

From commodity to  
independent  
womanhood, the  
spiritual  
transformation of  
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Mary Barton is a story of material temptation, sexual seduction and spiritual transformation. The character Mary Barton is an impoverished girl with considerable material ambitions who is seduced by the lavish wealth of her rich suitor. Mary's lifelong poverty leaves her with the fervent desire to secure material comforts. Her experience as a dressmaker in a frivolous milliner shop also imbues her with a trace of vanity. This combination of vanity and materialism turns Mary into an aspiring social climber, which makes her highly susceptible to the seduction of the rich Harry Carson. Mary is tempted by Harry's wealth and treats his seduction as a golden opportunity for social advancement. For the first half of the novel, Mary focuses on her goal of using her beauty to ensnare Harry into marriage so she can become a lady of leisure. Her attraction to Harry is entirely mercenary. By seeking to capitalize through her physical beauty and to marry a man whom she has no romantic attachment, Mary turns herself into a sexual commodity awaiting purchase by a man who can afford her. However, Mary experiences a life changing epiphany in the middle of the novel which completely alters outlook on life. This epiphany purges her of her vanity and forces her to end her amorous entanglement with Harry. After she becomes free from Harry Carson, Mary undergoes an astonishing transformation from a passive mistress into an autonomous and independent woman. Mary's experience demonstrates that there is more than one path for a woman to gain comfort and success. Becoming self-sufficient is far less destructive than selling oneself as a disposable sexual commodity. In order to understand Mary's initial attraction to Harry Carson, it is important to understand Mary's character. In the first half of the novel, Mary Barton is a vain and materialistic woman. Her superficial ambitions are a direct result of <https://assignbuster.com/from-commodity-to-independent-womanhood-the-spiritual-transformation-of-mary-barton-in-elizabeth-gaskells-mary-barton/>

her living environment. As a slum dweller in an industrial town, Mary is born into poverty and has always lived in the most wretched destitution. As long as she can remember, the people around her have been plagued by the want of life's bare necessities. These slum dwellers are known for their intense materialistic obsession. The emaciated, starving people around Mary are focused on obtaining " food, light and warmth" (Gaskell 98). Their materialistic outlook is not instigated by greed or avarice, but because they are dying from the lack of basic necessities. Surrounded by " sorrow and want" (209) and witnessing daily the sight of starving children and careworn parents, it is only natural that Mary would develop materialistic goals. She becomes desperate to extricate herself from her impoverished position. The financial necessity of her family makes her " ambitious" (122) and enterprising. Her practical outlook on life gives her the skill of " practical shrewdness" (122) and turns her into a social climber. At this stage of her life, Mary's most ardent wish is to climb the social ladder and lift her family out of the mire of poverty into a life of relative ease and comfort (121). Mary's vanity is also the product of her environment. When she gets a job as a dressmaker in a fashionable millinery, Mary enters into a decadent world of frivolity. The millinery is famous for its luxurious atmosphere where most of the conversations center on " fashion, dress, and parties" (143). It is a make-believe world, completely out of place with the impoverished conditions that Mary goes home to. Mary spends her days making dresses and other fripperies that elegant ladies will find appealing. Her whole existence is devoted to beautifying her clients with decorations and ornaments. Not surprisingly, Mary's daily contact with these decorative objects makes her susceptible to the seductive influence of pretty dresses and elegant

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appearances (122). These beautiful fineries beckon Mary and awaken a new kind of hunger in her young and impressionable mind (122). As an uneducated woman, Mary only knows what she sees around her, which her even more vulnerable to the temptation of wealth. By serving the millinery's elegant customers, Mary develops a desire to become a member of that privileged class. She is fascinated by the lifestyle of the gentility and entertains the hope that she might one day lead a similar lifestyle by "doing all the elegant nothings appertaining to ladyhood" (122). Mary gradually starts to become particular about her appearance and spends her time on deciding "what gown she should put on" (63). She dreams of the day when she will become a genteel lady, living a life and leisure. She begins to take pleasure by turning herself into a decorative object (63) and by "mak[ing] an impression" (63) on others through her appearance. Mary's newfound vanity and materialistic outlook explains her initial attraction to the rich Harry Carson. She is ambitious and determined to improve her station in life. Mary's mindset makes her extremely vulnerable to seduction by rich men like Harry. Mary is attracted to Carson because he has the power to satisfy her materialistic ambitions and lift her family out of poverty. He is the son of an immensely rich industrialist who possesses vast property and estates. His polished manners and his "neat and well appointed" (107) dress all portray a luxurious and self-indulgent lifestyle. Mary sees him as a prize that she is competing to win. While Carson has wealth at his disposal, Mary's beauty is her most valuable asset. As a low-rung dressmaker earning a meager living, she has a very slim chance to achieve any social advancement through honest industry. Mary's only opportunity climb the social ladder lays in her ability to ensnare a rich man. At first, Mary is determined to capitalize on her

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beauty. Her “consciousness” (58) of her physical attractiveness endows her with the determination that “her beauty should make her a lady” (58). This mindset reveals her awareness of the monetary value of female beauty. Her beauty gives her the ambition to aspire to great heights, such as a marriage with Harry. By seeking to use her desirable body as the ticket into the world of privilege and wealth, Mary unconsciously treats herself as a sexual commodity to be bartered. Through this lens, her body becomes something with commercial value. Any wealth that Mary obtains through the commodification of her body is thus tainted, because it is the product of carnal exchange rather than that of the honest industry. Mary’s mercenary attraction to Harry turns her into a passive commodity. Secluded in the milliner shop, she spends most of her time in dreaming the day when she will be swept into a life of wealth and status. She is barely conscious of the political agitation around her (143) and is entirely “taken up with visions of the golden future” (116) as Mrs. Harry Carson. Nevertheless, Mary never voices any feelings of love for Harry’s person. When she thinks about him, her mind is always consumed by the vision of fabulous wealth and material abundance that await her. In Mary’s mind, Harry is associated only with material things to the extent that his personality fades into the background. The reader soon finds out that Mary’s true affection belongs to Jem Wilson, her childhood sweetheart and a man of her own class. Mary blushes scarlet when Jem appears and suffers great pain at the sight of his agony. She has a spontaneous outburst of affection for Jem with a passion that she never shows for Harry. Mary’s feelings for Jem are therefore natural and genuine, originating in true love and affection. In contrast, her attraction towards

Harry has no bearing to any genuine emotional attachment or love. Yet <https://assignbuster.com/from-commodity-to-independent-womanhood-the-spiritual-transformation-of-mary-barton-in-elizabeth-gaskells-mary-barton/>

despite of her affection for Jem, Mary's material goals take top priority. Since Mary treats her body as a commercial commodity at this stage, money becomes the most important determinant in her choice of husband. She does not see a husband is as an emotional companion. She turns down Jem's proposal of marriage because he is only a " poor mechanic" (181), and could never place her in the " circumstances of ease and luxury" (181). Mary therefore turns marriage into a commercial exchange. By refusing Jem, Mary sacrifices her affection in the cause of wealth and social advancement.

Driven by material ambition, Mary is eager gain value in the eyes of high society by " show[ing] them all [that Harry is the one who] would be glad to have her" (178). Her firm and emphatic declaration that she " can never be [Jem's] wife" (179) powerfully expresses her practical outlook on life. Mary becomes a pure sexual commodity through her willingness to give herself up to the higher bidder, even though she has no serious romantic leanings towards him. After rejecting Jem's proposal, Mary suddenly experiences a life- changing epiphany. Jem's passionate declaration of love catches Mary off guard. Since Mary has always loved Jem, it only takes a little passionate assertion on Jem's part for Mary to unleash her suppressed feelings of love. After Mary discovers the intensity of her affection for Jem, she realizes that the most important thing in life is love rather than any worldly riches. After this epiphany, Mary resolves to renounce her vanity (181) by ending all her affair with Harry. She realizes that marriage should be an act of love rather above any material considerations. She also realizes that all worldly possessions are empty unless they are shared with the one she loves (181).

After this realization, her feelings for Carson immediately change from longing to a near hatred (181). She hates Carson for " decoy[ing]" (181) her  
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from the life of honest labour and emotional truth. Mary transforms herself from a passive commodity back into an autonomous and independent thinking woman. As an autonomous woman, she is at the liberty to go wherever her heart leads her. By choosing to marry her true love, Mary is once more a self-governing woman ruled by the dictates of her heart, and is no longer a disposable commodity that is for sale to any man of wealth. By rejecting Harry, Mary has narrowly escaped the fate of becoming a sexual commodity. Mary is correct when she asserts that she has drawn herself back from the brink of danger (181). She has indeed exposed herself to great danger by encouraging Carson, because his intentions have never honourable towards her. Harry always treats Mary as a sexual commodity. He never gives any serious thought to the idea of marrying a girl so far beneath his social class. He simply wants to indulge in a casual love affair with Mary by turning her into his mistress. In contrast, to the devoted Jem who loves Mary "with all his heart and soul" (190), Harry is a pure libertine who boasts of his ability to "have any lady in Manchester" (189). He uses Mary as a tool for physical pleasure, a product that he can buy and use as he likes. Even though Harry ultimately proposes marriage to Mary, it is entirely the result of hot-headed impetuosity rather than a genuine commitment to matrimony. He easily retracts his proposal by saying that he shall not "offer [Mary] the same terms again" (189). Should Mary enter into an affair with Harry, she would have forever forfeited her moral reputation and is most certain to repeat the mistakes as her Aunt Esther. Esther's transient affair ended in an unwanted pregnancy, abandonment and social ostracism. As an impoverished, single woman burdened with a child, Mary could never seek an honourable employment again. She would be forced to migrate from the "

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abode of poverty for the more terrible abodes of vice” (310). Like Esther, she would ultimately be compelled to make her living through prostitution. Her affair with Harry would be prostitution at a higher level, but prostitution all the same. After Mary becomes free from Harry’s seduction, she experiences an astonishing transformation from a passive sexual commodity into an independent and active woman. In contrast to her passive presence in the first half of the novel, Mary assumes an assertive and domineering presence for the second half of the story. In order to clear Jem’s false charges, she undertakes a heroic quest to procure an alibi. She takes on the role of an active woman who courageously ventures into the public space. In order to get hold of the alibi, Mary ventures into a foreign city and chases the potential alibi in a race against time. In her quest to free the man she loves, Mary displays an astonishing “ energy [and] perseverance” (353), which contrasts vividly against her once frivolous character. By procuring the testimony of the alibi, Mary single-handedly saves Jem from false execution. Through this noble achievement, Mary elevates herself from a decorative female commodity into a woman of “ dignity, self-reliance and purpose” (330). Mary has “ struggled and triumphed” (342) over her vanity, and is not the once frivolous girl who takes pride in being pursued by a wealthy suitor. Mary is now an assertive woman with the “ confidence...[and] faith in her own powers” (342), and is never again a passive commodity that awaits to be purchased and consumed by a rich man. She has transcended from being a “ mere flesh and blood beauty” (403) into a “ higher...kind of beauty”, which is the beauty that shines from her noble daring and moral courage. Mary’s experience is an account of an astonishing spiritual transformation.

She undergoes a journey from passive commodity into an active, self-

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governing woman of energy and strength. The Mary in the first half of the novel reflects the 19th century womanhood, where women were expected to remain passive in the domestic space. Mary is not only seduced by Harry, she is in fact seduced by the indolent and unproductive lifestyle of a 19th century lady that he can offer her. Nevertheless, Mary eventually grows out of this passive state. By freeing herself from Harry's seduction, Mary also frees herself from the appeal of an idle existence. The active and energetic Mary of the second half the novel resembles a modern woman. She bursts with energy and resoluteness, venturing boldly into the public space to undertake of a serious social task. Therefore, Mary's journey is not merely a transformation from a commodity into a self-governing person, but is also from the passive 19th century femininity into an active state of modern womanhood. Works Cited Gaskell, Elizabeth. *Mary Barton*. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2000.