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Economically, politically, and militarily Britain was the leading nation of the 19th century, the richest country in the world, and the birthplace of Industrialization. But it was also a country of sharp social contrasts. Whereas the owners of factories, mines etc. The actual living conditions did, however, depend on the economic situation. The s, and particularly the s — the historic background of the Mary Barton —, saw an economic downturn that lead to high unemployment. As in economic crises the contrast between working class and bourgeoisie stands out more clearly, it is not surprising that the s were the Heyday of Chartism.

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One of them, Davenport, lives with his family in a damp, cold, and almost unfurnished cellar. Too poor to buy food for himself or his family and sick because of poor sanitary conditions, Davenport dies. These conditions were by no means exceptional in the poor quarters of Manchester. The Bartons are, however, more representative of the average working-class family of the time. They have to pawn many of their household goods, and almost have to vacate their home because they cannot pay the rent.

The average worker lives on the edge of social decline. Of course, these conditions were criticized not only by the Chartists but also by many members of the middle and upper classes. There were various motives for this criticism and many concepts for its solution. There was the incipient socialist and communist current, pointing to the causes of the misery within the economic and social system and demanding its radical alteration. And there was the Christian current to which Elizabeth Gaskell belonged that pleaded for charity and understanding between the social classes. Gaskell came from a Unitarian background. Unitarianism, a dissenting Protestant current, had a long tradition in her family and her husband was a Unitarian minister.

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Mary Barton by Elizabeth Gaskell

Gaskell has endowed also this part of the novel with a moral that represents her general approach to individual or social problems: the rediscovery of Christian morals as a guiding principle for real life, as opposed to the restriction of religion to service on Sunday — a development she criticized among her contemporaries. A moralistic story like that of Mary, dealing with the topic of the individual and his conscience, is conceivable in different epochs and with different cultural backgrounds, and has thus lost some of its significance and interest.

Therefore, I will mainly deal with the character of John Barton and its development. The two plots are linked only by the identical characters and the murder, but beyond that, there is hardly any real connection. Apart from the murder, the first plot hardly adds anything to the development of the second one, and vice versa. The book contains two separate morals and two stories which could have supplied ample material for two separate books.

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To Unitarians, going to church was less important than leading a life according to Christian values and morals such as honesty, charity, and temperance. The second edition, with Gaskell's corrections, particularly on typographical mistakes when writing the Lancashire dialect, appeared on 3 January The third edition soon followed, in February. A fourth, without Gaskell's involvement, appeared in October The fifth edition, from , was the first single volume edition and included William Gaskell's lectures on the dialect. One element of the novel that has been a subject of heavy criticism is the apparent shift in genres between the political focus of the early chapters to the domestic in the later ones.

Raymond Williams particularly saw this as a failure by the author: the early chapters, he said, are the "most moving response in the literature to the industrial suffering of the s", but in the later, the novel becomes a "familiar and orthodox Victorian novel of sentiment". However, Kamilla Elliot disagrees with Williams about the weakness of the domestic genre, saying, "It is the romance plot, not the political plot, that contains the more radical political critique in the novel. It is a subject of some debate whether the first person narrator in Mary Barton is synonymous with Gaskell. On the one hand, the consistent use of tone through the original preface and the novel, and authorial insets like the first paragraph of chapter 5 suggest the Gaskell is directly narrating the story.

Contrarily, critics like Lansbury suggest the narrator is too unsympathetic in all Gaskell's Manchester novels to be her own voice:. Nothing could be more unwise than to regard the authorial 'I' of the novels as the voice of Elizabeth Gaskell, particularly in the Manchester novels. The narrator has a tendency to engage in false pleading and specious argument, while the workers demonstrate honesty and commonsense. Hopkins goes so far as to claim that the detail to verisimilitude in the novel made it the first "respectable" social novel , in contrast with the lack of believability in, for example, Disraeli 's Sybil or Tonna 's Helen Fleetwood.

Prominent in the novel is Gaskell's attempt to reinforce the realism of her representation through the inclusion of "working-class discourses", not only through the use of closely imitated colloquialisms and dialect, but also through "passages from Chartist poems, working class ballads, proverbs, maxims, and nursery rhymes, as John Barton's radical discourse, Ben Davenport's deathbed curses, and Job Legh's language of Christian submission. The first half of the novel focuses mainly on the comparison between the rich and poor. In a series of set pieces across the opening chapters, we are shown the lifestyles of the Bartons, Wilsons most prominently in the chapter "A Manchester Tea-Party" and Davenport's respective households compared to the contrasting affluence of the Carson establishment in the chapter "Poverty and Death". A key symbol shown in this chapter is the use of five shillings; this amount being the price John Barton receives for pawning most of his possessions, but also the loose change in Harry Carson's pocket.

Gaskell details the importance of the mother in a family; as is seen from the visible decline in John Barton's physical and moral well-being after his wife's death. This view is also symbolized by Job Legh's inability to care for Margaret as a baby in the chapter "Barton's London Experience". The theme of motherhood is connected to declining masculinity: Surridge points out that the roles of nurturing fall towards the men as bread-winning falls away. Both Wilson and Barton are pictured holding the infants in the place of the nanny that can't be afforded as the novel begins, but eventually, both end up relying on the income of their children, Jem and Mary respectively. The second half of the book deals mainly with the murder plot. Here it can be seen that redemption is also a key aspect of the novel; not least because of the eventual outcome of the relationship between Messrs Carson and Barton, but also in Gaskell's presentation of Esther, the typical "fallen woman".

The selfless nature she gives the character, on several occasions having her confess her faults with brutal honesty, is an attempt to make the reader sympathize with the character of a prostitute, unusual for the time. Indeed, throughout the novel Gaskell appears to refer to her characters as being out of her control, acting as not so much a narrator but a guide for the observing reader. Another aspect of the passivity of the characters is, as some suggest, that they represent the impotence of the class to defend or even represent, themselves politically. Cooney draws attention to this in the scene in which the factory is on fire — a scene the reader anticipates to be domestic fails in its domestic role one might imagine Jem's heroism to prompt Mary to discover her true feelings actually sees the crowd passively at the mercy of ill-equipped firemen and unconcerned masters.

Several times Gaskell attempts to mask her strong beliefs in the novel by disclaiming her knowledge of such matters as economics and politics, but the powerful language she gives to her characters, especially John Barton in the opening chapter, is a clear indication of the author's interest in the class divide. She openly pleads for reducing this divide through increased communication and, as a consequence, understanding between employers and workmen and generally through a more human behaviour based on Christian principles, at the same time presenting her own fears of how the poor will eventually act in retaliation to their oppression. Gaskell also describes an Italian torture chamber where the victim is afforded many luxuries at first but in the end, the walls of the cell start closing in and finally they crush him. It is believed that the story has been influenced by William Mudford 's short story " The Iron Shroud ".

Death plays a significant and unavoidable role in the plot: it has been interpreted both as mere realism Lucas points out the average mortality rate at the time was 17 and autobiographically as the cathartic relief of grief over her son's premature death. The image of a dying child was also a trope of Chartist discourse. The novel was first published anonymously , but its authorship was widely known within a year. Early reception of the novel was divided, with some praising its honesty and fidelity to facts and others criticising it for presenting a distorted picture of the employer-employee relationships. The British Quarterly Review said it was a "one-sided picture", and the Edinburgh Review that the division between employers and employed was exaggerated. Part of the sensation the novel created was due to the anonymity with which it was published. Gaskell claimed that on occasion she had even joined in with discussions making guesses at the authorship.

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Mary Barton: A novel by Elizabeth Gaskell. Summary of the book.

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Elizabeth Gaskell's Mary Barton and the Social Question - GRIN

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A great portion of the novel is committed to distinctions between classes on the contrary to the economic compass. The story starts with two families meeting only outside of Manchester in a field. One family comprises of Jane and George Wilson and their infants who are twins alongside seventeen-year-old son named Jem. The other is John Barton, his pregnant spouse Mary, and their thirteen-year-old girl whose name is also coincidentally Mary. Jane and Mary sit chatting with one another while their spouses go for a walk together. John believes that Esther has picked up too high a dimension of freedom on account of the money she is making as a simple worker in the factory. Jem, in the interim, is slapped by youthful Mary when he kisses her.

Following three years pass, Mary is filling in as an understudy to a dressmaker and John is included with the Trades Union. At the point when one more year passes, and Mary is seventeen, Alice acquaints her with a needleworker named Margaret Jennings who lives with her grandfather Job Legh and they become great friends. Margaret is gradually losing her vision making it progressively troublesome for her to sew, however, may probably take up singing as a career to help herself out financially. Harry Carson, who originates from the affluent family that possesses the plant at which George Wilson works is interested in Mary. Jem is also in love with Mary however Mary does not have similar feelings for him and tries as much to be in less contact with Jem. The Carson factory one day get burned down and then George becomes jobless.

The very only way for supporting the family financially is that the money earned by Jem. Adding to the harsh occasions of the Wilson family is the passing of the twin young men from disease.

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