

Fredrick hale: viewing north and south from a transatlantic lens



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Most literary critics agree that Margaret Hale is the central figure in Gaskell's *North and South*. Margaret's emotional, social, and psychological contexts are often analyzed with excruciating detail, as many view her story to be of principal importance. However, the narrative of Fredrick Hale, Margaret's brother, should be viewed with the same amount of importance, if not more. Despite being viewed as a minor character, Fredrick Hale is the link by which Milton is connected to the rest of the global society. Through Fredrick, the conflicts in the novel are replicated on a transatlantic scale that is made possible by the advent of industrialization and capitalism; Fredrick's narrative, along with his various conflicts not only mirror the context of the "Milton revolution" but also conflict in the United States and abroad. It is not often that minor characters receive five chapters devoted to them, yet Gaskell gives Fredrick's narrative ample time to breathe. Some have made claims that Fredrick's tales are strictly to obscure the central plot, yet they fail to look at Fredrick's adventures from a more global perspective (Lee). By analyzing Fredrick from a global perspective, Fredrick's narrative begins to imitate the bevy of conflicts happening in Milton as well as other transatlantic nations.

Although it is not clear how close Fredrick and Margaret were, Gaskell is very quick to introduce the character of Fredrick. When informed of Mr. Hales decision to leave the Church, Margaret immediately relates the decision to Fredrick's situation (Lee). By mentioning a "minor" character so early, Gaskell seems to suggest that Fredrick will play a significantly greater role throughout the course of the novel. Fredrick is frequently mentioned by Mrs. Hale in thought as well as conversation. Lee argues that Fredrick occupies "

too much” of her own character, as she frequently wishes for her son to be physically present. Although Margaret does not seem to worry over Fredrick’s predicament at the beginning of the novel, there is an obvious change in her thoughts towards the end. After Fredrick’s sudden intrusion into the plot, Margaret becomes fixated on his safety to the point where it interferes with her daily tasks (Lee). It is also important to note that Fredrick’s story is conveniently nestled at the end of Volume I, thus serving as the beginning of Volume II. Therefore, Fredrick is the transitional point of the entire novel. It is on these grounds that Fredrick Hale is much more than a simple secondary character.

Fredrick’s introduction to the novel is through the description of his occupation and a very brief mention of the mutiny. Fredrick’s mutiny is a direct comparison to the subsequent strike in Milton. Although Fredrick did not truly “ strike,” he did successfully manage to disrupt the established social order (on the ship), much like the strikers in Milton wished to do. By learning of Fredrick’s mutiny before the Milton strikes take place, Gaskell seems to hint at the importance of Fredrick. The mutiny also foreshadows the issues with Thornton’s business practices, which mirror that of an Enlightened Despot, as well as the possible problems that the participants in the strike will face (Lee). To further discuss Fredrick’s importance to the novel, his naval experiences will be examined. Hale’s profession in itself is a direct foil to the societal relations in Milton. As a sailor, Fredrick is able to transcend not only geographical boundaries, but hypothetical boundaries as well. Fredrick’s general fluidity is a direct contrast to the rigid, caste-like system of Milton. Much like his sister, Fredrick is elevated beyond the

artificial boundaries of class. However, Fredrick is elevated above class boundaries because his specific class roll is unclear. Although he comes from a relatively middle class family, Fredrick loses his sense of class during his sailing expeditions. Due to his captain's cruelty, Fredrick's class shares much commonality of slaves (Lee). Captain Reid's treatment of Fredrick can easily be compared to the treatment of the American slave. According to Bolster, sailors could frequently be severely flogged, the practice become more lethal and prevalent during the height of British impressment (Bolster). By comparing Fredrick's transatlantic mistreatment to that of slaves, Gaskell is able to link Fredrick to the institution of capitalism, a main theme of the novel. Fredrick is essential to the idea of capitalism, as he is the literal and theoretical link between nations. Hale is the link between the cotton producing Antebellum South and the North of England (Lee). From this link, Gaskell's novel can be seen in a much broader, global context, mirroring that of an emerging capitalistic society.

Through Fredrick's link to the cotton trade, the text seems to show how American interests and ambitions impact Britain, which can very well impact domestic relations, especially in regards to labor. Around the time of publication, England was in a very poor place domestically. When looking at the global economy in the nineteenth century, English stability in the domestic realm was directly impacted by American stability (Lee). Therefore, it could be reasonably assumed that the rising tensions in Milton could be a result of a tumultuous economy, where America is possibly to blame.

Therefore, the link between America and England, primarily through societal

relations and capitalism, is crucial to the plot of the novel, as the two nations fates are essentially intertwined.

Due to the economic link between the two nations, the text allows for connections between the United States and England. The primarily link that can be examined are worker relations and the institution of slavery. Lee points out the fact that many of Gaskell's novels seem to mirror social conditions in not only England, but America as well (Lee). Around the time of publication, British citizens became increasingly aware of slave narratives, that frequently included tales of "cruel masters" in addition to "scenes with whippings" (Lee). It is evident that Fredrick's tales of mistreatment aboard the HMS Russell reflects many slave narratives of the era. Yet, Fredrick's story mirrors that of a slave that shared his surname, Fredrick Douglass. Both of the Fredricks' storylines primarily revolve around a revolt against a sadistic master. Lee argues that the character of Leonards, a former mate of Fredrick's, mirrors the consequences of the Underground Railroad, specifically the constant battle between freedom and the risk of getting caught (Lee). Not only does Fredrick mirror an American slave, he is a slave to the system of capitalism. As a sailor, Hale's employment essentially is governed by global demand. The text suggests that much like Fredrick, Milton and England will eventually fall prey to capitalism. Therefore, Fredrick's tales mirror the slave narratives and subsequently portray Fredrick as a man who lacks national identity, a rarity in a time where nationalistic tensions frequently manifested themselves in countries. The fact that Fredrick does not have a distinct identity is a direct contrast with every other character in the novel. Although the other characters various identities

change, there is no arguing that they are present. Fredrick is a man caught between two nations, the nation of his birth and the nation where he currently resides, Spain. Hale's identity crisis is a representation of the English identity crisis, as England is in the transition from a Southern, agrarian society to a hearty, industrial Northern society but does not yet fully belong to either.

Although Fredrick lacks an identity as well as a specific social class, he brings about subsequent changes in characters after his fairly brief appearance.

Fredrick, more so than any other character, is responsible for bringing about a substantial change in his sister. During Fredrick's brief stint in Milton, he is able to provide comfort to a visibly worried Margaret. However, after Mrs. Hale's death, their roles are subsequently altered. Margaret is then charged with comforting not only a distraught Mr. Hale, but her brother as well.

Margaret's emotions are much more visible after Fredrick's appearance.

After Fredrick's visitation, her relationship with John seems for naught, as Thornton developed an animosity towards Fredrick and Margaret. From a logical standpoint, it is quite possible that Margaret would not have lied to the police inspector to protect Fredrick. Through her actions, it is evident that Margaret is acting out of love for the only family member she cares for.

Despite the plethora of emotional distress, Fredrick's visit changes Margaret yet again. From this point on, Margaret's transformation as the patriarch begins to take place. After her time with Fredrick, Margaret begins to slowly develop her confidence and eventually asserts herself into the business of Marlborough Mills. Margaret also indirectly experiences globalization, as she soon picks up a new vernacular. Mrs. Hale was disgusted that Margaret had

traded her sweet tongue of Helstone for the “ horrid words of Milton” (Lee). Although Fredrick is not directly responsible for this phenomenon, Margaret shows that even she is subject to the forces of globalization and acculturation. Thornton’s personal and financial distress can be directly related to Fredrick. Thornton’s very personality is attacked by Fredrick, who he mistakenly mistakes for Margaret’s lover. Thornton is also attacked by capitalism and the global market, the very system that is the essence of Fredrick. Thornton, constrained by inefficient Irish scabs, soon decimates the personal fortune he had at the beginning of the text. Despite his somewhat rapid loss of wealth, Thornton’s outlook on worker relations and Margaret begin to change. Without Fredrick, who in this specific case represents the fledgling, capitalist, global economy, it can be argued that Thornton’s transformation would never had taken place.

In closing, Fredrick deserves equal, if not more, respect by readers and critics alike. Although it is nice that Gaskell gives him a sizable portion in the novel, he needs to be viewed from a much more critical level. As the sole entity that links Milton with the rest of the world, Fredrick is the vehicle by which Gaskell introduces the potential pitfalls of conducting business in a fledgling capitalist, global economy. Although Fredrick is unassociated with a specific class, his ability to transcend traditional Victorian social constraints is of utmost importance. By exploring comparisons between Fredrick and the slave novels, it shows how Hale lacks national identity, rather becoming a citizen of the globe. Through Fredrick, Gaskell hypothesizes on the future of social, economic, and political implications in a globalized world.

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