The evolution of thornton's views on the working class in north and south

Science, Biology

North and South, an industrial novel by the English writer Elizabeth Gaskell, presents to us the disparate perspectives of capitalist mill-owners and their factory workers, of ‘ masters and men’, as they are called in the novel. The plight of the working classes was a commonly discussed topic during the Victorian era and has served as the subject of dozens of novels (such as Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens and Shirley by Charlotte Brontë) which later came to form the genre of industrial novel. In his article Networks and the Industrial Novel Michael D. Lewis argues that the genre offers ” collective, political solutions to suffering and injustice” and while the novels ” certainly don’t advocate an extension of the vote”, they ” plot models of democratic networks that join a variety of opponents, from employer and employees to governor and governed.” (Lewis, 243) North and South offers a glimpse at some of the crucial issues in the relationship of industrial capitalists and the working class, but also a possible solution to these problems, which is presented to the readers through the evolution of John Thornton’s views on the working class.

John Thornton, one of the principal characters of the novel North and South, starts out as a classic representative of 19th century economic liberalism. As a person who was born poor but has become rich, he believes everybody can, through hard work and self-reliance, rise to the very top. After his father committed suicide because of debt he incurred through speculation, John had to leave school and provide for his family. Slowly but surely, he started accumulating wealth and is, at the beginning of the novel, known as an influental, wealthy, capitalist mill-owner in Milton, a small industrial town in the north of England.

‘ It is one of the great beauties of our system, that a working-man may raise himself into the power and position of a master by his own exertions and behaviour; that, in fact, every one who rules himself to decency and sobriety of conduct, and attention to his duties, comes over to our ranks.’ (Gaskell, 96)

Thornton doesn’t seem to be completely ignorant of the hardships faced by factory workers, saying that ” there can be no doubt of tyranny [masters] excercised over their work-people” (Gaskell, 96), however, he refuses to acknowledge that the opportunities afforded to him might not be afforded to everyone. Workmen feel largely oppressed and exploited by their masters who don’t even call them men but ‘ hands’. Mr. Thornton calls the relationship between these two classes a ‘ battle’, believing it to be antagonistic in nature. This antagonism largely stems from the reluctance of both sides to communicate – seeing as both the masters and men are unaware of each other’s viewpoints and motives, their resentment and indignation grows. A good example of this in the novel would be the strike – the workers down their tools as their wages are cut because of the pressure of competition coming from America. The reasons that laid behind the cuts are not explained to the workers, so it’s only logical that they feel betrayed and decide to strike. When Margaret asks Thornton why he can’t simply explain to the workers that their wages are lowered because of bad trade, his reply is ‘ 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…I will not be forced to give my

reasons’ (164) He compares the workmen to children in need of guidance, all the while denying that the masters have anything to do with making or keeping them that way. He maintains that they are ” the happiest under the unfalling laws of a discreet, firm authority” (Gaskell, 140), hence ” despotism is the best kind of government for them”. (gaskell, 141) Mr. Hale argues that the workmen are more like teenagers, ” passing rapidly into the troublesome stage which intervenes between childhood and manhood” (Gaskell, 141), so masters should therefore take up the roles of friends and advisors. Essentially, what he is suggesting is that, in dealing with this issue, applying the philosophy of social paternalism (which Thornton seems to strongly support) might not be the best possible solution and that communication might be a better alternative. Margaret, taking the role of an altruist, implores Thornton to speak to the workers and explain the situation to them, saying that it is ” not in the least because of [his] labour and capital positions, but because [he] is a man, dealing with a set of men over whom [he] has, whether [he] rejects to use it or not, immense power, just because [their] lives and welfare are so constantly and intimately intervowen.” (Gaskell, 143) She manages to persuade him to do so at the height of the strike, when his house is sorrounded by an angry mob of rioters, by saying:

‘ Mr. Thornton, 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. Don’t let the soldiers come in and cut down poor creatures who are

driven mad. I see one there who is. If you have any courage or noble quality in you, go out and speak to them, man to man!' (Gaskell, 209)

In addition, she tries to explain the position of masters to workmen, thus trying to build empathy between them:

' Suppose they could not, or would not do the last; they could not give up their farms all in a minute, however much they might wish to do so; but they would have no hay, nor corn to sell that year; and where would the money come from to pay the labourers' wages the next?' (Gaskell, 156)

Margaret succeeds in her desire to establish communication between the classes. Swayed by Margaret, Thornton begins working on improving his relationship with the workers. He finally becomes aware of his own class privilege and seems to feel a sense of genuine empathy and concern for the working class. After first rejecting him, he reconsiders and decides to employ Nicholas Higgins, a character in the novel who serves as a representative of the working class. The two develop a business relationship – Thornton listens to Higgins's ideas about the factory and starts implementing them while Higgins keeps Thornton informed of the thoughts and doings of the workers. The two complement each other perfectly and it is finally shown that the relationship between the two classes doesn't have to be a battle and that it's possible for them to work together. In his resolution to understand the workers better he even goes as far as to build them a dining room so he could provide them with dinner. He doesn't go to the dining room without an invitation so he wouldn't bother the workers, but when invited he's happy to

dine with them. He also helps the worker’s children by providing them with money for education. He no longer calls his workers ‘ hands’. On his new course of action he says:

‘ I have arrived at the conviction that no mere instituions, 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 instituions bring the individuals of the different classes into actual personal contact. Such intercourse is the very breath of life. (…) I would take an idea, the working out of which would necessitate personal intercourse; it might not go well at first, but at every hitch interest would be felt by an increasing number of men, and at last its success in working come to be desired by all, as all had borne a part in the formation of the plan; and even then I am sure that it would lose its vitality, cease to be living, as soon as it was no longer carried on by that sort of common interest which invariably makes people find means and ways of seeing each other, and becoming acquainted with each others’ characters and persons, and even tricks of temper and modes of speech.’ (Gaskell, 515)

Jill L. Matus argues that Thornton’s views are “ not changed by intellectual conviction…Rather, he needs to be motivated by personal contact with the people about whom he has so far generalized; only when he has one of his workers in his home…which forces him to recognize the workers as independent and responsible people” (Matus, 138).

As the novel reaches its end, it’s more than evident how much Thornton’s views and character have changed and what a positive influence this change has had. North and South introduces us to key predicaments of the Industrial Evolution, offering us a glimpse into the lives of both wealthy, capitalist mill-owners and the poor, struggling workmen. However, the novel also bestows upon us the solution to this issue of disparity – communication. With help of Margaret Hale and Nicholas Higgins, John Thornton realizes the power of communication and how beneficial it can be to both mill-owners and workmen. – through implementing the worker’s suggestions in the decision-making process and taking into account their needs and interests, as well as keeping them informed of the particulars of their workplace, both the workmen and the capitalists can flourish. A relationship that was once described as antagonistic can now almost be described as friendship.