

Gender roles in north and south

People



Tierney Deggelman Morrissey Engl 209 October 1, 2012 Gender Roles in North and South It is no surprise that the novel *North and South* is one that frequently employs the literary style of placing two entities in juxtaposition as the very title coincides with the idea of comparison. Similarly, the chapter headings often mirror this literary style: “Masters and Men,” “Likes and Dislikes,” “Roses and Thorns”. The most significant of these comparisons is masculinity and femininity.

Through the development of the novel's female heroine Margaret Hale and through John Thornton's perspectives of her, Emily Gaskell is in essence taking a stand against gender stereotypes and highlighting the underestimated value of female empowerment in Victorian society. Throughout the novel Margaret Hale proves herself to be a strong, outspoken, capable and irrepressible spirit. These descriptions of Margaret however were more likely to be attributed to men in this time, as they were viewed as the superior gender. Gaskell describes Margaret as “full of a soft feminine defiance, always giving strangers the impression of haughtiness” (58).

In attempts to draw attention to the fact that Margaret is out of the ordinary with a personality unlike most women of her time, Gaskell incorporates Mr. Thornton's first impressions of her as well. “He almost said to himself he did not like her, before their conversation ended; he tried so to compensate himself for the mortified feeling, that while he looked upon her with an admiration he could not repress” (59). This passage is significant because it shows the discontent Thornton feels due to Margaret's reluctance to conform to stereotypes of femininity.

However, even with feelings of discontent, Thornton looks at her with admiration showing he cannot help but be captivated with her strong-minded manner. Perhaps this is Gaskell's way of showing us that if breaking gender stereotypes can be admired by a high class powerful man such as Thornton, then why can't it be admired by society as a whole? Another instance where Margaret demonstrates her unusual strength is in regards to her mother's illness. When she finds out her mother is dying she decides to keep it from her father as she says, " He will not bear it as I can" (119).

The instant she convinces the doctor to reveal the severity of her mother's illness marks the moment she takes on the role of authoritative figure in her family. The authoritative position in a family would again usually belong to a man but Margaret claims her father could not handle it and that she will have to step forward. Margaret's strength through her mother's illness, taking power over her father is yet another characteristic of hers that advocates female empowerment. This is reinstated in the actual event of her mother's death. Her eyes were continually blinded by tears, but she had no time to give way to regular crying. The father and brother depended upon her; while they were giving way to grief, she must be working, planning, considering" (230). This quote depicts Margaret acting as backbone for the family. She has allowed her family members to look to her for stability, which is extremely rare in a time where women were viewed as delicate. The most memorable demonstration of Margaret's character is in the event of the strike when she comes outside of the Thornton household and steps in front of John Thornton.

Margaret puts herself in a spot of grave danger in between Mr. Thornton and the strikers who are described as beastly, animalistic creatures who have lost all traces of their previous humanity. The stepping in front of Mr. Thornton symbolizes the crossing of his masculinity. In essence she is stating herself more masculine than Thornton by doing so. The irony of this situation is as she is preceding his masculinity, the very thing she banks on not getting hurt is gender. She thinks that as a woman she will not be subjected to any violence delivered by man.

Margaret's attitude toward her mother's death and her approach to confronting the strikers shows her strong and brave character. Such character that contradicts the social norms of gender roles is attributed to the female protagonist in attempts to convey the author's values of female empowerment. The fact that Mr. Thornton is not oppressive toward women instead attracted to Margaret's challenging nature marks Gaskell's attempt at getting readers to believe that women can be just as strong as their male complements despite what society says.