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USE OF "THE HANDS" METAPHOR AS A MARK OF CHRISTIAN CAPITALISM IN EVENTUALLY RECONCILIATION OF SIDES IN NORTH AND SOUTH BY ELIZABETH GASKELL

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Abstract

North and South by Elizabeth Gaskell, categorized as an industrial novel of the Victorian Age, reflects social conditions of the period like social injustices, class division, employer - employee relations and labor - capital issues depending upon the developments of the Industrial Revolution. While dealing with the issues of the period by using several opposites in content like 'north and south', 'employer and employee', 'power and poverty', the novel uses 'marriage' as an apparent theme in the narrative. What is more, mutual understanding and reconciliation between the sides, employers and employees, and apparently between the protagonists, Margaret Hale coming from the rural area and Mr. Thornton, the mill owner, are at the forefront as a theme in the novel. The novel uses 'the hands' metaphor between the employers and the working class representing reconciliation which is also a mark of Christianity. Moreover, this Christian virtue has overtones of Unitarianism in the process of negotiation, and the attitudes and thoughts of some characters.

Keywords: Industrial novel, Working class, Industrial revolution, Christianity, Unitarianism.



“God has made us so that we must be mutually dependent.”

Margaret Hale, *North and South*

When one reads *North and South* by Elizabeth Gaskell, a Victorian novel first published in 1854, by disregarding a theoretical context, considers the title of the first chapter named as ‘Haste to the Wedding’, and interprets the novel regarding Margaret’s, the protagonist’s, refusal of her suitors’ proposals and Mr. Thornton’s, who is a mill owner in the town of Milton-Northern wishing to be accepted as a husband by Margaret, one can suggest that it seems like a marriage story. There seems a struggle for marriage for some characters which is an apparent theme in the novel, however, Gaskell’s *North and South* has been known as one of the most crucial industrial novels of both Victorian Age and English Literature. The novel reflects several social conditions of its extratextual context such as social injustices, distinctive class division when compared to the ones before the Industrial Revolution, industrial based master – slave dichotomy rather than feudal, class consciousness, developing capitalism associated with the Industrial Revolution, and lifestyle and atmosphere in the industrial towns called urban. As Nash remarks, “[Gaskell questions] the status quo, and [she is] unwilling to limit [her] subject matter to the traditionally “feminine” areas of courtship and marriage” (Nash, 2007, 1). In her novel, Gaskell deals with the problems of social classes of the period vitally shaped within industrialization. Eagleton remarks the term “the so-called ‘industrial novel’” that is another definition under the Victorian Novel, and he argues that “[it] is not merely recording these cataclysmic upheavals; it is a forensic instrument in the attempt to interpret and assimilate them” (Eagleton, 2005, 127). Matus’s argument of Gaskell’s *North and South* concerning “emotional and psychic states in the context of social change and the upheavals of modernity” in a sense contributes to Eagleton’s statement (Matus, 2007, 27). Accordingly, Gaskell’s *North and South* can be categorized, as Byrnie states, as a “social problem novel”¹ (Byrnie, 2010, 100-101). Byrnie adds that the industrial novel and the “condition of England” novel are the “subcategories of the social problem genre” (Byrnie, 2010, 101). While concerning social problems Gaskell reflects the story by using several opposites. It is pointed out and summarized by Byrnie considering the very beginning, the title, of the novel:

- As its title suggests, *North and South* is a novel about opposites. The conjunction “and” does not imply connection; it might as well be “versus.” The oppositions represented include the north of England and the south; the industrial city and the rural village or estate; rich and poor; hardship and comfort; work and leisure, or in fact work and desperate unemployment; the “male” sphere of industry and the “female” sphere of the domestic. Gaskell’s polarities comprehend man and woman, youth and age, faith and doubt, ignorance and experience, and much more (Byrnie, 2010, 105).

One can add “labour and capital” to that much more as one of the opposites depicted in the novel what Matus argues mostly focusing on its “intense emotional experience” as a social problem novel of industrial life (Matus, 2007, 35). The story is narrated regarding the point of view and experience of a female, Margaret, who, in a way necessarily, moved from a southern rural area to an industrial northern town. The protagonist is a woman of aristocracy coming from a setting of conventional mode of production. The story is in a sense about her confusion of encountering a new social reality depending upon new modes of production, and her struggle to overcome it. She witnesses and experiences the conditions of working class, and the attitudes of masters/employers to their employees (through the example of John Thornton). Simply put, the condition of sides (the classes), their attitudes to one another and Margaret’s trying to get used to the new circumstances are a process of mutual understanding and reconciliation in the story. As Flint suggests:

- It is made a southerner’s learning experience particularly easy by tracing the reactions of Margaret as she comes from a background shaped both by the life of a vicar’s daughter in a pastoral village and an acquaintance with fashionable London society, gradually encountering, and becoming more understanding of, the conditions and tensions of northern industrial life (Flint, 2001, 28).

While analysing the process of mutual understanding (between the employers and employees, and Margaret and John Thornton), and the condition of particularly working class in terms of employers’ power and employees’ poverty, one can discover the marks of Christian based morality. Allot points out that Margaret

¹The phrase, as Byrnie states, comes from Thomas Carlyle’s *Past and Present* (1839).



from the south gradually overcomes her hostility against the northern masters, and ““North” and “South”, as well as employers and employed, are to be reconciled by the exercise of mutual understanding and Christian charity” (Allot, 1982, 4).

The motifs of ‘life experience’, and ‘learning’ that Margaret is exposed in a northern industrial town, and ‘conscience’ during the process of reconciliation are also the motifs of Unitarianism to some critics. According to Matus “[n]urtured by the rich social and religious context of nineteenth-century Unitarianism, Gaskell is typically open-minded in response to social transformation and change” (Matus, 2007, 1). Pettitt states by referring to R. K. Webb that “Unitarians [...] had repeatedly stressed the importance of pursuing truth”, and she remarks, then, that “theologically Gaskell’s immediate circle focused [...] more on the potential practical value of scientific progress to society”, and both in *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* Gaskell “had used female characters as a means of symbolically resolving class iniquities” while examining the effects of industrialization (Pettitt, 2004, 220). Some major characters can be exemplified depending upon their decisions and attitudes considering Unitarianism according to Chapple. In *North and South*, “Mr. Hale’s conscience impels him to leave his Anglican vicarage to become a Dissenter in a northern city, leading up to a tableau of typically Unitarian tolerance: “Margaret the Churchwoman, her father the Dissenter, Higgins the Infidel, knelt down together. It did them no harm” (Gaskell, p.371)” (Chapple, 2007, 176). Considering the main principle of Unitarianism which is the refusal of the Holy Trinity as the underlying corruption of Christianity – see Joseph Priestley (1871), a philosopher and scientist, who primarily defined the Unitarian ideology as clearly revealed in the title of his book², Gaskell’s approach by gathering those three in a conversation seems like creating an anti-holy Trinity. What is more, Mr. Hale’s attitude of not challenging the authority, and what he says while in this conversation with Margaret and Higgins reflects Unitarian point of view of the novel: “your Union in itself would be beautiful, glorious, – it would be Christianity in itself – if it were but for an end which affected the good of all, instead of that of merely one class as opposed to another” (Gaskell, n.d., p.371).

John Thornton’s latter change as a manufacturing employer in quality and attitudes, and use of ‘the hands’ metaphor as a representation of reconciliation between classes can be exemplified as some of the crucial motifs of Christian morality. Moreover, as an old vicar, and now a Dissenter, but still a man of God, Mr. Hale’s proposal of a selected employer’s meeting with the workers for talk reveals the negotiations for reconciliation. Byrnie suggests in her analysis of Elizabeth Gaskell that “as it plays out in [*North and South*], the industrialists’ greater understanding of the workers comes from seeing that “the hands” are not brutes but experience the same emotions they do”. By emphasizing that it is reform rather than socialism, Byrnie adds “the enlightened masters respond with a form of Christian capitalism; they accept that they have a responsibility for their employees’ well-being, and they allow their consciences to override the profit motive (Byrnie, 2010, 107).

Initially there is a tense between Margaret and Mr. Thornton, apparently because of her. She refuses to give her hand to Thornton, which can be understood as refusing a suitor to marry, too. Such kind of attitude against Thornton seems like a representation of the situation between the employer and employees depending upon the principles and behaviours of the mill owner. If one traces the metaphor of ‘the hands’ at all in the story, one may claim that Margaret’s giving her hand to Thornton apparently for marriage is such a foreshadow, allusively a sign of classes’ reconciliation. Interestingly, Byrnie’s above statement of the conjunction *and*’s probable implication of “versus” in the title of the novel, early in the story, turns into connection in meaning considering the finale. Margaret representing the south and Thornton representing the north unite. North and South of the country becomes united and reconciled through the metaphor of marriage. After that as Byrnie remarks, Thornton, the employer, takes the hand of Nicholas Higgins, the leader of employees, “in the “good grip” of equals”. It is a representational act of “the masters’ attitude to the workers summed up in Thornton’s use of the term “the hands,” [indicating as] the only part of the men of interest to their employees [being] the part [working] for them” (Byrnie, 2010, 107). In other words, ‘hands’ are crucial, indeed functional, as a motif in the story, and they are the working parts of employees, also representing labour, as a metonymy.

North and South significantly focuses on the condition of working-class individuals’ owning and consuming less. Margaret, by using her quality of empathy, meets the poor, visits their houses, witnesses their

²Priestley, Joseph (1871). *A History of the Corruptions of Christianity*. London: The British and Foreign Unitarian Association, 178, Strand. Available in <http://books.google.com>



poverty. Not only does she mingle with the poor, but also, she is with the rich, Mr. Thornton and his family. However, when one reads *North and South*, one explores that, poor, working class and their condition, their, inevitably, minimal houses, poverty and its reasons are narrated, or reflected in large part. Lindner points out that unlike Thackeray's (*Vanity Fair* (1848)) and Trollope's (*The Way We Live Now* (1875)) not questioning the social origins of commodity and wealth, Gaskell's industrial novels "[take] their subject [as] the new social experiences of a newly industrialized State, [...], [and] tell the untold stories of urban existence—namely, those of the working classes, the unemployed masses, and the material hardships of their domestic lives" (Lindner, 2000, 380). *North and South* focuses more on working class's poverty instead of industrial manufacturers', masters', oppressors' power and taking their commodity and purchasing power into the centre depending upon the economic situation. To Lindner, these under-furnished and under-decorated domestic spaces, for example Higgin's house, are the opposite of what Marx famously stated in his *Capital* that "how wealth in capitalist societies expresses itself as an "immense accumulation of commodities, its unique being a single commodity". [...] To put it simply, it is a transformation that reverses or undoes Marx's process of wealth-accumulation" (Lindner, 2000, 382). It can be a different matter of argument if Gaskell's being a woman is a determining factor for her focusing more on the oppressed class when she is compared with her male contemporaries such as Thackeray, Trollope, and others. However, female point of view of the narrative, and functionality and vitality of female touch and influence on the reconciliation of sides are stubborn facts in the novel. One can explore the condition of working class in Milton through the eyes of Margaret. She uses her empathy, and indeed courage. A good example for Margaret's empathy is her use of the slang of working-class. She uses the words 'slack of work' and 'knobstick' while in a conversation with her mother, and she defends herself for her use of the working class's slang against her mother's resistance like that: "And if I live in a factory town, I must speak factory language when I want it. Why, mamma, I could astonish you with a great many words you never heard in your life. I don't believe you know what a knobstick is" (Gaskell, n.d., 377). According to Byrnie, "the novel's Christian, liberal, reformist ethos" and the agreement of the two major characters, Margaret and Thornton, in opposition, at least on the surface, are "dramatized through dialogue". Margaret, as in the above example, with her family is "exposed to several different registers of the English language" (Byrnie, 2010, 107). Her mother's immediate refusal of the terms what Margaret uses as slang of the northern working-class reveals that the Hales, Margaret's family, are educated, southern, rural people rather than the northern, urban, tradespeople with different culture. On the other hand, Thornton's change in positive way to his employees, even sometimes eating with them in the mill, taking their hands - representatively Higgin's - can be an example to reform as stated above.

As Kucich states when he points out the reasons of Victorian religious doubt such as "the growing humanitarianism and optimism about social reform", "punitiveness and indifference of the Christian God", "the series of scientific discoveries [particularly involving geology, astronomy, and evolutionary biology] that "loss of religious faith was seldom considered a subject appropriate to raise in the pages of a [Victorian] novel". Instead, the Victorian Novelists used the themes like social breakdown, may be moral values, apparently in their novels (Kucich, 2001, 214). It is easier to see the effect, or marks, of religion (Christianity) in *North and South*; religious doubt (Mr. Hale), Christian-blended Capitalism, and reform (John Thornton). Consequently, the process, the struggle, ends with reconciliation between the classes, and Margaret and Mr. Thornton, and thus the sides of north and south of the country metaphorically, with the help of Margaret's empathy, her 'learning experience', and Mr. Thornton's modesty. According to Kucich messages of reconciliation between social classes were also framed in the language of religion, as in *Mary Barton* and *North and South* (Kucich, 2001, 216). Use of 'the hands' metaphor for reconciliation, and the marriage (of Margaret and Mr. Thornton) in the end can be interpreted as appropriate themes to give a positive message in terms of social rights and ethics, blended with Christianity, considering the Victorian society, and understanding. When one considers the matters of the old vicar Mr. Hale's dissent, because of "painful, miserable doubts" (Gaskell, n.d., 48-49), but not leaving Christian virtue, the Hale Family's scientific and innovative approach of their education yet Christian based which can be interpreted as Unitarian, and the ultimate modest attitude of tradesman Mr. Thornton of rising industrial capitalism, who is apparently not a man of religion, one can put that Gaskell's approach and style in *North and South* are remarkable in giving a message of social rights, social unity, virtue and morality also considering Christianity involving the social conditions under the Victorian Age when compared to many other canonical works of Victorian literature (see Kucich (2001)).

'Marriage' is a metaphor, an 'alliance', for the union of the sides, union of a man from a northern industrial town and a woman from a southern rural one, union of the employer and the employee... Consequently, there is 'marriage' motif in the very beginning of the story making readers think that it is a



marriage story. It is to claim considering the alliances of sides that marriage stands as a crucial theme in the story. Besides, it is worth taking into consideration of a female touch, Margaret, taking a side as a conciliator not only between the industrial north and rural south, but also between the employer and the employee, as also being in a close friendly relationship with the employee Nicholas Higgins, who is also the union leader. It goes without saying that such friendly relationship between Margaret and Higgins concerning their status is unusual considering the period's social norms. Consequently, Margaret and Mr. Thornton's marriage is the signification of unities; two genders on the surface with their cultures, the north and south of the country metaphorically, and the social classes.

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