapters of the novel, has carefully prepared the reader, by the skilful development of Margaret's character,

for the cultural shock she receives on her arrival in Milton Northern. Her description of the Hales' first entrance into Manchester - for Manchester it is, in spite of its rather awkward pseudonym of Milton Northern - is impressive:

As they drove through the larger and wider streets, from the station to the hotel, they had to stop constantly; great loaded luries blocked up the not over-wide thoroughfares. Margaret had now and then been into the city in her drives with her aunt. But there the heavy lumbering vehicles seemed various in their purposes and intent; here every van, every waggon and truck, bore cotton, either in the raw shape in bags, or in the woven shapes in bales of calico. People thronged the foot-paths, most of them well-dressed as regarded the material, but with a slovenly looseness which struck Margaret as different from the shabby, threadbare smartness of a similar class in London.²³

The most significant aspect of this description is Mrs Gaskell's acute observation of the working classes. She is keenly aware that the working class of Manchester are a very different group from their social counterparts in London. Few other writers of the time would have been so perceptive regarding the nature of these class differences.²⁴

²³ Works, IV, 67.

²⁴ Evidence may be found to support this by taking examples from the unconvincing descriptions of industrial workers in Disraeli's Sybil or Dickens's Hard Times.

The chapter which introduces the reader to Milton also introduces the character of Thornton. The meeting between Margaret Hale and John Thornton is a clash of opposites. The values of the representatives of the two social groups are immediately in conflict. On this occasion Thornton experiences some annoyance at being delayed in his meeting with Mr Hale, because of the loss of valuable time on a market day. In drawing the reader's attention to this point, Mrs Gaskell is introducing one of the major themes of the novel. She shows great interest in the relationship between, time, leisure, earning capacity and the use of wealth and contrasts the Lennox family, Thornton, Bell and the Hales in this respect.

Contrast is a favourite device of Mrs Gaskell's and she uses it constantly. Each social group is seen deliberately in its relationship to others. Thus when Margaret is depressed by her new home in Milton a letter arrives from her cousin Edith describing her life in Corfu.

Her husband had to attend drill, and she, the most musical officer's wife there, had to copy the new and popular tunes out of the most recent English music, for the benefit of the bandmaster; those seemed their most severe and arduous duties.²⁵

Meanwhile Margaret attempts to become more tolerant of the rough life of the streets which surround her home. Mrs Gaskell vividly describes the behaviour of the work people, with its combination of familiarity and frankness, which only some one who had first hand experience could

²⁵ Works, IV, 76.

really appreciate.²⁶ The workers from the factories

came rushing along, with bold, fearless faces, loud laughs and jests, particularly aimed at all those who appeared to be above them in rank or station. The tones of their unrestrained voices, and their carelessness of all common rules of street politeness, frightened Margaret a little at first. The girls, with their rough, but not unfriendly freedom, would comment on her dress, even touch her shawl or gown to ascertain the exact material.²⁷

It is, however, the attitudes of the men that she feared most because they openly commented on her looks. But when she overcame her initial irritation she began more readily to accept the comments in good part:

as she was unconsciously smiling at some passing thought, she was addressed by a poorly-dressed, middle-aged, workman, with "You may well smile, my lass; many a one would smile to have such a bonny face."²⁸

This is the beginning of Margaret's friendship with the Higgins family. But the development of a relationship with a family of a different social class is not easy, as Mrs Gaskell knew well, particularly because of the different patterns of behaviour. Margaret quickly finds out that her offer of a visit is not so easily accepted as when she had made

²⁶ Ellis Chadwick suggests that the experiences of Margaret Hale are a fictional record of Mrs Gaskell's own, when, as a young woman of twenty-two, she began to undertake her first duties as a minister's wife, in the poorer districts of Manchester. Mrs Gaskell: Haunts, Homes and Stories, pp. 198-99.

²⁷ Works, IV, 81.

²⁸ Works, IV, 82.

similar offers to farm-labourers as the vicar's daughter in Helstone. The old hierarchical order of the village had been eroded away by the industrial revolution. There were no longer the traditional responsibilities of master to man and man to master. Because the owners of the factories felt no obligations to the workers, the workers no longer felt the need to respond socially in the way in which they had done so for centuries. Social visits from the middle classes are only possible as long as the working classes are willing to accept them. Higgins's reply typifies this:

"I'm none so fond of having strange folk in my house."

But then relenting, as he saw her heightened colour, he added,

"Yo're a foreigner, as one may say, and maybe don't know many folk here, and yo've given my wench here flowers out of yo'r own hand; - yo' may come if yo' like."²⁹

Higgins, like his predecessor John Barton, is revealed as an intelligent perceptive man, who is able to see the way in which Margaret has responded to his reply and is blunt enough to say so.

"Aye, aye", said the father, impatiently, "hoo'll come. Hoo's a bit set up now, because hoo thinks I might ha' spoken more civilly; but hoo'll think better on it, and come. I can read her proud bonny face like a book. Come along, Bess; there's the mill bell ringing."³⁰

Although Margaret is proud she is not a prig. She is shown to be taken

²⁹ Works, IV, 84.

³⁰ Ibid.

aback by being confronted by a class attitude to which she is unaccustomed, but she is also shown to be capable of flexibility and this appears in the pleasure she takes from her new association. It also makes possible the exploration of the working class culture through the eyes of Margaret who must represent very largely the anticipated reader.

From this point on in the novel the meetings between Margaret and Thornton and Margaret and Higgins alternate very deliberately, almost to the point of stylisation. The contrast Mrs Gaskell thus achieves between the values of the various groups becomes very important in this part of the book.

As the relationship between the Hales and the Thorntons begins to develop we are made aware of the fundamental differences between the values of the two families. Mrs Thornton, although reacting with the instincts of a possessive mother, sees the association between her son and Margaret very much in monetary terms. She feels that her son is superior to Margaret because he possesses more money and she is angered because the Hales are not sufficiently impressed by the wealth and industry of her son. Mrs Thornton's social class background prevents her from understanding that the conflict which exists between Thornton and Margaret is not a conflict between rich and poor, but a conflict of values and patterns of behaviour. In this aspect of the relationship Mrs Gaskell is far more informed and more penetrating in her analysis of class differences than other contemporaries. For example, Disraeli tends to evade the problem of class difference in Sybil by making Sybil secretly of the same class as Egremont. Dickens on the other hand tends to exaggerate class differences to a point of almost non-communication as in the relationship between Lizzie Hexam and Eugene

Wrayburn in Our Mutual Friend (1864-5). Mrs Gaskell is content to explore the less dramatic and more subtle aspects of class differences. She confidently demonstrates her knowledge and skill by reversing the position of the financial resources of the characters, so that it is the middle class girl who is poor and it is Thornton, a man recently risen from the ranks of the workers, who possesses the money.

"Why should you dress to go and take a cup of tea with an old parson?"

"Mr Hale is a gentleman, and his wife and daughter are ladies."

"Wife and daughter! Do they teach too? What do they do? You have never mentioned them."³¹

Mrs Thornton's concern with what the mother and daughter do is very important. As I have already mentioned, one of the areas of conflict in the book is the differing attitudes to the acquisition and use of wealth. That the Hales should be poor and the daughter not work is almost beyond the comprehension of Mrs Thornton. In contrast the Thorntons work to acquire wealth which they neither have the time nor the ability to spend. This is slightly less true of the son who is aware of other worlds outside those of commerce, and his attempts to study with Mr Hale demonstrate this. But he does not allow his interest in the classics to be anything more than a hobby, which can be easily set aside when the problems of the business world become more pressing.

When Thornton visits the Hales for tea the conflict between the north and south is more openly expressed, but again it is seen by Thornton in terms of work and leisure.

³¹ Works, IV, 88.

"I would rather be a man toiling, suffering - nay, failing and success-
less - here, than lead a dull prosperous life in the old worn grooves
of what you call more aristocratic society down in the South, with
their slow days of careless ease."³²

He sees conflict between masters and men as inevitable. But he also
thinks that industrialization has made social mobility more possible:

"It is one of the great beauties of our system, that a working-man may
raise himself into the power and position of a master by his own
exertions and behaviour; that, in fact, every one who rules himself to
decency and sobriety of conduct, and attention to his duties, comes
over to our ranks; it may not always be as a master, but as an over-
looker, a cashier, a book-keeper, a clerk, one on the side of authority
and order."³³

This statement by Thornton is almost a direct quotation from the
comments on the subject by William Rathbone Greg.³⁴ Mrs Gaskell was
greatly influenced by Greg in his criticisms of Mary Barton, and North
and South goes a very long way towards accepting his views.
Shusterman,³⁵ as I have mentioned earlier, would go even further and he
maintains that the character of Thornton is based on Greg. Certainly

³² Works, IV, 93.

³³ Works, IV, 96.

³⁴ See above.p.158.

³⁵ See David Shusterman, 'William Rathbone Greg & Mrs Gaskell',
Philological Quarterly, xxxvi (1957) and above p.157.

at this point in the novel he sounds very like him.³⁶

But perhaps the most important point raised in this chapter is the concept of alienation. Mrs Gaskell was extremely perceptive in focusing the reader's attention on the subject which was just beginning to be considered by sociologists. It is very doubtful if she had any knowledge of the work of Karl Marx, yet it is clear that she had understood that industrialization had created forms of occupations, which alienated the worker from his job in a way which had not occurred in agricultural communities.³⁷ Margaret Hale says:

"You do not know anything about the South. If there is less adventure or less progress - I suppose I must not say less excitement - from the gambling spirit of trade, which seems requisite to force out these wonderful inventions, there is less suffering also. I see men here going about in the streets who look ground down by some pinching sorrow or care - who are not only sufferers but haters. Now, in the South we

³⁶ Mrs Chadwick (Mrs Gaskell: Haunts, Homes and Stories, p.216) suggests the model of Thornton used by Mrs Gaskell is the inventor and industrialist James Nasmyth. He had come to live in Manchester in 1834 and had set up a partnership with a member of the Gaskell family. He and his wife were frequent visitors to the Gaskells' home. (Letters of Mrs Gaskell pp.22-23, letter 10 (7 August 1838)). Nasmyth invented the steam-hammer in 1839 and this provides the subject for discussion between Thornton and Hale. He was also thought to be a kind and generous employer who was concerned with the welfare of his workers.

³⁷ Karl Marx in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844) says: 'What constitutes the alienation of labour? Firstly, the fact that labour is external to the worker, i.e. does not belong to his essential being; that he therefore does not confirm himself in his work, but denies himself, feels miserable and not happy, does not develop free mental and physical energy, but mortifies his flesh and ruins his mind. ... External labour, labour in which man alienates himself, is a labour of self-sacrifice, of mortification. Finally, the external character of labour for the worker is demonstrated by the fact that it belongs not to him but to another, and that in it he belongs not to himself but to another.' Karl Marx, Early Writings, translated by Gregor Benton, (Harmondsworth, 1975), p.326.

have our poor, but there is not the terrible expression in their countenances of a sullen sense of injustice which I see here."³⁸

Here Mrs Gaskell has captured the essential elements of the concept of alienation, which is that the individual feels himself to be cut off from certain aspects of his social existence. The worker under industrialization felt alienated because the opportunities for a meaningful and creative existence were lacking. The specialization and the unequal distribution of authority and economic rewards characteristic of advanced industrial production, prevented the worker from exercising his full potentialities. In the traditional communities, the hierarchical structure was more readily accepted because it was less impersonal and there were more opportunities for individual involvement in spite of the conditions which were often very poor. But the advancement which Thornton so optimistically spoke of was available to only a few and the rest were frustrated and antagonized, as Mrs Gaskell well knew.

The visit of Mrs Thornton and Fanny to the Hales brings further conflicts and misunderstandings due to the different ways in which the families perceive the world. Fanny, who is very similar in many ways to the daughter of the Carson family in Mary Barton, has all the advantages of the manufacturer's wealth without either having to work for it or being able to benefit from it in terms of education and culture.

Although Fanny feels superior to Margaret because her family is more prosperous, she soon reveals her ignorance in conversation. She has learnt to play the piano, as a young lady's accomplishment, but has not developed any musical taste to accompany it. Margaret, on the

³⁸ Works, IV, 93-94.

other hand, who has not learned to play, is by no means culturally deprived. Again Mrs Gaskell has reversed a class convention in order to indicate more meaningfully the conflict that exists between the classes. The cultural values of a particular class are always much more difficult to acquire than those who wish to be social climbers are often aware of. Thus the symbols of the class to which people aspire are often more readily accessible than the accompanying values. Values and patterns of behaviour are often subtle and complex and difficult to grasp by outsiders. This is something which Mrs Gaskell is very much aware of and illustrates very effectively:

"You have good concerts here, I believe."

"Oh, yes! Delicious! Too crowded, that is the worst. The directors admit so indiscriminately. But one is sure to hear the newest music there. I always have a large order to give to Johnson's, the day after the concert."

"Do you like new music simply for its newness, then?"

"Oh, one knows it is the fashion in London, or else the singers would not bring it down here."³⁹

In this conversation Mrs Gaskell is able to convey all she wishes. There is no need for any authorial comment. The dialogue says it all - it is skilfully accomplished with just the lightest touch of humour.

The rest of the visit serves to air the prejudices of both Mrs Hale and Mrs Thornton on the subject of factory life in Milton, which Mrs Thornton admires and Mrs Hale, not uncharacteristically, views with distaste.

³⁹ Works, IV, 112.

Meanwhile, Margaret's relationship with Bessy Higgins has been developing. Margaret, aware that her new friend is dying, learns on her second visit how the disease came about which is killing her:

"I think I was well when my mother died, but I have never been rightly strong sin' somewhere about that time. I began to work in a carding-room soon after, and the fluff got into my lungs and poisoned me."

"Fluff!" said Margaret, inquiringly.

"Fluff," repeated Bessy. "Little bits, as fly off fro' the cotton, when they're carding it, and fill the air till it looks all fine white dust. They say it winds round the lungs, and tightens them up. Anyhow, there's many a one as works in a carding-room, that falls into a waste, coughing and spitting blood, because they're just poisoned by the fluff."⁴⁰

Mrs Gaskell's knowledge of the appalling conditions in the factories is introduced convincingly here as the cause of the death of one of her characters. It is important to realise how advanced her knowledge was of the problems of industrial diseases, as Dorothy Collin has shown.⁴¹ But what is impressive is not a mere knowledge; it is the way in which she uses her skill as a writer to demonstrate the conflicts that arise between various groups under such circumstances. In reply to Margaret's question, concerning the possible prevention of such a terrible disease, Bessy says:

⁴⁰ Works, IV, 118.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Gaskell, North and South, edited by Dorothy Collin, (Harmondsworth, 1970), p.533n. 'Greenhow was one of the first British observers to describe in 1860 a cotton respiratory disease characterised by difficulty in breathing.'

"I dunno. Some folk have a great wheel at one end o' their carding-rooms to make a draught, and carry off th' dust; but that wheel costs a deal of money - five or six hundred pound, maybe, and brings in no profit; so it's but few of th' masters as will put 'em up; and I've heard tell o' men who didn't like working in places where there was a wheel, because they said as how it made 'em hungry, at after they'd been long used to swallowing fluff, to go without it, and that their wage ought to be raised if they were to work in such places. So between masters and men th' wheels fall through."⁴²

Mrs Gaskell shows here how the different viewpoints of masters and men are in conflict at levels which are unpredictable, intangible yet typically human. The problem is far more complex than simply persuading the owners to provide better conditions, or even overcoming the difficulties of the financial loss incurred. It is the need to see the activity of manufacturing as something beyond the 'cash nexus' which means educating the owners on broad social terms. But even this is not enough for in those cases where the enlightened employer is concerned with the welfare of his workers, he meets resistance through ignorance. The workers too need education to appreciate the long term advantages. They are suspicious of the behaviour of the mill owners and mistrust any action they may take even if it appears to be to their advantage. They also view things very much on a short term basis, rather than consider the future consequences. In the case of the carding-room, the workers were concerned with the immediate problem of hunger rather than the future chance of disease. It must also be remembered that many of the cause and effect relationships in disease, which we now take for granted,

⁴² Works, IV, 119.

were unknown at this time. It will be recalled that Kingsley points to this problem in Yeast when Lancelot tries to show the causes of typhus to a farm-labourer's wife.⁴³ In North and South Mrs Gaskell sees that the situation is often perverse because the less scrupulous owner can use the ignorance of his workers as an excuse to do nothing.

The occasion of the return visit by the Hales to the Thorntons gives Mrs Gaskell a further opportunity to show the difference in values between the two families. Margaret is first surprised by the situation of the Thorntons' house. She could not understand why anyone should wish to live in such a place when they were able to afford a house in more congenial surroundings at a distance from the factories. Once they are inside the house further evidence of the Thorntons' values are offered, when they are ushered into the drawing room, which has no functional use other than as a symbol of wealth acquired.

There was no one in the drawing-room. It seemed as though no one had been in it since the day when the furniture was bagged up with as much care as if the house was to be overwhelmed with lava, and discovered a thousand years hence. The walls were pink and gold; the pattern on the carpet represented bunches of flowers on a light ground, but it was carefully covered up in the centre by a linen drugget, glazed and colourless.⁴⁴

The books in the room are arranged for display purposes only, and contrast with the books of the Hales which are constantly in use. When

⁴³ Charles Kingsley, Yeast, p.191 and also above p.33.

⁴⁴ Works, IV, 130-31.

Mr Hale discusses the subject of Thornton's studies Mrs Thornton dismisses the kind of reading her son is doing as a complete waste of time:

"I have no doubt the classics are very desirable for people who have leisure. But, I confess, it was against my judgment that my son renewed his study of them. The time and place in which he lives, seem to me to require all his energy and attention. Classics may do very well for men who loiter away their lives in the country or in colleges; but Milton men ought to have their thoughts and powers absorbed in the work of to-day."⁴⁵

Mrs Thornton does not see her son's study of the classics as simply a waste of time, although that is partly her criticism; her greatest fears are that it may seriously undermine his whole way of life. But when challenged about the purpose of her son's life, she is led into the slightly ludicrous position of wishing him to be recognised as a famous manufacturer. This desire is given little support by the fact that neither Margaret or Mr Hale had ever heard of him until he was mentioned by Mr Bell. However, people do not generally like the pre-suppositions on which they base their lives to be challenged and Mrs Thornton appears as no exception. If she had been forced to give an honest answer she would have been obliged to say that she believed her son's purpose in life was to make money. Thus the whole issue of the relationship between culture and leisure is raised. It was a topic which was frequently debated in the nineteenth century, as John Lucas⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Works, IV, 132.

⁴⁶ David Howard, John Lucas & John Goode, Tradition and tolerance in nineteenth century fiction (London, 1966), pp. 197-198.

has pointed out. The conflict is between those whose sole purpose is to make money, which excludes any possibility of enjoying what it can provide, because that would be a waste of time; and those who see wealth as a means of providing leisure, through which culture can be achieved. Thus in spite of being poor, the Hales do not believe that their values should be sacrificed to increase their wealth as Mrs Thornton would in similar circumstances. However, Mrs Gaskell is not foolish enough to believe that all who belong to a certain class have these values and she later uses Mr Bell to challenge the intellectual poverty of the Lennox household - a poverty which exists in spite of the leisure opportunities for improvement.

But chapter XV is important for a number of reasons and the visit to the Thorntons and Mr Thornton's return visit also give an opportunity for the central theme of the strike to be raised. It is through the strike action that Mrs Gaskell highlights the distinctiveness of the working class culture. The strike is much more than a disagreement over wages, it is a clash between two distinct ways of life, which determine separately the behaviour of both owners and men. Yet because of the structure of the industrial society they are obliged to come to terms with each other in spite of the difficulties in communication and the inability - even unwillingness - to perceive the other's point of view. Mrs Gaskell is careful to introduce first the expected middle class view of the workers' behaviour, by giving Mrs and Mr Thornton's comments on the strike. But the unwillingness to communicate is soon revealed when Thornton is shown aggressively refusing to explain his actions to his men, who he thinks are fools:

"Yes; the fools will have a strike. Let them. It suits us well enough. But we gave them a chance. They think trade is flourishing as it was

last year. We see the storm on the horizon and draw in our sails. But, because we don't explain our reasons, they won't believe we're acting reasonably. We must give them line and letter for the way we choose to spend or save our money."⁴⁷

Margaret is dissatisfied with this answer and Thornton tries to give further justification by drawing a parallel with the way in which domestic servants are treated. The introduction of the comparison with servants at this point is very subtle on Mrs Gaskell's part because she is able to reveal, in a very few lines, the weaknesses in Thornton's comprehension of the subject. Domestic servants are not like factory workers. Dixon, the most obvious close example, is completely involved in every aspect of the Hales' problems both financial and emotional and she is given justification for changes in circumstances throughout the novel. Therefore Thornton's inability to see a distinction between the different relationship between employers and employed is fundamental to his failure to perceive the total situation at this juncture.

Mrs Gaskell, through Margaret, expresses her central argument. It is that she finds it incomprehensible that two groups of people like employers and workers, who are forced to work with one another, should not wish to communicate concerning the problems that arise. Thornton does not share her view and challenges her to explain:

"I don't know - I suppose because, on the very face of it, I see two classes dependent on each other in every possible way, yet each evidently regarding the interests of the other as opposed to their own; I never lived in a place before where there were two sets of people always running each other down."⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Works, IV, 137.

⁴⁸ Works, IV, 138.

As the conversation continues Mrs Gaskell manages to make Thornton argue a line which is contradictory. He maintains that despotism is necessary because the workers are ignorant and need to be told like children, but he also argues for freedom when the conversation turns to the way owners may act regarding the market. What Margaret principally objects to is the view that the worker, according to Thornton, is a kind of commodity. But to Mrs Gaskell, in Margaret's words, the question is not of capital and labour but of the personal interrelationship which must be developed if industrial relations are ever to be improved.⁴⁹ At the core it is men dealing with men, regardless of any economic status position:

"Not in the least," said Margaret, determined just to say this one thing; "not in the least because of your labour and capital positions, whatever they are, but because you are a man dealing with a set of men over whom you have, whether you reject the use of it or not, immense power, just because your lives and your welfare are so constantly and intimately interwoven."⁵⁰

Although I have abstracted the social argument of this conversation, Mrs Gaskell has been skilful enough to present this discussion at the same time as she is advancing the relationship between Margaret

⁴⁹ There were many, like Sir Arthur Helps, whom Mrs Gaskell knew, who suggested that the masters should adopt variants of a form of liberal paternalism towards the workers, but there were few who advocated communication on equal terms between masters and men, and even fewer who chose to express this view in works of fiction. Nevertheless, Mrs Gaskell was impressed by the way in which Sir Arthur Helps was capable of putting forward an argument and recommended him as a model to Marianne Gaskell. See The Letters of Mrs Gaskell, p.541, letter 420 (15 March 1859).

⁵⁰ Works, IV, 143.

Hale and John Thornton. The combatants' viewpoints are sharpened by the underlying sexual response, creating an interest which the bald social comment would have lacked for the general reader. It would be difficult to give an adequate quotation illustrating this without presenting the whole conversation because the effect is cumulative arising from the odd phrase, the intimate tone, the cold response and the blush. But the total effect is much more sophisticated than the simple authorial commentary and it is clear that Mrs Gaskell has greatly advanced in technical skill since the writing of Mary Barton.

Shortly after Thornton's visit, Margaret goes to see the Higgins family and the worker's view of the strike is given. Mrs Gaskell's conception of the character of Margaret as both intelligent and ignorant of work relationships enables her to explore the situation with a discussion between Margaret and Higgins in the chapter called 'What is a Strike?'

The subject arises from the differing views of north and south. Although Margaret loves the south, it does not prevent her from realising that the agricultural workers have a very hard life; she attempts to explain it to Higgins:

"It's sometimes in heavy rain, and sometimes in bitter cold. A young person can stand it; but an old man gets racked with rheumatism, and bent and withered before his time; yet he must just work on the same, or else go to the workhouse."⁵¹

⁵¹ Works, IV, 156-57. For verification of the accuracy of Mrs Gaskell's description, see the factual account of rural workers' hardships given, for example, by William Cobbett, Rural Rides, edited by G.D.H. Cole and Margaret Cole, 3 vols (London, 1930), I, 13-15 and Edwin Chadwick, Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain (1842) edited by M.W.Flinn (Edinburgh, 1965), pp.83-89.

Even this kind of comment is very rare among writers of the time and Charles Kingsley is one of the few other novelists, who recognised that life in the country was anything else than idyllic. But the conditions are only considered in passing, the real argument centres on the value of strike action, which basically divides the agricultural worker from the industrial worker. Because of the large distances involved farm workers were less successful in organising strikes than those men who worked in close proximity to one another in the urban areas. As Margaret has never seen a strike in the south, she naïvely believes that they have no purpose and Higgins is left to defend them. In putting forward his argument he manages to give a certain dignity to the idea of a strike and he reveals Mrs Gaskell's sympathies with the workers' point of view. Higgins compares the nobility of the soldier's action with that of the striker - a point of view which Margaret cannot accept. She says that a striker's action is selfish, whereas the soldier's is not. Higgins disagrees:

"Dun yo' think it's for mysel' I'm striking work at this time? It's just as much in the cause of others as yon soldier - only m'appen, the cause he dies for is just that of somebody he never clapt eyes on, nor heerd on all his born days, while I take up John Boucher's cause, as lives next door but one, wi' a sickly wife, and eight childer, none on 'em factory age; and I don't take up his cause only, though he's a poor good-for-nought, as can only manage two looms at a time, but I take up th' cause o' justice."⁵²

⁵² Works, IV, 158.

Part of Mrs Gaskell's achievement in this novel is related to the way in which she is able to make the broad themes of social change, industrialization and the conflicts between workers and owners into experiences which are very personal and human for the characters involved. She is not talking about a strike in abstract terms, nor merely clothing characters in order to illustrate a strike, as Harriet Martineau tends to do, but she is able to show vividly what a strike means in a particular character's life. It is not simply a case of stopping work. The psychological implications for both the workers and their families are immense. Bessy tries to explain to Margaret how the mental effects of the strike influence the men's behaviour:

"There are days wi' you as wi' other folk, I suppose, when yo' get up and go through th' hours, just longing for a bit of a change - a bit of a fillip, as it were. I know I ha' gone and bought a four-pounder out o' another baker's shop to common on such days, just because I sickened at the thought of going on for ever wi' the same sight in my eyes, and the same sound in my ears, and the same taste i' my mouth, and the same thought (or no thought, for that matter) in my head, day after day, for ever. I've longed for to be a man to go spreeing, even if it were only a tramp to some new place in search o' work. And father - all men - have it stronger in 'em than me to get tired o' sameness and work for ever. And what is 'em to do? It's little blame to them if they do go into th' gin-shop for to make their blood flow quicker, and more lively, and see things they never see at no other time - pictures, and looking-glass, and such like. But father never was a drunkard, though maybe, he's got worse for drink, now and then. Only yo' see," and now her voice took a mournful, pleading tone, "at time o' strike there's much to knock a man down, for all they start so hopefully; and where's the comfort to come fro'? He'll get angry and mad - they all do - and then

they get tired out wi' being angry and mad, and maybe ha' done things in their passion they'd be glad to forget."⁵³

In this passage Mrs Gaskell manages to capture the feeling of alienation and frustration of the workers in what seems to them to be a never ending, pointless struggle for existence. It is a sympathetic account, even of the worker's excesses, which are justified to a degree as an outlet and compensation for their miserable lives. The strikes of those times occurred as a gesture of desperation, brought on by long suffering and hardship. Yet the strike itself often created further suffering. Passions ran high and the anger and disappointment often caused men to seek solace in drink.⁵⁴ The character of Bessy gives a feeling of one who has experienced a strike and Mrs Gaskell displays her understanding of what such a character might have felt.

As the events of the strike develop, the preparations for the dinner at the Thorntons are contrasted with the terrible effects the stoppage is having on the worker's families. We are constantly made aware of the two separate worlds in which the owners and the workers live. This point is pressed home when Margaret visits Bessy again and

⁵³ Works, IV, 160-61.

⁵⁴ J.F.C. Harrison speaking on the subject of drink in early Victorian times says: 'Temperance workers assessed the total amount spent on drink at over £67 million in 1830 and nearly £81 million in 1850. This averaged nearly £3 per person per year, which in a labouring family of five or six amounted to more than they paid in rent ... Moreover the gross effects of drunkenness could be seen any Saturday night in any town in Britain, with labouring men staggering about or lying helpless in the gutter. After the Beerhouse Act of 1830 ... the number of beerhouses (Tom and Jerry Shops) increased by 30,000 to 40,000. Manchester had nearly a thousand inns, beer houses and gin shops.'

The Early Victorians 1832-51 (London, 1971), pp.70-71.

the discussion first centres on what Margaret is likely to wear at the Thorntons' dinner and then turns to the plight of those who come to see Bessy's father, as the union representative. Bessy attempts to describe them:

"Some spoke o' deadly hatred, and made my blood run cold wi' the terrible things they said o' th' masters - but more, being women, kept plaining, plaining (wi' the tears running down their cheeks, and never wiped away, nor heeded), of the price o' meat, and how their childer could na sleep at nights for th' hunger."⁵⁵

The workers, however, are shown to be naïvely optimistic. They imagine that the demand for their labour is so great that the strike will quickly bring the owners to their knees. They are relatively unaware of the economic situation and do not understand the changes that are taking place in the world markets. They cannot see the problems of foreign competition as Thornton does, and they know nothing of Thornton's intention to introduce Irish labour if the strike continues.

Although some of the more obdurate workers, like Higgins, are prepared to stick it out to the end, there are others, like Boucher, who do not have the strength and determination to fight on. Often this unwillingness is directly related to the size of their families. Higgins, with his family can manage for a while on the money he has. Boucher cannot. In a heated passionate argument with Higgins, Boucher puts his case:

⁵⁵ Works, IV, 177-78.

"Five shilling a week may do well enough for thee, wi' but two mouths to fill, and one on 'em a wench who can welly earn her own meat. But it's clemming to us. An' I tell thee plain - if hoo dies, as I'm feared hoo will afore we've gotten th' five per cent, I'll fling th' money back i' th' master's face, and say, 'Be dommed to you'; be dommed to th' whole cruel world @' yo'; that could na leave me th' best wife that ever bore childer to a man!' An' look thee, lad, I'll hate thee, and th' whole pack o' th' Union. Ay, an' chase yo' through heaven wi' my hatred, - I will, lad! I will, - if yo're leading me astray i' this matter. Thou saidst, Nicholas, on Wednesday sennight - and it's now Tuesday i' th' second week - that afore a fortnight we'd ha' the masters coming a-begging to us to take back our work, at our own wage - and time's nearly up, - and there's our lile Jack lying a-bed, too weak to cry, but just every now and then sobbing up his heart for want o' food, - our lile Jack, I tell thee, lad! Hoo's never looked up sin' he were born, and hoo loves him as if he were her very life - as he is - for I reckon he'll ha' cost me that precious price - our lile Jack, who wakened me each morn wi' putting his sweet lips to my great rough fou' face, a-seeking a smooth place to kiss - an' he lies clemming."⁵⁶

Mrs Gaskell brilliantly shows the agony of the man through this very simple, direct speech. She conveys the intense feeling of hopelessness by entering fully into the character's consciousness. Even the exaggerated sentimentality of the last two lines does not spoil the effect of the whole. She enables us not only to understand the sociological implications of a strike in those days, but she also makes it possible

⁵⁶ Works, IV, 182.

for us to experience the situation through this working man's eyes. Her success is the greater because the character of Boucher is deliberately made unsympathetic. He is in many ways weak and without determination of spirit but, in spite of this, at this time in the early part of the strike he is able to evoke our respect.

As the strike continues Thornton's threat to introduce Irish labour becomes a reality and this increases the antagonism of the workers and brings the conflict to a climax. Margaret had set out to visit Mrs Thornton. She hoped to borrow a water-bed from her in order to bring some comfort to Mrs Hale, whose health is rapidly deteriorating. As she walks towards the house the sounds of the approaching crowd impinge on her thoughts. Mrs Gaskell very carefully builds up the atmosphere around this growing, aggressive mob, which is converging on Thornton's mill. Little by little she introduces the presence of this restless group, first in the background and then, increasingly, in the foreground so that we are made aware of their increased anger as they approach the object of their hatred. It is a long sustained passage which concludes by effectively pointing towards the confrontation of the next chapter:

She went across the yard and up the steps to the house door. There was no near sound - no steam-engine at work with beat and pant - no click of machinery, or mingling and clashing of many sharp voices; but, far away, the ominous gathering roar, deep-clamouring.⁵⁷

Mrs Gaskell possesses considerable skill in depicting crowd scenes

57 Works, IV, 204.

as she had previously demonstrated in Mary Barton, on the occasion of the mill fire. At this point in the novel, when the mob assemble in Thornton's yard, she gives the reader the feeling of a huge crowd, yet at the same time she draws attention to individuals and separate groups so as not to make the scene vague and nebulous. Thornton was content to wait until the army arrives to disperse the workers, but Margaret wants him to attempt to reason with them so as to avoid the disastrous consequences of a clash with the soldiers. This argument is central to Mrs Gaskell's thesis that the masters and men must attempt to communicate at a personal level, before relationships can be improved. But she does not overstate her case. She is sufficiently aware of mob psychology and crowd behaviour to know that reason at this point is unlikely to prevail. This she expresses through Margaret's fears, once she has persuaded Thornton to go down into the yard and talk to the men:

Many in the crowd were mere boys; cruel and thoughtless - cruel because they were thoughtless; some were men, gaunt as wolves, and mad for prey. She knew how it was; they were like Boucher - with starving children at home - relying on ultimate success in their efforts to get higher wages, and enraged beyond measure at discovering that Irishmen were to be brought in to rob their little ones of bread. Margaret knew it all; she read it in Boucher's face, forlornly desperate and livid with rage.⁵⁸

It is not simply a crowd with a single thought. Anger and hatred may be the driving forces of the moment, but Mrs Gaskell also shows us a range of motivation among the workers from the irresponsible acts of the

⁵⁸ Works, IV, 210.

boys to the desperate response of the fathers of starving children. With the appearance of Thornton on the scene, Mrs Gaskell dramatically depicts the psychological point of challenge, which will cause events to swing suddenly one way or another:

He stood with his arms folded; still as a statue; his face pale with repressed excitement. They were trying to intimidate him - to make him flinch; each was urging the other on to some immediate act of personal violence. Margaret felt intuitively, that, in an instant, all would be uproar - that the first touch would cause an explosion, in which, among hundreds of infuriated men and reckless boys, even Mr Thornton's life would be unsafe - that, in another instant, the stormy passions would have passed their bounds, and swept away all barriers of reason, or apprehension of consequence. Even while she looked, she saw lads in the background stooping to take off their heavy wooden clogs - the readiest missile they could find; she saw it was the spark to the gun-powder.⁵⁹

By selecting Boucher and the young lads, who are ready to throw their clogs, Mrs Gaskell impressionistically creates a scene which we can see clearly. Even when she oversteps the mark and introduces Margaret into the situation the quality remains, if we can forget for the moment the romantic theme and the relationship between her and Thornton. When blood has been drawn and Thornton goes forward to meet the crowd the critical point has passed. This is beautifully shown in the way in which the mob hesitates, falters and finally moves toward the gate. As

⁵⁹ Works, IV, 210-11.

it was irrational behaviour which created the situation so it is irrational behaviour which causes the crowd to move away. The initial move is hastened afterwards by the sound of the soldiers' approach. The whole scene, apart from Margaret's intervention, is handled masterfully. It is unfortunate that she allowed the reality of the presentation to be somewhat marred by the intrusion of the romantic theme at this point in the novel.

When the event is over, Margaret claims that she acted purely from a concern for humanity and thus perceives the situation very differently from Thornton. In consequence, the proposals made by him next day in the belief that Margaret had offered encouragement is firmly rejected. This has a disturbing effect on Margaret and in order to forget the unpleasantness of the meeting, Margaret goes to see Bessy, where she hears the worker's views of the recent occurrences.

Mrs Gaskell tries to present a sympathetic account of the worker's motives and to justify the actions of the strikers as being the result of the rational behaviour of intelligent men fighting for their livelihoods. Bessy explains that her father, who is a member of the strike committee of the Union, has been attempting to conduct the strike within the bounds of the law so that public sympathy might be on their side:

"They were to hou'd together through thick and thin; what the major part thought, t'others were to think, whether they would or no. And above all there was to be no going again' the law of the land. Folk would go with them if they saw them striving and starving wi' dumb patience; but if there was once any noise o' fighting and struggling - even wi' knobsticks - all was up, as they knew by th' experience of many and many a time before."⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Works, IV, 237.

But in spite of the efforts of Higgins and the Union committee, a riot ensues in which Boucher is believed to have played a major part. This makes Higgins intensely angry, because all the suffering of the strikers has been brought to nothing by a few thoughtless people like Boucher, acting irresponsibly. Higgins is so angry that he threatens to hand Boucher over to the police as one of the leaders of the riot. Boucher, because of the suffering of his children, responds violently, and in spite of his weakness, strikes Higgins and goes off.

In Boucher we have a character with whom we must sympathise in spite of his failings. He is in a dilemma which for him has no solution. His family are starving and the patient approach which Higgins advocates is no solution to the immediate problem of food. His blind thoughtless response in the riot is understandable because we see that it is the only way he feels he can respond to a situation which is beyond his control. But if the morality of Boucher is complex in one way, Mrs Gaskell shows us that Higgins's morality is complex at another level, as the following conversation reported by Bessy indicates:

'Father, father!' said I. 'Thou'll never go peach on that poor clemmed man. I'll never leave go on thee, till thou sayst thou wunnot.'

'Dunnot be a fool,' says he, 'words come readier than deeds to most men. I never thought o' telling th' police on him; though, by G-, he deserves it, and I should na ha' minded if someone else had done the dirty work, and got him clapped up. But now he has strucken me, I could do it less nor ever, for it would be getting other men to take up my quarrel. But if ever he gets well o'er this clemming, and is in good condition, he and I'll have an up and down fight, purring an' a', and I'll see what I can do for him.'⁶¹

⁶¹ Works, IV, 238-39.

This passage reveals Mrs Gaskell's understanding of the type of working man she is attempting to portray in the character of Higgins, and the values and patterns of behaviour which such a man would find acceptable. He would not personally see that Boucher was arrested, but he would be pleased if some one else had arranged it. He would not fight him at the time he was starving, but at a time in the future when he is well he will use all means to win a fight against him including kicking him with his clogs.⁶²

The conversation which Margaret had with Bessy concerning the strike was the last. The next day Bessy is dead. In keeping with the custom of paying respect to the dead by seeing the body laid out, Bessy's sister asks Margaret to come to the Higgins's home. At first she is reluctant but finally takes courage and goes. When she visits the house, Higgins is distraught. He has no solution for his sorrow but to turn to drink. In a desperate effort to prevent him, Margaret brings him home to see her father.

Mrs Gaskell's awareness of social class differences, makes her pay careful attention to the way in which Mr Hale greets Higgins:

Mr Hale treated all his fellow-creatures alike: it never entered into his head to make any difference because of their rank. He placed a chair for Nicholas; stood up till he, at Mr Hale's request, took a seat; and called him, invariably, "Mr Higgins", instead of the curt "Nicholas" or "Higgins", to which the "drunken infidel weaver" had been accustomed.⁶³

⁶² Fighting and kicking with clogs (purring) was common at that time in the north west, as Angus Easson has pointed out in his edition of North and South, (Oxford, 1973), p.443.

⁶³ Works, IV, 267.

Mr Hale's behaviour, which is guided by Christian principles, enables him to get a good response from Higgins and they are soon in earnest conversation.

The conversation between the two men gives rise to a number of important social issues. Mrs Gaskell argues that the failure of the Union's approach to its own members is very similar to the mistakes which the owners made in dealing with the workers. They both expect too much from the men. They require them to behave like machines, without feelings or passions, and criticise men like Boucher, when they give way to them. The Union also wants the imported Irish workers to see the strike in its own terms and they cannot. For Higgins, the bitter disappointment is in seeing his fellow workers give way to the pressure of the strike and what is worse, bring the law down upon themselves.

When the subject of wages is raised, Mr Hale wants to show Higgins a book, but he rejects it. His employer Draper, had also given him a book on economics but it was meaningless to him. Here Mrs Gaskell tries to show that what we perceive as real, or what is real to us depends on our particular and individual experience or viewpoint. What is real for Higgins has nothing to do with textbook economics. The reality of his own daughter's death from factory work and the starving Boucher family cannot be altered for him by abstract economic arguments. If Higgins perceives the world in a particular way, then, as Mrs Gaskell indicates, that is reality for him and it will affect his thoughts and actions.

"I'll not be bound to say I shall end in thinking the same as any man. And I'm not one who thinks truth can be shaped out in words, all neat and clean, as th' men at th' foundry cut out sheet-iron. Some bones won't go down with every one. It'll stick here i' this man's throat, and there i' t'others. Let alone that, when down, it may be too strong

for this one, too weak for that. Folk who sets up to doctor th' world wi' their truth, mun suit different for different minds; and be a bit tender in th' way of giving it too, or the poor sick fools may spit it out i' their faces."⁶⁴

Mrs Gaskell's presentation of the character of Higgins on this occasion is performed with consummate skill. Not only has she succeeded in putting forward a particular view of the world and the limitations that have been placed upon it by his lack of access to academic training but she has done so through the mouth of a working class character. She has been able to keep within the range of the man's limited vocabulary, yet also to present a sophisticated argument, thus revealing a deep understanding of the character she is depicting. Higgins, although uneducated, is shown to be thoughtful and intelligent. We witness his struggles to make sense out of the world but his limited command of the language inevitably restricts his perception. The extent to which the working class character's actions are determined by their deficiencies of language in Mrs Gaskell's two novels will be dealt with later.⁶⁵

After Higgins's impassioned speech, Mr Hale returns to Mrs Gaskell's familiar solution of the problem of industrial conflict: the development of better understanding between masters and men:

"I wish some of the kindest and wisest of the masters would meet some of you men and have a good talk on these things; it would surely, be

⁶⁴ Works, IV, 273.

⁶⁵ See below chapter 7.

the best way of getting over your difficulties, which I do believe, arise from your ignorance."⁶⁶

He therefore proposes that a meeting should take place between Higgins and Thornton. Higgins is not very much in favour of the idea and the conversation turns to the subject of the unions once more. Margaret attacks them, declaring that, in their behaviour to those who will not join them, they are as ruthless and tyrannous as the masters. She is particularly incensed by the way in which the men are sent to Coventry, which Higgins describes:

"Well! If a man doesn't belong to th' Union, them as works next looms has orders not to speak to him - if he's sorry or ill it's a' the same; he's out o' bounds; he's none o' us; he comes among us, he works among us, but he's none o' us. I' some places them's fined who speaks to him. Yo' try that, miss; try living a year a two among them as looks away if yo' look at 'em; try working within two yards o' crowds o' men, who, yo' know, have a grinding grudge at yo' in their hearts - to whom if yo' say yo'r glad, not an eye brightens, nor a lip moves, - to whom if your heart's heavy, yo' can never say nought, because they'll ne'er take notice on your sighs or sad looks."⁶⁷

Here Mrs Gaskell has managed to translate the concept of being sent to Coventry into a very human scene, by showing the way in which men are prepared to behave towards one another under conditions of stress. Higgins in almost Marxian terms, sees the conflict between masters and

⁶⁶ Works, IV, 273.

⁶⁷ Works, IV, 275.

men as a class war, and therefore argues that, as in war, some of the harshest means justify the end.⁶⁸

"It may be like war; along wi' it comes crimes; but I think it were a greater crime to let it alone. Our only chance is binding men together in one common interest; and, if some are cowards and some are fools, they mun come along and join the great march, whose strength is in numbers."⁶⁹

At this point in the novel the social themes and the working class world are thrust aside by other major events. Mrs Hale's fatal illness has brought her son, Frederick, to her bedside, in spite of the dangers which attend a man who is wanted for mutiny. Unfortunately, the furtive visit involves Margaret in lies and deception, which drive a wider gap between her and Thornton. This is in part due to Thornton's belief that Frederick is Margaret's secret lover and the cause of his own rejection and partly to his belief that she is a liar. It is therefore not until some six chapters later that Margaret and her father visit Higgins again and the discussion concerning the unions is renewed.

The strike is over but Higgins has no work. The men who have returned to the factories have had to promise not to belong to or support the Union and Higgins feels that he cannot accept work under those conditions. Margaret returns to the tyrannical nature of the

⁶⁸ Karl Marx in an early statement on class conflict in the Manifesto of the Communist Party (1848) says: 'Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinctive feature: it has simplified the class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: bourgeoisie and proletariat.' Karl Marx, The Revolutions of 1848 (Harmondsworth, 1973), p.68.

⁶⁹ Works, IV, 276.

Union, but Higgins still defends it strongly:

Hoo doesn't comprehend th' Union for all that. It's a great power; its our only power. I ha' read a bit o' poetry about a plough going o'er a daisy, as made tears come into my eyes, afore I'd other cause for crying. But the chap ne'er stopped driving the plough, I'se warrant, for all he were pitiful about the daisy. He'd too much mother-wit for that. Th' Union's the plough making ready the land for harvest-time. Such as Boucher - 'twould be settin' him up too much to liken him to a daisy; he's liker a weed lounging over the ground - mun just make up their mind to be put out o' the way.⁷⁰

The initial reaction of the reader to this passage may be to reproach Mrs Gaskell for giving expression to exaggerated sentiment which is out of keeping with the character of Higgins, and this is partly true of the tearful response he says he gave to the poem. However, Mrs Gaskell was careful to select her example from the popular poetry of Robert Burns which might easily have impressed Higgins and she also deliberately adjusted the man's speech and behaviour in relation to his conversation with Margaret. The working class Higgins is not speaking to other members of his class here, instead he is attempting to give some modification of his expression by presenting the analogy of the daisy as a more feminine interpretation of the Union for Margaret's benefit. The reference to Boucher as a weed and not a daisy also introduces the lightest touch of humour while successfully continuing the simple parallel.

⁷⁰ Works, IV, 348.

Boucher is particularly attacked by Higgins, because not only did he participate in the riot and weaken the position of the Union, but when the strike was over, he went crawling back for work on any terms. He was willing to turn against the Union, which had fed his family during the strike, in order to be given employment. But while Higgins speaks in anger against Boucher a noise is heard in the street. It is neighbours carrying the dead body of Boucher. In this scene Mrs Gaskell powerfully describes the dead man and the way in which he is brought home. She has often been criticised for her treatment of death scenes,⁷¹ but this is a magnificently controlled description, which is relatively brief, yet using every word to great effect. She emphasises the incongruities of his suicide by drowning him in a tiny stream. He had been brought home afterwards on a door used as a makeshift stretcher:

They put the door down carefully upon the stones, and all might see the poor drowned wretch - his glassy eyes, one half-open, staring right upwards to the sky. Owing to the position in which he had been found lying, his face was swollen and discoloured; besides, his skin was stained by water in the brook, which had been used for dyeing purposes. The fore part of his head was bald; but the hair grew thin and long behind, and every separate lock was a conduit for water.⁷²

The passionate feeling which Higgins had against Boucher is now shown to be in a state of turmoil and he is unable to go to the widow and tell her of her husband's death. Mr Hale through weakness and indecision, is also unable to move, but Margaret quickly volunteers to go.

⁷¹ See above p. 160.

⁷² Works, IV, 350.

In a brief but very vivid scene Margaret struggles to tell Mrs Boucher what has happened against a background of screaming children, in which she can hardly make herself heard. Mrs Boucher, uncomprehending, complains that her husband has been away for days:

"No one would give him work here, and he'd to go on tramp toward Greenfield. But he might ha' been back afore this, or sent some word if he'd gotten work. He might" -

"Oh, don't blame him," said Margaret. "He felt it deeply, I'm sure" -

"Will'to' hold thy din, and let me hear the lady speak!" addressing herself, in no very gentle voice, to a little urchin of about a year old. She apologetically continued to Margaret, "He's always mithering me for 'daddy' and 'butty'; and I ha' no butties to give him, and daddy's away, and forgotten us a', I think. He's his father's darling, he is," said she, with a sudden turn of mood, and, dragging the child up to her knee, she began kissing it fondly.⁷³

Higgins realises the effects that the pressure both from the employers and the Union have had on a weak character like Boucher. The suicide is the result of being unable to stand up to the events which have overtaken him. Because Mrs Gaskell is dealing with a working class character, who experiences difficulty in expressing himself, she presents his point of view through what he does not say as well as through what he does say. She also uses his actions to give expression to his thoughts, which in his case, are a substitute for words. He withdraws

⁷³ Works, IV, 352.

and bolts his door against Margaret and in this gesture demonstrates the strong feelings that the suicide has roused in him. He cannot communicate in words yet his actions are made to say a great deal. To have made Higgins respond in any other way at this time would have been out of keeping with his character, and of this Mrs Gaskell is acutely aware.⁷⁴

The next chapter of the novel is concerned with the exploration of the mind of Mrs Boucher and her reactions to the suicide of her husband. When Margaret and her father visit her a second time, they find that she is angry with her husband for having deserted her and is selfishly concerned with her own wants. She sees the children as a burden and even makes them look at the mutilated corpse in order to draw some sympathy from them. She blames Thornton as a representative of the owners and Higgins for the faults of the Union. Margaret and Mr Hale try to understand this bitterness and attribute it to alienation, created by urban industrial life. But Mrs Gaskell does not draw a simple picture in which country life is praised and town life condemned. She sees that there are difficulties in both but the pressures are different. When Margaret comes away from the Boucher's home she gives expression to these views in a conversation with her father:

"It is the town life," said she. "Their nerves are quickened by the haste and bustle and speed of everything around them, to say nothing of the confinement in these pent-up houses, which of itself is enough to induce depression and worry of spirits. Now, in the country, people live so much more out of doors, even children, and even in the winter."

⁷⁴ The relationship between working class thought, language and action is explored in more detail below in chapter 7.

"But people must live in towns. And in the country some get such stagnant habits of mind that they are almost fatalists."

"Yes; I acknowledge that. I suppose each mode of life produces its own trials and temptations. The dweller in towns must find it difficult to be patient and calm, as the country-bred man must find it to be active, and equal to unwonted emergencies. Both must find it hard to realise a future of any kind: the one because the present is so living and hurrying and close around him; the other because his life tempts him to revel in the mere sense of animal existence, not knowing of, and consequently not caring for, any pungency of pleasure, for the attainment of which he can plan, and deny himself, and look forward."⁷⁵

This may be a too simple generalisation of the contrast between town and country working class, yet Mrs Gaskell is saying something important here. She is attempting to examine the relationship between the environment and the members of that society which are conditioned by it. It is a subject which sociologists would continue to explore for the next century.⁷⁶ But in the middle of the nineteenth century it was a new concept. Most writers of the time, apart from Kingsley, could go no further than contrast the harshness of the cities with a sentimental nostalgia for a rural situation that did not exist.

⁷⁵ Works, IV, 358-59.

⁷⁶ Two of the most important explorations of the distinctive characteristics of industrial and pre-industrial societies made by sociologists may be found in the discussion of 'mechanical solidarity' and 'organic solidarity' in Emile Durkheim, The Division of Labour in Society, translated by George Simpson (New York, 1964) and in the discussion of bureaucracy and the process of rationalization in Max Weber, The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation, translated by A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York, 1964).

Later, when Higgins comes to see Margaret, the subject is raised again. Higgins in his desperate attempts to find work contemplates going south, where he believes that food is cheaper and work is easier to find. Margaret quickly disabuses him of these ideas.

"You must not go to the South," said Margaret, "for all that. You could not stand it. You would have to be out all weathers. It would kill you with rheumatism. The mere bodily work at your time of life would break you down."⁷⁷

She goes on to describe the terrible existence of agricultural workers with understanding and accuracy,⁷⁸ showing that he would be exchanging one kind of suffering for another:

"You would not bear the dullness of the life; you don't know what it is; it would eat you away like rust. Those that have lived there all their lives are used to soaking in the stagnant waters. They labour on from day to day, in the great solitude of steaming fields - never speaking or lifting up their poor, bent, downcast heads. The hard spade-work robs their brain of life; the sameness of their toil deadens their imagination; they don't care to meet to talk over thoughts and speculations, even of the weakest, wildest kind, after their work is done; they go home brutishly tired, poor creatures! caring for nothing but food and rest."⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Works, IV, 364.

⁷⁸ Mrs Gaskell's earlier comment on rural conditions has been discussed above on pp. 248-49.

⁷⁹ Works, IV, 364.

Mrs Gaskell presents a striking and chastening description of an agricultural labourer's life and completely avoids any overtones of sentimentality associated with the popular contemporary view, that if man could return to the land all his problems would be solved.⁸⁰ Again, like Marx, she does not feel that the problems of the factory worker can be solved by returning to the country but sees that they must be tackled by remaining and improving the conditions within the realm of industrialization.

After a great deal of persuading, Higgins rejects the idea of going south and promises that he will attempt to talk to Thornton personally in an effort to get a job. When the two meet, the fiery nature of both their temperaments prevents any kind of agreement. Mrs Gaskell, however, makes good use of the meeting by providing a new viewpoint. In Higgins's anxiety to find work to feed Boucher's children, he inadvertently places himself in Boucher's shoes. In his desperation, he is willing to undercut the rate paid to navvies and thus become, what he has been so strongly against, a 'knobstick'. This Thornton is quick to point out to him:

"Don't you see what you would be? You'd be a knobstick. You'd be taking less wages than the other labourers - all for the sake of another man's children. Think how you'd abuse any poor fellow who was willing to take what he could get to keep his own children. You and your Union would soon be down upon him."⁸¹

⁸⁰ Even the Chartists became involved with unsuccessful attempts to provide land schemes for workers after the failure of the Charter.

⁸¹ Works, IV, 381-82.

Here Mrs Gaskell is able to show how extreme conditions can drive men to take moral stances which on the surface seem to be so unjustifiable. By putting Higgins in a position where he could easily become a 'blackleg' Mrs Gaskell has enabled us, not only to understand more about Higgins as a character but also be more sympathetic to Boucher's earlier actions and those of knobsticks in general. After the discussion when Higgins has gone home, Thornton discovers that the man had waited five hours to see him. This impressed him and later Thornton changes his mind about giving Higgins work.

Mr Bell, an Oxford fellow, now appears for the first time. He had already been established at the beginning of the novel as the link between Mr Hale and Mr Thornton. In a conversation with the two men Bell soon takes up the familiar Victorian theme of the relationship between culture and leisure. The subject had been introduced earlier when Mrs Thornton enquired what Margaret did for a living and was shocked to find that she did not work. Now the question is, in part, reversed when Mr Bell wishes to know what Thornton intends to do with all the money he has made:

"you are all striving for money. What do you want it for?"

Mr Thornton was silent. Then he said, "I really don't know. But money is not what I strive for."

"What then?"

"It is a home question. I shall have to lay myself open to such a catechist, and I am not sure I am prepared to do it."⁸²

As I have pointed out before,⁸³ because leisure is so inextricably

⁸² Works, IV, 397.

⁸³ See above p. 244 and the reference to John Lucas.

bound up with culture in the minds of the people living in the nineteenth century, it would be difficult for Thornton to argue for high cultural aims, as that would infer that he had leisure. In Milton Northern leisure is another word for idleness and therefore cannot be tolerated. Mrs Gaskell's introduction of Bell into the novel adds another perspective to the industrial scene. It is not without some irony that she points out that Bell's leisurely life at Oxford is in part supported by the lands leased to a Milton manufacturer:

"It is not everyone who can sit comfortably in a set of college rooms, and let his riches grow without any exertion of his own. No doubt there is many a man here who would be thankful if his property would increase as yours has done, without his taking any trouble about it," said Mr Hale.⁸⁴

When Bell comes to offer some consolation to Margaret, after the loss of her father, he also visits Thornton. The industrialist tells him of his new plans. He has decided to build a dining-room for the men. The introduction of the new canteen is intended to symbolise the change of attitude to the workers which Thornton has undergone. But as Mrs Gaskell is careful to show, it is not easily accepted by Higgins and the men. In the interest of their own self-esteem they feel obliged to reject the offer at first. Later they come up with a proposal which is very similar to the one that Thornton originally made. However, Thornton is not churlish enough to reject it and the scheme goes ahead. In Thornton's discussion with Bell, Mrs Gaskell introduces the subject of charity to the working classes. She maintains

84 Works, IV, 393-94.

that there is a need to retain the self-respect of those who receive charity by enabling them in some measure to contribute to the process.⁸⁵ The whole subject was seriously debated in early Victorian times, as Humphry House⁸⁶ has pointed out. Therefore when Mr Bell offers a ten pound note for the new scheme, Thornton chooses to reject it:

"Thank you; but I'd rather not. They pay me rent for the oven and cooking-places at the back of the mill: and will have to pay more for the new dining-room. I don't want it to fall into a charity. I don't want donations. Once let in the principle, and I should have people going and talking, and spoiling the simplicity of the whole thing."⁸⁷

After her father's death, arrangements are made for Margaret's return to Harley Street. In her last meeting with Higgins, there is a beautifully controlled example of Mrs Gaskell's understanding of both working class language and attitudes. Margaret gives Higgins her father's Bible and asks him to read it for his sake:

"If it were the deuce's own scribble and yo' axed me to read in it for yo'r sake and th'oud gentleman's, I'd do it. Whatten's this, wench? I'm not going for to take yo'r brass, so dunnot think it. We've been great friends, 'bout the sound o' money passing between us."

"For the children - Boucher's children," said Margaret hurriedly. "They may need it. You've no right to refuse it for them."⁸⁸

85 This is a point of view which was also stressed by Charles Kingsley, see above p. 81.

86 Humphry House, The Dickens World (Oxford, 1941), pp.77-105.

87 Works, IV, 433.

88 Works, IV, 443-44.

Mrs Gaskell has been able to express the emotional strength of Higgins's feeling, through the working class language, with a power that is contained within its simplicity. A more elaborate speech would have conveyed no more and would have seriously weakened the credibility of Higgins as a character.

The remaining chapters of the novel hastily draw the plot to a conclusion. The problem of serialisation and the shortage of space in the last chapters, has already been considered.⁸⁹ Margaret takes up her old life with the Lennoxes, who have returned from Corfu and her hopes of visiting her brother in Spain diminish. Mr Bell dies suddenly and leaves Margaret an heiress, with lands in Milton and Thornton as a tenant. This rather clumsily opens up the way for a reunion between the two lovers. In a brief chapter, the events following the strike are described in order to bring the reader up to date with Thornton's changed circumstances. The poor state of trade coupled with the difficulties incurred by employing inefficient Irish labour have caused Thornton's business to collapse. Mrs Gaskell uses Thornton's strength in adversity to demonstrate what she feels to be the right attitude of an ideal employer. In spite of knowing that Higgins was one of those who was responsible for the strike, Thornton avoids being antagonistic and gropes towards a greater understanding of the men he employs. For their part, they respect his efforts by voluntarily working overtime when an urgent order needs completing. When the factory is closing they sign a round-robin to show their willingness to work for him in the future. But these elements are introduced in order to justify Mrs Gaskell's views on the relationship which should be developed between

⁸⁹ See above p. 221.

masters and men, and they do not fit easily into the novel as a whole, nor are they given a chance to develop in a way which will lend some credibility to them. The failure of the business is also used to further the romantic theme and to draw Margaret Hale and John Thornton together for the conclusion. Thus it is contrived that Margaret's newly acquired wealth is to be used to support Thornton's future projects.

Mrs Gaskell, anxious to press home her message, arranges a meeting between Thornton and a Member of Parliament, when he comes to dine at the Lennoxes'. Thornton says:

"My only wish is to have the opportunity of cultivating some intercourse with the hands beyond the mere 'cash nexus'."⁹⁰

This is a modest hope which does not imagine any utopian state in the future. In fact it is a short term programme, where the very strangeness and difficulties of the situation would lend support to it.

"But I would take an idea, the working out of which would necessitate personal intercourse; it might not go well at first, but at every hitch interest would be felt by an increasing number of men, and at last its success in working come to be desired by all, as all had borne a part in the formation of the plan; and even then I am sure that it would lose its vitality, cease to be living, as soon as it was no longer carried on by that sort of common interest which invariably makes people find means and ways of seeing each other, and becoming

⁹⁰ Works, IV, 515-16.

acquainted with each others' characters and persons, and even tricks of temper and modes of speech. We should understand each other better, and I'll venture to say we should like each other more."

"And you think they may prevent the recurrence of strikes?"

"Not at all. My utmost expectation only goes so far as this - that they may render strikes not the bitter, venomous sources of hatred that they have hitherto been. A more hopeful man might imagine that a closer and more genial intercourse between classes might do away with strikes. But I am not a hopeful man."⁹¹

In giving such a lengthy exposition of her thesis, Mrs Gaskell is in danger of falling into the kind of trap which Charles Kingsley often falls into, that is, allowing the concerns of the reformer to take over from the task of the novelist. But Mrs Gaskell avoids some of the difficulties by keeping close to the character of Thornton, although her concept of the ideal employer clearly shines through. I also feel that we are more willing to accept the didactic content of Thornton's speech because Mrs Gaskell has succeeded in giving us a penetrating analysis of industrial relations and how she anticipated they would develop. It is interesting to note that much of the work of sociologists in the field of organisational theory has stressed similar points, and the importance of communication and negotiation between employers and men has been paramount. As Thornton hoped, in most cases, the conflicts have been channelled into negotiated order, where some of the bitterness and harshness has been removed.

North and South shows generally a greater control of the themes

⁹¹ Works, IV, 516.

which were first used in Mary Barton. The love plot is much more fully integrated with the theme of industrialization and social class relationships than had been possible in the earlier novel and the two are often seen to be progressing simultaneously, particularly in the case of the conversations which take place between Margaret Hale and John Thornton. North and South does not offer the total working class world of Mary Barton and the working class characters play a relatively smaller part, but the achievement of the novel is greater because the relationships between the classes are more subtle and complex. By developing a variety of perspectives, Mrs Gaskell is able to observe the characters from various points of view. Thus we do not simply see the working class characters in isolation nor observe them from the standard middle class point of view but we are able to see them in relation to each other and to their employers and other members of the middle classes. It is with the intricacies of the interaction between the social classes that the novel shows its greatest advance of skill and this inevitably leads to a more sophisticated interpretation of the characters belonging to the working class.

Chapter 7: Mrs Gaskell's use of dialogue in her characterization of the working class

Throughout this study I have been trying to show the extent to which both Charles Kingsley and Elizabeth Gaskell present a view of a social class in their novels which is distinguishable from that traditionally accepted by the middle class at the time. In this chapter I wish to indicate the important part which dialogue plays in Mrs Gaskell's novels in presenting this distinct working class view and to examine the methods she used to enhance the credibility of her working class characters in scenes where we witness their interaction with one another and with members of other social groups.

First, I shall consider the problems associated with the presentation of accurate dialogue in a work of fiction and secondly, I shall discuss the function of certain kinds of speech in Mrs Gaskell's work which reveal some of the norms, values and patterns of behaviour associated with the working class and contribute to creating a 'reality' within the novels.

At the more direct level of using working class dialect as a vehicle for conversation by serious and important characters in fiction it is clear that she was an innovator, as Norman Page has pointed out:

In spite of the example of Scott and Edgeworth (Scots and Irish dialects have in any case not carried the same social implications as English dialects) the comic tradition persisted until the mid-nineteenth century. When Mrs Gaskell used the Lancashire dialect in Mary Barton (1848) for serious purposes, she felt impelled to provide footnotes which not only glossed the meanings but cited parallels from Chaucer,

the Prayer Book, and other highly esteemed early sources - thus making a frontal attack on the reader's social prejudice as well as his probable ignorance.¹

There is no doubt that Mrs Gaskell was well versed in the subject of the Lancashire dialect and she and her husband had made a careful study of it. This is demonstrated in 'The Lancashire Dialect Illustrated in Two Lectures' given by her husband and published with the fifth edition of Mary Barton in 1854, as well as in the footnotes mentioned above.

Norman Page² also confirms the authenticity of the Gaskells' work by drawing a comparison with the Glossary of Lancashire Dialect published by J.H. Nodal and G. Milner in 1875. As long ago as 1929 Gerald De Witt Sanders had indicated the significance of Mrs Gaskell's use of speech in 'A Note on Mrs Gaskell's Use of Dialect'.³ In a brief concluding chapter of his monograph he suggests that she had achieved her effects in the novels largely by two methods. The first was to show a change in the pronunciation of words by internal changes, cutting syllables or running words together, the second, was to use words which were completely different from standard English. In the first group, typical examples are: they'n (they han = they have), shanna (shall not), lile (little) and in the second group: nesh (tender), farrantly (comely), liefer (rather), ay (yes), frabbit (peevish), clemmed (starved). In addition he maintained that Mrs Gaskell had a considerable influence on the subsequent use of dialect in the novel:

¹ Norman Page, Speech in the English Novel (London, 1973), p.53.

² Norman Page, p.65.

³ Gerald De Witt Sanders, Elizabeth Gaskell (Oxford, 1929), pp.145-55.

Mrs Gaskell's felicity in the writing of dialect gave a great impulse to its use in fiction after her time, and suggested to subsequent authors how well it became novels dealing with persons uneducated and uncultivated. She made her workingmen and servants talk as in real life they were wont to talk, and not as refined and literate persons.⁴

But any consideration of the realistic and accurate use of working class dialect in a nineteenth century novel is confronted by major difficulties. Written dialogue is the transformation of one medium of language into another and as we do not possess the necessary means with which to reproduce accurately the intonation patterns, the written form cannot be said to truly represent the spoken word. Also most writers are very selective in their choice of those grammatical categories of speech which serve to represent the conversation of a particular fictional character because to include all the hesitations, pauses, false starts and badly constructed sentences which logically lead nowhere, would produce a dialogue form in the novel which would be extremely tedious and boring for the reader.

Even where present-day literature is concerned, and where we ought to be in a peculiarly strong position to perceive the essential differences, there has been a common tendency to exaggerate the resemblance of written dialogue, or written language in general, to everyday speech.⁵

We have no first-hand knowledge of the spoken language of the past with which comparison of written records would be possible, and any

⁴ Gerald De Witt Sanders, p.145.

⁵ Norman Page, p.4.

attempt to compare the language used by the working class of the same period in other contexts would not provide the necessary basis for establishing the factual accuracy of the language used by the fictional characters in Mary Barton and North and South.

Although their intentions were not the same, the problems associated with the accounts of working class speech recorded by, for example, Joseph Adshead in Distress in Manchester, or Henry Mayhew's London Labour and The London Poor, are clearly those faced by modern professional dialectologists. Such professionals usually obtain their linguistic material by questionnaires and interviews, which concentrate on selected lexical and grammatical items, likely to vary regionally. These are either transcribed phonetically by a competent interviewer, or, in more modern times, recorded on tape. In trying to record pronunciation, dialectologists faced two major problems in their field-work. What was to be taken as the normal pronunciation of the speakers? How could it be determined whether this was used in a particular interview? Dittmar, speaking on the subject of methodologies used by dialectologists, says:

Dialectologists reached the conclusion that the pronunciation of speakers in the situation of an interview represented - in most cases - the formal style of their verbal repertoire. This problem of style selection in an interview situation has remained unsolved till the present day.⁶

⁶ Norbert Dittmar, Sociolinguistics translated by Peter Sand, A.M. Seuren and Kevin Whiteley (London, 1976), p.116.

Labov, in his analysis of speakers of Non-Standard English, called this the Observer's Paradox and suggested that the difficulty was that:

the aim of linguistic research in a community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain this data by systematic observation.⁷

If modern fieldworkers, using much more sophisticated techniques in dealing with the problem of dialect, experience extreme difficulties, then it would be reasonable to argue that the dialogue recorded by nineteenth century social surveys are questionable as accurate accounts of working class speech.

The problems connected with using as evidence the works of working class writers, like Thomas Cooper, Samuel Bamford, John Overs and the creator of the Rowbottom diaries,⁸ are of a different order. First, there is the difficulty associated with the nature of the sample, as John Burnett points out:

the chief defect of the use of diaries and autobiographies as a source must be the self-selectivity of the 'sample'. To keep a daily journal or to write the story of one's life is, and was, at once atypical, especially for working people to whom writing did not usually come easily.⁹

Secondly, there is a distinction to be made between their customary use

⁷ W. Labov, Sociolinguistic Patterns (Philadelphia, 1972), p.209.

⁸ Examples from these writers' works are given in Appendix I.

⁹ Useful Toil edited by John Burnett (London, 1974), p.11.

of the spoken language and the written style which they felt to be appropriate for recording events associated with their own lives. Thirdly, there existed an ever present desire in most of them to imitate the language of 'literature' when they attempted creative writing. Both J.S.Bratton and Martha Vicinus make reference to the extent to which the accepted middle class 'literary' style influenced and inhibited genuine expression of the feelings of the working class in their own language. J.S.Bratton, speaking of the ballads of the common man, emphasises the double aspect of the artist and audience in this respect, when she says:

some writers and performers who were undeniably of working-class background wrote in a tone which resembles very closely that of middle-class poets; and ... many working-class audiences were led by their education and aspirations to reject all popular art in favour of the productions of the courtly tradition in music and poetry.¹⁰

Similarly, Martha Vicinus, in her examination of the Chartist writers, says:

As pioneers in creating a literature worthy of their people, they embraced the most respected styles of the time. They rarely used song metres or catchy rhymes; the sonnet, the epic and other complex forms were preferred as more aesthetically important. Cooper wrote his epic The Purgatory of Suicides, in the very difficult Spenserian stanza; it was a tour de force that earned him respect among the middle class and admiration among its few working-class readers. It is an extreme example of the problems all Chartist poets faced: how to write appealing and ennobling poetry that was intelligible to the working-class. Some, like Cooper, settled for impressing their 'betters'.

¹⁰ J.S.Bratton, The Victorian Popular Ballad, (London, 1975), p.89.

Most, however, addressed their verse to those educational Chartists anxious to master the riches of English literature.¹¹

Ferguson¹² discusses this subject, which he calls 'diglossia', and argues that there are two functionally different language varieties in a speech community. In a relatively stable situation of a regional dialect there exists an L (low) variety and a superior posed variety, an H (high) kind. The H variety is used for writing and in situations which the participants believe to be formal. It is often the language learnt in educational institutions but it differs from the L variety used for oral communication and conversation in its grammar, lexicon and phonology.

From an examination of some of the difficulties associated with the recording of working class dialogue it can be clearly seen that if a novel is examined in similar terms, it would be largely unproductive, because it is not the intention of the author to provide accurate dialogue, but to write a form of speech which would create a semblance of reality within the framework of the novel. In examining Mrs Gaskell's achievement in this particular aspect of her work, I wish to consider the way in which the dialogue functions in contributing to a fuller appreciation of the characters concerned. Although there are characters within the novels from a variety of social groups I shall concentrate more specifically upon those who are essentially working class. The division is not a simple one, however, because Mrs Gaskell

¹¹ Martha Vicinus, The Industrial Muse (London, 1974), p.98.

¹² C.A. Ferguson, 'Diglossia' in Language in Culture and Society edited by Dell Hymes (New York, 1964).

has chosen to include a large variety of people within this one social group. In order to provide some basis for comparison the following examples of dialogue in Mary Barton have been taken from conversations between members of the working class on the subject of human relationship problems.

John Barton is a mill hand and, although we are not told precisely what his job is, we might now refer to him as being a semi-skilled worker. He is literate (there is evidence of his reading the Northern Star) and he is also politically active. In a conversation with George Wilson he says:

"I donnot mean," continued he, "to say as I'm so badly off. I'd scorn to speak for mysel; but when I see such men as Davenport there dying away, for very clemming, I cannot stand it. I've but gotten Mary, and she keeps herself pretty much. I think we'll ha' to give up house-keeping; but that I donnot mind."¹³

George Wilson is also a semi-skilled worker, who is literate (he is able to read Davenport's letter), but he is not politically motivated. In speaking to Barton of the length of time he had known Davenport, he says:

"Better nor three year. He's worked wi' Carsons that long, and were always a steady, civil-spoken fellow, though, as I said afore, somewhat of a Methodee. I wish I'd gotten a letter he'd sent his missis, a week or two agone, when he were on tramp for work. It did

¹³ Works, I, 73.

my heart good to read it; for, yo see, I were a bit grumblin' mysel; it seemed hard to be spongin' on Jem, and takin' a' his flesh-meat money to buy bread for me and them as I ought to be keepin'. But, yo know, though I can earn nought, I mun eat summut. Well, as I telled ye, I were grumblin' ..."¹⁴

Here Mrs Gaskell is attempting to create a style of dialogue which will give a genuine feel of working class language. Both speeches contain sentences that are relatively short, although they would probably be shorter in real speech. Most of them consist of simple main clauses, though co-ordinate clauses linked by 'and' and 'for' are also fairly common. Adjectives occur rarely. Statements of fact, as both reason and conclusion appear in 'I can earn nought, I mun eat summut' and there are examples of 'pause-fillers' in 'as I said afore', 'yo know' and 'as I telled ye'. Both men use dialect words like 'clemmin'', and words with syllables cut: mysel, ha'.

Job Legh is also a mill hand but a different kind of working class man from John Barton. He is closer to the 'self-help' concept admired by many Victorians, and a type which Charles Kingsley found attractive. Job is a keen biologist and in developing this interest he has attempted to educate himself. He is a character who is thoughtful and independent. Thus when he speaks of the problems related to his membership of the trade union he takes an individual view. Mrs Gaskell succeeds in giving his speech a very different treatment from that of John Barton's, yet it still retains the working class characteristics she gives to the other mill hands, but in a modified form.

¹⁴ Works, I, 71-72.

"Ay! I'm one, sure enough; but I'm but a sleeping partner in the concern. I were obliged to become a member for peace, else I don't go along with 'em. Yo see they think themselves wise, and me silly, for differing with them. Well! there's no harm in that. But then they won't let me be silly in peace and quietness, but will force me to be as wise as they are; now that's not British liberty I say. I'm forced to be wise according to their notions, else they parsecute me, and sarve me out."¹⁵

The speech achieves a delicate balance between the extremes of working class speech and middle class speech in the novel by making such additions as Job would be capable of, without receiving a formal education. It contains an enlarged vocabulary (with words like 'parsecute' explicitly shown with regional pronunciation), longer sentences and a touch of irony. The structure of Job's speech contributes substantially to the understanding of the man. He is a person who spends a great deal of his time in both thinking and reading, yet he is severely limited in his educational opportunities.

The acquisition of knowledge concerning the specimens that Job gathers has obliged him to develop a language which enables him to classify and document his collection. (It will be remembered that the Dean attached great importance to this activity in Alton Locke.) Mrs Gaskell tries to demonstrate this increased language skill in Job's speech. She goes to considerable lengths to make the idea of the self-educated working class man credible and cites a number of real examples, where experts have consulted men like Job Legh and found their knowledge

¹⁵ Works, I, 228.

to be invaluable.¹⁶ When Job is listening to Will Wilson's sea stories he is clearly aware of the distinction between hearsay and truth regarding the existence of strange creatures. Will Wilson's descriptions of mermaids are ignored as fiction but when he raises the subject of a flying fish Job is easily able to identify it as 'the Exocetus; one of the Malacopterygii Abdominales'.¹⁷

Mary Barton's speech is less easy to justify in terms of her social position. Both Kathleen Tillotson¹⁸ and Aina Rubenius¹⁹ have pointed to Mary's speech as being out of keeping with her background and the difficulties that Mrs Gaskell faced in dealing with a working class heroine have already been considered.²⁰ If Mary Barton had had a strong working class accent she would probably have alienated many readers, but it could be argued that there are some justifications for Mary's speech because it is in keeping with her aspirations, which have been encouraged by her aunt. Her hopes of a different kind of life, her dreams of marriage to Harry Carson and her father's belief that she was something better than a common factory girl, prompted an attempt to speak with more care than her peers. In a conversation with Sally Leadbitter, the girl with whom she works, on the subject of Harry Carson she says:

¹⁶ Works, I, 40-41.

¹⁷ Works, I, 176.

¹⁸ Kathleen Tillotson, Novels of the Eighteen-Forties (Oxford, 1954), pp.213-14.

¹⁹ Aina Rubenius, 'The Woman Question in Mrs Gaskell's Life' in Essays and Studies on English Language and Literature edited by S.B. Liljegren (Upsala, 1950), V, 167.

²⁰ See above pp. 230-31.

"Do, Sally, dear Sally, go and tell him I don't love him, and that I don't want to have anything more to do with him. It was very wrong, I dare say, keeping company with him at all, but I'm very sorry, if I've led him to think too much of me; and I don't want him to think any more. Will you tell him this, Sally? and I'll do anything for you, if you will."²¹

Although the structure of the sentences is very similar to those speeches quoted above, it is written in Standard English with no dialect indicators at all.

The distinction between the various kinds of speech used by the working class in Mary Barton is relatively slight but they all bear a very marked difference from the kind of speech used by the middle class. As we have seen from the chapter on Mary Barton, the middle classes appear very rarely in this novel and there are few occasions in which middle class speech is heard. Nevertheless, I have chosen an illustration which continues the theme of human relationships in the exchange between Harry Carson, a mill owner's son, and Jem Wilson, a skilled worker at the foundry, on the subject of Carson's intentions toward Mary Barton.

"Before I make you into my confidant, my good man," said Mr. Carson, in a contemptuous tone, "I think it might be as well to inquire your right to meddle with our affairs. Neither Mary, nor I, as I conceive, called you in as a mediator." ...

"And so, my fine fellow, you will have the kindness to leave us

²¹ Works, I, 153.

to ourselves, and not to meddle with what does not concern you. If you were a brother or father of hers, the case might have been different. As it is, I can only consider you an impertinent meddler."²²

In this speech the sentences are longer and more complex. There is a greater use made of subordinate clauses, a wider vocabulary and an absence of 'pause-fillers'. There are also clear indicators that Carson feels that he is speaking to someone of inferior social status with the use of expressions such as 'my good man' and 'my fine fellow'.

So far what has been considered is the structure of the working class speech, but the relationship between the content and the context has also an important part to play in the development of characterization in Mrs Gaskell's novels. In writing about the working class Mrs Gaskell has succeeded in using working class dialogue so that it relates to the social structure of the world she is trying to create. The language of the working class characters is not something which has been superimposed, as we might find with the characters of a similar class in Mrs Trollope, Harriet Martineau or Benjamin Disraeli, but it is directly related to the way in which they think and feel in a particular social context. She has directed our attention to kinds of social behaviour through the use of fiction which Gumperz suggests we must take into consideration when examining real situations:

Just as intelligibility presupposes underlying grammatical rules, the communication of social information presupposes the existence of regular relationships between language usage and social structure. Before we can judge a speaker's social intent, we must know something

²² Works, I, 206.

about the norms defining the appropriateness of linguistically acceptable alternates for particular types of speakers; these norms vary among subgroups and among social settings.²³

In Mary Barton Mrs Gaskell begins to explore this additional dimension in her characters tentatively but in North and South it is developed with much greater confidence. A clear example of her ability to relate the dialogue of the working class to the social context can be found in the way in which Barton and Wilson seek to preserve their self image of tough masculinity while performing tasks which they associate in their minds with gentle effeminate behaviour. John Barton provides food for the Davenports, but avoids any possibility of praise or thanks in his gruff speech:

"See, missis, I'm back again. - Hold your noise, children, and don't mither your mammy for bread; here's a chap as has got some for you."²⁴

Wilson speaks in a similar offhand way when he has made arrangements for the care of the Davenports' children overnight:

"I'll tell yo what I'll do," said Wilson, "I'll take these two big lads, as does nought but fight, home to my missis for to-night, and I'll get a jug o' tea. Them women always does best with tea, and such-like slop."²⁵

²³ J. Gumperz, 'The Speech Community' in Language and Social Context edited by Pier Paolo Giglioli (Harmondsworth, 1972), p.220.

²⁴ Works, I, 66.

²⁵ Works, I, 67.

It is obvious that Wilson is embarrassed by what he feels to be womanish behaviour so he attempts to regain his rough image by deflecting the attention to female habits of drinking tea.

When Mrs Gaskell is dealing with working class characters she realises the importance of conveying what they don't say as much as what they do. Thus the two men, without speech, come to an agreement about staying with the Davenport family:

Then the two men consulted together. It seemed decided, without a word being spoken on the subject, that both should spend the night with the forlorn couple; that was settled.²⁶

They had talked but they had approached the problem circuitously without having mentioned the actual subject at all. To speak of the subject more directly would have meant trying to express tender feelings which they had no adequate words for and which would have presented them in a light which they would have felt to be unfavourable and this they could not bring themselves to do.

All the techniques related to the use of dialogue in Mary Barton are either repeated or extended in North and South. Nicholas Higgins, a mill hand like Barton and Wilson, is given the same speech characteristics and his 'toughness' is exemplified in a similar manner. Higgins, faced with the sudden prospect of Boucher's death, cannot allow himself to react or show emotion which he clearly feels:

Higgins, thou knowed him! Thou mun go tell the wife. Do it gently,

²⁶ Works, I, 69.

man, but do it quick, for we canna leave him here long."

"I canna go," said Higgins. "Dunnot ask me. I canna face her."

"Thou knows her best," said the man. "We'n done a deal in bringing him here - thou take thy share."

"I canna do it," said Higgins. "I'm welly felled wi' seeing him."²⁷

Both the men who have brought Boucher home and Higgins try to preserve their 'toughness' in the face of an obviously emotional situation. This is shown in such sentences as 'Do it gently, man, but do it quick'. But Mrs Gaskell also advances our understanding of the man by deliberately showing Higgins not using words. Because Higgins will not go, Margaret tells Mrs Boucher about the death of her husband. On her return Margaret attempts to enter the house of Higgins in order to talk to him:

They knocked. There was no answer, so they tried the door. It was bolted, but they thought they heard him moving within.

"Nicholas!" said Margaret. There was no answer, and they might have gone away, believing the house to be empty, if there had not been some accidental fall, as of a book, within.

"Nicholas!" said Margaret again. "It is only us. Won't you let us come in?"

"No", said he. "I spoke as plain as I could, 'bout using words, when I bolted th' door. Let me be, this day."²⁸

It is not that Higgins is incapable of feeling, but that the way in which he shows it relates to the language he is accustomed to using.

²⁷ Works, IV, 351.

²⁸ Works, IV, 356.

He literally has no words to express himself in this kind of situation so he is obliged to express himself through action. In bolting the door he uses a physical gesture as a substitute for words. He wishes to be left alone to think and it is the only way he knows which will convey his desire. It is of course true that we all feel 'lost for words' at times but in this instance Higgins is placed firmly within his social context and his behaviour, shown in relationship to the dialogue used, enables the reader to have a greater grasp of the character of the man. Mr Hale was also unable to confront the widow but that is a pointer to an entirely different aspect of the psychological nature of Margaret's father.

In developing the character of Higgins in North and South, Mrs Gaskell emphasises the way in which the man's cultural background and use of language contribute significantly to his perception of various situations. He is greatly concerned with attempts to ameliorate the conditions under which he and his fellow workers live. He is frustrated because the abstract reasoning of the economists and the arguments produced by the mill owners seem to bear no relationship to what he feels he knows from observing events of his own daily life. In a conversation with Margaret Hale at the beginning of the strike Higgins expresses his viewpoint:

"State o' trade! That's just a piece o' masters' humbug. It's rate o' wages I was talking of. Th' masters keep th' state o' trade in their own hands, and just walk it forward like a black bug-a-boo to frighten naughty children with into being good. I'll tell yo' it's their part - their cue, as some folks call it - to beat us down, to swell their fortunes."²⁹

²⁹ Works, IV, 158-59.

Later in the novel when Bessy Higgins has died, Margaret brings the father home to talk to Mr Hale. The problem of the relationship between the concrete and the abstract is raised again in Higgins's mind. Mr Hale attempts to offer him a book on economics, which will explain the situation, or so he believes:

"About the wages," said Mr. Hale. "You'll not be offended, but I think you make some sad mistakes. I should like to read you some remarks in a book I have." He got up and went to his bookshelves.

"Yo' needn't trouble yoursel ', sir," said Nicholas. "Their book-stuff goes in one ear and out at t'other. I can make nought on't. Afore Hamper and me had this split, th' overlooker telled him I were stirring up th' men to ask for higher wages; and Hamper met me one day in th' yard. He'd a thin book i' his hand, and says he, 'Higgins, I'm told you're one of those damned fools that think you can get higher wages for asking for 'em; ay, and keep 'em up too, when you've forced 'em up. Now, I'll give yo' a chance and try if yo've any sense in yo'. Here's a book written by a friend o' mine, and if yo'll read it yo'll see how wages find their own level, without either masters or men having aught to do with them;"³⁰

The point at issue here is not the rights or wrongs of a particular economic theory but the inability of Higgins to gain access to these particular abstract arguments because of the kind of language to which he is restricted by the limitations of social class. It is not simply a question of being able to understand words on a page but it is the more complex problem of comprehending the total academic structure which

³⁰ Works, IV, 271-72.

gives support to the use and meaning of the abstract arguments that are contained in a book on economics.³¹ Mrs Gaskell presses the point home when, in response to Mr Hale's kindly efforts to persuade him that the book would have contained some truth, Higgins replies:

"it might, or it might not. There's two opinions go to settling that point. But suppose it was truth double strong, it were no truth to me if I couldna take it in. I dare say there's truth in yon Latin books on your shelves; but it's gibberish and not truth to me, unless I know the meaning o' the words."³²

In order to come to terms with abstract ideas, Higgins explores the problem through a particular example. In defending his strike action to Margaret Hale, he speaks of justice, but the concept is arrived at through actions taken in respect of particular individuals, as he says:

"Dun yo' think it's for mysel ' I'm striking work this time? It's just as much in the cause of others as yon soldier - only m'appen, the cause he dies for is just that of somebody he never clapt eyes on, nor heerd on all his born days, while I take up John Boucher's cause, as lives next door but one, wi' a sickly wife, and eight childer, none on 'em factory age."³³

Mrs Gaskell had previously attempted to incorporate some of these ideas in the development of John Barton's character, but they had not

³¹ Charles Kingsley shows Alton Locke experiencing similar problems in the initial stages of his self-education. See above pp.106-7

³² Works, IV, 273.

³³ Works, IV, 158.

been formulated with the same clarity. John Barton tries to come to terms with his antagonism towards the owners by adjusting his ideas to a form which is comprehensible to him. The abstract concepts which are concerned with economic processes and supply and demand mean nothing. Like Higgins he tries to shape a plan of action which has some form of direct and concrete expression. Mrs Gaskell initially shows us Barton's attempts to give expression to his class hatred when, in a conversation with Wilson at the opening of the novel, he expresses his views with a biblical reference:

"and yet we are to live as separate as if we were in two worlds; ay, as separate as Dives and Lazarus, with a great gulf betwixt us."³⁴

The use of Dives and Lazarus helps to focus his hatred, but the biblical characters are too remote for him. Later, in a conversation at the deathbed of Davenport, Barton tries to direct his hatred of the rich by excluding them from the world of God:

"Don't ye think He's th' masters' Father, too? I'd be loth to have 'em for brothers."

"Eh, John! donna talk so; sure there's many and many a master as good or better nor us."

"If you think so, tell me this. How comes it they're rich, and we're poor? I'd like to know that. Han they done as they'd be done by for us?"³⁵

³⁴ Works, I, 8.

³⁵ Works, I, 72.

But this approach provides no solution for him, because he wishes to take concrete action. The opportunity comes when, after the failure of the union negotiations, the men decide to draw lots in order to assault physically the owners. Although there is a deliberate attempt to keep the method and subject vague it inevitably leads to the choice of a particular person. At last Barton is able to direct his hatred in a way which is comprehensible to him. It is not that he has a special antagonism towards Carson as a man, but it is because he serves as a concrete example of the class against which Barton wishes to express his hatred. As Mrs Gaskell says later in the novel:

To intimidate a class of men, known only to those below them as desirous to obtain the greatest quantity of work for the lowest wages - at most to remove an overbearing partner from an obnoxious firm, who stood in the way of those who struggled as well as they were able to obtain their rights, - this was the light in which John Barton had viewed his deed.³⁶

The destruction of Harry Carson is a way of coming to terms with incomprehensible economic policies which are a source of frustration in the lives of men like John Barton. It is not perfectly worked out in Mrs Gaskell's first novel and this analysis is not intended to establish that this is a working class view only, but it is meant to illustrate the kind of relationship which Mrs Gaskell showed as existing between a social class environment and the way of interpreting a particular situation. Thronton's use of the impersonal synecdoche

³⁶ Works, I, 425.

'hands' as a term for the members of his work force³⁷ - a term to which Margaret objects strongly - is an example of a way of thinking in another social group. Thinking in this way enables Thornton to avoid the social responsibility which might evolve from treating the men as individual human beings. It is not being suggested that this use of language inevitably produces this kind of response but that Mrs Gaskell has used this technique to give a further dimension to her characters.

John Thornton's background is complex; as a child and a young man he experienced several changes of fortune. Initially he was of middle class origin, but his father's failure in business forced him to be deprived of the kind of academic education which he longs for. The recruitment of Hale meant that he was able to take up again the studies of Latin and Greek, which he gave up in order to provide a livelihood for his family. Thus John Thornton views education in a very different way from Job Legh. He does not see it as a tool which enables him to pursue an interest as Job does, because his command of language is already sufficiently good to fulfil his everyday requirements, yet he feels a need. He believes that his advancement, brought about by his commercial success, has left him with a lack of culture which he feels is associated with his new social position. Mrs Gaskell does not illustrate Thornton's speech by using the structure she associates with the mill hands but she reveals his background both in the subjects which arouse his emotions and the somewhat ostentatious way in which he chooses to express himself when his anger is provoked. In response to Margaret Hale's comments on the behaviour of a gentleman, he says:

³⁷ A similar example may be found in Charles Dickens, Hard Times Book I, chap.10.

'Among the multitude of Coketown, generally called 'the hands', - a race who would have found more favour with some people, if Providence had seen fit to make them only hands, or, like the lower creatures of the sea-shore, only hands and stomachs.'
(Oxford ed. p.63).

"I am rather weary of this word 'gentlemanly', which seems to me to be often inappropriately used, and often, too, with such exaggerated distortion of meaning, which the full simplicity of the noun 'man', and the adjective 'manly', is unacknowledged - that I am induced to class it with the cant of the day."³⁸

His choice of vocabulary however, does not disguise his feelings of being socially inferior, especially with regard to Margaret Hale. In a conversation with his mother, he says:

"The only time I saw Miss Hale, she treated me with a haughty civility which had a strong flavour of contempt in it. She held herself aloof from me as if she had been a queen, and I her humble, unwashed vassal."³⁹

Mrs Thornton is under no such illusions concerning the virtue of culture, as her commercial background makes it impossible for her to perceive the broader view:

"Classics may do very well for men who loiter away their lives in the country or in colleges; but Milton men ought to have their thoughts and powers absorbed in the work of to-day. At least, that is my opinion."⁴⁰

But if it is a desire for classical education which exerts an influence on Thornton's speech and thought it is the Bible which is a formative

³⁸ Works, IV, 194.

³⁹ Works, IV, 89.

⁴⁰ Works, IV, 132.

influence on Bessy Higgins. For many working class homes the Bible was an invaluable reference book, which was used to support arguments and colour expressions about a whole variety of subjects. Charles Kingsley is also aware of this and comments on it in the speech of Tregarva in Yeast.⁴¹

In a conversation with Margaret Hale, Bessy says that she has dreamed of seeing Margaret in the white evening dress that she is going to wear at the Thorntons' dinner party:

"And why might na I dream a dream in my affliction as well as others? Did not many a one i' the Bible? Ay, and see visions too! Why, even my father thinks a deal o' dreams. I tell yo' again, I saw yo' as plainly, coming swiftly towards me, wi' yo'r hair blown back wi' the very swiftness o' the motion, just like the way it grows, a little standing off like; and the white shining dress on yo've gotten to wear."⁴²

Not only is the idea of the white dress readily transferred from descriptions in Revelation, but the vocabulary of Bessy's speech is also influenced by the reading of the Bible. For example, she uses such words as 'affliction' to describe her illness and expressions like 'swiftness o' the motion', which are interspersed in her otherwise simple speech.

When Margaret Hale says she feels guilty about attending the

⁴¹ "Oh, why, why are you gentlemen running off to Norway and foreign parts, whither God has not called you? Are there no graves in Egypt, that you must go out to die in the wilderness?"

Lancelot, quite unaccustomed to the language of the dissenting poor, felt keenly the bad taste of the allusion.' Charles Kingsley, Yeast, p.59.

⁴² Works, IV, 176.

dinner party because so many families could use the money to feed their children, Bessy's reply is again couched in biblical terms which are imbedded in her working class language.

"No!" said Bessy, "Some's pre-elected to sumptuous feasts, and purple and fine linen - may be yo're one on 'em. Others toil and moil all their lives long - and the very dogs are not pitiful in our days, as they were in the days of Lazarus. But if yo' ask me to cool yo'r tongue wi' th' tip of my finger, I'll come across the great gulf to yo' just for th' thought o' what yo've been to me here."⁴³

Bessy's speech contains within it a way of perceiving existence which extends beyond the overt expression of a religious belief. Her morality and medium of thought are inextricably linked in a way which is essentially part of her social environment. In spite of her affection for Margaret, Bessy implicitly believes that the biblical distinctions between the poor that are saved and the rich that are damned must inevitably place Bessy in heaven and Margaret in hell. It is also a way in which she has been able to come to terms with the suffering and hardships of her own life on earth. Bessy sees death in terms of a journey to a pleasant place and her joyless life encourages her to wish for a speedy end to her illness in death.

"I'm weary and tired o' Milton, and longing to get away to the land o' Beulah; and, when I think I'm farther and farther off, my heart sinks."⁴⁴

⁴³ Works, IV, 177.

⁴⁴ Works, IV, 103.

When Margaret tries to encourage Bessy to read those parts of the Bible which are concerned with spiritual comfort, Bessy does not want this; instead she prefers those parts of Revelation which contribute to the dreams of life after death and provide comfort in a form of escapism. Margaret says:

"Don't dwell so much on the prophecies, but read the clearer parts of the Bible."

"I dare say it would be wiser; but where would I hear such grand words of promise - hear tell o' anything so far different fro' this dreary world, and this town above a', as in Revelations? ... No, I cannot give up Revelations. It gives me more comfort than any other book i' the Bible."⁴⁵

The care with which Mrs Gaskell related individual speech characteristics to her major figures is also seen to some extent with a few of her minor characters like Mrs Wilson and Mrs Boucher, but these have already been discussed.⁴⁶

North and South is a novel which particularly emphasises class differences and Mrs Gaskell shows through dialogue the way in which speech is modified when a member of one class addresses a member of another class. Thus she points to the importance attached to the use of 'Mr' in Hale's conversation with Higgins after the death of his daughter, Bessy, Higgins modifies his language to accommodate Margaret when he explains to her the function of the union and Mrs Boucher is caught between two forms of address when she tries to speak to Margaret

⁴⁵ Works, IV, 162.

⁴⁶ See above pp. 189-90, 266.

and her children simultaneously after the death of her husband.⁴⁷

In this chapter I hope to have shown that Mrs Gaskell emphasises social class distinctions in Mary Barton and North and South through the way in which her characters converse. The relationships which she establishes between language and social structure has served to reinforce the credibility of the characters involved. This analysis has not been used to demonstrate any positive relationship to the 'real' world of the Victorian society but only to emphasise the extent to which an appearance of 'reality' has been created within the novels.

⁴⁷ For a full discussion of each of these incidents, see above pp. 254, 264, 266.

Conclusion

Having examined independently the way in which both Charles Kingsley and Elizabeth Gaskell created fictional working class worlds in their novels, I shall conclude this study with a brief discussion of the similarities and differences in their approaches.

Both writers made substantial contributions to the development of the novel when they attempted to treat working class characters with a new kind of seriousness. It is dangerous to generalise, but with a few exceptions, such as those discussed in chapter One, authors had tended to treat working class characters comically. In the writing of Mrs Gaskell and Charles Kingsley the working class people occupy an important position and no longer remain minor characters who have been added for effect or atmosphere, or as contributors to one of the lesser subplots. This point is made most forcefully with John Barton and Alton Locke, who are treated as major figures, but it is also true of Nicholas Higgins and Tregarva.

The concern for contemporary social problems expressed by these writers led them as a matter of course to give importance to those people who were directly involved in these problems. More than that, they succeeded in creating genuine working class characters, who were shown to have attributes worthy in themselves, rather than offering to their readers characters of a higher rank who, by some quirk of fortune, had been placed among the working class, as for example in the case of Disraeli's *Sybil*.

There is no doubt that Kingsley was sincerely concerned with the struggles of the working classes and this is demonstrably expressed in his involvement in numerous schemes to alleviate their distress which I have referred to earlier, in chapter Two. When he creates characters with consistency and gives expression to their thoughts and feelings,

then he provides insights into the development of the working class which are valuable in constructing a semblance of reality. It is when he chooses to manipulate characters and events to formulate a view of what ought to be done that the credibility of the situation he describes becomes questionable. In his exploration of the character of Alton Locke, particularly in the early stages of his development, we are given a unique sense of the experiences which are specific to the working classes both at the level of mental and social structures. It is the high point of Kingsley's fictionalised account of a working class world.

Similarly Elizabeth Gaskell is clearly concerned with the struggles of the working class, but she is much more willing to create characters who reflect her experiences of them and express themselves in ways which are not so directly shaped by the author's future expectations. It is true that she has hopes that the conflicts in industrial relations are capable of being solved through communication and understanding, but she does not attempt to minimise the difficulties. It is through the exploration of the complex ways in which the two classes relate to one another that her novels develop their great strength. She may want the working classes to behave differently, but this does not prevent her from giving a very vivid and detailed account of their world.

Lukács, speaking on the subject of realism, has said:

Of course every great realist found a different solution for the basic problem in accordance with his time and his own artistic personality. But they all have in common that they penetrate deeply into the great universal problems of their time and inexorably depict the true essence of reality as they see it.¹

¹Georg Lukács, Studies in European Realism (London, 1972), p.13.

Charles Kingsley at times and Elizabeth Gaskell consistently have given what Lukacs has called 'realistic' accounts of the working class, both as individuals and as a group, and in this respect they have succeeded in generating a kind of writing which differed substantially from that of most of their contemporaries. In their sincere attempts to make a convincing record of what they believed to be true they were frequently obliged to set aside their convictions of what ought to be the case in order to describe what they actually saw. Thus it is in the portrayal of the working class individuals, as they develop organically within their particular environment, that we find originality and not in the conclusions of their novels, where the novelists more or less explicitly state their beliefs.

But in spite of there being a broad area of the roman-à-thèse which is shared between them, there are, nevertheless, distinct differences in treatment, in style and in tone between the two novelists. Kingsley's anxiety to convey a particular message often causes him to set out scenes in crude emotional terms. At times he was so impatient to make a point that he failed to give substance to the character who could make the point credible. This is clearly illustrated in the opening conversation between Tregarva and Lancelot in Yeast, where Kingsley makes Tregarva immediately use a casual remark about the river to hint at the disease it creates. Kingsley does not allow sufficient time or space for the development of his characters so that the reader's experience is more akin to that of listening to a sermon or reading a political pamphlet than to witnessing some kind of social interaction. This is obviously more of a criticism of the shorter work, Yeast, than of Alton Locke, but even in the longer novel he is often more concerned with what is being said than by whom it is said and there are frequent

lapses of probability in a novel which is being presented as essentially realistic.

Mrs Gaskell is much more concerned with developing her arguments through the delineation of her characters and she takes care to prepare the ground so that she may create a willingness on the part of the reader to respond to something which seems genuinely experienced and expressed. Sympathy for a particular social problem is gained through the way in which we grow to understand and appreciate the difficulties that individuals experience in their relationships with others in different social groups. As an artist, she is at her best in Mary Barton and North and South when she is exhibiting her understanding of the feelings, attitudes and behaviour of men like John Barton or Nicholas Higgins, or more subtly in North and South when she is developing the novel at two levels simultaneously. For example, at one level the conflict between Margaret Hale and John Thornton is one of private emotions, but this basic love relationship is overlaid by the conflict which exists between masters and men, where Margaret's passionate defence of the workers is very closely bound up with her feelings towards Thornton as a man. As they grow to understand the complexities of the relationship between the owners and the men they come closer to understanding the feelings they have for each other.

However, it is in viewing scenes from both writers which appear superficially similar that the distinction between their styles and techniques is often made most clear. In this concluding section I have selected only a few outstanding examples, and some which are not necessarily central to the novels, in order to substantiate this point. For example, both novelists speak of the joy which workers derive from their visits to the countryside, but Kingsley's interpretation of Alton Locke's experience on his first journey to Cambridge, is of a

very different kind from Mrs Gaskell's description of a country walk in the opening scene in Mary Barton. It is true that Kingsley is to some extent aiming for a contrast between town and country, but his main object is to make the reader aware of the excitement that the cockney tailor feels from this new sensation, and despite a certain falseness in the tone and more than a touch of sentimentality, he succeeds up to a point:

And, indeed, the whole scene was so novel to me, that I had no time to analyse; I could only enjoy. I recollect lying on my face and fingering over the delicately cut leaves of the weeds, and wondering whether the people who lived in the country thought them as wonderful and beautiful as I did.²

Mrs Gaskell's emphasis is different. Obviously the pleasure the workers receive from a visit to the country is present but she is essentially concerned with exploring, through contrast, the relationship between the characters and their background. Behind the pleasures of a day's release from the toil lay the mills, whose very existence had permeated every aspect of the worker's being. Her description of the countryside is quickly passed over in her concern for the people who are in it. Of the factory girls walking by, she says:

Groups of merry and somewhat loud-talking girls, whose ages might range from twelve to twenty, came by with a buoyant step . . . Their faces were not remarkable for beauty; indeed, they were below average, with one or two exceptions; they had dark hair, neatly and classically arranged, dark eyes, but sallow complexions and irregular features.³

² Charles Kingsley, Alton Locke, I, 235.

³ Elizabeth Gaskell, Works, I, 3.

And when we are allowed to overhear the conversation of the main characters for the first time, their subject, in spite of the holiday, is the conflict which exists between masters and men. This scene is also given prominence in the structure of the novel as a whole, both as an introduction and as a continued effect of contrast, through reference and remembrance, which distinguishes it from anything in Kingsley's work.

Another topic which the two authors have in common is emigration. When Alton Locke and Crossthwaite are made to emigrate, Kingsley is offering a practical solution for them but in addition one which he firmly believed to be a general solution for the unemployed. In Mary Barton Jem Wilson is forced to emigrate when communication between the owners and his fellow workers has broken down. It is a plot device and a desperate remedy born out of the lack of mutual understanding which Mrs Gaskell felt to be so important and which, again, forms a unifying theme in the novel as a whole.

Kingsley's great achievement as a novelist of this genre is the treatment of rural poverty and distress. In spite of his borrowings from other sources, notably the correspondence of S.G.O., he nevertheless presents a view of rural conditions in fiction which is refreshingly new. Lancelot Smith's visit to the country fair and Alton Locke's second visit to Cambridgeshire show a knowledge and understanding of the plight of the rural worker which go much deeper than those of any other contemporary novelist.

Mrs Gaskell, despite her detailed examination of the urban worker's way of life, did not see the rural problem in the same terms as Kingsley. She is aware of the conditions and she reveals her knowledge through the advice which Margaret Hale gives to Higgins:

They labour on from day to day, in the great solitude of steaming fields

- never speaking or lifting up their poor, bent, downcast heads.

The hard spade-work robs their brain of life; the sameness of their toil deadens their imagination.⁴

This speech could almost have been made by Tregarva, but on the occasion when Margaret Hale visits the village of Helstone, Mrs Gaskell chooses very largely to ignore this aspect of rural life. The evils of village life are mentioned but she mainly uses the opportunity to provide a nostalgic alternative - a view of happier times for the Hale family before the move to Milton Northern.

Both writers choose to include union meetings and both are unsympathetic to the way in which the unions exert pressure on the individual. There are a number of union meetings in Alton Locke and at one Locke rashly volunteers to seek the support of the farm-workers. Although this act has disastrous consequences for him, the actual meeting is only briefly described. The most important occasion is when Locke addresses the farm-workers at the open air meeting in Cambridge-shire. Kingsley uses this opportunity to describe in detail the suffering of the labourers and show how easily desperate circumstances can cause well-intentioned men to take desperate remedies. It is a vivid description of rural conditions and the chain of events relates closely to the irresolute nature of Locke's character, which had been established previously. Its weakness as a realistic scene is partly due to the way in which Kingsley fails to make other characters important in their own right and, instead, simply uses them as objects to which Locke responds. As a visiting union official he is speaking to strangers and by using this situation Kingsley has gained the advantage of being able to present the farm-worker's case as an outsider

⁴ Works, IV, 364.

would freshly hear it, but he has sacrificed the opportunity of any real social interaction between Locke and the other characters.

In Mary Barton the union meeting is an integral part of the structure of the novel. It arises as a natural development of the events which have gone before and it is concerned with characters who have been established already. In addition it is the focal point of the novel. Mrs Gaskell used the occasion to emphasise the conflict between worker and worker, with John Barton's description of his visit to the infirmary to see the results of a vitriol throwing incident. From this horrible mistake grows the notion that solidarity between the workers against the owners must be maintained at all costs. It is at this point that the seemingly innocent cartoon of the workers by young Carson pushes the men beyond the bounds of reason. But the real achievement of this chapter is in the human response so realistically described and beautifully modulated that it hovers between good humour and tragedy where the men could almost laugh at their caricatures if they were not starving and yet finally resolve to murder the man who drew them.

Mrs Gaskell's understanding of the working classes not only enabled her to perceive clearly the kind of characters that she wished to portray but it also influenced the way in which she chose to structure the total novel. This is particularly true of Mary Barton, where John Barton's behaviour largely determines the form of the whole work. In North and South the relationships which exist between the characters are very strongly influenced by their social class attitudes and substantially direct their thoughts and actions throughout the novel. Charles Kingsley has only partially succeeded in the integration of his characters with their background and they are often to be found merely

offering a viewpoint rather than giving the feeling of actually experiencing it. Mrs Gaskell's social insight, however, is inextricable from her art as a novelist. She is able to create a world in which we have a feeling that the working class characters fully belong. This success is closely related to her greatest achievement which is her understanding of the relationship that exists between language and culture. This enables her to give both a feeling of authenticity to the speech of her working class characters by effectively simulating actual dialect in their conversations, and to advance beyond the simple expression of words and phrases representative of their speech to create in the dialogues of her characters distinctive viewpoints which are generated by specific cultural experiences. It is the total comprehension of the working class culture at all levels that gives depth to her characters, which a simple overlay of speech patterns could not have created. It is her skill in presenting such a feeling of totality in her working class characters that makes those parts of Mary Barton and North and South where these characters appear, notable in the work of a writer of this period.

APPENDIX I

Henry Mayhew, London Labour and the London Poor (1861)

Statements of Sheep's Trotter Women

"Women's far worse to please than men. I've known a woman buy a trotter, put her teeth into it, and then say it wasn't good, and return it. It wasn't paid for when she did so, and because I grumbled, I was abused by her, as if I'd been a Turk. The landlord interfered, and he said, said he, 'I'll not have this poor woman insulted; she's here for the convenience of them as requires trotters, and she's a well-conducted woman, and I'll not have her insulted,' he says, says he, lofty and like a gentleman, sir. 'Why, who's insulting the old b--h?' says the woman, says she. 'Why, you are,' says the landlord, says he, 'and you ought to pay her for her trotter, or how is she to live?' 'What the b--h--ll do I care how she lives,' says the woman, 'its nothing to me, and I won't pay her.' 'Then I will,' says the landlord, says he, 'here's 6d.,' and he wouldn't take the change." (I,172-73)

Statement of a Blind Tailor

"The workshop at this cheap house was both small and badly ventilated. It was about seven foot square, and so low, that as you sot on the floor you could touch the ceiling with the tip of your finger. In this place seven of us worked - three on each side and one in the middle. Two of my shopmates were boys, or else I am sure it would not have held us all. There was no chimney, nor no window that could be opened to let the air in. It was lighted by a skylight, and this would neither open nor shut. The only means for letting out the foul air was one of them working ventilators - like cockades, you know, sir - fixed in one of the panes of glass; but this wouldn't work, so there we were, often

from 5 in the morning till 10 at night, working in this dreadful place. There was no fire in the winter, though we never needed one, for the workshop was over-hot from the suffocation, and in the summer it was like an oven. This is what it was in the daytime, but mortal tongue can't tell what it was at night, with the two gas-lights burning away, and almost stifling us. Many a time some of the men has been carried out by the others fainting for air." (I, 343)

Thomas Cooper, The Life of Thomas Cooper; written by himself (1872)

The happiest hours of all I had in early years were spent alone, and with books. When childhood was past, and I ceased to feel so much absorbed in the Fables, and little story books, the immortal "Pilgrim's Progress" was my book of books. What hours of wonder and rapture I passed with Bunyan when a boy! He was always new; and though a "number-man", or travelling-bookseller, kindly left me his curiosities, now and then, because my eagerness interested him, I returned with increased relish to Christian and Faithful, Great Heart and Giant Despair, after reading odd numbers of Baines's "History of the War", and "Pamela", and "The Earl of Moreland"; and the stories of Turpin and Nevison, the famous highwaymen, and Bampfylde Moore-Carew, the King of the Gipsies. (p.22)

Samuel Bamford, Early Days (1849)

It was about such a period as this that my earliest recollections of my parents and our family commence. My father as I have said, was a huge-framed body of a man, but at that time he was pale, stooping, and attenuated, probably from scanty fare, as well as repeated visitations of sickness. My mother, - and I have her image distinctly

before me, - was a person of very womanly and motherly presence. Tall, upright, active, and cleanly to an excess: her cheeks were fair and ruddy as apples; her dark hair was combed over a roll before and behind, and confined by a mob cap as white as bleached linen could be made; her neck was covered by a handkerchief, over which she wore a bed-gown; and a clean checked apron, with black hose and shoes, completed her every-day attire. (p.5)

John Over's Letter to Charles Dickens (1840)

My dear Friend

Subdued by a fit of spleen, - or rather, perhaps, I should say usurped by a snarling fiend of discontent and despondency which occasionally obtains the mastery I know not why or wherefore, I dare not venture to convey to you certain remarks or rhapsodies which have arisen in my mind partly from your conversation, and partly from the digestion of the book by Thomas Carlyle entitled "Chartism" which your kindness has enabled me to peruse. I have therefore waited till the murrain passed away, which I hope you will receive as an apology for the all unconscionable time that I have detained your book, and which I herewith return with many thanks.

Rowbottom Diaries (1797)

Saddleworth this day a great number of people attended at a place called Raven Stones in Greenfield for the purpose of blowing up by Gunpower a venerable large stone called one of the raven Stones wick Stone was Situated up a verey High and Lofty rock when the people where mineing under the Stone in order to lay their powder the Stone Suddenly fell down and made its way down a large precipice where

a Great number of Spectators where assembled Happyly there was but one man kiled but a Great number where much wounded in its way to the water wich runs down Grinfield its velocity and weight where so Great that it Crushed Smaller Stones and Levelled the Ground so much that it resembled a new baldered road (pp.34-35)

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