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Margaret Hale as a Transformative Mediator: Bridging the Divide Between Masters and Men in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854-1855)

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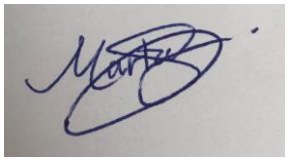

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

0. Introduction 1

0.1. Historical context 2

0.2. State of the art 3

0.3. Theoretical Framework 4

0.4. Outline 6

1. Becoming a mediator 7

1.1. Overcoming prejudices and communication difficulties 8

1.2. Giving attention: Subverting the visiting lady 13

2. Conflict transformation 20

2.1. Teaching attention: Master's ears against human heart 22

2.2. The power of direct communication 24

3. Conclusions and Further Research 32

Works Cited 35

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Abstract

The Industrial Revolution brought about numerous advancements as well as struggles for the English population. These rapid societal transformations found a literary response in Victorian industrial novels, which sought to reflect the complexities of the evolving landscape. In *North and South* (1854-55), Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) explores one of the main challenges of the era —the conflicting relationship between manufacturers and factory workers. By examining this novel through the framework of transformative mediation, this paper aims to explore how Margaret Hale becomes and functions as a mediator between these classes and whether Elizabeth Gaskell resolves the conflict between masters and workers. This paper proposes that although Gaskell does not systematically resolve the labour and social conflicts, she suggests a method for alleviating class tensions by fundamentally altering the nature of their interactions. Through the character of Margaret, whose actions resonate with the contemporary principles of transformative mediation, Gaskell introduces a philanthropic model that aims to guide both parties towards engaging in conflict with greater humanity.

Keywords: Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, Victorian literature, mediation, industrial novel, condition-of-England.

0. Introduction

Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854-1855) stands among the most remarkable works of Victorian fiction. The novel is often classified within the subgenre of the industrial novel—alternatively called social problem fiction, bourgeois or domestic realism, or the Condition-of-England novel—together with other prominent works such as *Sybil* (1845) by Benjamin Disraeli, *Shirley* (1849) by Charlotte Brontë, and *Hard Times* (1854) by Charles Dickens. Victorian industrial novels depict the impact of industrialization on individuals and communities in England, providing a lens through which readers can understand the economic disparities, social injustices, as well as living and working conditions which permeated that era.

Gaskell (1810—1865) witnessed the socio-economic transformations of the Victorian period firsthand. She married William Gaskell, a Unitarian minister and charity worker, which facilitated her engagement with working-class inhabitants of Manchester. This provided her with valuable insight into their lives and fueled her commitment to portraying the struggles of the working class with empathy and nuance. Through her works, Gaskell sought to humanize and give voice to the individuals affected by the rapid yet profound changes shaping England, as well as bring attention to their struggles. *Mary Barton (1848)*, published anonymously, was her first industrial novel, and it faced criticism for its perceived bias towards the working class (Nesbit 153). Serialized in Charles Dickens' magazine *Household Words*, *North and South* was her second. Through the experiences of its characters, the narrative navigates the complexities of social dynamics, labour struggles, and the quest for social cooperation. As Gaskell draws upon her own observations of Manchester's industrial landscape, *North and South* stands as a compelling portrayal of social classes in contact as well as conflict.

0.1. Historical context

North and South (1854-1855) was written near the end of the Industrial Revolution in the mid-nineteenth century. This period of British history, also known as the Victorian era, was a time of rapid change characterized by technological advances, unprecedented class mobility, rural-to-urban migration and social unrest. The French Revolution (1789) and the Napoleonic wars with France (1793-1815) had profoundly impacted English society, as well as influenced political and social dynamics. The Crimean War (1853-1856), which coincided with the novel's publication, marked a shift in military tactics and exposed shortcomings in medical care.

Industrialization brought about both advancements and challenges. As England transformed from an agrarian to a manufacturing economy, skilled workers were increasingly replaced with machines. As a result, this era witnessed the emergence of the Luddite movement, which protested the replacement of workers with machinery, often through the destruction of machines in raids. Those who remained employed, suffered from deplorable working conditions. The Chartist movement, which was less violent and advocated for the political representation of workers, also gained importance. The period was characterized by a series of movements and conflicts as workers sought better conditions, fair wages, and improved labour rights. This evolving economic landscape forged a divide between employers and workers —also called ‘masters’ and ‘men’. Factory owners, referred to as 'masters,' often subjected workers to long hours, low wages, and terrible working conditions. In response to the deficiencies of industrial employment, Parliament began to pass the Factory Acts in 1802, which were legislative measures aimed at regulating the hours of work, especially for children and women, as well as improving safety standards in factories. Workers began forming trade unions to collectively bargain for better wages, working hours, and conditions. Altogether,

struggles for workers' rights and fair labour conditions were central to this era, shaping the historical backdrop against which Gaskell's narrative unfolds.

0.2. State of the art

In terms of analysis of class and social change within the novel, early critics (Kettle 1973; Williams 1966) regarded its ending as an abandonment of social concerns and a retreat into the private sphere. In contrast, Gallagher (1985) recognized Margaret's moral influence and highlighted her role in connecting the private and public spheres. Bodenheimer (1988) maintained that the self-expression of the characters is essential for social change. In addition, the scholar rejected the idea that the novel offers paternalism as a solution to *laissez-faire* despotism. Elliott (1994) similarly posed that by portraying Margaret as a departure from the historical "visiting lady"[1], Gaskell rejects simplistic benevolent paternalism as a solution to class conflict. More recently, academics such as Wainwright (2007) have argued that this work values individuality and reflective capacities over promoting a specific ideology. Anderson and Satalino (2013) focused on the roles of prejudice and tolerance in promoting social change. More recently, Lowe (2020) suggested that the novel's emphasis on individual connections results in a resistance to broader institutional changes. Nesbit (2020) added to Elliott's essay by establishing a parallelism between the archetypical figure of the "charitable listener"[2]

[1] In nineteenth-century England, it was usual for women of the middle and upper classes to regularly conduct charitable visits to the poor. This is known as the "Visiting Movement". Most visits had the aim to introduce them to daily Bible reading. There were manuals, such as *The District Visitor's Manual* (1840), which instructed visitors on proper relations with the poor.

[2] Sympathetic middle and upper-class characters whose social work involves listening rather than preaching. Recurring figure of social writing published in the 1840s and 1850s.

with the protagonist and regarded it as an attempt to redefine the role of the middle-class woman as an agent of social reform. Scholars generally agree that the protagonist of the novel plays a crucial role in the resolution of the social plot. Kestner (2022) maintains that "*North and South* depicts the power of a woman's influence" (170). Similarly, Gallagher (1985) asserts that "it is partly through Margaret's influence that these two men are ultimately able to achieve a cooperative relationship." (172). While various scholars have even explicitly referred to her as a mediator (Anderson and Satalino 2013; Brown 2000; Elliott 1994; Nesbit 2020; Stoneman 2006), her function as such has never been thoroughly analyzed.

In this paper, I seek to answer the questions of whether the conflict transformation promoted in *North and South* contributes to the narrative resolution of the social problems depicted in the novel, as well as how Margaret Hale functions as a transformative mediator between both classes. While Elizabeth Gaskell does not systemically solve the labour conflict nor the social conflict between masters and workers, she offers a means to ameliorate class antagonisms through the transformation of the nature of their relationship. The author employs Margaret Hale, whose actions align with the contemporary model of transformative mediation, to offer a model of philanthropy aimed at assisting both sides to conduct conflict in a less dehumanizing manner.

0.3. Theoretical Framework

To approach the literary text, I will be using conflict resolution theory. Conflict resolution is a multidisciplinary field that explores ways to effectively manage and resolve conflicts, ranging from interpersonal conflicts to larger societal issues. Its goal is to find

constructive and peaceful solutions that meet the needs of all parties involved. It mainly finds application in law studies, international relations and business management.

In this analysis, I will be particularly using a transformative mediation framework. Mediation is a specific method employed to facilitate the resolution of conflicts by utilizing a neutral third party—the mediator. The three widely recognized approaches to mediation are 'facilitative', 'narrative', and 'transformative' mediation (Garcia 4). The focus of the latter is on the transformation of the parties' relationship with one another, and settlement simply becomes the result of the positive changes in their relationship (Bogdanoski 31-32).

As previously mentioned, industrial novels depict social groups in contact, and more often than not in conflict, as is the case with *North and South*. Gaskell's novel revolves around the collective labour conflict between 'masters' and 'men'. The labour relations between management and employees are at the heart of the story, particularly between a mill owner named John Thornton and his workforce. Nicholas Higgins is a leader of the millworker union's strike committee, a city-wide labour strike in which Thornton's workers participate to protest a reduction in wages. Although Higgins does not work for Thornton in Marlborough Mills until the end of the story, he represents Thornton's antagonist, although not in a traditional sense. The tension between them arises from the broader societal conflict between the mill owners of Milton and the workers. Each character embodies the interests and struggles of their respective class. The mediator of this conflict is none other than the protagonist of the novel, who adopts the role of a transformative mediator between these two characters. Margaret's methods resonate with the principles and goals of transformative mediation; and her achievements

have a profound effect not only on their interpersonal relationship but also on that of their respective classes.

While the concept of transformative mediation did not exist in the nineteenth century, employing this contemporary framework allows for a more nuanced exploration of Margaret Hale's role as a mediator in *North and South*. Anachronistically applying the principles of transformative mediation to Margaret's actions enables us to draw connections between her approach and the transformative potential inherent in conflict resolution. It is important to acknowledge the temporal disjunction and recognize that the field of mediation, as we understand it today, had not yet emerged during the time of Gaskell's writing. However, using this lens enhances our comprehension of Margaret's character and the dynamics of conflict resolution in the socio-economic landscape of the novel.

0.4. Outline

The first section of this paper will examine the development of Margaret Hale from a visiting lady to a more effective agent of social change. Firstly, I will be delving into her initial prejudices and communication difficulties with both classes. Secondly, I will focus on her change from a visiting lady to a less patronizing and more attentive philanthropist.

The second section will focus on the transformation of the conflict between masters and men as a result of Margaret's mediating efforts. First, I will look at her influence on Thornton in terms of teaching him to be more attentive and humanize his workers. Lastly, I will delve into the effectiveness of direct communication in transforming their relationship by exploring the effects of her mediation.

1. Becoming a mediator

North and South does not immediately begin with Margaret's intervention in the labour dispute. In fact, it is not until chapter twenty-two that she gets involved, more particularly during the riot at Marlborough Mills. The seemingly delayed intervention does not imply that the preceding chapters are irrelevant regarding the upcoming mediation process. The build-up stage is crucial because Margaret must undergo moral growth in which she overcomes her prejudices together with her communication impediments with both sides:

> To be a social mediator Margaret must be able to understand and communicate in both directions. In the various dialogues in the novel she alternately represents Thornton's opinions to Higgins and Higgins's opinions to Thornton. Margaret is not merely a conduit between the two men, however. Each time she speaks to either of them, she, the "master" of both languages, interprets and translates the men's opinions. (Elliott 41)

Margaret's moral evolution dominates the novel (Wyatt 112), and communication is not only key in the reconciliation between workers and mill-owner but also in the psychological growth of their mediator. As Wyatt suggests, "The idea of communication, on one level an essential issue in social terms between masters and men, is a dimension which is also vital in Margaret's own awakening knowledge of her inner strength." (112). This previous phase therefore serves as a stepping stone to the success of Margaret's mediating efforts. It seems that the heroine's triumph is not only due to her influence on Thornton and Higgins but also on, as Elliott puts it, "her role as ideal reader and interpreter of both personal and public discursive practices." (41). Owing to all this, it is worth examining Margaret's own moral journey and communication problems with the parties before diving into her mediating efforts.

1.1. Overcoming prejudices and communication difficulties

It is during this previous stage that Margaret comes into contact with both sides of the conflict, which strengthens her moral transformation and fuels her involvement in the labour dispute. As the heroine transitions from the familiarity of rural southern England to the industrial landscape of Milton, she undergoes a profound shift in her perspectives and values. In the beginning, she is prejudiced and loathes the North and its people. However, this is not indicative of classism as she manifests feelings of dislike towards both workers and employers. Her discomfort with the North rather stems from unfamiliarity and the stark differences between the two regions. When still in Helstone, she had "almost a detestation for all she had ever heard of the North of England, the manufacturers, the people, the wild and bleak country" (Gaskell 38). Even on the day before she arrives in Milton, "she had a repugnance to the idea of a manufacturing town" (55). When still in Helstone, Margaret reveals her disdain for those involved in trade: "I don't like shoppy people. I think we are far better off, knowing only cottagers and labourers, and people without pretence" (19). When Mr. Hale tells her that there is an opening for a private tutor in Milton, his daughter questions the relevance of classical education for manufacturers: "'A private tutor!' said Margaret, looking scornful: 'What in the world do manufacturers want with the classics, or literature, or the accomplishments of a gentleman?'" (37). This reaction demonstrates her preconceived notions about the incompatibility of refined knowledge with manufacturers. Cazamian infers that Margaret "has not escaped the prejudices of her background: she condemns the spirit of commerce without knowing anything about it, and dismisses the work of the industrial bourgeoisie as all being selfishly motivated." (501). Her perceptions do not change immediately upon her arrival in Milton. For a while, Margaret "went less abroad, among machinery and men; saw less of power in its public effect" (Gaskell 64), that is, she does not initially

interact extensively with the people of Milton. Her initial interactions are mainly confined to her family and servants, making her oblivious to the power of the men and machinery of Milton, and shielded from the harsh realities of the industrial town.

It is only after an unplanned meeting with Thornton, that the protagonist's life becomes more entwined with the townspeople. Their first interaction is highly significant because it hints at her future influence on Thornton and exposes how challenging effective communication can be. In this scene, Margaret notices that he looks "not over-brushed, nor over-polished, it must be confessed, after his rough encounter with Milton streets and crowds." (58). Overall, he does not possess the appearance of the gentlemen she is used to. She feels apathetic towards him: "She wished that he would go, as he had once spoken of doing, instead of sitting there, answering with curt sentences all the remarks she made." (58-59). Thornton is fully aware of her contempt, and attributes it to his lack of gentleman-like looks and elegant manners: "while he looked upon her with an admiration he could not repress, she looked at him with proud indifference, taking him, he thought, for what, in his irritation, he told himself he was—a great rough fellow, with not a grace or a refinement about him." (59). Altogether, he finds himself in an unusual power dynamic: "Mr. Thornton was in habits of authority himself, but she seemed to assume some kind of rule over him at once. He had been getting impatient at the loss of his time on a market-day, the moment before she appeared, yet now he calmly took a seat at her bidding." (58). This first meeting sets the tone for their relationship, as it advances the authority that the protagonist will exert on his views and actions in the future.

The quality of this first exchange is rather poor. Later that evening, Mr. Hale refers to it as a "long *attempt* at conversation" (60, emphasis added), reinforcing the idea that their first tête-à-tête does not qualify as a proper conversation. Civilized forms of dialogue

are crucial for Gaskell, in particular, the maintenance and restoration of inter-class communication (Wainwright 92). One of Margaret's tasks as a mediator between Thornton and Higgins will precisely be fostering communication, a subject to which we will return later. Yet that is not an easy task. As Wainwright writes, "Gaskell's narrative acknowledges as it investigates the difficulties of initiating, sustaining and developing dialogue; it identifies the many obstacles hindering meaningful talk, so that the novel proves just how problematic the business of communication can be." (95). Through the evolution of Margaret and Thornton's relationship, Gaskell portrays the power of communication in achieving reconciliation while acknowledging the challenges that it entails. The tense outset of the relationship between Margaret and Thornton resembles the initial problematic relationship between Thornton and his workforce.

When Margaret gives an account of her first impression of Mr. Thornton to her mother, she acknowledges that her first impression is only superficial and thus not enough to offer an accurate description: "'Oh! I hardly know what he is like'" (Gaskell 60). It is not until Thornton is invited to tea by Mr. Hale that Margaret begins to notice the complexity of his being and to see beyond the stereotypical manufacturer that she has in mind. After Thornton leaves, Mr. Hale tells Margaret that he expected her to leave the room during Thornton's account of working in a draper's shop in the past. To her father's surprise, she replies that his confession was her favourite part:

> 'Oh, papa! you don't mean that you thought me so silly? I really liked that account of himself better than anything else he said. Everything else revolted me, from its hardness; but he spoke about himself so simply—with so little of the pretence that makes the vulgarity of shop-people (…) No! his statement of having been a shop-boy was the thing I liked best of all.' (80)

Margaret seems to admire Thornton for raising himself when the responsibility of maintaining the family unexpectedly befell him after his father's death. Similarly,

Margaret's comments puzzle Mrs. Hale: "'I am surprised at you, Margaret,' said her mother. 'You who were always accusing people of being shoppy at Helstone!" (80). Here, Mrs. Hale accurately observes that her daughter's perspectives are mutating. However, Margaret does not completely change her views on Thornton until she revises her own weaknesses (Wainwright 102). Thornton plays a crucial role in her achievement of moral maturity because he prompts a reflection upon her own pride, a moral failing "which had thwarted the full realization of her capacity to love and accept love" (102).

Furthermore, Margaret's moral transformation is reinforced by the fact that "she [is] thrown with one or two of those who, in all measures affecting masses of people, must be acute sufferers for the good of many" (Gaskell 64). Here, her upcoming involvement with working-class characters is foreshadowed. It is quite ironic that what forces her to finally walk the streets is the difficulty in finding a servant to assist her. In a sense, she will be the one aiding the working-class characters whom she will come across. In her quest for a servant around the Crampton suburb, she meets a key participant in the labour conflict:

> This man looked so care-worn that Margaret could not help giving him an answering smile (...) He seemed to understand her acknowledging glance, and a silent recognition was established between them whenever the chances of the day brought them across each other's paths. They had never exchanged a word; nothing had been said but that first compliment; yet somehow Margaret looked upon this man with more interest than upon any one else in Milton. Once or twice, on Sundays, she saw him walking with a girl, evidently his daughter, and, if possible, still more unhealthy than he was himself. (67)

This workman is none other than Nicholas Higgins, a millworker and union leader. His strained appearance instantly triggers Margaret's sympathy for him, and there is an unspoken affinity between them ever since their first interaction. Father and daughter become Margaret's main connection to the working class of the town. She crosses paths with them on so many occasions that she considers them as "humble friends" (67), even

though she has not conversed with them yet. In that same encounter, she "slackened her pace to walk alongside of the man and his daughter, whose steps were regulated by the feebleness of the latter." (67). The previous passage greatly contrasts with an earlier one which evidences that Margaret initially regarded factory people with disdain:

> The side of the town on which Crampton lay was especially a thoroughfare for the factory people. In the back streets around them there were many mills, out of which poured streams of men and women two or three times a day. Until Margaret had learnt the times of their ingress and egress, she was very unfortunate in constantly falling in with them. (66)

She had intentionally learned how to avoid factory people, but now she modifies her pace to walk by two of them, even when one of them walks slowly due to her health issues. This is highly symbolic— the way that she modifies her pace mirrors the adjustments of her views, instead of avoidance she now displays interest, in what is the beginning of her moral evolution. After meeting them, her perspective of Milton has further shifted:

> Margaret went home, wondering at her new friends […] From that day Milton became a brighter place to her. It was not the long, bleak sunny days of spring, nor yet was it that time was reconciling her to the town of her habitation. It was that in it she had found a human interest. (69)

Now that she has found friends there, she sees the town in a more positive light.

Nevertheless, Margaret also faces communication problems with her new friends (Elliott 39). These issues do not stem from indifference or prejudices but from problems related to language (39). Wyatt contends that "When she first ventures out into Milton, the language of the people appears foreign, and hers is a strange tongue to her new acquaintances." (112). The significance of this language barrier extends beyond mere linguistic differences; it symbolizes class differences and the cultural contrast between both regions —that is, North and South. This obstacle is especially conveyed in a scene where Margaret thinks that Nicholas Higgins is an alcoholic because she misinterprets

Bessy's use of the term "drink" (Gaskell 125). Bessy must then clarify that in working-class culture, it just means an occasional drink: "But father never was a drunkard, though maybe, he's got worse for drink, now and then." (125).

Gradually, Margaret learns to interpret and use the language of the North (Wyatt 112). This is shown, for instance, when Mrs. Hale scolds Margaret for using Northern terms: "Margaret, don't get to use these horrid Milton words. "Slack of work:" it is a provincialism." (Gaskell 218). To that accusation, her daughter responds: "'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.'" (218). If Margaret knows what a "knobstick" is, it is because she has heard this word from Bessy on many occasions. Certainly, Margaret's answer demonstrates how serious she is about understanding the Higginses (Elliott 40). Her interactions with the people she visits are of paramount importance because they boost Margaret's moral evolution. They move her to see working-class people as complex individuals rather than representatives of their class, as well as spark her interest in the lives and language of Milton inhabitants. More importantly, "Margaret's openness to new languages and her willingness to learn new ways of interpreting signs is key to her success as a mediator of social conflict" (40).

1.2. Giving attention: Subverting the visiting lady

Various scholars have drawn attention to the fact that Margaret acts as a visiting lady (Elliott 1994; Wyatt 2006; Nesbit 2020), analyzing the novel in the context of "an issue it obviously raised for contemporary readers." (Elliott 23). While previous critics have overlooked its relevance, the portrayal in Gaskell's novel of a woman visiting a working-

class household was a familiar subject to people of mid-nineteenth-century England. As Elliott explains, “Wives and daughters of the landed classes traditionally visited the poor on their estates and in the villages surrounding them, dispensing charity, giving advice, and exhorting the poor to religion.” (32). There were organizations like the Charity Organization Society and manuals which instructed female visitors, such as *The District Visitor’s Manual.* These visitors both shed their moral influence and served as investigators of the working-class condition (31). All this demonstrates the social and even political role of such relations (30).

However, the heroine does not adhere to the figure of the common female visitor for various reasons. Firstly, although some did visit independently, “most women visitors were representatives of some organization, either philanthropic or religious” (33). Margaret, in contrast, is an autonomous visitor, since she independently chooses to visit the Higginses. Unlike a representative of the church or a philanthropic association, she does not come with an official role (33). Secondly, although she does initially use an evangelical approach to visiting, she soon finds that it is not effective with them. This realization is highly significant because it will lead her to change her way of visiting. Already in her first conversation with Higgins, Margaret encounters an unprecedented resistance to her benevolent intentions:

> 'And your name? I must not forget that.'
>
> 'I'm none ashamed o' my name. It's Nicholas Higgins. Hoo's called Bessy Higgins. Whatten yo' asking for?'
>
> Margaret was surprised at this last question, for at Helstone it would have been an understood thing, after the inquiries she had made, that she intended to come and call upon any poor neighbour whose name and habitation she had asked for.
>
> 'I thought—I meant to come and see you.' She suddenly felt rather shy of offering the visit, without having any reason to give for her wish to make it, beyond a kindly interest in a stranger. It seemed all at once to take the shape of an impertinence on her part; she read this meaning too in the man's eyes.
>
> 'I'm none so fond of having strange folk in my house.' (Gaskell 68)

Margaret, having recently moved to Milton, expresses an interest in visiting a working-class family, a practice she was accustomed to in Helstone. Her inquiry about Nicholas's name and the mention of intending to visit them reflect her initial approach as a visiting lady, driven by a genuine curiosity and a desire to assist the poor. However, the response she receives from Nicholas is less welcoming than she might have expected based on her experiences in Helstone. When Nicholas questions her motive for asking his name and remarks that he does not like having strangers in his house, Margaret is taken aback. In Helstone, it would have been customary and understood that inquiring about someone's name and habitation implied an intention to visit. However, in the industrial setting of Milton, where social relations are shaped by different circumstances and attitudes, such inquiries are perceived differently. This encounter is one of Margaret's early experiences in adjusting her approach to fit the realities of her new community. Despite his initial hesitation, Higgins finally grants her permission to visit, partly because he knows that she is a foreigner and reckons that she probably lacks familiarity with local people; and partly because she has been kind to his daughter Bessy. Again, his reasons shock Margaret because she is not used to poor people permitting her to visit as if it were a favour on their behalf. Her inquiries and expressions of kindness are met with scepticism in the industrial setting, highlighting the need for the heroine to adapt her approach to fit the distinct social dynamics of her new community.

Once she begins with her visits, she attempts to bring religious teachings to the Higginses, influenced by her background as the daughter of a parish priest. Nearly all visiting societies were “evangelical in their aims (...) the visitor’s most important and most consistently required task was to read the Bible aloud to the supposedly heathen poor.” (Nesbit 149). Margaret's first visits are certainly marked by a paternalistic attitude,

where she sees herself as a figure imparting guidance. She attempts to introduce the Bible and religious principles into the lives of the Higginses, particularly Bessy, who is sick due to the hostile working conditions she endured: “Margaret bent over and said, 'Bessy, don't be impatient with your life, whatever it is—or may have been. Remember who gave it you, and made it what it is!'” (Gaskell 83-84). Margaret offers the Bible as a source of solace, aiming to provide spiritual comfort to a girl she perceives as in need. However, the girl’s father strongly disapproves of her approach. Margaret asserts that God gave Bessy life and determined the kind of life she was meant to lead, suggesting that she sees life events as part of a divine plan. To this, Higgins responds:

> ‘Now, I'll not have my wench preached to. She's bad enough as it is, with her dreams and her methodee fancies, and her visions of cities with goulden gates and precious stones. But if it amuses her I let it a be, but I'm none going to have more stuff poured into her.' (…) hoo's welcome, as long as hoo'll keep from preaching on what hoo knows nought about.' (84)

Moreover, his response reflects an empirical perspective. He states that he believes only in observable reality, which explains his scepticism towards religious doctrines. His views reflect the pragmatic mindset that is prevalent in the industrial setting of Milton:

> I'm loth to vex thee, I am; but a man mun speak out for the truth, and when I see the world going all wrong at this time o' day, bothering itself wi' things it knows nought about, and leaving undone all the things that lie in disorder close at its hand—why, I say, leave a' this talk about religion alone, and set to work on what yo' see and know. That's my creed. It's simple, and not far to fetch, nor hard to work.' (84)

As Bessy clarifies to Margaret, her father’s outlook is not exceptional in the area: “'Don't be vexed wi' him—there's many a one thinks like him; many and many a one here. If yo' could hear them speak, yo'd not be shocked at him; he's a rare good man, is father” (84). What all this demonstrates is that Nicholas displays resistance to being lectured or preached to about matters of which he is sceptical. This visit has a profound impact on Margaret; once at home, this experience still troubles her.

Although Bessy does not reject the religious side of Margaret's visits unlike her father, it is not enough to soothe her suffering:

> I thought when father left, oh! if I could just hear her voice, reading me some words o' peace and promise, I could die away into the silence and rest o' God, just as a babby is hushed up to sleep by its mother's lullaby.' (...) Bessy tossed to and fro. If, by an effort, she attended for one moment, it seemed as though she were convulsed into double restlessness the next. At last, she burst out 'Don't go on reading. It's no use. I'm blaspheming all the time in my mind, wi' thinking angrily on what canna be helped.—Yo'd hear of th' riot, m'appen, yesterday at Marlborough Mills? Thornton's factory, yo' know.' (181)

Bessy yearns for Margaret's voice reading from the scriptures, but as the latter begins, Bessy's restlessness increases. Even when she tries to attend to the words, these only intensify her inner turmoil. Bessy's physical tossing and turning reflects the profound impact of the ongoing social unrest on her, more specifically, the riot at Marlborough Mills. Bessy's internal conflict reflects the harsh reality of factory workers and the limitations of spiritual solace in the face of systemic suffering.

Margaret's evangelical approach, though well-intentioned, is therefore met with a lack of receptivity from the Higgins family. Acting as a benevolent patron is inappropriate and ineffective in dealing with the urban working class (Elliott 32). Merely reading the Bible without actively engaging with the injustices in the surrounding world is pointless. As Elliott suggests, "As a visitor, she cannot simply dispense charity and reinforce deference, but rather must promote understanding and even intercede to prevent violence between "masters" and "men" involved in open class conflict" (32). This marks a crucial moment in Margaret's journey as a mediator, prompting her to reassess her approach and seek alternative ways to connect with and understand the working-class residents.

Margaret eventually deviates from the figure of the strictly evangelical and patronizing visitor and adapts her charity to the new social context. She instead becomes the trope of the 'charitable listener'. At first, she performs as any other 'Reading Lady'

by offering spiritual advice and reading aloud from the Bible, but eventually, she shifts from instructing to listening (Nesbit 154). According to Pryke, Margaret "learns by listening" (qtd. in Wyatt 122). Only after she learns to listen, can she begin to immerse herself in the life of the city and comprehend the nature of the social tensions within it.

Following the previous scene where Bessy asks Margaret if she has heard of the riot, the latter makes sure to center Bessy's voice instead of her own by limiting herself to asking questions: "'Your father was not there, was he?' said Margaret" (…) 'But why?' asked Margaret. 'I don't understand.' (Gaskell 181). What is more, Margaret shows a genuine interest in the matter, and a desire to comprehend what Bessy has to say. She also avoids talking about her experience at the riot, despite having been present:

> 'Yo'd be there then, were yo'?' asked Bessy (…)
> 'Yes. Never mind. Go on. (…) But what did he answer to your father?'" (182)

Despite Bessy's attempt to deviate from the focus, Margaret makes sure to stay on topic, that is, on Bessy's frustrations. In this scene, the girls' roles reverse because the visitor privileges the voice of the marginalized (Nesbit 160-161). Thus, Bessy is a representative voice of the working class that Margaret endeavours to amplify. Through the protagonist, Gaskell instigates the desire of other characters and readers to hear voices like Bessy's, that is, she sparks their curiosity about the concerns and perspectives of the working class.

This is directly related to an issue that Gaskell perceived in the society of her time, and which she addresses and tries to ameliorate in this novel through Margaret's change of approach as well as mediation. The problem at hand is the lack of attention of the privileged classes towards the struggles of the lower ones. Gaskell already tried to tackle this in her previous industrial novel *Mary Barton*. In that book's preface, she expresses

that what moved her to write it was the desire to "give some utterance" to "the agony of suffering without the sympathy of the happy" (Gaskell, *MB* 3), a desire that stemmed from her reflection upon the "unhappy state of things between those so bound to each other by common interests, as the employers and the employed must ever be" (*MB* 3). In *North and South,* Gaskell is driven by the same aspirations but employs a different strategy because of all the criticism that *Mary Barton* had previously received for its unbalanced perspective. Some critics argued that it was biased towards workers and misrepresented factory owners. In her second industrial novel, thus, "The duty to listen falls upon the middle-class visitor" (Nesbit 157). While characters such as Edith or Mrs. Thornton exemplify the wealthy and inattentive people who live unbothered, Margaret represents "a model and guide for the naive but interested middle-class reader." (158). Of course, before moving to Milton she still lived rather sheltered: "Sometimes I used to hear a farmer speaking sharp and loud to his servants; but it was so far away that it only reminded me pleasantly that other people were hard at work in some distant place, while I just sat on the heather and did nothing." (Gaskell 93). There is a clear contrast in terms of attention to working-class individuals after maintaining direct contact with some of them: "As she went along the crowded narrow streets, she felt how much of interest they had gained by the simple fact of her having learnt to care for a dweller in them." (91-92). Giving attention to Bessy and Nicholas not only sparks her interest in the lives of these particular individuals but also in the crowds of Milton she initially avoids. This provides her with a reinforced empathy and openness to the perspective of the workers, especially regarding the labour conflict —something crucial for her mediating efforts.

2. Conflict transformation

North and South departs from conventional gender roles by including a female protagonist whose philanthropic acts include a mediation of a labour conflict, an unconventional stance for a woman in the Victorian era. Wyatt explains that "the mid-Victorian role for the middle-class woman with a social conscience was charitable activity, with the male engaged in politics and organisation." (109). In fact, this novel has been reexamined as a narrative featuring an outer layer that describes society and urbanization, but with inner narratives delving into the intricacies of gender and the challenges faced by a woman involved in social action (105). In a time when the opportunities for women engaged in social action were limited, Gaskell devised a protagonist whose new involvement in public life was not restricted anymore to just making occasional visits to deliver food and bare necessities (109)**.** Margaret transcends gender roles by engaging in quasi-political debates with Thornton and Higgins (109). Indeed, a major theme of the novel is the study of emerging individuality for the female philanthropist (109-110).

While the protagonist's exposure to the unfamiliar industrial landscape and her contact with some of its inhabitants undoubtedly contribute to her comprehension of the social tensions, it is especially through the debates with both Nicholas and Thornton that she can accurately discern the underlying problem between 'masters' and 'men'. What she detects is that the issue is rooted in the lack of effective communication. Before the impending strike, Mr. Thornton visits the Hales and Mr. Hale asks him about it. Thornton's response illustrates the unwillingness to include the workers in the discussion:

> 'Yes; the fools will have a strike. Let them. (…) 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. (Gaskell 107)

Margaret does not understand the reason why masters do not care to offer any explanation: “'But why,' asked she, 'could you not explain what good reason you have for expecting a bad trade?” (108). To this, Thornton once again provides a dismissive response: “'Do you give your servants reasons for your expenditure, or your economy in the use of your own money? We, the owners of capital, have a right to choose what we will do with it.'” (108). His comparison to how individuals do not provide detailed explanations to their servants about personal expenditures underscores a paternalistic mindset. This refusal to disclose their financial strategies to the workers only contributes to the workers' misunderstanding and resentment. Two chapters later, Nicholas and Margaret similarly discuss the reduction in wages:

> Ask th' masters! They'd tell us to mind our own business, and they'd mind theirs. Our business being, yo' understand, to take the bated' wage, and be thankful, and their business to bate us down to clemming point, to swell their profits. That's what it is.' (123)

Margaret deflects the inquiry back to the masters, suggesting that they would have reasons for their decisions. Nicholas’ assertion that masters would simply marginalize them reflects the underlying problem of faulty communication. As she discusses this issue with both Thornton and Nicholas, the protagonist perceives a paradox in “this strange society” (109): “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.'” (109). This observation reflects the underlying problem of communication and understanding. The constant undermining of each other exacerbates the tensions, making it difficult for the two classes to collaborate or find common ground. Margaret's attempts

to redirect the worker's question to the masters, as well as her astute observation of the running down of each class by the other, foreshadow her role as a transformative mediator. Her engagement in this dialectic not only strengthens her understanding of what she has witnessed and experienced in Milton but also helps her to discern her own function in this new context (Wyatt 105).

In order to solve the labour conflict, Margaret simultaneously concentrates her efforts on two endeavours. Firstly, in teaching attention to Thornton, and secondly, in fostering communication between the master and Nicholas Higgins —that is, both sides of the mediation. The aim of her philanthropic acts goes beyond palliating a temporary issue. By addressing the root causes of the conflict, the heroine transforms the relationship between both parties and de-escalates future ones. It is for this reason that her function is that of a transformative mediator.

2.1. Teaching attention: Master's ears against human heart

In women's social-problem writing, it is common for middle-class female characters to engage in social change by teaching attention to male characters rather than just listening sympathetically themselves (Nesbit 152). In this novel, Margaret addresses Thornton's deficiencies, particularly the ones that impact his relationship with his workers. Embodying the ministry of listening, she inspires others to follow her example (170). Indeed, Margaret is foreign to all the concepts which permeate the industrial setting. She admits that she knows "so little about strikes, and rate of wages, and capital, and labour, that [she] had better not talk to a political economist like [him]." (Gaskell 108). However, that is not an obstacle to her taking actions to ameliorate the social conflict.

As discussed previously, giving attention is something Margaret knows well. This is crucial, since “Margaret’s influence converts Thornton to philanthropy.” (Cazamian 501). Just as she learned to pay more attention to the struggles of the working class, she teaches Thornton to do the same. In a nutshell, Thornton struggles to find sympathy for those who, unlike him, do not overcome their life struggles. He believes in individual independence and refuses to intervene in the lives of his workers (502). When Thornton maintains that masters do not owe their workers any explanations, Margaret appeals to their moral and religious obligation of utilizing intelligently their money: “there are passages in the Bible which would rather imply—to me at least—that they neglected their duty as stewards if they did so.” (Gaskell 108). As masters, she suggests, it is their responsibility to take care of their resources and workers. Towards the end of this discussion, Thornton argues that imposing too much interference on the lives of the workers, especially outside of business hours, would be like trenching on their independence. Margaret’s response challenges Thornton to consider the broader societal context and the impact of historical inequalities on people's attitudes towards authority:

> 'is not that because there has been none of the equality of friendship between the adviser and advised classes? Because every man has had to stand in an unchristian and isolated position, apart from and jealous of his brother-man: constantly afraid of his rights being trenched upon?' (112)

Until the end of their discussion, Margaret continues asserting that the issue is not solely about labour positions but about their shared humanity and mutual dependence: “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.” (112). She then goes on to argue that as human beings, they are inherently interconnected, and this interdependence extends beyond their economic relations. Margaret argues that God has designed human relationships to be mutually

dependent, and that even the most independent individuals rely on others for various aspects of their lives. With all these arguments, Margaret essentially aims to change Thornton's inattentiveness to his workers, since he is "the epitome of individualism's finest virtues, and worst excesses" (Cazamian 502) and talks, as the protagonist herself puts it, "as if commerce were everything and humanity nothing." (Gaskell 140). One of the initial tasks of a transformative mediator is precisely to look for signs of weakness and self-absorption, since "these are the starting points for interactional transformation." (Bush and Pope 87). Certainly, all of Margaret's responses to Thornton are aimed at causing a shift in his attitude from self-absorption to responsiveness. Despite all this, Thornton ultimately learns the lesson through practice rather than through hearing Margaret's preaching.

2.2. The power of direct communication

Margaret's conflict resolution efforts extend beyond teaching attention; she acts as a transformative mediator by encouraging communication between both parties and transforming the nature of their interaction to one that is positive, constructive, connecting and humanizing, even amid ongoing conflict and disagreement (Bush and Pope 82). In the following passage, Mr. Hale echoes the author's ideas on the power of direct contact:

> '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 the best way of getting over your difficulties, which, I do believe, arise from your ignorance—excuse me, Mr. Higgins—on subjects which it is for the mutual interest of both masters and men should be well understood by both. I wonder'—(half to his daughter), 'if Mr. Thornton might not be induced to do such a thing?' (Gaskell 212)

In practical terms, the skills of a transformative mediator who seeks to attain interactional change should focus on "*supporting interparty communication and understanding.*"

(Bush 439, italics in the original). Margaret's commitment to fostering dialogue becomes especially evident during the riot, a scene that illustrates faulty communication, which is the main problem caused by industrialization for Gaskell (Nesbit 169-170). Rather than remaining a passive observer, the protagonist actively involves herself in the conflict. As tensions escalate, she confronts Thornton, challenging him to address the workers directly and engage in a humanized dialogue:

> 'go down this instant, if you are not a coward. Go down and face them like a man. Save these poor strangers, whom you have decoyed here. Speak to your workmen as if they were human beings. Speak to them kindly. (…) If you have any courage or noble quality in you, go out and speak to them, man to man.' (Gaskell 161)

This reflects her belief in the power of direct contact and communication to achieve understanding and a resolution.

Similarly, Margaret encourages Higgins, who is seeking work after the failed strike, to communicate directly with Thornton: “'But I wish you had seen Mr. Thornton,' repeated Margaret. 'Would you go again—it's a good deal to ask, I know—but would you go to-morrow and try him? I should be so glad if you would.'” (280). Despite Mr. Hale’s offer to speak to Thornton on Higgins’ behalf because he thinks that would stir his sympathy: “'I'm afraid it would be of no use,' said Mr. Hale, in a low voice. 'It would be better to let me speak to him.'” (280). Yet Margaret remains firm: “Margaret still looked at Higgins for his answer. Those grave soft eyes of hers were difficult to resist. He gave a great sigh. (…) I do it for yo'r sake, Miss Hale, and it's first time in my life as e'er I give way to a woman. Neither my wife nor Bess could e'er say that much again me.'” (280). His acknowledgement that it is the first time he has yielded to a woman, reveals Margaret's persuasive power. Her influence highlights her ability to inspire trust and cooperation, an indispensable quality since trust is a fundamental component of mediation (Brown in Bogdanoski 36). Despite Higgins' initial resistance, Margaret's sincerity and

the implied trust she places in him motivate him to act for her sake. Even after Higgins cedes, Mr. Hale still insists on intervening, and this time it is Higgins who rejects his offer:

> 'And as to Mr. Thornton,' said Mr. Hale, 'I'll give you a note to him, which, I think I may venture to say, will ensure you a hearing.'
>
> 'I thank yo' kindly, sir, but I'd as lief stand on my own bottom. I dunnot stomach the notion of having favour curried for me, by one as doesn't know the ins and outs of the quarrel. Meddling 'twixt master and man is liker meddling 'twixt husband and wife than aught else: it takes a deal o' wisdom for to do ony good. (Gaskell 280-281)

Nicholas' reluctance to accept Mr. Hale's assistance exemplifies the power that Gaskell attributes to direct communication as a means to resolving conflict. Margaret's words before their first interaction evoke Gaskell's hopes:

> I wonder what success he'll have to-morrow. If he and Mr. Thornton would speak out together as man to man—if Higgins would forget that Mr. Thornton was a master, and speak to him as he does to us—and if Mr. Thornton would be patient enough to listen to him with his human heart, not with his master's ears —' (281)

Margaret actively seeks to dismantle the existing communication barriers between masters and men, recognizing that a lack of understanding perpetuates the cycle of conflict. By advocating for direct dialogue, Margaret strives to create an environment where both parties can express their concerns, which lays the groundwork for a more harmonious relationship.

Thornton initially denies Higgins a job because the overlooker tells him that Higgins is one of the leaders of the Union, and "was known to him by name as a turbulent spirit." (290). After learning about his identity, Thornton's attitude towards him changes abruptly: "'Come along,' said he, and his tone was rougher than before. 'It is men such as this,' thought he, 'who interrupt commerce and injure the very town they live in: mere demagogues, lovers of power, at whatever cost to others.'" (290). On top of that, Thornton is unsure about the veracity of Higgins' reason for seeking work in order to take care of

Boucher's orphaned children: "I won't say, I don't believe your pretext for coming and asking for work; I know nothing about it. It may be true, or it may not. It's a very unlikely story, at any rate. Let me pass. I'll not give you work. There's your answer.' (292). Thornton eventually goes to visit Higgins' neighbourhood to apologize in person, since "he felt that he had been unjust, in giving so scornful a hearing to any one who had waited, with humble patience, for five hours, to speak to him." (295-296). His showing up in person in the Higgins' neighbourhood shows how far he is willing to go, even across class lines, to correct his mistake. Another reason for his visit is that he has been "collecting evidence as to the truth of Higgins's story, the nature of his character, the tenor of his life" (296), and is touched by his generosity toward Boucher's children. Higgins' generosity "made him forget entirely the mere reasonings of justice, and overleap them by a diviner instinct." (296). After acknowledging his mistake and asking for forgiveness, Thornton not only grants Higgins a job at the mill but invites him to work for him: "Will you take work with me? That's what I came to ask.'" (297). Higgins seems reluctant for an instant but accepts the job offer. They seal the deal with a handshake, a gesture that signifies a symbolic agreement, a willingness to move beyond their previous hostilities and cooperate.

Towards the end of the novel, Higgins expresses his struggle to reconcile the two sides of his new employer to Margaret and Mr. Hale:

> To tell the truth,' said he, 'he fairly bamboozles me. He's two chaps. One chap I knowed of old as were measter all o'er. T'other chap hasn't an ounce of measter's flesh about him. How them two chaps is bound up in one body, is a craddy for me to find out. (...) Meanwhile he comes here pretty often; that's how I know the chap that's a man, not a measter. (308)

Now that he knows Thornton much better, Nicholas perceives a duality in Thornton's personality —he has a harsh and authoritative side as well as a much more human one.

The fact that Thornton often pays him visits at home shows, on the one hand, a subversion of the power dynamics and thus his desire to speak as equals. On the other hand, it reflects Thornton's willingness to get involved in the lives of his workers outside of the mill. What is more, his visits resemble Margaret's ones and demonstrate that he has learned the lesson. As Nicholas explains, in his visits, Thornton "sits and listens and stares" (308). Just like Nicholas now sees the man instead of the master, by giving attention, Thornton has learned to see the man instead of the worker.

The effectiveness of Margaret's transformative mediation is also evident in their newfound ability to hold a peaceful conversation. They can now exchange their thoughts and opinions, and despite their differences, they manage to stay receptive and not damage their overall relationship:

> I tell him some of my mind that I reckon he'd ha' been the better of hearing when he were a younger man.' (…) Sometimes he says a rough thing or two, which is not agreeable to look at at first, but has a queer smack o' truth in it when yo' come to chew it. (308)

In Walker's words, "A successful negotiation leads to a decision which in turn leads to action" (8). Certainly, the transformation in Thornton's relationship with his workers goes beyond rhetoric. Thornton begins to act for the benefit of his workers in general: "'I'm building a dining-room—for the men I mean—the hands.'" (Gaskell 328). This action reflects his concern for their well-being as men and not only as workers. It is also highly significant that before starting this project, he waited for Higgins' approval, who consulted with other workers as well. This action emphasizes Thornton's willingness to involve them in decisions that directly impact their lives. Thornton therefore adopts a more democratic approach which contrasts with his earlier authoritarian style. More importantly, this project becomes an opportunity to improve his relationship with the workmen by occasionally eating and conversing with them.

This shows how much his relationship with his workers has changed. He enjoys spending time with them, which is also true for the workers, as evidenced by their constant invitations. They even seem to feel comfortable despite being in the presence of their master: “I am getting really to know some of them now, and they talk pretty freely before me.'” (330). Their shared meals serve as a parallel to Margaret’s earlier visits to the Higgins family, as they are an opportunity for Thornton to establish direct contact with the working class, fostering a humanizing view of his workers. During these moments, he can gain insights into their struggles by giving attention. This allows him to take concrete actions aimed at improving their quality of life, which mirrors Margaret's efforts to amplify the voices of the working class by directly engaging with them and listening to their experiences.

When in the last chapters Thornton fears failure like other Milton businesses, the narrator “analyses his personal journey from imperious, distant employer to a man meeting other men” (Wyatt 106):

> He and they had led parallel lives—very close, but never touching—till the accident (or so it seemed) of his acquaintance with Higgins. Once brought face to face, man to man, with an individual of the masses around him, and (take notice) out of the character of master and workman, in the first instance, they had each begun to recognise that ‘we all of us have one human heart’. (Gaskell 380)

The authorial voice here suggests that Higgins represents the turning point of his newfound closeness to his workers, which has allowed both sides to finally see their shared humanity. It is in that moment of potential failure when Thornton not only fears the loss of his own position but also that of the contact with some of his workers: “the apprehension of losing his connection with two or three of the workmen whom he had so lately begun to know as men (...) gave a new poignancy to the subtle fear that came over

him from time to time" (380). This fear of losing his newfound relations makes him value his position as a master more than ever:

> until now, he had never recognised how much and how deep was the interest he had grown of late to feel in his position as manufacturer, simply because it led him into such close contact, and gave him the opportunity of so much power, among a race of people strange, shrewd, ignorant; but, above all, full of character and strong human feeling. (380)

Through the narrator, Gaskell suggests that this transformed relationship, while not fully preventing the rise of future conflicts, effectively helps both sides confront any new problems with more openness, patience, and willingness to understand the other, therefore decreasing the level of escalation:

> And thence arose that intercourse, which though it might not have the effect of preventing all future clash of opinion and action, when the occasion arose, would, at any rate, enable both master and man to look upon each other with far more charity and sympathy, and bear with each other more patiently and kindly. (381)

There is an instant when Mr. Colthurst asks Thornton about his belief in the effectiveness of such experiments:

> '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 they have hitherto been." (391-392)

Thornton's expectations indicate that it would be misguided to consider Gaskell's narrative resolution as an evasion. Gaskell never intended to provide an overarching solution to the class struggle in *North and South*, to begin with; rather, she hoped it would help to make it less destructive. In transformative mediation, reversing the negative conflict cycle is more important than resolving a problem in particular, because "without a change in the conflict interaction between them, parties are left disabled, even if an agreement on concrete issues has been reached." (Bush and Pope 75). Owing to

Margaret’s use of this approach to mediation she not only solves their present issue but also potentially prevents the escalation of future conflicts.

Thornton inevitably fails and is forced to sublet Marlborough Mills. Besides the fear of losing this connection with the workers, he also feels uneasy because his experimental plans have been ruined before having been able to test them. He defends the advantages of his latest approach: “I felt that I was on the right path, and that, starting from a kind of friendship with one, I was becoming acquainted with many. The advantages were mutual: we were both unconsciously and consciously teaching each other.” (Gaskell 390). He is so convinced of the potential of such changed dynamics that he is trying to find an employer who allows him to keep performing experiments aimed at fostering direct and humanized contact with the workers: “My only wish is to have the opportunity of cultivating some intercourse with the hands beyond the mere "cash nexus." (391). The term "cash nexus" alludes to the transactional nature of the master-worker relationship. It is his conviction that an enhanced mutual understanding would lead to a more favourable relationship: “We should understand each other better, and I'll venture to say we should like each other more.'” (391). The culmination of all these sentiments is encapsulated in Thornton's conclusion on class relationships, which mirrors Gaskell's ideas about moving towards social harmony:

> I have arrived at the conviction that no mere institutions, however wise, and however much thought may have been required to organise and arrange them, can attach class to class as they should be attached, unless the working out of such institutions bring the individuals of the different classes into actual personal contact. Such intercourse is the very breath of life. (391)

In essence, Gaskell's ideas, as channelled through Thornton, emphasize the significance of breaking down barriers between social classes through personal contact.

Gaskell ends the novel without securing better wages for the workers or solving the class struggle. I propose that the aim of the author in writing this novel was not to provide a resolution to the class antagonism but to contribute to the advancement towards that resolution. The protagonist's transformative mediation succeeds in achieving a different kind of resolution by transforming the relationship dynamics between master and men, particularly through the interactional change between Nicholas Higgins and John Thornton. Just like Margaret learns to give attention, she helps the master to do the same by the end of the book. Gaskell hoped that, just like Margaret and Thornton are in the story, her readers would also be called to attention by this novel (see 1.2 pp. 18-19). After all, the goal of transformative mediation is not resolution per se. According to Bush, "Transformative mediation aims not at achieving agreements that resolve the parties' problem, but at supporting the parties' attempts to change the quality of their interaction itself, from negative to positive" (439). This is because the resolution of the particular conflict that emerged simply comes as a natural result of the change in the interaction (439). In this sense, *North and South* offers a means to reduce the probability of escalation in future confrontations.

3. Conclusions and Further Research

This paper has explored, on the one hand, how Margaret Hale becomes and functions as a mediator between a master and his men. On the other hand, it has ascertained whether Elizabeth Gaskell resolves the labour and social conflicts between masters and workers in her novel. A close reading of the novel through the framework of transformative mediation has revealed that Margaret acts as a model mediator of this conflict resolution method by fostering direct communication between both parties and effectively achieving

interactional change. This analysis has additionally unearthed that although Gaskell does not outright solve the labour and social disputes between masters and workers, the author undoubtedly contributes to the resolution of class antagonisms by exemplifying a shift in relationship dynamics in a way that minimizes the impact of any conflict that may arise between both sides. Through the lens of transformative mediation, this novel unveils a long-lasting means of ameliorating the deeply rooted issues between masters and workers.

Before intervening in the class conflict, Margaret evolves from a visiting lady into a more attentive philanthropist by addressing her communication difficulties as well as adapting her approach to charity to the industrial landscape. Having learned to give attention to the struggles of the working class through her contact with the Higgins family, she initiates her mediating efforts aimed at transforming the conflict between Thornton and his workers. She teaches Thornton and Higgins the importance of direct communication. Her efforts especially focus on the relationship between these two characters, and their impact extends to Thornton's interactions with his entire workforce. This novel adds to the resolution of the class conflict by exemplifying a shift in the relationship between masters and workers. Gaskell employs Margaret as an agent of change who sets in motion an enduring transformation in the relationship between classes that goes beyond immediate problem-solving. Her mediating efforts extend beyond mere conflict resolution; they aim to fundamentally transform the dynamics between the conflicting classes, addressing class antagonisms and urging both sides towards less dehumanizing conflict management. Reading *North and South* through a transformative mediation framework reveals that while Gaskell finishes the story without an explicit solution to the labour conflict or the class conflict, this novel stands as a significant contribution to the efforts towards their resolution. Certainly, this aspect exposes Gaskell’s realism as it acknowledges the complexities of the class struggle. Most

importantly, the value of this work resides in the enduring positive impact on the relationship dynamics between masters and workers.

To delve deeper into the exploration of Margaret Hale as a mediator, a comparative analysis could be conducted, aligning the stages of her mediation in *North and South* with the recognized stages[3] of a typical mediation process. This comparative study would shed light on the extent to which Margaret's actions align with established models, providing valuable insights into her role as a mediator. Additionally, a more nuanced examination of Margaret's transformative mediation efforts could focus on empowerment and recognition shifts[4]. While this paper emphasized her role in fostering dialogue and the results of the mediation, a detailed investigation into the smaller shifts she instigates would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of her impact on the social dynamics within the novel. Extending the scope beyond *North and South*, future research could explore the application of transformative mediation frameworks to other novels dealing with conflict resolution. This broader exploration would not only deepen our literary understanding but also contribute to the scholarship on conflict resolution.

[3] The three classic stages of mediation are ‘exploring’, ‘exchanging’ and ‘formulating’ (Walker 5).

[4] The main goals of a transformative mediator are to foster empowerment and recognition shifts (Bush and Pope 84).

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