

Social injustice in mary barton



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Throughout Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, social injustice is a powerful and prevalent theme. This essay will focus especially on Chapter Six, where John Barton seeks medicine for his equally impoverished friend, Ben Davenport. This Chapter perhaps presents the fact that Gaskell's novel moves beyond even social injustice to that of basic human kindness. The phrase 'social injustice' suggests that a group in society is ignored, which, undeniably, the lower class in nineteenth century England are. Yet, this focus on Barton's journey to seek medicine presents the divide between classes as literally a matter of life or death, irrefutably more serious than simply being ignored. Barton's actions also allude to a wider metaphor regarding the class system. As it has been established, the poor are treated as 'out of sight, out of mind'; it is a hierarchy that is so foundational to their society that not even someone's life is worth breaking it.

Gaskell uses an extremely simple metaphor to illustrate this stark contrast between classes: light and dark. As Barton journeys to seek medicine, he marvels at the lavishness of the 'lighted shops' at night: of all shops a druggist's looks the most like the tales of our childhood, from Aladdin's garden of enchanted fruits to the charming Rosamund with her purple jar. The metaphor of the light and dark is used to physically display the social injustice in John Barton's status. The 'lighted shops' emanate an almost holy aspect, as Barton pilgrimages in search of a miracle. This is in direct contrast to his own position in the dark street; the separation of the light and dark suggests a barrier between lower and upper classes, one which John will never be able to breach. Furthermore, the imagery of the fictional tale 'Aladdin' suggests the unreachable aspect of the upper classes; for John

Barton, it is only possible to experience such wealth if he imagined himself in a fairy tale. This is emphasized further through Barton's mirroring of Aladdin. As the street urchin had to walk through the garden of enchanted fruits, Barton also has to walk through the street, touching nothing. His social status deems him unable to touch the 'display of goods', which seem almost frivolous in comparison to the humble medicine John seeks. Through placing what John seeks –the medicine –akin to a fairy tale, it suggests just how unreachable his goal is. Therefore, the only comfort John seems to draw is from stories of his 'childhood'; an imaginary world is certainly much kinder than the social injustice he currently experiences.

Through placing Barton on this metaphorical, and physical, pilgrimage, the contrast between the poor and rich is extremely palpable. Therefore, the reader almost expects Barton to embody this pious figure, dedicated to helping his own. Instead, we are presented with his inner, contradictory feelings, allowing the reader to witness not only the actions of social injustice, but the human reactions also: Barton's was an errand of mercy; but the thoughts of his heart were touched by sin, by bitter hatred of the happy, whom he, for the first time, confounded with the selfish.

Gaskell firstly employs understatement to simultaneously present the unimportance of the lower classes and Barton's humble attitude; his journey is described as an 'errand', despite holding a much higher importance than simply going to collect shopping. This could perhaps suggest the casual brutality of their class reality. Death through poverty is common, so seeking medicine in this manner is perhaps as normal as their usual errands.

Furthermore, the use of the semi-colon then separates this idea of mercy

from sin, suggesting that the human nature is capable of acting in opposition to their emotions. This moment is also pivotal for Barton as a character, as it is an epiphany where he realises ‘ for the first time’ the true nature of social injustice. He has always been aware of his status as poor, but only now does he begin to compare this to others above him; this ‘ bitter hatred’ signals the beginning of the realisation that injustice exists. It is important that event occurs in an early chapter, as it lays the foundations for a rising resentment that will eventually push John to the murder of Harry Carson.

Chapter Six is full of contrasts, both physical and metaphorical, to illustrate the divide between social class. Thus far, only Barton as a character has been examined. However, to truly show this contrast, an upper class character must also be presented. Harry Carson is a great example, and ‘ was rich, and prosperous, and gay, and...would place [Mary] in all circumstances of ease and luxury.’ The use of three adjectives suggests their innate interconnectivity; if one is both ‘ rich’ and ‘ prosperous’, they are also ‘ gay’. With this emphasis on money, it suggests that moral wealth stands for nothing in this society. This deems John Barton as poor as ever, despite his merciful actions. Yet perhaps the largest contrast is between Carson’s ‘ ease’ of life, and Barton’s survival. If Harry Carson were in the same position, his money places him in a position of privilege and he would simply have to call for a doctor. For Barton in the same position, he has nothing to offer and so must set out on the streets to beg. Furthermore, this sense of bitterness at the rich is perhaps enhanced by the opportunities Carson offers Mary; he can place her in ‘ circumstances of ease and luxury’, everything that John cannot offer her.

Thus far, this essay has examined the social injustice that exists within the obvious class distinctions in nineteenth century society. Yet it is also interesting to consider the instances when this injustice is less prevalent. For example, John Barton willingly journeys to find medicine for his friend, Ben Davenport, suggesting that this injustice only occurs between classes, and not within each class. This perhaps suggests a fundamental prejudice against what is different. Carson is disgusted by the survival of the lower classes, and Barton resents the upper class ease of life. Therefore, as previously suggested, Gaskell's novel is not preoccupied with human decency, as this is clearly displayed within classes. This presents a juxtaposition throughout the entire novel; her characters are capable of mercy, but not across classes.

Bibliography ·

Gaskell, E. *Mary Barton* (Wordsworth Classics: Hertfordshire, 2012)