
The Ups And Downs Of Gender Roles In North And South

Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *North and South* is a tale of contradictions. Looking at the title, it presents the obvious, the distinctions between the northern rural industrial towns and the southern high-class cities. If we take a closer look, the novel also proposes the expectations and challenges of the different genders. Most women in the high social class of the Victorian era had two solemn duties: marry a rich man with a title and have plenty of children. But it wasn't always a picnic for the men either, they also had high-demanding requirements. From finding a suitable wife and starting a family, to entering a career in politics or business. There weren't a lot of options for women of this era, but things started to change when the novel *North and South* was released by Elizabeth Gaskell as a serial in 1854. Gaskell protests the ideas of gender in the Victorian era by creating the character, Margaret Hale, who had classic feminine aspects of generosity and kindness and the typical male qualities of strength and independence.

The idea of "separate spheres" overruled Victorian convictions about the roles of gender, stating that these positions among males and females were set in stone and not to be defied. Public life, including work, is within the masculine realm, while private life, such as domestication, lies within the feminine. The lady of the house was often viewed as the 'The Angel in the House,' she was responsible for all things good and simple. The man was considered to be the "protector" who put a roof over his family's heads and kept food on the table. The public sphere was considered critically immoral, and disaster occurred when the characters, especially heroines, did not bend to the will of society's standards.

This very concept is challenged in *North and South*. Margaret Hale is compelled to accept a masculine role by organizing her family's move from Helstone, and taking her father's role when announcing the news to her mother. She also takes on much of the responsibility for the family in the industrial town Milton, such as finding a new home for them to inhabit and breaking the news of her husband's death to Mrs. Boucher because her father is afraid. Margaret learns to be independent because much of the weight falls to her shoulders. She also exhibits bravery by standing against the mob to protect Mr. Thornton and having to lie to the police about Frederick's return to England for their mother's funeral.

Mr. Thornton, without denying his masculinity, demonstrates compassion and tenderness. Though he hides this from public view, it's shown in his care towards his mother and his quiet attention to the Hales. When he found out that Mrs. Hale was critically ill, he went out of his way to purchase and bring expensive fruits to their home to lift her spirits. He shows off these traits more as he develops relations with his workers by visiting Nicholas Higgins' home, making arrangements for the work environment to be safer, and eating with the men. Mr. Thornton is also judged by society and seen as cruel because he holds his employees to strict policy so that his mill can remain successful. Although, he probably wouldn't have done these things if it hadn't been for Margaret's influence on him, which goes to show that women were not incompetent when presenting their thoughts and ideas.

Another man in the novel that demonstrates tenderness and compassion, which were typically thought to be feminine traits, was the hard but thoughtful, Nicholas Higgins. Higgins assumes

the responsibility for raising the Boucher children after the death of their parents and exhibits maternal tenderness and strength with dignity. In Volume II, chapter eleven, when Mr. Thornton visits the Higgins' home to acquire for Nicholas about work, he sees the Boucher children and asks Nicholas if they belong to him, in which he replies, "They're not mine, and they are mine." This indicates that Mr. Higgins also broke the social norm by taking in the Boucher children instead of letting them become orphaned.

Margaret is different from the other women of her era, because she does not oblige to the rules of society, and it's unfortunate because she is highly criticized for her inspiring actions. For example, when she accompanied Frederick to the train station to make sure he got away safely, she was then chastised by Mrs. Thornton because her son, out of jealousy, assumed Margaret had a lover. By being alone with a young man at night she is disobeying the high standards of society for a young woman in her position, even though her true motives were too risky to admit. Another time this is presented in the novel is when Margaret throws herself in front of the mob to protect Mr. Thornton, and of course, he automatically assumes it's because she cares romantically for him. Even when she proceeded to tell him on page 194 in Volume I, chapter twenty-four, "It was only a natural instinct; any woman would have done just the same. We all feel the sanctity of our sex as a high privilege when we see danger."

While Gaskell created characters that challenged the concept of "separate spheres," both the women and men of the Victorian era were enslaved to the requirements ordained by their social classes.

Margaret Hale is seen as a striking character in the novel because she startles her peers with her insistence and stubborn attitude, while also having an ability to make others feel weak under her gaze. But why is she seen as an odd but revolutionary heroine? It is because she defied the aspects that are considered to be a traditional female in high Victorian society. The "Victorian Woman" was known to be timid, proper, and in continuous need of male leadership. Gaskell confronted the gender norms of her day with the characterization of Margaret Hale, who did not fit in with society's ideas about how women should behave. An example of a character in this novel that fits the "true Victorian woman" persona is represented by Margaret's mother Mrs. Hale. The wife of the ex-clergyman was certainly submissive, showing innocence and dullness. Even though she was outraged by her husband's decision to move the family to Milton, she put aside her disputes and followed him just as an ideal wife should.

Women of this era, as well as men, had to be considerate when making decisions, because the choices they made about marriage and relationships, gravely affected their futures. One standard, in particular, for the fitting behavior and features of women, was presented in a poem by Coventry Patmore. In his poem, "Angel in the House" (1854) in which he immortalized his "perfect" Victorian wife. He details the traits and habits that an ideal woman should obtain, and the dedication she must give her husband. A good woman was dutiful to the home and the family, and a man could only reach his full capacity with the encouragement and comfort of his wife.

The one trait in which women possess that men do not, is of course, the capability to have children. Often, women were only valued for their ability to birth children and were seen as a means for producing heirs. It was the social precedent that a woman's role, was first and foremost, to bring children into the world. Victorian standards for women of this time were quite narrowed. The expectations of women and what they expected of themselves was actually very

little. In the 19th century, in order to maintain uniformity of the home and family, the “ideal” woman must be submissive; something Margaret Hale is far from. Which is represented by her rejecting not one, but two marriage proposals, speaking her mind to Mr. Thornton about his behavior towards his workers, and refusing to put up with Mrs. Thornton as she criticizes Margaret for actions, she herself did not even witness. It was the husband’s job to make important decisions for both himself and the family, and their wives were to obey his decisions. Along with Margaret, there was also another female character in the novel who did not follow the traditional ideals of a Victorian woman. The snobbish and demanding Mrs. Thornton.

Mrs. Thornton disregards the gender norms in the absence of her husband. She defends and leads her family, including her son, in whom she teaches to be careful and to be thoughtful about the future. From her sacrifice and divergence from the typical, John grew up to be a successful and prosperous businessman.

While women may have always gotten the short end of the stick, men, (who had more options than women) didn’t have everything handed to them on a silver platter. Just as men had high expectations for the ideal Victorian woman, the women along with the rest of society, also had great assumptions for an exemplary Victorian man. Men, not only had to earn a woman’s respect before marriage, but they also had to impress the rest of her family as well as their social class. Males were also victims of social pressures because their peers also analyzed them for their accomplishments. In the novel, Mr. Thornton came from a poor background and worked his way up to his position as a successful mill owner. Even though he earned his position among society, instead of inheriting it, he is still criticized by his class and Margaret especially, because he holds his employees to strict policy and pays them what he sees as a “fair wage,” which strikes the Milton townspeople as harsh and cruel.

Victorian men were not only competing for respect within their own sex, but they also needed to impress the females as well. If they weren’t married, they were seen as degrading, because they had no family to provide for. Supporting a family was a sign of true success within the male sex. Being able to work through hardships and succeed financially while providing for the family, emulated that a man was accomplished in the workforce as well. This made him respectable by his company as well as other men in society.

North and South present the hardships for both men and women in all classes, which is one of the reasons the book is so influential and well known.

Elizabeth Gaskell lived in a time where everything was separated by gender and class. Her novel formerly appeared in twenty weekly episodes from September 1854 to January 1855 in *Household Words*, edited by Charles Dickens. Gaskell originally wanted to title the novel “Margaret Hale,” but Dickens, who imposed on the title “North and South” thought it would make more sense because the book deals with the difference in lifestyle between the rural southern and the industrial north of England. Even though Gaskell, the author, often titled her novels the names of her heroines, she was still a woman and had to oblige to the decisions of her male superiors.

The Victorian era was not an easy time, for women or men, of all classes. If it hadn’t been for inspiring writers such as Gaskell, and heroines like Margaret Hale, women of this era would not have had the courage to bring attention to the issues of the time that were plaguing them. The author creates a collection of different female role models within her novel and makes it known

that the conventional principles about women were not the only ones possible. Gaskell's text argues these traditions by creating characters that influenced women that they can be both successful and lead a happy life. Although this novel does administer the differences in life and class between the north and south of England during the Industrial Revolution, it also draws attention to the real hardships that women and men of this time dealt with every day. Margaret Hale is a character that people can relate to, not just because she is a woman, but because she is human, and no matter what class or "sphere" we belong to, everyone has to face the issues and challenges that life constantly tosses us.