



A Marxist Reading of *Mary Barton*

YANG Wenrui^{[a],[b],*} ; WANG Wei^{[a],[c]}

^[a]Ph.D. Candidate, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China.

^[b]Lecturer, School of International Communication, Communication University of China, Nanjing, China.

^[c]Lecturer, College of Foreign Languages, Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, Nanjing, China.

*Corresponding author.

Supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities in China (NR2016029).

Received 30 March 2016; accepted 21 May 2016

Published online 26 June 2016

Abstract

Mary Barton is a realistic novel written by Mrs. Gaskell. It assumes in the reader not only imaginative sympathy with the distress of the Manchester workers, but also knowledge of the social and political movement of the 1840s, which so often offered hopes to the oppressed. By applying Marxist literary theory to the reading of this novel one can find how subtle the authoress' depiction of growing hope and then crushing despair of the workingmen. Also, by using Marxist critique one can discover the authoress, while trying to write from the working people's viewpoint, can not simply empty herself of all her inherited middle-class attitude, which results in the unconvincing and doubtful ending of the novel.

Key words: Class conflict; Hope; Despair; Middle-class attitude

Yang, W. R., & Wang, W. (2016). A Marxist Reading of *Mary Barton*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 12(6), 54-57. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/8586>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8586>

INTRODUCTION

Karl Marx developed theory that "historical materialism" and economic forces were the driving force of human

endeavor. He perceived history as a series of class struggles where the alienation of the worker in industrial capitalist societies resulted in class warfare which was then reflected in the arts. He proclaims that the Proletariat revolution would eventually create a new social and economic order capable of creating great are. According to Karl Marx, art and society are intimately connected. Therefore, while reading Mrs. Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, some understanding of Chartism and allied movements is necessary for one to feel the full subtlety of her depiction of growing hope and then crushing despair of the working class (Marx & Engels, 1998, p.192).

1. MARXIST CRITICISM

Marxist literary criticism is a term based on socialist and dialectic theories. It views literary works as reflections of social institutions from which they originate. Marx's social theory forms the basis of Marxist criticism and has developed over time. Marx argues that economics forms the base of society including class interaction and power hierarchies. Society always wants to regenerate base. Superstructure consists of law, politics, philosophy, religion and art which grow out of society's base (Martin, 2005, p.78).

Literature is a product of work in itself and it does identifiable work of its own. Marxist Criticism "shows the text as it cannot know itself as a product of the conditions of its making of which it is necessarily silent" (Eagleton, 2004, p.38).

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF MARY BARTON

In 1832, in spite of the parliamentary reform, the living conditions of the workers did not grow better but become steadily worse. In 1834 there was the passage of the Poor Law. According to it, the inhuman workhouses were

established, in which the poor people had to do heavy tasks and live no better than in jails. The great misery of the workers led to an upsurge of labor movements and the organization of the workers into unions. In 1836, a working-class movement known as Chartism broke out, which was, according to Lenin, “the first broad, really mass, politically formed, proletarian revolutionary movement”. In 1837, the workers formulated their political demands in “The People’s Charter”. The people’s Parliaments gathered in 1837 and on “The People’s Charter” there were over a million signatures of workers. During the forties, the revolutionary events on the European continent led to a new strengthening of the English working-class movement. But the late forties witnessed the decline of Chartism owing to the defeat of the revolutions on the Continent and the easing of social tension in England (Liu, 1993, p.185).

Then, let us turn to the situation in Manchester during that period. During the relatively good years (1832-1836), working-class aspiration had focused on trade unionism. When the boom collapsed, however, enormous distress revealed again the impotence of the workers and the indifferent cruelty of the so-called economic “laws”. By June 1837, 50,000 workers were put on short time in Manchester alone. Handloom weavers were by far the worst hit. Irish immigrants still flooded in, utterly destitute, to aggravate the problems of the impoverished city. Manchester was ready for the Charter. On 8 May the Charter was published. In September 1838 the Manchester Political Union staged a mass meeting on Kersal Moor, at which delegates from all parts of the Chartist world demonstrated the strength and purpose of the movement. This was emphatically not a violent movement at this stage, whatever the fears and inflammatory activities of the middle class, for, as Mrs. Gaskell says, the idea that their misery had still to be revealed in all its depth, and that then some remedy would be found, soothed their aching heart, and kept down their rising fury. Delegates were elected at mass meetings all over the country and sent to the National Chartist Convention in February 1839. The fall of the Government forced a withdrawal to Birmingham, until the mass petition, the voice of the working people, could be urged on Parliament. The petition was presented in June and by July the workmen could see in the voting figures that they had been wrong, that their legitimate grievances would not instantly move every heart to their cause. Parliament refused to admit the Charter. A rising in Wales was ruthlessly suppressed and temporarily Chartism died down (Liu, 1993, p.186).

Mary Barton is situated in Manchester of that time, during which the hope of 1839 and the despair of the working class when their peaceable and reasonable methods were so contemned is what interested Mrs. Gaskell most directly for the purpose of her novel. The relevance of all the historical background to Mary Barton

should be evident. John Barton is a typical working-class figure portrayed as a noble, selfless and upright man. Class-conscious as he is, he believes that workers must fight for their own rights. He becomes an active Chartist and goes to London as one of the worker’s delegates. The rising hope and then crushing despair of him is an allegory of the contemporary “upsurge of the proletariat”. His change, after being bereaved of his pregnant wife and the unborn baby, from a kind tender-hearted man to a stern and desperate Union member represents the changed feelings of the proletariat toward the ruling class (Gill, 1970, p.89).

3. ANALYZING THE NOVEL FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MARXIST CRITICISM

The first several chapters of the novel can be read as evoking the conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. One can see from John Barton’s words, there is a gap, very wide, between the two opposing classes and there are indifference and ignorance of the middle class holds toward the working class.

“And what good have they ever done me that I should like them?” asked Barton, the latent fire lighting up his eye: And bursting forth, he continued, If I am sick, do they come and nurse me? If my child lies dying (as poor Tom lay, with his white wan lips quivering, for want of better food than I could give him), does the rich man bring the wine or broth that might save his life? If I am out of work for weeks in the bad times, and winter comes, with black frost, and keen east wind, and there is no coal for the grate, and no clothes for the bed, and the thin bones are seen through the ragged clothes, does the rich man share his plenty with me, as he ought to do if his religion was not a humbug? ...No, I tell you, it’s the poor, and the poor only, as does such things for the poor. ...We are their slaves as long as we can work; we pile up their fortunes with the sweat of our brows; and yet we are to live as separate as if we were in two worlds; ay, as separate as Dives and Lazarus, with a great gulf betwixt us ... (Gaskell, 1970, p.133)

Then the novel sets about widening the already existing gap between the classes by showing that the working men’s lives more miserable while that of the employers maintain the same level of extravagance. One can sense John Barton a changed man after losing his wife and the unborn baby.

One of the good influences over John Barton’s life had departed that night. One of the ties which bound him down to the gentle humanities of earth was loosened, and henceforward the neighbours all remarked he was a changed man. His gloom and his sternness became habitual instead of occasional. He was more obstinate.

The resentment against the rich is growing in his chest and makes him to become an active member of a trades’ union. He begins to care for the differences between the employers and the employed,

an eternal subject for agitation in the manufacturing districts, which however it may be lulled for a time, is sure to break forth again with fresh violence at any depression of trade, showing

that in its apparent quiet, the ashes had still smoldered in the breasts of a few.

At all times it is a bewildering thing to John Barton to see his employer removing from house to house, each one grander than the last, till he ends in building one more magnificent than all, while all the time the weaver, who thinks he and his fellows are the real makers of this wealth, is struggling on for bread for their children, through the vicissitudes of lowered wages, short hours, fewer hands employed, etc.

... he is, I say, bewildered and (to use his own word) 'aggravated' to see that all goes on just as usual with the mill-owners. Large houses are still occupied, while spinners' and weavers' cottages stand empty, because the families that once occupied them are obliged to live in rooms or cellars. Carriages still roll along the streets, concerts are still crowded by subscribers, the shops for expensive luxuries still find daily customers, while the workman loiters away his unemployed time in watching these things, and thinking of the pale, uncomplaining wife at home, and the wailing children asking in vain for enough of food, of the sinking health, of the dying life of those near and dear to him. The contrast is too great. Why should he alone suffer from bad times? (Gaskell, 1970, p.158)

The contrast between the two opposing classes becomes more obvious after the economic boom collapses. The masters see the leisure time as nothing more than a chance for them to relax themselves. They have more leisure than they have known for years; and promise wives and daughters all manner of pleasant excursions. It is a pleasant thing to be able to have time for domestic enjoyments. But there is another side to the picture. There are homes of those who would fain work, and no man gives unto them—the homes of those to whom leisure is a curse, which can be shown in the authoress' description:

There, the family music was hungry wails, when week after week passed by, and there was no work to be had, and consequently no wages to pay for the bread the children cried aloud for in their young impatience of suffering. There was no breakfast to lounge over; their lounge was taken in bed, to try and keep warmth in them that bitter March weather, and, by being quiet, to deaden the gnawing wolf within. Many a would have gone little way enough in oatmeal or potatoes, bought opium to still the hungry little ones, and make them forget their uneasiness in heavy troubled sleep.

The gap is being widened all the time in the economic depression. It becomes so wide that there must be some way to change the situation—the working class are then hoping for some peaceable and reasonable settlements. Some delegates were chosen from the gather masses of the working people and a petition was presented. John Barton is one of the delegates who feel hopeful for some change. "He hoped largely, but vaguely, of the results of his expedition. An argosy of the precious hopes of many otherwise despairing creatures, was that petition to be

heard concerning their sufferings." However his thinking that once the employers get to know the living condition of their workers, they will change their indifferent attitude toward these poor men only turns out, later, to be too simplistic and over optimistic, for the petition ends with no results.

After all peaceable means fail, John falls unemployed for being a Union leader. Mental distress and despair mingled with physical deterioration due to hunger makes him a changed man both in body and soul. Under such circumstances, the members of Trades' Unions turn desperate and ready for any thing; made ready by want. They take some extreme way of revenge both on the indifferent employers and on their fellow workers who refuse to join in the strike. John Barton thinks it wrong the idea of attacking those workers, and he shows great sympathy to the attacked knob-stick. But he holds firm the belief that the masters deserve to suffer. He said

I've thought we han all on us been more like cowards in attacking the poor like ourselves; them as has none to help, but mun choose between vitriol and starvation. I say we're more cowardly in doing that than in leaving them alone. No! What I would do is this. Have at the masters!

Then the novel reaches its climax represented by the murder on the master's son Harry Carson committed by John Barton as a vent for the distress of the working class. The result is both classes turn hostile toward each other.

However, when the story comes to a close, the class contradiction within the bourgeoisie world the previous chapters depict so vividly is reconciled, in a rather spurious or imaginary ways through religious means.

It is that, in the words of one of the earliest reviewers, in the *British Quarterly Review*, "the close of the story... seems to have been twisted out of shape, to serve the didactic purpose of the authoress". One can go further and argue that even much of the second part of the novel is similarly doubtful. It is not that it is boring, for the suspense story of the end of the murder plot is grippingly told. It is rather that one feels the second part to be in quite a different and a lesser genre from the first. It seems as if a complex re-creation of events, scenes and problems concerning the real circumstances of the 1840s has given way to a more simple fable which ends in a moral tableau (Showalter, 1997, p.89).

What is more doubtful of the second part of the novel is that John Barton slinks back into the story, and Mr. Carson, who vows remorseless vengeance, repents just in time to hold the dying murderer in his arms in a tableau of reconciliation. But this will not do even as an emblem of conflict reconciled, for in the murder story Mrs. Gaskell has not just simplified the issues, she has actually changed the grounds on which they are being discussed. The early hostility of Barton to the employers is the anger, convincingly rendered, of a man caught up in a system that is insupportable but apparently unavoidable. When

Barton becomes a murderer, however, he becomes an outcast from all classes. The result is that the diagram at the end of Barton dying in Carson's arms appears to say something about conflict and brotherhood, when in fact it has grown out of a progressive simplification of the issues with which the novel confronted us at its outset.

CONCLUSION

The reason is due to the fact that, according to Karl Marx, "ideology is socially determined". That so fine an artist as Mrs. Gaskell should be driven to so unsatisfactory a scene is an indication of the problems faced by the novel in attempting to deal not just in persons and individual relationships, but in classes, movements, conflicts, historical facts. The authoress' seemingly objective stand as a mediator between the classes cannot be tinted with her inherited middle-class attitude, because she cannot simply empty herself of all her petty bourgeoisie thinking, especially since she cannot but feel the rightness of some of them. Her sentimental philanthropy makes her look for means of reconciliation between the two opposing classes of capitalist society, in a way similar to Dickens. With all these limitations *Mary Barton* is still a realistic novel giving a picture of the class struggle in the period of Chartism.

REFERENCES

Abjadian, A. (2010). *A survey of English literature(II)* (6th ed.)
Tehran: SAMT.

- Althusser, L. (2004). *Ideology and ideological state apparatuses*. In J. Rivkin & M. Ryan (Eds.), *Literary theory: An anthology* (2nd ed.). UK: Blackwell.
- Gaskell, E. (1970). *Mary Barton*. 27 *Wrights Lane*. London: Penguin Group.
- Gill, S. (1970). An introduction to *Mary Barton*. 27 *Wrights Lane*. London: Penguin Group.
- Gramsci, A. (2004). *Hegemony*. In J. Rivkin & M. Ryan (Eds.), *Literary theory: An anthology* (2nd ed.). UK: Blackwell.
- Hawks, D. (1996). *Ideology*. London: Routledge.
- James, M. (2005). *Literary criticism: Chapter 4, Marxism*.
- Liu, B. S. (1993). *A short history of English literature*. Zhengzhou, China: Henan People's Publishing House.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1908). *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. New York: New York Labor News.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1998). The German Ideology. In C. J. Arthur (Ed.). London: Elecbook.
- Engels, F. (1894). *Herr Eugen Dühring's revolution in science* (E. Burns, Trans.). New York: International Publishers.
- Puthenpeedikail, M. J. (1976). *Marx on alienation: Elements of a critique of capitalism and communism*. India: Minerva Associates Publication.
- Rivkin, J., & Ryan, M. (2004). *Literary theory: An anthology*. UK: Blackwell.
- Showalter, E. (1997). *A literature of their own: British women novelists from bronte to lessing*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Wood Krutch, J. (1996). *"Modernism" in modern drama: A definition and estimate*. United States of America: Cornell University Press.